Psychogeographic Mapping Through Film:
Chantal Akerman's *News From Home* and Patrick Keiller's *London*

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Fragments of a map of Paris, cut up and rearranged with red arrows pointing and diverging from each piece to the next, form the lasting image representing the revolutionary activities of the Situationist International in the 1950s and 60s. This map, Guy Debord's *The Naked City* (1958) [Illus. 1], is labeled as a psychogeographic map and is often the solitary visual example representing Situationist mapping practices. Debord lifted its name from the 1948 film *The Naked City*, a New York crime drama shot in documentary style.[1] Subsequent examples of psychogeographic mapping can be found by returning to the medium of the title's inspiration—film. Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1976) and, later, Patrick Keiller's *London* (1994) use film to create psychogeographic maps of the city.[2] Utilising the properties of their medium, these two films map the city space, successfully subverting proscribed pathways through the urban environment and creating a new experience of the city which reflects each artists' state of mind and desires while transcending routine usage of this space.

The Situationists defined psychogeography as "the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals." Psychogeographic maps, therefore, reflect "the geographical environment's direct emotional effects," using the Situationist tools of the *dérive*, a drifting movement through the urban space, and, to a lesser extent, *detournement,* subversion of "pre-existing aesthetic elements".[3] The indexical relationship between film and the everyday experience of movement through space and time presents a point of departure from which these filmmakers challenge controlled and conditioned movements to create this new experience of the city. The *dérive*, or drifting movement through the city space, becomes a filmic *dérive*. According to Sadie Plant:

> One of psychogeography's principle means was the *dérive*… to *dérive* was to notice the way in which certain areas, streets, or buildings resonate with states of mind, inclinations,

[1] The film, in turn, derived its title from a series of crime photos of New York published by the photographer Weegee in 1945. Source: Thomas F. McDonough, "Situationist Space," *October* 67(1994): 61-62.
[2] Ken Knabb, ed., *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 45.
[3] Ibid. 45-6.

> and desires, and to seek out reasons for movement other than those for which an environment was designed.[4]

This subversion of movement through urban space is possible because of two properties of film that differentiate it from everyday experience: its ability to be edited and rearranged and its mediation of space via the camera.

In Akerman's *News From Home* a succession of long shots of various corners of New York City – a crowded street, an empty parking lot, a subway platform – are placed together while an intermittent voiceover reads letters from the artist's mother, recounting news in her native Belgium and wondering when she will be coming home. Much of the analysis around this film, such as that by Joanna Morra and Sarah Pucill, focuses on the relationship between Akerman and her mother told one-sidedly through her mother's letters.[5] Marie Walsh, on the other hand, looks at the film in a Deleuzian context, purposely de-emphasising the mother-daughter dynamic. Walsh describes *News From Home* as "a kind of filmic *flânerie*, but unlike that masculinist discourse, where the *flâneur's* vision is both possessed by and possesses the city, here the gazer becomes more and more absorbed by the image of the city."[6] Both the visual structure and the presence of the mother-daughter relationship in the voiceover, however, play a role as elements of a filmic psychogeographic map of the city.

The way Chantal Akerman, and later Patrick Keiller, use film challenges the Situationists' theories that film limits the freedom of the viewer while increasing the indoctrinating power of the filmmaker. In a 1966 publication, they wrote:

> To be sure, films, like songs, have intrinsic powers of conditioning the spectator: beauties, if you will, that are at the disposition of those who presently have the possibility of expressing themselves…it is a sign of the general conditions of our time that their cleverness is so

[4] Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge, 1992) 58-59.
[5] Joanne Morra, "Daughter's Tongue: The Intimate Distance of Translation," *Journal of Visual Culture* 6 (2007): 91-108. Sarah Pucill, "The 'autoethnographic' in Chantal Akerman's News From Home, and an Analysis of Almost Out and Stages of Mourning," *Experimental Film and Video*, ed. Jackie Hatfield (Eastleigh: John Libbey Publishing, 2006) 83-92.
[6] Marie Walsh, "Intervals of Inner Flight: Chantal Akerman's News From Home," *Screen* 45.3 (2004): 193.

