



Situationist Space

Author(s): Thomas F. McDonough

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Situationist Space*

THOMAS F. McDONOUGH

Proletarian revolution is the critique of human geography through which individuals and communities have to create places and events suitable for the appropriation, no longer just of their labor, but of their total history.

—Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*

I. The Naked City

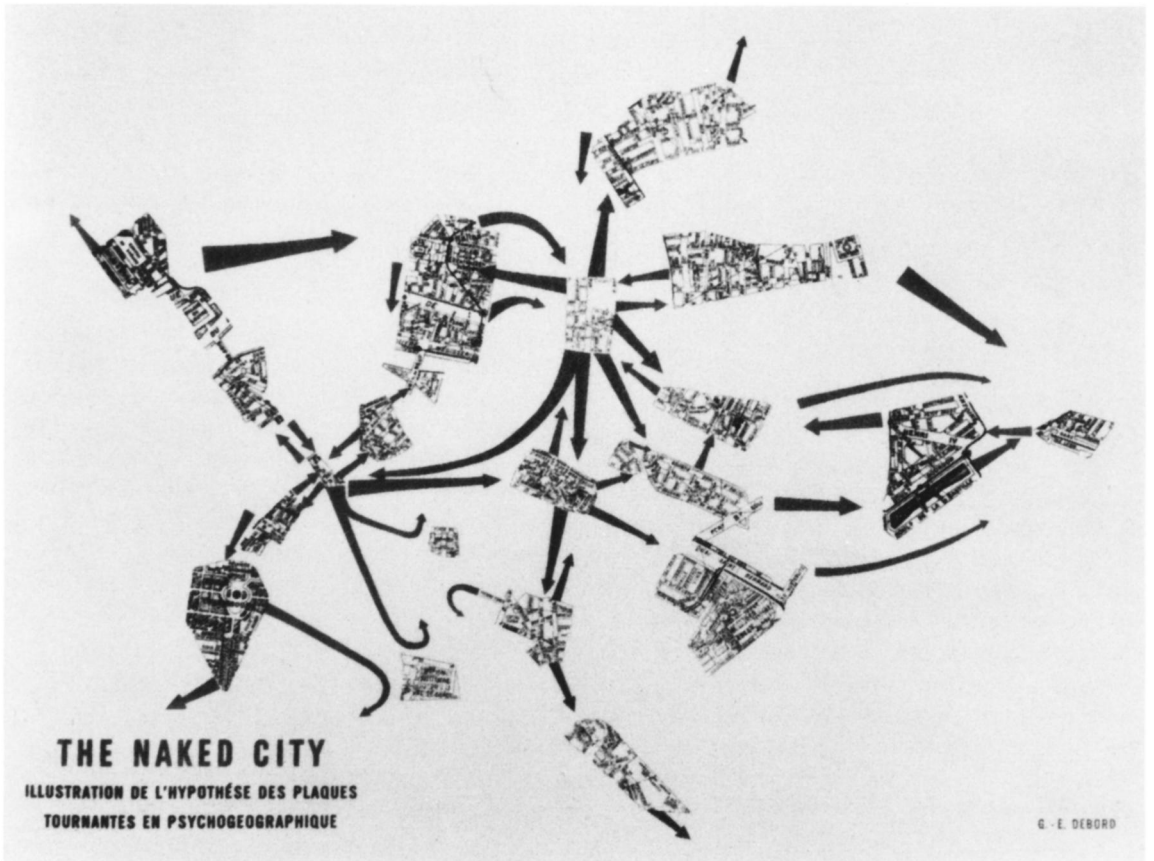
In the summer of 1957 the MIBI (“Mouvement Internationale pour un Bauhaus Imaginiste”), an avant-garde group composed of various ex-Cobra artists and their Italian counterparts,¹ published a singularly odd map of Paris entitled *The Naked City*, the creation of which was credited to G[uy]-E[rnest] Debord. The publication of this map was in fact one of the last actions taken by the MIBI, since this group had recently decided to join with the French “Internationale lettriste”—of which Debord was the most important member—and the English “Psychogeographical Society of London” in order to form the “Internationale situationniste.”² However, the map acted both as a summary of many of the concerns shared by the three organizations, particularly around the question of the construc-

* This paper was originally conceived for a colloquium on European Art 1945–68, taught by Robert Lubar at the Institute of Fine Arts; early research with my colleague Maura Reilly was instrumental in formulating its parameters. A year at the Independent Study Program of the Whitney Museum of American Art and the opportunity to work with Benjamin Buchloh and Rosalyn Deutsche were the greatest sources of inspiration and challenge in this project’s realization. Finally, I would like to thank my readers on *October’s* editorial board and especially Hal Foster for their critical comments and assistance.

1. On the MIBI, see Peter Wollen, “The Situationist International,” *New Left Review* 174 (1989), pp. 87–90.

2. The official history of the founding is told in Jean-François Martos, *Histoire de l’Internationale situationniste* (Paris: Editions Gerard Lebovici, 1989), pp. 9–65. See Peter Wollen, “The Situationist International,” pp. 87–90.

Guy Debord. The Naked City. 1957.



tion and perception of urban space, and as a demonstration of the directions to be explored by the Internationale situationniste in the following years. Surprisingly little attention has been accorded this document, despite the fact that it has become an almost iconic image of the early years of the Internationale situationniste, appearing on dust jackets and as an illustration in several of the major books and articles on the group.

