

Being Nowhere: Distraction, Disintegration and Spatiality

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Abstract: Concepts of distraction developed in nineteenth century research associate it with transformed urban landscapes in nineteenth century modern cultures. But from the 1930s to 50s Britain, it becomes associated with disorders of domestic spatiality, and a disregard of those design principles of order and hygiene, purpose and function, which were understood to define ‘problem families’. Researchers drew on psychological models of character to propose that these environments produced affective disorders – or defects of sentiment formation – through which adolescent working girls, whose distinctive susceptibilities were formed from the wartime disruptions to familiar landscapes, became predisposed to the lures of distraction. As a disjunctive perceptual disorder associated with transformations in urban spatiality, then, ‘distractibility’ became a symptom of a disruption of the cognitive function associated with that lack of purposiveness, the inability to cultivate ‘homely sentiments’, and the failure of order and demeanour which characterised the environment provided by the problem family. Affective disorders generative of modern forms of female adolescent distraction are seen to bring about a disturbance of perceptual modes that result in psychosis, as the breakdown of consciousness and meaning. As the girls’ immersion in the sensory realm situates them in terms of a ‘dispersal’ across urban landscapes, their attachment to contingent and capricious stimuli is understood to result in a degenerative progression towards the emotional immobility characteristic of the schizophrenic. Within the coordinates of psychological models of distractibility, they become located nowhere.

Keywords: Distraction, urban space, domesticity.

In the nineteenth century, psychological inquiry into states of distraction and attention in the context of new perceptual regimes, proposed a link between the altered environments of urban modernity and states of consciousness. ‘Distraction’ became situated on a continuum of attentiveness demarcating the functionality of the individual subject (Crary, 1999). But in 1940s Britain, psychological models of distraction were adapted to address concerns over the working class girl and her attachment to those sexualised entertainments associated with modern commercial cultures. In this period, the psychology of character transformed the notion of attention in such a way that individual ‘distractibility’ was defined as a separate psychological state, rather than as a failure of attentiveness. Seen as a pathological response to those commercial entertainments which are emblematic of the altered conditions of

modern urban environments, distractibility was seen not just as a perceptual state – a state of consciousness, or ‘mind’ – but one which was based in the affects: a *state of being* traceable to a pathological fabric of character through which these girls became susceptible to the lures of sensory excitements and ‘thrills’.

Distraction and sensation: being outside

In 1942, Pearl Jephcott published a study of young working girls growing up in Britain – elementary educated girls leaving school at fifteen who were mainly employed in factories, small shops or in private houses as ‘domestic girls’, the ‘little, unimportant jobs’ of the cheapest kind, demanding little skill and offering no opportunity to learn a craft (Jephcott, 1942, pp. 73–79). Jephcott’s particular concern was with girls for whom the disruptions of wartime environments had brought an uncertain future and a fragmented present:

Their fathers have gone away with the Forces, their schools have been broken up and scattered, they have seen the destruction of places which have been known to them all their lives, and some of them have been near to violent death themselves. ... What future awaits this ... set of girls? (Jephcott, 1942, pp. 35–6).

In Jephcott’s account of altered conditions and transformed domestic and social landscapes, the question concerning the future of these girls is framed in terms of the effects of a disrupted environment on vulnerable psyches. But the concerns she expresses relate to a particular transformation in habits and tastes, for that ‘susceptibility’ which makes the girls’ futures problematic relates to a discernible attachment to the ‘shallow pleasures’ of modern cultures and popular forms: their enthusiasm for the fantasy world of the cinema is only superseded by an alarming ‘craze’ for the dance hall. These girls, Jephcott suggests, are ‘at the mercy of the commercial world which in the main puts before them second-rate goods, cinemas rather than theatres, trash magazines rather than books, and synthetic foods and materials rather than the genuine articles’ (Jephcott, 1942, p. 38).

