

Back Pedaling
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Psychogeography and the Backpedaler

by William Humber

An older man I talked with on a bridge recently, while we waited for a soulful sounding train whistle in the distance to appear as a physical entity round the bend in the tracks to the east, was balancing his bicycle on a frigid Sunday morning in January.

“I like to cycle even in the winter because it cuts my time in half to get to the store,” he told me. He lived in one of the subdivisions on the north edge of town, a testament to the modern style of putting all the new houses a long way from most commercial activity so that walking to them becomes uncomfortable or unlikely. Then he told me his reason for commuting the mile and a half by bike. “To get my smokes,” he said.

I wanted to applaud him at first but then pondered the likelihood that just one of those cigarettes probably undid all of the good his ride provided. Then I reflected on my own prudish moralizing, and finally concluded that aren't we humans an amazing species – so capable of contradiction in most things we do.

Now we, and that cyclist, may have a way of putting our paradoxical wanderings into a clever frame. The field, for it is too early to call it a science, though it might qualify as art, is called psychogeography, an idea dating back to post war Paris and a group dubbed the Situationists and inspired by Guy Debord.

What they, and their growing number of followers, have set out to do is to psychically reclaim the built and natural environments surrounding us. To identify the absurdity of our waking up in Toronto, and in that same morning be reading newspapers purchased at Pearson Airport in a Vancouver coffee shop, but yet have no idea of what is within cycling distance of our own residence. This psychological disorientation can be blamed on a host of fast moving vehicles, from the cars transporting us to working places not just in other municipalities but with different growing seasons, to the yellow buses replacing that lovely childhood walk of discovery to school and back.

Writer Will Self's psychogeographic moments included walking from his home in central London to Heathrow, flying to New York and then walking into Manhattan from JFK. And then of course writing about a book about it along with gifted artistic touches from Ralph Steadman.

Aleks Janicijevic's companion is a digital camera for walking the streets of his native

Serbia, or Havana, and, on two occasions with me, the old neighbourhood of Bowmanville, Ontario and then, with another friend Sally Moore, the more complicated charms of a relatively new subdivision in Durham Region. Sally's willingness to engage in this discovery, by the way, put the lie to Self's claim that this field seemed to be only a male phenomenon. Though with its trappings of accessories, the pursuit of minutiae, and the excuse to discover new bars and pubs, one can see why he made such a claim.

Self describes Peter Ackroyd's writing as uncovering a phrenology of London by examining its characters and proclivities. Another description is deep topography such as that practiced by William Least Heat Moon when he decamped to a rural township in the American mid-west and by wandering its roads, meeting its people, and doing the background research, uncovered, as close as one could, the meaning of a place.

Psychogeography is the perfect refuge for the somewhat aimless cyclist, or the man I met on his way to buy smokes, because it reintroduces its practitioners to their surroundings in ways that are surprising, subtle, and loaded with meaning. In discovering a small world we discover the whole world.

There is a key word contained in this description however – aimless. And by rights that's not quite accurate. The idea is to plot a piece of territory, and ramble it like the flâneur. Perhaps the word timeless is a needed addition, for one should not be bound by strict timetables, nor by rigid paths but by a sense of intrigue and a willingness to leave the preordained in search of the unexpected.

If recording the experience renders the adventure somewhat utilitarian so be it, but there is something to be said for the permanence of memory captured in storytelling or images. The psychogeographer on wheels is the ultimate "backpedaler" – a person who covers much territory but all of which is truly experienced and then returns home with the travel intact and ready to be told. It becomes an inspiration to others undertaking similar journeys. Only in this way can we reclaim the world so extraordinarily detailed from space through Google Earth but so little understood and appreciated on the ground.