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Google Street View as Street Photography

McDonough states, modern street photography can be the result of an “urge to investigate the photographic medium and of postmodern experiments with the contamination of divergent media”¹ while others highlight the artificiality of their images as a reaction to the “artificiality of the post-urban environment”². Here I would like to discuss Google Street View images, created as a means of unbiased documentation, as a form of contemporary street photography which replaces the photographer as autonomous observer with a camera programmed to take photographs at systematic intervals.

One Google Street View image in particular, a screenshot, selected and cropped by me, of a post office and *depanneur* at the corner of Fairmount and Jeanne Mance, in Montreal, is an example of a photograph that exhibits qualities of mid-twentieth century street photography. This image both falls in line with and challenges certain conventional aspects of this type of street photography such as the spontaneous engagement of the photographer with the subject-matter; the subsequent meaning attached to the subject-matter through formal concerns such as composition and focus; and the imposed limitations of the process of creation of the photograph.

¹ Steven Jacobs, “Photographing Post-Urban Space: The Demise of Street Photography and the Rise of the Spectacular”, in *Spectacular City: Photographing the Future* (Rotterdam: Netherlands Architecture Institute, 2006), pp. 169-172.

² Steven Jacobs, “Photographing Post-Urban Space: The Demise of Street Photography and the Rise of the Spectacular”, in *Spectacular City: Photographing the Future* (Rotterdam: Netherlands Architecture Institute, 2006), pp. 169-172.

In this photograph, two crosswalks converge at the sidewalk in front of the door of the store, located on the corner of the building. Two people are visible in the scene: one is mailing a letter, while the other is stepping off the sidewalk onto the yellow crosswalk on the left. They seem not to have noticed the Google Street View vehicle passing by. The image is dated by Google as being taken in mid-day in October 2011. It bears Google's signature logo and compass.

This image is not a depiction of any one person, building or event, instead it serves as an impartial geospatial and temporal record of the intersection and buildings on this particular corner. Google's goal in creating Street View was not an artistic one. This image was meant as a neutral photograph of the intersection. It was taken automatically by a programmed camera atop a vehicle travelling along the road.

The mode of production of the Google Street View image imposes limits and helps define the visual aesthetic of the resulting photographs. Though the images are altered, the content is not. The steps involved in the creation and alteration of Google Street View images is one that is many-fold and is completely reliant on technological processes from beginning to end. The images are visibly altered to respect the anonymity of people's faces, license plate numbers and other inappropriate subject-matter³. This image shows blurred faces, unique digital texture, and distorted sense of depth.

Alteration of the images is not done with artistic intent. The goal is to recreate the cityscape as realistically as possible, a process which involves multiple images of the scene, which are initially stitched together from nine two-dimensional planes, projected to create a

³ Google Maps, Turning images into Street View", Google, 2012. <<http://maps.google.ca/intl/ALL_ca/help/maps/streetview/learn/turning-photos-into-street-view.html>>

three-dimensional cylinder, and resized to fit a two-dimensional computer monitor⁴. These various aspects combine to create Google Street View's visual grammar.

Google Street View images are appreciated for their apparent unspoiled gaze and neutral lens of the camera. Despite the many alterations to Google Street View images, this photograph is read as an unedited version of this intersection at the time of its capture and give the photograph a feeling of raw, untouched scene. Thus, this image is read as a snapshot of a typical October day on this particular street corner.

Consistent with mid-twentieth century street photography, which is noted for its “dynamic edgy style, characterized by unbalanced compositions, unusual framings, and often also motion blur and perspectival distortion”⁵, this image has qualities that are typically associated with an unposed or spontaneously photographed scene.

Often spontaneity, on both the part of the photographer, who “played on the events of the street”⁶, and the subjects, who “were often unaware of the photographer’s presence”⁷, played a large role in the conception of the mid-twentieth century street photograph. Thus the photographer acted as the mediator between the camera and the cityscape. Contrary to this, Google Street View images are not taken by a human photographer who mediates the composition, colours and focus of the scene. By eliminating the photographer and relying on a machine set to automatically capture the cityscape at 10 to 20 meter intervals, I argue that

⁴ Jon Rafman, “IMG MGMT: The Nine Eyes of Google Street View”, Art Fag City, August 12, 2009.

⁵ Steven Jacobs, “Photographing Post-Urban Space: The Demise of Street Photography and the Rise of the Spectacular”, in *Spectacular City: Photographing the Future* (Rotterdam: Netherlands Architecture Institute, 2006), pp. 169-172.

⁶ Steven Jacobs, “Photographing Post-Urban Space: The Demise of Street Photography and the Rise of the Spectacular”, in *Spectacular City: Photographing the Future* (Rotterdam: Netherlands Architecture Institute, 2006), pp. 169-172.

⁷ Steven Jacobs, “Photographing Post-Urban Space: The Demise of Street Photography and the Rise of the Spectacular”, in *Spectacular City: Photographing the Future* (Rotterdam: Netherlands Architecture Institute, 2006), pp. 169-172.

Google has created the ultimate unbiased form of street photography.