

THE NAKED CITY

PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY AND THE METAPHYSICS OF MAPPING

CHRISTOPHER COLLIER

Was the Situationist practice of psychogeography good mapping? Through a reading of Guy Debord's *The Naked City*, Christopher Collier argues this question is beside the point; rather, psychogeography should be seen as a negative critique of cartography and the metaphysics underlying it.

Often seen as a subjectivist, aesthetic diversion from Situationist International's political mission, the practice of psychogeography was in fact a consistent articulation of the group's unorthodox, yet still broadly Marxian attack on a society fundamentally structured through the abstractions of exchange. Psychogeographic maps did not simply challenge the traditional map's universalizing representation of spatial experiences for being the inequitable or totalizing cultural expression of a particular subject position. More fundamentally, I argue, they attempted to forge an approach to the map consistent with a historical materialist, critical method. As such, they attacked the specific metaphysical paradigm by which the traditional map's universalization is enabled, on the basis that it articulates and enacts the 'real abstractions' inherent in commodity exchange.

Psychogeographic mapping did not work directly towards an equitable, emancipated or differential form of representation, neither did it make maps to better depict the heterogeneity of spatial experience. Instead, psychogeography negatively contested the abstractions inherent in such representations as metaphysical reflections of the underlying system of commodity exchange. It was this system therefore, that can be seen as its real target. Where psychogeographic mapping diverged from a certain historical materialism however, was that it perceiving such representations themselves as actors, through the situationist concept of 'the spectacle'. Here metaphysical abstractions were not simply reflective of socio-economic conditions, but active in producing those conditions. Therefore, these 'productive' abstractions were not simply to be appended or adjusted, but rather at once negated and transformed, through the Situationists' negative, critical method *détournement*.

In the following article I draw upon Alfred Sohn-Rethel's ideas on real abstraction to suggest a framework through which psychogeographic maps might be understood in relation to the situationist project more broadly; specifically their notions of 'spectacle' and *détournement*. I argue that psychogeography deploys the negative, critical approach implied by

détournement against the 'spectacular' abstractions enacted by the traditional map. These considerations are then applied to an analysis of *The Naked City*, a well-known example of psychogeographical mapping produced by Guy Debord in 1957. In doing so, this article will attempt to show how this enduring artefact of psychogeography can be seen not simply as a critique of cartographic universalization *per se*, but also, ultimately, of the metaphysics attendant to commodity exchange and the forms of 'spectacular' spatial experience it produces.

PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY AND THE METAPHYSICS OF THE MAP

Before I look at the Situationists' approach to mapping, I will first demonstrate how the traditional map can be seen to arise from a specific, socially-produced metaphysical paradigm. I suggest that this metaphysics is not only reflective of a system of commodity exchange, but that it actually shapes the social production of space in ways congruent with the commodity.

Maps of the post-Enlightenment Western tradition of cartography present a systematic rationalization of the world that purports to be universally valid across spaces, times, and societies. As David Pinder has noted, many geographers have been rightly critical of such cartographic pretensions to neutrality.¹ They have shown that traditional maps are never a simple, correlative reflection of the world, but rather the universalizing articulation of a singular perspective, presented as transcendental truth. I propose that it is this historically contingent, metaphysical notion of transcendental truth itself that facilitates an abstraction of spatial and social relations to such a singular, totalizing representation – a godlike perspective upon gridded and measurable space. Such a notion of transcendental truth is ultimately the product of a specific liberal humanist metaphysics, bound to the belief in a similarly transcendental Kantian subject who functions as its arbiter. It can therefore be argued that the traditional map arises directly from a liberal humanist metaphysics.

