

political and economic change by developing the transformative potential of images of landscape.' Thirty-five years earlier, I had set out with what was essentially the same aim, expressed slightly differently.

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The Poetic Experience of Townscape and Landscape

The desire to transform the world is not uncommon, and there are a number of ways of fulfilling it. One of these is by adopting a certain subjectivity, aggressive or passive, deliberately sought or simply the result of a mood, which alters experience of the world, and so transforms it.

There is nothing particularly new or unusual about this. The subjectivity involved is that of the wandering daydreamer – Edgar Allan Poe's in 'The Man of the Crowd'; Baudelaire's *flâneurs* and dandies; Apollinaire's Baron d'Ormesan, the inventor of amphionism; Louis Aragon and his contemporaries in *Le Paysan de Paris*. The thrill they all seek is the frisson Aragon termed 'a feeling for nature', their realm is the street, and the common object of their speculation the phenomenon of place.

I began to pursue the 'feeling for nature' several years ago. My starting point was that of an architect, and my motivation the desire to find, already existing, the buildings that I wanted to build but for a number of reasons was unable to.

The more I looked the more I found, and the more I found the more I looked, but gradually my interest shifted from the instant



Coal hopper, Nine Elms Lane, London SW8, 1979

transformation of a building (object), to the discovery of a deeper sensation of place (space) akin to the *stimmung* that Nietzsche discovered during his last euphoria in Turin, and that so affected de Chirico.

The present-day *flâneur* carries a camera and travels not so much on foot as in a car or on a train. There are several reasons for this, mostly connected with the decline of public life and urbanism (another kind of *flâneur* lives on in fiction – the private investigator – though his secrets are well hidden behind the street fronts), but also because there is something about a photograph or a shot in a film that exactly corresponds to the *frisson* that Aragon identified. As early as 1918, in his first published writing, he wrote: 'Likewise on the screen objects that were a few moments ago sticks of furniture or books of cloakroom tickets are transformed to the point where they take on menacing or enigmatic meanings.'

I became a sort of architectural photographer and film-maker, trying to produce photographs and film footage that interpreted the objects of my desire as I saw them. It occurred to me that a

common aspect of these interpretations was a kind of analogy that saw the places I 'discovered' and photographed in terms of other places that I knew, or knew of, and it also occurred to me that much of this experience of other places was gained from looking at photographs and films. The image of a place on the screen is transformed in exactly the same way as the objects to which Aragon refers – by the photography itself, by the images that precede and follow it, and by the narrative.

To a certain extent, I began to look at places as potential photographs, or better still, film images, and even the still photographs took on the character of film stills.

This visual material deliberately depicts places that are nearly or altogether devoid of human presence and activity, but which because of this absence are suggestive of what could happen, or what might have happened. They are places in which events might *take place*, and the events are seen rather as possible contemporary myths. But the myths have a history – maybe they *are* history – and this history can be constructed as a narrative – a reconstruction of a past daydream or the construction of a new one – which links still images or provides a setting for the film, in the same way as the locations provide a setting for the action in other films. The aim is to depict the place as some sort of historical palimpsest, and/or the corollary of this, an exposition of a state of mind.

Such is a summary of the development of this activity up to now. What follows is an attempt to map out the tradition that has supported this development. There are different aspects to this: the literature of the wandering daydreamer, whom I perhaps inaccurately term the *flâneur*, the visual arts tradition of the reinterpretation of everyday objects and landscapes, which might be termed Surrealist realism, though it probably has more to do with photography as a way of seeing than any particular mode of thought; and a way of depicting places in literature and film where they are inextricably bound up with the state of mind of the characters who inhabit or observe them.

The *Flâneur*

The *flâneur* as a literary motif appears in two modes, or rather can be seen as signifying two types of experience. The first of these is that of a wanderer, perhaps a dandy, who takes the city as his salon, strolling from café to bar in search of amusement and perhaps romance. His chance encounters are largely with people; his haunts chosen for the company they provide, rather than any melancholy architectural quality, and the oneiric quality of his experience is largely the result of his surrender to the randomness of urban life.

