ABSTRACT

In the history of aesthetics and politics, the facts forming our perception of reality have often been questioned, even overcome by specific events. Events capable of creating an ambiance of undeniable emotional and behavioural impact. Generating thoughts inside the mind, yet revealed in every aspect of the surroundings (environment built or natural). Psychogeography comes to consolidate the methods, the place and the time. The dérive, the détournement, the moment (as defined by Henri Lefebvre), the “Other”, the cityscape, the construction of situations. “We propose to invent new, changeable decors....” notes Ivan Chtcheglov supporting that “architecture is the simplest means of articulating time and space, of modulating reality, of engendering dreams”. Arguments stemming from the critique of social lifestyle and from the need to change everyday life.

The desire for construction of situations is mainly manifested by the action of the avant-garde art movements (dada, surrealism, cobra, international movement for an imaginist Bauhaus, lettrism, situationist international), whose significance of work in current times is surprising. They have shifted the common sense by putting radical ideas into practice and have therefore inspired many groups and individuals nowadays. Contemporary examples of psychogeography appear both in urban practice (psychogeographic groups, groups developing exploration and wandering techniques, architects and projects whose theoretical base is clearly influenced by situationist and pro- situationist ideas) and in art and media events (street art, urban interactive installations, digital cities).

Especially for architecture and urbanism, it is essential for the new change to come through the emotions and behaviours that it evokes. The question is until what point is the architect/urban planner responsible or even capable of determining the factors that compose the sceneries we live in. The determinism of the means is additionally a subject exposed to objectivity.

KEYWORDS

psychogeography, dérive, détournement, dada, surrealism, cobra, international movement for an imaginist Bauhaus, lettrism, situationist international, Lefebvre and moments, otherness, infiltration, jinx magazine, street art, urban interactive installations, digital cities.
INTRODUCTION

“Facts continue to change their shape”. However, is it a metamorphosis of pre-facts of a pre-context or a sequence to post-facts? It is necessary to distinguish the actual facts between “facts” and “events” and explore the way that the past is perceived through both of them and incorporated into the present reality. And what is the significance of the place (topos)? Do we perceive the place as an element given that we appropriate or as something that we belong to? The issue is actually, in the given sceneries of our cities, what is the role of the events that will occur and who will create these events. In a rather controversial critique of everyday life, who is capable of determining the living conditions for the others? And more importantly, in such a situation who is able to materialize its subversion in order to construct a meaningful everyday life of his own. The whole attempt and action of the avant-garde art movements is based on the reconsideration of facts. The construction of those situations, through new practices, that would change life. Events can overcome facts. They are able to switch the representation to practice, consolidating these present actions as a means of revising the past.
The link with the past as a commitment to distinguish identities conferred by tradition reinforces the isolation and closure. The past as legalization of the present is almost always a past that was invented to justify and was not explored to question.  

Stavros Stavridis

The debate around the concepts of identity and otherness, the city through its varied ambiances and the meaning of moments, has led to the development of psychogeography. Psychogeography is defined by Guy Debord (Internationale Situationniste #1, 1958) as “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals”. It acquires the double meaning as: an active observation of the city regions, and also as a means of formulation of the assumptions for the construction of the situationist city. A city that would initially be constructed based on the critique of everyday life. Psychogeography is directly related to the practice of the dérive in the city, the various interpretations of the urban landscape and the détournement of facts, the definition of our identity through the exploration of otherness and finally the articulation of moments which will produce the constructed situations.