> limited that the extent of their ties with the dominant ways of life quickly reveals the disappointing limits of their venture.[7]

Following the Situationists' theoretical lineage back, Walter Benjamin notes in his *Arcades Project* that film is seen by his contemporaries as possessing a singular, powerful point of view. He cites another predecessor to the Situationists, Baudelaire:

> The following argument – which dates from a period in which the decline of sculpture had become apparent, evidently prior to the decline of painting – is very instructive. Baudelaire makes exactly the same point about sculpture from the perspective of painting as is made today about painting from the perspective of film. 'A picture, however, is only what it wants to be; there is no other way of looking at it than on its own terms. Painting has but one point of view; it is exclusive and absolute, and therefore the painter's expression is much more forceful.' Baudelaire, *Oeuvres,* vol. 2, p. 128 ('Salon de 1846'). Just before this (pp. 127-128): 'The spectator who moves around the figure can choose a hundred different points of view, except the right one.'[8]

Eschewing narrative conventions, Akerman's filmic map connects the pieces of New York City into a web of empty alleyways, late night food stands, and areas of transit where a distance, isolation, and detachment is felt [Illus. 2].[9] The editable nature of film allows Akerman to transport the viewer from one point to another within the city, concurrently building a nodal map and furthering this sense of emotional detachment. There is no routine or purposeful continuity within *News From Home*. Film, in this case, facilitates the freedom to follow imagined pathways and ignore pre-programmed movements and methods of movement through the urban environment. While this is a subjective journey determined by the desires and psychological state of mind of the artist, the viewer is not shut into a particular point of view or drawn into a spectacle. The traditional relationship between audience and filmmaker is broken down in that it's possible to lose a sense that the viewer's gaze is being directed; what direction exists instead allows the

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[7] "The Role of Godard," SI Journal #10 (1966), *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 176.

[8] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) 269.

[9] For a discussion of Akerman's use of the materiality of film for referentiality and not narrative fiction or documentary, see Kaira Marie Cabanas, "What the Map Cuts up, the Story Cuts across: Chantal Akerman's 'De l'autre cote'"/ La ou la carte decoupe, le recit traverse 'De l'autre cote' de Chantal Akerman," trans. Nathalie de Blois, *Parachute* 20 (2005) 12-27.

viewer to follow arrows between various pieces of the map. The shots are long enough that the viewer can find his or her own way through the scene, following this or that detail, finding a new way of navigating the city space. As Bruce Williams notes, "As is typical with Akerman, individual takes are often notably long and afford the viewer the chance to reflect both upon the images presented and his/her reaction to them."[10] While watching, it's possible to forget that the scene has been one long take because the experience of viewing closely mirrors the experience of, for example, actually sitting on a train platform watching the trains go by or of riding in a car, looking out the window down the street.

The mediation of the city space by the camera allows for a distancing of the artist/individual toward a more ambiguous viewpoint. In several scenes cars seems to drive straight into the camera [Illus. 3], or people sitting on the street seem oblivious to being filmed at intimately close range [Illus. 4]. This effect is accomplished by the camera lens' ability to zoom into a space while the camera or cameraperson is not physically present at that degree of closeness – although the viewer is. The voiceover, meanwhile, furthers the distance between the artist and the filmic dérive. It can only describe a longing for the nomadic, ghostly presence behind the film, revealing little about the film's creator. The psychogeographer thereby maintains the pseudo-scientific distance the term implies while revealing herself as a nomadic, flâneur-type figure, dispassionately observing and finding her way through the space while simultaneously embedding a subjective glimpse into her state of mind and desires which arise independently of and transcends the proscribed uses and pathways of the city space. Towards the end of the film, the mother's voiceover is increasingly drowned out by the background noise, giving a sense that the city has finally absorbed both Akerman and the viewer and that the distance from home is total as this nomadic wandering takes over. The final sequence of the film completes the map in that we are presented with a view of the totality of the city from a boat. Even this totality does not describe the city or its practical usage as an ordinary map would. It is, instead, ephemeral and impenetrable as it floats away and becomes shrouded in the fog. Various interpretations see this

