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Drifting and Cruising

Glyn Davis, University of Edinburgh

Dome Karukoski's film Tom of Finland (2017) is a biopic of the gay artist Touko Valio Laaksonen (1920-1991). Born and raised in Kaarina, near Turku, Laaksonen moved to Helsinki in 1939 to study and then work in advertising. Soon after his move, he began to produce homoerotic and pornographic illustrations of men flirting, cruising and fucking; across the span of four decades he would create more than 3000 images. Initially circulated through private channels, his work began to appear in print in physique magazines in the 1950s, eventually reaching a huge international audience through exhibitions and published collections (see, for example, Ramakers 1998). Laaksonen – who started to use the pen name 'Tom of Finland' in the second half of the 1950s – predominantly drew in monochrome pencil, though he also produced work in colour and utilised other materials (ink, pastels). His images regularly depicted men dressed in the clothing of stereotypically masculine roles and professions: bikers, cops, lumberjacks, sailors, cowboys, farmhands, construction workers, soldiers, and so on. Over the course of his career, the bodies of these muscular and well-endowed men became increasingly exaggerated.

Around forty-four minutes into Karukoski's film, Laaksonen (Pekka Strang) goes cruising in a city park at night. It is the 1950s, and he is dressed in a suit, overcoat, fedora hat and dress shoes. The sequence is brief, around thirty seconds in length, and is comprised of seven shots. The first five show: the back of Laaksonen's head as he smokes; his legs and feet as he descends a set of concrete steps; a mid-distance shot as he walks, partially obscured by some trees in the foreground; a longer-distance shot, as he stands and looks around; a shot from behind him of his head and shoulders. Then we see a policeman approaching, armed with a flashlight; and Laaksonen walks away, still smoking. The scene serves little narrative purpose: an earlier sequence in the film had already identified Laaksonen as a man who cruises public spaces and established the potential dangers of such activity. In a film propelled forwards by storytelling, each brief scene adding further biographical detail, this one stands out, acting as a moment of purposeless pause. However, what it reveals is that cruising involves a significant amount of loitering, waiting and drifting, activities (or, perhaps, non-activities) that may ultimately lead nowhere.

How are we to understand the drifting that is endemic to cruising? Might the Situationist International's concept of the *dérive* – the most widely-known and comprehensively elaborated theoretical model and praxis of drifting – be brought into productive discourse with the activity of cruising? At first glance, such a comparison may seem ridiculous: what could a man having his cock sucked by a stranger behind a tree in a park possibly have to do with the Situationist International's 'technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances' (Debord 2006 [1958]: 62)? Further, their histories are notably distinct. The *dérive* is associated with a group that only existed for a short span of years (although, as this journal issue explores, its value as a conceptual provocation has persisted). Cruising, on the other hand, has a much lengthier history. As Mark Turner notes, 'men have always made contact with other men in the city'; however, cruising 'emerges as a counter-discourse' and 'an alternative street practice' from the late nineteenth century onwards (Turner 2003: 7). A more sustained, solicitous stare, however, reveals valuable links between cruising and the *dérive*. Both are activities connected to urban space, to large metropolitan centres. Both the cruiser and the *dériveur* produce mental maps of cities that work against the conventions of urban planning and regulated uses of space; they seek out or create atmospheres and affective experiences that undermine, ignore, or work against the formal segmentation of cities into blocs, regions and neighbourhoods. Beginning from these febrile connections, then, this essay glances back and forth between the *dérive* and cruising. It compares their tactics and goals; it scrutinises their temporal dynamics; it questions their political value. I will primarily be discussing cruising as a practice conducted by men; however, the gendered dimension of cruising and the *dérive* will be subjected to interrogation. Throughout, Tom of Finland will serve as a walking companion: we will look at some of the images of cruising that the artist created, and examine sequences of cruising and drift that appear in Karukoski's filmic account of Laaksonen's life.

