Number 10 – What is Reverie?

What follows is a series of posts based around the theme of ‘Reverie’ made by the artists Kate Genever and Steve Pool from the Poly-Technic, the visual anthropologist, Amanda Ravetz, and myself Ian Waites. We went for a day out to Gainsborough to my childhood estate Middlefield Lane, together we asked the question What is reverie?.

Here’s mine, which begins with few lines from Scott Walker’s 1969 song On your own again:

You’re on your own again,
and you’re your best again.
That’s what you tell yourself.

I’m an only child. Here’s me on my new bike with a proud Mum on Dunstall Walk (and in front of that original fence which separated the estate from the cornfield and the rest of the countryside beyond) around the time that Scott Walker was existentially reflecting on his life after the events of May 1968, and in what is probably my second-favourite-ever song.

I certainly relate to those lyrics. When things go slightly wrong - for instance as I fail better once again to attract some research funding - my fall-back position is always to say to myself that I don’t care, I’m better off on my own, I can do these things on my own in any case.

But sometimes I know that I have to come out of my shell, and that I should let others into what I’m doing. I did this last month when - not with a little trepidation - I invited some other, shall we say, hopefully, ‘interested’, parties - artists Kate Genever and Steve Pool, and the visual anthropologist
Amanda Ravetz - to walk around the Middlefield Lane estate with me so that they could see the estate and, perhaps, shake me out of the insularity that an only-child-state, and a deeply personal research programme like this can perpetuate. In the end, of course, I needn’t have worried - it was just really nice to be able to walk around the estate with them, to show them the places and spaces of my childhood and, especially, to hear and see their responses to the estate.

The most gratifying aspect of our ‘preamble’ for me was that, without any prompting from me, they all recognised just how spacious, green, and well-planned the estate was. The other thing I liked was that they felt I was getting quite angry when I was telling them about how the original architectural and landscape planning of the estate had been messed about with over the years, especially in how the Modernist centre-piece of the estate, The Precinct shops, and its adjoining flats had been demolished, and of how it had been replaced by an incongruous set of new-build bungalows. If you want more of a flavour of that anger, have a look at a post from a couple of years ago ‘A new estate just like the old estate, only NEW!’ here.

Fundamentally though, we met to discuss the meanings and experiences of ‘reverie’. Amanda’s done some considerable work on this and, out of what she’s written, I have gleaned this as a definition of ‘reverie’ that means something to me at least: a dreamlike yet active state; a form of absentmindedness that does not distinguish between the seer and the seen. We discussed how children are maybe more open to reverie simply because they have no time constraints, no sense of the past or of the future pressing on them, that they live in the moment, and so are more likely therefore to enter into the moment, into a state of reverie. As we walked around the estate we saw one child who appeared to us as a classic example of this, wandering aimlessly on his own, and absent-mindedly whacking walls, fences and lampposts with a stick as he went on. I remember entering into a similar state as a kid when bombing around the pedestrianised spaces of the estate on that bike, and when the ‘seer and the seen’, the boy and the place, were indistinguishable.

The next writing comes from Amanda herself …
Other people’s childhoods

I am interested in reverie – my own, Ian’s, other people’s. Although reverie seems more common in childhood, I don’t think its limited to youth, and I’m intrigued by the possibility that it might be something shared. For me, reverie is joyful, and being invited to spend a day contemplating it promised to be a treat.

We began in Kate’s car (it was cold outside). We talked about reverie, what it is, if it is possible to define it, who had experienced it, when, what it had been like. At the end, Ian said the last time he had had a conversation in a car like this was in his early twenties. That felt like an achievement in itself – to revisit the intensity of conversations when young that connect to big questions and emotions. I thought how my own connections to council estates were mostly through other people’s childhoods.

We walked up the street and past Ian’s old now demolished secondary school across the footbridge to the estate. He described how the fields and paths looked before the big road was built. And then we were there. A grassy estate, a walk punctuated with stories, technical facts, musings in the way of someone who knows the obdurate details of their own youth and its formative place.

My mother lived from the ages of about 3 to 11 on one of the largest London council estates to be built between the wars in the UK, the Watling Estate. I grew up a couple of miles away, but she rarely mentioned that part of her childhood and we only went there once, drove around it in a perfunctory way, after I’d more or less insisted. I had the feeling, rightly or wrongly, that in her eyes it was a slightly shameful place to come from and this almost certainly played a part in my decision to do some of my PhD research on a council estate in a town outside Manchester where I had gone to live.

