

3

Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography

Guy Debord

1955. *Les Lèvres Nues*
Translated by Ken Knabb¹

Of all the affairs we participate in, with or without interest, the groping quest for a new way of life is the only thing that remains really exciting. Aesthetic and other disciplines have proved glaringly inadequate in this regard and merit the greatest indifference. We should therefore delineate some provisional terrains of observation, including the observation of certain processes of chance and predictability in the streets.

The word *psychogeography*, suggested by an illiterate Kabyle as a general term for the phenomena a few of us were investigating around the summer of 1953, is not too inappropriate. It is not inconsistent with the materialist perspective that sees life and thought as conditioned by objective nature. Geography, for example, deals with the determinant action of general natural forces, such as soil composition or climatic conditions, on the economic structures of a society, and thus on the corresponding conception that such a society can have of the world. Psychogeography sets for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals. The charmingly vague adjective *psychogeographical* can be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery.

It has long been said that the desert is monotheistic. Is it illogical or devoid of interest to observe that the district in Paris between Place de la Contrescarpe and Rue

¹ Reprinted with permission from Ken Knabb. Translation available in *Situationis International Anthology* (revised and expanded edition), Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006, and <http://www.-bopsecrets.org/SI/urbgeog.htm>.

de l'Arbalète conduces rather to atheism, to oblivion and to the disorientation of habitual reflexes?

Historical conditions determine what is considered "useful." Baron Haussmann's urban renewal of Paris under the Second Empire, for example, was motivated by the desire to open up broad thoroughfares enabling the rapid circulation of troops and the use of artillery against insurrections. But from any standpoint other than that of facilitating police control, Haussmann's Paris is a city built by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Present-day urbanism's main problem is ensuring the smooth circulation of a rapidly increasing number of motor vehicles. A future urbanism may well apply itself to no less utilitarian projects, but in the rather different context of psychogeographical possibilities.

The present abundance of private automobiles is one of the most astonishing successes of the constant propaganda by which capitalist production persuades the masses that car ownership is one of the privileges our society reserves for its most privileged members. But anarchical progress often ends up contradicting itself, as when we savor the spectacle of a police chief issuing a filmed appeal urging Parisian car owners to use public transportation.

We know with what blind fury so many unprivileged people are ready to defend their mediocre advantages. Such pathetic illusions of privilege are linked to a general idea of happiness prevalent among the bourgeoisie and maintained by a system of publicity that includes Malraux's aesthetics as well as Coca-Cola ads – an idea of happiness whose crisis must be provoked on every occasion by every means.

The first of these means is undoubtedly the systematic provocative dissemination of a host of proposals tending to turn the whole of life into an exciting game, combined with the constant depreciation of all current diversions (to the extent, of course, that these latter cannot be [diverted] to serve in constructions of more interesting ambiances). The greatest difficulty in such an undertaking is to convey through these apparently extravagant proposals a sufficient degree of *serious seduction*. To accomplish this we can envisage an adroit use of currently popular means of communication. But a disruptive sort of abstention, or demonstrations designed to radically frustrate the fans of these means of communication, can also promote at little expense an atmosphere of uneasiness extremely favorable for the introduction of a few new conceptions of pleasure.

The idea that the creation of a chosen emotional situation depends only on the thorough understanding and calculated application of a certain number of concrete techniques inspired this somewhat tongue-in-cheek "Psychogeographical Game of the Week," published in *Potlatch* #1:

In accordance with what you are seeking, choose a country, a large or small city, a busy or quiet street. Build a house. Furnish it. Use decorations and surroundings to the best advantage. Choose the season and the time of day. Bring together the most suitable people, with appropriate records and drinks. The lighting and the conversation should obviously be suited to the occasion, as should be the weather or your memories.

If there has been no error in your calculations, the result should prove satisfying.

We need to flood the market – even if for the moment merely the intellectual market – with a mass of desires whose fulfillment is not beyond the capacity of humanity’s present means of action on the material world, but only beyond the capacity of the old social organization. It is thus not without political interest to publicly counterpoise such desires to the elementary desires that are endlessly rehashed by the film industry and in psychological novels like those of that old hack Mauriac. (As Marx explained to poor Proudhon, “In a society based on *poverty*, the *poorest* products are inevitably consumed by the greatest number.”)²

The revolutionary transformation of the world, of all aspects of the world, will confirm all the dreams of abundance.

