

A New Dérive

by Christopher Collier

"Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes. It is rather hard work: there is now no smooth road into the future: but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles. We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen".

- D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

The Arcades Project by Jennie Savage, delving, listening and observing in the heart of the city of Cardiff, can be situated within a tradition of psychogeographical exploration that dates back to the France of the 19th century and possibly beyond. There are certainly apparent parallels that can be drawn between Jennie's work and the similarly named Arcades Project of Walter Benjamin. A Marxist literary critic and philosopher, Benjamin's great unfinished work dealt with the city life of Paris in the 19th century and the figure of the flâneur: the figure of the 'stroller' or 'loafer' deriving from the French verb *flâner*, meaning 'to stroll'. Baudelaire defined the flâneur as a person who walks the city in order to experience it and Benjamin's work seeks to address and lament the marginalisation of this figure of the flâneur in the increasingly mechanised and consumerist streets of his contemporary Paris. In this great, final work he offers 'a series of fragmentary insights into life in 19th century Paris'¹ in the form of an analysis of the arcades. The Paris arcades were traditional emporia, conducive to the wanderings of a casual flâneur that were to be destroyed in the name Baron Haussmann's 19th cent. redevelopment of the city. It is often ventured that the redesign of Paris with its long straight boulevards was intended to facilitate the use of artillery and the mobilisation of troops – town planning based on suppressing the mob. The parallels with the Cardiff Arcades Project here become yet more apparent for much like the Cardiff arcades and the redevelopment of the city centre in the form of the St. Davids 2 shopping centre with its increasing privatisation and voyeuristic manipulation of city space, for Benjamin it is was the commercial forces of the department store that ultimately swallowed up the figure of the flâneur, occluding him from the streets that gave him life.

'The city was now landscape, now a room. And both of these went into the construction of the department store, which made use of the flânerie itself in order to sell goods. The department store was the flâneur's final coup'

– Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, pg, 129.

The department store may well have been the flâneur's final coup but it also appeared to sound his death knell. It became apparent that the forces of consumerism had themselves pulled off a classic piece of détournement (before that term was coined) in the subversion of this originally subversive figure into the service of consumption. In Cardiff today, as in 19th Cent. Paris, with the flâneur 'increasingly hedged in and barred from the streets'² what options are left for the would-be urban wanderer and explorer? How might we use a new process of dérive to rediscover and remake new utopias from the sprawling 'domination of the freeway'³ in which we find ourselves mired?

The curious and bleak psychogeography of the homogenised, post-modern urban

¹ Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography*, pg, 63

² Coverley, pg, 65

³ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* pg, 97

hinterland was pre-empted in Ivan Chitchevlov's *Formulary for a New Urbanism*⁴, written in 1953 in which he stated 'A mental disease has swept the planet: banalisation'. It is a description that has gained yet more traction under the sprawling effects of globalisation and a homogenised, capital orientated model of urban planning that alienates citizens the world over, blanking out unplanned street interaction, fluid and dynamic identities, local history and social and political interaction. It is the process in which Michel de Certeau claims 'rumours propagated by the media cover everything'⁵ and 'Beneath the fabricating and universal writing of technology, opaque and stubborn places remain'⁶. He draws the distinction between the walker and voyeur. I would like to investigate how one might navigate such a 'glitter of spectacular distractions'⁷ in keeping with the principals of the flâneur.

As it was essentially through a kind of process of détournement that the wanderings of the flâneur - what might later be termed dérive - were subsumed into the environment of consumption (via the spectacle of the department store and the empire of the voyeur) I decided to examine the possibilities of what might be labelled counter-détournement.

In the conventional sense 'détournement within the old cultural spheres is a method of propaganda, a method which testifies to the wearing out and loss of importance of those spheres'⁸ but what of the type of détournement enacted in the non-cultural spheres, the type that is observed in the creation of the department store, in the transformation of flâneur and voyeur. This is the détournement, not of word, statement, image or event, but the détournement of symbol, of icon, the semiotic stripping of the subject back to its essential meanings. To attempt such a process is inherently difficult and unavoidably subversive.