To adopt a historical materialist approach to maps, as I argue the Situationists do, would perhaps be to show that this metaphysics itself

arises directly from socio-economic conditions. A historical materialist approach would therefore, in the first instance, be founded on a critique of this regime of metaphysics and its claims of universality. If the subject is not transcendental and self-sufficient, but rather is inseparable from the historical and social conditions in which she exists, then the notion of transcendental truth of which this subject serves as a guarantor is likewise untenable. Only a subject whose capacity for reason was transcendental rather than socially determined would be able to discern a transcendental truth as opposed to a socially determined one. In such an interpretation, the map would not reflect 'truth' as a timeless constant, but rather the time-bound 'truth' of the socially contingent conditions of its emergence.

Alfred Sohn-Rethel offers a historical materialist critique to Kantian philosophy, arguing that the abstract notion of the timeless, self-sufficient subject and the transcendental truth of which this subject is arbiter, are the reflections of abstractions inherent in commodity exchange.² Sohn-Rethel argues that the empiricist claims to truth made by modern scientific enquiry are, in fact, idealist inasmuch as the standards by which empirical facts are judged are the preserve of an assumed transcendental subject, a subject who is actually produced in the historically particular division between appropriation and production that arises in societies of commodity exchange.³ Furthermore, the very notion of timeless truth is reflective of the necessary characteristics of the commodity in a process of exchange: its abstraction from the social relations that produced it and its appearance of timelessness and universally applicable equivalence.⁴ Thus, the assumption that scientific abstraction, and in this I propose to include cartography, can transparently, neutrally, and universally reflect an object of study, is socially determined and arises from a particular set of conditions concomitant with commodity exchange and its abstraction of value.

This is not simply a matter of representation, either. If one follows Sohn-Rethel's argument, one might propose that the abstractions of traditional cartography not only carry an echo of the commodity form itself, but potentially also

prefigure it, in shaping cognition and spatial relations as congruent with this system of exchange. Inasmuch as maps impose a rationale of quantitative measurement, they also fragment and abstract, thus rendering the object of measurement predisposed to this very system of exchange and calculability. It is the triple co-ordinates of Cartesian space, the simultaneous equivalence and discretization, homogenization and fragmentation of space that is the real abstraction by which such space is commodified.⁵ One might thus argue that maps not only present a form of abstraction that is reflective of commodity exchange, but crucially, through this very abstraction, also serve a key role in the commodification of space. Commenting upon scientific truth claims, Sohn-Rethel argues that 'the enactment of science in unbroken continuation of its tradition as practices in the capitalist world is incompatible with socialism.'⁶ Perhaps this was what Guy Debord meant when he called for a 'renovated cartography', something the Situationists would explore through the practice of psychogeography.⁷

PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY AS CRITIQUE

In 1955, Guy Debord, the most prominent member of the (anti-)artistic avant-garde organization the Letterist International, first introduced the word '*psychogéographie*' to mean a technique of qualitative, embodied engagement with the city.⁸ Debord suggests the term to describe 'the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.'⁹ Psychogeography sought to map a subjective experience of the environment, thus mirroring a historical materialist critique in the sense that it attempted to show how maps represented the perspective of a particular subject position rather than expressing universal truth.

If maps can be seen as socially and historically contingent expressions of a given subject position, their universalization of this position, particularly in its identity with the assumed class, gender, and ethnicity of the Kantian subject, enforces a certain hegemony over spatial representations. Interpretations of the Situationists' psychogeographic mapping, such as

that of David Pinder, have recognized this fact and see the Situationists as contesting the traditional map's totalizing universalization of a particular subject position, potentially prefiguring a poststructuralist approach to mapping.¹⁰ Yet for Pinder, the situationists ultimately remained ambivalent towards overcoming the map's universalizing tendencies, and psychogeographic maps were unable to effectively represent differential, heterogeneous spatial experience.¹¹ Like Pinder, I hold that the Situationists' approach falls short of effectively articulating the heterogeneity of subjective experience in a positive sense.¹² I propose, however, that psychogeography should not necessarily be read in this way. Rather than seeking to articulate positive alternatives to the map, or contesting the hegemony it implies on a representational level, psychogeographic mapping perhaps attempted a more fundamental, negative critique of the particular real abstractions outlined above.

