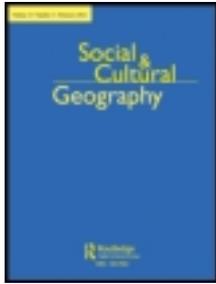


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In/different cities: a case for contact at the margins

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In/different cities: a case for contact at the margins

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Long before embarking on the academic life of a geographer, I made films about cities. In the following essay, I reflect on a series of my short films, shot in the magical aesthetic of super8 film, which meditate on themes that continue to preoccupy and interest many urban geographers, in particular, the dialectic between social life and the built landscape of contemporary urban space. A central argument suggested by these cinematic excursions is that the margins of urban space share an immediate homology with the margins of the social self and that experiencing difference in spatial life is a political and social good analogous to regular encounter with difference in the lives of strangers. Such experiences of difference, these films suggest, are under threat in the neoliberal city in which gentrification, privatisation, labour deregulation and urban policing increasingly homogenise and politically neutralise the social landscape. The films can be viewed at <http://www.brettstory.com/category/films-video/>

Key words: urban, gentrification, neoliberal, film, difference, labour.

“I have neither desires nor fears,” the Khan declared, “and my dreams are composed *either by my mind or by chance*”.

‘Cities also believe they are the work of the mind or of chance, but neither the one nor the other suffices to hold up their walls. You take delight not in a city’s seven or seventy *wonders*, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours’.

‘Or the question it asks you, forcing you to answer, like Thebes through the mouth of *the Sphinx*’. – Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 37–38

Introduction

I had been thinking about making a film about the city for a long time. But not the city as abstract and idealised, nor even concretised as a set of structures or institutions or ‘personal’

relationships so much as the messy composition of strangers, images, sounds and yes, marginalia through which all that’s politically necessary and possible about the city find material register. The city every angry teenager who hated her small town runs away to and

discovers punk rock in, the city where women without papers fight corporate landlords in the lobby of apartment high-rises and the messy city of fleeting, important encounters the science fiction writer Samuel R. Delany describes in his memoir, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999). A personal reflection on some three decades frequenting the gay movie theatres that once congregated around New York's Times Square, Delany's memoir is really a treatise about contact with strangers at the margins of 'family values' and spectacle tourism. It offers a glimpse into the transgressive potential of cross-class contact and the threat it poses to capitalism as well as into the social transformations possible at our own outer limits.

In the gentrified, neoliberal city of the twenty-first century West, the outer limits of many of our own lives increasingly correspond to the outer limits of urban space. At least it has often seemed to me. This overlap is the marginalia that has preoccupied my earliest cinematic forays: geographic expeditions in search of the ends of my ostensibly singular subjectivity for the collective that was supposed to dwell, as Walter Benjamin told us, in the streets (Benjamin 1999a [1939]).

I had just moved to New York and did not know anyone, which suited me just fine. It was Delaney's New York I was seeking, a place where the possibilities for ever more complex experiences are built right into the landscape. Federico Lorca wrote of running around with strangers at dawn 'on enormous fire escapes/-searching between the angles for spikenards of drafted anguish' (Lorca 2008 [1940]: 73). I sought the New York that threw up peep shows, kung-fu movie houses and 'pizza parlours that might or might not carry a sideline in phenobarbitals in the shadow of the fruit-punch machine' (Sante 1991: 366).¹ Where in the hours before dawn, the fish delivery drivers

would already be up and hauling oily fish bellies into the back of Chinatown's kitchens. I carried my super8 camera around with me everywhere.

What I began then and have continued to make is a kind of cinematic contact with the margins. By 'margins' I don't just mean outliers of any particular social order, but more subjectively, the margins of my own life, the spaces and people just *past* the limits of autonomy and self-sufficiency, past too the familiarity of intimate friendships and enduring family. Here, in the unfamiliar collisions of strangers and difference is where I suspect the real liberating promises of the city hold court, and this is what I have chased with my camera and its tiny gauge film.

