The City Seen

Bachelor's Thesis

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It was, above all, out of my exploration of huge cities, out of the medley of their innumerable interrelations, that this haunting ideal was born.

-C. Baudelaire

Introduction

With the publication of the collection of prose poems entitled *Le Spleen de Paris* in 1869, Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) introduced a new way of narrating the experience of the 'Modern City'. These prose poems show Baudelaire as the first to look at the modern city as an aesthetic object that moves the perceiving subject with its mixture of chaos and beauty. Baudelaire's Paris, halfway through the nineteenth century, was undergoing massive changes; the number of inhabitants had grown exponentially as people moved from the countryside into the city and old structures were replaced by architectural projects such as Baron Haussmann's 'renovation of Paris'. These changes made it impossible to continue the old way of life because there was a new reality that had to be dealt with. New forms of art emerged in the struggle of dealing with this turmoil, and among these we find Baudelaire's prose poems. In the preface to *Le Spleen de Paris[1]*, Baudelaire explains that the form of the prose poem came to him as the solution to the problem of representing the modern city. The prose poem is the 'haunting ideal' that is mentioned in the epigraph, the dreamed-of "miracle of a poetic prose, musical, without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul (…)" (Baudelaire: 1970, ix-x); a new style that is inextricably bound up with the city.

In my thesis I will draw together elements that originated in Baudelaire's city-inspired prose poems with later theories of the Situationist International (hereafter referred to as SI) on the

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[1] The English translation I will be using: Baudelaire, Charles. *Paris Spleen*. (Transl. by Louise Varèse.) New York: New Directions Publishing Coorporation. 1970. Print.

urban space in the 20th century. I argue that Baudelaire's prose poems were a break with older ways of writing about the city and opened up a space for the subjective, everyday experience. Though seemingly far apart, I want to show that Baudelaire and the SI's views on the city are essentially the same in their resistance to traditional representations of the city. Their respectively aesthetic and political views on the city come forward in specific actions and techniques that both criticize and interact with urban[2] life through the notions of subjective perception and representation. Moving from literature out into the (socio)political realm, Baudelaire's new form and the SI's subversive attitude can then both be seen as revolutionary. I will conclude by bringing the different elements of space in the city together in a short analysis of Georges Perec's *Life A User's Manual* (1978). Like Baudelaire and the SI, Perec took a great interest in the notions of space and everyday life, and in this novel they take on such an importance that they could be called the subject of the book.

First, I will focus on the fragmentary montage element in Baudelaire's work. By investigating the way Baudelaire places the focus of his work on different aspects of the city, *Le Spleen de Paris* will serve to distill a model of the 'modern city' as Baudelaire (saw and) wrote it. Literary and cultural critic Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) has written extensively on Baudelaire's work and influence, in the essays that are collected in *The Writer of Modern Life*. This analysis is an integral part of understanding Baudelaire's poetry and its relationship with the modern city, and it will be my main source for this first part of the thesis.

The introduction to *The Writer of Modern Life* Jennings points out that;

Benjamin was considering Baudelaire's poetry in conjunction with key categories of

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2   The authors I refer to throughout my thesis use the terms "urban', 'city', 'metropolis' and its derivatives. To avoid unnecessary confusion and retain clarity, I will keep the different terms intact in the quotes, but refer to either the city or the urban in my own argument.

modernity and especially of the technologized cultural production that is characteristic of urban commodity capitalism (Benjamin: 2006, 7).

New technological developments made their appearance during the time Baudelaire wrote his work, and the argument can be made that it must have been present in his and other artists' mind and imagination, as we can see the influences in the art of the time. Benjamin goes a little further when describing Baudelaire's work, borrowing terms from mechanical and photographic instruments to point out the analogy between the work and the technologies. This is seen when he says that in the newspaper serials (feuilleton) "[l]iterature submits to montage" (Benjamin: 2006, 45). Photography made its 'official' entrance during Baudelaire's life (1839), and montage, rather than collage[3], arose as an aspect of photography that gave the photographer the ability to influence the outcome of the photographic process. Consequently, its influence on the arts was felt. Literary montage is a key concept here. For Benjamin it meant that,

> I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse−these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them (Benjamin: 1999, 460).

The parallel with photography, and the idea that a photograph simply shows the way things truly are without intervention and application of hierarchies, is obvious here. Because of this idea of photographic truth, it is easy to forget that montage is a way of transforming reality. This is true even for Benjamin, who wants to grant 'the rags' the importance he feels they are due[4]. The work

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3   Here, the difference between a collage and a montage lies in the spatial aspect. Montage and collage are generally considered to be two sides of the same coin, and the terms are used in various confusing and contradictory ways. But the distinction of collage as more spatially-oriented and the montage as temporal seems the most fruitful, as the artistic process is practically the same (see Perloff: 2003, 246).
4   Benjamin delved deeper into questions of photography, cinema and art in the 20th century in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936).

Benjamin intended this method for, *The Arcades Project*, was unfinished at the time of his death and his project of literary montage remains unfinished. Rather than merely assembling fragments, montage produces meaning, "combin[ing] and organiz[ing] it's various clashing components to produce a meaningful total effect" (Plottel: 1983, x). This way of accumulating and putting together fragments to bring across a more unified impression or meaning was particularly useful to those that wrote on the modern city. The new reality that they were faced with did not match the traditional manner of perception and "in collapsing space and time, the use of montage produced a new sense of reality" (Lehan: 1998, 78). Montage was thus an essential element of Baudelaire's prose poems, and it will reappear in my later analysis of both Baudelaire and Perec's work.