The damaged landscape of wartime Britain provides a means, therefore, of articulating the disruption to traditions of culture brought by factors other than war. The girls’ psychic predisposition – a susceptibility to the excitations of the myriad of stimuli inherent in modern urban landscapes – is thus modelled on the texture of urban life: a ‘disconnected’ and fragmented experience of a colliding series of ‘sense impressions’ (Singer 1995, p. 91). Emblematic of these dangers in 1940s’ Britain, cinemas and dance halls offer the pleasures of intensity, ephemerality and abstraction: the cinema provides a dream world of action, colour, emotion and ‘thrills’, and the ‘hot rhythm and syncopated music’ of the dance hall is invoked

as the ultimate symbol of vulgar sentiment and synthetic excitement which characterises the commercial world's 'sterile recreation' (Jephcott, 1942, pp. 118–9; 120–5). For Jephcott, the effects of factory work predispose young working girls to the repetition and mechanical rhythms associated with the music of the dance hall. Dehumanising and unchallenging, the 'continuous din', speed and mechanical routine, 'drugs' them: their own responses become mechanical, involuntary, unconscious. Suspended in the repetitive rhythms of the dance-hall band, absorbed in the distracted moment of cinema fantasy, the girls' psyches become lifted from the 'grounding' of physical space and progressive spatialised time: they are figured outside spatial and temporal coordinates, in a synthetic world of modern commercial entertainments and the automatic, sensory pleasures of the modern consumer.

'Problem families' and squalid homes: making primitive

From the 1930s, distraction was identified as a distinctive symptom of young girls' predisposition to delinquency. Grace Pailthorpe's study of 200 girls in prisons and preventive and rescue homes at the beginning of that decade brought her to conclude that delinquent behaviour derives from defects in 'sentiment development', as the girls failed to discipline instinctual drives or impulses in ways which demonstrated social adaptation, or adjustment. The girls' maladjustment, their over-attachment to urban entertainments, was seen by Pailthorpe as symptomatic of a distinctive affective disorder deriving from insufficient sentiment training in the home:

We are dealing with individuals whose dispositions are rudimentary largely because life has been lived in surroundings which have been rudimentary. The surroundings lack ideals which are the outcome of, as well as the making of, sentiments (Pailthorpe, 1932, p. 19).

As the familial origin of the girls' lack of social adaptation was linked to the regressive nature of their domestic environments, they became positioned within a grouping identified in the same period as the 'problem family' (see Joint Committee of the British Medical Association and the Magistrates' Association, 1946).

The concept of the problem family itself derived from an attempt to reclassify the nineteenth century concept of 'the residuum', as the *Wood Report*, inquiring into the incidence of 'mental defect' in 1929, identified what it referred to as the 'social problem group'. For the Wood Committee, 'social problems' (or forms of delinquent behaviour) could be traced to a group of families within which there existed an unduly large proportion of 'insane persons, epileptics, paupers, criminals (especially recidivists), unemployables, habitual slum dwellers, prostitutes, inebriates and other social inefficients' compared to other families (*Wood Report*,

cited Blacker, 1937, p. 2). Eugenicists attempted, over the following twenty years, to classify this group in the interests of limiting its expansion. Primary amongst the features identifying this group was the squalor and disorder of their homes:

The home, if indeed it can be described as such, has usually the most striking characteristics. Nauseating odours assail one's nostrils on entry, and the source is usually located in some urine-sodden, faecal stained mattress in an upstairs room. There are no floor coverings, no decorations on the walls except perhaps the scribblings of the children and bizarre patterns formed by absent plaster. Furniture is of the most primitive, cooking utensils absent, facilities for sleeping hopeless – iron bedsteads furnished with soiled mattresses and no coverings. Upstairs there is flock everywhere, which the mother assures me has come out of a mattress she has unpacked for cleansing. But the flock seems to stay there for weeks and the cleansed and repacked mattress never appears ... There are sometimes faecal accumulations on the floors upstairs, and tin baths containing several days accumulation of faeces and urine are not unknown. The children, especially the older ones, often seem to be perfectly happy and contented, despite such a shocking environment ... the general standard of hygiene is lower than that of the animal world (Wofinden, 1946, p. 128).