The Naked City is composed of nineteen cut-out sections of a map of Paris, printed in black ink, which are linked by directional arrows printed in red. Its subtitle describes the map as an “illustration of the hypothesis of psychogeographical turntables.” Appropriated by Debord, the term “plaque tournante,” which usually denotes a railway turntable (a circular revolving platform with a track running along its diameter, used for turning locomotives), here describes the function of the arrows linking the segments of the psychogeographical map. Each segment has a different “unity of atmosphere.” The arrows describe “the spontaneous turns of direction taken by a subject moving through these surroundings in disregard of the useful connections that ordinarily govern his conduct.”³ Thus these “spontaneous inclinations of orientation” that link various “unities of atmosphere” and dictate the path taken by the given subject correspond to the action of the turntable, which links various segments of track and dictates the orientation of the locomotive. The implications of analogizing the subject to a locomotive are, of course, founded on a certain ambiguity: although self-propelled, the locomotive’s path is determined within strict boundaries, just as for the Situationists, the subject’s freedom of movement is restricted by the instrumentalized image of the city propagated under the reign of capital.⁴

It is immediately apparent that *The Naked City* did not function like an ordinary map. This observation is confirmed when its antecedents in the *Carte du Tendre* of Madeleine de Scudéry are examined. Cited in a 1959 article in the journal *Internationale situationniste*, the *Carte* had been created three hundred years earlier in 1653 by Scudéry and the members of her salon.⁵ It uses the metaphor of the spatial journey to trace possible histories of a love affair. Key geographical features, through pathetic fallacy, mark significant moments or emotions (e.g., the “lac d’indifférence”). Positing this aristocratic diversion as an antecedent of *The Naked City* is another instance of appropriation, but despite their very different origins the *Carte* did illustrate the key principle of the psychogeographic map.

3. From a text printed on the reverse side of *The Naked City*: Asger Jorn, “Quatrième expérience du MIBI (Plans psychogéographiques de Guy Debord),” reprinted in *Documents relatifs à la fondation de l’Internationale situationniste: 1948–1957*, ed. Gérard Berreby (Paris: Editions Allia, 1985), p. 535.

4. The term “plaque tournante” may also be an intended or unintended pun on “tableau tournant,” which refers to magical or seance-like operations of trickery. (I would like to thank Benjamin Buchloh for pointing out this possibility.)

5. The map was published in 1654 in her *Clélie: histoire romaine* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1973). It is cited in “L’urbanisme unitaire à la fin des années 50,” *Internationale situationniste* 3 (December 1959), pp. 11–16. On the map, see Claude Filteau, “Tendre,” in *Cartes et figures de la terre* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1980), pp. 205–7.

Madeline de Scudéry. Carte de Tendre. 1653.



That is, both maps are figured as narratives rather than as tools of “universal knowledge.” The users of these maps were asked to choose a directionality and to overcome obstacles, although there was no “proper” reading. The reading chosen was a performance of one among many possibilities (of the course of the love affair in the *Carte du Tendre*; of the crossing of the urban environment in *The Naked City*) and would remain contingent. The subject’s achievement of a position of mastery, the goal of narrative’s resolution, was thereby problematized.

The odd title, rendered in bright red capitals, was also an appropriation of the name of an American film noir of 1948. *The Naked City* was a detective story set in New York and filmed in a documentary style. Based on a story by Malvin Wald, the screenplay was a collaboration between the author and Albert Maltz.⁶ (The title of the film, however, is itself an appropriation: originally entitled *Homicide*, the movie’s name was changed to match the title of a book of crime photographs by Weegee, published in 1945.)⁷ Although the reference to this Hollywood film of the previous decade may at first seem arbitrary, its purpose becomes clear when one examines the structure of the movie. As Parker Tyler explains in *The Three Faces of the Film*:

In *Naked City* it is Manhattan Island and its streets and landmarks that are starred. The social body is thus, through architectural symbol, laid bare (“naked”) . . . The fact that the vastly complex structure of a great

6. Albert Maltz and Malvin Wald, *The Naked City* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979). Maltz, born in Brooklyn in 1908, was a mainstay of the American literary left throughout the 1930s; in 1941 he moved to Los Angeles, where he worked on several movies—generally either detective films (e.g., *This Gun for Hire*, 1942) or wartime propaganda movies (e.g., *Pride of the Marines*, 1945). In 1947 he was called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities for his involvement with the Communist party in the 1930s; his refusal to testify led to his being named one of the “Hollywood Ten.” *The Naked City* was his last film before being committed to federal jail in 1950. See Jack Salzman, *Albert Maltz* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1978) for a full biography, which, however, slights Maltz’s years in Hollywood.

7. Arthur Fellig (Weegee), *Naked City* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975).

city, in one sense, is a supreme obstacle to the police detectives at the same time that it provides tiny clues as important as certain obscure physical symptoms are to the trained eye of a doctor.⁸

Just as the term turntable serves as a useful analogy for the “spontaneous turns of direction” indicated on the map, so the title *The Naked City* serves as an analogy for the function of the map as a whole. It is no longer the streets and landmarks of Manhattan, but those of Paris that are “starred”: one quickly recognizes, in the cut-out fragments, parts of the Jardin du Luxembourg, Les Halles, the Gare de Lyon, the Pantheon, etc. The act of “laying bare” the social body through the city’s architectural symbols is implicit in the very structure of the map. Freed from the “useful connections that ordinarily govern their conduct,” the users could experience “the sudden change of atmosphere in a street, the sharp division of a city into one of distinct psychological climates; the path of least resistance—wholly unrelated to the unevenness of the terrain—to be followed by the casual stroller; the character, attractive or repellant, of certain places.”⁹ So wrote Debord in his “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography” (“Introduction à une critique de la géographie urbaine”) of 1955, two years before the publication of his version of *The Naked City*. For Debord the structure of Paris, like that of New York in the movie, was also a “great obstacle” that simultaneously offered “tiny clues”—only they were no longer clues to the solution of a crime, but to a future organization of life in its presentation of a “*sum of possibilities*.”