Then, after the chapter on the prose poems there will be a transition to more modern theories regarding the city and the urban landscape, most notably by the SI. The SI was a collective of Avant-Garde critics of late capitalism, active during the years 1957-1972. Through challenging the way people interact with the city, the SI wanted to achieve freedom from 'the spectacle' that had become predominant in society. The SI's views on the urban landscape will add a political dimension to the discussion on the urban experience. I bring them in for a much needed commentary on the influence of capital(ism), which will be shown to lie at the core of many of the city's changes that overcame Baudelaire and his contemporaries (and which we are still dealing with today). It allows us to further connect these city texts even more with our own experiences -of both awe and repulsion- with the developments of global capitalism. This commentary is not only important, but also inescapable in today's world.

Baudelaire; First Glances at the Modern City

Perhaps you will say "Are you sure that your story is the real one?" But what does it matter what reality is outside myself, so long as it helped me to live, to feel that I am, and what I am?

-C. Baudelaire

1.1 New City Eyes

When we speak of the modern city, and especially of writing(s) on the city, Baudelaire's poetry cannot be overlooked. The new Paris that emerged in the nineteenth century was one of the first cities of its kind, giving rise to opportunities and problems alike. Streets were broader than they ever were, lined with buildings that were taller than they had ever been, and both were filled with masses of people that did not know the next passer-by, but together constituted a crowd. Inhabitants of the city were forced to find a new way of dealing with their surroundings in their everyday lives (see Timms & Kelley: 1985, 3). How was one to deal with this new place, these new impressions?

For the artists, this meant finding new ways of depicting this 'new world' that had violently shoved aside the old. Baudelaire felt it was the primary task of a good artist to create a thing of beauty that incorporated "the painting of manners of the present" (Baudelaire: 2012, 1). He felt beauty in art was constructed from a part 'timeless and mysterious beauty' and a part 'time-bound beauty' that can only be found in depicting the present (see Baudelaire: 2012, 11-2). In *The Painter of Modern Life,* Baudelaire uses fashion as an example to illustrate his point. Everything about a person's dress is up-to-date, not only the fabric and the cut, but also the expression on the wearer's face (see Baudelaire: 2012, 12). When something is old-fashioned and

thus belongs in a different time, we notice immediately that there is something off. In art, the same effect is present, only creating something truly beautiful when the two elements come together. The influence of the world around us reaches much further, of course. It shapes the way we think and perceive, ensuring that "almost all our originality comes from the seal which Time imprints on our sensations" (Baudelaire: 2012, 14). Artists must find elements that resound within themselves, and these elements must 'fit' the present times. Baudelaire called this time 'modernity':

> "By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable. (…). This transitory, fugitive element, whose metamorphoses are so rapid, must on no account be despised or dispensed with. By neglecting it, you cannot fail to tumble into the abyss of an abstract and indeterminate beauty (…)" (Baudelaire: 2012, 12).

As with beauty, modernity is made up of two elements which must be valued equally if there is to be a true representation. More than anything, the term came into being to describe the changing times Baudelaire saw himself faced with. Modernity becomes a matter of perceiving and adequately representing city life. This seems to have been a successful approach since we as readers tend to agree with Benjamin's observation that, "[t]he uncommon difficulty one encounters when approaching the core of Baudelaire's poetry can be summed up by the formula: in this poetry, nothing yet is outdated" (Benjamin: 2006, 150). The changes that came about in 'Baudelaire's Paris' are still very much present today. They are still part of our 'modernity'.

But, one must have the right poetic disposition, the right eye, in order to represent things in such a way. As is exclaimed in the prose poem "Miss Bistoury": "What oddities one finds in big cities when one knows how to roam and how to look!" (Baudelaire: 1970, 98). The figure of

the flâneur makes his appearance here. He[5] is the ultimate city-dweller, wandering around the city, looking for what is different and neglected to catch his eye. The prose poems consist of fragments of city life that gain importance through the flâneur's aesthetic eye. Benjamin was especially interested in the flâneur, and Baudelaire as its ultimate embodiment as he strolled through Paris, letting his connoisseur's eye rest on the city's features and seeing value where it is least expected (see Benjamin: 2006, 39).

1.2   Prose Poems

Before the posthumous publication of *Le Spleen de Paris* in 1869, some of Baudelaire's prose poems were published in various newspapers. At the time short prose installments were still immensely popular (their publication goes back to the eighteenth century), but they generally had a different point of focus. Andreas Huyssen describes a difference between these traditional short prose pieces and what he calls the 'modernist miniatures' (see Huyssen: 2007, 29-30). These pieces are written after the crisis of perception that the modern experience brought on and, therefore, focus on different and new aspects of city life (see Huyssen: 2007, 30). He explains that "in their very form they record and construct a new sensibility in perceiving time and space" (Huyssen: 2007, 37). What we see in Baudelaire's prose poems is that time and space are indeed not represented in their conventional modes. There is no literal mapping of the city of Paris, no

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5   I found several interesting studies of the female flâneur, ranging from defenses of the flâneuse as a concept to critiques showing that women historically had less space to move freely in (wandering alone trough the city at night is still not recommended), and that the concept of the flâneur therefore neglects the experience of women. Several critiques are mentioned in Highmore: 2002, 141. Unfortunately, I do not have the space to include this aspect in my thesis.

concrete places that are pointed out. In fact, all the impressions in the prose poems are entirely subjective, dealing with the threatening and disquieting aspects of urban life. The result is that

> [h]is prosody is like the map of a big city in which one can move about inconspicuously, shielded by blocks of houses, gateways, courtyards. On this map, words are given clearly designated positions (…). Baudelaire conspires with language itself. He calculates its effect step by step (Benjamin: 2006, 126).

The map is not made by the rules of cartography, but by lived experience. He also shows the readers, his fellow inhabitants of the city, that there is more to their Paris; "he estranges Parisians from their city. They no longer feel at home there, and start to become conscious of the inhuman character of the metropolis" (Benjamin: 2006, 43).

