Towards a Digital Age Psychogeography and the hybrid flâneur | STELLA SYLAIOU, MARIA CHOUNTASI, ELENA LAGOUDI

1. Introduction

The complex and interdependent relationship between people and the space that surrounds them has been the central issue of an on-going interdisciplinary discussion that extends well beyond the limits of geography to the fields of anthropology, psychology, history, sociology, ecology and the arts. Already in the 19th century, the advocates of the Romanticism were strongly opposed to the scientific rationalization of nature and highlighted the need for a harmonic coexistence between humans and nature. They upheld the act of flânerie as a living urban experience of understanding the rich variety of the city landscape, closely connected to socio-political, as well as cultural activities.

However, does the use of digital media and new technology during the actual process of walking in a landscape, or for the same matter, the virtual process of “walking” the Internet, exploring a space full of impulses and information, constitute a practice with particular socio-political aspects, or, rather has it been de-politicized as a type of entertainment and has become an “exploration for the sake of exploration”? And more particularly, has the use of new technologies in the context of art creation gained a clear socio-political content, or does it constitute the medium for abstract experimentations? Given the fact that in most cases of new media applications in art, especially those that utilize geospatial data, the artists appear to have been profoundly inspired by the principles of the art movement of Situationism as well as psychogeography, one cannot help wondering if the basic conceptual threads of Situationism – exploration (dérive) and reversal (détournement) – as those were defined and loaded with political meaning by the Situationists themselves, are truly applied in the efforts of the modern explorers and/or artists.
The present study explores and analyzes the various ways in which the fundamental principles of Situationism have been applied in specific cases of digital media art creation. Furthermore, the study investigates and comments on the alternative possibilities that are provided to artists, as well to non-artists, through the use of new technologies, in order to experience the surrounding space, express themselves and share their concerns. Lastly, it has to be pointed out that, in sharp contrast with the principles of Situationism, contemporary geospatial artistic efforts are lacking a coherent sociopolitical orientation, resulting to the weakening of their dynamics in challenging and changing the status quo.

2. Walking art

Walking is a principal mode of perceiving and living, thereby embodying, urban spaces, which can be seen as an aesthetic and insightful act. Nowadays, with the wide use of Virtual Reality (VR), in order to explore alternative pathways of interacting with the human and physical environment, the relationship of persons with their space is heavily influenced by bodily movement and particularly the practice of walking, a way to "find ourselves by getting lost". The interdisciplinary study of walk has established that this type of human movement is a sophisticated human process that combines various aspects of human experience, such as comprehension of a particular space, pursuance of meanings in subjects and objects, evocation of intense feelings and memories recall. The explorers are in a constant dialogue with the space they walk, are stimulated by a wide variety of images, meditate on the surrounding human activities, create meanings and, sometimes, are able to incorporate their walking experience and transform it into art.

Walking art can be experienced as revisiting/reconceptualising a human-constructed environment, particularly in the streets and neighborhoods of an urban space, which constitute a vibrant and continuously flourishing corpus. According to de Certeau, who underlines the importance of space as a practiced place, "the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers". He posits that "... a space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables ... It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it". Especially nowadays, the development of technology and advanced digital media convert the practice of walking to a whole new experience attaching to it alternative and unexpected aspects previously unexplored. The contemporary flâneur is a hybridized type of explorer, who augments and modifies experiences through the use of mobile technologies and web browsing.

The new digital media provide the opportunity to every visitor of a cultural site to become an actual participant by eliminating intermediation and by creating an ‘area’ of active engagement where the traditional concept of time collapses in favor of a living time constructed by an ensemble of possible routes. Additionally, almost everyone is able through the use of new technologies to engage with creative cartography, to collect geospatial data and to convert them into a work of art by providing a new meaning to the concept of psychogeography.

3. Psychogeography and ICT

Already since 1994 the question ‘what serves as the analogue to the city for the post-modern spectator?’ has been asked. The solution may be offered by digital technologies and giving the possibility to browse both the urban landscape and the fantastic landscapes, via the Internet, of an intangible space that resembles a world-wide labyrinth. The term cyberspace was firstly used in William Gibson’s Neuromancer, described as a vast computer network and a "consensual hallucination". Cyberspace is considered a metaphor, a digital ‘space’ behind the computer screen, in which users can ‘surf’, visit and explore real and virtual places. It is related to a network that provides a range of new applications that change the practices of everyday life, e.g. education (distance learning), art (new media art), commerce (e-commerce), citizenship (e-citizenship), science (e-science). The Internet uses hyper-text, a non-linear form of information structuring, with segments that do not have a fixed pattern and fixed series. Hyperlinks and semantic interoperability help transfer the explorer to various ‘areas’ of the Internet in non-linear, unorthodox and
Guy Debord’s theory of psychogeographic dérive could be considered as relevant to the modern use of the Internet: for Debord the dérive is a spontaneous voyage in the urban space, where aesthetics and the wider ambiences subconsciously lead the participants/voyagers into a whole new and emotive experience of re-appropriating the human environment. In this context, Internet constitutes a new type of dérive which includes the knowledge that our everyday life is invisibly governed by social norms and technologies shaping our world to a significant extent and at the same time provides the means for re-appropriating reality. As psychogeography applied in practice the power of the people to create new and unexpected social situations, such as an alternative public space, through the actual, physical movement, accordingly the hypertext helps to democratize knowledge and empowers the free will of the individual to connect otherwise unconnected “dots”. Although browsing the Internet offers a much wider range of experiences than browsing a city, however it could be compared with it, since the outcome of browsing both in existing and virtual places creates new experiences through narration and “movement” [Fig.1].