[10] Bruce Williams, "Splintered Perspectives: Counterpoint and Subjectivity in the Modernist Film Narrative," *Film Criticism* 15.2(1994): 3.

final scene as an indication that the absent addressee of the mother's letters is returning home.[11] The drowning out of the voiceover by city noise and the increasing presence of intra-city traveling sequences towards the end, however, suggest a transition to urban nomad rather than a return home. These traveling sequences are like Debord's red arrows that connect the various parts of the map (not in the ways one might expect), while the view of the island of Manhattan presents a deceptive totality, simultaneously complete and impenetrable, revealing nothing of the whole of the city's structure.

Akerman's *News From Home* can be better understood as a psychogeographic map when compared to Patrick Keiller's *London*, which is a more explicit psychogeographic study. Keiller's film similarly maps urban spaces, in this case London, utilising long still shots and a similar detachment of the narrator or his described traveling companion Robinson from the scenes shown. Keiller describes the freedom inherent in these long, still shots when discussing his work in relation to early film, "…early films are generally between about one and three minutes long and, lacking montage, close-up and other sophistications, they depict spaces in which one's eye can wander…"[12] In *London,* the urban space is transformed into a place of hidden histories, weaving these histories together with the political climate of London in the early 90s. Unlike *News From Home*, most of the shots in *London* have a more direct relationship to the voiceover, though often this relationship is surprising or unexpected, looking at the infrastructure of the city in an unconventional way. When describing how Robinson speaks to the gate posts in Vauxhall, we are shown a close up of these posts, revealing a surprising anthropomorphism [Illus. 5]. Other scenes, with the addition of the voiceover, suggest something ironic or comical about everyday urban spaces. For instance, the narrator talks of the writings of Montaigne while a view of a language school named after the writer advertising English instruction is shown [Illus. 6]. There is a marked absence of either the narrator or his companion Robinson, though their presence and point of view are felt in the particular meander: they are described as former lovers and the

[11] As cited by Walsh, 194: Richard Kwietniowski, "Separations: Chantal Akerman's News From Home (1976) and Toute une nuit (1982)," *Movie*, nos 34/35 (1990): 113.
[12] Patrick Keiller. "Phantom Rides," *Guardian Online*. 10 Nov. 2007. 16 Dec. 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/nov/10/2>.

history of London's homosexual underground culture emerges at various points in the film. Additionally, the narrator states that they are looking into the 'problem' of London while various threads in the narration and scenes meander through the Conservative government and its relationship to poverty-stricken areas of London.

Like *News From Home*, the medium of film is utilised to essentially reorganise the pieces of the map of London in a way that reflects the motivations and inclinations of the artist – fittingly he is positioned as a scientific investigator – and transforms the city into a new space with a new purpose set apart from the conditioned movements through it and its designated uses. Like *News From Home*, the artist is a nomadic figure. While *News From Home*'s absent daughter essentially becomes a rootless nomad consumed by the city, Keiller's narrator begins rootless. Having been at sea for several years, he is returning to London. It is not a homecoming for him. Instead, he is an explorer assisting Robinson on an urgent scientific investigation into the 'problem of London'.

Using film to map the city allows for an exploration of the urban landscape in both a spatial and temporal sense, lending extra dimensionality to Debord's *Naked City*, which seems a good deal less radical in comparison. Although the Situationists discussed film in some depth throughout their writings, its surprising that its potential for mapping was never fully realised in both Situationist theory and practice. The structural properties and possibilities in film, with its edited format, similarity to everyday lived experience, and the distance created via the camera's mediation make it an ideal vehicle for expressing and exploring alternative – even radical – ways of moving through the city.

