

Life is Serious; **ART SERENE**

Biography

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DREAMSCAPES AND OTHERWORLDS: SURREALISTIC CITY STAGING

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Abstract

For the Surrealists, the city was an extensive playground. Their idea was to fully immerse themselves in the dynamics of the urban landscape and extract its hidden potential in order to rebel against what they perceived as an oppressive and monotonous everyday life. Following the above, this paper will focus on surrealist city practices, the most clearly embodied in André Breton's seminal work 'Nadja', but will also refer to the works of other theorists such as Ivan Chtcheglov (Gilles Ivain) and the conducted actions of other practices such as the Situationist one headed by Guy Debord, with the aim of considering how applicable and necessary their ideas are today. Both of those listed continued in the footsteps of the Surrealists in the idea of carrying out journeys without a specific goal or plan through the urban landscape, deviating from established, everyday patterns with the idea of encouraging spontaneous situations and events in space.

Keywords: city, surrealism, dérive, psychogeography, maps

1. INTRODUCTION

The aimless stroll through the city by which is meant moving from one public place to another, on foot, in one's own pace, carried out without hurry or hastiness, for no particular reason or the specific end goal, is a modern urban phenomenon. It has its roots in European Romanticism, the late 18th century artistic and intellectual movement, with the strollers changing the classic Romanticism scenery – instead of being in the nature, they reside in the modern city. Many prominent authors, since the 19th century, have remained open to the experiential potential of wandering in the urban landscape, thus awarding a new quality, meaning and value to the public spaces, as well as to the activity itself, which is commonly taken for granted or underestimated. City walks are understood as synonymous for reflection, as an opportunity for gaining intellectual insights and aesthetic impressions, while exposure to a multitude of visual, sound and olfactory sensations is guaranteed to trigger imagination, if only attention is being paid.

Among those who believed that “the path to authentic being leads through the automatism of steps, through aimless walks through the streets and neighbourhoods of Paris, that is, through an activity that is not guided by any practical goal” (Novaković, 2018, p. 11), was also André Breton, the father of surrealism. His preoccupation with the urban landscape is almost excavational and deeply subjective in its nature, for “the outside world, Parisian streets, neighbourhoods, squares, monuments, become an image of his inner space, his imaginary world, a projection of his obsessions” (Novaković, 2018, pp. 11-12). For Breton, city spaces were both personal archaeological sites, containing a lot, and archaeological tools, bringing to the surface accumulated memories, desires and aspirations.

2. “... THERE IS ALSO ANOTHER MOVING WORLD, SPECIAL, VISIONARY, IRRATIONAL, WHICH ONLY SEEMINGLY COINCIDES WITH THE FIRST ONE...” (Musil, 2010, p. 405)

Surrealists led by André Breton were in never-ending quest for all things hidden trusting that what is unapparent is far more potent and has more content than what is evident, and so they sought to provide insights into the realms of mystery, of the unconsciousness, of the ambiguity in the world around them. Interested in all things dreamlike or illogical to be the final outcome, that is, the main quality of their work, members of the movement applied and developed numerous techniques in order to step out of the field of logic reasoning, and it can be noted that they were, among other things, influenced by the theories and research methods of psychoanalysis. Their main tendency was “to liberate the imagination... and to explore the realm of desires”, whereby they relied on different procedures such as “hypnosis, recital of dreams, investigations into the methods of esoteric and magical arts, the recording of chance encounters, the staging of unusual events, and the collecting of found objects” (Livesey, 1994, p. 112).