Urged by the critique of everyday life, the situationists want to convert reality and construct those situations that would form new ambiances where desires will be fulfilled. The urban landscape should constitute a spatiotemporal experience of pleasure! The basic situationist practices are the constructed situation, the unitary urbanism, the détournement and the dérive as a method of perceiving psychogeography. (Figure 1)

DERIVE AND THE FLâNEUR

The dérive is actually “a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances”. It involves a “playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects”; and therefore differs from the classic notions of a journey or a stroll. In fact, it is essential that one or more persons during the dérive, drop their relations, their common habits and their everyday life “roles”, though, without taking on other roles. The aim is to let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they come across. The element of chance is not an important factor since “from a dérive point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones” (Internationale Situationniste #2, 1958). (Figure 2) The practice of the dérive is conducted exclusively in the psychogeographical setting of the city as it would develop totally different aspects and interpretations realized in the countryside.

The concept of the dérive meets its literary equivalent to the drifting as “flânerie” and the personality of the Parisian “flâneur” of the 19th century (literary writings of Baudelaire). The presence of the astonishing French arcades, forming an illusion of interior-exterior captured the flâneur in a mood of eager exploration and observation. Later, they induce Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1955) to stroll around an unfinished extent work known as the “Passagenwerk” whereas Breton, in his “Nadja”, is already seeking the people amongst the public who would be ready for a revolution, he stands critic across the behavioural interpretations formed in the psychogeographical scenery of the city.
DETOURNEMENT AND APROPRIATION OF SPACE

According to its given definition, in the SI texts, in 1959, “détournement is the integration of past or present artistic production into a superior environmental construction”. The intention is the disappearance of the meaning, the substance of the converted element (even to the point of total loss of its primer meaning) and simultaneously the formulation of a new semantic total (significant), which comes to re-define the meaning of each element. Everything can be transformed in symbols and gain a new content in a new context. On the contrary everything that constitutes a symbol can remain void of meaning, when ceases to be linked with its original context. (Figure 3) This intention of the distorted (visual or perceptive in any sense) significance appears already in various manufacturing techniques of collages by the dadaists, the surrealists and even more in the practices of the lettrists. The implement of détournement in everyday life is called hyper-détournement and in architecture it would involve the transformation of buildings and decors which would contribute to the alteration of the psychogeographical ambience of the cities.

According to Debord, “Architecture must advance by taking emotionally moving situations, rather than emotionally moving forms, as the material it works with. And the experiments conducted with this material will lead to new, as yet unknown forms”. However, there could be emotionally moving forms motivating emotionally moving situations! For this to occur, the objective subjectivity of our needs should “evolve” into the subjective objectivity of our experiences. To be more specific, nowadays, an architectural form that raises questionable issues or constitutes a bizarre spectacle in the city, nevertheless, is being constructed, since everything is “happening” through the needs and the profits of commercialism. Maybe we should stand still for a moment and wonder about the true qualities of life (and not lifestyle) and their complete absence from the designing process! We are heading forward to the construction of buildings that merely display themselves in a city exhibition! In these terms, I believe, the value of the concept has been way overestimated. Meanwhile, public space in the sense of living space is being ignored, or commercialized. The public space has to motivate a playful behaviour and activate the sense of desire. (Figure 4)

CONSTRUCTED SITUATION AND UNITARY URBANISM

“A moment of life, concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of unitary environment and the free play of events”. The construction of situation in the city is the point where action and behaviour collide, in order to create an atmosphere and contribute to the fulfilment of desires. (Figure 5) Seeking an authentic experience of collective creation in terms of art and life, the constructed situation opposes to the world of the spectacle and supports a unitary urbanism. Unitary urbanism refers to the combined use of art and technology leading to the integrated construction of an environment dynamically linked to behavioural experiments. It does not constitute a theory but a critical view of urbanism. Since 1956 the whole idea of unitary urbanism was held on the one side by experimental actions of the lettrists, such as the dérive and psychogeography and on the other side by some architectural approaches in the field of construction. This is the year that Constant enters the movement of the Imaginary Bauhaus. (Figure 6) The collaboration of these two sides derives from the need to create new “changeable” integrated settings and to explore behaviour and environment as a unity.
THE MOMENT AND THE “OTHERS”

