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City, Script & Critique

David Michalski

Abstract:

This preface to the new *Streetnotes* introduces readers to the *Streetnotes* project to publish socially descriptive poetry, photography, ethnography and essays, which address the documentary experience. In differentiating itself from other media outlets which record 'daily-life', it invites concrete-based theoretical interventions into urban forms and encourages contributions, which document and address the challenge of the city to think about the near and distant character of social relations.

The project opening before you represents a new beginning for the journal *Streetnotes*, a journal I began editing in New York City in 1998 as the supplement to the print journal *Xcp: Cross Cultural Poetics* edited by my collaborator and cousin, Mark Nowak. The idea was to develop an online exhibition to showcase documentary work that engaged the traffic of everyday life. By drawing on the qualitative and participatory methods of social and cultural studies and the experimental methods of performance and display pioneered in the art-into-life and poetry work of the 1960s and 1970s, I sought to publish writing and photography that combined ethnographic and art practices, to make an artistic and poetic intervention into institutionalized and professional social science, and to introduce into avant-garde poetry and art the tools of observation deployed by ethnographers. Inspired by the imaginative politics and cultural geography of 1968 and the do-it-yourself spirit of early 1990s cyber-culture, the ambition was to promote a popular and engaged critique born of the concrete and complex problematic of urban life.

For thirteen years, *Streetnotes* has published a wide variety of creative non-fiction, photography, and socially descriptive poetry, and provided a showcase for larger multimedia and performance art projects from both established and emerging scholars, artists, poets and documentarians. The driving idea was to demystify the strategic methods of ethnography and documentary while defamiliarizing the commonplace. The name *Streetnotes* embodies this call to turn the care and technique, which the anthropologist directs toward distant fields, onto the near. By training an investigatory beam on the quotidian and mundane, *Streetnotes* sought to encourage, as a means of critique, the popularization of a poetics of documentary, while also elevating the ethnographer's notebook to the scrutiny of art. Deploying poetry and art practices, the journal sought to promote a flourishing of style in both method and display—all in the effort to foster renewal in the critique of everyday life. To discover new ways of reading and writing the city, this was the goal.

Today, under the guidance of a newly formed editorial board of multidisciplinary scholars, artists, and poets who will direct, curate, and nurture *Streetnotes* moving forward, we seek to invigorate this project. We want to invite both old and new alike to fly into the streets, with notebook, camera or device, in the effort to build innovative, contemplative, and critical documents of participatory poetics and sociology.

With this issue, we mark a new beginning but also a continuity. *Streetnotes* was made possible by a grant from the Buffalo Freenet, a free community web hosting space in Buffalo, New York and for the first eighteen issues that was our home. In the beginning of this year, however, the Buffalo Freenet lost its battle to hold on to its slice of cyberspace in our era of privatization and corporate control. Fortunately, just as that site went dark, *Streetnotes* secured a platform in a different but similarly dedicated organization, the University of California's eScholarship initiative, a project committed to Open Access publishing and the freedom of information. We are grateful for the opportunity to continue to associate our project with these means of distribution and look forward to moving the, now offline, first eighteen issues to this new platform in the future.

Although the original vision of *Streetnotes* was introduced before the age of Facebook, and Flickr, before the advent of peer-to-peer web 2.0, before Google, Google Maps, and

before the geo-tagging of microblogs and mobile uploads, the *Streetnotes* project, looking back, arose in the same anticipatory space, alongside a common cultural desire for a do-it-yourself construction of reality. It was driven to achieve a heightened mode of reflection and a valorization of the complex and concrete exchanges of daily life. *Streetnotes* began when web publishing seemed to offer new and exciting possibilities to change the focus of culture. Now, however, that the web is replete with images and text of the everyday experience dispatched on-site, I've been moved to question the unique contribution of something like *Streetnotes*. I wondered what distinctive purpose this project might have in a world that seems to have embraced the contemporary imperative to document the everyday. With so many avenues of expression now available, with digital recording devices so interwoven into the fabric of public lives, is it still necessary to provide webspace for documentary projects?

In this preface to the new *Streetnotes*, I am obliged to consider this question, a question which cuts to the heart of documentary practice, and forces a new definition of documentary poetics in relation to the current proliferation and distribution of street imagery, street observation and notes. The current environment compels one to historicize the contemporary social desire for reflection, an environment in which our digital documentary tools flourish. It requires one to define the place of critical documentary work between news and theory, between memoir and public art. Towards this end, I want to renew the case for *Streetnotes*, a project which, I hope, you will make your own.