Though it is unlikely that Debord would have known the work of Sohn-Rethel, arguably Debord apprehends to some degree capital's process of real abstraction, and his notion of 'the spectacle' can be understood in such terms.¹³ Debord understands the spectacle as the domination of socially constructive activity by the general equivalent of the image – abstracted from social relations and yet transforming those very relations, serving to occlude all qualitative incommensurability precisely through its fragmentation into generalizable, exchangeable units.¹⁴ For Debord this is not just the occlusion of useful, concrete labour by abstract labour, but also – accounting for the expansion in the consumption of leisure time – a suppression of qualitative experience beyond the factory, into the sphere of everyday life. For him, the spectacle is the occlusion of incommensurable, autonomous experiences more generally: 'inverting living values into purely abstract values'.¹⁵ Spatial relations and the city themselves become 'spectacularized' – that is to say mediated through abstraction and becoming, in a sense, really abstract. Spaces really do become homogenized in their equivalence and fragmented by their division into discrete, exchangeable units.

Tom McDonough draws on the similar ideas

of onetime situationist collaborator Henri Lefebvre, concerning the social production of space and its contradictory unity and fragmentation.¹⁶ Whilst McDonough does so in a renewed attempt to emphasize psychogeography as a tactic for expressing positive difference, his identification of this contradictory dimension of capitalistic space also finds an echo in psychogeographic maps. These characteristics of capitalist space are precisely expressive of the abstractions of commodity exchange – of its equivalences and fragmentations. I contend that the Situationists apprehended this spectacular abstraction and that psychogeography was an early attempt to develop their total critique of the spectacle. It sought to equally contest the simultaneous spatial homogenization and atomization found in both centralized urban planning and market-driven spatial development, for both share this characteristic of spectacular abstraction.

Of course such aims appear directly opposed to the traditional function of the map, so much so that the notion of a 'psychogeographic map' as a positive representation of psychogeographic practice would seem an oxymoron. Such a map could instead exist only as a negative, immanent critique of the map itself. For the Situationists to contest the map from the position of an alternative, positive representation would arguably be to repeat its abstractions and thus re-articulate the same metaphysics of the commodity. Whilst psychogeographic praxis itself might have been somewhat prefigurative in the sense implied by Debord's description of it as 'the science fiction of urbanism', its maps, as maps, remain inescapably tied to these abstractions, to which negative critique is the only consistent approach.¹⁷ Such an approach can be discerned in the Situationists' well-known tactic of *dé-tournement*.¹⁸ This practice hijacked existing cultural elements to critically turn them against themselves. It transformed such cultural elements into critiques of their own metaphysical basis, challenging their fixed correspondence to any transcendental truth value. It did so, however, without positing a new positive ground for such a critique.

In this context it becomes possible to read psychogeography as critique, attacking a



transcendental metaphysics not just for producing a universalizing representation, but as an expression of the commodity form itself. I read the Situationists' psychogeographic maps as a negative method, seeking to undermine the map as an expression and tool of the spectacle's real abstractions. It might be objected that using Sohn-Rethel's understanding of real abstraction to read Debord's notion of spectacle renders this notion, in congruence with the common critique of Sohn-Rethel's theory, problematically ahistorical. Yet, whilst the concept of spectacle does imply a wider critique of separate and externalized power and agency, it remains most keenly focused as a critique of a contemporary society at a particular confluence of historical conditions.¹⁹ These could be surmised as the culmination of avant-garde rejections of representation, the dissolution of the worker's movement into its own representation as statist parody, and the invasive abstractions of capitalism, historically specific in their unprecedented complexity and generalization. Only in capitalism, for example, is production organized around a

multiplicity of abstract individuals.²⁰ Therefore, as Alberto Toscano puts it, there is 'solidarity between abstraction and capitalism'.²¹ The spectacle can in this sense be seen as specifically critical of the intensity and ubiquity of *capitalist* abstraction.²²

THE NAKED CITY

Intended for exhibition shortly before the official inauguration of the Situationist International in 1957, Guy Debord's screenprint *The Naked City* marks a pivotal moment when psychogeographical investigations formed a catalyst in uniting the component avant-garde groups that would go on to form the organization (fig. 1). The exhibition, entitled *Première exposition de psychogéographie* (1957), took place at Taptoe Gallery in Brussels.

