

Affective Powerplay

Sher Doruff, Waag Society
August 2006

Strange attractors.

Take an urban hike. Drift awhile. Follow the scent of freshly baked bread. Or cross a narrow street to avoid a trail of dog shit. Stop to read a café menu. Turn right to scan a shop window. Turn left and tag a kiosk ad. Jump a fence. Search for a surveillance camera. Wave. Reflect on this encounter.

The *psychogeographic*¹ [1] experience of drifting through an urban landscape without purpose, guided by the shifting rhythms of random and selective attraction is a well-known subversive aesthetic initiated by several artist/activist groups in France, Belgium and The Netherlands in the 1950's. They merged for a short time to become the Situationist International (SI) in 1957. Their drifting practice was called a *dérive*² [2] and it has subsequently become a common referent in contemporary locative media projects that mix performance strategies with new media technologies in predominantly urban settings. The connotations of an urban *dérive* were then, political and affective, alluding to both the poverty *and* potential of "everyday life." The city, as a field of dynamically changing *situations*, hosts both the pseudoworld of the spectacle explored by Guy Debord and the potential utopian playground of Constant Nieuwenhuys. In the context of situated creative processes, this is fertile ground presently tilled by locative media projects (first life, physical) on one hand and multi-player games on the other (Second Life, virtual³). However, the political and affective cornerstones of urban "situations" advanced by Debord, accelerated some 50 plus years, are now folded into a complex and confounding late capitalism.

In Debord's societal paradigm - the *spectacle* rules. It is the all-consuming, self-generating expression of capitalist production subsuming itself through its own recursive representations of reality. In the *society of the spectacle*, the potential of social relation is overpowered and overtly mediated by a gloss of imagery. Ultimately, the spectacle feeds on itself and consumes its antidote, consumes all protest, all critique to adapt and thrive. The spectacle is more than a metaphor for a dominant capitalism, it is the *becoming* of a capitalist economy. For Debord, the situationist aesthetic cocktail of *politics* and *play* took a turn into a dark passage. In Constant's decidedly more utopian cartography,

the city exerts a potential to become the New Babylon of the Homo Ludens⁴ (man as species of players), a playground of dynamic situations, a network of intensive, changing spaces. Constant's Homo Ludens city life constituted an adventurous exploration and expansion of urban habitats, a freewheeling *unitary urbanism*, continually transformed and playfully recreated. In this Situationist city, Homo Ludens/New Babylonians:

[...] wander through the sectors of New Babylon seeking new experiences, as yet unknown ambiances. Without the passivity of tourists, but fully aware of the power they have to act upon the world, to transform it, recreate it. They dispose of a whole arsenal of technical implements for doing this, thanks to which they can make the desired changes without delay. [3]

Playful (ludic) expression simply trumps the representational content of the spectacle. This is the *détournement*, a diversionary appropriation of one aesthetic for another more playful and subversive one.



Figure 1: Constant's map of Amsterdam with New Babylonian sectors superimposed over areas of the city that respect the historic centre while drifting out to peripheral areas. Circa 1963. [4] (Sadler, 1998)

On Shifting Societal Paradigms

The cold war era of the Situationists ushered in a slow paradigm shift in the politics of power relations. The structural tendencies of 18th/19th century *disciplinary* rule advanced by Foucault were exaggerated by east/west polarizations and yet, at the same time, were entering a state of slow dissolution. The top-down, hierarchical institutional enclosures endemic to these *societies of discipline* (governments, prisons, schools, museums, hospitals) began to seep outside their containments, spreading and disseminating their functions in more fluid ways. Capital begins to flow unencumbered. The negative feedback of homeostasis, that which regulates a disciplined society like a thermometer controls the temperature in a room begins to “play” with the status quo, begins to *play* with the chaos of positive feedback, a spinning out-of-control. Equilibrium wavers. Indeterminate potentialities confuse axiomatic certainties. Deleuze saw this shifting imbalance as a turn towards *societies of control*.