The other type of *flâneur* drifts through the city as if it were the substance of a dream, marvelling at the transformations that this brings about. He may meet others, he may fall passionately in love, but this is not his motive, it merely enhances his experience by enabling it to be shared.

There is also the lonely life of the street photographer, who acts the *flâneur* in the hope of recording little glimpses of the marvellous with his camera. His is a difficult task, for poetic insights so rarely survive their capture on the emulsion. But I digress.

Edgar Allan Poe wrote, in 1840, a short story, 'The Man of the Crowd'. The narrator, a convalescent, sits in a coffee house in London observing the thronging pedestrians passing the window. With that new vision often granted to those recently recovered from illness, he is enjoying finding distinct types among the passers-by, when an old man who fits none of these captivates his curiosity. He leaves the coffee house and follows the man as he wanders through the streets with no aim other than to be constantly in a crowd. The afternoon turns to evening, and the evening to night. Still the old man walks on and still the narrator follows fascinated, trying to discover what the old man is about. On the evening of the following day he gives up his pursuit, knowing that it will never end: "This old man," I said at length, "is the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. *He is the man of the crowd.*"

While Poe's attitude to the old man is far from any sympathetic identification, here I believe for the first time we see some recurring themes in 'urban dream' writing: the narrator's convalescent state, a heightened state of awareness: 'one of those happy moods which are so precisely the converse of *ennui* – moods of the keenest appetency, when the film from the mental vision departs'² – and his resultant rather alienated observation through the window of what came to be called 'modern life'; his subsequent pursuit of an enigma; the description of the streets through which they pass, the low-life – they enter a gin-palace at dawn – and above all the emerging sensitivity to the erotic implications of crowds.

Poe's reputation in Europe was considerably enhanced by Baudelaire, who praised and translated his works. He quotes 'The Man of the Crowd' in 'The Painter of Modern Life'. Baudelaire's writing is full of awareness of 'the poetry of modern life', the life of the streets and boulevards and other public places, but specific references to townscape are rare. His encounters are with people, or spirits, but not places. In the letter to Arsène Houssaye, which serves as the preface to *Paris Spleen*, he writes of his desire to create the poetic prose of which the book is composed: 'It was, above all, out of my exploration of huge cities, out of the medley of their innumerable interrelations, that this haunting ideal was born.'³

Apollinaire produced the most demonstrative of *flâneur* writings. In *The Wandering Jew* the story is not unlike 'The Man of the Crowd', but here the enigma guides the narrator through Prague until it transpires that he is several centuries old.

The most prophetic of Apollinaire's stories here is 'The False Amphion', one of the *Stories and Adventures of Baron d'Ormesan*.⁴ The Baron is an old acquaintance of the narrator, who thinks he is a tourist guide, but the Baron, on the contrary, has invented a new art form, amphionism:

"The instrument of this art, and its subject matter, is a town of which one explores a part in such a way as to excite in the soul of the amphion, or neophyte, sentiments that inspire in them a sense

of the sublime and the beautiful, in the same way as music, poetry and so on . . .'

'But,' I said laughingly, 'I practice amphionism every day. All I have to do is go for a walk . . .'

'Monsieur Jourdain,' cried Baron d'Ormesan, 'what you say is perfectly true! You practice amphionism without knowing it.'

Now this is all very ironic, but the irony is directed not at the idea of poetic wandering, but at the Baron's insistence that the art consists of composing the journeys, rather than on the one hand building the buildings, or on the other concretising the poetic experience of wandering among them – in other words, that the art depended on the sensibility of the artist, not what he did with it. The Baron's adventures are full of similar misunderstandings, such as the film-makers who, for the sake of realism in their film, pay a man to actually murder a couple.

The point about subjective transformations of townscape is that they do depend on a certain state of mind, which can be adopted deliberately (this is why I write of 'aggressive' subjectivity), but not by an audience (and probably best not at all, for it is best to take one's reveries as they come).

