AMERICAN BEAT

JACK KEROUAC

A synopsis of a literary study investigating the notion of “the new” in the work of Jack Kerouac, as well as a discussion of his conception of his place in literary history

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1st MA module
American Studies
Fall 2013

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1. Introduction and problem area
Jack Kerouac and the rest of the Beat Generation were on the move, searching for something brand new. They wanted to write in a new language about the New America following the end of World War II and the emerging of the consumer culture - leading the way into the post-war frame of mind. They journeyed to find identity, something new, “it”, and this trip was sometimes a geographical one, but every day it was also a mental one, founded in a bohemian lifestyle of excessive drug use, the violent injection of literature and philosophy into their young minds and a deep interest in spirituality and mental enlightenment.

The trip was sometimes taken in cars, ships and freight carriers, but mostly the trip was inside the head, and in the paths that could be tread through the haze of inebriation and the blur of sleepless nights in smoke-filled rooms, dripping with imminent conversation.

I am interested in Kerouac's search for novelty, his yearning for progression, for a new language and a new way of life. At the same time I find it fascinating that this desire to be at the forefront of the literary and philosophical development did not make him reject the past that shaped him. I see certain connections between the historical avantgarde of Europe and the Beat generation and I would like to investigate where we can find similarities in the outlook on life.

I will only focus on Kerouac's work and concentrate on his conception of reality since he was writing about the Beat generation throughout his career. Jack Kerouac could be considered the chronicler of the movement (Stephenson 1990, p. 2) and his books are as close to autobiographical as possible, with only the names of the characters and a few geographical places changed.

I will focus on the novel On The Road and the novella The Subterraneans and investigate the protagonists' view on literary history and the craving for something new around the corner. They have different names but Sal Paradise (On the Road) and Leo Perceptied (The Subterraneans) are incidentally the same idealized person - Jack Kerouac - even if he did romanticize and alter reality to suit his literary project. I am aware that the fictionalized Kerouac might deviate from the “real” Kerouac in certain aspects, so all of the conclusions in this project will derive from the Kerouac of the books as I cannot say anything about his personal opinions with absolute certainty.

Consequently I am interested in investigating Jack Kerouac's relationship to the Beat generation's place in literary history and in what ways he sought “the new” in his own pseudo-fictionalized restless existence. This curiosity led me to the following questions:

How does novelty and change occur as themes in the work of Jack Kerouac, particularly in his books On The Road and The Subterraneans and how can the Beat Generation be related to the historical avantgarde?

2. Method
In this synopsis I will sketch out the ideas and structure for a proposed project. In order to understand the cultural context the project will involve a glance at the historical situation of the late 1940's and early 1950's in America, namely the new concept of “the teenager” and the freedom gained by the youth, as well as the consumerism that followed the economic upswing. To find out whether there are similarities between the European literary avantgarde and the Beats I will lay out a short explanation of the key concepts of the historical avantgarde.

This is followed by a discussion of the autobiographical aspects of Kerouac's writing as well as his writing style, using the substantial body of work on the life and writing of Jack Kerouac.
In this section I will also discuss how the Kerouac of the books perceive his position in the literary history, and how this is connected to the avantgarde.

I will use these results to analyze the two books, and find out in what ways the characters seek the new, the untried and the original.

3. Historical context

3.1 Consumer culture and the post-war teenager

Following the economic hardship of the 1930's and the devastation of the Second World War something ominous was luring in America. Peace was a reality, but fear was growing as the cold war invaded the minds of all Americans. Fortunately the big corporations had products to sedate insecurity.

The baby boom created a large young generation in the 1950's and due to a financial upswing this young generation could afford to “live life”. Consequently the word “teenager” entered the English language in the early 1950's and the suburbs were invaded by young couples with money to spend. Consumerism was born with this new large generation, the economic boom and the arrival of consumer credit. The new American Dream was to wear a suit, get a white-collar job and rise all the way to the top of the corporate ladder, while supplying your nuclear family with cars, televisions, refrigerators and all the other commodities that exploded onto the market.

It was an age of progress, but also of fear. The technological progress did not only bring the citizens televisions but also hydrogen bombs. The cold war had an impact on all Americans, but the youth treated the problem in disparate ways. On one side the clean cut teenager spent his money on cars, drive-ins and clothes, ignoring the political situation. On the other side there was a youth feeling alienated by the consumerism of post-war America, bemoaning the political indifference of their generation. This new alternative youth culture was searching for “a sense of identity as members of a new generation that had come in the wake of World War II and the atomic bomb, a generation that lived in the shadow of a nuclear apocalypse” (Raskin 2005, p. XI).

