

Situationist Roaming Online

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ABSTRACT: Situationism has recently been equated with the online context, especially in form of information access as a kind of online 'dérive'. This equation is not necessarily an obvious one and thus will be questioned in the paper by referring to the original concept(s) in Situationism. The concentration is on an outline of the concept of the dérive and its potential relationship to online information access. The suggestion is that it is only a useful comparison if one wants to put a particular emphasis on the disruption of usual information access patterns.

KEYWORDS: Situationism, dérive, movement & information access online

INTRODUCTION

Situationism, the radical (European) art movement that originally span from 1957 to 1972, has recently received renewed attention not only *in*, but also *in relation to* the online context. Apart from the obvious collection of websites on the subject, certain aspects of it, like the *dérive*, have been used as a metaphor for online movement and perception.

Obviously, surfing the web can be an example of the Debordian derive, in which one abstracts oneself from the cares of everyday life and seeks adventure, novelty, and the unexpected on the Internet. ... one drifts though [sic] the hypertexts of cyberworld, clicking from one destination and spectacle to another, sometimes merely observing and sometimes participating in more interactive endeavor. [2]

This kind of linkage has implications for the understanding of what the online sphere represents, how information is accessed online and how the user relates to the information presented. This link is explored here through reference to the original concept and to the context in which it was developed. How this relates (or does not relate) to online information shall be explored in the latter part of the paper.

SITUATIONISM

The term Situationism refers back to a group of 20th century conceptual artists called the 'Situationist International' or S.I. This group was based around the

philosopher and artist Guy Debord and included some other contemporary thinkers and artists. It was founded in 1957 in Northern Italy. The founders came primarily from two other artists' groups, the 'Lettrist International' and the 'Imagist Bauhaus'. A journal and regular conferences followed in the years after the foundation. Many of the original members were eventually replaced with others, while Debord remained the core. Part of the Situationist repertoire were events in art galleries and museums. Situationism also moved beyond France, when new groups were set up throughout Europe. Partly through their events, but especially through some student activities, the Situationists are said to have helped prepare the French student revolts of 1968. The group itself finally dissolved in 1972, but several artists since have claimed to follow in their footsteps. Debord himself took his own life in 1994.

Taking inspirations from Karl Marx and Henri Lefebvre, the Situationists tried to apply a social critique to the societal situation of the post-second world war period (primarily in France). The Situationists concentrated on the city and looked at the production of space therein, related to the emergence of a consumer society. Debord, in his seminal piece *The Society of the Spectacle* [5], described and attacked processes of commodification, and he did so creatively and poetically. His main claim was that everything - education, politics, art - was in the process of becoming one huge spectacle. 'Having into appearing' is one expression of the changes described therein. Society is depoliticised, because everything is 'only' representation and vision becomes the primary sense. Debord and the Situationists were partly inspired by Lefebvre's 'critique of everyday life' [14] and developed it further. Their theories were also informed by earlier radical art movements (like the Dadaists and especially the Surrealists).

For the Situationists, however, the critique had to become a transformation of everyday life and this was meant to take place in a form of subversion. Thus the Situationists did not remain simply theoretical, they added a practical dimension to their claims. 'Radical situations' were to be constructed. Thus they encouraged individuals to produce their own culture in order to contravene the general societal tendencies. They themselves were committed to bring revolutionary elements, which had supposedly been abandoned, back into the avantgarde. This was meant to be implemented through - often offensive - actions. They developed two primary principles, or aesthetic strategies, for these actions: a) the *détournement* and b) the *dérive* (drift).

The *détournement* was a form of 'creative vandalism' [11], which meant that existing bourgeois cultural forms were taken up and changed slightly in order to show them

for “what they really are” and to reveal new meanings. Cutting up and reassembling was the motto here. The system was meant to be ruptured from within, because there was no alternative outside of the system [3]. The existing culture was thus used to subvert itself.