In a *society of discipline*, each institution serves as an independent variable through which a player discontinuously passes in life, leapfrogging from school to hospital to church, each time starting from zero, from a relatively blank slate. Roles and realities separate into discreet life compartments. In a *society of control*, by contrast, change is continuous, borders are permeable, realities contiguous and power is affective. For Deleuze, the institutional enclosures of the discipline society “[...] are molds, distinct castings, but controls are a modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point.” [4]

Debord’s *society of the spectacle* prefaces the Deleuzian control society and sits in a transitional middle between the power models of discipline and control, not yet self-organizing but nonetheless all-encompassing. The spectacle, for Debord is:

[...] that oldest of all social specializations, the specialization of power. The spectacle plays the specialized role of speaking in the name of all the other activities. It is hierarchical society’s ambassador to itself, delivering its official messages at a court where no one else is allowed to speak. The most modern aspect of the spectacle is thus also the most archaic. [5]

Debord convolved discipline and control. Yet if indeed power relations are now shifting in a paradigmatic swivel from top-down to bottom-up, passing from discipline to control through the spectacle, how might we understand current tendencies? Control no longer

emanates from a dominant outside power but *emerges* and is self-varying. It modulates an affective in-between; modulates the felt sensation of consumption and production; modulates the relation itself. As a porous capitalism migrates from closure to openness it nonetheless folds the “old” disciplinary structures into its complexity in new ways. Institutions don’t disappear, they mobilize and globalize even as power trickles down to the most local unit (individual, node).

Controls then, are the protocols and modulators of a society that finds spontaneity and playfulness advantageous. That’s a tantalizing concept: *control* as a player-subject in the creation of the new. But therein lies the truly confounding bit. Late capitalism of the control society thrives on the production of variety, rewards improvisation and diverts affect towards its own regeneration. It redistributes affect for profit, exploits it. Massumi: “Capitalism starts intensifying or diversifying affect, but only in order to extract surplus-value” [6]. On this scale, there is seemingly no way to wander out of the regurgitating system of the monster. The old-style leftist politics of the SI have been consumed, appropriated and re-appropriated, détourned, by neo-cons in emperor’s clothes.

An Aesthetic of Play and the Détournement

The Situationists understood the paradox of the subsumption of difference. They conceived a double-sided aesthetic event in the *détournement*. On one side: the devalued meaning of an appropriated cultural object or concept. On the other: the re-organization of that devalued material to create a new aesthetic genre, to re-appropriate something “aesthetic” to create something more beautiful.

Détournement is thus first of all a negation of the value of the previous organization of expression. It arises and grows increasingly stronger in the historical period of the decomposition of artistic expression. But at the same time, the attempts to reuse the “detournable bloc” as material for other ensembles express the search for a vaster construction, a new genre of creation at a higher level. [7]

Ultimately, the *dérive* itself, as a devalued genre, supports its own usurpation in a *détournement*. The question is - how can a drift be diverted by something “more beautiful” than itself? Attain a higher level of creation? It has certainly been re-appropriated.

Contemporary “*dérivative*” praxis in locative media and gaming cultures is evidence of psychogeography reimagined as the exponential *spectacle*. Emerging aesthetics in a

control society play in an urban sandbox with new kinds of toys: RFID's, GPS, mobile phones and online, multi-player ecologies. Art and technology collaborations must necessarily "exploit" hand-me-down military technologies, everything from sensors to the Internet itself, to perpetuate zones of playfulness. Ethically, it's a tricky business. Those hand-me-downs do not come duty free. There's no avoiding collusion with the ubiquitous spectacle and precious little wiggle room for diverting anything from the powerful current of capital flow. Though many art-techno machinations are tamed by pay-to-play and/or play-if-it-pays conditioning there are other vectors that vibrate in a far-from-equilibrium spin towards "out-of-control". The double-sidedness is reminiscent of the Situationist coin standing on end and drifting merrily along.

The Psycho to Cybergeography diversion

Enter Second Life. Drift awhile. Fly-over a Nubian crater. Take a dip in a marbelized aquatic inlet. Follow the trail of a tanned muscleman. Or chat up dog-eared femme fatale. Stop to purchase a bullet-proof vest. Turn right to buy a dvd. Turn left to play poker. Leapfrog a video billboard. Find ten surveillers and five flaneurs. Wave. Request the machinima playback. Reflect on this encounter. Strange attractors.

