



Towards the Detour: Commuting as Mobile Making

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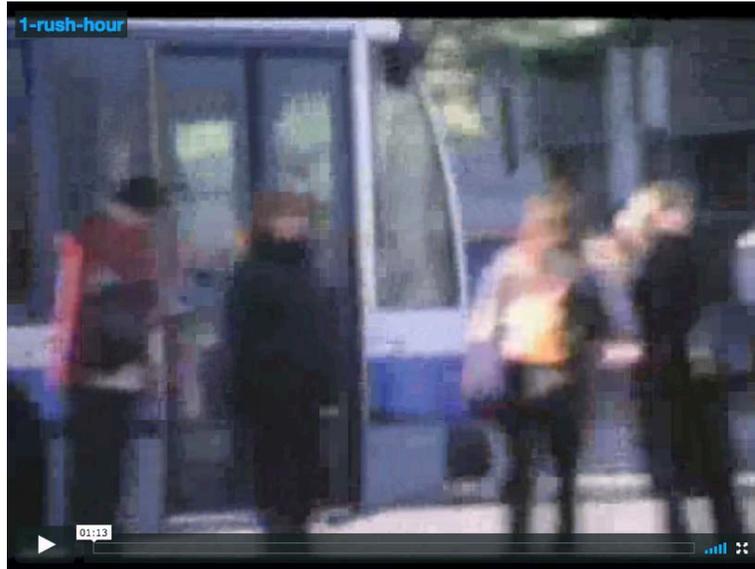
Towards the Detour: Commuting as Mobile Making

Taien Ng-Chan

Abstract

The functionalistic and routine commute can be seen as simply necessary transport to move from point A to point B, but it can also be a meaningful practice of everyday life. A poetic, phenomenological and autoethnographic methodology can be part of a deep mapping process for attending to one's liminal spaces more closely, sharpening one's skills at reading the physical and ephemeral layers of the city and the self in the urban social landscape. It can also be a relational art practice, taking from both Lynchian and Debordian psychogeographies to uncover stories, histories, ambiances and emotions. Mobile media making and locative art can contribute to a practice of the detour, towards creative engagement in quotidian travel.

Introduction



video: rush hour <https://vimeo.com/203940899>

Like a nomadic grazer, the exploratory mapper detours around the obvious so as to engage what remains hidden. – James Corner (1999, 225)

Metro, boulot, dodo

For many people, the parts of the city that they experience most are the ones they move through on the way to work or to school. In his “Theory of the Dérive” ([1956] 1996), Guy Debord points to Chombart de Lauwe’s famous map of all the trajectories made by a Parisian student over the course of one year, to illustrate the narrowness to which one’s life can sometimes be reduced. There are times when a person can become caught in the nine-to-five structures of modern society, and one’s daily itineraries may form similarly narrow triangles between home, work, and places of leisure and consumption. Debord expressed “indignation at the fact that there are people who live like that” (22), and although I am inclined to agree, I know also that to wander the streets in a *dérive* or

as a *flâneur* is a luxury that some cannot afford. Sometimes, the daily commute is the only time that I am able to be actually out in the city, moving through it.

Ole B. Jensen argues that people “not only observe the city whilst moving through it, rather they constitute the city by practising mobility” (2009, 140). Clearly, the method of mobility impacts greatly upon how the city is constituted. For example, walking or bicycling allows close contact with the streets and the urban environment, and thus the city is detailed and of a human-bodied scale. Taking public transportation and driving, especially during rush hour, can be intense experiences, with line-ups and crowding on city transit (see video: “rush hour”) in a very social city, and traffic gridlock on highways in a sprawling city. As Doreen Massey points out, space is the “sphere of a multiplicity of trajectories” (2005, 119). One does not just move through or across it. Since space is relational and social, one also helps to alter space, co-constitute it, participate in its production.

The mindset with which a person approaches the commute is also important. Time spent in such quotidian movement can be seen as simply transportation, a necessary dead time where nothing happens, or it can be a hectic rush to be endured and avoided if possible. It also can be a time to prepare for work or to decompress, and it can be seen as “gift time” (Jain and Lyons 2008), a space for contemplation or enjoyment, to listen to music or podcasts, to read, or to daydream. As Jensen points out, “pleasure seems to be a less discussed dimension” of non-exotic everyday mobility, but one that can provide a meaningful approach to everyday travel as a life practice (2009, 152). Instead of being a utilitarian method of transport from point A to B, commuting can be “part of the daily

identity construction of the mobile urbanites...there are aesthetic experiences and emotive attachments to be made” (Jensen 2009, 152).