Tourism

This was certainly the case on 14 April 1921, the date of the first Surrealist event. Organised by André Breton, it was to consist solely of direct experience of the city. The Surrealists had already explored brothels and the 'cretinous suburbs' as well as the flea market, but they had not yet demonstrated their discoveries to the public.

The new itinerary would 'put in unison the unconscious of the city with the unconscious of men', and was to take in St Julien-le-Pauvre, the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, the Gare St Lazare and the Canal de l'Ourcq. The first expedition, advertised throughout Paris, to St Julien-le-Pauvre, was a complete failure. It rained and no tourists turned up, and the rest of the tours were cancelled.⁵

It was more than thirty years before anyone tried anything like this again. Once more in Paris, in the early 1950s, the Lettrist group developed the techniques of 'drifting' and 'psychogeography'. Drifting was a free-association in space. Drifters would follow the streets, go down alleys, through doors, over walls, up trees – anywhere that they found desirable. Later 'mass drifts' involved teams linked by walkie-talkie radio. Psychogeography was the correlation of the material obtained by drifting. It was used in making 'emotional maps' of parts of the city, and in other ways.

In 1958, the Lettrists evolved into the Situationist International, and in 1968 their polemic was influential in *les événements*. Drifting was still a preoccupation. In *Ten Days That Shook the University*, an account of the election and subsequent propagandist exploits of a Situationist-inspired group who in 1966 gained a short-lived control of the students' union of Strasbourg University, there is a strip cartoon of two cowboys riding through a landscape:

'What's your scene man?' asks one.

'Reification,' the other replies.

'Yeah? I guess that means pretty hard work with big books and piles of paper on a big table.'

'Nope. I drift. Mostly I just drift.'⁶

Drifting, it seems, has reconstituted itself as a myth.

Le Paysan de Paris

Louis Aragon began writing *Le Paysan de Paris* in 1924, three years after the ill-fated touristic event. It is constructed about descriptions of two places: the Passage de l'Opera, in whose bars he and his contemporaries drank and talked, and the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, which they held in high esteem as an oneiric location, and which was to have been the subject of one of the touristic ventures. Between the two descriptions, he outlines the genesis of 'a feeling for nature':

I felt the great power that certain places, certain sights exercised over me, without discovering the principle of this enchantment. Some everyday objects unquestionably contained for me a part of that mystery, plunged me into that mystery . . . The way I saw it, an object became transfigured: it took on neither the allegorical aspect nor the character of the symbol, it did not so much manifest an idea as constitute that very idea. Thus it extended deeply into the world's mass . . . I acquired the habit of constantly referring the whole matter to the judgement of a kind of frisson which guaranteed the soundness of this tricky operation.⁷

I have already compared this frisson to that preceding the click of a camera, but Aragon's account of his discovery outlines a way of looking at things that runs through the whole history of twentieth-century art, and twentieth-century attitudes to pre-twentieth-century art. On the next page he looks at petrol pumps: 'The nameless sculptors who erected these metallic phantoms were incapable of conforming to a living tradition like that which traced the cruciform shapes of churches. These modern idols share a parentage that makes them doubly redoubtable.'⁸

Petrol pumps like these turn up in the paintings of Edward Hopper – *Gas* (1940) and *Four Lane Road* (1956) – and in the photographs of Robert Frank – *The Americans* (1958). Similar perceptions of everyday objects occur in painting, sculpture, photography and film in areas as diverse as metaphysical painting, *film noir* or 'conceptual' art, never mind pop art. The transformation may be seen both as a realisation of the ontologically miraculous and as a hysterical alienation from banality. What is remarkable about Aragon's transformation is not just that he managed to perform it without benefit of nostalgia, which so automatically provides a poetic cloak for any object (those petrol pumps, or their heads, also turn up highly priced in antique shops), but that he managed to direct it at whole districts of the city. André Breton said of him, years after their break: 'I still recall the extraordinary role that Aragon played in our daily strolls through Paris. The localities that we passed through in his



Jacques-André Boiffard: 'My point of departure will be the Hôtel des Grands Hommes . . .' from *Nadja* (1928). The statue, melted down during the occupation, was of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

company, *even the most colourless ones* [my emphasis], were positively transformed by a spellbinding romantic inventiveness.⁹

Breton, for whom the street was 'the fountain of all true experience', wrote another classic text of Surrealist Paris, the story of his relationship with the enigmatic, innocent, experienced Nadja. An account of Surrealist love (shared revelation rather than physical passion), their affair takes place in the streets, in cafés, on trains. Some of these locations are illustrated by a number of remarkably prosaic photographs.

