

Walking for Revolution: From Surrealism to the Situationist International

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Abstract

THIS article examines the Parisian Surrealist and Situationist engagement with urban walking as a critical artistic practice. Exploring how the theme of urban wandering, essential to Parisian Surrealism in its early years, is re-elaborated in the Situationist concept of the *dérive* [drift], the article sheds new light on the relationship between these rival movements. Firstly, it offers a narrative account of Surrealist wandering that closely considers two events, the Dadaist visit to Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre in 1921 and the aimless wandering (*déambulation*) experiment in Blois in 1924, alongside two landmark Surrealist texts, Louis Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926) and André Breton's *Nadja* (1928). Secondly, it situates the difficult relationship of Guy Debord to Surrealism in the history of artistic avant-gardes. Thirdly, it highlights the importance of Surrealism to the elaboration of the *dérive*, by analysing the implicit and explicit references to Surrealism through Debord's writings of the 1950s. Finally, it turns to the literary precursors of the *dérive*, distinct from but related to the Baudelairean *flâneur*, to explore the poetic roots of Surrealism and the Situationist International in modern French literature. This article illuminates the importance of Surrealist concepts to the Situationist city, to deepen our understanding of the Parisian avant-garde and their legacies.

*La formule pour renverser le monde, nous ne l'avons pas
cherchée dans les livres, mais en errant.*

Guy Debord, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*

SURREALISM had a fundamental role in the elaboration of Situationist theories and practices, particularly in the works of Guy Debord. References to Surrealism appear constantly in Debord's writings. Yet, the relationship between these two avant-garde movements is complicated, marked by strong affinities and divergences. The Situationist relationship to Surrealism is defined at once by opposition—rejecting the movement's conceptual pillars of chance, automatism, and the unconscious—and by the continuation of Surrealist themes, ideas, and

principles. One of the most striking connections between them is the theme of urban wandering, essential to Parisian Surrealism in its early years, and re-elaborated in the Situationist concept of the *dérive* [drift].

References to the *dérive* of Debord and the Situationists have burgeoned in recent years in disciplines such as architecture, geography, art history and theory, and cultural studies; and among contemporary artists, notably in participatory and performance works (Benesch and Specq; Bassett; Hancox). Simultaneously, a vast literature has emerged on the French cultural and intellectual history of *flânerie* and of walking as a critical practice. This article builds on three key studies on the history of walking as an aesthetic or artistic practice: *Marcher, créer* (2002), by French art historian Thiery Davila, *Walkscapes* (2002), by Italian architect Francesco Careri, and *Keep Walking Intently* (2017), by American art historian Lori Waxman. Both Careri and Waxman tell the story of how walking became an artform, in which Surrealism and the Situationist International (SI) play the leading roles, setting the scene for its rise in contemporary art. Where Careri conceives walking as a critical instrument for mapping the body in the landscape, originating in the Nomads, with a transformative force for self and society, Waxman takes Surrealism as the starting point for a history of ambulatory art through the avant-garde. Davila offers a different aesthetic understanding, in a non-chronological account of walking-as-art in the twentieth century, focusing on the work of three global artists of the late 1990s: Gabriel Orozco, Francis Alÿs, and urban collective Stalker (co-founded by Careri). Davila points out that contemporary forms of pedestrian action—especially Stalker—often cite Situationist *dérive* as a formative influence. Yet, when describing their historical precursors, Davila steers away from Dada and Surrealism, centring instead on Walter Benjamin's analysis of Charles Baudelaire's *flâneur*.

The figure of the *flâneur*, made famous in the writings of Baudelaire as the anonymous, detached observer of urban life who delights in wandering the city, has been extensively studied. While urban walking as a poetic expression in modernist literature is typically grounded in nineteenth-century Paris and London, the *flâneur* is widely held as a Parisian phenomenon, anchored in the historical and geographic context of Haussmann's renovation of Paris in the 1850s and 1860s. While it is tempting to frame the later ventures of the Parisian avant-garde through the literary figure of the *flâneur*, this would be a perilous project. The Surrealists and the Situationists aimed to do something quite different by setting foot in the streets—as I will make clear—and yet their lineage is often assumed, and rarely challenged, in literary studies, which assimilate them into vague explorations of the Baudelairean *flâneur*, sustained mainly by Benjamin's interpretation of it (Tester; Wrigley). The allure of this approach is seen in contemporary literary works adopting the *flâneur* as a lens, which read like guidebooks to Paris, meandering through the city's literature, history and culture: From Edmund White's *The Flâneur* (2001) to Federico Castigliano's *Flâneur: The Art of Wandering the Streets of Paris* (2016), and Matthew Beaumont's *The Walker* (2020). The pattern holds for academic works—like anthropologist David Le Breton's *Éloge de la marche* (2000), Frédéric

Gros's *Marcher, une philosophie* (2008), and Antoine de Baeque's *Une histoire de la Marche* (2016)—which position Surrealist wandering and Situationist *dérive* in wide-sweeping treatments of walking as a universal human action.

Extending the work of Careri and Waxman, this article retraces the steps of walking as a critical artistic practice from Surrealism to the SI, to more closely examine the relationship between these rival movements and open up this discussion to a literary perspective. The article follows in four parts. Firstly, it retraces the poetic expression of wandering in Parisian Surrealism, through the consideration of two events and two texts of the 1920s. Secondly, it situates the difficult relationship of Debord to Surrealism in the history of artistic avant-gardes. Thirdly, it highlights the importance of Surrealism to the elaboration of the *dérive* by analysing the implicit and explicit references to Surrealism through Debord's writings of the 1950s. Finally, it turns to the literary precursors of the *dérive*, distinct from but related to the Baudelairean *flâneur*, to explore the common poetic roots of Surrealism and the SI in modern French literature.

Landmarks

THE Surrealist poetics of everyday life can be apprehended in their concept of wandering: locating an expressive, revolutionary power in the simple act of walking. Urban wandering was a central theme within Parisian Surrealism in its early years, developing through two landmark events and two successive texts.

The first, on 14 April 1921, was an afternoon excursion to Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre, a medieval church alongside the Seine on the Left Bank of Paris, directly opposite the city's most loved (now scorched) Gothic landmark. Announced as the *Ouverture de la Grande Saison Dada* ("Ouverture"), this event came about one year after the long-awaited arrival of Tristan Tzara in Paris in January 1920 who, along with Francis Picabia and members of the Dada group from Zurich, joined the founders of the journal *Littérature*, Philippe Soupault, Louis Aragon, and André Breton—chief organizer of this event. It was advertised as the first in a series of "excursions & visites" in newspapers and flyers handed out in the neighbourhood. While there were no details of the *rendez-vous*, there was a rationale for the venue. As the poster states: "Les dadaïstes de passage à Paris voulant remédier à l'incompétence de guides et de cicerones suspects, ont décidé d'entreprendre une série de visites à des endroits choisis, en particulier à ceux qui n'ont vraiment pas de raison d'exister",¹ with future outings planned to the Louvre, the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, the Canal de l'Ourcq, and the Gare Saint-Lazare (fig. 1). This spot in the Latin Quarter was neglected on the tourist trail and seemed to double as a garbage dump for residents of the 5th arrondissement. With an unobstructed view of the southern façade of Notre Dame, it offered a prime vantage point for a

¹ Transl.: "The Dadaists passing through Paris wanting to set right the incompetence of suspicious tourist guides, have decided to undertake a series of visits to selected places, in particular to those which have no reason for existing." Translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

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**LA PROPRETÉ EST LE LUXE
DU PAUVRE
SOYEZ SALE**

Excursions & visites DADA

DADA

UN CULTE NOUVEAU :

1^{ÈRE} VISITE :

*Église
Saint Julien le Pauvre*

PROCHAINES VISITES :
Musée du Louvre
Buttes Chaumont
Gare Saint-Lazare
Mont du Petit Cadenas
Canal de l'Ourcq
etc.