For myself as an artist, I take pleasure in the commute as a creative and poetic mapping practice, a process of gaining deeper knowledge about my routes through the city, the material, social and political histories of the places that I pass through, the visual and aural details, and in particular, the accumulation of stories that are various shades of made-up and true. Narratives, whether factual or fictional, have the power to provide meaning to what might otherwise be deemed “non-places” in Marc Augé’s sense, that is, locales such as highways, airports, and any in-between kind of place “which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity” (1995, 63). Non-places do not exist in “pure” form, but rather on a continuum and in different ways for different people, depending on their personal knowledge and engagement. A bus driver will relate to the non-place of city transit in a different way than a passenger, for instance. I am interested overall in how we engage with these mobile urban spaces through practices of “deep mapping” or “deep topography,” particularly narratives and stories, images and emotions, that move a non-place closer to place.

The terms “deep mapping” or “deep topography” refer generally to genres of landscape-based writing that incorporate auto/biography, folklore, and local history, though the idea of deep mapping is much wider, and can also include illustration, radio, performance and multimedia (Roberts 2016; Biggs 2010; Biggs 2011; Least Heat-Moon 1991). Here, I am referring to practices of describing a place and its ephemeral and physical elements, which can include narratives and histories, images and sound, as well

as smells, textures, and atmospheres. Each trip through the city adds another layer of space-time, like geological strata, forming one's mental archive of knowledge. The challenge lies not only in how to map the geography, the built environment, and the ephemeral layers that are not normally found on maps – the stories, sensual details, and sociopolitics – but also in how to convey this knowledge to others. Forms of art, particularly locative and site-specific art, are prime examples of innovative ephemeral mapping and affective mapmaking that convey both story and location.

A practice of deep mapping – and deep mapmaking as well – can provide what I call a “detour” within the everyday routine, to turn the functionalistic commute into meaningful mobility. Indeed, many seasoned commuters have a routine in place to “maximize” their efficiency, as Augé notes in his book *In the Metro* (2002), but I am interested in more than efficiency. I propose a practice of detouring for those who wish to build or expand their creative spatial practices; I focus particularly on the daily commute because in my view, it is often overlooked in terms of artistic encounters, even though it could be the perfect space for such – since one is a captive audience, as Michel de Certeau points out in his essay “Railroad Navigation and Incarceration” (1984). The detour does not need to be a physical one. For instance, many of my multimedia art works are maps that one can travel through virtually and mentally, and that aim to convey some of my experiences of moving through the city. Like itinerary maps used by pilgrims (Delano-Smith 2006), these media works can function as either practical or imaginative instructions. My goal is to develop both a theory and a practice of the detour that can assist in highlighting everyday poetic engagements with the self and the ephemeral, mobile city.

Learning from psychogeography

The Situationist *dérive* is often seen as a precursor to many of the practices central to alternative or artistic walking and mapping, which often focus on getting lost (O'Rourke 2013). *Dérive*, in the original French, means “drift”. It is, by Guy Debord’s definition, the opposite of the commute:

In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there (Debord [1956] 1996, 22).

The value in the *dérive*, as “dream-like drift through the city” as James Corner notes, is that it “discloses hidden topographies within ruling, dominant structures in an attempt to re-territorialize seemingly repressed or spent ground” (1999, 235). It permits a critique from within space, rather than from outside and above (as in a masterplan): the “mapping of alternative itineraries and subverting dominant readings and authoritarian regimes” through “the contingent, the ephemeral, the vague, fugitive eventfulness of spatial experience” (Corner 1999, 231). Normally, during a *dérive*, one wanders according to the sensing of attraction and repulsion in the urban landscape, the “axes of passage” and “pivotal points” (Debord [1956] 1996, 26). While not aimless or random, there is no other purpose than the drift.