As a whole, *Le Spleen de Paris* is made up of fragments that have completely abandoned the rhythms of lyric poetry. Interestingly enough, the last success on a mass scale in lyric poetry was Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Benjamin: 2006, 171). *Les Fleurs du Mal* seems to have been the last step before the complete turn-around that Baudelaire made with the prose poems. Kaplan points out that Baudelaire's "overall development confirms his conversion from "poetic" idealism to a literature of daily experience" (Kaplan: 2009, 1). The subjective comes together with poetic ability and modern life is shown in a way "that joins both lyricism and critical self awareness" (Kaplan: 2009, ix).

The prose poems are montaged in such a way that they make a coherent set in which each of them can be appreciated separately "since each one is both 'tail and head[6]', [and thus] we must accept the collection as coherent" (Kaplan: 2009, 3). The subjects that are chosen from city life are portrayed without hierarchy, no prose poem is placed above another. As Huyssen points out

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6   Baudelaire said that his work had no tail and head, for every part was both (Baudelaire: 1970, ix-x).

"[i]t was (…) precisely the perspectival viewing that metropolitan life threw into turmoil" (Huyssen: 2007, 30). Events become separate, isolated points of focus that are not necessarily connected to a history of experiencing things. The prose poems show different aspects of city life in a way that leaves behind conventional perception. Traditional values are left behind as new ones are generated. For example, the epilogue of *Le Spleen de Paris* mentions aspects of the city that are frowned upon by polite society -"Brothel and hospital, prison, purgatory, hell"-, but Baudelaire hailed them; "Infamous City, I adore you! Courtesans/ And bandits, you offer me such joys,/ The common herd can never understand" (Baudelaire: 1970, 108). Elements such as poverty and prostitution have equal right to come forward, alongside artistic and imaginary life. For example, after the quietly contemplative prose poem 'Sea-Ports', comes 'Portraits of Some Mistresses'. In the prose poem, four men tell their tales of their favorite mistresses and how they lost them, one even confessing to murder. After the confession, the men then order more wine, and no moral judgement is made (see Baudelaire: 1970, 85-9). Baudelaire's poetry "is to be imagined not in the sphere of morality but in that of perception." (Benjamin: 2006, 28). Even reality is not positioned above the imaginary (see epigraph ch.1).

Objects and experiences are moulded to the perceiving eye of the poet, roaming the streets of 'his' city as a flâneur, who is a walking duality in more than one respect. Baudelaire evokes the image of the artist starving for his art, but the flâneur is decidedly bourgeois. He has the time to roam the streets and observe, which is a luxury in its own right (especially in the midst of industrializing Paris). And while wandering and observing he has a view from within the city, but is somehow still looking in from the outside. He is the one giving his imagination free reign while he is looking through the windows, instead of residing behind them. This is what happens

in 'Windows[7]'; "What one can see out in the sunlight is always less interesting than what goes on behind a window pane. In that black or luminous square life lives, life dreams, life suffers" (Baudelaire: 1970, 22). Being positioned on the border of the in- and outside gives a certain freedom to his imaginings and judgements. His words have authority because he is the perceiving subject that sees more than others, while the flâneur himself is decidedly not part of 'the common herd'.

1.3   From Prose Poem to the City

Baudelaire can easily be cast in the role of the poet and city-dweller, but he must also be placed within the framework of his time. A time where urban life became fast-paced, erratic, and where the commodity took on ever-greater importance; so much so that streets became arcades (and arcades eventually became department stores), forever changing our perception of the urban landscape. Traditionally the interior and the exterior are strictly separated. Alongside the binary private/public, they give an idea of the movement that is possible within the respective spaces. An interior is usually an inside space (e.g. a room) where private life is played out (traditionally the interior is also inhabited by women). An exterior is the opposite; an outside space, the open space of the world where public life takes place (with the interesting exception of prostitutes, the exterior is traditionally the realm of men). The shift in perception comes from this transgression of boundaries (of exterior elements into the interior space and vice versa) as the new city landscape puts the traditional notions of interior/exterior and private/public under stress.

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7   The epigraph of chapter 1 is also taken from this prose poem.

Benjamin's further exploration of the rise of urban commodity capitalism would be dealt with in his work *The Arcades Project*, a collection of quotes, scraps, and added notes that was unfinished at the time of his death in 1940. The arcades were a phenomenon that greatly interested Benjamin. A token of capitalist development, they consisted of streets, an element of the outside/exterior, but through the glass roofs and gas lighting, it became an inside/interior that brought in (day)light, and confused these boundaries. They became something between a street and an interior (see Benjamin: 2006, 68). Benjamin saw this as a symbol of the mercantile capitalism of the period[8] (see Benjamin: 2006, 8), a street that is protected from rain and dispels the night's darkness with gaslit lamps (see Benjamin: 2006, 68). For the flâneur, the arcade became his street, where he roamed around in the crowd and scrutinized the commodities that were on offer (see Benjamin: 2006, 85). But it must be said that even though Benjamin describes Baudelaire's representation of Paris as fragmented and commodified, he still points to the moments of acute perception, where sudden shocks create new images and disrupt the empty repetitions of 'commodity capitalism' (see Caws: 1991, 172).

In *Le Spleen de Paris*, Baudelaire's neglect of older forms of poetry is striking. While he still used rhyme schemes such as the alexandrine in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, this is left behind in the prose poems. According to Benjamin this is in part due to Baudelaire's unfamiliarity with subjects such as history and philosophy, in short: his ignorance (see Benjamin: 2006, 100). Baudelaire felt it was not the business of artists to be concerned with antiquity, as they had all they needed (modernity) right there in front of them (see Benjamin: 2006, 110). The departure from antiquity's forms is not to be mistaken with a dialectical approach. Baudelaire's attitudes and work "exclude

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8   It's later, heightened incarnation is the department store, "the form of the intérieur's decay" (Benjamin: 2006, 85).

a dialectical conception" (Benjamin: 2006, 156). His approach to the city is too subjective, the focus too much on perception alone. Benjamin's own approach, on the other hand, is very clearly dialectical[9]. He sees a forward movement in when looking at the presence of the old that is Baudelaire's Paris:

> "the arcades and intèrieurs, the exhibition halls and panoramas. They are residues of a dream world. The realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up, is the paradigm of dialectical thinking" (Benjamin: 2006, 45).