1 – Guy Debord, *The Naked City: Illustration de l'hypothèse des plaques tournantes en psychogéographie*, 1957, lithography, ink on paper, 33.3 x 48.3 cm, collection of FRAC Centre, Orléans. Photo by François Lauginie.

Owing ostensibly to a train mishap however, Debord declined to send the psychogeographical maps he had prepared for the show.²³ Of the five maps he was to exhibit, the most well known is *The Naked City: illustration de l'hypothèse des plaques tournantes en psychogéographique*.²⁴

The map's title is taken from the 1948 film noir *The Naked City*, directed by Jules Dassin. This film is shot largely out of the studio on the streets of New York and is bracketed at beginning and end by a montage and narration that attempts to give form to the city's impossible puzzle of coeval existences. In this respect, it echoes a rich 'psychogeographical' heritage; it continues in the tradition of Baudelaire and Poe – described by Debord as psychogeographical 'in landscape'²⁵ – by attempting to understand the relation of unity and fragment in the modern city.²⁶ The film begins with a wide shot of the city from above, drawing in on its various inhabitants, the darkened streets and gleaming bars. It is one o'clock in the morning and somewhere in the city a murder is taking place. A diachronic narrative of qualitative, irreversible time intersects with the synchronic cross-cutting of the characters' coeval experiences of this moment. As the film ends, the narration lingers on a montage of melancholic faces, each life a trajectory touched by this particular event. 'There are eight million stories in the naked city', it announces, 'this has been one of them'.²⁷

The film's exploration of synchronic and diachronic, unity and fragment, is extended in Debord's own *The Naked City*.²⁸ Here the psychogeographic map responds to the way in which cartography abstracts spatial relations to what Lefebvre called 'the undifferentiated state of the visible-readable realm', precisely by introducing the negativity of critique into cartographic representation.²⁹ Through this, it makes visibility visible, appearance appear, denaturalizing this appearance and illuminating its contingency. In this respect Debord's *Naked City* echoes his critical experiments with the cinematic image itself, disrupting the particular metaphysics implied by film's assumed indexicality through the use of negative audiovisual space, the disjuncture of picture and sound, direct attacks on the film stock, and, characteristically, through

détournement.³⁰ Debord's *The Naked City* inflicts similar methods upon the cartographic image.

For traditional cartographers such as Louis XIV's engineer, creator of the original *Plan de Paris* upon which Debord's *Naked City* was ultimately based, the labyrinth had to be tamed.³¹ This taming is specifically the map's real abstraction of space, something that might be equated with Debord's notion of the spectacle – social relations mediated by images. The exchangeable abstract representation transforms existing social relations to conform to its abstraction. Debord sought to critique this via *détournement*, something he elsewhere identifies with 'negating the negation', the spectacle being the negation of the qualitative in abstract representation.³² Thus as a critical, negative strategy, this psycho-geographic map negates the negation of social space performed by the traditional map. It addresses the spectacle's own contradiction of unity and fragment in the negative, yet it refuses to offer a new synthesis in a metaphysics of positive totality. Totality is here suggested in the blank ground of the collage, the gap between fragments that intimates possible unity. Therefore, it is also the negative space of critique and *détournement*; that which reveals the fissures in the spectacular totality of the exchange abstraction that founds the traditional map's claims to universalism, allowing the fragments to appear as they are, as fragments.³³ Retaining a possibility of totality, even if it cannot be apprehended, negatively shows the gap between subjective experience and social whole, a gap which, as I have argued, receives the spectacular illusion of reconciliation in the metaphysics of abstract equivalence through exchange.³⁴ In showing the gap and the contingent, rather than universal, nature of such abstractions, totality here serves the function of negative critique. In *The Naked City* it is the negative dialectical move of *détournement* that evokes totality in the negative as a critical tool, revealing the contradictions upon which the traditional map is founded.