Over the years, *Streetnotes* contributors called upon two established documentary practices to open space between two modes of communication, between the daily reporting of events and the intellectual analysis of their effect. In the effort to hold these two registers of analysis apart, to hold them in relation, rather than staging their convergence, in the effort to address a fundamental lack that motivates both modern poetry and documentary: a perceived disconnect between culture and daily life, contributors drew on two methods to shape their encounters with non-identical existent phenomena into a culture renewed, to bring a new kind of news. The first was the *dérive*, the Situationist mode of urban reconnaissance, a mode of investigation had by wandering (literally drifting) through the city. It is a process of activating the senses so that one might excavate objects, moments or feelings, in the effort to release potentiality—a way of gathering artifacts of the city for their potential repurpose. Contributors used this method to mine contemporary and historic urban forms so that they might remake the city or, more simply, to project a new city beside the one previously known. A second related device deployed by contributors was *defamiliarization*, a technique of poetic estrangement, articulated by Victor Shklovsky as a means to radically recontextualize objects from their encased state in the social structure, architecture or visual culture. These entwined methods are deployed to break established perceptions and patterns of being, to evoke a discovery of different practices, to restore attention to detail, and to replace detail in new settings. They are both investigatory methods and methods of struggle set against the banalization of city life, ways of arresting and intervening into what has become, too often, the slowly destructive routine of modern cities.

The necessity of these means, and the project of *Streetnotes*, which aims to encourage them is compelled by a challenge immanent in the city, one that was articulated in sociology in the early twentieth century by Georg Simmel, who was perhaps the first to focus the sociological mind on the near and distant quality of urban social relations. His thoughts on the play of urban consciousness are most vividly presented in essays such as "Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903) and "The Stranger". (1908) The first essay

famously describes the blasé attitude that urban dwellers don as an affectation and means of protection against by the jarring stimuli of the city. The blasé attitude is described by Simmel as a critical distrust, a remoteness that allows the urbanite to manage wide variety of social relations, as a means of obtaining a requisite sense of freedom in the face of crushing social commitments. For Simmel, the blasé attitude is an internalization of a distant perspective conjured by the image of the city as a remote mass society or totality. The affectation worked to filter-out minutiae and render shallow social contacts that might otherwise interfere with the overwhelming complexity of urban lives.

This blasé attitude is foundational to contemporary thinking on urban culture as well as popular depictions of the urban. It is portrayed with master comedy Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld in shows like *Seinfeld*, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, where characters revel in a self-centered distracted neurosis. Their comic effect is induced by focusing on the alienating and anomic aspects of urban living, by staging for a sympathetic audience an internalized contradiction between the cosmopolitan view and earnest parochial aloofness. The cosmopolitan regime in its remoteness is alienating, and the tragic loss of meaning, enacted by invasive, intimate yet ephemeral social relations is anomic.

This challenge of the city: the imperative that the urbanite manage (or be managed by) the shifting scale of relationships, the challenge that the city issues to us: to place every sense, sight, or social contact in relation to a grander, yet inaccessible and often malformed picture of totality, is a challenge that arises historically alongside the city as a social form. One might recognize the core of this challenge as far back as Plato, in *The Republic*, and in *The Laws*, where the city functions as both an object and apparatus of critical thought, where the urban environment is both a challenge to the way people relate totality to the particular, and a means to resolve or reconcile that contradiction, which emerges in the city form between individuality and society.

Georg Simmel, writing in Berlin during a period of profound urban expansion confronted this age-old problem where he met it, in his contemporary historic milieu. His was not some timeless city, but a city taking shape within a particular political economy and cultural conjecture, an emergent consumer culture, a sign under which we still live. Thus, in the *Philosophy of Money*, he is careful to attribute the blasé attitude to the near and distant quality of urban social relations found in the new money economy. The City and Money, are the two great muses of Georg Simmel (and perhaps of sociology in general). Today they continue to reflect each other, although I might argue, with a new sense of urgency pushed forward by our unique material and historic conditions. Like the emergent modern metropolis, money in the capitalist society compels the near and distant quality of social relations. As a commodity, money embodies the contradiction set between its interchangeability and its object form. It is at once systematic and global in its interpretation and range, yet it remains deeply personal and endowed with specific socially embedded meanings.

For Marx, capital works to convert all that was solid into air, and money is used to render equivalent that which is difference and unique. Together they convert embedded social values into a new kind of Value, one we have come to understand as Value as such. Any remnant symbolic meaning attached to money or a commodity takes on a fetish quality. The allure of gold or gems as a unique vessel of Value is challenged by money. Gold is made equivalent to the like value of its opposite, a pound of coal or a day's work. Money's interchangeable power, the power of the commodity market to liquidate the object through a conversion of its worth compels, on the part of any participant in the money economy, Simmel argues, a certain remote or blasé attitude, not just to social relations, but to things.