What follow are stills from a collection of short non-fiction films about a variety of interrelated urban themes, accompanied by short lyrical descriptions and elaborations. Though they have different stories attached to their making, they were also all pretexts (like so many projects are) for exploration and escape, for contact and encounter, for the questions they posed, and still do. The texts I have added are not summaries of their subjects so much as further reflection on what's at stake in the erasures of their differences.

Much good work has been done, of course, on contemporary urban space, its political and even revolutionary potential as much as its centrality to contemporary flows of capital. These films and the reflections accompanying them here are woven through with themes that have been taken up with great scholarly rigor elsewhere, from gentrification (Keil and Wilson 2008; Rose 1984; Smith 1996, 2002), to urban neoliberalism (Brenner 2009; Brenner and Theodore 2002; Gibson 2012), securitisation (Cowen and Smith 2010; Graham 2009), subjectivity, difference and urban life (Harvey 1989; Matejskova and Leitner

2011; Sennett 1990; Simmel 1971; Young 1990) and in various ways and at various times, the potential of urban revolution (Hobsbawm 2005; Kipfer 2009; Lefebvre 2003 [1970]; Mitchell 2003). This piece professes no claims to furthering these specific debates *per se*. Rather, its aim, like that of the films themselves, is to explore, in a smattering of contradictory instances, how and where the margins of subjective experience meet the margins of other people's lives—or fail to.

These are 'minor' films, none of them longer than 7 min and all of them about the forgotten places, feelings and people of twenty-first century urban life, each of them struggling, often failing and sometimes succeeding to make contact with each other in the neoliberal city. They are about deep loneliness, marginalisation, encounter, struggle and an incompleteness that renders 'the margins'—both subjectively and spatially—a field of endless possibility.

Hard City Heart

2007, 6 min. It is deep December and Montreal is already buried in snow. Everyone I know seems to be suffering a depression and blaming the city for it.



On the radio, a man's voice says: '...The street, a place of domination, power, commerce, but not a place in which people find themselves. Real value is something hidden inside a building. Or that the real meanings of things are unseeable in everyday life...'²

I am reminded of a line from a Sylvia Plath poem: '*All morning the / Morning has been blackening*' (Plath 2008 [1965]: 262).

Montreal is changing, everyone agrees, but no one wants to be seen as nostalgic. More video screens, more cops, more condos and less homeless. Or is it more homeless? We just do not see them in our city anymore. We gauge property values by the evisceration of surplus bodies, while speculators quietly buy up buildings and dress them in youth. Everyone gets to be creative or buy it, whatever. As the political hangover of Quebec separatism wears off, the city announced it is once again safe for capital. It widens the sidewalk and tears the backs off of benches. Another friend tells me he is depressed.



Walter Benjamin called the streets 'the dwelling place of the collective' (Benjamin 1999b [1939]: 423). But I'm not sure we have yet rescued the street for the future city. On the street, power displays itself as indifference: people going about their own business against the coarse loneliness of each stranger's fail-

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ures. I make a film about Montreal winter for a sad friend; the processed footage comes back to me, and the colour of everything is blue.

Willets Point 2008, 6 min.

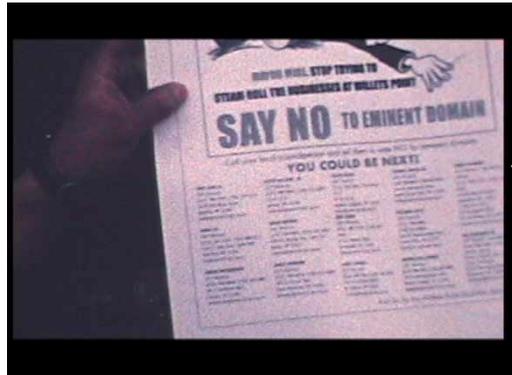


10th April, 2008. I read in the *New York Times*:

Local workers in Willets Point—the district of Queens near Shea Stadium known mostly from its auto repair shops and potholes—filed a federal lawsuit last month accusing the city of depriving the neighbourhood of services so property values would fall, easing the way for the land to be taken through eminent domain.