The inability of these families to maintain standards of hygiene is linked to a failure of order and functionality, as they show no inclination to assemble the props, utensils and facilities of a purposively-designed environment suited to the rhythms and rituals of privatised family life. Meaning is (literally) turned inside out: objects designed for sleeping and bathing become receptacles of waste; the logic of 'decoration' is disorganised and the surface eroded, as walls exhibit only gashes and gaps in plaster and the incoherent markings of children's play, and floors are smeared with faecal matter; and 'furnishing' is disrupted as mattresses are emptied and their interiors dispersed across the house, flock 'everywhere'. Insidious and permeating, impossible to consign to a distinct place, these 'innards' – nauseating, stinking, soiled, stained – become part of the fabric of 'ordure' which characterises the problem home and its inhabitants: regressive, disintegrative, dispersed, formless.

These are not just defects of domestic design, or evidence of an inability to arrange and deploy objects according to function and with respect for form, but an orientation to living which is produced as its opposite – in a principle of *anti*-design. And since this orientation is predicated on the erosion of form and structure and their association with order and purpose, it impacts upon the home as an environment for character formation, as the adolescent's capacity for disciplined behaviour depends upon the 'moulding pressures' of 'directive discipline' (Morgan, 1943).

Problem families, and especially, more worryingly, the children of such families, were understood in terms of a failure – or formlessness – of character evident in a pathological contentment with conditions that were now seen as incommensurate with the provision of those moulding pressures relating to the correlation of adolescent character with a modernised family life: ‘these families for one reason or another have not kept pace with social progress and are a brake on the wheels’ (Wofinden, 1946, p. 127). Modern forms of domestic order synchronise the physical and emotional landscapes involved in modernising British character: the *making primitive* of domestic environments was not only the sign of a socially atavistic character, but created the conditions within which social atavism would become a legacy for the character development of the next generation.

Serenity, distraction and the self-affects

The exchange, in the girls’ affective pathologies, between atavism and ‘distractibility’, depended on their subjection to the self-affects. The behavioural features of problem families – ‘fecklessness, irresponsibility, improvidence and indiscipline in the home’ (Blacker, 1946, p. 118; 1952a, p. 16) – were translated into a psychological model of temperamental instability. If individual sentiment-formation – the acquisition of emotional tendencies or structures of feeling that involved directing or channelling the instincts to gain satisfactions which were in line with social aims – was developed through familial training, its aim, above all, was the cultivation of those ‘homely sentiments’ – parental, filial and marital – which provide the coordinates of integrated harmonious character (Blacker 1952b). This, it was argued, provided the basis of a form of ‘demeanour’ in the home which would create an effective environment for children to develop into effective future citizens: regulating conduct according to external demands or constraints and striving towards goals (Blacker, 1952b).

In this way, the self comes to rule supreme over conduct, the individual is raised above moral conflict; he attains character in the fullest sense and a completely generalised will, and exhibits to the world that finest flower of moral growth, serenity (McDougall, 1908, p. 404, my emphasis).

Serenity implied an adherence to principles of order that became imbued with moral foundations. The importance of harmony and equilibrium, restraint and discipline, to the making of the modern home, sees the development of a regime of aesthetic order which suggested that physical space should be arranged in terms which relied on an understanding of the appropriate balance between visual and sensory stimuli and their link to those perceptual and emotional responses which would cultivate an effective familial environment. Just as integrated character was understood in terms of an equilibrium – disciplined according

to a hierarchy in which the selfish sentiments were moderated by social sentiments, but also avoiding an over-rigid system in order to allow the satisfaction of the instincts – so too domestic space must be rationally organised: orderly yet harmonious, uncluttered, soothing, *serene*. Models of interior design developed in the 1940s and 1950s made it clear that homes that created an effective environment for families would eschew the regressive, over-ornamental ‘clutter’ and heavy materials and dark colours of older styles – evidence of the ‘undeveloped mind’ – as well as the ‘insincere’, ephemeral, ‘flippant’ pleasures of superficial visual effect and synthetic garishness, to create instead a balancing of authenticity and the modern which manifested a ‘moral unity’ suited to the building of effective family life and individual character (Hornsey, 2003, pp. 175–204).