When we see the residue of something that is no longer here, we become aware of the change that has taken place to get us where we are now. This leads to the realization that the same process will inevitably take place again, and what we currently experience will make place for something new.

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9   *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*: "In Hegel, dialectic refers to the necessary process that makes up progress in both thought and the world. (…) The process is one of overcoming the contradiction between thesis and antithesis, by means of synthesis; the synthesis in turn becomes contradicted, and the process repeats itself until final perfection is reached." (Blackburn: 2008, 99)

Mental Attitudes to Urban Landscapes

The delight of the city-dweller is not so much love at first sight as love at last sight.

-W. Benjamin

2.1   Changing Attitudes

In "The Metropolis and Mental Life*"* (1903), German sociologist Georg Simmel wrote on the modern city and the effects it had on the minds of its inhabitants as they scrambled to make sense of the changes. He points out that in the city people are more dependent on their intellectual faculties than they were in the small towns, where emotional relationships were predominant (see Simmel: 1903, 12). The city passes out an endless number of disruptions and these must be dealt with rationally to protect one's sanity. The emotional consequence to this overstimulation, according to Simmel, is a 'blasé attitude' in which the inhabitant's nerves renounce the response to the content and form of urban life (see Simmel: 1903, 14). Benjamin follows Simmel in this opinion and can even "be seen as continuing Simmel's project of a sociology of modernity" (Highmore: 2002, 30). Both Simmel and Benjamin felt that the modern city created "an uneasiness of a special sort. People had to adapt themselves to a new and rather strange situation, one that is peculiar to big cities" (Benjamin: 2006, 69). Essentially, perception had to change as a matter of survival. But Baudelaire's experience of the city had a different effect than that which Simmel speaks of; "[h]is experience of the crowd bore the traces of the "heartache and the thousand natural shocks" which a pedestrian suffers in the bustle of a city and which keeps his self-awareness all the more alert" (Benjamin: 2006, 91). His senses do not seem at all dulled, instead, he is even more alert. He does not keep the outside world at a distance, but focuses on a

select number of things and adds his own experience and imagination to them, making sense of it for himself. Rather than considering the city an impediment, with Baudelaire it became the focus; it became subject. The subject of his strolls, his musings, and his writing.

What Baudelaire also immerses himself in is the crowd. The crowds are a source of great interest, particular to the city and its massive numbers, and the flâneur often finds himself in the midst of one. It seems that "Baudelaire loved solitude, but he wanted it in a crowd" (Benjamin: 2006, 81). The crowd can be studied and looked at, and will behave in a different manner than the individuals that make it up. Through the eyes of the crowd everything is different, through it "the familiar city beckons to the flâneur as phantasmagoria- now a landscape, now a room" (Benjamin: 2006, 40). Crowds exist in the public/exterior space, but as soon as we focus on a few people, we see a private scene**.** The prose poems show an indulgence in all these experiences, holding wonder and beauty along with anxiety and shock. Benjamin points out that as Baudelaire interacts with the city,

> [t]he deepest fascination of this spectacle lay in the fact that, even as it intoxicated him, it did not blind him to the horrible social reality. He remained conscious of it, though only in the way intoxicated people are "still" aware of reality. This is why Baudelaire in the big city almost never finds expression though a direct representation of its inhabitants (Benjamin: 2006, 89).

The perceiving eye in the prose poems is not simply an inhabitant of Paris, he is a flâneur. Wandering, looking around, he lets everything he sees echo within himself and writes his image of the city. *Le Spleen de Paris* depicts city life in short pieces, in which no specific place in Paris can be recognized (see Benjamin: 2006, 183). The 'sketches' on their own feel somewhat isolated but together they form a crowd of sorts, making up a map of the lived experiences in the city.

Lived, because a view like Baudelaire's defies the (seemingly) 'detached' attitude that is associated with cartography, having a birds-eye view of the city. He makes no attempt to show all of the city, nor does he claim to show it objectively. The Paris we are led through by *Le Spleen de Paris* is Baudelaire's Paris.

Perhaps the blasé attitude has more of a place within today's urban landscape than in that of Baudelaire. The images and advertisements that sprung up as a result of the money-economy were not as prevalent then as they are now, and the city landscape just started to be influenced by them. But there is a more important difference: Simmel's urban figure is living everyday life *in spite of* the city, while Baudelaire immerses himself in the experience, looking with an aesthetic and artistic eye. Where Simmel wishes to be autonomous of the movements and progress all around him, Baudelaire engages with the city, accepting its idiosyncratic nature in a way that pushes us forward. Simply put, Simmel points out the alienation of everyday life though the city, while Baudelaire gives us the manner for its transformation.

2.2   The Society of the Spectacle

Baudelaire was fascinated with the spectacle of the modern city, but through later critiques of the city by the SI, the concept of 'the spectacle' acquires a new and far more ominous meaning. In 1957 the SI was established as a radical Avant-Garde collective of artists and theorists that critiqued late capitalism in the urban space, dealing with its aesthetic, social and political themes (see Highmore: 2002, 138). Their members were spread out across the world, and most of them were part of other collectives (such as the Letterist International) before they came together in the

SI. The Situationists derive their name from one of their key concepts, that of 'constructed situations'[10]. According to the SI, "everything that was once lived has moved away into a representation" (Debord: 2010, § 1). In their critique they "attempted to confront the ideological totality of the western world" (Sadler: 1998, 4). They wanted to transform "avant-garde interest in everyday space and mass culture into a revolution" (Sadler: 1998, 11). This revolution is inextricably tied up with the city. The SI as a movement was quite different from preceding Avant-Gardes. Guy Debord compared them to a research laboratory where the particular craft of situationist activity is not yet practiced (see Debord: 1959). Considering, questioning, and experimenting are the first steps towards any kind of change, and this was what they set themselves to.