The lawsuit, filed in the United States District Court in Brooklyn, is another salvo in the locals' fight to stop the city's \$3-billion redevelopment plan for the area. The plan calls for razing the 61-acre business district and replacing it with 5,500 units of housing, a hotel and convention center and 2.2 million square feet of office space, restaurants and retail shops. The plan would displace some 250 businesses employing 1,300 workers (Rivera 2008).

At some point, money came back to New York City. Since then, even the far limits of downtown squalor have been colonised by



prosperity, and despite the bankruptcy of banks and the crisis of finance, money shows no signs of abandoning its dominion. Gentrification has left the neighborhood and now has the whole city in its jaw (Smith 2002). The children of privilege circle the blocks below Houston Street admiring the architecture. Every neighbourhood is the subject of a lifestyle piece in a glossy magazine. The city is overwhelmed by hubris and ambition, presumptions of classlessness and appropriately disinterested conversations about 'space'.

Then, one travels to what seems like the most outer echelons of the city, to a seemingly abandoned tract of land at the edge of Queens, busy with migrant workers and auto-body shops only to find out that they too, face displacement from their tiny strip of the revanchist city.

Grace

2008, 7 min. The banks are imploding and New York is heavy with tension, heavier still in the low-lit gallows of the underground subway. At the station near my house in Brooklyn, a team of Baptist church members has descended, offering 'free prayers' to

passengers who mostly ignore them. Occasionally, however, someone will stop, accept the offer of a prayer and then the two of them, this Baptist church member from Tennessee and some random New Yorker, will take each other's hands or hold shoulders and make a small column of quiet against the subway traffic. They find 'grace' there. Grace, one of them explains to me, is the relief that God offers: *'relief from the burden of work or of having to be a good person.'* To get to heaven, all we need to have is faith. This is the promise, or rather, the *grace* of God. When I ask what it is that people request their prayers to be about, I'm told that most of them just want help in finding a job.



In the neoliberal city, each person assumes responsibility for her situation and every poverty, the consequence of poor decision-making. Police prod sleeping bodies off of benches, and the falling urban crime rate belies the deep brutality of the incessant, militarised, surveilled and intensifying war on the poor. Anger is privatised and then repented. No wonder we retreat from the city into obsessive interiority. The outside is built for shopping, for gawking; it is an outside imagined for a 'public, but not as people' (Berman 1982: 304).³ We are either subdued or disoriented by the scenes it displays. But mostly, we are tired.

Indifference appears as both adjective and noun. How we might characterize the homogenous, segregated spaces cordoned off as real estate and how we then behave toward one another in the few interstitial remains as if separated by seams into private sufferings.



Car Wash

2008, 6 min. There are ruptures of course. Arriving in Los Angeles, I'm reminded of a passage in Calvino's book about an emperor surveying his empire, itself messy with cities: 'The Great Khan contemplates an empire covered with cities that weigh upon the earth and upon mankind, crammed with wealth and traffic, overladen with ornaments and offices, complicated with mechanisms and hierarchies,

swollen, tense, ponderous' (Calvino 1978: 73).
Swollen, tense, ponderous.



I have just had my heart broken and have followed the boy who broke it to Los Angeles (LA). It is the deep heat of August, and I have never been to this city but its reputation precedes it. I am determined to make something of this trip other than my own humiliation. On the plane, on the way down, I read about car wash workers throughout LA, who in the spring of 2008, began an unprecedented campaign to unionise the informal workers of a multi-million dollar industry rampant with exploitation.

The professional carwash industry is a \$23-billion enterprise. Most of these workers are undocumented migrants, often Latino, whose aspirations have led them to washing cars in



the city of angels for a few dollars an hour. Despite their exclusion from the protections of basic labor law, they are organising themselves. The film I make ends with a voice, sturdy as he explains to me: *We have been fighting, fighting for this campaign to make sure that our employers don't take away our voice. Because they want to silence us, they want to privatise our voices. As workers.*

Five-Metre Rule

In progress. It was Goethe, in his turn as amateur scientist, who defined colour as *the deeds and sufferings of light*. But it was darkness that used to be a precondition of urban poverty. Shortly before Edison perfected his light bulb, the New York authorities busied themselves erecting arc lights mounted on high poles. It was an expensive procedure, and the Chief of Police justified the cost by declaring: 'Every electric light erected means a policeman removed' (quoted in Zardini 2005: 80).