DÉRIVE

The *dérive* or drift, on the other hand, is an aimless wandering in the city, but the wandering takes place according to specific systems. The subversion of pre-given patterns (of movement and perception) is the aim. This is well described in the idea of someone taking the map of London and following it strictly, while actually walking through mountainous German countryside [18]. The concentration of the Situationists, however, lay primarily on the city space itself. Thus their version of the *dérive* was to develop a system and follow it throughout the city (e.g. follow the first street to the right and then the next two to the left). The general idea was to add everyday behaviours in places and at times where they would appear absurd. *Dérives* should ideally take place in small groups of two to three people. This leads to a different understanding of the surroundings. But if it has to, the *dérive* can also take place as a solitary activity. The average *dérive* takes a day (in the sense of waking hours, not daylight), but it can last up to several months, when the differentiation between different stages of the *dérive* becomes rather difficult. The *dérive* can also take the form of a static-*dérive* - in the train station. Or in front of the screen.

The *dérive* is a “technique of transient passage through changing ambiances” [7]. ‘Letting go’ is the basis, but at the same time giving more than usual attention to the surroundings, to let encounters take place. One needs to get lost in order to understand, but not in an unsystematic manner. The ‘getting lost’ is meant in a social rather than a topographic sense: one should become homeless, marginal.

... the element of chance is less determinant than one might think: from the *dérive* point of view, cities have a psychogeographical relief, with constant currents, fixed points and vortices which strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones. [7]

to *Dérive* was to notice the way in which certain areas, streets, or buildings resonate with states of mind, inclinations, and desires, and to seek out reasons for movement other than those for which an environment was designed. [16]

The *dérive* is aimed at studying a terrain on the one hand, and emotional disorientation on the other. In order to properly start the *dérive*, conversations are sometimes begun with a passer-by - an engagement with the environment is produced. The Situationists used the

moment they were in, they created a web of associations right there and then. The desired cultural subversion is taking place by, for example,

... slipping by night into houses undergoing demolition, hitchhiking non-stop and without destination through Paris during a transportation strike in the name of adding to the confusion, wandering in subterranean catacombs forbidden to the public...[7]

The concentration lay entirely on the city in the situationist *dérive*, and on its ludic potential. The city was seen as a centre for possibilities and meanings, as a landscape. The Situationists were interested in the absurdity of such spaces and encounters. They were also interested in showing that resistance to the existing system was possible, especially in the sense of a withdrawal from patterns of work. The aimlessness (and often an additional intoxication) as well as the potential length of such a stroll were meant as forms of resistance to the ‘society of the spectacle’. This resistance is important to keep in mind when trying to implement the *dérive* online. This underlying, but important philosophy behind the drift gets all too easily forgotten.

Psychogeography, a situationist neologism, is the ‘theory’ behind the *dérive*. Psychogeography is the study of the influences of the geographical environment on human emotions and behaviour. Psychogeography tries to record the mental reactions to particular places, the emotional and behavioural effects of certain geographies on individuals. Thus, in psychogeography, buildings are seen like words in poetry. The structures can be read.

DÉRIVE ONLINE

The *derive* I've taken is unmapped....unplanned....a starting point is chosen at random....or what can be considered random....the thought/word enters the brain....fingers type the letters www.(your name here)....and I'm transported....instant...a link provides the terminus for jumping into the ether....again, unmapped....and again....again....ad infinitum if you like....the *derive* could extend forever if one had the stamina, the support, the TIME, the SUGAR to do so.... (mailing to vpalist@eGroups.com on 19 May 1999, author withheld)

It seems fitting to add such imaginations (the idea of buildings as poetry) to the web sphere, since the latter has been widely portrayed as spatial, but also as cultural and especially as textual in the wider sense of the word. It also seems fitting to equate the ‘unmapped’ nature of the surfing with the *dérive*. Situationist wanderings have often been read as a form of ‘appropriation of city space’. City space, if equated with an information sphere, can be

further abstracted from. Thus Situationism has been equated with an 'appropriation of the web sphere'. But cities are more than information sphere - they are *inhabited structures* and thus structures which cannot be entirely controlled. A city has its main thoroughfares and minor pathways, but it also contains people and cultures and commercial aspects and invites subversions of given structural elements. The city is thus not only an information structure, but a living one, a constantly evolving one. And it opens up dreams and ideas that go beyond the immediately available information sphere. Again, the web can be seen in a similar light, although many encounters are less immediate and the basic structures are differently organised.