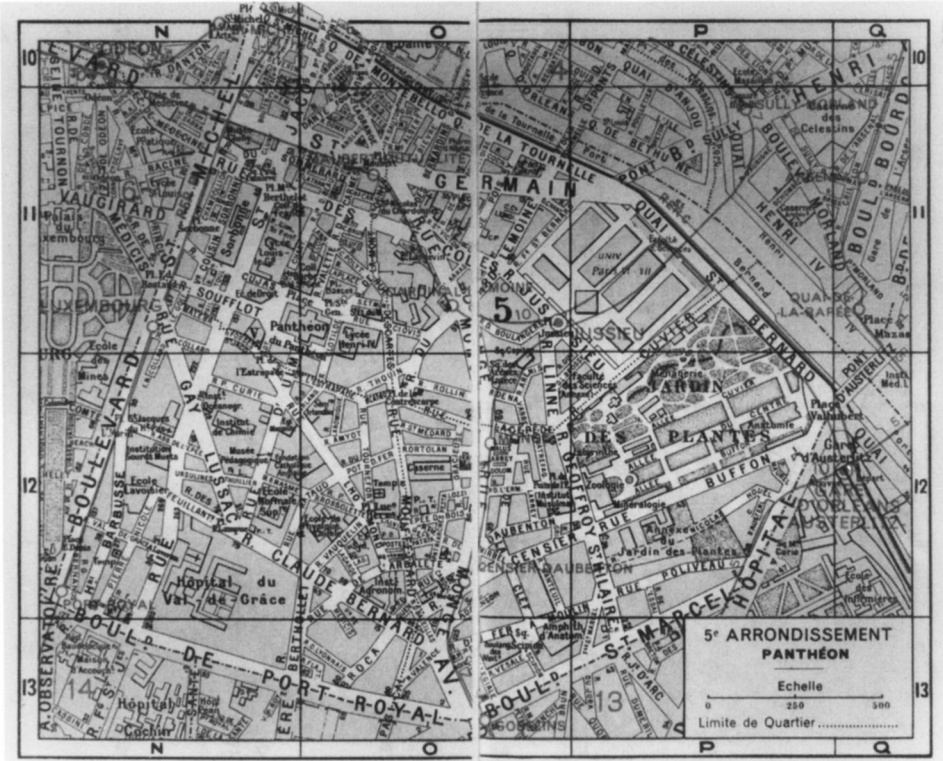
Visually, *The Naked City* is a collage based on the appropriation of an already-existing document, composed of nineteen fragments of a map of Paris. It is significant in this light that Debord, in the 1955 “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,” had discussed “a renovated cartography”: “the production of psychogeographical maps may help to clarify certain movements of a sort that, while surely not gratuitous, are wholly insubordinate to the usual directives.”¹⁰ These influences or attractions determine the habitual patterns through which residents negotiate the city. The complete “insubordination” of such influences is realized in *The Naked City* by the fragmenting of the most popular map of Paris, the *Plan de Paris*, into a state of illegibility.

The Naked City subverts the structure of the *Plan de Paris*. The latter is structured in a way analogous to the mode of discourse called “description,” which acts to “mask its successive nature and present it as redundant repetition, as if all were present at the same time. It is as if the object [here, the city of Paris] were always

8. Parker Tyler, *The Three Faces of the Film: The Art, the Dream, the Cult*, rev. ed. (South Brunswick, N.J.: A. S. Barnes, 1967), p. 97.

9. Guy-Ernest Debord, “Introduction à une critique de la géographie urbaine,” *Les Livres Nues* 6 (September 1955). Trans. as “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,” in the *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, Calif.: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), pp. 5–8.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 7.



Map of the 5th arrondissement from the Plan de Paris.

already visually present, fully offered to full view.”¹¹ The Paris of the *Plan* exists in a timeless present; this timelessness is imaged spatially in the map’s (illusory) total revelation of its object. That is, users of the map see the entire city laid out before their eyes. However, such an omnipresent view is seen from nowhere: “it is in fact impossible to occupy this space. It is a point of space where no man can see: a no place not outside space but nowhere, utopic.”¹² This is the traditional condition of the map; in linguistic terms, it is pure structure (“langue”) without individuation (“parole”).

If the *Plan de Paris* is structured by description, which is predicated on a model of seeing that constitutes an exhibition of “the knowledge of an order of places,”¹³ then a very different mode of discourse structures *The Naked City*. It is predicated on a model of moving, on “spatializing actions,” known to the Situationists as *dérives*; rather than presenting the city from a totalizing point of view, it organizes movements metaphorically around psychogeographic hubs. These movements constitute narratives that are openly diachronic, unlike description’s false “timelessness.”¹⁴ *The Naked City* makes it clear, in its fragmenting of the conventional, descriptive representation of urban space, that the city is only experienced in time by a concrete, situated subject, as a passage from one “unity of atmosphere” to another, not as the object of a totalized perception.

II. *The Naked City and Social Geography*

But the narrative mode does not fully account for the appearance of Debord’s map. First, *The Naked City* does not cover all of Paris, as is expected of any “good” map. Second, the fragments have no logical relation to one another; they are not properly oriented according to north-south or east-west axes, and the distance between them does not correspond to the actual distance separating the various locales. (Consider, for instance, the distance separating the Jardin des Plantes from its annex, which are contiguous in the *Plan de Paris*.)

Debord explains these features in his article of 1956, “Theory of the *Dérive*.” The fragments only represent certain areas of Paris because the map’s goal is “the discovery of unities of atmosphere, of their main components and of their spatial localization.”¹⁵ Presumably not all areas in the city lend themselves to such spatial localization; *The Naked City* names parts of the city (certain “uni-

11. Louis Marin, *Utopics: Spatial Play*, trans. Robert A. Vollrath (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1984), p. 202.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

13. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 119.

14. Louis Marin, *Utopics*, pp. 201–2. Although “narrative” may not be the ideal term to describe the structure of *The Naked City*, it does convey the sense that the map is a representation of an event—or more properly, a sum of events, i.e., the spatializing actions of the *dérive*.

15. Guy-Ernest Debord, “Théorie de la *dérive*,” *Les Livres Nues* 9 (November 1956). Translated as “Theory of the *Dérive*,” in the *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 53.

ties of atmosphere”) instead of the whole (“Paris”) that includes them. Through this synecdochic procedure, totalities like the Paris of the *Plan de Paris* are replaced by fragments like the components of Debord’s map.¹⁶

But beyond the “discovery” of such unities of atmosphere, the map also describes “their chief axes of passage, their exits and their defenses.” The psycho-geographical turntables of the map’s subtitle allow one to assert “distances that may be quite out of scale with what one might conclude from a map’s approximations.”¹⁷ Such distances become blank areas in *The Naked City*, gaps that separate the various fragments. The suppression of the linkages between various “unities of atmosphere,” except for schematic directional arrows, corresponds to the procedure called “asyndeton”: a process of “opening gaps in the spatial continuum” and “retaining only selected parts of it.”¹⁸

Structuring *The Naked City* through synecdoche and asyndeton disrupts the false continuity of the *Plan de Paris*. The city map is revealed as a representation: the production of a discourse about the city. This discourse is predicated on the appearance of optical coherence, on what Henri Lefebvre called the reduction of the city to “the undifferentiated state of the visible-readable realm.”¹⁹ This abstract space homogenizes the conflicts that produce capitalist space; the terrain of the *Plan de Paris* is that of Haussmannized Paris, where modernization had evicted the working class from its traditional quarters in the center of the city and then segregated the city along class lines. But abstract space is riddled with contradictions; most importantly, it not only conceals difference, its acts of division and exclusion are productive of difference. Distinctions and differences are not eradicated, they are only hidden in the homogeneous space of the *Plan*. *The Naked City* brings these distinctions and differences out into the open, the violence of its fragmentation suggesting the real violence involved in constructing the city of the *Plan*.