A method that I propose for such a process involves a détournement enacted upon that arch-symbol of consumerism and individualism, as decried by Debord and the Situationists, the motor car. Merlin Coverley in his *Psychogeography* claims that 'street life has been suppressed and that same hostility to the pedestrian that drove the flâneur from the streets of nineteenth century Paris continues unabated today'⁹. The situation that he describes is what Debord called the 'dictatorship of the automobile'¹⁰. Whilst Debord saw the automobile as the agent of alienation, more recently J G Ballard adopted a more ambiguous stance, perceiving the car as means by which to transcend banality: one of his most famous characters describes a car crash as 'the only real experience I had been through for years'¹¹. Indeed Ballard ventured to explore the possibilities of semiotic détournement upon the icon of the automobile. Controversially he was to examine the side effects of what he defined as the 'Death of Affect', the loss of emotional engagement and alienation of modern living, through the symbol of the car in his 1973 novel *Crash*.

What I propose is not similar to Ballard's approach in terms of method, however it does involve the subversion of the automobile as icon of alienation, a method of détournement in the spirit of the subversive games played out by those proto-Situationists in their *Potlatch* journal, the Lettrist International. It would be a surreal evocation of play within the context of urbanism, in the style of the Lettrist '*Psychogeographical Game of the Week*'. I

⁴ From '*Internationale Situationniste #1*' Ken Knabb (Ed) *Situationist International Anthology*, pg2

⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, pg, 108

⁶ de Certeau, pg, 201

⁷ Guy Debord, '*Society of the Spectacle*' pg 28

⁸ From Knabb, pg 45

⁹ Merlin Coverley *Psychogeography*, pg102

¹⁰ *Society of the Spectacle*, pg, 97

¹¹ JG Ballard, *Crash*, pg 32

would like to establish a psychogeographic method of motorised *dérive*, a piece of classic, subversive *détournement* of de Certeau's 'fabricating and universal writing of technology',¹² namely Sat-Nav *Dérive*. In returning to a piece of textual *détournement* briefly, let me propose: everyone will drive in his own personal "cathedral," so to speak. There will be vistas more conducive to dreams than any drug, and soundtracks to which one cannot help but love. I would seek to 'jam', to reprogram, that technological antidote to being lost – the satellite navigation system. As Walter Benjamin states:

Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance – nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city – as one loses oneself in a forest – that calls for quite a different schooling. Then signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily standing erect at its centre.

- Walter Benjamin, *A Berlin Chronicle* (from *Wanderlust*, Rebecca Solnit, pg, 199)¹³.

To get truly lost, one must abdicate responsibility for the journey, the direction, to the unconscious or to surrealist automated techniques such as Debord's unnamed friend's navigation of the German Harz Mountains with the use of a London map¹⁴. The reprogrammed Sat Nav allows just such an automated method of exploration.

Through either a method of the physical reprogramming of Sat-Nav software in order to generate random instructions each time it reaches a junction or else the entering of postcode destinations derived from randomly generated algorithms the Sat-Nav is subverted into an instrument of *dérive*: a tool for getting lost. Through the constant and unplanned stream of randomised instructions the device enables the user to transcend and subvert the voyeuristic systems of traffic management and road planning, once more assuming the position of the 'walker' in the de Certeau sense. When used in combination with an in-car stereo, fitted with a randomising MP3 player or modified radio that randomly retunes every minute, the combination of randomised vistas, viewpoints and directions is combined with an equally randomised soundtrack. This musical accompaniment facilitates unexpected mental associations, incongruous juxtapositions of sound and image, the feeling of exploration and mental detachment that is an essential component of being a *flâneur*. The participant becomes removed from a conventional method of travelling and experiencing the city and instead is left to free associate on a journey that is as much mental as it is physical, exploring alternative ways of seeing and feeling. The *flâneur*-driver in time occupies a different mental space and begins to feel less like a commuter and more like the protagonist of a personal psychodrama that may lead, like this proposal, anywhere and everywhere, round in circles or even nowhere at all.

¹² de Certeau, pg, 201

¹³ Rebecca Solnit *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, pg.199

¹⁴ Guy Debord, Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography' Knabb, pg 5