The particular form of *movement* through an information sphere that the situationist *dérive* implies, i.e. a specific kind of leisurely walk through the city, is what I take as an interesting approach to cyberspace. Rather than the panoramic view, it is the detail that counts and the slow encounter on the ground - also described by Michel De Certeau, who interprets the ground-walk as a potential for resistance [8]. It thus mirrors not only the way information is found online, but also how knowledge is produced on the net, how encounters take place. It is a reflection on a potential 'nature' of this medium and also, implicitly, on its newness, i.e. its specificity as a medium.

The limitation of chance, through the earlier mentioned psychogeographical relief as well as through the partly systematic approach, is a parallel in relation to (re)searching the web: one does not simply go 'anywhere' when one spends time online - there are limitations both from the information provider's point of view and from the access point of view (and here I am primarily referring to search engines). The psychological starting point of the searching person and the social factors, such as current debates, etc., also play a role. But the *dérive*, while acknowledging these limitations, suggests that one should try new ways, develop strategies to discover the sphere. It both encourages and warns concerning illusions - too much dreaming is not what the Situationists promoted (this they left to the Surrealists). Instead, pointing one back at oneself is the speciality. These mental wanderings are concerned with the marginal. Situationism is a *model of engagement*. Ephemerality is core - the ephemeral *inside* everyone. This can also apply to the online information *access*. It thus points to an 'ephemeral engagement' version of strolling online.

As part of this discovery of the space, one also constructs the city - and/or cyberspace - anew. This is an appropriation of the information sphere with every sense involved. The cyberspace version of this could be the emphasis on the textual, used as the above mentioned study of the terrain. The emotional disorientation is the potential discovery of the new.

Randomness and System

Another point of reference for the web (re)search in relation to the *dérive* is the idea of the 'possible rendezvous' as the starting point for the *dérive*. In the *dérive*, one might meet someone to set oneself off, or one might not, but one starts at a particular point in the city and begins with a familiarisation of this point until one begins to wander off systematically in the style defined beforehand. This is where the search online shows parallel features. Unless the online-search has a very clear-cut aim (for example, a particular website address from which no further link is followed), it is a 'systematic wander', a *system of randomness*. If one uses a search engine and types in a search term, then one also takes a well-defined starting point that can then lead to unexpected results, but it also follows certain principles to provide the information. These principles are rarely chosen by the person searching. In the online *dérive*, one's own principles are added to the technologically pre-given ones. The original *dérives*, the drifts, have been read as pedestrian speech acts [17]. They were utterances that add to the city - and they can be utterances that add to the web.

It is mostly the randomness of the encounter (which the Situationists systematised) which signifies the ideas of the Situationists and their radical ways of capturing the encountered city (often artistically, sometimes intellectually). Plus it is their earlier mentioned revolt against the social 'requirements' that is also expressed in these movements. This is an aspect that is less often seen in relation to the web access as 'situationistic'. Instead, online the *dérive* is thus far primarily a search principle. Traces of online *dérives* are few and far in between. Interesting starting points, such as the following, have not been followed up:

can this online derive be recorded with the URL's to each link followed? what becomes of the on-line derive report when URL's are our only record? Is a record necessary? will the spirit of such a drift be rendered impotent once recorded? (mailing to vpalist@eGroups.com on 20 May 1999, author withheld)

Even the recording of the event, let alone the further reworking, is problematic. Neither is done enough.

SITUATIONIST ROAMING ONLINE?

