Wanderings in Psychogeography:  
Syllabus and Orientation Notes  
Ezra Haber Glenn, Lecturer  
Fall 2017

1 Contact Information

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<tr>
<th>name</th>
<th>email</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ezra Haber Glenn</td>
<td><a href="mailto:eglenn@mit.edu">eglenn@mit.edu</a></td>
<td>7-337</td>
<td>Tues. 9–10AM</td>
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Class website:  

2 Overview

In his seminal article, “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography” (1955), Lettrist/Situationist founder Guy Debord called for a new field of inquiry, to be known as “psychogeography,” established to study “the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.”

Despite this apparent attempt at concrete definition, the field of psychogeography has eluded the methodological and theoretical formalization common in other disciplines — it is, at heart, an undisciplined discipline — being more frequently associated with what even Debord himself referred to as “a rather pleasing vagueness.” (Indeed, one suspects a tongue-in-cheek smirk behind Debord’s insistence on a “precise” and “specific” approach — the gentleman doth protest too much, methinks.)

Equally important, although the Situationists may have been the first to recognize and name it, the practice of psychogeographical inquiry can be traced back though centuries of historical precedents and influences found in travelogues, real and invented biographies, opium-induced confessions, playful and
surreal works of art, and other literary, poetic, and geographical flights of fanciful reality (and realistic fantasy).

Similarly, the past 60 years have seen further flourishing (albeit perhaps “underground flourishing,” reminiscent of the growth pattern of psychotropic subterranean fungi...) in the field from novelists, poets, and essayists (Ackroyd, Ballard, Sebald, Self, Sinclair, Solnit), as well as geographers and planners (including DUSP’s own Kevin Lynch, who explored mental maps of urban spaces), photographers, filmmakers, anarchist communitarians, guerrilla artists, landscape painters, musicians, game designers, and others.

As a result, the quest to define “psychogeography” may in fact be a form of psychogeographical wandering itself — possibly futile, but nonetheless fun, fascinating, and rife with hidden meanings. (Or perhaps it is just one big inside joke....)

Through this seminar-style class we will explore the history, present, and future of psychogeography, hoping to map the center and the edges of this elusive field and to pioneer potential new directions and applications for the principles we discover (or invent) along the way. Class will meet once/week to discuss classic and more recent texts — including novels, essays, poems, reviews, films, and other works of creative nonfiction and speculative fiction. Students will also undertake their own psychogeographic wanderings and complete a final “carto-imagino-synthetic” project to document, describe, map, and otherwise “make sense of place” through these techniques.

3 Logistics

3.1 Structure of the Class

This is a seminar class, which means a few important things:

a. The class will be small, and everyone is expected to participate; each of us is responsible for bringing material in to our discussions.

b. The goal of the class is not for me to “convey” knowledge to you, but rather for us to work together to explore and generate ideas. (The term “seminar” originally comes from the Latin word for “plant nursery” or “seed plot” — it’s where insights for learning are generated.)

To “seed” our discussions, students will write short reflection notes on the week’s readings (see below).

3.2 Credits

9 (nine).
3.3 Assignments

In addition to reading and participation, students are asked to complete the following assignments:

weekly reflections: After completing the assigned readings each week, please write down your thoughts in the form of brief (1–2 pages) reflections; these can take a variety of forms: short musings prompted by the material, an essay on a single aspect that struck you as noteworthy, or even a comparison or contrast of some key aspects. Questions for discussion are encouraged as well.

final psychogeographic project: By the end of the semester, each student will prepare and present a psychogeographic work based on their own exploration of some real or imagined place. Elements may include poetry or prose; photography, film, sound, smell, and tactilometry; bits, atoms, data, signal, and noise; history, biography, cartography, imagination; blood, sweat, spleen, and other humorous elements; spirit, soul, pathos, hopes, dreams, memories, traces, hints, will-o-wisps, fears, nightmares, and whatever else you discover or invent along the way. (More details will be provided as the course progresses and we figure out what this subject is even about. . . .)

3.4 Walks, Tours, Explorations

From time to time over the semester, students are welcome to attend — and encouraged to organize — optional group walks to explore various sites and neighborhoods, to put into practice the psychogeographic principles we are reading about. Individual dérives and attempts at détournement are also recommended.

All class participants will be eligible for membership in the Tech Sychogeographic Psociety (TSP), with all the rights and privileges pertaining thereto.

3.5 Grading

Final grades for the class will be based on the following formula:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Weekly Reflections</td>
<td>$11 \times 5 = 55%$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Project</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Random Surrealist Coin Toss</td>
<td>1%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>101%</strong></td>
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Notes:

- Weekly reflections are due for 11 of the 12 weeks with readings; students may miss one week without excuse or penalty.