JEUDI 14 AVRIL A 3 h.

RENDEZ-VOUS DANS LE JARDIN DE L'ÉGLISE

Rue Saint Julien le Pauvre — (Métro Saint-Michel et Cité)

COURSES PEDESTRES DANS LE JARDIN

**ON DOIT
COUPER
SON NEZ
COMME
SES
CHEVEUX**

**LAVEZ VOS SEINS
COMME VOS GANTS**

DISTRIBUTION DE BAS DE SOIE A 5,85
LEÇONS DE COUPE

Les dadaïstes de passage à Paris voulant remédier à l'incompétence de guides et de cicerones suspects, ont décidé d'entreprendre une série de visites à des endroits choisis, en particulier à ceux qui n'ont vraiment pas de raison d'exister. — C'est à tort qu'on insiste sur le pittoresque (Lycée Janson de Sailly), l'intérêt historique (Mont Blanc) et la valeur sentimentale (la Morgue). — La partie n'est pas perdue mais il faut agir vite. — Prendre part à cette première visite c'est se rendre compte du progrès humain, des destructions possibles et de la nécessité de poursuivre notre action que vous tiendrez à encourager par tous les moyens.

*** EN BAS LE BAS** **EN HAUT LE HAUT**

Sous la conduite de : Gabrielle BUFFET, Louis ARAGON, ARP, André BRETON, Paul ELUARD, Th. FRAENKEL, J. HUSSAR, Benjamin PÉRET, Francis PICABIA, Georges RIBEMONT-DESSAIGNES, Jacques RIGAUT, Philippe SOUPAULT, Tristan TZARA. Acq 7 314 118

Rés. g. Z
321
(10)

(Le piano a été mis très gentiment à notre disposition par la maison Gavault.)

**MERCI
POUR
LE FUSIL**

et encore
une fois
BONJOUR

Fig. 1. Dada excursions and visits: First visit, Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre church, 14 April 1921. [Excursions et visites Dada: 1^{ère} visite, église Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre, jeudi 14 avril 1921. BNF.]

critique of Paris, the capital of monumental landmarks and city guides (fig. 2). This collective gathering subverted the ordinary “tourist” and “scholastic” circuits by diversion: turning their attention to banal places of no apparent value (the decrepit relic and not the must-see backdrop). The participants walked around the site in a strange and confused manner, being offered little in the way of explanation.

Staging an excursion to a place of insignificance, this gesture held distinctive meaning for artistic avant-gardes—as noted in the Dadaists' press release:

Il y a, paraît-il, encore quelque chose à découvrir dans le jardin pourtant si aimé des touristes.

Il ne s'agit pas d'une manifestation anticléricale comme on serait tenté de le croire, bien plutôt d'une nouvelle interprétation de la nature appliquée cette fois non pas à l'art, mais à la vie.² (Qtd. in Sanouillet 213)



Fig. 2. The Dada group in the garden of the Saint-Julien-Le-Pauvre church in Paris. [Le groupe Dada dans le jardin de l'église Saint-Julien-Le-Pauvre à Paris. Photo: D. R. Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Fonds André Breton (BRET 3:37).]

Perambulating the lines between art and life, the visit to Saint-Julien undermined art's links to institutions, culture, and commerce. The event would produce few objects of value for museums, market, or even historical interpretation. The French Dadaist Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes led a guided tour through the courtyard with a Larousse dictionary in hand, reading out definitions of words at random. The walks and their absurd commentary ended at the church entrance. Standing before a crowd, Breton read a manifesto that was both ironic and prophetic:

Tout ce qui s'est passé jusqu'ici sous l'enseigne de Dada n'avait que le caractère d'une parade. D'après elle, vous ne pouvez vous faire aucune idée du

² This note (*prière d'insérer*) was titled "Faut-il fusiller les dadaïstes ?", after an inquiry of the same name launched by *La Revue de l'Époque*. Transl.: "There is, it seems, still something to discover in this garden which is nonetheless so loved by the tourists. It isn't an anticlerical manifestation as we would be tempted to believe, but rather a new interpretation of nature applied this time not to art, but to life."

spectacle intérieur. [...] Contentez-vous de tourner la tête. Nous sommes en plein Paris. Il peut vous sembler doux en ce jour de pluie printanière [...] de vous promener au bord de la Seine et de voir en nous une jeunesse espiègle semblable à la jeunesse romantique, qui donna sa sève au XIX^e siècle. Le voici, ce fameux bijou de l'architecture gothique aux rosaces traversées par le ciel, aux saints de métal précieux pareils aux apôtres du dadaïsme en proie à la folie Éternité.³ (*Euvres* 1: 626–27)



Fig. 3. Dada event at Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre. [Manifestation Dada à Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre. Photo: Roger Van Hecke. Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Fonds André Breton (BRET 3.35-36).]

The men in suits and women in furs were huddled under umbrellas (fig. 3). The spectators were bored by the speeches and started to scatter. Upon leaving, they were handed surprise envelopes which contained “phrases, portraits, cartes de visite, étoffes, paysages”,⁴ obscene drawings, and even five francs notes defaced

³ Transl.: “All that has happened until now under the sign of Dada was just a sideshow. You can have no idea, judging from that, of the spectacle inside. [...] Simply turn your heads. We are in the middle of Paris. It may seem sweet to you, on a day of pleasant spring rain [...] to stroll by the Seine and see in us a mischievous youth similar to the young Romantics. Here it is, the famous jewel of Gothic architecture with Rosetta windows crossed by the sky, with saints in precious metal identical to Dada apostles fallen prey to the madness of Eternity” (Breton, “Artificial Hells” 140).

⁴ Transl.: “phrases, portraits, calling cards, bits of fabric, landscapes”.

with erotic symbols, as Paul Éluard mentioned in a letter to Tzara on 12 April 1921 (qtd. in Sanouillet 216). It seems that the audience dispersed without holding on to these parting traces. Apart from the poster and a few photographs, we can only really sketch out what happened that afternoon through some fragmentary accounts. Jacques Baron, for instance, remembers the last Dada event as poorly attended and “plutôt déprimante” [“rather depressing”] (45). Most of the day’s plans were scrapped due to rain. The event was not a success—it remained a one-off in the proposed series.

A month later, Breton gave the official record of Dada’s passage through Paris as part of his epistolary chronicle for Jacques Doucet, in a piece titled *Les “Enfers artificiels” : Ouverture de la “Saison dada 1921”* (*Œuvres* 1: 623–30). In a summary of the events of Spring 1921 beginning with the excursion to Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre, Breton writes: “Nous avions songé à conduire notre public en des lieux où nous pussions mieux le tenir que dans une salle de théâtre” in events without any other pretext (*Œuvres* 1: 626).⁵ While Paris Dada had promised “de vives polémiques et de grandes assemblées” [“lively polemics and large audiences”] (*Œuvres* 1: 624), the reality was disappointing. The initial phase of agitation, performances, and manifestations in 1920 gave way to a second phase of Dada activity, with a programme that included the Saint-Julien visit, the Max Ernst exhibition, the mock trial of Maurice Barrès, and the *Congrès de Paris*—events that were largely, by Breton’s measure, failures. The new momentum of the *Littérature* group was met by inertia and suspicion by the original Dadaists, causing tensions with Picabia and Tzara in particular. The emerging Surrealist project called for disciplined collective action. By contrast, Dada was founded on anarcho-individualism that did away with *all* structure and *all* hierarchy. Theorizing Dada events as “enfers artificiels” [“artificial hells”], Breton points to the limits of Dada aesthetics when he later laments that the move from “salles de spectacle à l’air libre” was not enough to put an end to the Dada “poncif” [“cliché”] (*Œuvres* 3: 468–69).⁶ The title of Breton’s article alludes to Baudelaire’s *Les Paradis artificiels* (1860), an essay on drugs and creation that explores the poet’s beautiful yet troubling visions under the influence. However, Breton will highlight a different sort of aesthetic pleasure when he mentions Baudelaire in the text, which redeems Dada in the following terms:

Il est certain que les manifestations Dada participent d’un autre désir que celui de scandaliser. Ce dernier, si fort qu’il soit (il est facile d’en suivre la trace de Baudelaire jusqu’à nous), ne suffirait pas à procurer la volupté qu’on peut attendre d’enfers artificiels. Il faut tenir compte, aussi, de l’étrange plaisir qu’il y a à « descendre dans la rue » ou « ne pas perdre pied », comme on voudra [...].⁷ (*Œuvres* 1: 625)

⁵ Transl.: “We imagined guiding our public to places in which we could hold their attention better than a theater” (Breton, “Artificial Hells” 140).

⁶ Transl.: “Moving from auditorium to the open air was not enough to get us away from the ‘Dada’ cliché” (Breton, *Conversations* 52).

⁷ Transl.: “Dada events certainly involve a desire other than to scandalize. Scandal, for all its force (one may easily trace it from Baudelaire to the present), would be insufficient to elicit the delight that

If there was something worth keeping from their collaboration, as Breton notes, it would be something other than scandal. While this urban escapade was technically Dadaist, it opened the way to another adventure. There are signs of Dadaist performance—mockery, improvisation, an attack on representation, a mood of absurdity—but as art historian T. J. Demos notes, “the event is irreducible to it, entailing, above all, an escape from the cabaret” (138). As recent scholarship has underlined, the excursion to Saint-Julien not only breaks with Dada’s theatre conventions but prefigures a new kind of artistic action: walking the city as a means of engaged cultural critique (Bishop 67–71; Haladyn).

The death of Paris Dada was declared one-by-one by disaffected members—most famously in Breton’s manifesto *Lâchez tout* (1922)—marking the transition into Surrealism proper (see Legge). Much like *Les “Enfers artificiels”*, Breton’s collection of essays *Les Pas perdus* (in which *Lâchez tout* reappeared, 1924) shows the Surrealist leader’s ongoing attempt to construct his *own* history of the movement. With shifting accounts over the years, Breton will give a final version of the “facts” in his scripted radio interviews with André Parinaud, broadcast between January and July 1952. Breton may have seen these interviews as a chance to set the record straight after the publication of *Histoire du surréalisme* (1945), by French literary critic Maurice Nadeau: a synthetic narrative that had mainly focused on the political tracts and, by declaring the end of the movement in 1939, tried to bury Surrealism before it was over. Where Nadeau had drawn attention to the roots of Surrealism in Dada, Breton insists upon its rupture: “Il est [...] inexact et chronologiquement abusif de présenter le surréalisme comme un mouvement issu de Dada” (*Œuvres* 3: 462).⁸ More than an outgrowth, Breton will define Surrealism as a distinct phenomenon and then invent a genealogy that allows him to efface and discredit the Dada episode as mere provocation (see Fourny). Competing for the place at the forefront of culture, the avant-garde forms new models of artistic production on the strata and fault lines of earlier movement. Transforming Dada’s negative logic of cultural desecration into a constructive logic of subversion, Surrealism will reinvest the pleasure of “taking to the street” with poetic meaning.

Walking with the Surrealists resumes in a second excursion organized by Breton: three years later, in May 1924, when Breton, Aragon, artist Max Morise, and playwright Roger Vitrac travelled by train 185km south-west of Paris to a town picked at random from a map. Conceived as an exploration between life walked and life dreamed, they set off from Blois on a ten-day journey in the Loire Valley. The aim was the lack of all aims: an attempt to put Surrealist games on the map. Or better, to realize Breton’s call to drop everything: leave your job, your routine, your family—get out onto the open road, “Partez sur les routes !” (*Œuvres* 1: 263). According to Breton’s biographer Mark Polizzotti, “for the most part, they wandered aimlessly throughout the French countryside, conversing all the while,

one might expect from an artificial hell. One should also keep in mind the odd pleasure obtained in ‘taking to the street’ or ‘keeping one’s footing,’ so to speak” (Breton, “Artificial Hells” 139).

⁸ Transl.: “It is [...] inaccurate and chronologically abusive to present Surrealism as a movement that stemmed from Dada.”

resolutely following their lack of itinerary” (201–02). As Breton recalls in *Entretiens* of the four-person trip through empty territory, “déambulation” [“wandering”] cut them off from reality and unleashed some troubling fantasies (*Œuvres* 3: 473–74). During rest stops, they composed automatic texts. But as tensions arose between travellers, the experiment ended. If the first walking event at Saint-Julien had overlooked a rule for engaging with the urban—the intervention of the unplanned (on that day, shitty weather)—then the second corrected the fault of the first, but it missed the mark by going *outside* city limits.

While these two pilot excursions failed under Breton’s direction, they initiated a poetics that singularizes the figures of this movement: the Surrealists were walkers. Walking in the city is an essential theme in their poetic and narrative works.⁹ And most of all, a practice that filled their everyday lives. What mattered in the Surrealist exploration of places was not the end point but the *passage*: wandering the streets without aim or end, from dusk to night. Walking in that contrary manner of automatism—at once detached and attentive—the Surrealists sought to release dormant energies of the unconscious by traversing urban and mental disturbances. Evoked by Jacques Baron as the “promenade interminable” [“endless walk”] (83), the Surrealists located modern life’s new colour and meaning in the ever-changing dynamism of the capital. The poet caught adrift in the street, with its crowds, posters, cafés, métro stations. The Surrealists saw walking as a means to jolt the screen of habit, to see the city afresh through disorientation and marvellous juxtapositions. “La rue”, Breton writes in *Les Pas perdus*, “avec ses inquiétudes et ses regards, était mon véritable élément : j’y prenais comme nulle part ailleurs le vent de l’éventuel” (*Œuvres* 1: 196).¹⁰ The group strayed from the artistic hubs like Montparnasse and Saint-Germain-des-Prés. They preferred the industrial, working-class districts of the Right Bank and the city’s northern edge: Paris of Grands Boulevards, Les Halles, and the Quartier de la Presse; Place Blanche; the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont; the flea markets at Clignancourt and Saint-Ouen. This practice resulted in two landmark works of Surrealist literature, by the writers present on that dull afternoon in 1921 and that walk in the valley in 1924: Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926) and Breton’s *Nadja* (1928).

If there is a Surrealist theory of walking, it resides in *Le Paysan de Paris* and *Nadja*: formally experimental works of prose, prefaced with theoretical principles. Both are part-fictional, part-autobiographical texts, interwoven with documents and found objects: for Aragon, fragments of maps and café menus (*cartes* of all kinds), sketches, signs, newspaper clippings, photographs of inscriptions; for Breton, photographs (of hotels and cafés; city streets, monuments, signs); portraits by Man Ray and Henri Manuel; postcards, letters; posters, drawings, and collages. In *Le Paysan de Paris*, Aragon retraces two urban walks in detail. The first centres on the Passage de l’Opéra, one of the enclosed, glass-roofed arcades in the 1st ar-

⁹ The walker is a key figure in Robert Desnos’s *La liberté ou l’amour !* (1927) and Philippe Soupault’s *Les dernières nuits de Paris* (1928).