One of the theories the SI is most associated with is Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle[11],* a series of short theses in which he critiques 'the spectacle' that has taken over everyday life. The spectacle refers to the "collapse of reality into the streams of images, products and activities sanctioned by business and bureaucracy" (Sadler: 1998, 14). As such it is the existing order's uninterrupted monologue about itself, justifying its conditions, actions and aims, effectively managing the conditions of existence (see Debord: 2010, § 24). Life in our times is not presented as it is, but in its manipulated spectacular form. The assault the spectacle plays on our senses never ceases; we see ads on buildings as we walk outside through the crowds of the city, and inside we are faced with television and social media (an interesting development, as we have it with us both in- and outside) and so we are never left alone, away from the influence of the spectacle. By living in the manner the spectacle presents to us, we participate in its

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10 Guy Debord explains these as the "concrete construction of momentary ambiences of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality" (Debord: [1957] 2006). Life needs to be lived and experienced in constructed situations that are different from the ordinary succession of situations that make up everyday life.
11 In 1973 Debord made a movie of the same name, to be found here: http://vimeo.com/60945809

perpetuation and keep the existing order in place. At the same time, we are caught by the spectacle, and it does not present us with an alternative way of life. Ultimately, the SI demanded revolution and freedom from the spectacle (see Highmore: 2002, 138), out of representation, and into life.

The SI proposes several techniques to free ourselves -if only momentarily- from the spectacle. 'dérive' and 'détournement' are such tools, intended to explore and change the city (see Pinder: 1996, 406). Dérive literally means 'drift' or 'drifting', and is described as wandering around the city (see Highmore: 2002, 139) in 'a journey out of the ordinary' (see Debord: 1957). It is "a type of free-form but critical drift through urban terrain" (Pinder: 1996, 416). The Situationists,

> wandered through the spaces of the everyday and tried to map out the play of power in the city, as well as the play of possibilities: the potential openings to a new and richer life that they believed was currently suppressed by existing social relations (Pinder: 1996, 413).

The dérive is not aimless, in spite of the seemingly idle action of wandering. The connection to flânerie is clear; a drifting about the city in order to experience the city and to see things differently (see Sadler: 1998, 95). Adding an explicitly political tone, the SI tried to see beyond the existing order on such drifts to come across new possibilities to improve everyday life, creating a movement away from the spectacle and the traditional structure of society.

Détournement is a way of confusing meaning. It is a practice whereby "objects, images, or words were ripped out of their original contexts and then juxtaposed -carefully and deliberately, not randomly- to create new meanings and effects" (Pinder: 1996, 419). Two things are paramount; the loss of importance of each détourned autonomous element, and the new

organization of another meaningful ensemble (see Debord: 1959). Obviously there is an element of montage here. More specifically "an approach to montage that stresses the necessity of negating elements of culture as a prelude to their transformation" (Highmore: 2002, 139). It is not simply the process of detaching something from its original meaning, but also the transformation into something new that challenges the old because it has lost that meaning.

2.3   Mapping the City and Everyday Life

Everyday life is saturated with the spectacle's influence, where it manipulates our perceptions and opposes revolutionary tendencies even before they rise up. The way people live their actual life in the city has a chance to gain importance though the use of techniques like the dérive, détournement and the construction of psychogeographical maps. For the SI this uncovering of everyday life is essential since,

> [f]or the Situationists, as for Lefebvre[12], the contemporary urban everyday of capitalism
> is characterized by the saturation of mass cultural forms (such as TV and radio),
> penetrating everywhere as an act to cover up and hide the discontinuities of everyday
> life (Highmore: 2002, 140-1).

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12 Henri Lefebvre must be mentioned when we speak of the production of space and everyday life (even if only in a footnote). Lefebvre was a marxist philosopher and sociologist who wrote extensively on the city and urban life. One of the concepts he introduced is 'the critique of everyday life', a commentary on the quality of life in the city and the late capitalistic system that influences its every aspect. Lefebvre felt that everyday life needed to be revolutionized as it was the place where he saw capitalism reproducing itself, and this rampant capitalist development had killed the traditional city (see Harvey: 2013, xvi). He felt it is our political task to imagine and reconstitute a totally different kind of city (see Harvey: 2013, xvi). In his work, Lefebvre tries to overcome this gap between the importance that is given to thought and practice over politics (see Lefebvre, 2000: 63). He stresses, just as Benjamin did, the importance of dialectical thought. In his opinion only dialectical reason can master multiple and paradoxically contradictory processes (see Lefebvre: 2000, 82). Lefebvre's theories are closely tied in with those of the SI as he was closely associated with the group before they had a falling-out.

These 'mass cultural forms' effectively function as a montage; hiding what does not fit by leaving it out of representation. Thus it is not a true representation of everyday life, but the spectacle's. It makes sense then, that a particular concern of the SI has to do with the way the city is represented in maps. This concern shows in their investments in dérive's and the way these negate the accepted structure of a city. The dérive and détournement are both strongly connected to the concept of psychogeography. When moving through the city on a dérive, one is led along by the 'psychogeographical currents' which dis- or encourage certain roads and turns (see Highmore: 2000, 139). With the information gathered on dérive's, psychogeographical maps can be constructed. This is done is by an action of détournement. The practice "shatters the ordered and functional representations of Paris created by such [conventional] maps, and subverts their illusion of reality" (Pinder: 1996, 419). The psychogeographical maps are a definite departure from traditional cartographic practices. The 'panorama-city' with its bird's-eye view is considered a "visual simulacrum[13]" (see Pinder: 1996, 409), and thus needs to be overcome. Cartography is limiting and misleading because "[t]hese perspectives do not provide a superior way of knowing the 'real' world; on the contrary, they separate the subject from the city, the observer from the observed, and transfigure the subject into a 'voyeur'" (Pinder: 1996, 409). Looking at the city as if it is a static place with an objective truth as it is shown by the cartographic tradition, keeps people from really knowing the(ir) city. Distance is created and makes the subject passive, putting people in traditional roles that keep the existing structures in place. And this is exactly what the situationists try to get beyond. They favored an immersion in the streets (as Baudelaire did) over a detached view over the city (see Pinder: 1996, 413). Pinder thus concludes that the SI is