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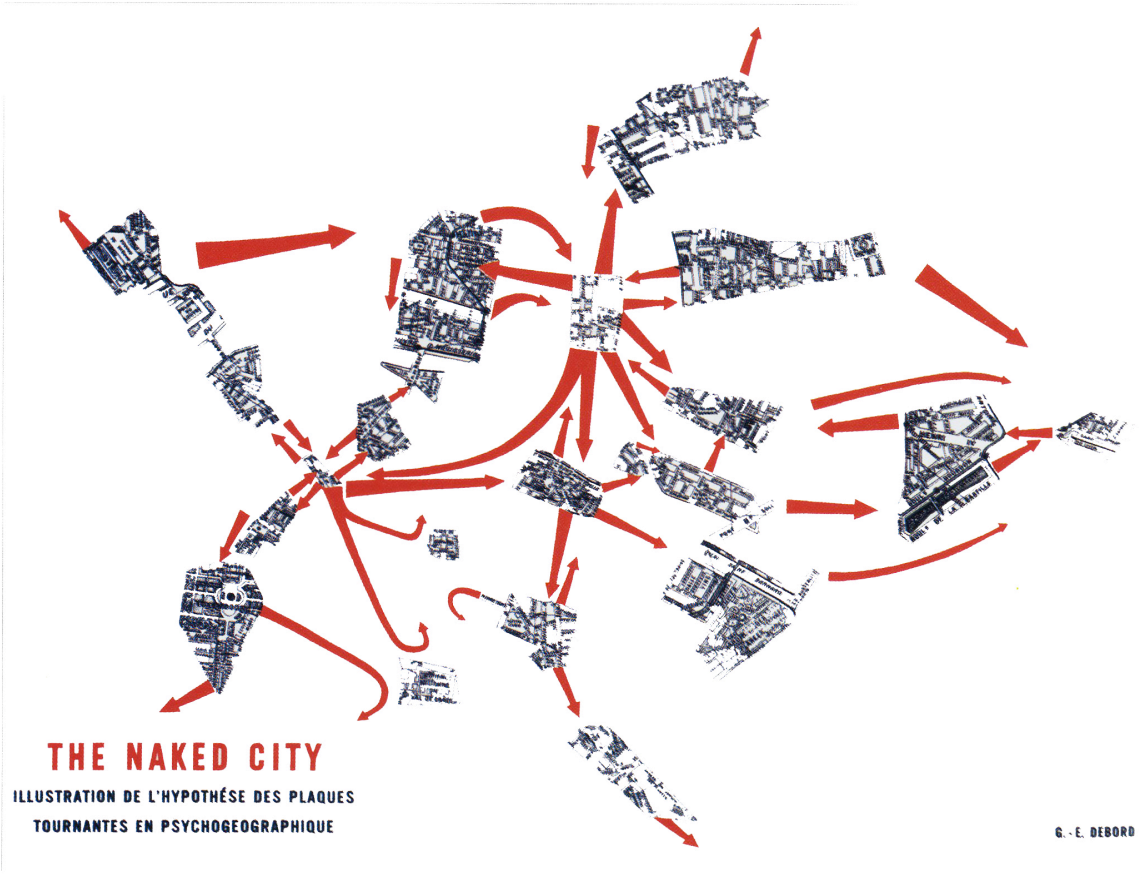

Illustration 1 – *The Naked City*, Guy Debord, 1958

Source: Ford, Simon. *The Situationist International: a user's guide*. London: Black Dog Publishing, 2005.