In this manner *The Naked City* engages the discourse of geography. In France, academic geography (institutionalized in the university) was a product of the 1870s; in the wake of the defeat suffered in the Franco-Prussian War, a number of historians around Paul Vidal de la Blanche founded what may be called a “spatial history.” Vidalian geography considered itself a “science of landscape” whose goal was taxonomic description; but, as in the *Plan de Paris*, “description” cannot be considered an ideologically neutral term. By presuming an already “given” object of study (country, region, city), this geography hypostatized concepts as trans-historical that were actually the products of particular historical relations. Moreover, the geographer’s interest in description privileges visual criteria that depend on the illusion of an object “fully offered to full view,” a view that is more-

16. Michel de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 101.

17. Guy-Ernest Debord, “Théorie de la dérive,” *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 53.

18. Michel de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 101.

19. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 355–56.

over gendered as masculine, from which a feminized space is perceived. (Vidal spoke of the eye “embracing” the landscape, which “offers itself up” to view.)²⁰

But there is a curious contradiction in Vidal’s methodology of description: despite his reliance on the visual presence of the object of study, his landscapes cannot actually be seen. That is, he is not so much concerned with an observable, concrete space, but with a typical, abstract space that is constructed from a “synthetic and derivative mobilization of cliché” in the form of various exoticisms, references to literature, and enumerations of local flora and fauna.²¹ The abstract space of academic geography is the source of the homogeneous, abstract space of the *Plan de Paris*.

In making *The Naked City*, however, Debord was not simply refuting an eighty-year-old tradition of academic geography; he was also, unconsciously, reasserting the goals of a social geography. “Social geography” was a term first used by Elisée Reclus, a communard, socialist, and geographer for whom geography would become “history in space.” Unlike Vidal’s “geography of permanences,” for Reclus geography was “not an immutable thing. It is made, it is remade every day; at each instant, it is modified by men’s actions.”²² Rather than explaining spatial organization, like Vidal, as the consequence of inevitable social processes (mediated by deterministic metaphors, as in the “individuality” or “personality” of a region), Reclus theorized space as a social product and thus as inseparable from the functioning of society. Two dissimilar concepts of society were being proposed in these two geographies. On the one hand, Vidal desocializes the social, employing an “environmental determinism” in which “forms of metropolitan social life” are the adaptations of “human populations to environments in which certain processes tend to remain constant and invariable.” On the other hand, Reclus understood space as a socially produced category—as an arena “where social relations are reproduced” and as a social relation itself.²³ Debord, developing similar ideas, would also comprehend this indivisibility of urban space and social

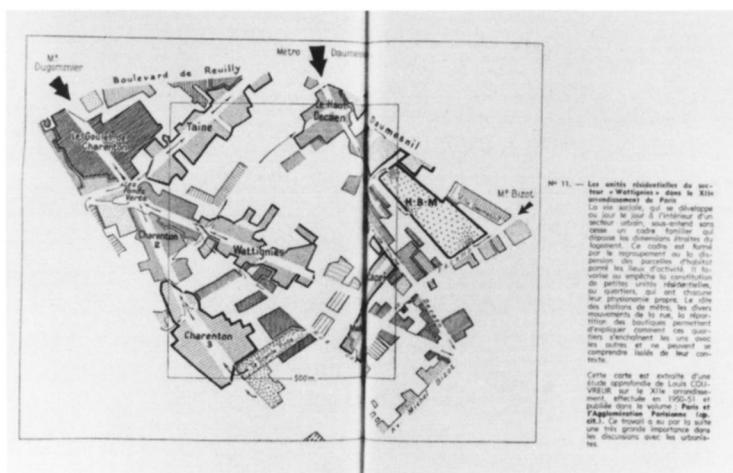
20. This discussion of academic and social geography is indebted to the work of Kristin Ross in *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 85–97. The space of narrative (e.g., of concealment and discovery in film noir) is also gendered; see Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) and Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975), pp. 6–18. To the extent that Debord’s *Naked City* may be compared with the narrative of film noir (as the map’s title indicates), its point of view must be problematized; however there are obviously significant differences in the subjects constructed by these respective “narratives.” (Perhaps this is where the limits of the usefulness of this term for describing Debord’s map are reached.)

21. Ross, *Emergence of Social Space*, pp. 86–87.

22. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 91. For more on Elisée Reclus, see Gary S. Dunbar, *Elisée Reclus, Historian of Nature* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1978) and Marie Fleming, *The Geography of Freedom: The Odyssey of Elisée Reclus* (Montreal and New York: Black Rose Books, 1988).

23. See Rosalyn Deutsche, “Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City,” *October* 47 (Winter 1988), p. 24. See also Manuel Castells, *The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977) and Peter R. Saunders, *Social Theory and the Urban Question* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981).

The residential units of the “Wattignies” district in the 12th arrondissement of Paris, from Chombart de Lauwe, “Paris and the Parisian Agglomeration.”



relations; but with the experience of psychogeographic exploration, space could also be the arena for the contestation of these relations through an active construction of new “unities of atmosphere.”