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13 'Simulacrum' understood as a representation that hides that there is no original, and becomes truth in it's own
    right. Baudrillard quotes Ecclesiastes when he says that "The simulacrum is true" (Baudrillard: 1988, 1).

involved in "a process of *mapping* rather than *map making*." (Pinder: 1996, 417. Author's emphasis). The city in these maps is collaged (here too, the difference between a collage and a montage is spatial) in a way that gives us the "feeling that the city is tied together, but it is also fractured and in pieces" (Pinder: 1996, 419). Here too, the fractured nature of the representation of the city does not undermine its unity. In his *Writings on Cities* Lefebvre formulates a question which, in this context, seems to be it's own answer: "Is the city the sum of indices and facts, of variables and parameters, of correlations, this collection of facts, of descriptions, of fragmentary analysis, because it is fragmentary?" (Lefebvre: 2000, 94-5). It seems to be the case.

The City of the Situationists International

A patchwork city, known through actions and footsteps.

-D. Pinder

3.1   The Situationist City

The city was, for the SI, the ultimate level at which the "politico-artistic struggle" was to be played out (see Sadler: 1998, 11). Because the members of the SI came from all over the world, they did not limit themselves to perspectives on just one city, but Paris got most of their attention. As McKenzie Wark points out, there are times when aesthetics and politics seem free-standing categories, while at others they (seemingly inevitably) intermingle, which in the French context ranges from the first successful revolution (1789), via the Paris Commune (1871), to the last failed revolution (1968) (see Wark: 2003, 22-3). Authentic life must be uncovered, and the spectacle is seen as a veil below which the city is teeming with authentic life (see Sadler: 1998, 15). But,

> [w]hat matters is the remaking of counter-strategies that (...) attempt to produce a different kind of social practice (...), outside of power as representation and desire as the commodity form (Wark: 2003, 47).

The practices of dérive and, especially, détournement, free images from their constraints, not to render them meaningless, but to produce new meaning and new social relations. "Debord does not want to further reduce them to meaninglessness. His approach is quite the opposite. It is to take the images of the spectacle as a true representation of a falsified world" (Wark: 2003, 127). Wark goes so far as to say that "[c]ulture is nothing if not what the Situationists called

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détournement: the plagiarizing, hijacking, seducing, detouring, of past texts, images, forms, practices, into others" (Wark: 2013, 16). As such these images must be remade into an image of authentic life, reaching beyond the falsification of the world. Surges of authentic life, and the call for it through the appropriate means, is what incites revolutions; "[t]he spontaneous coming together in a moment of "irruption", when disparate heterotopic groups suddenly see, if only for a fleeting moment, the possibilities of collective action to create something radically different" (Harvey: 2003, xvii). Creating psychogeographical maps through détournement is a way of trying to escape the saturation of the spectacle in everyday life, and make meaning for oneself (like the prose poems did for Baudelaire).

Figure 1. (on page 33) is an example of a psychogeographic map. The map of the city of Paris is cut-up, and then reassembled with swirling arrows to show their connections. Different areas that are experienced as belonging together are connected by the red arrows, signaling the 'drift' and distance that is mentally perceived between them. Mental associations like this take precedence over the rules that are adhered to in cartography. One neighborhood that is physically across the city from another can be conceived to have a strong connection with the first, and this is then shown on the psychogeographical map through a variety of abstract codes and conventions (such as the placement and red arrows). The result is that they "shut out the city's noise and confusion, it's energy and incessant movement, and transform it's messy incoherences into a fixed graphic representation" (Pinder: 1996, 407). But this does not mean the representation cannot come across as erratic as the city itself. These maps are a break with representing the city in the same way that Baudelaire's prose poems were a break with older modes of writing; they are a new form that came into being because the old form, and its neglect of subjective experience, was found unsatisfactory. The result foregrounds subjective experience

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in the city, doing away with the former representations.

3.2   The City Represents the System

Essential to all the art, theories, and experiments of the SI is, as we have seen, the experience of everyday life in the city. Since Baudelaire's Paris of the Second Empire, this experience has been the scene of a debate (both in art and in theory), "focussing on the dynamics of technological civilization and its effect on the quality of everyday human life" (Timms and Kelley: 1985, 1). But according to Wark, it is not so much technology, but capital, that turned out to be the game changer in the end: "[i]t was capital that changed things, but popular discourse blamed the city. In the 1860s people believed Paris was disappearing and being replaced by something unreal. [But now] [e]veryday life is becoming a matter of consumption rather than industry" (Wark: 2013, 30). It is, however, impossible to ignore the experiences of the city that have found expression from the 1860's onward, on the basis that the reason for the transformation of the city was one-sidedly placed on technological developments rather than on the rise of capitalism and its endless consumption. It would be more constructive to not simply dismiss the notions of a city that became 'unreal' (the SI felt it had become just that due to capitalism) but take them into account for what they were: experiences.

The flâneur Benjamin saw in Baudelaire "knew the true situation of the man of letters: he goes to the marketplace as a flâneur-ostensibly to look around, but in truth to find a buyer" (Benjamin: 2000, 66). It seems commodity has always had a place in the discourse in cities, especially since they became the modern cities we know through the writings of crowds, arcades,

and the like. The artistic representations that tried to grapple with Paris becoming more strange and unreal to them were not so much concerned with its causes, as with its effects. The rise of capital had a visual component, changing the face of the city from nineteenth century shop-signs to the continuously ad-playing screens on buildings we have now. It was this outward show of changing life that city texts such as Baudelaire's were grounded in, as were the SI's maps and theories.