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1Note: you are allowed to miss one week without excuse or penalty
4 Schedule

4.1 Weekly Topics/Readings

**09/11** Guy Debord and the Situationists: Ludo-Political Psychogeography


**09/18** Some Urban Planning Roots: Socio-Spatial Psychogeography

Chicago, 1925, chapter 1 ("The City")

**09/25** 18th and 19th Century London and Paris: Literary Ur-Psychogeography


10/09 No class

10/16 Smells, Sounds, Sickness, and Sensing the City: Hidden Patterns of Data-Driven Psychogeography


Optional Film: Walter Ruttmann. Weekend (Wochenende), 1930.

10/23 Madness and Altered States: Insanito-Psychadelic Psychogeography


10/30 Flights of Fancy: Journeys in Imaginato-Occult Psychogeography [Special Guest: Peter Bebergal (invited)]


Optional Reading: Xavier de Maistre. A Journey Round my Room. Hurd and Houghton, 1871. Originally published as Voyage autour de ma chambre in 1763; translated in 1871 by Henry Attwell.; available online at https://archive.org/details/journeyroundmyro00maisrich

**11/06** Language, Ethnicity, and Race: Subaltern Psychogeographies [*Special Guest: Garnette Cadogan (invited)*]


Optional Film: John Sayles. *Brother from another planet*, 1984.

**11/13** Gender: Feminist Psychogeography


Optional Film: Agnes Varda. *Cléo de 5 à 7* (*cléo from 5 to 7*), 1962.

**11/20** Undergrounds and Underworlds: Cops and Robbers; Detectives and Voyeurs; Explorers and Stalkers; Pushers and Pickpockets; Hackneys, Hobos, Hustlers, and Hookers; Pervasive-Subversive Psychogeography [*Special Guest: Stuart Spina*]


**11/27** Jaywalking, *Détournement*, Hacking, Squatting, Occupying: Trespassive Psychogeography

Optional Film: Banksy. Exit through the gift shop, 2012.

12/04 Branches, Twigs, Sprouts, Leaves, Debris: 1975–present

12/11 New Directions: Student Projects
Final projects due; in-class presentations.

5 Additional Notes

5.1 Feedback
Somewhere in here I wanted to be sure to mention that I really do care about your ideas and feedback on the course, and ideally would want it during the semester so I can be aware of problems (or opportunities) and make changes as necessary. Please feel free to contact me with issues as they arise, either in person or through email (or even anonymous notes).

5.2 Some Other Required Elements
Although all of this should go without saying, the Institute requires us to say the following:
5.2.1 Accommodation for Disabilities

If you have a documented disability, or any other problem you think may affect your ability to perform in class, please see me early in the semester so that arrangements may be made to accommodate you.

5.2.2 Writing and Communication Center

The Writing and Communication Center at MIT (WCC) offers free one-on-one professional advice from communication experts. The WCC is staffed completely by MIT lecturers. All have advanced degrees. All are experienced college classroom teachers of communication. All are all are published scholars and writers.

The WCC works with undergraduate, graduate students, post-docs, faculty, staff, alums, and spouses. The WCC helps you strategize about all types of academic and professional writing as well as about all aspects of oral presentations (including practicing classroom presentations & conference talks as well as designing slides).

No matter what department or discipline you are in, the WCC helps you think your way more deeply into your topic, helps you see new implications in your data, research, and ideas. The WCC also helps with all English as Second Language issues, from writing and grammar to pronunciation and conversation practice.

The WCC is located in E18-233, 50 Ames Street). To guarantee yourself a time, make an appointment. To register with our online scheduler and to make appointments, go to [https://mit.mywconline.com/](https://mit.mywconline.com/) To access the WCC’s many pages of advice about writing and oral presentations, go to [http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/](http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/) Check the online scheduler for up-to-date hours and available appointments.

5.2.3 Academic Misconduct

Plagiarism and cheating are both academic crimes. Never (1) turn in an assignment that you did not write yourself, (2) turn in an assignment for this class that you previously turned in for another class, or (3) cheat on an exam. If you do so, it may result in a failing grade for the class, and possibly even suspension from the college. Please see me if you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism. Anyone caught cheating on an exam will be reported to the provost in line with recognized university procedures.

References


Banksy. Exit through the gift shop, 2012.


Xavier de Maistre. *A Journey Round my Room.* Hurd and Houghton, 1871. Originally published as *Voyage autour de ma chambre* in 1763; translated in 1871 by Henry Attwell.; available online at https://archive.org/details/journeyroundmyro00maisrich


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