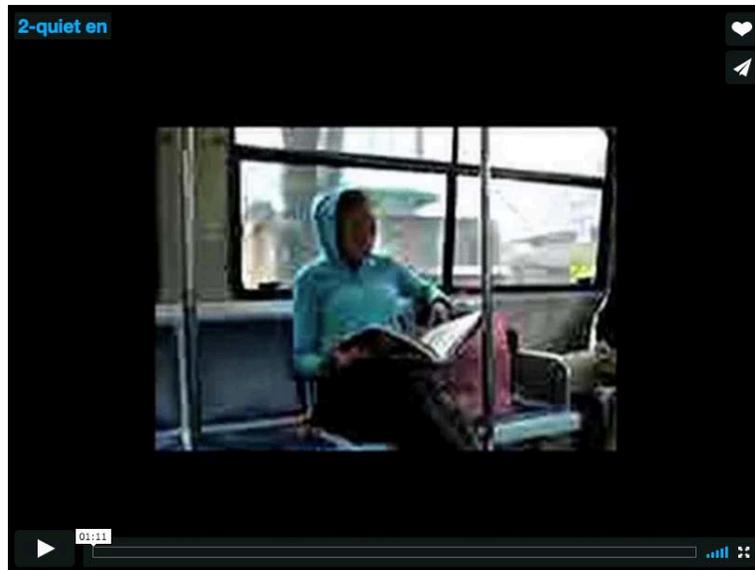
But who can afford to *dérive*? Not parents, usually, nor those with full-time jobs, nor those who are not as easily mobile... in short, it seems, a great part of society. Drifting is paradoxically a privilege for those who are able, who can afford the wandering time, or a necessity for those outside the status quo societal structures of work and leisure, for

instance, the itinerant and homeless. I focus on the routine commute rather than the wander, precisely because it is the opposite of the *dérive*. While methods of play and long wanders are important interventions designed to break routine and widen one's knowledge of the urban landscape, it is the routine walk (or ride) that might have the most relevance and impact upon daily life, simply because one deals with it every day. Rather than seeing routine as something needing to be broken, how can one make use of it as a "tactic" towards connection to place, à la de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984)? Can principles of psychogeography and play be applied to routine?

In English, "to derive" means "to take from," to find the roots, the precedents. In this sense, the detour derives from the *dérive*, but differs in that one does not necessarily need to physically get lost or to drift. Unlike the wander, there is with the commute no discovery of new places, no getting lost. The route is familiar. Each journey like onion skin is laid over all the previous journeys to create a narrative of place, each detail adding up, often unnoticed until something is different. But attending to the details can provide pleasure in the gaining of deep knowledge. In fact, the detour benefits from the repetition of travel because it maps both space and time, through rhythm – with a nod to Henri Lefebvre's *Rhythmanalysis* (2004) – and the accumulation of details and stories. As David Bissell argues, such everyday mobilities can best be visualized as loops, which are temporal formations – "grasped more through their duration and repetition" – rather than just as spatial traces (2013, 360). A detour is usually performed alone as a personal practice, but may also benefit from group work. A detour can be virtual or mental travel. It is simply to turn the functionalistic commute away from its original goal of mere transport into meaningful engagement.

Michael Sorkin, in his book *Twenty Minutes in Manhattan* (2009), provides an excellent example of how to detour. He details his route from his home in Greenwich Village to his studio in Tribeca, a twenty minute walk that he has taken for over fifteen years. He begins with a chapter on his front stairs that leads to discussions on architecture, apartment living, neighbourliness and stoop-sitting, and so forth, each subsequent chapter moving along to the places of his daily route. In his discussion of gentrification, Sorkin notes that as walkable cities become an urbanist ideal, they also tend to become less affordable and less diverse. Lack of choice notwithstanding, the walking commute can be an ideal commute: daily exercise and the chance to create an intimate mental archive of the space-time strata that comprises one's route. It gives itself to a material analysis because one is in close contact with one's surroundings. It is arguably the best method for detailing and describing the city in its physical form.

This mental detouring of one's route can be used with other kinds of commuting, though the spaces and results will be different. The city as materialized by car will usually be larger but less detailed, while the city by metro consists of dark tunnels. As a creative mapping, the archiving of one's route can also be done through photo, sound, text, and other forms of art. For instance, when I lived in Montreal, my non-rush-hour commutes on the 80 Avenue du Parc bus – my regular route to downtown – were often spent in a state of quiet observation, documenting and making videos (see video: “quiet”).



video: quiet <https://vimeo.com/203941083>

The detour also derives from the psychogeography that developed from Kevin Lynch's work on cognitive mapping. The *dérive* is not the only tool of psychogeography, after all. Denis Wood, in his article "Lynch Debord: About two psychogeographies" (2010), points out that the Situationist practice emerged in the 1950s, at roughly the same time that Lynch was experimenting with his cognitive maps. Ten years later, Lynch's work came to influence researchers at Clark University who termed their studies "psychography" and eventually "psychogeography" (186). Although these two practices are very different, they share traits that are uncannily similar. Lynch and Debord were both interested in the city, and in the search for alternate ways of thinking; both methods "grew from a deep dissatisfaction with post-World War II urban-planning practices" (194). However, the obvious difference lies in intent. The Situationists were outside of urban planning as a profession, and aimed at turning the planned city of utility into one of games and dreams. Lynch was within the profession of urban planning and aimed to

change its destructive tendencies towards shaping better cities and more memorable city-images.