Terms and Conditions

Obviously, there are basic, pragmatic distinctions between the *dérive* and cruising. Debord's 'Theory of the *Dérive*', first published in 1956, outlines parameters within which the activity may take place, parameters which run counter to standard practices of cruising. These proposals – they are not strident enough to be called

conditions or regulations – include suggestions for the number of people involved. ‘One can *dérive* alone’, Debord writes, ‘but all indications are that the most fruitful numerical arrangement consists of several small groups of two or three people’. (Debord 2006 [1958]: 63) Cruising, in contrast, is primarily a solitary activity. Even when the cruising space – a park, a beach, a public toilet – is peopled by numerous bodies simultaneously involved in similar activities, cruising is in each iteration centred on a libidinal visual and affective exchange between two isolated actants. Cruising may occur within a group of people sharing a space, but a group of men would not decide to spend the day cruising together (at least, such activity would be extremely rare). Debord also suggests timings for the *dérive*: ‘The average duration of a *dérive* is one day, considered as the time between two periods of sleep. The starting and ending times have no necessary relation to the solar day, but it should be noted that the last hours of the night are generally unsuitable for *dérives*.’ (64) In contrast, cruising is an activity that has no temporal limits, that becomes instead a regular and habitual practice, one that is unplanned: as Henning Bech suggests, the cruising gaze is a ‘self-actuating radar that automatically launches into action whether you want it or not.’ (Bech 1997: 107-8) Cruising for sex in public spaces can occur at any time. It can be a fleeting experience, or one that is more sustained. Daylight cruising is commonplace, but the hours of darkness are arguably the most conducive to the practice.

The *dérive* and cruising also differ in their attitudes to the visual. Thomas McDonough draws attention to the ‘blindness of the people on the *dérive*’, which he identifies as a ‘tactical practice’: ‘This blindness, characteristic of the everyday user of the city who confronts the environment as opaque, was consciously adopted in order to subvert the rational city of pure visibility.’ (McDonough 1994: 74) Working against the society of the spectacle, the *dérive* emphasised alternative modes of engaging with the urban – in particular, registering the atmospheres or ambiances of particular neighbourhoods, spaces and districts. In contrast, cruising is marked by the primacy of its visual dimension. For Bech, the gaze is at the core of cruising. He writes that ‘homosexuals are virtuosos at using the gaze; it can discern almost imperceptible signs; it can fine-tune and flit around in endlessly different ways; it has an enormous cruising range’ (Bech 1997: 107). However, what does unite the *dérive* and cruising in relation to the visual is the lack of visibility of such activities to the

passer-by. The *dérive*, writes McDonough, 'took place literally below the threshold of visibility, in the sense of being beyond what is visible to the voyeur's gaze.'

(McDonough 1994: 73) Similarly, cruising activity is purposefully coded, unnoticeable to those lacking knowledge of such tactics. As an example, around twenty minutes into Tom of Finland, Touko Laaksonen is cruising a park where a young man catches his attention. Touko removes his lit cigarette from his mouth and holds it to his groin; the young man, Veli (Lauri Tilkanen) mimics his movements. The action is discreet, subtle and easy to miss, yet signals sexual availability and mutual interest: the two men move behind a tree. The cruiser and the *dériveur*, then, both work their ways across urban space gathering glimpses of possibilities beyond the humdrum, charged affective fragments of tantalising opportunity, without the general populace around them realising what is occurring.