¹⁰ Transl.: “The street, with its cares and its glances, was my true element. There I could test like nowhere else the winds of possibility.”

rondissement, dating back to the 1820s. Inside was the Café Certâ, the regular meeting place for the *Littérature* group, as well as the Dadaists passing through Paris. An architectural vestige of an earlier era, this Passage would disappear by the time of Aragon's publication due to modernization. The narrator casts an ethnographic gaze onto the city, at once participant and spectator, attentive to the exchanges between merchants, escorts, waiters, concierges, hairdressers, and clients (Sheringham 75). While these observations are informed by the Freudian notion that hidden desires construct reality, this is not a Freud-inspired dream space of neo-Classicist edifices, dramatic perspectives, phallic forms, and barren landscapes inviting psychoanalytic interpretation. Rather, the author depicts a space of marvel and reverie *in* the urban—a certain magic that Aragon locates in the unnoticed atmospheres of public baths and brothels, places devoted to sensual pleasure. Myth is no longer issued from the gods, the heavens, the idols, but formed in the sphere of lived experience: “Des mythes nouveaux naissent sous chacun de nos pas” (Aragon, *Paysan* 13).¹¹ *Le Paysan de Paris* maps the movement of bodies through urban spaces, uncovering the city's activity behind façades and closed doors, to exalt a new cult of ephemera that Aragon calls a “mythologie moderne”.

The Surrealist walker is led by a mysterious force, most often a woman—real or imaginary:¹² the mythic source of inspiration, the superior being, and incarnation of enigma (Clébert 434–35). The Surrealist city is a site of erotic encounter, a place to ignite sexual frisson in the flow of strangers. This is the premise of *Nadja*, the landmark Surrealist anti-novel by Breton: a love story that begins with a chance encounter on the boulevards (*Œuvres* 1: 643–753). Breton relates the principles of objective chance (*hasard objectif*), scrutinizing the “facts” of his life with the clinical tone of medical examination. The main event happens while *he walks*: Breton, wandering without aim or occupation down the rue Lafayette, crosses a woman by the name of Nadja. From there, he documents their nine-day affair in a chain of meetings and walks across Paris. The narrator is magnetized by the feminine figure (herself errant) whose contours he traces through a series of impressions, comments, doubts, and ruminations. Breton celebrates the protagonist's surreal visions and peripatetic life as a different way to experience the world, framing madness as altered states of mind rather than symptoms to cure. In an account of his obsessive libidinal and sentimental investments, reality becomes twisted with compulsive, evanescent projections of desire, turning objects into the tangible figuration of Breton's own fantasies. The city and walker become entangled in this winding story that flickers between conscious and unconscious thoughts—a theme that extends across Breton's trilogy *Les Vases communicants* (1932) and *L'Amour fou* (1937). In this way, *Nadja* illuminates the mental aspect of the odd pleasure obtained in “taking to the street”, so to speak.

¹¹ Transl.: “New myths spring up beneath each step we take.”

¹² As in “L'Esprit Nouveau” (1922), where Breton and Aragon trail a young woman through the streets of Saint-Germain-des-Prés (Breton, *Œuvres* 1: 257–58).

Distinguished by an idiosyncratic prose at the limits of fiction and autobiography, *Le Paysan de Paris* and *Nadja* are emblematic of the Surrealist attitude treading the lines between art and life. In search of surprise encounters and creative inspiration, transfigured by dreams and sensual experiences, the capital of Breton and Aragon opens a gateway to another world: one of authentic poetic and erotic life. The Surrealist city is both hallucinatory and realist. Hallucinatory, because the walker loses themselves in time and space, within a subjective dreamscape that escapes objective reality. Breton and Aragon treat the city as a labyrinth of hidden meanings, decrypting the signs and “secrets” that underlie façades, arcades, and landmarks—an urban fabric rich in meanings inaccessible to the clear-cut faculty of human reason. While, from the outside, the Surrealist walk appears disordered, like the free flow of images and psychic drives, the narrative gives wandering sense through quest and inquiry, culminating in identity and love (Bancquart). Realist, because Surrealist itineraries are charted through the concrete reality of Paris, referring to “anchors” (*repères*) that orient the walker toward an end point (*dénouement*). This is a dualism that characterizes *surréalité* as Breton defined it, two seemingly contradictory states of consciousness, like a lucid dreamer who sees the world with double vision (*Ceuvres* 1: 319). The Surrealists saw the city as a space for personal exploration, drawing on this experience as a source for poetic revelations and self-transformation. These texts offer an implicit theory for Surrealist wandering: a way to re-enchant the everyday through subjectivity and the act of attention.

Imprint

BY the mid-twentieth century, Surrealism was becoming known as the most influential artistic movement of their generation. In Paris after the Second World War, the new league of artistic avant-gardes faced a double challenge. First, to address the heritage of Surrealism that dominated the cultural field and, second, to confront its present form and living leader: the inimitable André Breton (see Penot-Lacassagne and Rubio). One of the first groups to emerge in this scene was Letterism, the collective of artists and theorists led by Isidore Isou that resurrected, in large part, the Dadaist attack on linguistic order through experiments in poetry, painting, film, and performance. In *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique* (1947), Isou described the history of arts as two successive phases: the “amplifying” [*amplique*] phase, moving toward progress in means of mimetic representation, and the “chiselling” [*cisélante*] phase, working to destroy those means (like the Letterists themselves). By bringing the destructive process to its limit, Isou announced his movement as the “final” avant-garde that would achieve the so-called end of art. When a breakaway faction of Letterism formed around Guy Debord in 1952—the Letterist International (LI), to become the Situationist International (SI) in 1957—this goal was taken forward. The SI declared themselves the true successors of Dada and Surrealism, overcoming the “failures” of former avant-gardes in a final stage of modern art that would integrate everyday life.

With the same emancipatory agenda, Debord combines the theoretical standpoints of Dada and especially Surrealism—negation and construction—for a so-called supersession (*dépassement*) of art.

If novelty is paramount for the avant-garde, they must reinvent models of artistic creation that surpass earlier movements—this process is mimetic and always reactionary. In the same way that the manifesto was used strategically by the artistic avant-garde to galvanize collective identity, conditioning the development of one movement to the next, Debord annexes the Surrealist framework to negate the past until the present, asserting his group's agency in culture and society. The SI responded to two failures of revolutionary praxis: the disintegration of the avant-garde and the decline of the radical Left. In the first expression of their political-aesthetic stance, *Rapport sur la construction des situations* (1957), presented at the SI's founding conference at Cosio d'Arroscia, Debord argues that a regressive pattern destined the avant-garde to fail: when a collective recognizes that their will to change the world is unachievable, the group reverts to the dogma they had initially rejected.