From the perspective of the money economy, the city arranges its parts in accord with the dual register of the commodity form. It serves as a container for things, but less a sanctuary than an immense inventory shelf, one whose primary role is the support the circulation of Value, that is, the city appears as a mechanism for the conversion and flow of Value. The city alienates the personal, just as it demands individuation. For Kracauer, community and personality perish in the capitalist city as calculability demands the ever more detailed and differentiated production of subjects from a totality that appears distant and non-responsive. In the best circumstances, the city registers us as its guests.

On the other side of alienation, the loss of the stability caused by the potential liquidation and conversion of things induces a prevalent meaninglessness and anomie, which might be still wider-felt were it not for the affectation of city standoffishness. In the city, the preciousness of things must be limited, Simmel contends, always contextualized, their sacredness tempered, their spirit vacated—our enthusiasm, curbed. Such a blasé attitude, however, is only one response. The other reaction is to rush into the void in the attempt to rescue objects, places, and memory from an anomic tide. This is the romantic response. The vulnerability of the particular, the different, the abject of the system manifests a desire to capture the elusive allure of things, to model them in emotionally clad vitrines. The sacred element, the call of the hoard, is not negated by money or the commodity culture, nor simply retained as a vestige of an old economy. It is made all the stronger by the commodity form as it is called upon as a defense against meaninglessness. It manifests in the recall of precious spaces, in the close and intimate nature of things encrusted with memories and emotions. These appear as the *petit object a*—a lack configured in the shape of nostalgia, remains—or ruins, rescued from marketplace conversion or spared the onslaught of commodity production, the rare and authentic experiences staged against capitalism's cascade of things and (sometimes even human) subjects. That which is missing takes shape as an object of desire, a seduction for place, memory, authenticity, and history.

The fetish quality of objects is thus not a false component of the commodity or city form. It is a socially concrete consequence of the modern city and the money economy. It is brought into being in museums, in collecting, in historic preservation and in the desire to shop or taste, to experience one's (individuated and socially) sensuous self. It helps one assemble the panoply of self against the liquidation of custom and tradition, against the meaninglessness of money/wage labor. The attraction of the fetish is deeply at home in modern life. It appears to resolve or at least discharge the city's immanent contradiction. In the place where the intimate must confront the public, it opens an escape to interiority, a secret, sacred city amidst the profane. This holy city is a temple of objects, shiny, unique and endowed with inconvertible truths, markers of place against spatialization, indicators of events against the flow of market time.

This countermovement, against the spirit of capital, to embrace the sociocultural materiality of things carves out against their dissolution both a sense of urban texture, and a human place within a human landscape. It allows for style. But how do we distinguish this work of rescue from hoarding, from acquisition in service of circulation? How can one acknowledge this validation of individuality against the role such valuation plays in the movement of the money economy? Although such acts of style, collection and preservation appeal to the sentiments of an historic economic condition, and are often staged with aristocratic airs, they are at their core not only accomplices in the configuration our contemporary bourgeois outlook, but necessary for the construction of ourselves as modern economic agents. As such, how can an effort to name the streets, the effort to claim them, overcome the functionality this acquisitive ritual naming has for construction of the city as an economic unity? Can an object-poetry of

the streets transcend its utility in the exchange of value? Can any individual resistance to anomie lay bare the scripts of the city, the forces of systematic interpellation and, in turn, chart new scripts, new assemblies or collectives staked out against the alienating character of the urban totality?

The potential of the fetish or aura to do so is recognized in critical theory, and in the most pronounced fashion, in the work of Walter Benjamin, who was drawn towards the proto-potentiality of objects as a form of resistance in an overly determined and administered world. Two tropes that inhabit his *Arcade Project*, recall the twin forces at work in the commodity city. The first is the *flaneur*, draped in the mantle of blasé disaffection the figure drifts amongst the world of things alighting on some detail momentarily before moving on to the next. Like a stranger, or tourist moving across the city's surfaces, this strategically detached figure embraces the alienating effect of a remote totality. She or he moves perceptual through urban space pressed forward only by the allure of objects. The other trope, the collector, by contrast returns to objects, poring over them emotionally, in the effort to renew and invigorate their meaning through new contexts. She or he battles against the disappearance of thingness by setting each object within a conceptual yet deeply personal universe, a collection, which aims to stand against the dispersal of commodity liquidation. For Benjamin, both these figures are indicative of materialist conditions of a city, which, at once, vacates the aura of objects while simultaneously naturalizing the processes of its history.