Furthermore, Pinder and McDonough see *The Naked City*'s arrows functioning as an articulation of positive, subjective difference and relationality that contest the universalizing

hegemony of the traditional map's representation. I propose, however, its primary move is a negative critique of this universalizing on a more fundamental level. It does not simply critique the hegemonic violence and occlusion of relationality that the traditional map's singular, transcendental perspective enacts (though it doubtless does this), it also more fundamentally critiques this universalizing as founded in a particular metaphysics, one that serves as a continuum of the real abstractions of commodity exchange. Psychogeography here functions as a negative mapping, in which the blank field of *The Naked City* negatively reveals the fragmentary abstractions of the map. In doing so, however, it likewise contests the fragmentary abstraction of urban space and the disjuncture of such with the potential autonomous creation of this space as a collective, social construction.

As a *détournement*, *The Naked City* declines to find a new metaphysics on which to found some alternative, utopian totality. Psychogeography in this map is a critical strategy, a negation of spectacle. The map's title – *The Naked City* – highlights this paradox; it is by stripping away representational content that the fragmented map can more effectively illuminate the fragmented territory, revealing the real abstraction of the city by the spectacle. It is this, I argue, that the situationists' anti-map, the critical negation of the map, attempts to show.

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NOTES

- 1 ● David Pinder, 'Subverting Cartography: The Situationists and Maps of the City', in: *Environment and Planning A*, 28, 1996, pp. 405-427. E.g. J.B. Harley, 'Historical geography and the cartographic illusion', in: *Journal of Historical Geography* 15 (1989) 1, pp. 80-91; Graham Huggan, 'Decolonizing the map: post-colonialism, post-structuralism and the cartographic connection', *Ariel*, 20 (1989) 4, pp. 115-131; Denis Wood, *The Power of Maps*, London: Routledge, 1993.
- 2 ● Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit: zur Epistemologie der abendländischen Geschichte* (1970), trans. by M. Sohn-Rethel as *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, London: MacMillan, 1978, p. 191.
- 3 ● Ibid. p. 193.
- 4 ● Ibid. pp. 60-61.
- 5 ● Lukasz Stanek, 'Space as Concrete Abstraction. Hegel, Marx and Modern Urbanism in Henri Lefebvre', in: Kanishka Goonewardena et al., *Space, Difference, Everyday Life: Reading Henri Lefebvre*, New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 71.
- 6 ● Sohn-Rethel, op. cit. (note 2).
- 7 ● Guy Debord, 'Introduction à une critique de la géographie urbaine', in: *Les lèvres nues*, 6 (September 1955), trans. by Ken Knabb as 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography', in: K. Knabb (ed.) *Situationist International Anthology*, Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006, pp. 8-12 (11).
- 8 ● The Letterist International movement was the predecessor of the more well-known 1957-72 Situationist International.
- 9 ● Debord, op. cit. (note 7), p. 8.
- 10 ● Pinder, op. cit. (note 1).
- 11 ● Ibid. p. 422.
- 12 ● Ibid.
- 13 ● Benjamin Noys makes a similar claim, arguing that to some degree Debord apprehends capital's process of real abstraction, in Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012, p. 97.
- 14 ● Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle* (1967), trans. by Ken Knabb and republished as *Society of the Spectacle*, Eastbourne: Soul Bay Press, 2009, p. 33.
- 15 ● Ibid. p. 36 [emphasis in original].
- 16 ● Tom McDonough, 'Situationist Space' (1994), in: T. McDonough (ed.), *Guy Debord and the Situationist International, Texts and Documents*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004, pp. 248-249.
- 17 ● Guy Debord, 'La psychogéographie, c'est la science-fiction de l'urbanisme', unpublished catalogue notes for *Première exposition de psychogéographie*, Taptoe Gallery, Brussels (1957), as quoted in Guy Debord, *Oeuvres*, Paris, Gallimard, 2006, p. 280.
- 18 ● Guy Debord and Gil Wolman, 'Mode d'emploi du détournement', in: *Les lèvres nues*, 8 (1956), trans. by Ken Knabb as 'A User's Guide to Détournement', in: Ken Knabb (ed.) *Situationist International Anthology*, Berkeley, Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006, pp. 14-21.
- 19 ● For Debord's pithy summation of the historical genesis of the spectacle, see his letter to Juvenal Quillet, 14 December 1971, trans. by NOT BORED. Accessed through: www.notbored.org/debord-14December1971.html, 26 April 2013.