There are two movements emphasized in Debord's history of modern art, allowing for a narrow definition of the SI's origins, consequences, and aesthetic aims. First, the Dadaists, who delivered a fatal blow to the traditional conception of culture but ordained their own dissolution through a logic of absolute negation: “Ses violentes manifestations, dans l'Allemagne et la France de l'après-guerre, portèrent principalement sur la destruction de l'art et de l'écriture, et, dans une moindre mesure, sur certaines formes de comportement (spectacle, discours, promenade délibérément imbéciles)” (*Œuvres* 311–12).¹³ What exactly is Debord referring to here, in terms of Dadaist *promenade*? It is strange that Debord would even mention such a thing. There are virtually no traces of the Berlin Dadaists' actions in the street, given their preference for context-based ephemeral practices (Grindon 92). This leaves two possibilities: Debord may refer to the Dada Early Spring Exhibition (*Dada-Vorfrühling*) at a pub in Cologne, April 1920, where visitors were escorted through the urinals by a girl reciting poetry and then given axes to destroy the artworks displayed in the courtyard.¹⁴ But it is more likely that he refers to the aforementioned walk to Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre organized by Breton in May 1921 as part of Paris Dada, which also featured, among other oddities, deliberately idiotic spectacles and speeches. Breton's account of the Saint-Julien event in his interview with Parinaud would have been accessible to Debord; the series aired on national radio and was published in full by Gallimard in 1952. The second focus of Debord's history of modern art is (of course) the Surrealists, who endeavoured to define a field of “action constructive, à partir de la révolte morale” [“constructive action on the basis of moral revolt”] (*Œuvres* 312) but resorted to dependence on

¹³ Transl.: “Its violent manifestations in post-war Germany and France, mainly concerned with the destruction of art and writing, and, to a lesser extent, with certain forms of behaviour (deliberately idiotic spectacles, speeches, walks).”

¹⁴ When Max Ernst and others were excluded from a museum exhibition, they decided to hold their own in a public house, the Brauhaus Winter.

automatism and the unconscious. These points are developed in the first issue of the journal *Internationale situationniste*, published one year later, opening with a piece titled “Amère victoire du surréalisme” [“The Bitter Victory of Surrealism”]. Debord writes:

le surréalisme a réussi. Cette réussite se retourne contre le surréalisme [...] avec les autres contradictions du capitalisme évolué, les mêmes impuissances de la création culturelle, maintient l’*actualité* du surréalisme et en favorise de multiples répétitions dégradées.

Le surréalisme a un caractère indépassable, [...] parce qu’il est déjà [...] un *supplément* à la poésie ou à l’art liquidés par le dadaïsme, parce que toutes ses ouvertures sont au-delà de la post-face surréaliste à l’histoire de l’art, sur les problèmes d’une vraie vie à construire. De sorte que tout ce qui veut se situer, techniquement, *après* le surréalisme retrouve des problèmes *d’avant* (poésie ou théâtre dadaïstes, recherches formelles dans le style du recueil *Mont-de-Piété*).¹⁵ (3)

As an example of a question *predating* Surrealism, Debord cites Breton’s first published work, *Mont de piété* [*Pawnshop*] (1919), a collection of experimental poems written between 1913 and 1919. In the subsequent article “Le bruit et la fureur”, by proposing to invent a “mouvement plus libérateur que le surréalisme de 1924” (5), Debord revisits a pivotal time in the group’s history: the year of the opening of the *Bureau des recherches surréalistes*, the publication of Breton’s *Manifeste du surréalisme*, and the launch of their flagship magazine *La Révolution surréaliste*. Although Debord remained conceptually indebted to the revolutionary outlook of Surrealism in the 20s, he felt that the movement had betrayed its original spirit, mainly due to its commercial success and decline into occultism from the 30s onward. While preparing the second issue of *Internationale situationniste*, Debord explains the privileged place of this movement—that is, a long critique of Surrealism placed first-up in the inaugural issue of the journal—in a letter to Constant Nieuwenhuys, known as Constant, dated 8 August 1958: “le surréalisme s’est présenté comme une entreprise totale, concernant toute une façon de vivre. C’est cette *intention* qui constitue son caractère le plus progressif, qui nous oblige maintenant à nous comparer à lui, pour nous en différencier (le passage d’un art révolutionnaire utopique à un art révolutionnaire expérimental)” (*Correspondance* 129).¹⁶ Exalting poetry, desire, and spontaneity, the SI will radicalize Surrealist

¹⁵ Transl. : “SURREALISM IS A SUCCESS—but [...] this success has turned surrealism against itself. [...] contradictions of advanced capitalism have reduced surrealism to an endless parade of degraded repetitions. [...] surrealism cannot overcome its character, because it is already [...] a *supplement* to the art and poetry liquidated by dadaism, and because all its overtures are beyond the surrealist epilogue to the history of art on the problems of a real life to construct. All those who attempt to situate themselves *after* surrealism once again discover questions which *predate* it (Dadaist poetry or theatre, formal research in the style of the *Mont-de-Piété* collection)” (Debord, “Bitter Victory”).

¹⁶ Transl.: “Surrealism presents itself as a total project, concerning a whole way of living. It is this *intention* that constitutes Surrealism’s most progressive aspect, which [now requires] us to compare ourselves to it, so as to differentiate ourselves [from it] (the transition from a utopian revolutionary

principles in order to eclipse the “armchair politics” of their predecessors, proposing a full-blown revolutionary programme that addressed the culture of everyday life.

While Debord’s critique in “Amère victoire du surréalisme” dissects the theoretical bases of the Surrealist project, this is not always the case in the LI and SI publications. The rampant mentions of Surrealism and Surrealist members found in the LI bulletin *Potlach* and the journal *Internationale lettriste* are typically polemical in tone, taking the form of acerbic critiques or personal insults, fired at André Breton and his entourage. Breton and co. are depicted by the LI as sell-outs, conspirators, gangsters, Stalin-sympathizers, and proponents of so-called “sénile-occulte” Surrealism. As Krzysztof Fijalkowski explains, the “principal target for the LI’s and SI’s persistent and sometimes frankly *ad hominem* attacks” was not the historical interwar Surrealist group (the hard core built around Breton, Aragon, Éluard, Soupault), but rather the post-war Parisian Surrealist group: their contemporary rivals (28–29). In addition to the call-outs in their respective journals, there were a number of face-offs between the LI and the post-war Surrealist group. The two groups even attempted to come together on a joint protest around the commemoration of Arthur Rimbaud’s 100th birthday. The LI accepted to co-sign a Surrealist tract about the misattribution of a poem to Rimbaud, *Ça commence bien ! [It Starts Well!]*; but, in a matter of weeks, the tract was re-printed by the LI as *Et ça finit mal [And It Ends Badly]*, marking the end of a brief alliance.¹⁷ The LI rip into the Surrealists for abandoning their project for social revolution, characterizing them as capitalists working to safeguard the academy and the bourgeois world: “Breton, aujourd’hui c’est la faillite. [...] Le mouvement surréaliste est-il composé d’imbéciles ou de FAUSSAIRES[?]” (Debord, *Œuvres* 165).¹⁸

We should not, however, reduce their conflict to the surface disturbance of polemic discourse. Shock tactics and provocations are the ammunition of avant-gardes. As Fijalkowski notes, even though the LI and the SI roasted the post-war Surrealist group, they still accepted and integrated many central Surrealist attitudes that defined the movement in its first decade, like its focus on everyday lived experience (28). While the LI lambasts Surrealism for their faults, the movement is constructed on their precedent. To outdo Surrealism, Debord confronts and emulates it constantly. If we accept the view of Jérôme Duwa, it was this rivalry with Parisian Surrealism that led Debord to align with Revolutionary Surrealism in Belgium, pursuing collaborations with the poet Paul Nougé and his younger associate Marcel Mariën in the mid-1950s. Considered the primary theorist behind Belgian Surrealism, Nougé had always kept distance from the Parisian faction; he preferred the rational over the irrational, rejecting the concepts of automatism and the unconscious, thus sharing many of Debord’s views on Bretonian Surrealism

art to an experimental revolutionary art)” (Debord, *Correspondence* 149; the changes to the translation are mine).

¹⁷ A response to the Surrealist counter-tract *Familiers du Grand Truc*, published a few days earlier.

¹⁸ Transl.: “Breton, this is bankruptcy [...] Is the Surrealist movement composed of fools or FORGERS[?]”.

