

## UNCERTAIN WANDERINGS

I am not an architect. I am not an urban planner. However I live in the urban and city spaces that these people construct around me. The ideas of how we are to live and how we are to 'function' in such environments, are their considerations and those that they work for. However a blueprint for living and working are very different from the actuality of living. Some conceive of the 'constructed environment' as a place/a site/a space of resistance to the mapping of their lives.

I do not live in Eden, I live in a 'modern' or for some a post modern environment. I cannot avoid what that environment imposes upon me, whether for good or bad. Located in the 'lived experience' of everyday life, my question is how to respond not just physically to it but psychologically to it. I move through it as a body, but I also think through it.

I live, you live, in a vast network of codified spaces. Where to walk, where to cross the road, where to park, where to shop, where to work, the list is a long one of social structures that configure our everyday life. Let me state from the outset this paper is not about the rights or wrongs of such conditions, but is about how on the personal level we interact with such conditions. Conditions that we can say are the results of modernity.

Georg Simmel one of the founders of modern sociology would write in 1902 in, *The 'Metropolis and Mental Life'*, that;

*'The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life. The fight with nature which primitive man has to wage for bodily existence attains in this modern form its latest transformation'.*

The technique of life, what a telling phrase.

I would suggest that for most people the 'technique of life', is governed by the rigours of economic necessity. Simmel uses the term a 'social-technological mechanism', to describe our position in modern life. The necessities of a life at work, has as it's compensation the pursuit of leisure and pleasure when the time permits.

When the time permits.

That is very much at the heart of this paper. If personal time is designated as that which is 'free' from the 'social-technological mechanism' then we misunderstand the potential for our individual freedom. When Simmel was writing, he could argue that our lives were governed or indeed, '*forced*' by '*punctuality, calculability, and exactness*'. Imagine then how he would perceive of those terms today in relationship to our mental life and the metropolis?

The twentieth century's modernist mantra, 'form follows function' which extended well beyond the architectural, was defined by the American architect Louis Sullivan. In his 1896 article, 'The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered' the true extent of his thinking is given the status of a law, he wrote;

*'Of all true manifestations of the head,*

*Of the heart, of the soul,*

*That the life is recognizable in its expression,*

*That form ever follows function.*

*This is the law'*

This 'law' most often shortened now to, 'form follows function', equates its utilitarian functionalism with inheritance theory, an evolutionary concept proposed by the eighteenth century French naturalist, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck. This theory was in opposition to Charles Darwin's, wherein, 'form preceded function'. Sullivan elevates architectural practice to a 'natural' law, this is the way it is and moreover, the way it should be.

However this 'law' is arguably no more than taste redefined and one determined by a limited idea of function, a repudiation of aesthetics and ornament perceived as superfluous. To recognise the complexity of the human self, confronts such reductionist views and therefore asks how our own individual desires engage with the constructed environment that others make.

The French sociologist and philosopher Edgar Morin argued that we need to acknowledge *'the beat of our hearts'*, and *'the passions of our soul'*. We are he stressed both biological and cultural beings who need myth and imagination. How interesting it is to note that both these individuals, virtually a century apart, cite the heart and the soul, as the essence of our human condition. However their answers to this condition could not be more different.

We are Morin declares 'a mad animal whose madness invented reason', but the idea that only pure reason need prevail, is to make us subservient everyday to an order of a very particular kind; a bureaucracy of intellect. A bureaucracy whose relationship to people appears to offer them so much in how to use their time, but really only conceives of them as Simmel suggests as, *'the person as if in stream'* and that *'one needs hardly to swim for oneself'*.

The attempt *'to swim for oneself'* within the everyday is the purpose of Uncertain Wanderings. Our encounters with the everyday as Simmel identifies, is one consisting of, *'the intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of our outer and inner stimuli'*.

This then is the social impact upon our individuality.

The history of responding to this impact is already a long one and in its English tradition precedes the modern as I have used the term today, with literary and visionary figures like Daniel Defoe, William Blake, and Thomas de Quincey. All wanderers whose influence would inform the likes of Charles Baudelaire and the figure of the Flaneur; Andre Breton and Surrealism; and Guy Debord and the Situationists.

Implicated in this second list is the city of Paris. When Baron Haussmann oversaw its 'regeneration' during the 1860s it would make Paris into the first modern city, one marked by boulevards, linear streets, roundabouts, lighting, street furniture and public transport. Needless to say not everyone conceived of this renewal as positive. The French playwright Victorien Sardou in a play *Maison neuve* had one of his characters describe the new Paris as;

*'An external sidewalk going on and on forever! A tree, a bench, a kiosk! ....A tree, a bench, a kiosk! A tree, a bench, a kiosk... This is not Athens any longer, it is Babylon!'*

Nevertheless it is the French poet, artist, photographer, philosopher and/or political activist and the city of Paris that has come to define most significantly the wanderer and their objectives. The street then is their place of resistance to calculability and reason. Louis Aragon in his book *'Paris Peasant'* published in 1924, extols the virtues of a *'geography of pleasure'* as an *'effective weapon against life's tediums'*.

Perhaps one reason for this dominant position can be found in Edmund White's book *The Flaneur*, in which he describes the language of English speaking philosophy doing little to *'stir the soul or fire the imagination of young Romantics'*.

It's that word again, soul.

More importantly, he suggests that the fascination with particular French ideas, was that it made the *'individual responsible for all his actions'* and that, *'thinkers everywhere, moreover, were called on to play a role in society, to be engaged or committed'*.

But what actions or commitments are we to be engaged with?

The answer as an action is simple, we walk, we stroll, we wander or we drift throughout the city. The answer as a commitment is more ambiguous. To 'rework' the city and everyday life is often termed as psychogeography, a rather indeterminate term that encompasses a variety of practices. The term itself can be traced to Guy Debord and to Paris during the 1950s, and his definition;

*'The study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals'.*

But Debord himself declared this definition 'a pleasing vagueness'. A resistance then to the idea being fixed, the idea itself 'drifted' whether he liked it or not, which by the way he did not. Perhaps a more useful definition is Merlin Coverley's from his book 'Psychogeography';

*'For psychogeography may usefully be viewed less as the product of a particular time and place than as a meeting point of a number of ideas and traditions with interwoven histories'.*

Whatever else an individual does within their 'pleasing vagueness', walking ultimately determines the strategy. Whether to transgress the boundaries set for the social environment, or to reveal the mysterious 'underbelly' of the historical city, or to play with its contemporary surface, the banality of the everyday is to be exorcised and made 'marvellous'.

For me this means to photograph.

The exorcism is a surrealist enterprise for it allows the photograph as a document or as an evidence to be at the very intersection of geographical and psychological 'transformation'. To photograph is to place oneself in front of the subject. However, to suggest that this implies only that a document or an evidence is produced, fails to recognise the inherent photographic paradox, that of our own subjective relationship to the subject.

Why is that the object identified and not something else?

The greatest of 'street' photographers, Henri Cartier-Bresson understood this beautiful ambiguity, when he wrote in 1995 in a tribute to Andre Breton, Surrealism's founder, that;

*'It is to surrealism that I owe allegiance, for it has taught me to allow the camera lens to rummage in the debris of the unconscious and of chance'.*

Recognised for all of his working life as a photojournalist, Bresson would deny the simple idea that the photograph was only ever in a pure state, that of a document. He was in the picture and his private motivation and 'rummage' are there, no matter that they are not discernible to either you or I.

Take as a principle that idea, the rummage, remove the journalistic endeavour, and we have a perfected twentieth century avant-garde practice and now, a twenty first century 'tradition' for a response to everyday life.

