

Urban Wandering

Ahead of a major new cinema season, *Urban Wandering – Film and the London Landscape*, writer Will Self explores the history behind the movement in this essay on ‘psychogeography.’



Will Self © Valerie Bennett 2010

‘Psychogeography is the undertaking of essentially purposeless transits of the urban environment (i.e. with no discernible commercial motivation), with the aim of achieving new insights into the relationship between psyche and place.’

The French Marxian groupuscule known as the Situationist International, the ideological avatar of which, Guy Debord, coined the term ‘psychogeography’, both begins and arguably ended with film. Debord’s own film *Hurléments en faveurs de Sade* (1952), was a typically avant-garde concoction of screeching soundtrack and scumbled imagery, intended by its creator to be unwatchable. It was forced by Debord and his then confrères in the Letterist International (the SI’s forerunner) on to the programme at the Cannes Film Festival in 1952, where it attracted predictable opprobrium. Forty-four years later the hagiographic TV special *Guy Debord, son art et son temps* received equally negative responses – although for diametrically opposite reasons. In the parabola described between the edgy discontinuities of the former film, and the seamless banalities of the latter, we can if we choose, discern the compass of psychogeographic film-making.

Except for this: if we consider psychogeography to be an examination – through creative praxis – of the free psychic interplay between the human mind and place, then just as ‘psychogeography’ long antedates Debord (in

London we can trace its origins via De Quincey and Wordsworth to Addison and Defoe), so psychogeographic film-making is by no means confined to the would-be revolutionists of the Rive Gauche in the years leading up to *les evenements* of May 1968. In the Barbican’s celebration of London’s psychogeographic interpretation, there are films that verge on being conventional documentaries, intended to present a synoptic view of a city that, in its vast size, age and complexity, is effectively ungraspable by the individual subject; and there are those that employ non-linear and discontinuous narrative techniques, to force upon their viewers a panoptic sense of the city as an entity that exists outside space and time as a self-evolving phenomenon, one that may, conceivably, be possessed of its own form of consciousness.

At the core of this Barbican season, surrounded by a constellation of interesting films, each of which tries in its way to express London’s *genius loci*, we find the work of **Iain Sinclair** and **Patrick Keiller**, the doyennes of London psychogeography. Sinclair may – in truly Debordian fashion – wish to dissociate himself from an ascription he sees as confining his own ever-protean practise – filmic, fictive, poetic, descriptive – in a typological straightjacket, but there’s no gainsaying the contribution he has made, over five decades now, to a vital appreciation of our city that fuses the felt and the understood. His and Andrew Köttling’s whimsically revolutionary *Swandown* (2012) is a perfect example of the psychogeographic

derive – or ‘drift’ – conceived of as a transit of the urban environment for non-commercially-bound reasons, the aim of which is to subvert what Debord termed ‘the spectacle’ in this case the unholy miscegenation of global capital and parochial nationalism that was the London Olympics.

Patrick Keiller’s *London* (1994), one part of the director’s *Robinson* trilogy, stands as perhaps the apogee of London psychogeographic film. Film is in many ways an unpromising medium for psychogeography, often depending as it does for its emotional effects on rapid editing, serial drama, and precise framing. But in the hands of Keiller the frame wraps around the viewer, the drama becomes atemporal, and the deployment of the extended – and often static – shot becomes a tunnel through which we travel into an Einsteinian city of space-time.

Perhaps the best possible impact a film can have is to cause its viewers to regard the world around them with fresh eyes; watching these London films in the very heart of London will, I feel sure, massively intensify such effects.

Urban Wandering – Film and the London Landscape
18 Sep–2 Oct
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