(like those in the 1957 *Rapport*). During his visit to Paris in 1954, Nougé proposed that the LI collaborate with the Brussels-based journal *Les lèvres nues*, directed by Mariën, which became a venue for a series of key texts by Debord between September 1955 and November 1956, including “Introduction à une critique de la géographie urbaine” [“Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography”] (1955) and “Théorie de la dérive” [“Theory of the Dérive”] (1956).

Passages

IF Surrealist Paris was the site of erotic encounter, for the Situationists, the streets are the target of critique: the city was modelled on rationalist logic in service of capitalism and the state. Through modernity, Paris had been monumentalized, museumified, engineered, and organized in ways that built alienation into urban life. First, in Haussmann’s renovation of the Second Empire: a plan of monumental streets and homogenous buildings that forced the working class out of the centre and divided the city along class lines. And then, in the vast network of roads reserved for bourgeois devices (cars); the newly-constructed orbital highways (*périphériques*); and the oppressive urban schemas and concrete towers of Le Corbusier. The social agendas of modernist functionalism—initially thought to improve life for the masses—had actually been subsumed by the productivist discourse of capitalism, reducing life to repetitive, utilitarian acts sanctioned by business and bureaucracy. The city’s user, unthinking subject of habits and routine movements, passed through the streets in monotonous circuits from home to work. As suggested in Debord’s film *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps* (1959) [“On the Passage of a Few Persons Through a Rather Brief Unity of Time”], “Ils ne voyaient pas l’insuffisance de leur ville. [...] Nous voulions sortir de ce conditionnement, à la recherche d’un autre emploi du paysage urbain, de passions nouvelles” (*Œuvres* 478).¹⁹ The Situationists propose a counter-use of the city to wilfully disrupt the pedestrian’s humdrum repetitions. Their zone was Paris of the Latin Quarter: stretching from the bars and taverns of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in the 6th arrondissement, to the streets around the Sorbonne, rue de la Montagne Saint-Geneviève (the LI and later the Situationist HQ) and the Place Contrescarpe in the 5th. Seeing the city fall to the utilitarian logic of modernity, the group will develop a poetics of movement to reclaim urban space overrun by bourgeois values—namely, in the *dérive*, first practiced in Summer 1953 during the early years of the Letterist International (LI).

While it is widely acknowledged that the Letterists and the Situationists appropriate Surrealist wandering in their concept of the *dérive*, there is more to be said on this relationship. Aesthetically, Situationist drift has been framed by Jean-Marie Apostolidès as both a *continuity* and *opposition* of the Surrealist imagination, or by Alexandre Trudel as the move from dreams to intoxication. Boris Donné makes

¹⁹ Transl.: “They did not see the deficiency of their city. [...] We wanted to break out of this conditioning, in quest of another use of the urban landscape, in quest of new passions” (Debord, “Passage”).

a compelling case for the Surrealist influence on the *dérive*, suggesting that the inspiration was catalysed in 1953 through Debord's encounter with Ivan Chtcheglov (alias Gilles Ivain), extracting side-by-side quotes from Breton, Chtcheglov, and Debord of astounding similarity. Chtcheglov, a Russian poet well versed in the works of Breton and Aragon, may have passed on to Debord a set of patently Surrealist ideas without recognizing their origin; from this perspective, drift seemed to be little more than an "imaginative update" of a game for which the rules were fixed in Surrealist literature twenty-five years earlier. Yet, Donnée's claim that Debord could have received these ideas without detecting their sources seems unlikely in light of his exchanges with classmate Hervé Falcou between 1949 and 1953 (pre-dating his meeting with Chtcheglov), which show Debord's passion for Surrealism as a teenager (see Debord, *Marquis*). In a letter to Falcou from 1950 that is covered in about thirty aphoristic phrases alluding to Dadaist and Surrealist authors, two of these phrases in particular stand out. In the upper corner of the page, Debord reworks Breton's famous closing lines of *Nadja*, "La beauté sera CONVULSIVE ou ne sera pas" (Breton, *OEuvres* 1: 753), rephrased by Debord as: "L'AMOUR / ne peut être que convulsif / ne se recommence pas",²⁰ while in the lower section, he writes:

Les Rencontres

elles sont fortuites
elles sont tout ce
qui vaut la peine
de marcher (Debord, *Marquis* 59)²¹

The emphasis placed here on love, chance encounters, and walking, alongside the several references to the Surrealist texts that Debord reads at the time—a corpus to which, in 1951, he adds Breton's *Anthologie de l'humour noir* and *Amour fou*, as well as Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* (*Marquis* 72)—leads me to believe that Debord was aware of the origin of these themes before the time the *dérive* was conceptualized. In this critical debate, I will argue more along the lines of Simon Sadler's discussion in *The Situationist City*, suggesting that the urban and conceptual priorities of the *dérive* were deliberate ways to create distinctions from the better-known Surrealist precedents. In their engagements with the city, there is a crucial shift: from the Surrealist use of spectacle *for* critique (as staged at the Saint-Julien event), to the Situationist critique *of* spectacle. Attentive to the conditioning mechanism of a media-crazed society, as Sadler notes, for the SI, spectacle is not the gateway but the barrier (15).

In the "Théorie de la *dérive*" (first published in *Les lèvres nues*, no. 9, November 1956), Debord defines the *dérive* as a "technique du passage hatif à travers des ambiances variées"²² where the drifter drops all their regular motives for movement

²⁰ Transl.: "LOVE / can only be convulsive / cannot be repeated."

²¹ Transl. : "Encounters / they are fortuitous / they are all / that it is worth / walking for."

²² Transl.: "technique of hasty passage over varied ambiances".

and action, “pour se laisser aller aux sollicitations du terrain et des rencontres qui y correspondent” (*Œuvres* 251).²³ In simple terms, the *dérive* translates as the intentional act of spontaneous walking through the city. Practiced alone or in small groups, a *dérive* consisted (at its inception) of unplanned movements from one neighbourhood to another, in cycles of walking, drinking, and drifting—to excess. Termed a “ludique-constructif” [“playful-constructive”] behaviour, drifting focuses on the immediate, sensory experience of the city, and is premised on opposition to the classic, leisurely notions of the voyage and the stroll (*promenade*). In this text, Debord gives mention to the famous aimless wandering (*déambulation*) event in 1924, departing from a town selected at random, fated to be “un échec morne” [“a dismal failure”] because “l’errance en rase campagne est évidemment déprimante, et les interventions du hasard y sont plus pauvres que jamais” (*Œuvres* 252).²⁴ Debord then cites the physiologist Pierre Vendryès, who had commented on this anecdote in an article titled “Surréalisme et probabilité” in the neo-Surrealist magazine *Médium* (no. 3, May 1954) comparing the Surrealist experiment to his observations of tadpoles in a tank. Adopting a satirical stance on “libération antidéterministe”, Debord seems to hold the author with as much intellectual capacity as tadpoles—and the Surrealists with less: the “têtards [...] ont cet avantage d’être ‘aussi dénués que possible d’intelligence, de sociabilité et de sexualité’” (*Œuvres* 253).²⁵ If Debord is at pains to set his proposal apart from Breton’s pilot excursions in the 1920s, he manages to downplay chance in the equation—Breton’s *objective chance*, that is. The *dérive* doesn’t seek randomness without aim, but involves both a letting-go and an intention. It is a set of techniques to record the real movement of a body through space, a way of charting flows with an urban index. Some places are attractive, others repellent; the drifter responds to the push-pull effect of their surroundings. The *dérive* taps into the atmospheres of particular districts to stir variations in emotions and behaviour, seeking out contrasts that could provoke new experiences and perspectives of the city. While the Surrealists saw chance as a force to break rational constraints and trigger self-transformation, in sync with the unconscious, the SI framed the *dérive* as a means for broader social transformation with conscious intent: they insist upon the need to walk *differently*, purposely subverting mundane patterns of movement, to critique the capitalist structures of urban life.