The moral reprobation of families, who did not adopt the ascendant regime of order and hygiene in domestic design and management in their homes to ensure the effective development of moral character in children, was clear. If the homes of problem families exhibited a lack of order and propriety, and an eschewing of functionality, undermining the purposiveness which links form with function, so too their characters exhibited a failure of that purposiveness – the capacity to strive towards goals – which was understood as the cornerstone of human character. For problem families were characterised by ‘laziness’, ‘lack of persistence’, ‘indifference to the standards of the community’, a lack of foresight and purpose, and an ‘obliviousness of all but momentary issues’ (Blacker, 1952b). In this respect, the physical disintegration in their homes was a symptom of a much deeper problem: psychic disintegration.

As problem families displayed a domestic anti-modernism and disorder that acted against the development of purposiveness as a central feature of disciplined character in girls, so these same girls’ opposite flight towards the artificial glitter of commercial forms in adolescence suggested a response that took them too freely into the chaos of self-affects offered by an accelerating urban modernism. Lacking a family life based in the delicate balance and tempered merging of styles embodied in domestic modernism and based on the continuity of those principles of sentiment development embodied in ‘serenity’, the girls became immersed in the self-affects, with ‘the gratification of the moment ... the limit of their mental horizon’ (Joint Committee of the British Medical Association and the Magistrates’ Association, 1946, p. 7).

Distractibility and disintegration

Anthony Vidler argues that diseases associated with new configurations of urban space, such as agoraphobia and claustrophobia – the fear of vast empty space and that of being alone in

a closed space – are predicated on the loss of boundary to the visual field and the collapse of perspectival space – or the collapse of foreground distance and ‘prospect’.¹ The disruption of that spatial positioning of the individual within the visual landscape through which detached vision, and distanced reflection, is made possible, represents a loss of the spatial coordinates which locate an apprehending individual consciousness. As Vidler demonstrates, for critics of urbanism and psychologists alike, the surfacing of a regressive, instinctual fear is a uniquely modern response to the ‘impossibility of stabilizing modern space or sheltering the subject in a world of rootless psyches’ (Vidler, 2000, p. 50). In their link to the fear of the crowd, these diseases also become invested with the unpredictability of a formless mass, spatially connected but dispersed, and the exposure of the senses to promiscuous and capricious sensation. The contingent stimulus, the incidental apprehension, pressing itself upon the individual involuntarily, robs individual consciousness of the purposive force of voluntary attention, just as it is robbed of its centrality in making visual perceptions meaningful by the collapse of spatial detachment.

As ‘modern’ diseases, then, these spoke to a disjuncture between the perspectival regimes of urban modernity and those perceptual modes through which individual consciousness could be anchored. But the problem family proposed a disjunctive principle within those very environments understood to shelter the individual from the dislocating effects of urban space and experience: environments created in the exchange between the spatial regimes of domestic modernity and those modes of sentiment formation that anchored individual character.

Disorders of attention, then, were not produced by the entry of the individual into the urban landscape. Neither did they simply originate in the *misdemeanours* of problem families, as problems of sentiment formation. Rather, they were woven into the spatial orientations and landscapes of regressive, anti-modern – anti-design – domestic environments. For the ideal of cleanliness embodied in modern architecture and design (which ‘joins the doctor’s white coat, the white tiles of the bathroom, the white walls of the hospital, and so on’) is a ‘cleansing of vision’ itself, ‘bracketing the sensual out in favour of the visual’ (Wigley, 1995, p. 5). While the problem family represents a disturbance to that regime of hygiene – which cleanses not just space, therefore, but the look, perception, *consciousness itself* – it manifests itself as not only the disintegration of space, surface and order which characterises the squalid home, but in those failures of perception, attention and character which are encompassed by ‘distractibility’.