Cruising and the *dérive* both tend to take place below the visible threshold of a wider public awareness. In addition, their occurrences are also circumscribed by terms and conditions: it is not only the form of the *dérive* that is regulated. Cruising practices are complex and nuanced, involving subtle interactions and negotiations between bodies in particular spaces. The rules of these interactions can be learnt to some extent through numerous printed sources. *The Joy of Gay Sex*, for instance, published in 1977, includes a 'how-to' section on cruising for the uninitiated (Silverstein and White 1977: 74-5). Laud Humphreys' sociological study of men who have sex in public bathrooms, *Tearoom Trade*, details the various roles that can be adopted in such spaces and how sexual activities are initiated, including some helpful diagrams (Humphreys 1970). John Hollister's ethnographic account of the behaviours that take place at a highway rest area cruising ground also serves to provide advice and guidance for the inexperienced. For instance, he highlights the different ways in which verbal interaction can play out: 'In classic tearooms, spoken words may clear the room out as quickly as the arrival of a policeman. In parks and rest areas, some light conversation about the weather may initiate an otherwise silent contact. Only in the most secure sites is conversation likely to be routine, casual, and refer to sexual contact.' (Hollister 1999: 61) Other examples of written guidance on cruising could be added to this list, including accounts that appear in memoirs and fiction. However, both the *dérive* and cruising are urban experiences, involving bodies moving through space. Written texts can only go so far in giving a

flavour of them, detailing their textures and articulating their limits; indeed, it is worth questioning the extent to which it is possible to capture the embodied experience of a *dérive* or cruising in mediated form, whether that is cinematic, novelistic, photographic, or otherwise.

Aims and Objectives

Cruising and the *dérive*, then, are semi-regulated forms of urban experience that slip below the radar of the general public. But do they share similar aims? At a fundamental level, they don't: cruising is often the prelude to a sexual encounter, whereas the *dérive* is intended to produce materials that could be used, as Debord put it, 'to draft the first surveys of the psychogeographical articulations of a modern city.' (Debord 2006 [1978]: 66) Tom of Finland depicted a great deal of public cruising and sex in his work; parks and woodland repeatedly featured as locations. When cruising was depicted, the intended outcome was usually transparent, sexual contact between bodies temporally just beyond the moment captured. In a 1972 image, for instance, a nude man, depicted from behind in the foreground, exchanges glances with a biker who has parked and dismounted from his vehicle. The biker wears a peaked cap, a leather jacket open to reveal his bare torso, jodhpurs that have been unzipped to display his penis, and leather boots. Some high-rise buildings and a populated city park are visible in the background. The cruise between the men has moved already to a level of sexual display and initial activity: we cannot see the man in the foreground's hands, but the positioning of his arms suggest that he is masturbating. Tom of Finland often depicted cruising and sexual interaction within the same frame. A 1976 colour image, for example, shows a man dressed in white vest, flared blue jeans and leather cap walking along a lakeside. He has spotted two men in the woods just back from the lake – men who occupy the foreground of the image. One, completely naked and with an erection, sits astride a log, smiling as he pulls down the trousers of a moustached man in a tight blue t-shirt and blue baseball cap.

Sexual release was never the intended aim of the *dérive*. This does not mean, however, that it lacked erotic dimensions. In his theoretical outline of the workings of the *dérive*, Debord referred to its 'passional terrain' (Debord 2006 [1958]: 62). The third issue of the SI's publication Internationale situationniste, published in 1959,

juxtaposed a 1656 cartographic illustration by Madeleine de Scudéry – Carte du Pays de Tendre, ‘Map of the Land of Feeling’ – with an aerial photograph of Amsterdam, the latter anointed as ‘an experimental zone for the drift’. As Simon Sadler notes of this comparison, the 1656 image configures its ‘ideal of tenderness as a debate between love and friendship’, whereas the SI ‘mapped the drift as a “discourse on the passions of love” [...] No map, it seemed, could be read dispassionately.’ (Sadler 1999: 84, 86). The SI – which was a predominantly male group – seemed to configure the cityscape as one that was feminine, subject to fetishization, fragmentation and possession. As Sadler argues, ‘psychogeography offered a sense of violent emotive possession over the streets. Exotic and exciting treasures were to be found in the city by those drifters able to conquer her’ (81). The *dérive*, then, like cruising, was primarily conceived of as an urban experience for men. As such, both activities could be accused of reproducing dynamics of power between men and city space. However, such a perspective fails to acknowledge the contributions of women (especially Michèle Bernstein) to the SI, or the complex interactions between women and the spaces of the modern metropolis, including such activities as *flânerie* and cruising (see D’Souza and McDonough 2008 for re-evaluations of the figure of the *flâneuse*, and Valentine 1996 for an exploration of lesbian relations to city geographies).