While anyone familiar with the literary works of Parisian Surrealism would be able to see urban walking as a major theme, the task of finding a critical text that elucidates this idea might not be so easy. Of the few mentions to errancy or walking in the Surrealist manifestoes, the most striking of these are poetic evocations: Aragon’s notion of the “surréal” as a relation “qui fuit comme l’horizon devant le

²³ Transl.: “to let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there”.

²⁴ Transl.: “Wandering in open country is naturally depressing, the interventions of chance are poorer there than anywhere else.”

²⁵ Transl.: “tadpoles [...] have the advantage [over the Surrealists] of being ‘as devoid as possible of intelligence, sociability and sexuality’.”

marcheur” [“that flees like that horizon before the walker”] in *Une vague des rêves* (18); Breton’s half-dreamed vision of the “homme marchant” [“walking man”] cut in two by a window in the *Manifeste du surréalisme*, and his depiction of “l’idée surréaliste” as “la promenade perpétuelle en pleine zone interdite” in the *Second manifeste* (*Œuvres* 1: 325, 791).²⁶ This works to the advantage of Debord, who devises a theory for Situationist *dérive* based on a rational approach. “Théorie de la dérive” reads as an open-ended experiment: Debord outlines the parameters of *dérive* in time (hours to days to months) and space (cities, landscapes), setting the scope of this experimental field, its best conditions (climate, light rain; not too late); rules and exceptions (taxis, “static-dérive” [“static-drift”]); with a quasi-scientific language (“composantes” [“elements”], “unités” [“units”], “relevés” [“surveys”]) like data to be analysed, quantified, plotted on urban terrain.

The *dérive* is grounded in the complementary concept of *psychogéographie*, presented in “Introduction à une critique de la géographie urbaine” (first published in *Les lèvres nues*, no. 6, 1955) as “l’étude des lois exactes et des effets précis du milieu géographique, consciemment aménagé ou non, agissant directement sur le comportement affectif des individus” (Debord, *Œuvres* 204).²⁷ Psychogeography traces the path and observations of the *dérive* in the form of descriptive accounts (*comptes rendus*), images, and maps. However, psychogeography is at best a hybrid science, mixing the objective and subjective—just like the *dérive* occurs in concrete reality, but seeks to extract its affective and poetic quality. This tension is reflected in the “Introduction à une critique de la géographie urbaine”: it is a critical text strewn with references to social scientists (geographers, sociologists, and urbanists); alongside references to works of architecture and art (paintings by the Surrealist precursor Giorgio de Chirico, depicting the troubling “quartiers d’arcades” [“arcade districts”] (*Œuvres* 207); the Baroque painter Claude Gellée, dit *Le Lorrain*) and literature. Debord may avoid citing any Surrealist authors, but he gets awfully close: “*L’imaginaire est ce qui tend à devenir réel*, a pu écrire un auteur dont, en raison de son inconduite notoire sur le plan de l’esprit, j’ai depuis oublié le nom” (*Œuvres* 209).²⁸ Debord is here quoting Breton’s poem “Il y aura une fois”, from *Le Revolver à cheveux blancs* (1932). In the closing paragraph of “Théorie de la dérive”, Debord writes:

Je ne m’étendrai ni sur les précurseurs de la dérive, que l’on peut reconnaître justement, ou détourner abusivement, dans la littérature du passé, ni sur les aspects passionnels particuliers que cette dérive entraîne. Les difficultés de la dérive sont celles de la liberté. [...] Un jour, on construira des villes pour dériver.²⁹ (*Œuvres* 257)

²⁶ Transl.: “the endless walk in a forbidden zone”.

²⁷ Transl.: “the study of exact laws and precise effects in the geographic context [...] acting directly on the affective behaviour of individuals”.

²⁸ Transl.: “*The imaginary is what tends to become real*, may have written an author whose name I have since forgotten, due to his notorious misconduct on the plane of the mind.”

²⁹ Transl.: “I will neither dwell on the precursors of the *dérive*, that we can rightly recognize, or excessively distort, in the literature of the past, nor on the particular passionate aspects that this

Two years later, in 1958, Debord will republish “Théorie de la dérive” in the second issue of *Internationale situationniste*, with a few important changes. A sentence was added, emphasizing method over manner by putting a caveat on the output: “Ce que l’on peut écrire vaut seulement comme mot de passe dans ce grand jeu” (“Théorie” 22).³⁰ The two reports of *dérives* along with two passages were removed from the text, leaving, in place of this final paragraph, an abrupt conclusion: “(A suivre. . .)” [“To be continued”]. With Debord’s insinuations that we can effectively recognize *or* misappropriate the literary precursors of the *dérive*, his initial comment warrants speculation.

Precursors

WALKING in the city is unquestionably a motif in modern French literature and, as I showed earlier, essential to the Surrealist works of Aragon and Breton in the 1920s. The Situationists may sidestep the Surrealist classics, but they exalt the movement’s precursors: from the Marquis de Sade to the Comte de Lautréamont, Jonathan Swift, Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Guillaume Apollinaire, Jacques Vaché, and Arthur Cravan. For Debord, the influence of Surrealism reaches back to his youth; his letters to Falcou are the proof. Not only was Breton the first version that Debord reads of Karl Marx, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Sigmund Freud, but also likely his way into writers that Debord admires and will cite (or *détourner*) across his oeuvre.

Surrealism looms large in Debord’s work and thinking. Fragments snatched from Surrealist texts are everywhere in his writings. One challenge to pinpointing the Surrealist influence lies in discerning between the said and *unsaid* at the discursive level, between the explicit, on one hand, and implicit allusions, on the other. Debord’s reading notes (*fiches de lecture*), citations, and short commentaries organized in the folder “Poésie, etc.” within the Fonds Debord at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, transcribed integrally in the volume edited by Laurence Le Bras under the same title (2019), are a crucial source for intertextual readings. As Gabriel Zacarias suggests in the postface of *Poésie, etc.*, these citations and commentaries had a key purpose for Debord: a source for *détournement*, appropriating them in his critical works as much as his films.³¹ Debord kept in mind the poems of Apollinaire, Baudelaire, and others, that he recited first by memory, and then found later in his notes (*Poésie*). Based on Debord’s notes, it seems that what interested him most in Baudelaire was neither his poetry, nor the *flâneur*. Most citations come from the second part of *Les Paradis artificiels*: Baudelaire’s translation and commentary of *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), by Thomas De Quincey, which recounts the author’s drug addiction and long walks under the

dérive entails. The difficulties of the *dérive* are those of freedom. [...] One day, we will build cities for drifting.”

³⁰ Transl.: “Written descriptions can be no more than passwords to this great game.”

³¹ For an English translation of Zacarias’s postface, see “The Budding Forest: Guy Debord’s Reading Notes on Literature” in this themed issue of *New Readings* (pp. 1–18).

influence, drifting through the working-class streets of London. The Situationists will often evoke De Quincey's *Confessions* (the story of Ann of Oxford Street in particular) as precursors of the *dérive* (see Debord, "Préface"; "Urbanisme").