But the police have returned anyway. And these days, they look more soldiers than policemen. They arrested more than a thousand people that weekend in June of 2010 in Toronto. The G20 had descended on the city and suits inside a billion-dollar summit security perimeter were coordinating plans to

implement some of the most severe austerity measures in modern history in the name of ‘fiscal consolidation’. The citizens of Greece were launching Molotov cocktails, but more importantly stealing water while the students in Britain built shields in the form of oversized books. The police beat us hard, and the city threw us under the bus. The only thing anyone cared about was a flaming cop car.



The Integrated Security Unit (a coordinated policing apparatus made up of national, provincial and regional police forces) charged with securitising the Toronto G20 summit made use of a wide range of tactics and technologies. These included a mix of the old and the new, the ‘combat-proven’ and the cutting-edge: ever-expanded use of pepper spray, tear gas, plastic projectiles and Taser guns; biometric surveillance; legal suspensions, pre-emptive arrest and incarceration; aggressive raids of both domestic and sanctioned public spaces; crowd-control maneuvers such as ‘kettling’ or trapping of people within police lines and arresting them; infiltration and the use of informants in activist organisations and the sweeping up of random people into mass arrests (Cowen and Smith 2010).

I am not sure they returned the uprooted trees, but the cameras have stayed up. Toronto

activists pronounce ours to be ‘the age of austerity’. The city carries on, while funding less.



Coda

Last night on the subway, I looked over to see a young man, maybe seventeen or maybe younger, hunched over and carefully scrawling a note on a piece of paper. I was close enough to read it, and it said ‘*I wish I could talk to you*’. He wrote a few more sentences and then folded his note and held it tightly in his hand. The train stopped and a young woman across from us rose to leave the car. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched as he held his folded piece of paper out for her as she walked past, but she refused to take it, and after the doors closed and the train screeched forward, he ripped his note into the tiniest of pieces and let them fall to the floor.

In the city that belongs to no one, people are constantly seeking to leave a trace of themselves, a record of their story. Scraps of paper on the subway floor and small pleas to no one or everyone scratched into the Plexiglas of the bus stop. In a neighbourhood in LA, I find photo-copied home-made posters stapled on dozens of telephone poles, from someone inviting one or all of us to ‘be my friend’.



He has circled all his favorite activities in cloud bubbles and hopes that they might be your interests too: video games, watching movies, bicycling.

In the city that belongs to no one, we assume everyone is a danger. In the city that belongs to capital, what we make in the urban realm are bland and neutral spaces, spaces that remove the threat of social contact, spaces held back by glass panes and neutered architecture. A man sees from his office window, a tree blowing in the wind but is unable to hear the wind blowing, a woman walks by a skinny kid asking for help without registering his existence. The right to privacy is everyone's great excuse; its built form includes a single, policed entrance. Eviction notices are delivered as privatised correspondence in the domestic corridors of our atomised economy.



In the city that belongs to everyone, differences do not exist to be overcome. They are about a harsher connection with strangers than politeness, about an acceptance of ourselves as incomplete, messy and inadequate. For Simone Weil, communication and sympathy could not depend on everyone sharing the same life, but it could depend on everyone sharing an understanding of their own inadequacy and that of others: 'We cannot contain within ourselves the necessary strength to live; we are each, fragments in a pattern too ill-distributed and short-supplied for us alone to provision our lives' (quoted in Sennett 1990: 227).