The human life is a series of enforced everyday situations and even though none of them are exactly the same as the other, in their majority they differ that little that give the impression of total resemblance. Therefore the truly exciting and unique, though rare situations that appear in life tend to strictly delimit it and detain it. Inspired by Lefebvre’s theory of moments, the situationist, define as moments, the circumstances that in our own personal criteria we would describe as authentic moments, where the monotony of the fact collapses. The “moment” is mainly temporal, forming part of a zone of temporality, not pure but dominant. Articulated in relation to a given place, the situation is completely spatiotemporal. According to Debord, “moments constructed into “situations” might be thought of as moments of rupture, of acceleration, revolutions in individual everyday life”.

In such a spatiotemporal experience, the existence of boundaries, the notion of boundaries and above all the perception of boundaries direct our actions and relations/relationships. These boundaries, (Figure 7) function as invisible limits that restrict our movements and conduct the whole dialectic of seeing. It is interesting to investigate the “not so obvious” way of defining “the Other”, naming “the Other”, seeing “the Other” and mostly creating “the Other”. The dialectic of philosophy introduces a sequence of naming the “Other” in relation to the “I” forming dipoles of profound cognition. To begin with, Hegel refers to the relation of the subjects of otherness as a “master and servant dialectic” and Marx later explores the conversion of this relation, through the diversion of the notions of liberty, power, fear and property. Freud uses the term “other”, which evolves to the “big Other” and the “little other” by Lacan, whereas Zizek reveals us the “imaginary real”, the “symbolic real” and the “real real”. It is obvious that the identity of a subject is constructed by that of another and that the unity of a group depends on the presence of another. According to the psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva “The Other is situated in the core of our own identity”.

RADICAL ART MOVEMENTS

Considering all these, psychogeography develops in the scale of the city through all those factors that challenge us to abandon our set destination and let our instincts explore the city. The surprise and the complete experience of the place is the aim. All these radical ideas have been put into practice by avant-garde art movements and their attempt to shift the common sense of things has inspired many groups and individuals nowadays.

In 1916 appears DADA, in Switzerland, followed by the Surrealists, mainly situated in Paris, and COBRA in 1948, a group of artists between Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam. After COBRA, in 1953 the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus is formed that later in collaboration with the lettrist movement; they give birth to the Situationist International in 1957. The contribution of situationist’s ideas is quite clear in theoretical texts and graffities of the French May 1968. However, in architecture and urban planning their theories were never been applied in a complete realized project. Nevertheless, their influence is undeniable. Contemporary examples of psychogeography appear both in urban practice (psychogeographic groups, groups developing exploration and wandering techniques, architects and projects whose theoretical base is clearly influenced by situationist and pro- situationist ideas) and in art and media events (street art, urban interactive installations, digital cities).
CONTEMPORARY URBAN PRACTICES OF PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY

After the first Psychogeographical Association of London in 1957, worldwide there is an increasing number of psychogeographical groups interested in various aspects of urban life, urban development and social issues of regional planning and alternative cartography. The London Psychogeographical Association (LPA), the Nottingham Psychogeographical Unit, the Orlando psychogeographical association, the New York psychogeographical association to the Psychogeographical Cyclists Association.

As for the groups that develop exploration and wandering techniques, an interesting example is the group Infiltration. Coming from Canada, they claim to offer a mix of the practice and theory of urban exploration in areas not designed for public usage. They publish a journal about going to “places you’re not supposed to go”, a paper publication devoted to the art of urban exploration, a sort of interior tourism that allows the curious-minded to discover behind-the-scenes sights and have a lot of free fun. In addition, they publish editorials, exploring advice and information, articles on recent expeditions, and interviews, all illustrated with maps, pictures and diagrams. The challenge is to enter places that are declared as insecure, abandoned, marginal or underground. (Figure 8)