In the manner of the above mentioned, André Breton conceived probably the most significant surrealist novel and one of the most important works of French surrealism in general, “Nadja” (1928), a first-person narrative book, whose essence and content are based on his rather purposeless walks, “guided” by a string of coincidences, through the city of Paris. Breton saw the French capital as one of the few places in the world “where something worthwhile can happen... [where] the rhythm of life is not the same as elsewhere, where certain beings still nourish a spirit of supreme adventure” (Breton, 1977, p. 28). In “Nadja” (Fig. 1.), references introduced in the literary text are, in significant part, supported by visual documentation throughout the book: those are the photographs of real places, objects and people which Breton encounters on his urban adventures. These make an essential part of the novel as he includes them “in order to discover in that reality what is unusual and incredible and which in some way refutes it”, and with that he actually “twists the traditional type of novel that takes elements from reality to transform them and build fiction following the laws of logic and the law of probability, so that the reader accepts it as reality” (Novaković, 2018, pp. 9-10). For Breton, “the city becomes analogous to a book, a repository into which events are written” (Livesey, 1994, p. 110), as he is in the constant pursuit for the city's hidden layers, for its surrealistic potential which is “often discovered in the banal, in trivial and ephemeral things such as billboards and shop signs, and in more enduring objects such as statues and public places” (Livesey, 1994, p. 113).

The philosopher Walter Benjamin, a contemporary of Andre Breton, influenced by the work of the surrealists, and an author whose intellectual output is largely based on the French capital, similarly observed that “sign-

boards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer...”, stressing that Paris taught him “this art of straying” (Benjamin, 1986, p. 9). In the essay “Paris, Capital of the 19th Century” (1935) by using the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin introduced the character of the *flâneur* into the scientific discourse. For Baudelaire and his literary contemporaries, the *flâneur* represented a passionate observer who, seemingly aimlessly, wanders the streets of 19th century Paris, which were for him a source of constant artistic inspiration. Walter Benjamin considers the *flâneur* as the prototype of a modern man with excess free time, who is at the same time an inseparable part of the cityscape and its distant observer, an urban explorer, who “seeks refuge in the crowd... the crowd is the veil through which the familiar city is transformed for the *flâneur* into phantasmagoria” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 21).

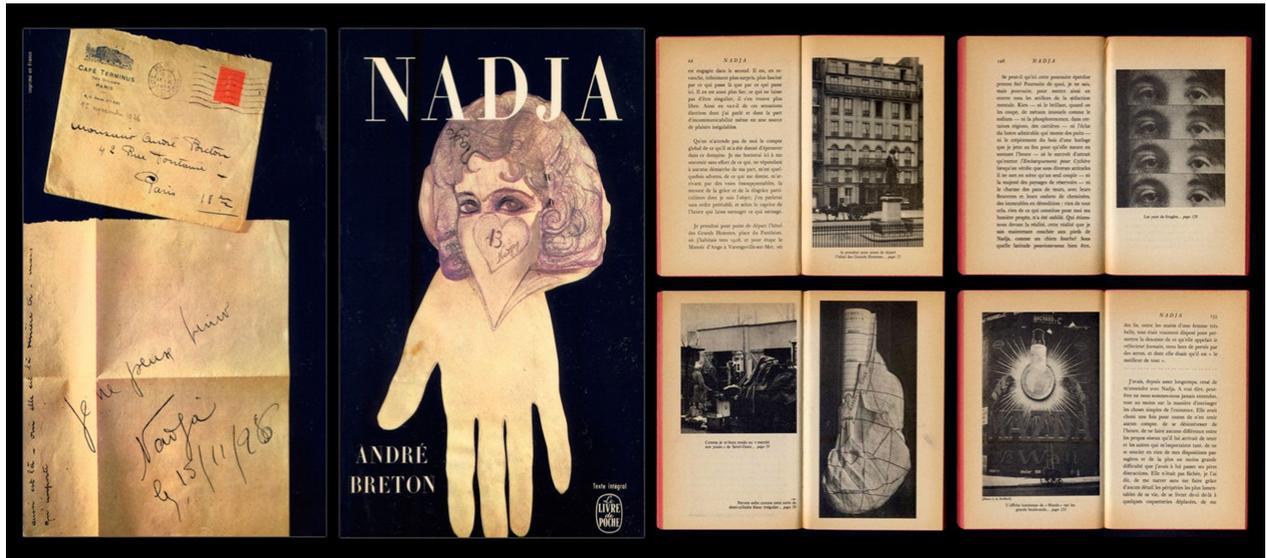


Fig. 1. “Nadja”