We have named the flâneurs and crowds that pass through the streets of this unreal city, but what of the interiors, and the buildings that hold them? The interior showcased the everyday life that helped Baudelaire to 'live and to feel that he was, and what he was' as he imagined them, as he saw them from the outside (see Baudelaire: 1970, 77). The way buildings (and whole neighborhoods of the city) were constructed during the existence of the SI was something they vehemently opposed. Buildings were seen as purely functional spaces, and it was felt by the SI that the city and everyday life could not be revolutionized if people lived in 'inhuman' spaces (see Sadler: 1998, 77-8)**.** The notion caught on outside of the SI near the group's dissolution. As Mitchell points out:

> "Architecture began to see its role not as constructing functional and monumental "machines for living" but as providing less rationalized living spaces directly connected with the everyday (…). [A]rchitects and urban planners began to metaphorize their work in terms of writing: buildings and cities became "texts" and "collages" (Mitchell: 2004, 1).

This correlation created the opportunity for new forms and the further incorporation of everyday life in the discussion of the city and literature. It also cannot have escaped Georges Perec, the author of *Life a User's Manual* (to be discussed shortly), who counted several architects and

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theorists among his friends (such as Lefebvre, who called the city "oeuvre" (see Lefebvre: 2000, 66)).

3.3   User's Manual to Spaces

Georges Perec wrote *Life A User's Manual* in 1978, roughly a hundred years after Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris* was published. Here too, time and historical developments have moved us to a different Paris than Baudelaire or even the SI found themselves in. The uprisings of may 1968, for example, (in which the SI and their ideas played some part) was a failed revolution but still pushed society forward, changing the socio-political landscape. It is in this landscape Perec wrote his works. *Life A User's Manual* is unusual for a number of reasons, but the structure he put in place is most notable. As part of "Oulipo", a group of writers who sought to write under constrained writing techniques, Perec wrote with several restraints. *Life A User's Manual* consists of 99 fragments (chapters) with a preamble and epilogue that tell of the lives of the tenants of a fictional Parisian apartment building, spanning a hundred years. The book's title page refers to itself as 'novels' instead of in the singular because of the fragmented way in which it is constructed. We move through the different rooms with the specific and limited steps of the knight on the chess board. The 'chess board' is the building, which is constructed as 10x10 grid. For the reader this is not visible, and so the movement feels more random, but it does make clear that "[i]t is space, rather than temporality or personae, that is the basic organizing principle of the novel (...)" (Mitchell: 2004, 6). Until we are made aware of the rigid structure Perec wrote with, we have no insight in the 'knight-steps' we take through the building, but it was there all along,

guiding us through the spaces via the lives of the inhabitants.

In his various other works, Perec is also occupied by the notion of space. Perec's foreword in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (1997) is pointed out in this context: "To live, is to pass from one space to another, while doing your very best not to bump yourself" (Lévy: 2004, 39). Spaces make up our lives as we move in and out of them. This book specifically, is made of "pieces" (rooms) of a building and

> refer to the act of relating spaces or going from one space to another, whether that space is a room in a building, or a chapter in a book−or more precisely, a chapter in a book on the subject of a room in a building (Lévy: 2004, 39).

In the case of *Life A User's Manual,* these spaces are all inside. Instead of focussing on the aspects of the city that are outside, his gaze is turned inward to the interior of a building. The moments I will shortly address here are those in the 'stairs chapters'; the fragments that take place on the stairs. Of all the spaces in the apartment building, the stairs are communal. It is the space where the narrative starts, "in this neutral place that belongs to all and none, where people pass by almost without seeing each other (...)" (Perec: 2008, 3). The narrative consciousness that is 'speaking' these words, is the character of Valène, the resident that has lived in the building the longest. He mostly comes forward on the stairs. It is no coincidence that this is the place where his narrative presence is felt most, as it is where the all the residents have passed through. And thus:

> "The stairs, for him, were, on each floor, a memory, an emotion, something ancient and impalpable, something palpitating somewhere in the guttering flame of his memory: a gesture, a noise, a flicker (…) a noise of people, a shout, a hubbub, a rustling of silk and furs (...)" (Perec: 2007, 61-2).

The images he evoke of all the things and people who passed through there make the stairs sound like a street where life passes through. They are, in essence, the streets of the building; the streets of the interior Perec presents us with. In his narrating role, "Valène is a kind of flâneur figure; a solitary walker and spectator who weaves his way though the labyrinthine microcosmic urban space of 11 rue Simon-Crubellier, reading the building as though it were a text (...)" (Mitchell: 2004, 5). Valène experiences the presence of his memories in the spaces, the stairs people have walked on in their everyday lives. Maybe one could even say that as a flâneur he is involved in a dérive through the building and is led by the psychogeographical currents (his memories, past events) of that building. Much like the flâneur, indeed, he moves through an arcade of sorts -a place (lit though the wonders of technology) where the street and the interior, and through them, the private and the public, merge. The effect this has is that, as is the case with city literature, it "allowed fiction to imply an urban macrocosm through the depiction of a microcosm." (Mitchell: 2004, 3). Or, in this case, depict a collection of microcosms. The city is implied through the building. The way this collection is brought together is an action of montage. Looking back at the difference between collage and montage, a montage has the emphasis on the temporal aspect (see Perloff: 2003, 246). Through montage then, a sense of continuity can be created. In *Life A User's Manual* the subject of the book as such is space, and the movement through the different lives of the inhabitants is guided by spaces, in a way that feels fluid in spite of Perec's rigid underlying structure. This continuity is created through the way the chapters are montaged together. In the end, it feels as though book and building correspond (see Mitchell: 2004, 4).