Debord never wrote about Elisée Reclus, but he did write about a French sociologist whose work of the early 1950s was very concerned with “social space” and with urbanism: Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe. Debord quotes Chombart de Lauwe’s “Paris and the Parisian Agglomeration” (1952) in his “Theory of the Dérive” of 1956.²⁴ Even more significant, *The Naked City* adopts the form of a map that appears in Chombart de Lauwe’s report. This map, made by Louis Couvreur (a researcher working along with Chombart de Lauwe on the urban studies that contributed to the 1952 report), depicts “the residential units of the ‘Wattignies’ district in the 12th arrondissement of Paris.”²⁵

In the 1952 report Chombart de Lauwe defines the elementary unit of the city as the residential unit or, as called by its inhabitants, the quarter. The quarter is “a group of streets, or even of houses, with more or less clearly defined borders, including a commercial center of variable size and, usually, other sorts of points of attraction. The borders of a neighborhood are usually marginal (dangerous) frontier areas.”²⁶ It is important that these quarters are not “given” urban districts, clearly defined and logically linked one to the other. Rather, Chombart de Lauwe states that they “reveal themselves . . . to the attentive observer” in “the behavior of the inhabitants, their turn of phrase.”²⁷

Clearly dependent on these ideas, Debord also altered them in the fabrication of the psychogeographic map. For example, the notion of the quarter as the basic unit of urban structure is held in common by both Debord and Chombart

24. Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe, “Paris et l’agglomération parisienne” (1952), in *Paris: Essais de sociologie, 1952–1964* (Paris: Les éditions ouvrières, 1965), pp. 19–101. For Debord, see “Theory of the Dérive,” *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 50. This dependence is noted in passing by Wollen in “The Situationist International,” p. 80, n. 40.

25. Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe, “Paris et l’agglomération parisienne,” pp. 60–61.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

27. *Ibid.*

de Lauwe; for both it is the site of social life and possesses a distinct character. (Chombart de Lauwe, in a telling naturalizing metaphor, writes that each quarter has its own “physiognomy.”) However, Chombart de Lauwe defines the quarter as a “residential unit,” giving it a preeminently functional role, whereas Debord defines it as a “unity of atmosphere,” which proves to be a much less empirical idea.

Chombart de Lauwe ultimately relies on the notion that quarters can be “discovered,” their existence proven, through more or less traditional research methods. Space is thought of here as a context or container for social relations—an idea that hypostatizes both space and the social. But space does not simply reflect social relations; it is constitutive of and is constituted by them. That is, the quarter is not only the expression of the needs of its inhabitants, the spatial form of their social relations. As Rosalyn Deutsche has written, urban space is rather also “an arena for the reproduction of social relations and as itself such a relation.”²⁸ Debord’s psychogeography and its graphic representation in *The Naked City* take this into account, constructing “unities of atmosphere” rather than “discovering” them like physical, geographical phenomena that exist in a spatial context. *The Naked City* denies space as context and instead incorporates space as an element of social practice. Rather than a container suitable for description, space becomes part of a process: the process of “inhabiting” enacted by social groups.

In this Debord takes up a position some distance from Chombart de Lauwe, but one that is quite close to certain ideas developed by Henri Lefebvre later in the 1960s. Lefebvre was also interested in the quarter as the essential unit of social life. Like Debord, he chose to study “not the ossified socio-ecological forms (which are, by definition, inapprehensible), but the tendencies of the urban units, their inertia, their explosion, their reorganization, in a word, the practice of ‘inhabiting,’ rather than the ecology of the habitat.”²⁹ Although Lefebvre is here referring to the Chicago School of urban ecology, his distance from Chombart de Lauwe’s functionalist model of urban sociology is equally clear. Against such a model he posits the notion of “inhabiting”—what the Situationists called “experimental behavior”—a practice, as will be seen, mapped in *The Naked City*.

III. *The Naked City and Cognitive Mapping*

Debord’s map images a fragmented city that is both the result of multiple restructurings of a capitalist society and the very form of a radical critique of this society. Its figuration of a type of inhabiting is simultaneously related to and distinct from Fredric Jameson’s “aesthetic of cognitive mapping,” perhaps most succinctly described in his classic article, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic

28. Rosalyn Deutsche, “Alternative Space,” in *If You Lived Here: A Project by Martha Rosler*, ed. Brian Wallis (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), p. 55.

29. Henri Lefebvre, “Quartier et vie de quartier, Paris,” *Cahiers de l’IAURP* 7 (1967).

of Late Capitalism.” Jameson concludes that the fragmentations of urban space and the social body create the need for maps that would “enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of the city’s structure as a whole.”³⁰ These maps would allow their users to “again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion.”³¹

Certainly Debord also saw the “spatial confusion” of the modern city as symptomatic of the violence inherent in capitalism’s configuration of the space of the production and reproduction of its social relations. *The Naked City*, however, adamantly refuses the status of a regulative ideal, which is the goal of the cognitive map. If the latter is a means toward “a capacity to act and struggle,” the former is a site of struggle itself. In its very form it contests a dominant construction of urban space as homogeneous, appropriating pieces of the *Plan de Paris* and making them speak of the radical discontinuities and divisions of the public realm.

The cognitive map’s normative function relies on the production of a spatial imagability that desires to assume what Rosalyn Deutsche has called “a commanding position on the battleground of representation.”³² The danger in this position is that the positionality of the viewer and relations of representation are sacrificed in order to obtain a “coherent,” “logical” view of the city. Debord’s map, on the other hand, foregrounds its contingency by structuring itself as a narrative open to numerous readings. It openly acknowledges itself as the trace of practices of inhabiting rather than as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions. Likewise, its representation of the city only exists as a series of relationships, as in those between *The Naked City* and the *Plan de Paris*, or between fragmentation and unity, or between narrative and description.

IV. *The Derive and Social Space*

Debord wrote in *Society of the Spectacle* that under advanced capitalism “everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.”³³ As formulated by Lefebvre, the corollary to this in spatial discourse was that directly lived space (“representational space”) had moved away into the space of the conceived and the perceived (“representations of space”). Social, concrete space had been completely denied in favor of mental, abstract space: “*the free space of the com-*

30. Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 146 (1984), p. 90. See his more developed argument in “Cognitive Mapping,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 347–57.

31. Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” p. 92.

32. Rosalyn Deutsche, “Men in Space,” *Artforum* 28, no. 6 (February 1990), pp. 21–23. An expanded version of this article appeared as “Boys Town,” *Society and Space* 9 (1991), pp. 5–30.

33. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1977), p. 1.

modity.”³⁴ However, this thoroughly dominated capitalist space was not seamless; in fact, it was full of contradictions, hidden only by a homogenizing ideology. These contradictions made possible the struggle formulated by the Situationist project: the exploration of psychogeography and the construction of spaces that accommodated difference. Situationist “experimental behavior,” their practice of “inhabiting,” were operations in dominated space meant to contest the retreat of the directly lived into the realm of representation, and thereby to contest the organization of the society of the spectacle itself.