It is also worth mentioning that the following quote from “Nadja”: “Meanwhile, you can be sure of meeting me in Paris, of not spending more than three days without seeing me pass, toward the end of the afternoon, along the Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle between the Matin printing office and the Boulevard de Strasbourg. I don’t know why it should be precisely here that my feet take me, here that I almost invariably go without specific purpose, without anything to induce me but this obscure cure: namely that it (?) will happen here. I cannot see, as I hurry along, what could constitute for me, even without my knowing it, a magnetic pole in either space or time” (Breton, 1997, p. 32), reminds of a statement by Jean-Luc Godard, made few decades later, when the director pointed out that the city itself became his inspiration for the film: “Very often, I start to have an idea about a film by looking at a location... in “Breathless” (1960) my characters would have seen the Champs Elysées sixty times a day, so of course it had to be shown” (Godard, 2003, p. 155). The French New Wave is strongly linked to Paris, and most of its prominent representatives had a particularly emotional relationship with the city. They shot films in the locations they knew best, in the places where they worked and lived, and cafes, streets and parks that had not been shown before, began to appear on the movie screen. The script was not strictly determined in advance, so chance and fleeting encounters in the cityscape often influenced the course of filming and the film’s narrative. Like their predecessors discussed above, the French New Wave filmmakers understood the city as place “defined not only by its physical structures but also and increasingly by lines of movement and connection, by the currents of energy and flows of information, goods, and bodies... with the protagonists set loose in an uncontrollable mass of other bodies, buildings, shops, automobiles, street signs, and movie marquees, the stuff that together constitutes the *mise-en-scène* of Paris” (Tweedy, 2013, p. 87).

3. “NOT TO FIND ONE’S WAY IN A CITY MAY WELL BE UNINTERESTING AND BANAL. IT REQUIRES IGNORANCE – NOTHING MORE. BUT TO LOSE ONESELF IN A CITY... THAT CALLS FOR QUITE A DIFFERENT SCHOOLING.”

(Benjamin, 1986, p. 8)

The idea of gaining life experience by leaving it to the course of chance was also the subject of discussion by the founding member of the Situationist International Guy Debord, in the sense that the French philosopher considered how the activity of wandering through the city streets, which involves deviating from established, everyday patterns, stimulate spontaneous events in urban space and influence the behaviour of participants, thereby layering their everyday life. In 1956, Debord defined the strategy for exploring cities called *dérive*, during the implementation of which, over a certain period of time, “one or more persons... 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” (Debord, 2006, p. 76). The inventive strategy of *dérive* is part of Guy Debord’s broader study of psychogeography, which deals with the study of “precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals” (Debord, 2006, p. 20).

The key term, continuous drifting, that is, continuous *dérive*, Debord adopted from Gilles Ivain (Ivan Chtcheglov), a French political theorist, activist and poet, who first mentioned it in his text “Formulary for a New Urbanism” (1953), where he also stated the following: “We are bored in the city, we really have to strain to still discover mysteries on the sidewalk billboards, the latest state of humour and poetry...” (Ivain, 2006, p. 12). Ivain believed that the more a place is dedicated to free play, the more it influences human behaviour and the stronger its appeal grows, and he thought that the answer to the question of how to achieve this “must be sought in the magical locales of fairy tales and surrealist writings: castles, endless walls, little forgotten bars, mammoth caverns, casino mirrors...” (Ivain, 2006, p. 13). One of his solutions to avoid boredom in the city included dividing the city districts of Paris into moods that “could correspond to the whole spectrum of diverse feelings that one encounters by *chance* in everyday life” (Ivain, 2006, p. 18) while stressing out that his need for creation “has always been intimately associated with the need to play with architecture, time and space” (Ivain, 2006, p. 16).