Moreover, digital technologies can act as mediators in the interaction of people with physical spaces, as well as between people. While browsing the Internet, visiting real or virtual places, the cyber-flâneur gathers data and knowledge, stops at various points of interest and uses interconnections to move from one place to another, to be disoriented, to let the environment affect them and to experience new emotions. However, based on the principles of psychogeography, the “situations” created and

![Figure 1: Hypertext and the City (source: http://www.christianhubert.com/writings/hypertext_city.html)](http://www.christianhubert.com/writings/hypertext_city.html)
experienced during tours in the real world are not totally accidental acts, but they are structured interventions with aesthetic purposes and a specific socio-political rationale; it is questionable whether browsing the Internet usually has such a logic.

The virtual world is increasingly becoming part of the real world. Exploring space both in the virtual world and the real world opens up new perspectives on the field of human perception and creation. Many cities provide technological means to their visitors for "psychogeography" as a tourist activity, giving the opportunity to them to navigate through points of historical and cultural interest\[^9\]. Sometimes in the actual place tools prompt the traveler to visit the virtual space. For example, in Plaza Diaz Vélez, Buenos Aires, there is a sign that encourages the visitor to visit the relevant website on Facebook to learn more about the history of the site and to communicate with those responsible or with other visitors.\[^9\] Other sites use augmented reality through smartphones to "layer on" the information relevant to their visit, based on their location. One example of this is the Streetmuseum Londinium app\[^10\], a Museum of London experiment in AR, which allows visitors to experience Roman London "layered-on" their physical visit through the city's streets augmented with rich graphics and historical data\[^11\].

Neogeography means the application of geographic techniques and tools for personal use or, for use by a community of users who may be specialists in geography, or not. The term is more common in recent years, as it has been linked to an increase of user-generated content through Geographic Information Systems on the Internet. Neogeography enables users to use and manage geographic information according to their interests, without taking account of rules and mapping techniques. Accordingly, User-Generated Content or Crowdsourcing are two concepts with similar content: both emphasize on the information itself and its origin, which can now be realized by unspecialized volunteers, while previously it was realized exclusively by specialized scientists. An example of such an application is OpenStreetMap.org, in which users can leave their GPS tracks as part of a global collective walk in progress. Furthermore, via MapTube.org Internet users can upload or link map data with Google maps. Google maps provide the opportunity to their users to personalise their own roads, but also to allow them to create their own maps, through the option My Maps. Cyber-\traditional flâneurs\ can browse and explore online through the Internet places across the globe that they may not have the opportunity to visit. The phenomenon of cyber-\textit{dérive} is so extensive that it would be not exaggerating to talk about a global village, a cyber-community, that not only democratises knowledge by sharing it, but also shares personal information about its tours with everyone who has access to the Internet.

Although, the Internet is an intangible medium, thus the mind has a leading role while browsing Internet, our activities in it can simulate activities we do with our physical body, e.g. virtual tourism, visits to virtual museums. Thus, experiential aspects of a physical visit can even be recreated through a virtual tour. This situation of "absent body presence" permits the cyber, or the hybrid flâneur, to map cities or areas of cities, which otherwise would not have the opportunity to visit physically, and explore them with his/her body. In an attempt to create a "footprint" and memories of these experiences, maps are created by Internet users to capture and transfer images and experiences from points of the city. The roots of this phenomenon are well to be traced in the beginnings of the Situationist movement, when the need for mapping alternative city routes had been acknowledged, thus leading to the creation of psychogeographic maps, which illustrated new ways of walking around the urban space and proposed an original experience of it. Accordingly, nowadays Internet offers a massive and suitable "platform" to create such emotive maps: on a digital map of New York the blue images are created by the locals, the red images by the tourists, while the yellow images can be created by both locals and tourists\[^12\].
However, the question of anonymity arises as to contemporary cyber-dérive and creating digital psychogeographic maps of a city, when the art of flâneurs masters is that "of seeing without being caught looking." Nevertheless, there is always the opposite argument of historian Della Pollock who describes performance in everyday life - such as flânerie - as "observing well and being well worth observing." According to Pollock, in performance the performer has a dual role, as a subject and an object:
the body is divided, it observes – thus it becomes a subject – and at the same time is being surveyed by its own subject – thus it becomes an object. In this context, the actual practice of digital psychogeographic mapping results from the agents/participants/flâneurs that act out as observers of a dérive and as objects of their own observation.