The move from abstract space to social space can be seen in a condensed form in the different attitudes taken toward aerial photographs by Chombart de Lauwe and the Situationists. In Chombart de Lauwe’s 1952 report he reproduces an aerial photograph of the city center of Paris along with its immediate suburbs. He writes that such photographs permit a better understanding of certain structures and of the contrasts between “the different kinds of urban textures.” He cites the different textures of the bourgeois quarters on the one hand (the 7th and 17th arrondissements), and on the other hand, the “popular” quarters (Belleville and Menilmontant), the former characterized by regularity, the latter by disorder. From these visual characteristics one may deduce the respective conditions of life and social practices of each quarter.³⁵

Chombart de Lauwe’s praise of the aerial photograph as a research tool raises the question asked by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*: “Is the immense texturology spread out before one’s eyes anything more than a representation, an optical artifact?” The elevation provided by “the overflight at high altitude” transforms the sociologist into a voyeur of sorts, who not only enjoys the erotics of seeing all from his hidden vantage point, but who also enjoys the erotics of knowing all. The scopic and epistemophilic drives unite in mutually seeking pleasure in the totality of the city as seen in the “vue verticale” of the aerial photograph (or of the *Plan de Paris* for that matter). But this whole is imaginary, a fiction, and “the voyeur-god created by this fiction . . . must disentangle himself from the murky intertwining daily behaviors and make himself alien to them.”³⁶

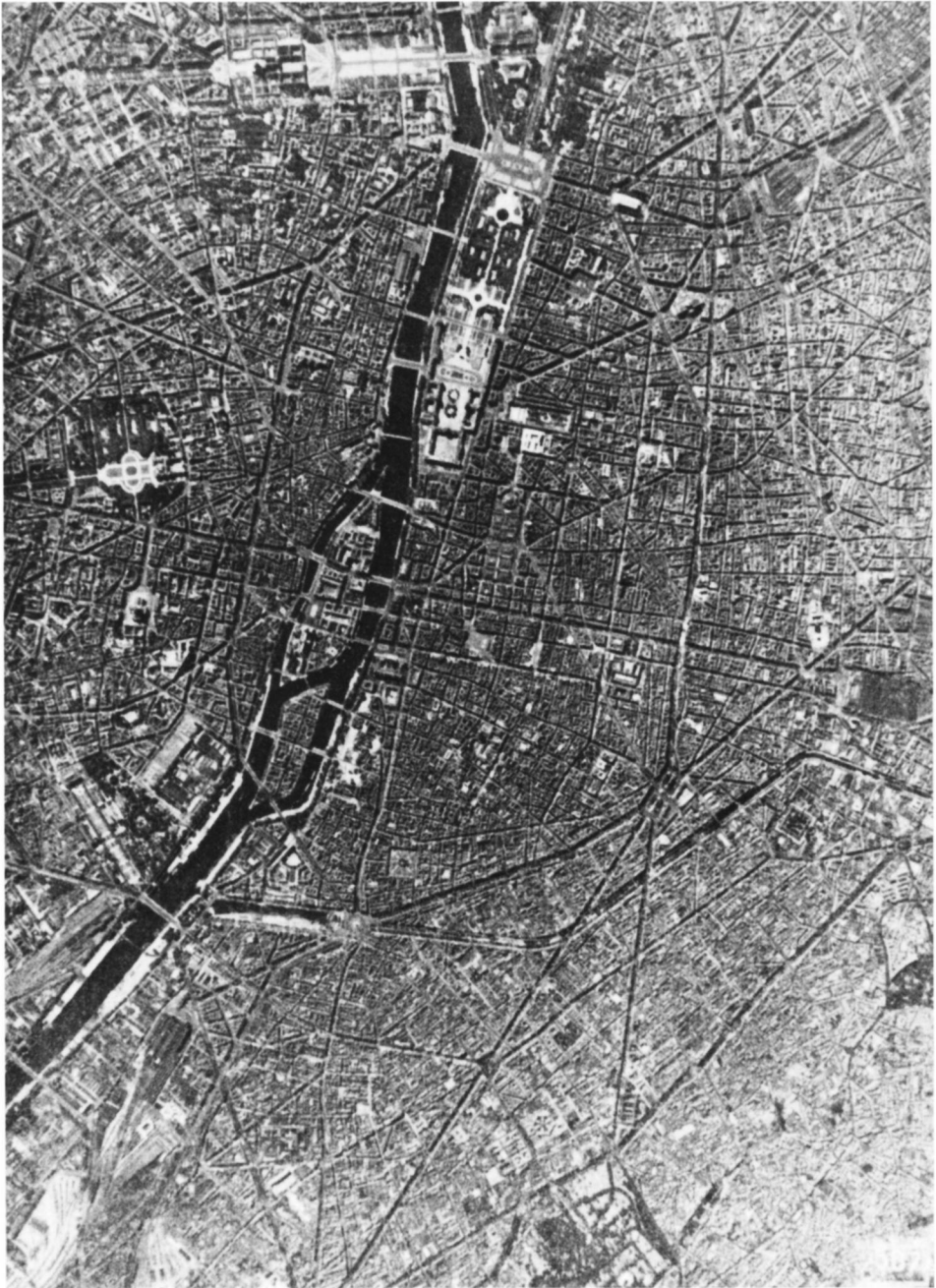
It is precisely this disentanglement, this alienation, that the Situationists refused by locating cultural struggle within the city. In contrast to Chombart de Lauwe’s faith in the knowledge provided by the spectacularized image of the city as seen in the aerial photograph, they refuted this voyeuristic viewpoint. In the first issue of *Internationale situationniste*, accompanying Gilles Ivain’s “Formulary for a New Urbanism,” there was an aerial photograph very similar to that discussed by Chombart de Lauwe; however, this photograph was not used for ascertaining the structure of the city. Instead it bore the caption “New Theater of Operations in Culture.” The military term indicated the refusal to take

34. Ibid., p. 166.

35. Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe, “Paris et l’agglomération parisienne,” pp. 33–34.