The eroticism portrayed is as much that of their relationship with their surroundings as with each other. Georges Bataille writes: 'Erotic activity, by dissolving the separate beings that participate in it, reveals their fundamental continuity, like the waves of a stormy sea.'¹⁰

Love is the conquest of the discontinuity between individuals: hence the erotic dimension to 'losing oneself in the crowd', or indeed losing oneself in the city, habitually so alienating, reconstituted instead as a dream. It is in such an appropriation, such a repossession of townscape – or landscape – that the possibility of an erotic relationship between people and public space is to be found.¹¹

There are other Surrealist townscape texts: Robert Desnos's *La Liberté ou l'Amour!* (1927) and those of Walter Benjamin, notably *Marseilles* (1928), in which he converts the then new cathedral into a railway station, and *Hashish in Marseilles* (1928), which enjoys the transformations enabled by the drug.¹²

Benjamin recounts the remark made of Eugène Atget that he photographed the deserted Paris streets 'like scenes of crime': 'The scene of a crime, too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence. With Atget, photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance.'¹³

Bernard Tschumi has written that, for Georges Bataille, 'architecture covers the scene of the crime with monuments'¹⁴ (this is perfectly true – just think of Trafalgar Square). Atget's depictions of public places in and around Paris captured, in the

most modest way (this is surely his strength), the sense that 'anything could happen' that the Surrealists were later to write about, as well as being evidence of all the terrible things that already had happened. They reveal an ambiguity, a potential for transformations both subjective and actual, in ordinary locations. The crime that Bataille and Benjamin allude to is an ambiguous affair, but its major resonance is that of the rarity, in everyday experience and in actuality, of such transformations. They come about only, if ever, in reveries, revolutions, or the more poignant moments of war.

Atget's photographs were of the streets; Surrealist photographers went to more exotic locations. Eli Lotar's photographs of the abattoirs at La Villette illustrate Bataille's entry 'abattoir' in the section 'Chronique: Dictionnaire' in *Documents*.¹⁵ Bataille concerns himself with outlining the significance of abattoirs, that they are the modern counterpart of sacrificial temples in which animals were killed for both religious and alimentary purposes, the cursed status of abattoirs in modern times resulting from the denial of their religious function. Lotar's photographs demonstrate this world within the one we think we know, as they demonstrate the camera's ability to unmask it. It is almost as if the machine was built for this purpose, as we now know only too well, for indiscriminate transformations of the ordinary into the miraculous now form one of the mainstays of advertising.

Anguish

At the same time, the discovery of the ability to perceive the marvellous leads to the discovery that things have a habit of not staying that way:

Although I can always see how beautiful anything could be if only I could change it, in practically every case there is nothing I can really do. Everything is changed into something else in my imagination, then the dead weight of things changes it back into what it was

in the first place. A bridge between imagination and reality must be built.¹⁶

In Poe's writing, taken as a whole, two things seem to stand out as most remarkable: his descriptions of extraordinary states of consciousness, and of rooms, buildings and landscapes. Many of his works consist of little else: 'The Philosophy of Furniture', a treatise on decor; 'The Domain of Arnheim' and its 'pendant' 'Landor's Cottage', which describe respectively the creation of a superlative landscape garden by an individual of exemplary endowments, and an idyllic cottage inhabited by an idyllic couple in an idyllic setting. There is no other purpose to these works than these descriptions. In 'The Pit and the Pendulum', the greater part of the writing is description of the narrator's delirium as he hovers on the edge of consciousness, and most of the rest details his gradual awareness of the awful particularities of the dungeon into which he has been cast. In 'The Fall of the House of Usher', the place and the state of mind of its residents are even more inextricably bound up, though not this time in the first person, for the narrator is a guest: 'I know not how it was – but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible.'