4. Creative cartography and data art

Baudrillard defined map as a “precession of simulacra”⁴¹, or in other words a “mise en scene of events with no apparent cause, a free-floating mediascape in which the endless reproduction of cultural forms speeding by on screens”⁴². According to Baudrillard, maps do not represent a given reality; on the contrary, they precede the territory they depict, and in fact “it is the map that engenders territory”⁴³ affecting how spatial reality is perceived. As such, mapping a landscape is a highly relative practice, which depends on the individual interpretation of the world, thus, changing from person to person and depending on his/her experiences, desires and expectations.

Baudrillard’s perception of mapping is similar to what Lefebvre has called representations of space. According to him, a representation of space is a mental imaginary space, that is, it can be conceived through the understanding of the relative oppositions between the real and the imaginary. In this context, maps are representations of space, which can be seen as communication and information systems, “conveyed by images and signs”⁴⁷. Maps of space representations are the “tangible” expressions of spatial practices, that is, of the practice of connecting separate places together, such as actual networks, routes and intersections: “Spatial practice is observed, described and analyzed on a wide range of levels: in architecture, in city planning or ‘urbanism’, in the actual design of routes and localities, in the organization of everyday life, and, naturally in urban reality”⁴⁸. In Lefebvrian spatial practices and representations of space could be echoed the situationist unitary urbanism: initially, the Situationists had the vision of a complete shattering of a more and more fragmented city, in order to reconstitute the urban space by unifying “what has a certain unity, but a lost unity, a disappearing unity”⁴⁹.

ICT technologies use Baudrillard’s and Lefebvre’s arguments on a comprehension of relative and social space and spatial mapping by creating complex, interactive digital maps that facilitate the decoding and interpretation of the site and call for active participation by individuals. The use of mobile geospatial technologies and digital maps in smartphones has brought a real revolution as it has affected the way travelers are wandering in the constructed and natural environment. Through their use, everyone is tempted to prescribe a route and minimize the chances of getting lost in it, while still letting himself/herself experience the randomness of the stimuli he/she encounters during the process⁵⁰. As such, users/psychogeographers become active participants of virtual places and creators of unexpectedly new forms of digital art.

A completely free exploration could take place when the cyber-flâneur follows virtual routes within the “pathways” of the Internet. There are artists which use the exciting new potential for exploration of the Internet by setting the basis for the field of Digital Psychogeography. Exhibitions, such as Les Liens Invisibles use Google maps, in order to guide the spectator to a non-linear journey on maps via Internet⁵¹ [Fig.3 & 4].
Figures 3 & 4: Google Is Not The Map, from the exhibition Les Liens Invisibles

(source: http://www.lesliensinvisibles.org/2008/11/google-is-not-the-map/)
Accordingly, Wilfried Hou Je Bek[22], an artist and culture hacker, inspired by the Situationist dérèive uses algorithmic walking to create “algorithmic routes” and to explore a city in a non-intuitive way[22][Fig.5]. He organizes walks where participants wander in a city being directed by a code, thus transforming their body into some sort of computer that runs software. The data collected by the participants is further maximized through collaborations with other artists, hackathons and data art projects.

Artists like Je Bek set the scene for a future where so-called biohacker artists get out of the studios - where it is easier to record data - and enter into the urban space with sophisticated wearables and sensor gadgets, in order to experiment with state-of-the-art technologies, such as gait recognition.

In this framework of a virtual form of psychogeography, J. R. Carpenter[26] creates hybrid virtual places that are attached to real-world ones. They are narrative landscapes with autobiographical information connected to real-world maps. Her work *Broadside of a Yarn*, commissioned for the Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice (ELMCIP) conference *Remediating the Social*, introduces the broadside, a poster-form street literature that was popular between the 16th and 19th century and featured proclamations, advertisements, descriptions of crimes, and the text of ballads, as “a multi-modal performative pervasive networked narrative attempt to chart fictional fragments of new and long-ago stories of near and far-away seas with nought but a QR code reader and an unbound atlas of hand-made maps of dubious accuracy[26][Fig.6].
Figure 6: Screenshot from Broadside of a Yarn

(source: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/illya-szilak/mapping-the-virtual-elit_b_3...)

5. Conclusions
The above described trends and practices are essentially precursors to a rising reality where the concepts of space are both perceived through a “classical” situationist perspective of urban wandering and exploration: destinationless, leaderless, themless, as well as through contemporary concepts and continuously changing perspectives shaped by the modern digital environment. This amalgamation leads to an alternative mapping of cities, monuments and natural landscapes within a context of social emancipation, where the concepts of space, place, environment and community are redefined and transformed.