They were trying to find their way in a chaotic new existence. They were the New Lost Generation (Bowles 1951), not lost by the devastation of war, but by the deprivation of man's ability to govern his own life in a consumer economy (Tytell 1976, p. 9).

3.2 The avantgarde and modernism

As described in the work of art historian Peter Bürger in his acclaimed Theory of the Avantgarde, the historical avantgarde of the early 20th century, encompassing the futurists, the dadaists and the surrealists, is to be considered part of the same development. One of the key components of this movement was the rejection of the past en masse. (Bürger 1975)

They sought to experiment with art to discover new ways to create. This lead to groundbreaking methods such as the cut-up technique of the dadaists, the “automatic writing” of the surrealists and the revolutionary attempts of connecting art and life to one entity that was dominant in the whole movement.

At the same time the modernist movement lead by American authors residing in Paris was changing the history of literature in a less dramatic but more lasting fashion. Their concern with the psychoanalytical (which was also the foundation of the work of the surrealists) found its way into the literature of the 1920's and 1930's, and this had a great influence on the Beat Generation, as we shall see in the next section of this project.
4. Theoretical section

4.1 The autobiographical aspects of Jack Kerouac's writing
Jack Kerouac himself stated that all his book comprise one large piece of work, and that he was writing about the lives of the Beat Generation seen through his eyes (Kerouac – Big Sur 1962, preface). Due to demands from publishers he had to change the names of the characters, but in essence they are all the same people. In that sense it is possible to look at his books as a semi-accurate depiction of the reality they were written in. He was famous for being blunt and “putting it down the way it happened” (Theado 2009, p. 53).

4.2 The writing style of Jack Kerouac
Kerouac wrote in a spontaneous prose, which sought to recreate the now. Sudden associations, parenthetical impulses and very few stops meant for a stream-of-consciousness-like read that mimicked the experience of the mind. He claimed that his use of dashes instead of periods was inspired by jazz horn solos, but it was also clear that modernists such as James Joyce had a great influence on his work (Theado 2009, p. 33-34).

He was able to alter his writing in order to represent different experiences, so the pandemonium of a night out would be described without periods, very short sentences, almost staccato-like recital of impressions, while changing to longer sentences with parenthesis inside parenthesis when he was imitating the jumble of thoughts inside the head of a pensive person “as if he was reporting an endless dream” (Theado, p. 36)
Kerouac attempted to write about truth and turn his reality into myth. Literary scholar Regina Weinrich describes his work as a “stylistic attempt to redefine legend” (Weinrich in Theado, p. 32).

4.3 The Beats and the avantgarde
Writing about the Beat generation, Kerouac calls them “great heroes of America (…) the boys beat on curbstones seeing symbols in the saturated gutter, the Rimbauds and Verlaines of America on Times Square” (Kerouac 1971, p. 49-50).
It is clear from this paragraph that he considered The Beats (including himself) to be innovators of style and language, much like the avantgarde of the interwar period or the contemporary neo-avantgarde in France (such as the situationist Guy Debord, who was more existentially founded and much more militant).
Unlike the European avantgarde the Beats didn't reject the past. They praised the American minds of Thomas Wolfe, Joseph Conrad and many others (Kerouac 1971, p. 64, 74) and they admired the European heritage of Marcel Proust and Charles Baudelaire. Kerouac even found inspiration in the impressionistic paintings of Cezanne and Renoir (Theado 2009, p. 34).
The Beats were inspired by the techniques of the avantgarde; Burroughs was inspired by Tristan Tzara and his cut-up technique, Kerouac used spontaneous prose to reach the unconscious truth. However much like any other revolutionary movement they were opposed to certain aspects of the past, specifically the voice of New Criticism inspired by T.S. Eliot (Ruland, Bradbury 1991, p. 397).
In general they found the traditional literary forms restrictive, cast away most and found inspiration in others, reflexively using them to their own means. The Beats found some inspiration in the avantgarde, some in the transcendentalism of Whitman and Thoreau (Tytell 1976, p. 4) and some in the radical part of modernism, especially Henry Miller (Stephenson 1990, p. 4-10) and in the dark apathy of weltschmerz connoisseur Louis-Ferdinand Céline. (Ruland, Bradbury 1991, p. 397).

Just like the avantgarde Kerouac sought to bring the art closer to life, and he found a kindred spirit in Allen Ginsberg to whom he wrote:
“You seek identity in the midst of indistinguishable chaos, in sprawling nameless reality”
The identity they searched for was a rejection of the material, inspired by eastern metaphysics, with a desire to replicate the sensation of the experience in writing. They had conviction in their methods, in their place in history, and they believed they were transcending the borders of the mind, reaching a spiritual enlightenment (Stephenson 1990, p. 8-9).