Jumping from the physical reality of city strolls to the virtual yet very real encounters in digital gaming elicits further consideration. Analogue and digital games and improvisatory genres are defined by their control mechanisms, by their rule sets. Today, an expansive MMORPG (Massively-Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) culture moves the nomadic recreation of lived space from the actual streets of an historic urban centre such as Amsterdam (the city most explored on dérives of the 50's and 60's) to the virtual, 3D-rendered landscapes of zero-sum gamers (a remnant of disciplinary society's start from scratch enclosures) and role players in games such as *Second Life* that offer persistent, socially reverberant environments.

The boundaries and obstacles encountered in a first life real world of physical drifting (walls, fences, traffic, trees, mean men, dog turds) both inhibit and excite psycho-geographic orientation. The challenge to forge new attractor trails is measured by hazards and uncertainties. In cyberdérives, boundaries are often mutable concepts. With the proper tools and/or skills the "matter" of their code can be inventively hacked just as a real wall can be imaginatively scaled. Game objects are often created and recreated, territorialized, reterritorialized and deterritorialized in digital domains that support facile

fly-overs and temporary termination (zero-sum death by laser). This virtual mobility/immortality feature of the cybergeographical encounter renders a new *situation* for the *dérive*. Though there's ample evidence for example, that sexual attraction and love can flourish in these domains, fear is more difficult to unpack. As fear of physical danger is absent, emotional vulnerability is ever-present. Perhaps even exaggerated and heightened. How might affect impact physical orientation and proprioception in virtual worlds? Or, how might proprioception impact affect?



Figure 2: Screen capture of an avatar (dis)orienting in *Second Life*

Finding a Sense of There There

Orientation in a digital game world of contemporary Homo Ludens is filtered through an avatar identity and a controlling device (keyboard, mouse, joystick, sensors, etc). Visual and aural modalities rendered in the virtual world *and* outside it, in the ambience of the real world location, aid in (dis)orienting. So do the tactile sensations of the hardware interface(s). Second Life and first life are never clearly distinguishable and blur into each other. Proprioceptive⁵ sensing is integral to the experience. In navigating a virtual world it is more elusive and more essential. Proprioceptive relations in cybergeographies are powered by affective modulations, sensations of sensations, much as they are in real world activity. These are the same affective modulations that are implicated as power generators in control societies. As in the physical world, a map-like cartographic rendering does not provide enough sense data to create a feeling of “place”. That is accom-

plished with a synaesthetic mix of modalities in which proprioception is integral. “At the same time as proprioception folds tactility in, it draws out the subjects reactions to the qualities of the objects it perceives through all five senses, bringing them into the motor realm of externalizable response.” [8]

A sense of place moves through an incorporeal space of the body in both psycho and cybergeographies. Affective intensities and their modulations loop through, like a möbius strip, the non-Euclidean, non-representational topologies of our felt experience, of affective intensities, and their Euclidean actualizations, our representational experience of the world. A seated player-body behind a computer screen is as much enveloped in multidimensional movements of thought and matter as an urban drifter. Her sensation of absolute and relative position, simultaneous in the game and in the chair, is felt thought – affect. It’s plausible that cyberdérives excite a heightened sensation of “being there” by producing a hyper-resonant “becoming here”.

The psychogeographical détourned to the cybergeographical may be seen as a clear extension of the urban encounter in all the unpredictability of its affective intensity. Attractors are distributable. Though a Second Life dérive may indeed be derivative of its first life ancestor, a potential affective intensity is palpable in both realms. Synaesthetic qualities are folded into proprioceptive sensing in a manner that suggests an amplification of the experience of encounter in the rendered world. Contextualized in an SI model, these experiences could be construed as a true détournement that parodies and jumps to an evolved aesthetic field. But it may not be that simple.

I See You. I See You Too

The very existence of heavily populated cybergeographies as exploratory realms evokes the ubiquitous expanse of the society of control and the reach of affective modulations. As disciplinary elements are still viable forces in the new paradigm, it’s of interest to find connective threads. Just as *play* is a common thread in both paradigms, *surveillance*, from the flaneur to the panopticon, is another. Foucault’s disciplinary description of the panopticon in prison systems [9] correlates with the “always on panopticon” of late capitalism’s ubiquitous networks [10]. Surveillance, through cameras and code, spreads control virally while generating a healthy surplus-value in a service economy. The ideological surge in developing creative, playful networks of the 90’s and early 00’s has been absorbed by the inevitable commodification of that momentum; of that surplus-value.