The Jinx Project is the journal of the World Urban Adventure. Various reports on urban exploration and international missions are published, along with collections of material from the so called “friends and enemies’. The magazine is published at irregular intervals since 1997 and is online since 2001. The Jinx Project is self-referred as a “global information management organization not controlled by governments and only bound to the passion to defend freedom against any enforcement. Their texts reveal an intention of anti-authoritarian practice, an anti-touristic attitude, which perhaps is beyond the playful nature of other groups of urban exploration. (Figure 9)

In any case, the psychogeographic approach of these teams is based on the fact that, since people “are not supposed” to enter or be present in those places, the absence of signs enables them to move into the area following their pure instincts. The aim is to discover and the desire for adventure what attracts them. They are fascinated by human trails; they observe, collect and put link the “pieces” of time as imprinted on the material. They are interested in the sense of attraction and repulsion that can coexist in a site. Drown by the game of adventure which enables them to wander through paths out of the ordinary everyday life.

The Workshop for Non-Linear Architecture was realised during the 90s, by a group of experimental artists and psychogeographers active in Britain. The workshop focused its practise on developing the lettrist theory of Unitary Urbanism through physical research and behavioural intervention; redefining the psychogeographical terrain of the cityscape in relation to its emotive resistivity. They publish the magazine issue Viscocity, and their tracks disappear after the fourth and last issue.

In addition, an interesting perspective, today, is “Genetic Psychogeography” that is defined as another possible definition of psychogeography which involves an activity that tries to decipher how the cognitive image that we have of a site, is developed by the design of space itself, attempting to reconnect the image to reality through the exploration of space with non-conventional ways. If we consider here and study (Figure 10) of Chombart de Lauwe, (“Paris et l ‘agglomeration parisienne,” Library of Contemporary Sociology, PUF 1952), which notes that
“the district of a city is not determined solely by economic and geographical factors, but also from the image that perceive of it, its inhabitants as well as the residents of other neighbourhoods”, the interaction between environment and behaviour, architecture and space perception is undeniable. Many contemporary architects and urban planners, such as Mark Wigley, Nigel Thrift and Steve Pile whose theoretical work is clearly influenced by the practices and theories of the situationists, draw their attention on the scenographic ambience of the city as a means of analysing the dynamics of the environment. In their writings, they explore the relationship of architecture and perception through various interpretations, codes and symbolisms of the elements that constitute our geographical environment.

DIGIT]-ART CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES OF PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY

Nowadays, digital cartography of cities and mechanisms of exploring geographic potentials through mobile phones or pcs have reached a high level of development and importance as well. Even from simple travelling guidelines to urban planning applications or mere curiosity of exploring other sites all over the world, browsers have managed to surprise us with the accuracy of data they achieve. Wandering around the world cartography used to seem unperceivable yet, now can be done in seconds. Current knowledge has made almost impossible the very own existence of the impossible. It reminds us of the interpretation given by situationists for the absence of utopia. “No utopia can no longer be available because already exist all the conditions to become reality.” The problem, however, is that these conditions are used in order to maintain the current state of things and not to serve the needs for quality life.

Technology combined with art, in the field of psychogeography, has led to the development of urban interactive installations and happenings of interactive challenge. This new dimension of investigation, the human involvement in geographical terrain, has inspired the construction of another new cartography. Some artists implement their work on theories of the situationists and try to approach the dynamics of human presence and behaviour. (Figure 11) Using tech-machines to create active magnetic fields, they record and decode the movement of people within a certain sphere of influence, based on analysis data and factors that have been scheduled and preceded. In these cases, the elements of otherness, of moments and space, all contribute to the whole project and the investigation of certain urban aspects of interest. In this way, these experiments manage to add another element to psychogeography. Another starting point. The initial behaviour of individuals that determines and creates an atmosphere which afterwards affects the behaviour of other individuals. Of course, many are the cases of artists who “borrow” the terms of derive and psychogeography, without practically associating their work with the notion of these concepts, as originally interpreted.