The image of the city, as Lynch pointed out (1964), is different for each person, changing according to socio-political factors including class, race and gender. As seen in his study of imageability, Lynch identifies five main elements of the city image: path, edge, node, district, and landmark. He notes that the visual hegemony of paths was the “key influence as the network from which most people experience their surroundings” (45). Pathways are the main elements through which one connects with the city, which acts as a locus point, a hub, a meeting place of vectors, and a thickening of layers. Because paths make up the “network of habitual or potential lines of movement” through the city, they are “the most potent means by which the whole can be ordered” (96). The concentration of habitual travel along a path, as in a transit line, will reinforce this familiar continuous image... “This is the skeleton of the city image” (96). The movements of everyday travel make the bones that hold up the map.

Although the Lynchian and Debordian methods of psychogeography have divergent aims in their original iterations, both take for granted the use of “human instruments” to measure the urban landscape, and both made use of maps as indicators of ephemeral experience. The detour takes elements from both methods. While Lynch’s method offers a wider range of tools and practices for mapping the imagined city, including drawings, questionnaires and interviews, the Situationist *dérive* is useful as it was originally motivated by political aspirations that sought to challenge the functionalistic use of the city and the increasing spectacularization of society wrought by capitalism. This

motivation is often lost in many artistic walking practices that derive from the *dérive*. The detour highlights and updates the motivations behind the original *dérive* to include contemporary issues of social justice around space, place, mobility and embodied experience, while keeping its sense of play.

The Body as Mapping Instrument

The use of the body as an instrument that senses the “psychogeographical relief, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes” (Debord [1956] 1996, 22) is one of the main elements that provides a starting point to the *dérive*. Critics have pointed out the very male nature of the *dérive*, historically, and as I have already noted, its basis seems antithetical to the routine of the commute. However, there are aspects of the *dérive* other than the wander that are valuable and can be recouped and reused in the detour. Debord claimed his methods as objective, but surely, what is attractive or repulsive about the urban landscape differs according to the kind of body one is in, and the values that one holds. A man, a woman and a child each experiences the urban landscape in different ways, which is complicated by multiplicities of other factors, including race, class, ability, and orientation – hence, there can be no singular or completely objective stance. Debord did note that the *dérive* was best performed in small groups, so if there was a good range of diversity within the group, there would a wider sample of experiences. For a solo commuter, the *dérive*’s “playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects” (22) can be reconfigured for the detour by expanding one’s sensitivities not only to the urban landscape, but to one’s own embodiment, phenomenologically and autoethnographically.

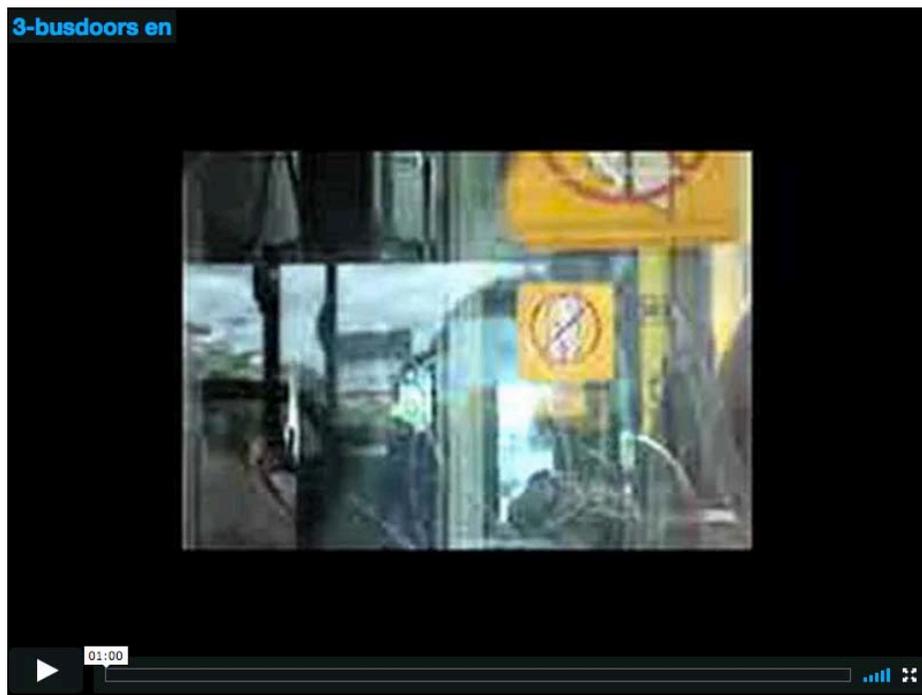
The fact of a body moving through an environment both affects and is affected by that environment. Because I can situate myself within my environment's historical and material contexts, my formulation of the detour is an autoethnographic project as well as an aesthetic and critical one. Autoethnography is "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act" (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011, 1). Autoethnography attempts a break from traditional colonialist models of ethnography, often focusing on subjectivity, reflexivity, fragmentation and hybridity. In addition, Catherine Russell, in her book *Experimental Ethnography* (1999), investigates the collision that occurs when "experimental" and "ethnographic" are brought together to rethink both aesthetics and cultural representation, a "methodological incursion" that renews both avant-garde filmmaking and social theory. She notes that identity can become a powerful tool of cultural criticism, especially when politicized as the site of such discourses as ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, race or class, and proposes that "autobiography becomes ethnographic at the point where the film- or videomaker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes" (Russell 1999, 276). My practices as a media artist are naturally affected by my positioning.