If, for Jephcott and others, then, the problem of distraction is a *functional disorder*, the distinctive susceptibilities of those girls whom it comes to define – those defects of constitution which allow environmental stimuli to register in ways which create pathological responses – derive not from the urban landscapes from which these stimuli originate, but more intimate ones, the domestic, familial spaces within which their emotional tendencies are formed. Not only, then, is their distractibility a factor that points to that ‘lack of centralised interest’ and purposiveness which is expressed as a failure of attention (Pailthorpe, 1932, p. 94), but it becomes a symptom of that inability to discipline the self-affects which links their ‘craze’ for dance music, the cinema and erotic literature to a sexual instability (Joint Committee of the British Medical Association and the Magistrates’ Association, 1946). Pailthorpe notes that the delinquent girls she studied exhibited a precociously-developed aesthetic sentiment, evident in their responsiveness to sensory excitations, a factor she attributes to an ‘undue sexual stimulation’ characteristic of homes in which family members live and sleep in the same room. The distortion of the aesthetic sentiment by the sexual instinct, therefore, allows them to become defined in terms of a primitive, instinctual egoism: ‘their craving to follow fashion ... is largely imitative rather than idealistic, exhibitionistic rather than aesthetic (Pailthorpe, 1932, p. 39, 60).

These girls’ cultural attachments demonstrate a sensual responsiveness which functions in the absence of cognition, and so implies a radical disruption to subjective coherence and consciousness. The girls’ absorption in landscapes of distraction, their dependence on *the contingency of external stimuli*, functions as a counterpoint to the processes of voluntary attention which allow them to exercise cognitive ability and so attain the consistency and continuity of coherent subjectivity: they lack the ‘synthesising’ capacity which allows them to move beyond the sensory and the instinctual, to transform sense impressions into coherent, conscious thought. These disruptions to the subject’s capacity for synthesis threaten to undermine subjective integration, and render the individual ‘entirely unable at the present time to give her attention to anything’ (Pailthorpe, 1932, p. 60, 94). Pailthorpe identifies beneath their emotional excitability and self-assertiveness an emotional immobility, as the flow of emotions *becomes fixed in a more or less degree* (Pailthorpe, 1932, p. 102, my emphasis). This is evident in passivity towards the world outside the self, which constitutes a fundamental disordering of the relation of the individual to the external world:

Extreme passivity ... is ... indicative of the stifling of all natural functioning The mind is absorbed elsewhere and cannot be brought to focus full attention on external considerations (Pailthorpe, 1932, pp. 95–96).

In their inability to attend to the external world, these intractable cases point to the limits of therapeutic treatment. Exhibiting a failure of cognitive functioning, a prominence of the self-affects, a failure of purposive striving, an antisocial lack of affective relation to others, and the alternating extremes of apathy and excitation, the distinctive features of their pathological responses point to the disintegrative effects of psychosis, a schizophrenia which involves extreme introversion, an excess of the self-affects, and a failure of the capacity for 'rapport' (MacDougall, 1926, pp. 382).

Being nowhere

'Distractibility' is, therefore, a feature indicative of the pathological relationship between character and environment. But in this period, and for this group of girls, it is understood as evidence of a troubling persistence of archaic domestic landscapes ill-suited to effective character formation, as much as it is of an irregular orientation to new urban landscapes. The disintegrative elements of both urban and domestic environments are themselves mapped on to the girls' subjective formation, in a spatialised interiority. The girls become not just formless and dispersed, in their attachment to the stimuli of the urban commercial landscapes, but fixed outside cognitive experience, without the perspectival locatedness of a purposive consciousness. In the girls' absorption in the sensory realm and the 'regression' or 'arrest' of subjective perceptual abilities, their 'distractibility' carries the pathological coordinates of modern spatial disjunctions: formless, dispersed, and eventually receding into a psychosis which renders individuals 'cold, numbed, almost lifeless ruins' (MacDougall, 1926, p. 384). Immersed in the distracted moment, dispersed across a synthetic urban landscape of contingent stimuli, the girls exist outside the spatial and temporal coordinates of reality, fixed in a realm of chaotic sensation: they are not just suspended in time, they exist *nowhere*.

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Endnotes

- ¹ See Wolfgang Schivelbusch (1979) for an account of the way new forms of travel and new urban spectacles eliminate foreground space, and the close view, creating a visual and psychological dislocation, and destabilising spatial location and temporal rhythms (Swanson, 2000, pp. 138–9).