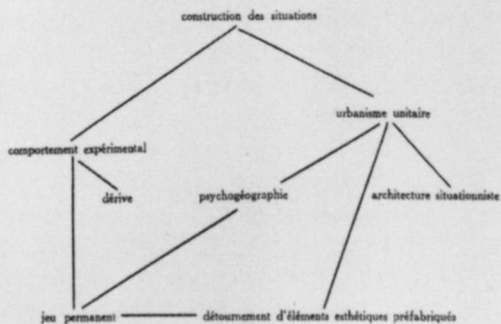
36. Michel de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, pp. 92–93.

*Aerial Photograph of Paris, 1950, from
Chombart de Lauwe, "Paris and the
Parisian Agglomeration."*



*From the Internationale situationniste 1,
June 1958.*

NOUVEAU THÉÂTRE D'OPÉRATIONS DANS LA CULTURE



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up the disengaged position implied in Chombart de Lauwe's interest in the aerial photograph. Rejecting this viewpoint, the Situationists opted for exactly the "murky intertwining behaviors" that the sociologist placed at a distance. With the city as their "theater of operations" their primary tactic was the *dérive* (drift or drifting), which reflected the pedestrian's experience, that of the everyday user of the city.

The *dérive* took place literally below the threshold of visibility, in the sense of being beyond what is visible to the voyeur's gaze. As Debord describes it, the *dérive* replaced the figure of the voyeur with that of the walker: "One or more persons committed to the *dérive* abandon, for an undefined period of time, the motives generally admitted for action and movement, their relations, their labor and leisure activities, abandoning themselves to the attractions of the terrain and the encounters proper to it."³⁷ In allowing themselves "to be drawn by the solicitations of the terrain," persons on the *dérive* escaped the imaginary totalizations of the eye and instead chose a kind of blindness.³⁸

Operating in the realm of everyday life, the *dérive* constitutes an urban practice that must be distinguished, first, from "classic notions of the journey and the walk," as Debord noted in "Theory of the *Dérive*." The *dérive* was not simply an updating of nineteenth-century *flânerie*, the Baudelairean strolling of the "man in the crowd." This is not to say that they do not share some characteristics: both the *flâneur* and the person on the *dérive* move among the crowd without being one with it. They are both "already out of place," neither bourgeois nor proletariat.³⁹ But whereas the *flâneur's* ambiguous class position represents a kind of aristocratic holdover (a position that is ultimately recuperated by the bourgeoisie), the person on the *dérive* consciously attempts to suspend class allegiances for some time. This serves a dual purpose: it allows for a heightened receptivity to the "psychogeographical relief" of the city as well as contributing to the sense of "depaysément,"⁴⁰ a characteristic of the ludic sphere.

For the Situationists, however, the *dérive* was distinguished from *flânerie* primarily by its critical attitude toward the hegemonic scopic regime of modernity.

37. Guy-Ernest Debord, "Theory of the *Dérive*," trans. in *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 50.

38. This use of the term "blindness" is to be distinguished from the paradoxical blindness of totalization that de Certeau discusses. Here it is meant to indicate the Situationists' problematization of the scopic regime of modernity as formulated in the nineteenth century.

39. See Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 172–73.

40. "Depaysément" is a term often found in early Situationist writings on the *dérive*. Literally, it means "taken out of one's element" or "misled." The Situationist use of the term seems to be in the same sense that Levi-Strauss calls anthropology a "*technique du depaysément*" in his essay "The Concept of Archaism in Anthropology" (in *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf [New York: Basic Books, 1963], pp. 117 and 118, n. 23). As the translators of this essay note, the term refers to "the conscious cultivation by the anthropologist of an attitude of marginality toward all cultures, including his [*sic*] own." The same attitude is cultivated by persons on the *dérive*.

As Griselda Pollock describes him (the *flâneur*, unlike the participants of the *dérive*, was an exclusively masculine type), the *flâneur* is characterized by a detached, observing gaze: "The *flâneur* symbolizes the privilege or freedom to move about the public arenas of the city observing but never interacting, consuming the sights through a controlling but rarely acknowledged gaze. . . . The *flâneur* embodies the gaze of modernity which is both covetous and erotic."⁴¹ It is precisely these class- and gender-specific privileges that the *dérive* critiques in its refusal of the controlling gaze. The city and its quarters are no longer conceived of as "spontaneously visible objects" but are posited as social constructions through which the *dérive* negotiates while simultaneously fragmenting and disrupting them.

The Situationists also located the *dérive* in relation to surrealist experiments in space. In his article on the *dérive* Debord cited "the celebrated aimless stroll" undertaken in May 1924 by Aragon, Breton, Morise, and Vitrac; the course of this journey was determined by chance procedures. The surrealists had embraced chance as the encounter with the totally heterogenous, an emblem of freedom in an otherwise reified society. Clearly this type of journey was resonant for the Situationists. For example, in 1955 Debord discussed a similar trip that a friend took "through the Hartz region in Germany, with the help of a map of the city of London from which he blindly followed the directions."⁴² However Debord would go on to critique the surrealist experiments for an "insufficient mistrust of chance." Perhaps, paralleling Peter Bürger's argument, Debord felt that these diversions had degenerated from protests against bourgeois society's instrumentalization to protests against means-end rationality as such. Without such rationality, however, no meaning can be derived from chance occurrences and the individual is placed in a position of a "passive attitude of expectation."⁴³ Given that the Situationists were not interested only in the discovery of the uncanny, or the making strange of familiar urban terrain, but in the transformation of urban space, their mistrust of surrealist chance is understandable.

The blindness of the people on the *dérive* was a tactical practice, dependent upon neither spectacular consumption of the city nor upon factors of chance. 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. The *dérive* was a tactic in the classic military sense of the term: "a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus."⁴⁴ Or, in the words of Clausewitz, a military theorist Debord greatly admired, the *dérive* as a

41. Griselda Pollock, *Vision & Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 67.

42. Guy-Ernest Debord, "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography," trans. in *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 7.

43. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 66.

44. Michel de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, pp. 36–37.

tactic was an “art of the weak.”⁴⁵ It is a game (Debord writes that the *dérive* entailed “a ludic-constructive behavior”)⁴⁶ that takes place in the strategic space of the city: “. . . it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. It does not have the means to *keep to itself*, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection: it is a maneuver ‘within the enemy’s field of vision,’ as von Bulow put it, and within enemy territory.”⁴⁷ The *dérive* therefore does not possess a space of its own, but takes place in a space that is imposed by capitalism in the form of urban planning.