I also follow Sara Ahmed's specifically queer phenomenological approach, which starts, as she succinctly puts it, with "the point from which the world unfolds: the here of the body and the where of its dwelling" (2006, 545). The body is not "merely an object in the

world,” rather “it is our point of view in the world” (551). What does it mean to be oriented in terms of wayfinding? How does one know what to do in order to move towards certain objects, to get to a destination, to have one’s bearings? Philosophically, she asks, does it matter what one is oriented towards? Ahmed investigates this question from the viewpoint of sexual orientation and brings it into dialogue with phenomenology in order to engage with how a body senses objects, and thus, itself. As she notes, “phenomenology emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready to hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds” (Ahmed 2006, 544).

Our bodies give us not only our point of view but also impact how we are seen and treated by others. As the old feminist adage states, the personal is also political. Movement is a gendered and performative activity, as many have pointed out – for instance, see Iris Marion Young’s reflections in her book of essays *On Female Body Experience* (2005). Further, my embodied experience is also about how the specifics of my body as an “Inappropriate Other” can affect the social space. Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1991) speaks about the double positioning of the outsider who is not foreign, who “refuses to reduce herself to an Other” but is not quite the same as the insider (74). Being both on the inside and the outside, my body and its positioning can both provoke spaces of conflict or tension, and allow a reflexivity that is useful in identifying and destabilizing such spaces. Paying attention, then, means attending to not only the outward surroundings but the inward landscapes as well. Whether walking, riding city transit or driving, my methodology is grounded in an experimental and

phenomenological autoethnography that aims for awareness of my own contexts and situations, prompting me to keep looking at things from different perspectives, a vital skill for artists and researchers. It is this psychogeographical use of the body as a spatial sensing instrument, expanded with a practice of phenomenological autoethnography, that can be adapted as a central element of the detour.



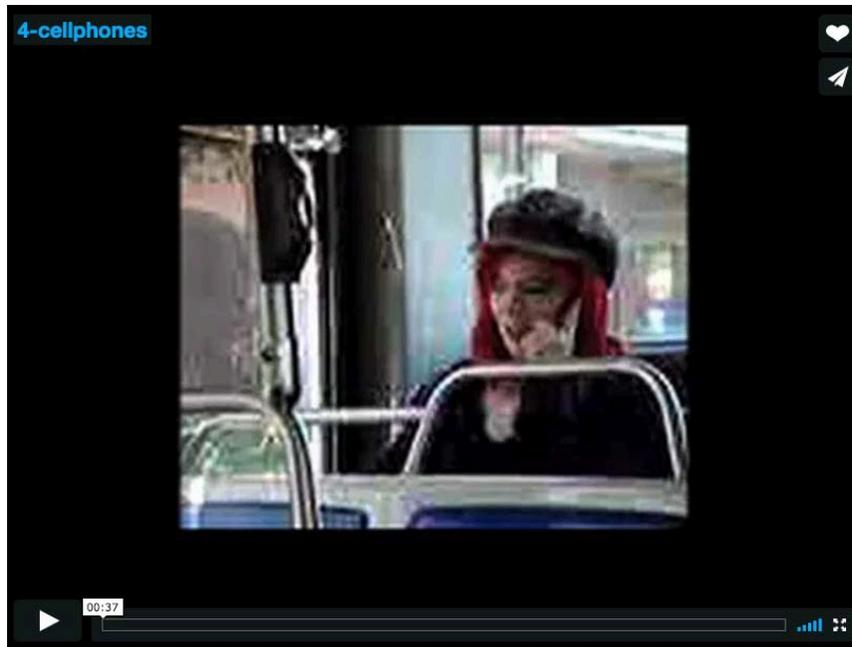
video: busdoors <https://vimeo.com/203941269>