Guy Debord and the Situationists drew inspiration from surrealistic ideas, although they remained somewhat sceptical of the Surrealist focus on chance and coincidence, believing that one must proactively participate in life by influencing one’s circumstances on a daily basis, rather than just reacting to them. They emphasized that in the city, the situational frameworks within which people’s lives unfold are rigid and impermeable, pre-created in advance by architects, urban planners and big business, which influences how urban life is shaped and directed, and they sought to disrupt and transform this pre-created framework as much as possible in their daily activities. For the purpose of the above, and as a product of intuitive wandering, i.e. *dérive*, situationist counter-maps were created, the most famous of which is certainly the “The Naked City” (Fig. 2), authored by Guy Debord and the Danish artist Asger Jorn, which represented a summary of Debord’s numerous reflections and actions. This counter-map consists of nineteen drawings of parts of the city of Paris, which, according to the authors, were still beyond the destructive reach of the establishment and capitalism, and which were taken from a standard tourist map, printed in black ink and connected by red arrows that ignore what could be called a “logical” way of moving around the city. With this, Debord and Jorn wanted to reclaim Paris in a certain way, to take control of their (urban) lives as city dwellers, to take the scenic route, departing from the paths and directions dictated by capitalism as the dominant ideology.

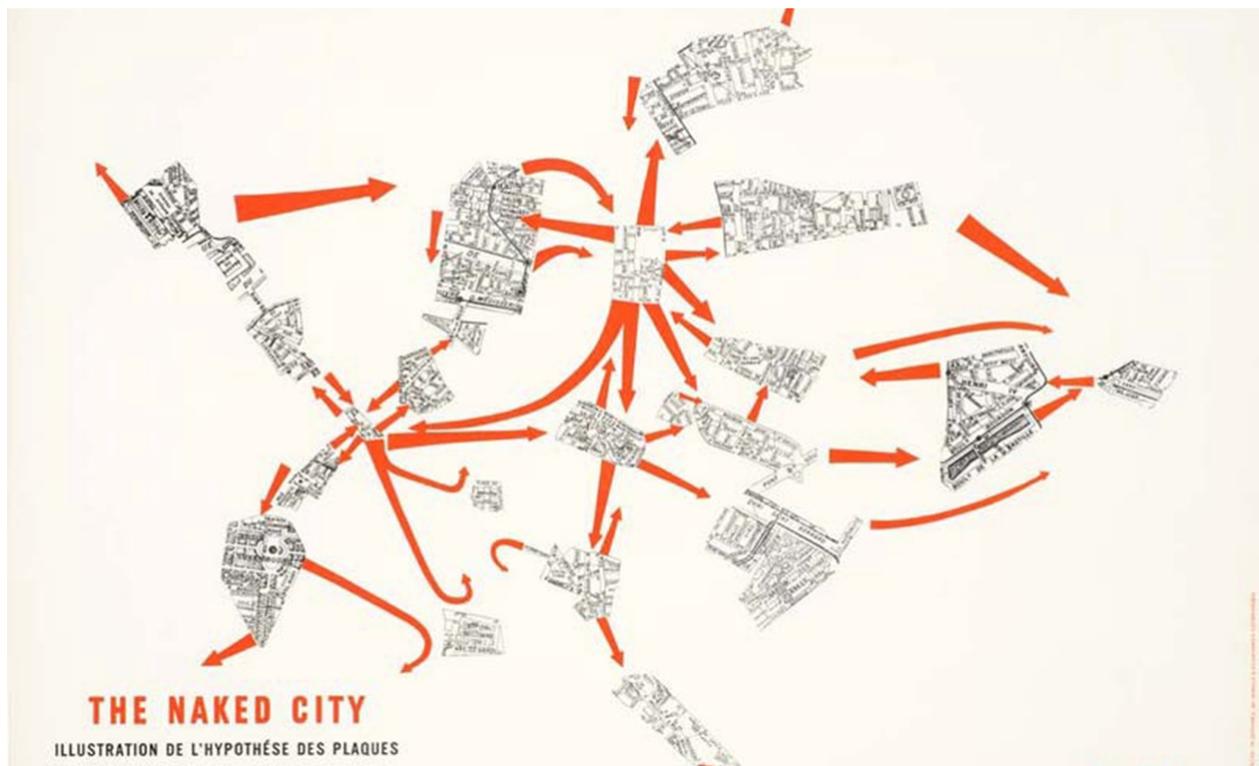


Fig. 2. "The Naked City"