The silicon panopticon of data surveillance by state, corporate and criminal monitors makes flying beneath the radar, RFID, biometric scanner and “packet sniffer” increasingly unlikely. Sharing data, playing together, leaves digital tracks. Keystrokes, once the fundamental mechanism of communicative distribution, are routinely screened. Daily interaction on micro and macro scales has become incorporated. Affect Inc. The cooperative co-opted. Locative media arts uncomfortably participates in the congestion of data accrual that tracks, archives and re-presents movements, social encounters and consumer preferences in the urban “sandbox”. Nearly every facet of private and professional life is available for scrutiny in vast databases overseen by the vestiges of disciplinary regimes. They are readily accessible to entrepreneurs of all stripes.

Surveillance technologies are a fractional niche within the broad domain of digital representation. Yet an exponentially flourishing network of security cameras and GPS navigators vie with personal and public webcam enthusiasts in capturing the Cartesian coordinate positions of things (humans, animals, autos, buildings) and their relations to the movement around them. Once again, and ambiguously, *there becomes here*. The overwhelming influx of images and representations in urban life (first life) that the Situationists railed against fifty years ago and attempted to modestly subvert through *dérives* and *détournement* have re-emerged in technologies of mobility and affect: MMORPG's, GPS, SMS, MMS, webcams, security cameras, mobile phones, PDA's, wearable RFID's, chat sessions, et al. The visualization and re-presentation of positional and affective data explored by locative performance practices and multi-user games, maps a detoured *dérive* on an arguably “higher level”, one sensitive to the playful dead-seriousness of a technologically augmented nomadic stage. Yet rather than an effusion of detoured indifference to the original *dérive*, their reification fifty years on appears to naïvely echo the original. The renewed spectacle with expensive toys is sighted in the viewfinder crosshairs of a well-dispersed control society. As the SI caustically exclaimed in 1959 when defining the *détournement*:

This combination of parody and seriousness reflects the contradictions of an era in which we find ourselves confronted with both the urgent necessity and the near impossibility of initiating and carrying out a totally innovative collective action — an era in which the most serious ventures are masked in the ambiguous interplay between art and its necessary negation, and in which the essential voyages of discovery have been undertaken by such astonishingly incapable people. [8]

Enter a Starbucks. Buy a long, skinny, mocha latte. Purchase your surfing time from an Internet provider. Run a virus check. Read your email. Empty your spam folder. Drift awhile. Boot up Second Life to meet a distant friend in a Bombay style cinema. Time's up. Feed the meter. Reflect on this encounter.

References

- [1] Debord, Guy-Ernest, 1955. "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography", Les Lèvres Nues #6 <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/4/en/display/2>
- [2] Debord, Guy-Ernest, 1958. "Theory of the Dérive", Internationale Situationiste #2 <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/all/en/display/314>
- [3] Nieuwenhuys, Constant, 1974. "New Babylon", The Hague, Haags Gemeetenmuseum
- [4] Deleuze, Gilles, 1990. "Society of Control", published online: <http://www.nadir.org/nadir/archiv/netzkritik/societyofcontrol.html>
- [5] Debord, Guy-Ernest, 1967. *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb, <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord/>
- [6] Massumi, Brian, 2002. *Parables for the Virtual*, Duke University Press
- [7] SI 1959. "Détournement as Negation and Prelude", <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/315>
- [8] Massumi, Brian, 2003. "Navigating Movement: An Interview with Brian Massumi", <http://www.21cmagazine.com/issue2/massumi.html>
- [9] Foucault, Michel, 1977. *Discipline and Punish. Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan, London, Pantheon
- [10] Rheingold, Howard, 2002. *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*, Perseus Books Group

Endnotes

¹ "Psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals." [1]

² "One of the basic situationist practices is the dérive [literally: "drifting"], a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. Dérives involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll. In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there." [2]

³ In this paper “virtual” will be understood in its media context of digital simulation rather than its philosophical context of abstract yet real.

⁴ From the Dutch sociologist and theorist Johan Huizinga’s influential *Homo Ludens* first published in 1938.

⁵ “Proprioception folds tactility into the body, enveloping the skin’s contact with the world in a dimension of medium depth: between epidermis and viscera. The muscles and ligaments register as conditions of movement what the skin internalizes as qualities [...] Proprioception translates the exertions and ease of the body’s encounters with objects into muscular memory of relationality.” [9]