Mobile Making and the Art of Noticing

Psychogeography can be used as a principle method of discerning ephemeral layers of space and time during the commute; it is important as well as for developing one's city-image in detail, as proposed by Lynch. I extend Lynch's methods beyond cognitive mapping, however, to include all the different layers of knowledge that can make up a place: history, story, experience, networks, vectors, ambiances, the natural and built

environments. Developing a deep spatial knowledge is like the mapping of these layers, a stratigraphy that illustrates the way places are formed through accumulation of meaning.

My Montreal commuting routines included a 20-minute walk and a 45-minute transit ride each way. These journeys made up an integral part of my daily life when I lived there. In attempting to examine closely the strata of my urban everyday, the recurrence of routine along with the accumulation of personal and collective meaning, I began to read and document these urban environments as I moved through them. On my commutes, I made a habit of taking my camera or cellphone (especially on the bus, where many people were using their phones) as a way not only of capturing the passage of time and space, but of provoking my attention to the inner and outer liminal landscapes. Each journey was a chance to add to my archives, in the form of texts, sounds and images, stories and observations. In a former life I was a poet, and poetry remains with me still as the ground that supports my explorations, aesthetically and methodically, not always through words, but through rhythm and repetition, movement and montage.



video: cellphones <https://vimeo.com/203941437>

The act of looking for images to take, framing and composing, affects one's perceptions of place. This is the art of noticing. One looks for patterns that repeat throughout the city, or else what is unique or new, with an eye towards colour, rhythm and form, an ear for sound, perhaps even a nose for odors. On the bus, I used my cellphone to slyly capture and categorize behaviours and events like people sleeping, reading, on their cellphones, or sunlight moving across the bus seats. I experimented with digital image-making, taking video on the lowest resolution and then enlarging the pixelated images to de-emphasize individuality and to emphasize the noise and the glitches of the digital format as a form of abstraction, which pleased my aesthetic sensibilities. During my walks, I took photos of whatever caught my curiosity, those objects that I was oriented towards, the everpresent garbage and food in the alleyways, graffiti, signs of human presence and absence. I listened to conversations, cellphone rings, engine noises. While

I tended to take still photos during the walking commute, the moving bus meant that things were in motion even when I stayed still, so the moving image became important for me on city transit.

I cast a watchful eye (a detective, an archivist, a collector), taking note of clues that enabled me to ask questions and make connections through further historical and sociological inquiry. For instance, why do neighbourhoods have different ambiances? How does urban planning affect social atmospheres? How are borders materialized? My essay and photo-collage of the long fence on L'Acadie Boulevard, part of the landscape of my walking commute, is an example of some outcomes of this inquiry (see Ng-Chan 2013). I also collected stories of encounters with neighbours and strangers wherever I went, documenting the social spaces of my commutes as tiny narratives that accumulated into a story-map of my neighbourhood. These stories were both made-up and true, from historical events inscribed onto places to my habitual imaginings of the lives of other commuters who I saw regularly on the bus or around the neighbourhood – my familiar strangers. So, in addition to the act of documentation, I added imaginative fiction, turning the neighbourhood spaces of social performance into a theatrical performance by staging a narrative.



video: beatrice <https://vimeo.com/203941510>

Over a period of about 2 years, I collected around 200 short cellphone and digital camera videos, as well as 30-40 sound recordings. My *City Transit* map (part of *Detours: Poetics of the City*, my collaborative, multimedia atlas of Montreal – see <http://agencetopo.qc.ca/detours/>) features videopoems that developed from my media archives of riding the bus and metro in Montreal, particularly certain routes such as the 80 Avenue du Parc. These poems and story fragments are laid out on hand-drawn routes over an appropriated and reworked city transit map, geo-located to the places where they were made, to give viewers a sense of aesthetic and narrative pleasure that might even change how they look at their fellow passengers on the bus or metro.