In the city, the idea of revolution is manacled to asphalt and the high-rise, the street furbished with disorder and provocation. The opposite of indifference is not love, it is just difference, and we fight indifference through ephemeral intimacies, jostled longings and social contact. It is not just transgression, abnormality, anti-capitalist behaviour, social dissent and surplus labour that are policed out of our gentrified, militarised city, but it is contact with difference—disentangled from its fatal couplings with power—itself (Gilmore 2002). Might it be that contact is revolutionary? Writes Delaney: 'The more ordinary sorts of contact yield *their* pay-off in moments of crisis: When there is a fire in your

building . . . it maybe the people who have been exchanging pleasantries with you for years who take you into their home' (Delany 1999: 125). Perhaps the more invisible sorts of crisis similarly depend on relations between strangers. The ongoing and unceasing prevalence of homelessness and joblessness and imprisonment of youth of colour and police beatings of sex workers and wage theft of immigrant domestic nannies, maybe these are the sorts of crisis that strangers in the city could also build a revolution around.

Notes

1. Luc Sante describes a New York in the 1980s, in decline, and the way dilapidation and affordability necessarily opened up space for transgressions, great and small. As he describes it, 'In the theater of its streets and in the works it broadcast to the world, the city displayed a soul that was democratic, quick-witted, independent, mocking of authority, skeptical, inquisitive, forward-looking, and not easily fooled' (364).
2. The voice on the radio was the urban sociologist Richard Sennett, interviewed for a two-part documentary called 'Flesh and Stone' for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's radio show *Ideas*. Retrieved October 12, 2011. <http://www.cbc.ca/ideas/episodes/2009/12/03/flesh-and-stone-the-sociology-of-richard-sennett-part-12-cd/>.
3. A description of the urbanism of Robert Moses as recounted in Berman 1982: 304.
4. Ndt: Je n'ai pas trouvé une façon de traduire le double sens suggéré par « In/Different Cities » qui comprend « villes indifférents » aussi bien que « dans de différentes villes »

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Abstract translations

*Des villes indifférentes*⁴: *Un cas pour le contact aux marges*

Bien avant de me lancer dans la vie académique d'un géographe, je faisais des films au sujet des villes. Dans l'essai suivant je réfléchis à une série de mes courts-métrages, tournés dans l'esthétique magique de la pellicule « super8 », et qui méditent sur des thèmes qui continuent à absorber de nombreux géographes urbains – en particulière, le dialectique entre la vie sociale et le cadre bâti de l'espace urbain contemporaine. Un argument central que proposent ces excursions cinématiques est que les marges de l'espace urbain partagent une homologie immédiate avec les marges du soi social; de plus, que exprimer la différence dans la vie spatiale soit un bien politique et social analogue à la rencontre habituelle avec de la différence dans la vie des inconnus. Au final ces films proposent que de

telles expériences de la différence soient menacées dans la ville néolibérale dans laquelle l'embourgeoisement, la privatisation, la déréglementation du travail, et la surveillance urbaine homogénéisent et neutralisent politiquement de plus en plus l'environnement social. Les films sont disponibles à <http://www.brettstory.com/category/films-video/>.

Mots-cléfs: urbain, embourgeoisement, néolibéral, film, rencontre, différence, travail, capitalisme.

In(En)/Diferentes Ciudades: Un estudio a favor del contacto en los márgenes

Mucho antes de embarcarme en la vida académica como geógrafa me dedicué a realizar películas sobre ciudades. En el siguiente ensayo presento una reflexión sobre una serie de cortos que realicé con la estética mágica del Súper 8. Los temas de estas películas continúan preocupando e interesando a muchos geógrafos urbanos –en especial la dialéctica entre la vida social y el paisaje construido en los espacios urbanos contemporáneos. Uno de los argumentos centrales que se desprende de estas excursiones cinematográficas, es que los márgenes del espacio urbano puede ser considerados inmediatamente homólogos a los márgenes de la identidad social. Aún más, se sugiere que experimentar la diferencia en la vida espacial representa un bien político y social que se equipara a los encuentros habituales con la diferencia representada por las vidas de los extraños. Estos cortos sugieren que las experiencias con lo diferente se encuentran amenazadas por la ciudad neoliberal en la cual la gentrificación, la privatización, la desregulación laboral y las políticas urbanas crecientemente homogeneizan y políticamente neutralizan el paisaje social. Los cortos pueden verse en este sitio <http://www.brettstory.com/category/films-video/>

Palabras claves: urbano, gentrificación, neoliberal, film, encuentro, diferencia, trabajo, capitalismo.