The pertaining question is whether the undertaking of meaning-making of the above concepts through the use of new technologies has a real sociopolitical effect or is based on experimentation-for-experimentation’s sake. Given that most artists engaged in the collection and management of geospatial data with a view to creating a new form and perception of landscape mapping are inspired by the fundamental principles of Situationists, inevitably a question arises: how consistent are contemporary artists with the groundbreaking visions of the Situationists for using arts as a means of achieving social and cultural change?

The Situationists proclaimed that “… we must try to flood the market - at least initially the intellectual market - with a wave of desires whose realization can be achieved through the available means of action of the material world and not through the old structures of social organization”. This shows exactly that the group had not withdrawn from real life and real politics, in order to shout a perpetual anathema to the capitalist way life, but, on the contrary, they lived in everyday reality by giving a leading role to the creation of art and poetry through the means of their era. Thus, Situationism established a critical stance and a resistance against the concept of capitalist spectacle society by suggesting tangible and experiential ways to reconnect the mundane with art and to re-energize the significance of aesthetics in the material world of urban life.

Most of the experimentations mentioned in this article use the vehicle of technology to suggest an alternative cognitive, mental and kinesthetic process about how to read the concept of landscape as a personal, sensual, existential and mystical landscape. As attractive as the venture seems, one cannot fail to notice that such a landscape approach is a-political and therefore diverge from the proposals of Situationism. There are few examples that combine poetics, interpretation, phenomenology and politics, as these were contained in the notion of the situation. Although the above-mentioned experiments have the character of a poetic intervention, a small "stop" for observation and reflection, in a context of traditional art display practices, there is no evident protest against capitalist ideals, such as the commercialization of art, there is no manifest desire to build an alternative public space, where the experience of participation and the need for change will be materialized.

According to Kaye who refers to de Certeau, “… space, as a practiced place, admits of unpredictability. Rather than mirror the orderliness of place, space might be subject not only to transformation, but ambiguity. Artistic practices presented here, invariably polysemic and ambiguous, pertain either to walking as an act which actualizes the space allowing for new sensations and meaning to arise, or to subjective mappings of personal/communal itineraries, movements, psycho-geographies. They both use lived space as a fulcrum for re-imagining the potential for reclaiming the subjects’ agency in relation to how our place in the world can be reinvented. As de Certeau states, “… to walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper”. By either walking as an art practice, or by creating mappings with or without the use of ICT, the common denominator is a need to search for a “proper”, for a visual/multimodal configuration which enables the chartographers of the personal to find their place in the world, to reformulate their experience of the space through their artistic practices. In a Baudrillardian dystopian era or in a post-utopian juncture in time the political projects and the ideological narratives for radical change, which motivated movements such as Situationist have simply ebbed. This is not a factor which de-energises the aforementioned forms of art, but puts them into the context of a constellation assemblage of subjective trajectories, which circumnavigate, map out and finally engender the spaces of tomorrow.

According to Raoul Vaneigem, a member of the International Situationist movement, an active participant is the one who desires “not a succession of moments, but the totality of a moment that is experienced without the sense of time passing. The passage of time is essentially the feeling that we grow up … the situation is built through the combination of moments, the emergence of the pleasure in such moments, the release of the promise of life. For Vaneigem and the rest of the group it is important to create Situations, moments in time, “playful creations of an active life prefigurative of a utopian remaking of social relations”, where an unexpected community of people, a collectivity, is born, to exalt the role of art, to denounce existing sociopolitical structures and to reflect upon the notion of the landscape as a public, social space, where the dominant cultural values evolve, for the sake of a new value code based on poetics, art and human. Therefore, the question that needs to be discussed by
artists, exhibition curators and the audience itself - as an active component of a visual intervention - is how, today, the use of new technologies in visual perceptions of space and the landscape “stitches” moments together so as to create the experiential poetics of a situation.

CVs

Stella Sylaiou has a background in humanities and her field of expertise lies in Digital Museology. She has many years of work experience in universities, museums and cultural NGOs. She currently works as Adjunct lecturer at the Department of Visual and Applied Arts in the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.

Maria Chountasi is an archaeologist. Her research interest lies on multidisciplinary approaches of material culture, with a focus on the exploration of anthropological performance theory on ritual events of Greek prehistoric societies. She has worked in various Ephorates of Antiquities in Greece and she is currently involved in research projects funded by INSTAP.

Elena Lagoudi is a digital engagement specialist for museums and cultural organizations with a focus on collections management, open cultural data and content strategy. She develops web strategies for memory and performing arts organizations and produces content for different digital and mobile platforms.


[18] Ibid., p.413-414.