Detours: Poetics of the City was produced with the idea of mapping the very local, the ephemeral and poetic details of quotidian spaces, particularly ones springing from

everyday travel. The project investigates the many ways of locating personal and idiosyncratic engagements with the city of Montreal, and is aligned with such projects as Jake Barton's *City of Memory* (<http://www.cityofmemory.org>) or the poetic maps in Denis Wood's *Everything Sings: Maps for a Narrative Atlas* (2011). Many of the map-layers were produced through movement, including *Desirelines* by Donna Akrey, who mapped the dirt paths that she encountered in her walking and bicycling commutes through the city. Emilie O'Brien's *Field Notes* invokes Maguire Meadows, a beloved "terrain vague" aka "Le champ des possibles," and the site of her daily walks. Samuel Thulin's *City Ditties* were made – literally – in places that he encountered often in his neighbourhood (he set himself the task of composing *in situ* on a smart phone). These maps offer the opportunity to detour during the usual routine. They are meant to be viewed on mobile devices such as smart phones and tablets, in the places where they were created such as on the bus, though they are also accessible to the armchair de-tourist.



Detours: Poetics of the City main interface screenshot

Mobile media art such as *Detours: Poetics of the City* engages the body, digital media interface design, and the concept of locative awareness (Southern 2015). Indeed, locative art is considered “one of the key arenas in which emergent interactions with the embodied and sensory dimensions of place, movement and presence itself are being explored” (Sheller and Iversen 2015, 15). It can be seen as connected to histories of performance art, relational art, theatre, experimental cinema, sound art and public art. Detouring as a practice can be found at the intersections of locative art, movement, political awareness, aesthetics, narratives and placemaking. The detour, optimally, can prompt a situation.

Prompts and Situations

The Situationists advocated works that “increased public consciousness and promoted direct action and systematic participation in everyday life” (Corner 1999, 231). They were less interested in art objects and aesthetics than with situations – “A moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambiance and a game of events” (“Definitions” [1958]1996, 68) – and disrupting the dominant regime. Similarly, an ongoing practice of detouring is a locative situation, “a form of alternative construction and engaged relation with life, a relation that people can define and not just passively consume” (Aceti 2015, 12). The detour prompts one’s attention to location, space, and place, and acts as “an open model, a set of procedures or a toolkit with which participants construct their own situation to be ‘lived’ independently of the artist” (McGarrigle 2009, 57-58). Based on various relational and process-oriented artistic works and approaches, the items in this detour “toolkit” are suggestive, encouraging the user to develop personal and creative routines for quotidian

travel. The “revolution of everyday life” – proposed by the Situationists, the Surrealists, and Fluxus, for instance (Waxman 2010) – is a project that I advocate for and can get behind.

Prompts and instructions can be extremely useful tools, since during the commute, routine can dull the senses and the impetus to detour. For instance, Lynch’s psychogeographic method involved interviews and questions that included asking for explicit directions “for the trip that you normally take going from home to where you work. Picture yourself actually making the trip, and describe the sequence of things you would see, hear, or smell along the way, including the pathmarkers that have become important to you” (141). Another example of an instructional toolkit is the “Travel Remedy Kit” by Watts and Lyons (2011), described as “interventions into train lines and passenger times” (104). It consists of a series of cards that urge the traveller to investigate time during the trip as “viscous,” as “boredom,” “transition,” or “gift,” or to consider the route and alternative routes, to get fresh air somehow, or to consider how you make the space around you through the placement of the self or belongings. Similarly, the “Strata-Walks” given by my artist collective, *Hamilton Perambulatory Unit* (see <http://hamiltonperambulatoryunit.org/>), urge one to identify different layers of strata as a way of provoking one’s attention, and can be adapted to any place or method of mobility. These prompts are optimal for routine and daily movements through the city, as one could focus on different strata to map on different trips. Here are some examples of our Strata-Walk prompts:

Signed Strata: Identify texts and the systems they belong to (street signs - civic, colonialist; advertising - capitalist; graffiti - poetic or

interventionist, etc.) Why is this street named its name? Did it ever have another name? Should it?

Architectural Strata: Identify architectural periods. Note lovely buildings, or intriguing buildings, or decrepit buildings and broken curbs.

Non-human animals Strata: Look for non-human creatures on the street.

Pet a cat. Who else lives on the street? Birds? Insects?