To summarise thus far: Situationism overall is quite broad when seen as a label for either the web (or its contents) or as access to the web. However, when equated with one of the major situationist concepts - the *dérive* - the comparison begins to make more sense. The *dérive* was originally an approach to the city (as inhabited social space). This city equation is potentially problematic, but has - comparatively speaking - many elements that again

make this equation useful. For example, it implies stable structures that are changing and a sphere full of constant movement and chance encounters. It also suggests a mixture of public and private, of impressions and/or engagements. Thus the city is beginning to make sense as a frame of reference. And since the *dérive* is a form of appropriation of the city, an immersion, an engagement with this sphere, it could be a useful concept to conceptualise the access and appropriation of web information. But the framework from which the *dérive* emerged was an overall philosophical approach, which meant resistance to the existing capitalist system. It meant a revolt against work, it meant that the playful was seen as a major element in life. The intoxication that often preceded a *dérive* underlines these points. But the *dérive* is still more than a drunken stroll. At least in theory, the most important elements are a) the - slightly erratic - systems that are added to the randomness of the aimless walk, b) the documentation that is often part of a *dérive* (thus the encounter with the city reaches out beyond the individual) and c) the overall philosophy behind it all.

The potential online *dérive* is more easily envisaged in terms of the 'systematic randomness' than the other two points. Some projects (esp. web art) have also tried to visualise or otherwise document encounters with the web. In terms of the combination of randomness and system, access to the web via search engines and/or hyperlinks and/or simple associative terms suggest similarities. If one allows oneself to 'surf', i.e. to follow a certain flow of unexpected information, many things might pop up in a way similar to encounters on a *dérive*. 'Surfing', however, is becoming increasingly less common as an approach to the web. In terms of the equation of the *dérive* and access to the web, this might be a call to re-create the 'surfing' approach, albeit with a system (of randomness). The system increases the elements of surprise and decreases personal preferences. One could start, for example, by typing certain terms that come to mind into the address space and then follow a specific number of hyperlinks from each site that appears. Or one can use search engines in a similar half-systematic way. This only half fulfils the idea of the online *dérive*, however. The documentation of the surf beyond the individual computer screen is still missing. While the 'surfing' is documented well enough by the technology, not many accounts can be found where this is made into a readable, publicly accessible story. In order to 'justify' the use of the *dérive* label fully, this might eventually become necessary. More importantly though, the overall 'anti-'stance, the 'revolutionary' approach might need to be present before the *dérive* can be claimed in these terms. Thus a certain desire to at least question the existing system (offline, but also as enacted online) seems necessary as an engagement with the intricacies of the web-sphere as a social and political system. Since much web-use has (re)moved itself from more radical aspects, this might be at least a careful return to these - and if it is only expressed in a) an awareness of the way the information is accessed and b) a potential

communication about this. Then the *dérive* online does begin to make sense. But it might also have lost a lot of its original charm.

CONCLUSION

To finish this brief exploration of the situationist *dérive* online, I would like to return to a couple of examples in order to illustrate the current limitations of the above explored. Thus far, one gets web-representations (or email rapports) of 'real' city *dérives*, but none on virtual ones. Maybe the practices exist, but they are not portrayed as online *dérives* and thus often less political. One exception were the above mentioned reflections from the UK-based *ypalist*. This list, founded in 1998 by Ian McKay, was indeed very active in trying to think through the possible relationships between psychogeography and the online sphere - and maybe potentially implement these changes. Unfortunately, this list and its website has since ceased to exist (or rather: another website with the same name (different url) has emerged, which claims different origins or consciously confuses authorship).

Since *dérives* have also been described as creating mood maps of the city and one's encounter with the city, the blog seems an appropriate representation - if they were to concentrate more on the connectivity of the web and less on the thoughts of the individual. Important would be to make the web into a more group-oriented encounter. While drifting with the flow, pure introspection should be avoided.

The *dérive* (with its flow of acts, its gestures, its strolls, its encounters) was *to the totality* exactly what psychoanalysis (in the best sense) is to language. Let yourself go with the flow of words, ..., until the moment when he rejects or modifies (one could say *detourns*) a word, an expression or a definition. [4]

Overall, situationism online is a problematic concept which implies many preliminary assumptions about the online sphere as a particular kind of space, about the user as pursuing a particular interest, of the information available online, etc. But it is also a useful concept not that much in terms of 'what people do online', but what could be adopted as a wider *strategic practice*, as a form of online resistance, so to speak. It does open up the question of the information presentation and the way that we, as users, are guided through the available information. It returns us to a moment of our own decision-making. Plus it re-introduces the element of playfulness, which seems increasingly to be pushed to the margins of online engagement, at least when speaking about wider use.

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