I spent a lot of my fieldwork hanging out with young people, and later wrote about their hallucinatory sense of place, some of it drug-induced, but much to do with what Kathleen C. Stewart calls fabulation – a kind of incessant narrativization of place.

Reverie comes into Ian’s feelings about Midlefield Lane estate, my sense of my mother’s childhood, and my own fieldwork in Todmorden. Despite her reticent to speak about Watling, the few memories my mother has relayed from that part of her childhood do have a strong feeling of reverie – running across the fields that surrounded the estate which was still a building site, to meet her father from Burnt Oak tube station; fishing for tiddlers in the stream. And my own semi-vicarious experiences on Ashenhurst doing fieldwork– a particular day when I realized I felt comfortable hanging out with my ‘participants’ for the first time. No one seemed to mind that I was videoing as we lounged around in the hallway of one of the young women’s houses, sun streaming in through the door so bright it made the detail of carpet weave stand out in a hyper-real way; youngsters knocking on, white fluffy clouds crossing a blue sky framed by roofs of yellow brick houses; a rare moment of mellow and calm.
In her article, ‘Sipping Water: Reverie and Improvisation’ (Critical Studies in Improvisation, Vol 8, No 2, 2012), Amanda writes of ‘free drawing’ as a method (if that’s the right word) of achieving a state of reverie. I don’t know if Kate got into a reverie when she went back to the estate to do some drawings of the spaces and places we saw and talked about, but the drawings are fabulous. Some of them can be seen in her piece below:

I draw to know a thing...
From Georges Perec – Species of Spaces and Other Pieces.
Space [Continuation and End]
I would like there to exist places that are stable, unmoving, intangible, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep-rooted places that might be points of reference, of departure, of origin:
My birthplace, the cradle of my family, the house where I may have been born, the tree I may have seen grow [that my father may have planted the day I was born], the attic of my childhood filled with intact memories…. Such places don’t exist, and it’s because they don’t exist that space becomes a question, ceases to be appropriated. Space is a doubt: I have constantly to mark it, to designate it. It’s never mine, never given to me, I have to conquer it.
My spaces are fragile: time is going to wear them away, to destroy them. Nothing will any longer resemble what was, my memories will betray me, oblivion will infiltrate my memory, I shall look at a few yellowing photographs with broken edges without recognizing them. The words ‘Phone directory available within’ or ‘Snacks served at any hour’ will no longer be written up in a semi-circle in white porcelain letters on the window of the little café in the Rue Coquilliere.
Space melts like sand running through one’s fingers. Time bears it away and leaves only shapeless shreds: To write: to try meticulously to retain something, to cause something to survive; to wrest a few precise scraps from the void as it grows, to leave somewhere a furrow, a trace, a mark or a few signs.
Paris 1973-1974
So I care to wrest a few scraps from the void and in doing so reflect that I care to look, to see and commit in drawing that engagement. I care for myself through their production. I care to know more, to give myself to the moment and see what returns. I care to believe that beauty and looking can have profound a/effects. I care to imagine a revolution of everyday life, to daydream. I care to move forward, risk and accept change. I care though that these drawings aren’t enough.
No golfing allowed

Here's a couple of photos that Steve Pool took of the estate. Playing (and, presumably, the reverie, the losing of one's self that can happen during play) persists on Middlefield Lane against all odds. Here's the first which still seems to sum up so many childhoods past and present:
And there's this, of a sign by a park on Aisby Walk, and which, I'm sorry to say, speaks volumes about the kind of society we currently live in. Where do you begin? Fixed penalty notices? Keeping the site 'in good condition'? That the estate is troubled by golfers?

This reminds me of what the artist, George Grosz, called his autobiography: A little Yes and a big No. Yes, you can make your own world but no, you won't. Not any more, but back in the day, in 1975, on this estate, me and my friends were making our own world. Indeed, the estate back then enabled us to do it. Here we are on that very playing field, feather-cuts, sta-prest trousers and all: Pete Needham, me, James Threakall and Mark Hemsall ... playing golf.