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 that is automatically followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the physical contour of the terrain); the appealing or repelling character of certain places – these phenomena all seem to be neglected. In any case they are never envisaged as depending on causes that can be uncovered by careful analysis and turned to account. People are quite aware that some neighborhoods are gloomy and others pleasant. But they generally simply assume that elegant streets cause a feeling of satisfaction and that poor streets are depressing, and let it go at that. In fact, the variety of possible combinations of ambiances, analogous to the blending of pure chemicals in an infinite number of mixtures, gives rise to feelings as differentiated and complex as any other form of spectacle can evoke. The slightest demystified investigation reveals that the qualitatively or quantitatively different influences of diverse urban decors cannot be determined solely on the basis of the historical period or architectural style, much less on the basis of housing conditions.

The research that we are thus led to undertake on the arrangement of the elements of the urban setting, in close relation with the sensations they provoke, entails

² Translator’s note: the quotation is from Marx’s *The Poverty of Philosophy* (chapter 2).

bold hypotheses that must be constantly corrected in the light of experience, by critique and self-critique.

Certain of De Chirico's paintings, which were clearly inspired by architecturally originated sensations, exert in turn an effect on their objective base to the point of transforming it: they tend themselves to become blueprints or models. Disquieting neighborhoods of arcades could one day carry on and fulfill the allure of these works.

I scarcely know of anything but those two harbors at dusk painted by Claude Lorrain³ – which are in the Louvre and which juxtapose extremely dissimilar urban ambiances – that can rival in beauty the Paris Metro maps. I am not, of course, talking about mere physical beauty – the new beauty can only be a beauty of situation – but simply about the particularly moving presentation, in both cases, of a *sum of possibilities*.

Along with various more difficult means of intervention, a renovated cartography seems appropriate for immediate utilization.

The production of psychogeographical maps, or even the introduction of alterations such as more or less arbitrarily transposing maps of two different regions, can contribute to clarifying certain wanderings that express not subordination to randomness but total *insubordination* to habitual influences (influences generally categorized as tourism, that popular drug as repugnant as sports or buying on credit).

A friend recently told me that he had just wandered through the Harz region of Germany while blindly following the directions of a map of London. This sort of game is obviously only a feeble beginning in comparison to the complete creation of architecture and urbanism that will someday be within the power of everyone. Meanwhile we can distinguish several stages of partial, less difficult projects, beginning with the mere displacement of elements of decoration from the locations where we are used to seeing them.

For example, in the preceding issue of this journal [*Les Lèvres Nues*] Marcel Mariën proposed that when global resources have ceased to be squandered on the irrational enterprises that are imposed on us today, all the equestrian statues of all the cities of the world be assembled in a single desert. This would offer to the passersby – the future belongs to them – the spectacle of an artificial cavalry charge which could even be dedicated to the memory of the greatest massacres of history, from Tamerlane to Ridgway. It would also respond to one of the main demands of the present generation: educative value.

³ Translator's note: two such paintings (Lorrain painted several of the same type) are included in Debord's film *The Society of the Spectacle*.

In fact, nothing really new can be expected until the masses in action awaken to the conditions that are imposed on them in all domains of life, and to the practical means of changing them.

“The imaginary is that which tends to become real,” wrote an author whose name, on account of his notorious intellectual degradation, I have since forgotten.⁴ The involuntary restrictiveness of such a statement could serve as a touchstone exposing various farcical literary revolutions: that which tends to remain unreal is empty babble.

Life, for which we are responsible, presents powerful motives for discouragement and innumerable more or less vulgar diversions and compensations. A year doesn't go by when people we loved haven't succumbed, for lack of having clearly grasped the present possibilities, to some glaring capitulation. But the enemy camp objectively condemns people to imbecility and already numbers millions of imbeciles; the addition of a few more makes no difference.

The primary moral deficiency remains indulgence, in all its forms.

⁴ Translator's note: the quotation is from André Breton's *Le Revolver à cheveux blancs*.