Finally, the situationists’ practices continue to inspire a large number of “underground” artists of the so-called street art, especially in terms of content and composition style. Certainly, graffiti adds colour to the gray scenery of our cities and various aspects of reality expressed by the delightful imagination of their creators. Meaning the prohibited expression of their imagination. The techniques of détournement and construction of situations enable these artists to create a whole new atmosphere in the city, or incorporate a second atmosphere in the existing one. (Figure 12) Ideas, concepts, symbols produced and constantly reproduced (the case of stencil) are dispersed in various parts of the city and contribute to the creation of a diverse collage, forming imaginative and intelligent compositions that accompany the daily routs of people in
the city. And that is their purpose of presence, their awakening impact and their beauty: the surprise of the transformation of the ordinary urban landscape!

CONCLUSIONS

If something has changed in psychogeography of the ‘50s in relation to psychogeography nowadays, I believe is the fact of the two-way conduction of assumptions. Still today, psychogeography studies the effects of the environment on human behaviour and emotions, but it also examines the parameters that led to the construction of that specific environment. The element of geography and the human factor constitute two poles of vast importance of study in constant interaction. Therefore, psychogeography accumulates an aimless derive with the perspective of détournement of facts into a spatiotemporal experience, profound and personal as well as aspiring to the potentiality of collectiveness. The political perspective cannot be absent.

Politics and arts have always been in a controversial terrain, in a dialectical relationship of disappointment and criticism. “Across the vast spaces of isolation and noncommunication organized by the present social order new types of scandals are spreading from one country to another, from one continent to another; and they are already beginning to communicate with each other. The role of avant-garde currents, wherever they may appear, is to link these people and these experiences together; to help unify such groups and the coherent basis of their project. We need to publicize, elucidate and develop these initial gestures of the forthcoming revolutionary era. They can be recognized by the fact that they concentrate in themselves new forms of struggle and a new content (whether latent or explicit): the critique of the existing world. Thus the dominant society, which prides itself so much on its constant modernization, is now going to meet its match, for it has finally produced a modernized negation.”

The notion and effectiveness of the created situations justifies the “scandals” and radical practices performed by avant-garde art movements. Lettrists, situationists, psychogeographers and those who have let themselves been drawn into a long-time dérive of manifestos and urban recipes for a fulfilling everyday life, they have all contributed in one way or another in the presence of creativity in the city. They demonstrated that nothing is implicit. The “implicit” is also constructed. Let’s be realistic, then, and demand for the impossible, they declare. Even if the initial content of their concepts has been “detoured” and excessively used by the world of the spectacle, we should, at least preserve their memory. Preserve these actions from the realm of the unconscious. Because they have always aspired to reach consciousness. Facts or events, consciousness cannot be underestimated, it constitutes the element that consolidates theory with practice.

“The revolution in everyday life, breaking its present resistance to the historical (and to every kind of change), will create conditions in which the present dominates the past and the creative aspects of life always predominate over the repetitive ones. We must therefore expect that the side of everyday life expressed by the concepts of ambiguity (misunderstandings, compromises, misuses) will decline considerably in importance in favour of their opposites: conscious choices and gambles”.

Guy Debord
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NOTES

1. Stavridis, Stavros (2002): From the city screen to the city scene.
2. Breton, André. (1928). “Nadja” is his second novel being published. The surrealists are known for their passion for derives and the complete letting go of oneself in terms of automatism. “Nadja” starts with the question “Who am I?”
FIGURES

Figure 1 | Figure 2

Figure 3 | Figure 4
Guy Debord, “détournement” using parts of a map, stamps and painted figures. «Evolution! Cause revolution implies going around in circles» “life continues to be free and easy”, 1959 graffiti.porto.2007

Figure 5
*The Naked City*, Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, 1957
"plotting of all the trajectories effected in a year by a student inhabiting the 16th Arrondissement", Chombart de Lawve, Figure 11| urban interactive installations 1952