Olfactory Strata: Notice the smells of the street. How can you map them without using words? If you do use words try synesthesia.

Audio Strata: How does the street sound? What does the street sound?

Where does the street sound? Record audio or take notes.

Cinematic Strata: What are the movie clichés overlaying your city-image?

What movies or stories affect how you see place?

Vector Strata: Map your movements through the city. Where are your main corridors? How much of the city do you cover?

Tactile Strata: How does the street feel? Make rubbings, drawings of felt strata.

Rhythm Strata: What is the rhythm of the day when you move through place? Are you in rush hour or is it slow? What is the weather, the rhythm of the seasons? What other rhythms can you sense where you are?

Speculative Strata: Map what the street could be. Revamp it according to your imagination.

As participatory workshops, the Strata-Walks function as public pedagogy and relational art, where the emphasis is on the inter-relationships between people and environments; the creative element does not lie in the making of an object, but a social event or a situation. The relations forged and uncovered during the event also form space-time strata as memory and new knowledge.

There are elements of place that cannot be gleaned from reading or sensing the landscape alone, or that need further textual research – histories of places, for instance. Literary and cinematic narratives connected to place are also not readily discernable, but can help to constitute space and place (for an excellent example, see Edward Dimenbergh's *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, 2004). It is here that the idea of digital annotation is useful. One of the modes of mobile locative media (along with navigation, commercial applications, social networking and gaming), annotation refers to the geotagging of locations with texts, photos, sounds, and other media or information (Lemos 2010; Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011). With mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets, which are used more and more in the liminal spaces of city transit, networks of information about places can be nearly instantly available, and as I have written about elsewhere, offer the potential to connect with, rather than disconnect from the space of the commute (Ng-Chan 2015).

Detouring as a practice can take many forms, and will differ for each person. It might involve a focus on the mundane, on the phenomenological, on the imaginative and poetic, and on all the bodily senses in addition to, or instead of, the visual. Tools such as locative media, prompts and instructions can be valuable in provoking the detour. In

attending to the strata of spaces during everyday travel, I speak to the importance of each person developing a deep mapping practice that engages with the quotidian. To develop an ongoing practice of detouring can be progressively political, pleasurable, and enlightening.



video: sunlight <https://vimeo.com/203941745>

Conclusion

I have outlined some of the creative approaches and possibilities to taking a detour within the routine commute. I have also shown how my conception of the detour is related to the *dérive* and psychogeography; it is aligned as well to such ideas as “dislocative” arts, a term suggested by David Pinder (2013, 524-525) to address artistic practices that “engage, reframe and repurpose” location-aware media so as to question, unfix and unsettle ways of locating, especially ones that rely on military technology (GPS

and GIS services) and tracking devices. The detour takes from Doreen Massey, James Corner, and other writers with postmodern concerns that emphasize “the variety of territorial, political and psychological social processes... The *interrelationships* amongst things in space, as well as the *effects* that are produced,” rather than “solely compositional arrangements of objects and surfaces” (Corner 1999, 227). Locative mobile media, a list of prompts, or a practice of art-making can all help to heighten and focus attention to the interrelationships, the effects, and the strata, as part of a deep mapping of liminal spaces.

Although in this study I focus mainly on local and everyday travel, tourist travel appears within the framework of the detour. The Tourist stereotype is often constructed to oppose the Local. The detour aims to collapse this binary, to find hybridized practices that question their construction. Susan Sontag (1973) once argued that “[t]he photographer is supertourist, an extension of the anthropologist... always trying to colonize new experiences or find new ways to look at familiar subjects” (42). She continues that “essentially the camera makes everyone a tourist in other people’s reality, and eventually in one’s own” (57). Although perhaps Sontag didn’t mean this in a positive way, to be a tourist in one’s own life, to see the nearby as “exotic,” is to question that binary of exotic/familiar, or local/stranger. De Certeau asks, “What does travel ultimately produce if it is not, by a sort of reversal...the return to nearby exoticism by way of a detour through distant places”? (1984, 107) The detour encompasses the idea of the tour, as a narrative spatial practice in general and also as something a tourist does, which stereotypically is to visit distant places in search of “exotic” experiences. But distance is not only physical. Local places can be distant if they are unknown. The

detour plays with the idea of touring the local through mobile media and locative art practices. Mapping and image-making – city-images particularly – can be excellent ways to train the attention, to develop the art of noticing, which can be used with any method of mobility, whether routine or not. Commuting with camera and other tools, or simply being open and attentive, is certainly a good place to start.

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