Almost all the Situationist heroes (Swift, Sade, Rimbaud, Apollinaire, Cravan, De Quincey) are featured in Breton's *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (1940), a text that Debord owned and analysed (*Poésie* 94–98). The "Poésie. etc." folder includes Debord's notes on Surrealist materials—the first five issues of *La Révolution surréaliste* and the collection of *Manifestes* (Sagittaire, 1955)—which, as Fabrice Flahutez suggests, reflect his understanding of Surrealism, substantiated by a close reading of Breton. In the analysis Debord devotes to *Manifestes* (*Poésie* 85–95), he turns specifically to Breton's famous list of precursors in the 1924 *Manifeste du surréalisme*, noting the "systématisation (abusives) de tout génie. . ." ["(excessive) systemization of all genius. . ."], exclusively lyric poets. Debord's notes on the *Manifestes* were likely written between 1955 and 1965, by which time he was probably quite familiar with the landmark works of Surrealism. This list had already caught Debord's attention; he used it for "*Un projet d'article-détournement de Breton*", a draft that he sent to Chtcheglov in November 1953³² seeking suggestions for the definitive version, which appears in *Potlach* (no. 2, 29 June 1954) with the revised title "Exercice de la psychogéographie" ["Exercise in Psychogeography"]:

Piranèse est psychogéographique dans l'escalier.
Claude Lorrain est psychogéographique dans la mise en présence d'un quartier de palais et de la mer.
[. . .]
Jack l'Éventreur est probablement psychogéographique dans l'amour.
[. . .]
André Breton est naïvement psychogéographique dans la rencontre.³³ (*Œuvres* 136–37)

As for the Surrealist precursors, many informed the Surrealist poetics of walking. The works of Aragon and Breton refer directly and indirectly to their literary ancestors: whether in the allusion to *Le Paysan perversi*, by libertine writer Rétif de la Bretonne (who describes his nocturnal walks in *Nuits de Paris*), or the influence of *Aurélia*, by Gérard de Nerval (who writes elsewhere of *Promenades et souvenirs*), in the representation of dreams, madness and love, channelled in *Nadja*. As Michael Löwy notes, the Surrealists never hid their fondness for the nineteenth-century Romantic tradition, but were highly selective in their attachments; they were drawn most to writers who contested bourgeois capitalism with an ambition to re-enchant the world (138–42). Where the Romantics had ventured into nature looking for sublime experience, the Surrealists located a revelatory power in the urban: on the boulevards, by the Seine, in the middle of Paris—latent zones of surprises and magic.

³² Reproduced in Debord, *Marquis* 145.

³³ Transl. : "Piranesi is psychogeographical in the stairway. / Claude Lorrain is psychogeographical in the juxtaposition of a palace neighbourhood and the sea. / [. . .] / Jack the Ripper is probably psychogeographical in love. / [. . .] / André Breton is naively psychogeographical in encounters."

Roving the city without agenda undoubtedly descends from the Baudelairean *flâneur*: the solitary, anonymous, bourgeois stroller at home in the flux of the city, a figure entwined with the changing urban landscape of Paris in the mid-nineteenth century. In his essay *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (1863), Baudelaire details his concept of modernity alongside the aesthetic of the *flâneur*, who seeks out “la beauté passagère, fugace, de la vie présente” [“the fugitive, fleeting beauty of present-day life” (*Painter* 40)] (*Œuvres*, 2: 724)—embodied in the artist Constantin Guys, whose pen-and-ink sketches captured the speed, fashions and impressions of Paris of the Second Empire. If the Surrealist attitude extends the ideas of Baudelaire’s aesthetic manifesto, it would be in the premise of contemplating life, then finding the means to express it: is this not the avant-garde goal after all, to realize art within life itself? Ambling the streets without occupation or purpose, Baudelaire’s dandy *flâneur* has the means and time to waste. A popular figure in nineteenth-century literature before Baudelaire’s portrait of it, the Parisian *flâneur* was typically bourgeois—shown in Louis Huart’s vignettes *Physiologie du flâneur* (1841) and in Honoré de Balzac’s *Théorie de la démarche* (1833): a “code” for the walker, defining the right appearances, postures, expectations, and behaviours. As capitalism had put an end to idle society (*société oisive*), what was once a marker of privilege in the time of Balzac or Baudelaire was shameful in the early twentieth century. For the Surrealists, walking was not only a way to waste time, but to actively subvert the rigid working hours of modern life with an anti-conformist stance. This is not to suggest, however, that the *flâneur* doesn’t resist the bourgeois’ transformation of the city. Baudelaire regrets the loss due to Haussmannization, particularly of the areas of old Paris—expressed famously in “Le cygne” (in the “Tableaux parisiens” cycle of *Fleurs du mal*): “la forme d’une ville / Change plus vite, hélas ! que le cœur d’un mortel” (*Œuvres*, 1: 85).³⁴ As a mode of urban exploration and critique, this resonates with Aragon’s *Paysan*, who perceives the changes in those spaces called *passages* as if “il n’était permis à personne de s’arrêter plus d’un instant” [“it were forbidden to stop for more than an instant”] (19–20). Aragon creates a deeply personal mapping of Paris, navigating the city as both a physical and mental space. Likewise, Breton, who explores a complex world of urban signs and symbols, to unlock hidden meanings and desires. While the characters of *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869) are fascinated by the surprising beauty of the streets, the *flâneur* maintains a sense of distance and anonymity; Baudelaire’s city is a theatre and the *flâneur* a detached observer of urban scenes. More than passive observation, the Surrealist walker seeks to actively interpret the city, unearthing deeper layers of psychic and personal meaning.

The relationship of Surrealism to Baudelaire was the object of an early study by Swiss literary critic Marcel Raymond, *De Baudelaire au surréalisme* (1933)—a book within both Breton and Debord’s personal libraries. Raymond’s essay traces the filiation of Baudelaire to Rimbaud to Apollinaire, praising Surrealism as the proponent of a new poetry and representation of modern life. However, it is

³⁴ Trans.: “Old Paris is no more (for cities change / – alas! – more quickly than a mortal’s heart)” (Baudelaire, *Flowers*).

important to note that both the Surrealists and Situationists developed theories and practices of walking distinct from the tradition of the *flâneur*. If Baudelaire is taken as the major reference for pedestrian poetics, has this limited our view of a potentially wider array of precursors and their influence on the artistic avant-garde? We should not overlook other predecessors—like Apollinaire’s *Le Flâneur des deux rives* (1918) and his opening piece for *Alcools*, “Zone”, tracing a walk through Paris from sunrise to sundown—as formative sources in the elaboration of Surrealist walking and its afterlife in the SI.

Conclusion

FOR the Surrealists and the Situationists, Paris is a source for events and narratives; walks that put chance and everyday sites on the map. *Le Paysan de Paris* and *Nadja* are the primary supports for a Surrealist theory of walking, stories that retrace their encounters and meandering paths across the city. The Paris that attracted the LI and the SI may not have been the Paris evoked in the works of Aragon and Breton, whose influence is downplayed in the critical writings of Debord. But by reworking this concept and declaring the streets as their field of activity, the Situationists extend the Surrealist attitude, developing their revolutionary intention into an experimental art in life itself. Transforming the Surrealist “revolution of the mind” into a total revolution of everyday life, the SI radicalizes Surrealism’s theoretical postures in a melancholic critique of post-war urbanism and consumerist society at large. The Situationist relation to Surrealism is two-sided: constructive and negative, since they at once appropriate the Surrealist model and demarcate themselves from it. Departing from the Surrealists’ automatic wandering, the idea of the *dérive* supplants chance and the unconscious with reason and conscious volition. In excursions to the middle of Paris, boulevards and arcades; in the act of hasty passage through the city; both Surrealism and the SI renew the position first manifested in Dada: the odd pleasure of taking to the street.

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