The *dérive*, then, was conceived as having sexual dimensions but not a sexual goal. Debord, in his initial outline of the *dérive*, noted that its aim ‘is to study a terrain or to emotionally disorient oneself’, highlighting that ‘these two aspects of *dérives* overlap’ (Debord 2006 [1958]: 64). Those involved in *dérives* gather data about the city. Collective harvesting of this data, however wayward or esoteric its shape, results in observations that can be collated and shared. These observations could then hopefully be used, as McDonough puts it, ‘to change the meaning of the city through changing the way it was inhabited.’ (McDonough 1994: 77) One way of understanding cruising, too, is as a form of information gathering. Cruising is a reading practice, in which bodies, their gestures, and their relations to space are scanned and interpreted. It is an inter-relational form of knowledge production, one that seeks, however briefly, to clarify, stabilize, actualize. As with the *dérive*, cruising’s information gathering works against reified and condoned systems of institutionalised knowledge production and collection. In her book *Cruising the*

Library, Melissa Adler elucidates at length the disciplinary power of cataloguing systems, focusing in particular on the classification and ordering practices of the Library of Congress. Cruising, she suggests, might offer a way to work against this calcified system of knowledge, a way to access promiscuous and perverse – though arguably no less ‘truthful’ – readings (Adler 2017). Although Adler does not reference him, John Paul Ricco makes a related argument in his book *The Logic of the Lure*. What if, Ricco asks, ‘we were to substitute a cruising ground for an epistemological ground?’ (Ricco 2002: xix) To do so, he suggests, would be to focus on fleeting events rather than ‘texts, images or objects’ – events that ‘defy representational logics’ and struggle to attain ‘even the slightest degree of epistemological certainty.’ (xx) His phrasing here could be used to apply both to cruising and the *dérive* as forms of knowledge production.

However, the *dérive* rarely served as a useful strategy for information gathering or knowledge formation. As Simon Sadler notes, ‘it certainly didn’t collate much real data’ (Sadler 1999: 78). He criticises in particular Ralph Rumney’s *Psychogeographic Map of Venice*, a photographic SI project from 1957: ‘it failed to yield anything remotely like “data”, its author struggling to explain the significance of his encounters with children and with old acquaintances, account for the romance of Venice, and identify “sinister”, “depressing”, and “beautiful” zones.’ (78) The focus on teleological end-points with both cruising and the *dérive*, however, can serve to obscure that both experiences provide satisfactions in their moment-to-moment unfurling – and that these can serve as goals in their own right. Lingering in the drift, dwelling in the dissipated temporality of urban wandering and its ephemeral encounters, delivers its own pleasures. As Mark Turner notes in his exploration of cruising, it ‘is a *process* of walking, gazing, and engaging another (or others)’ (Turner 2003: 60). He continues: ‘Reciprocal gazes may hold their own pleasure for some, and the dynamics of the gaze may be erotic and stimulating precisely because it does *not* end in sex. There are many levels of erotic investment and fantasy that exist in the idea of the possible, the potential, but the wholly unrealized encounter.’ (61) Or as Henning Bech puts it, in cruising the gaze can be ‘enough in itself: from being a means of contact, it becomes the end. The reciprocal glancing turns into *the* contact.’ (Bech 1997: 106) Cruising, in other words, has ‘its own rewards: pleasure, excitement, affirmation’ (106). Cruising allows the cruiser to dwell in a distinct

register and experience of time, one in which waiting assumes dominance and becomes pleasurable in itself. Cruising requires patience, a submission to temporal drift, and a relinquishing of the goal of always achieving sexual satisfaction and release. Similarly, the failure of the *dériveur* to accumulate data that can be productively used to transform urban environments does not mean that the experience of the drift was wasted; or rather, that waste can itself be pleasurable, its unique character and register worth savouring.