5. Analysis

5.1 On The Road
Sal Paradise, inspired by Dean Moriarty, goes through a development. He begins his journey with preconceived notions of behavior, but quickly learn that experience and life cannot be planned. Instead an open mind and subconscious instinct as a catalyst can lead us beyond the materialist reality inhibiting civilization, and he learns that movement itself is a source for wisdom and enlightenment. (Stephenson 1990, p. 23)
The impetus to movement and action is a key concept for Kerouac. This is particularly clear in the restlessness of On The Road where Dean Moriarty's constant desire to move on, never stop, is illustrated by this section:

“Sal, we gotta go and never stop going till we get there”
“Where we going, man?”
“I don't know but we gotta go.”
(Kerouac 2012, p. 217)

They are searching for the new in a restless quest. New people, new thoughts and new music. Kerouac's description of the new sound of bebop and the restless nature of the music becomes a metaphor for the restlessness of post-modern life (Kerouac 2012, p. 220).

They are yearning for "it", which is spiritual enlightenment, a sense of immortality always just outside reach. Sal Paradise calls it:

“the complete step across chronological time into timeless shadows” (...) sweet, swinging bliss, like a big shot of heroin in the mainline vein; like a gulp of wine late in the afternoon.”
(Kerouac 2012, p. 156-157)

5.2 The Subterraneans
Unlike On the Road the setting of The Subterraneans is not an ever changing myriad of American highway and buzzing cities. It is set in the alternative neighborhoods of San Francisco. However, this static setting does not mean that restlessness is not a recurring theme in this book – on the contrary. Without Dean Moriarty to drag him along, the protagonist (in this book named Leo Percepied) feels his restlessness pulling him away from the safe and stable living he has made for himself.

He has found a beautiful and intelligent girl, he is able to confer with Ginsberg and the other beats, he has room and time for writing and he is close to his mom. Yet he is constantly thinking about leaving his existence behind. Either fleeing to Mexico or breaking up with his girl (Kerouac 1971, p. 111). He finds the world he lives in chaotic and wonderful at the same time and he's trying to find his way. He is eager to stick out his thump or jump on a boat and leave it all behind (Kerouac 1971, p. 9), or sometimes he just wants to stay and drown his troubles.

But it is clear that the Kerouac of the books has gone through a development during his travels in On the Road. He embraces the crazy, impulsive people, and he is more inclined to stay and confront...
his demons. To be fearless in his search for enlightenment, and escape to something better on the other side:
“the city decadent intellectual dead-ended in cause-and-effect analysis and solution of so-called problems instead of the great JOY of being and will and fearlessness (...) the lot, afraid of madness, the fear of madness haunts her – not Me Not Me by God” (Kerouac 1971, p. 79)

5.3 Summing up On The Road and The Subterraneans
Kerouac is on the move.
He is searching for “it”, but where his restlessness takes him from place to place in On the Road, never settling, he reaches an existence in the Subterraneans where he's at least able to stay in one place and be more meditative than uneasy. He has not found “it” but he is on his way.

In both books his prose is cruising along without breaks, like his restless travels across the continent. Kerouac called it “an undisturbed flow from the mind” (Tytell 1976, p. 142), much like the surrealist automatic typing done by André Breton and others 20 years before.

Using the technique of the surrealists is a conscious choice and Kerouac seems well aware of his own place in history, living “with all the overtones of “new generation” and other historical concerns” (Kerouac 1971, p. 27).

6. Conclusion
On The Road and The Subterraneans share the same objection to the spiritually corrupting materialism and the fear of the cold war, but where On the Road is restless, moving from place to place, the Subterraneans is more static. Kerouac stays in San Francisco despite the longing for Mexico and a new life, and his journey has begun to become more inward.

The journey to something new is the cornerstone of Kerouac's writing, never content with the status quo, always searching for something better right around the corner or at the bottom of the next bottle of beer. But where constant activity drives him onwards in On The Road, the trip becomes mental in the Subterraneans. He is on a spiritual quest to find the new, to find “it” - enlightenment.

Kerouac was an innovative and progressive writer and he knew he was part of something big. The Beat Generation were doing something new, much like the historical avantgarde before them, and the contemporary situationists. But unlike the avantgarde they did not reject the past. To Kerouac the beats were prophets, writing the future of America – and this could not be done without a keen eye on the past they left behind.
7. Bibliography

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