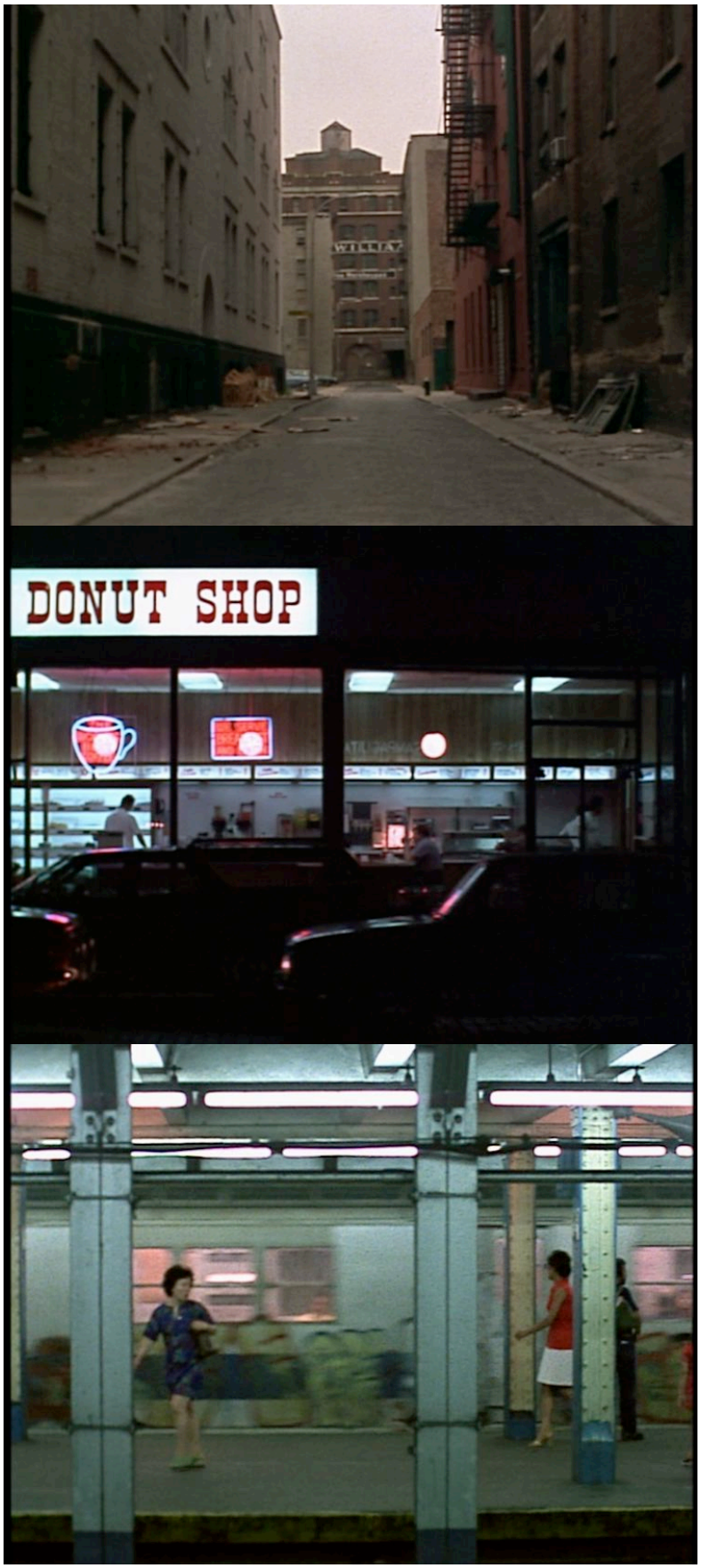

Illustration 2– film stills from *News from Home*, Chantal Akerman, 1976

Illustration 3– film still from *News from Home*, Chantal Akerman, 1976

Illustration 4– film still from *News from Home*, Chantal Akerman, 1976

Illustration 5– film still from *London*, Patrick Keiller, 1994

Illustration 6– film still from *London*, Patrick Keiller, 1994