Temporality and politics

In his 'Theory of the *Dérive*' Debord outlined possible timings for the activity, timings which have already been discussed. He also referred to the *dérive* as 'a technique of rapid passage' (Debord 2006 [1958]: 62). The emphasis on rapidity is puzzling, and not elucidated further; given the duration of some of the proposed drifts, moving continuously with such speed for such lengths of time could quickly exhaust the *dériveur*. Doesn't the notion of drifting – and, indeed, its synonyms, floating, meandering, wandering – carry connotations of calmness, slowness, a lack of hurry? In an account of a *dérive* that he carried out with Ivan Chtcheglov and Gaetan M. Langlais, Debord recounts how, believing that they were being followed, 'in the tradition of the gangster film' he and Chtcheglov ended up running across Paris; they had to 'hurriedly traverse the ground floor of the La Samaritaine department store, exiting onto the rue de Rivoli in order to rush down into the Louvre subway station' (Debord 1989 [1956]: 210). This hectic dash contrasts with the rest of the account, which largely consists of encounters and conversations had in bars. It is likely that these interactions are more representative of the practice of the *dérive*, with speed a rarely-deployed component, and that both cruising and the *dérive* unfold at a sedentary or slow pace.

As noted at the start of this essay, and revealed by [Tom of Finland](#), cruising often features periods of waiting, experiences of empty temporality that lack in form and drive. As with similar moments in the *dérive*, these can be pleasurable in their own right. Paradoxically, despite these pleasures, both cruising and the *dérive* can be seen as attempts to escape from boredom. For the Situationist International, boredom was a negative affect or emotion to be avoided and countered at any cost. Ivan Chtcheglov's 'Formulary for a New Urbanism' (1953), a key precursor text in the

evolution of the SI's ideas, opens with the sentence 'We are bored in the city, there is no longer any Temple of the Sun.' (Chtcheglov 2006 [1953]: 1) SI graffiti included the slogans 'Boredom is counterrevolutionary' and 'When people notice they are bored, they stop being bored' (quoted in Knabb 2006: 445, 450). Recognising one's boredom, it seems, is the first step in eradicating it – and it is vital that such eradication takes place. In Raoul Vaneigem's The Revolution of Everyday Life (1967), the author (controversially) expresses sympathy with murderers who claim boredom as their motive: 'Anyone who has felt the drive to self-destruction welling up inside him knows with what jaded insouciance he might just happen to kill the organizers of his boredom. One day. If he was in the mood.' (Vaneigem 2017 [1967]: 63) The *dérive* – and, indeed, many of the other activities proposed by the SI as ways to reconfigure social and cultural experience – took shape against the yawning tedium of the post-war consumer society that they inhabited and violently rejected.

Cruising can be framed similarly: as a reaction against the oppressive mundanity of heteronormative existence (and, indeed, homonormativity, with its emphasis on monogamous domesticity, apathetic consumerism, and depoliticised conformity). Jonathan Dollimore notes that the desire to escape boredom can be a root cause of cruising activity, 'one impetus for wanting to violate conventional sexual norms' (Dollimore 2017: 81). He describes using cruising to counter the tedium of particular cultural institutions:

Museums, libraries and art galleries have always bored me in a visceral, claustrophobic kind of way; I feel them as spaces which ossify everything they contain, positioning artefacts within a cultural perspective as oppressively regulated as the temperature of their environment, and the voices of their curators. It wouldn't be long before I was heading for the basement toilets of these places, which sometimes afforded a more animating aesthetic encounter. (84)

And yet, despite the visceral reactions against boredom which may be embedded within the *dérive* and cruising, both activities remain pervaded by slow temporalities – by the lassitude associated with the drift. Cruisers and *dérivers* may still have to wait lengthy periods of time for something to happen. Of course, waiting and boredom are not the same thing. And cruising and the *dérive* can both be punctuated by moments of excitement, by rapidity and rush, by affective and physical peaks. In

their perverse admixture of temporal registers, however, the *dérive* and the cruise are both marked by the languor and listlessness of the drift.