With this observation, Poe distances the narrator from the reader, who cannot help imagine some 'poetic' gloom precisely because it will only exist in his imagination. Poe is pinpointing a rather photographic dilemma – for photographs of unpoetic gloom, provided they are good photographs, generally make it look rather poetic whether this is the intention or not, as in war reportage and so on. The narrator goes on: 'I looked upon the scene before me . . . with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium – the bitter lapse into everyday life – the hideous dropping off of the veil.'¹⁷

Here he compares a particular state of mind with that following

the loss of another, again a kind of paradox. But this is typical, for Poe is at his best when describing not just the heightened states of mind of his characters, but the anguish which their (and presumably his) sensibilities bring about in their everyday lives. Thus, of Roderick Usher:

He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odours of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror.¹⁸

Throughout Poe's work, there is an implication that those who have access to heightened states of awareness are bound to suffer. Delirium is the result of illness or injury ('The Pit and the Pendulum', 'The Oval Portrait'), persons of extreme sensibility suffer ('Usher'), are haunted by irrational fears ('The Premature Burial'), or turn to drink and murder ('The Black Cat'), and those who cultivate the senses in the face of suffering and adversity invite destruction nonetheless ('The Masque of the Red Death'). He seems especially familiar, like the narrator in 'Usher', with the depression encountered when any heightened state departs.

This is a recurring theme in Baudelaire. In 'The Double Room', one of the prose poems of *Paris Spleen*, the room is an idyllic space; the light, the furnishings and the company are sublime, but then little memories of current circumstances alter this perception: 'And that perfume out of another world which in my state of exquisite sensibility was so intoxicating? Alas, another odour has taken its place, of stale tobacco mixed with nauseating mustiness. The rancid smell of desolation.'¹⁹ There is a political dimension to this:

Each subjectivity is different from every other one, but all obey the same will to self-realisation. The problem is one of setting their variety in a common direction, of creating a united front of subjectivity. Any attempt to build a new life is subject to two conditions:

firstly, that the realisation of each individual subjectivity will either take place in a collective form or it will not take place at all; and, secondly, that 'To tell the truth, the only reason anyone fights is for what they love. Fighting for everyone else is only the consequence' (Saint-Just).²⁰

Transformations of everyday space are subjective, but they are not delusions, simply glimpses of what could happen, and indeed does happen at moments of intense collectivity, during demonstrations, revolutions and wars. It is this realisation, together with that of the individual's predicament, 'his desperate desire to flee from the prison of his subjectivity, his furious longing to find some escape from the ugliness of modern life',²¹ that set up a dialectic that can inform an outlook on the townscape and landscape that constitute our surroundings, which are, as Georges Bataille points out, the physiognomy of our society.²²

Atmosphere, Palimpsest and Other Interpretations of Landscape

I don't suppose I can have missed a single episode in the first year of *Z Cars*, but I can't remember any of them. In fact I don't think I can remember in detail anything that I ever saw on television apart from a few oft-repeated items, and I suspect that such lack of retention is general.

This is a pity, for apparently only two episodes of *Z Cars* survive from the first six months of the series. I mention this having seen them (again?) at the NFT last September, this time on the cinema screen, where they were revealed as examples of a hitherto unknown and rather timeless genre. (Although there were elements of nostalgia: the cars, for instance – there were always an awful lot of Fords. Perhaps the BBC had done a deal.)

'They fight crime on wheels in a new series beginning tonight', said the *Radio Times* on 28 December 1961. Fighting crime on wheels has got itself a bad name in the period since, but in those days the lads in the cars were cast as more or less sophisticated social workers, imbued albeit with the extra moral authority of the law, who cruised from domestic disturbance to truant shoplifter distributing a positive understanding over the public-sector suburban desolation of (Kirkby) Newtown. It is this desolation that hasn't dated: it's all still there, and it still appears on television, in the work of Alan Bleasdale et al. The difference is that in 1961 things