Conclusion

Essential to all the art, theories, and experiments I have discussed, is the experience of the modern city and everyday life in the urban environment. Ever since Baudelaire represented the modern city, and created a new form to overcome the difficulties the city posed, seeing, living in, and representing the city subjectively has become a subject of interest to artists and theorists alike. Serious changes occurred in the Paris of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, but compared to the (sensory) explosion of PR and advertising in the late twentieth century, they seem almost mild. It is clear that "[t[he conditions and relationships of the early twentieth century metropolis have in many respects both intensified and been widely extended" (Timms and Kelly: 1985, 13). The SI and Perec have had to deal with a world that was very different from the one that Baudelaire, Simmel, and even Benjamin were faced with, but the same concerns for perception and the quality of everyday life are present. This shows in Perec's novel, which was written well after the dissolution of the SI, but still narrates different lives in a specifically urban context.

Baudelaire's focus was almost purely aesthetic, and though his aesthetic incorporates both the highs and lows of urban life, it does not become explicitly political. Instead of seeing the city as an almost exclusively aesthetic phenomena, both the SI and Perec felt that through looking at the city, or even a fraction of the city (such as an apartment building), we can see what our lives within them look like and, in the SI's case, how they must be revolutionized. They mapped the city though the flâneur-inspired practices of dérive and détournement in hopes of inciting this revolution. Though different in their objective, both Baudelaire's new form of the prose poem and the SI's subversive theory and practices are revolutionary in their resistance to traditional

representations of the city and urban life.

A representation of something as erratic as the city is made more comprehensible through the structure that the representation acquires with the process of montage. This can be seen in both *Les Fleurs du Mal* and *Life A Users Manual.* In the latter we are told the tales of the inhabitants of a Parisian apartment building by cutting from space to space. Perec's novel(s) feels as messy and chaotic as any place in a city, but it also feels like a city *and* a building. The building in which the events take place is becomes the city; it has busy streets (stairs) that extend though the city (building) and host a legion of inhabitants (residents). In the theories and texts that I have discussed the subjectivity of the lived experience takes on an important role. Whether this is expressed in subversive theories/practices or in literature, it is clear that the urban environment keeps pushing forward questions of perception, aesthetics, art and the construction of everyday life.
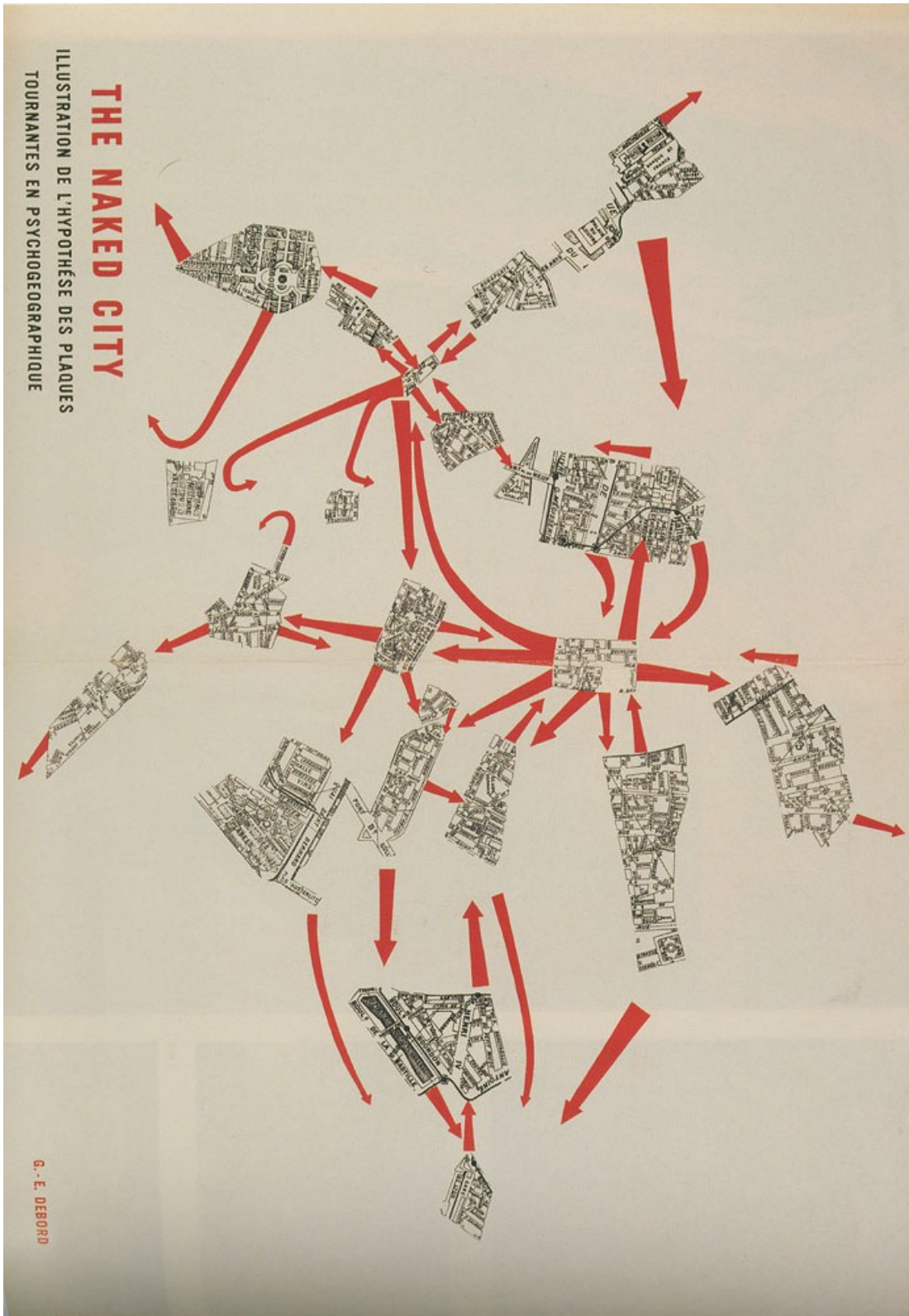
Word count: 8417 (excl. bibliography).

Figure 1. Guy Debord: "The Naked City", 1957.

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