Both the cruise and the *dérive* contravene the ways in which the hours of the day are conventionally segmented – into work, leisure and sleep. For McKenzie Wark, the political power of the *dérive* lies in this transgression. As he writes, ‘By wandering about in the space of the city according to their own sense of time, those undertaking a *dérive* find other uses for space besides the functional. The time of the *dérive* is no longer divided between productive time and leisure time. It is a time that plays in between the useful and the gratuitous.’ (Wark 2015: 25) A similar argument could be made for cruising: like the *dérive*, it has the power to upset how time is conventionally used. Cruising can be activated at any moment. Business meetings, commuting, bathroom breaks and walking the dog, all of which have their own allocated timeslot within the day, can provide the opportunity for fleeting sexual connections. The hours usually associated with slumber provide the opportunity for a nocturnal fuck. It is worth questioning, however, who gains from such experiences – that is, for whom they have political import and impact. If cruising and the *dérive* tend to occur below the awareness of the general population, then are they politically toothless, their practitioners the only beneficiaries?

Leo Charney’s notion of drift – which is not indebted to the SI’s use of the term, but has clear conceptual connections – suggests otherwise. For Charney, drift has significant philosophical import: ‘The experience of drift allows us to imagine the empty present both as ontology – as an unbridgeable structure no less insurmountable than the vision of full presence it displaces – and as epistemology, a way of knowing, a category of experience, a pragmatic strategy’ (Charney 1998: 7). It is the uses to which the drift is put – the wider ramifications that the experience can potentially have – that provide its value. I have already suggested the epistemological worth that both cruising and the *dérive* can have as drifting reading practices, modes of knowledge production that operate against normative practices of information accumulation. Charney’s arguments enable a push beyond this perspective, to propose that both cruising and the *dérive* also have ontological ramifications: that is, both practices model ways of being that reconfigure the

seeming vacuum of the empty moment as a space of political and interlocutory possibility.

Coda

Three brief images: a sea bay in which the water is iced over, unmoving; at dusk or dawn, a view of a deserted park path over which a dusting of snow has frozen, lit by yellow streetlights; large chunks of ice drifting slowly in water. And then an overhead shot of a desk on which sits an illustration by Tom of Finland: a man in white shirt and black suit walks through an avenue of trees, an urn tucked under his right arm, his gaze drawn to something unseen out of frame. This brief sequence in Tom of Finland marks the death of Touko Laaksonen's long-term lover Veli, which occurs off-screen. There is a sense of stillness, stasis and calm, but also one of drift: the camera gently eases us between locations, and the shifting ice gives a sense of imminent thaw. Accompanying these sensations, these atmospheres, there is a sense of incident about to erupt. The empty park we see is similar to the location in which Touko and Veli met whilst cruising for sex. The Tom of Finland illustration shown, which is notably muted in content by his standards, combines melancholia with erotic possibility: the man with the urn, we can presume, is cruising the woodland through which he walks. Whether or not he will make use of any potential connection remains unclear; he may choose to drift on, satisfied in the flow. The image's power – and, indeed, that of cruising and the *dérive* more broadly – lies in its revelation that an innocuous urban landscape can be simultaneously written across by seemingly competing impulses. Brief moments in Tom of Finland, and in the oeuvre of the illustrator Tom of Finland, serve to reveal the irruptive and transformative potential that the drift, in whatever form it takes, can hold.

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