

# Psychogeography and the dérive

The following text is taken from 'The most radical gesture: The Situationist International in a postmodern age' by Sadie Plant and published by Routledge. Read it, and live without dead time.

...The situationists' desire to become psychogeographers, with an understanding of the 'precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals', was intended to cultivate an awareness of the ways in which everyday life is presently conditioned and controlled, the ways in which this manipulation can be exposed and subverted, and the possibilities for chosen forms of constructed situations in the post-spectacular world. Only an awareness of the influences of the existing environment can encourage the critique of the present conditions of daily life, and yet it is precisely this concern with the environment which we live which is ignored.

"The sudden change of ambiance in a street within the space of a few meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres; the path of least resistance which is automatically followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the physical contour of the ground); the appealing or repelling character of certain places - all this seems to be neglected."

Guy Debord, Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography

Concealed by the functional drudgery of city life, such areas of psychogeographical research were seen as the ground of a new realm of experiment with the possibilities of everyday experience.

One of psychogeography's principle means was the dérive. Long a favorite practice of the dadaists, who organized a variety of expeditions, and the surrealists, for whom the geographical form of automatism was an instructive pleasure, the dérive, or drift, was defined by the situationists as the 'technique of locomotion without a goal', in which 'one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there'. The dérive acted as something of a model for the 'playful creation' of all human relationships.

Unlike surrealist automatism, the dérive was not a matter of surrendering to the dictates of an unconscious mind or irrational force. Indeed, the situationists' criticisms of surrealism concluded that 'the unconscious imagination is poor, that automatic writing is monotonous, that the whole genre of ostentatious surrealist "weirdness" has ceased to be very surprising'. Nor was everything subordinated to the sovereignty of choice:

to dérive was to notice the way in which certain areas, streets, or buildings resonate with states of mind, inclinations, and desires, and to seek out reasons for movement other than those for which an environment was designed. It was very much a matter of using an environment for one's own ends, seeking not only the marvelous beloved by surrealism but bringing an inverted perspective to bear on the entirety of the spectacular world. Potlatch carried a lovely example of this inversion of priorities in the form of a letter addressed to The Times protesting against the redevelopment of London's Chinese quarter. After a defense of the area itself, the letter ends:

"Anyway, it is inconvenient that this Chinese quarter of London should be destroyed before we have the opportunity to visit it and carry out certain psychogeographical experiments we are at present undertaking... if modernization appears to you, as it does to us, to be historically necessary, we would counsel you to carry your enthusiasm into areas more urgently in need of it, that is to say, your political and moral institutions."

...the situationists developed an armoury of confusing weapons intended constantly to provoke critical notice of the totality of lived experience and reverse the stultifying passivity of the spectacle. 'Life can never be too disorientating,' wrote Debord and Wolman, in support of which they described a friend's experience wandering 'through the Harz region of Germany while blindly following the directions of a map of London.'

Such disorientation was not craved for its own sake. But as a means of showing the concealed potential of experimentation, pleasure, and play in everyday life, the situationists considered a little chaos to be a valuable means to exposing the way in which the experiences made possible by capitalist production could be appropriated within a new enabling system of social relations.

From: Drifting with The Situationist International, Author Unknown, from Smile #5

An example of a situation-creating technique is the dérive. The dérive is the first step toward an urban praxis. It is a stroll through the city by several people who are out to understand the "psychogeographical articulation of the modern city". The strollers attempt an interpretive reading of the city, an architectural understanding. They look at the city as a special instance of repressed desires. At the same time, they engage in "playful reconstructive behavior". Together they turn the city around. They see in the city unifying and empowering possibilities in place of the present fragmentation and pacification. This "turning around" or détournment is a key strategic concept of the Situationists. Détournment is a dialectical tool. It is an "insurrectional style" by which a past form is used to show its own inherent untruth-- an untruth masked by ideology. It can be applied to billboards, to written texts, to films, to cartoons, etc.,

as well as to city spaces. Marx used it when he "turned Hegel on his head." He used the dialectic in the study of history to expose the ideological nature of Hegel's idealism. The Situationists use détournement to demonstrate the scandalous poverty of everyday life despite the plenty of commodities. They attempted to demonstrate the contrast between what life presently is and what it could be. They wanted to rupture the spell of the ideology of our commodified consumer society so that our repressed desires of a more authentic nature could come forward. The situation is based on liberated desires rather than alienated ones. What these desires are cannot be stated a priori. They will emerge in the revolutionary process of situation-creation, of détournment. Presumably, communality, unification, and public urban space will emerge as more desirable than commodification, fragmentation, and privatization.

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