The *dérive* appropriates this urban space in the context of what may be called a “pedestrian speech act,” in that “the act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language.”⁴⁸ Through the conscious appropriation of the city, the Situationists force it to speak of the divisions and fragmentations masked by abstract space, the contradictions that enable political struggle over the production of space to exist at all. The fragmented space of the city, as actualized in the *dérive*, is precisely what is imaged in *The Naked City*, with its invention of quarters, its shifting about of spatial relations, and its large white blanks of nonactualized space, the whole segments of Paris that are made to disappear, or rather that never even existed in the first place. The *dérive* as a pedestrian speech act is a reinstatement of the “use value of space” in a society that privileges the “exchange value of space”—that is, its existence as property. In this manner the *dérive* is a political use of space, constructing new social relations through “ludic-constructive behavior.”

V. The *Dérive* and Representations of Public Space

This contestation over the signification of public space leaves unaddressed the question of the very status of this space in the postwar period. It has been argued that, with the increasingly rapid growth through the 1950s of mass media, the formerly contested realm of the streets was evacuated. It was after all precisely technologies of the home—first radio, then television—that were the conduits for spectacular society’s attempts to domesticate fantasy. In this view, the *dérive* was doomed to being an anachronism. Indeed, some texts on the *dérive* and urban space seem curiously sentimental. For example, in the bulletin *Pottlatch* in 1954 an

45. See Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. M. Howard and P. Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976).

46. Guy-Ernest Debord, “Theory of the *Dérive*,” trans. in *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 50. The ludic nature of the *dérive* is indebted to Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens; a study of the play-element in culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), a text originally published in 1937 and translated into French in 1951. Huizinga argued that humans are defined not merely by their functional or utilitarian behavior, but also by their need for play; his ideas were of great interest to Northern European Situationists Constant and Asger Jorn, who were in close contact with Debord. On Huizinga and the Situationists, see Wollen, “The Situationist International,” p. 89.

47. Michel de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 37.

48. *Ibid.*, pp. 97–99.

article mourns the destruction of the rue Sauvage in the 13th arrondissement: “we lament the disappearance of a thoroughfare little known, and yet more *alive* than the Champs-Élysées and its lights.” Despite the qualification that “we were not interested in the charms of ruins,”⁴⁹ it is easy to agree with Benjamin Buchloh that, with the rise of technologies for controlling the domestic interior, the street “would increasingly qualify as an artistic attraction, in the manner that all evacuated locations (ruins) and obsolete technologies appearing to be exempt from or abandoned by the logic of the commodity and the instrumentality of engineered desire had so qualified.”⁵⁰ Such a view, however, fails to recognize that the city has *not* been fully evacuated. Simply because spectacle-culture has come to be administered primarily in the home, the street is not left therefore uncontaminated—quite the opposite. The “evacuated” city was not so much “exempt from . . . the logic of the commodity” as it was made into the site of mythic discourse, a discourse wholly contingent upon spectacle-culture. It appeared as a divided sign—division in the semiological sense of the emptying of the sign of its meaning, an operation constitutive of myth.⁵¹ In this operation the city as sign—which has “a fullness, a richness, a history” of its own—is captured by myth and is turned into “an empty, parasitical form,”⁵² a floating signifier able to be appropriated for various ideological ends.

But its meaning does not disappear; rather it is put at a distance, held in reserve. If the public realm is no longer “hypersignificant”⁵³ or “filled” as it was before the advent of spectacle-culture, it nonetheless must be acknowledged that its aesthetic role as “ruin” reproduces power. The “hyposignificant” city of myth is appropriated to various ends: its history is put back into play in harmless form as entertainment in, for example, tourist attractions where “public” space is commodified for very “private” consumption. (In his “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,” Debord cites tourism as that “popular drug as repugnant as sports or buying on credit.”)⁵⁴ The “museumization” of Paris is one obvious example of this process. As stated earlier, these representations have a very definite ideological character: “. . . the city is submitted to the norms of an abstract space

49. “On détruit la rue Sauvage,” *Pollatch* 7 (3 August 1954); reprinted in *Documents relatifs à la fondation de l'Internationale situationniste*: 176. This article was followed up in “La forme d'une ville change plus vite,” *Pollatch* 25 (26 January 1956); reprinted in *Documents relatifs*, pp. 234–35.

50. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “From Detail to Fragment: Décollage Affichiste,” *October* 56 (Spring 1991), p. 100.

51. See the essay “Myth Today” in Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Noonday Press, 1972), pp. 109–59. Note that the essays collected here were written between 1954 and 1956, precisely contemporaneous with the Situationists' theoretical articulation of the *dérive*.

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 117–18.

53. A term adopted from Françoise Choay; cf. her “Sémiologie et urbanisme,” *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 132 (1967).

54. Guy-Ernest Debord, “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,” trans. in *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 7.

which corresponds fairly precisely to the constitution of a political organization—the State—external to the daily activity of the citizens and to their attachment to the places they live in.”⁵⁵

The Situationists’ antipathy toward the “charms of ruins” was precisely an acknowledgment that these “norms of abstract space” that construct the public domain as evacuated were not “charming” at all. But these representations were not impervious to contestation; in fact, the coherence of the city’s signification was constantly threatening to break down. This was due to the fact that, despite the spectacle’s hegemonic power, the production of the city remained a social practice, one that could not be fully instrumentalized. Contrary to the projections of spectacular society, which posited the city as a natural, timeless form, it existed only as “an environment formed by the interaction and the integration of different practices.”⁵⁶ The *dérive* as a practice of the city reappropriated public space from the realm of myth, restoring it to its fullness, its richness, and its history. As an important tool in the Situationists’ struggle over who would speak through the city during the 1950s, the *dérive* was an attempt to change the meaning of the city through changing the way it was inhabited. And this struggle was conducted, not in the name of a new cognitive map, but in order to construct a more concrete collective space, a space whose potentialities remained open-ended for all participants in the “ludic-constructive” narrative of a new urban terrain.

55. Raymond Ledrut, “Speech and the Silence of the City,” in *The City and the Sign: An Introduction to Urban Semiotics*, eds. M. Gottdiener and Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 125.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 122.