4. TAKING THE SCENIC ROUTE

"There were moments when the ordinary world was transformed into something different, something full of potential and mystery... and everything outside seems better, like the colours are brighter or the world looks like a different place and I wanted to keep feeling that way..." –these were some of the reflections shared by participants of the highly successful alternate reality game *The Jejune Institute*, created by the artist collective "Nonchalance", which ran in San Francisco from 2008 to 2011 and drew over 10,000 players who, lured by strange flyers around the city, began their experience by "entering" the game's fictional headquarters inside a downtown office building. Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) are games that take place in real urban settings, where "players seek to uncover a hidden narrative through clues, events, and puzzles orchestrated by a team of *puppetmasters* who are responsible for the game design and how the otherwise secret game is executed" (Kristiansen, 2014, p. 242). Deeply connected to Surrealist and Situationist practices both in philosophy and in approach, ARGs seek to cultivate a heightened sense of presence and awareness within the urban environment, and not merely through observation, but by encouraging active participation with the space, with the goal of transforming and challenging the way inhabitants perceive and experience the city. Alternate Reality Games share a core belief with Surrealist and Situationist practices: that beneath the everyday city lies a hidden world, accessible through play or altered perception. They reimagine urban space not as a purely functional environment, but as a rich landscape of meaning and narrative – encouraging exploration guided by emotion and curiosity, and challenging conventional ways of experiencing public space by revealing it as layered, symbolic, and open to reinterpretation. Alternate Reality Games can profoundly affect city dwellers by advocating for a revolution in everyday life, much like the Surrealists and Situationists once did. They invite a new way of engaging with the urban environment – not merely as a space for survival, but as a realm for play, creativity, and ultimately, authentic living.

5. CONCLUSION

The discussed methods of thinkers and creatives, together with their unconventional urban practices, can indicate how routine by which life unfolds can be disrupted by paying attention to complexities and

contradictions that living in the city implies, and at the same time how this can be utilized in the field of contemporary urbanism. They advocated the idea of immersive approach to everyday, while believing that creativity and playfulness ought to be sought constantly as they are the only worthwhile way to participate in life. Along these lines, the work of André Breton “describe a shift into another reality – one that emerges from everyday life of the city either by chance or by searching carefully for the entry points”, it is a quest for “the city of dreams – a necessary and hidden other... that sustains and is sustained by the verifiable city of appearances” (Livesey, 1994, p. 114).

On the other hand, Guy Debord, like several of his fellow contemporaries, called for a revolution of everyday life, insisting on “the revolutionary transformation of the world, of the all aspect of the world” (Debord, 2006, p. 22) and calling for an approach to the urban environment that entails putting something more than mere survival skills and optimal strategies in the foreground. After all, the idea behind situationists counter-maps was to represent discrepancies, intricacies and heterogeneities of the city and not objective, exact or dispassionate disposition and to point out, as Roland Barthes puts it, that “scientific geography and in particular modern cartography can be considered as a kind of obliteration, of censorship that objectivity has imposed on signification” (Barthes, 1986, p. 89). Debord devoted himself to creating counter-maps such as “The Naked City” because he considered that “along with various more difficult means of intervention, a renovated cartography seems appropriate for immediate utilization” (Debord, 2006, p. 23).

Today, perhaps more than ever, complex spatial conditions require urban practitioners to have a pluralistic perspective that is not pre-established and one-sided. Being on foot in the city enables the appropriation of the city fragments which consequently allows to connect them in a meaningful whole, or in the other words, walking, as a special research method, permit to “build up a coherent world out of the fragmentary appearances of a city that, taken in isolated grouping, would be merely kaleidoscopic” (Husserl, 1981, pp. 248-249). If one adopts Frederic Jameson point of view that it became “clear that there can be no true maps”, while “at the same time it also becomes clear that there can be scientific progress, or better still, a dialectical advance, in the various historical moments of mapmaking” (Jameson, 1997, p. 51), one can argue for the importance of walking as a research method, by which continuity of research is achieved relatively easily, with the necessary and continuous mapping implied. In this way, everchanging urban conditions are continuously being “scanned, charted and mapped, thus investigating the spatial practices that have been woven into the fabric of the city” with the intention “not to explore singularities (infrastructure, post-conflict conditions, pollution, what have you), but to investigate the overlapping or the superimposition of such different spatial regimes” (Staničić, 2023, p. 203).

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