In their separate latent forms, the *flaneur* and the collector reinforce ideological thinking. They are the antecedents of the tourist and the shopper, two modes of participating in the modern spectacle of consumption. These reactions to the city, one arising from the condition of alienation, the other a reaction to pervasive anomie, however, are not for Benjamin merely symptoms of the money economy. They are cast as the proto-political complements of a revolutionary orientation towards the city. They are in their partition unrealized, but in the immediate juxtaposition potentially explosive. They respond ineffectually to the dialectical image the city presents. The dynamic interplay of the city is disengaged and diverted to internal parlor games or the phantasmagoria of remote routinization.

Much of today's city writing suffers from the tendency to separate the challenge of the city into distinct and severed registers, that is, it yields to the difficulty of responding to the challenge to think about the particular in relation to totality. Each side ignores the other, soldiering on, as if, unaware. While, there is no seeming end to the presentation of everyday life images or documents of intimate ephemeral spaces, too often these experiences emerge as if they were disconnected snapshots, confessions, isolated from both each other and from any sense of the concrete forces that insist upon them. They appear as bursts of nostalgia or fragmentary insights caught up and logged into a system which converts them to abstract data, information for some remote analysis. The pleasure of the unexpected can positively disrupt collective boredom, but only when its newness is not staged by way of the willful disregard of systemic thinking. Similarly, the difficulty systematic, social science, analysis has of registering either radical difference or the force of human concern in terms other than the economic play of capital and prestige leaves a parallel void. When the dialectic between street observation and its mode of display and analysis is disrupted, when discovery and presentation are separated from each other, the art of investigation and the creative process that can potentially turn events into shared experiences is diminished.

Yet, despite this squeeze, despite the elusive middle, the city continues to challenge us by compelling a near and distant vision, churning up familiar and the remote relations, intimate and abstract forms of membership, and, as such, remains a charged apparatus

of critique, one that induces us to recast relations and roles, re-form self and society, to re-script, and in doing so, push History forward.

This brings me back to a concern that motivated this preface, the seeming power of the virtual to resolve the central tension of urban life. The digital city, and the noetic lifeworld it represents, embodies and influences differs from the pre-digital city through its means of mediation. Digital systems provide advanced granularity and scalability for the organization, classification, and the recognition of the patterns of social life. The fluid and extensible structures used to capture and track relations, objects and events can help manage the shifting scale of social relations Simmel found so overwhelming in the metropolis. Not only does the computer enable evocative abstract visualization strategies and the deep analytical indexing of particulars, it can be used to provide platforms to shuttle between varied perspectives. As such, contemporary digital instruments for the capture and display urban forms expand the possibilities of interpretative social poetics, but only if these management tools are not used to foreclose the possibilities the urban imagination compels, so long as these systems don't obfuscate the social mediation the city demands.

A potential reading of *Google Maps* may serve as an analogy for the problematic that can develop in our geographic imagination when the mediating scale of the digital is naturalized or otherwise obscured from critique. *Google Maps* can constitute a kind of reconciliation when it appears to resolve the challenge of the city to think critically about the relation of the individual to society. While it presents the near and distant qualities of social relations and things, it does so along a single line of magnitude. This is its enchantment and, perhaps ironically, its aesthetic appeal. On its maps one can use an interactive level or zoom to view a former place of residence or urban haunt. I do this often. I find it mesmerizing to bask in the memories and imaginary play of places, zoom out to a large overview of the world of places, and then back in again, perhaps someplace else. It is truly a wonderful invention that offers a unique form of enchantment. At the same time, however, it produces a rather singular view of the world, wherein the particular is related to the general by way of a toggle down scale. There is a parallel between this view of the world and the image of the city induced by the money economy, where the near scale houses individuated objects and relations and the wide scale toggles up to reveal Value. As perfect and whole as this kind of mapping seems, it is only one way to solve the challenge before us.

Documentary poetics, armed with its methods of the *dérive* and defamiliarization, in turn, is capable of discovering multiple ways of arcing between macro and micro perspectives—either by fitting them together in new elegant ways—or creatively rubbing them off each other to bring forth new perspectives of social being and new forms of collectivity. *Streetnotes* does not seek to resolve the tensions of the city, to render outdated the difficulty of its oscillating perspectives, but instead to draw upon them as a force of discovery. We seek to interrupt totality with the particular, and to gather together individuated expressions of place in concrete collectivities. To inform the aesthetic mediation of the near and distant sensations, to enact the ethnographic imperative to exist both inside and outside social patterns, to collide the percept and the concept, this is the difference we seek to make.

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