- 20 • Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Commentary on Volume One*, London: Verso, 2011, p. 16.
- 21 • Alberto Toscano, 'Real Abstraction Revisited', accessed through: www.le.ac.uk/ulmc/research/cppe/pdf/toscano.pdf, 26 April 2013.
- 22 • It should also be noted that although I make the argument linking the abstractions critiqued in psychogeographic maps to those implied by Debord's theory of spectacle, the spectacle itself is a notoriously opaque concept, one whose meaning changed and deepened over time. The notion of spectacle present in Situationist thinking during the period they were producing such maps is arguably different from the more Marxian one later developed by Debord. In this respect my proposed reading does not necessarily aim to show what was originally intended in such maps, but rather how they might be understood as consistent with the emergence of a theoretically coherent situationist approach.
- 23 • Ralph Rumney, *Le Consul* (1999), trans. by Malcolm Imrie as *The Consul*, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2002, p. 41.
- 24 • *The Naked City: illustration de l'hypothèse des plaques tournantes en psychogéographie* was later bound into Asger Jorn's *Pour la forme: ébauche d'une méthodologie des arts* in 1958.
- 25 • Guy Debord, 'Exercice de la psychogéographie', in: *Potlatch*, 2 (June 1954), trans. by Reuban Keehan as *Exercise in Psychogeography*, in: International Online. Accessed through: www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/potlatch2.html, 26 April 2013.
- 26 • For a discussion on this examination of unity and fragment in Baudelaire, and Poe's figure of the flâneur, see most famously Walter Benjamin, 'Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire' (1939), trans. by Harry Zorn as 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', in: Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (1970), London: Pimlico, 1999, pp. 152-196.
- 27 • *The Naked City*, dir. Jules Dassin, Los Angeles: Hellinger Productions, 1948.
- 28 • McDonough, op. cit. (note 16).
- 29 • Henri Lefebvre cited in: McDonough, op. cit. (note 16), p. 249.
- 30 • Debord's experiments with the cinematic image in this respect follow those of key Letterist Isidore Isou.
- 31 • Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999, p. 82.
- 32 • Guy Debord and Gil Wolman, op. cit. (note 18).
- 33 • As the work of Fredric Jameson perhaps suggests, totality often works as a concept inasmuch as it illuminates the (im)possibility of its own apprehension under certain historical conditions. Jameson further suggests that only some form of dialectical thinking would be capable of conceptualizing the gap between subjective experience and social knowledge. Fredric Jameson, 'Reflections in Conclusion' (1977), in: Theodor Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, London: Verso, 2007, pp. 196-213 (212-213).
- 34 • Arguably, here Debord's theory of the spectacle owes a debt to Lukács' thinking on reification. For an examination of the connection between Debord's theory and Lukács' see Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord* (1993), trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith as *Guy Debord*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.