

# *Urban Drifting as a Work Method of the Creative Class*

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ABSTRACT. The paper emphasizes the double meaning of drifting, understood both as the physical movement of strolling aimlessly and the attitude of letting oneself be carried away in life by chance. Both aspects are linked in the use of drifting as a method of city exploration, practiced by *flâneurs* (Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer), situationists (Guy Debord), hobos (“the bohemians in the ranks of common labor” according to Robert E. Park) and the artists of survival (Chaplin’s Tramp). All these illustrate the paradoxical character of the urban strolling, which implies to get deliberately lost and to act by doing nothing, to react with a calculated spontaneity and to steer passivity, in an obvious analogy with creative (and artistic) processes. Such professional “urban pilgrims” conquer the city by succumbing to its fascination, experience the personal freedom as a productive idleness, and find self-fulfilment in creative improvisations. In this respect it is significant that drifting has been practiced in a reflective way precisely by exponents of the creative class, such as journalists and writers, architects and film makers.

“Les fleuves m’ont laissé descendre où je voulais.”

— Arthur Rimbaud

“Allez-vous faire influencer.”

— Gil J. Wolman

According to the information bulletin of the Internationale Lettriste, the French verb *dérivée* has the following meanings: 1) to drain off water, as in the words *dérivation* and *dérivatif*; 2) to leave the shore; and 3) (nautic) to drift, which stems from English *to drive* (Debord 2002, p. 206). The

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following considerations focus on this third meaning of a slow movement, which can be exemplified by a ship's or an aircraft's deviation from their course due to currents, side winds respectively (*The Oxford American Dictionary* 2003, p. 438). However, Rimbaud's poem *Le Bateau ivre* (Rimbaud 1982, pp. 132-133) opens the way for a symbolic interpretation of *dérive* (drifting), conceived as a passive movement of being carried casually or aimlessly. Later on, the French situationism will validate this meaning of a practice of disinterested and unintentional strolling.

In the following interpretations drifting refers to a double movement: the physical locomotion, sliding or floating, and the metaphorical drifting of an individual whose course of life has deviated from the ordinary track. In both cases, drifting implies an almost paradoxical steering of casualness and affection. And since the best laboratory for the study of human nature and social processes is the city (Park 1967, p. 46), this specific intertwinement between agency and passivity will be illustrated further on by examples of urban strolling taken from literature, journalism, architecture, sociology, and cinema (Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Situationism, Robert E. Park, and Chaplin). They all make clear that the *methodical* practising of drifting represents a paradoxical project, which consists in getting deliberately lost, acting by doing nothing and reacting with a calculated spontaneity. Such wanderers conquer the city precisely by succumbing to its fascination, they experience personal freedom as a productive idleness, and oppose to the routine of work the creative improvisation, understood as a means of self-fulfilment.

In conclusion, drifting has been elaborated as an artistic method of exploring cityscapes and thus can be considered *a work method of the creative class*. Also drifting manifests obvious *analogies to the art creation*, that has often been described precisely as an amalgam of passivity (the reception of an impersonal inspiration) and intentionality (the application of learned skills). Last, but not least, drifting as a way of life may provide an alternative theoretical model to the cliché of *bohème* for conceiving the *aesthetic existence*.

### ***I. The Flâneur : Empathy at a Distance***

The flâneur meanders through the city in a state of “anamnestic ecstasy” and takes it in possession by absorbing impressions and historic knowledge and by converting them into an “emotional knowledge” (Benjamin 1989, p. 529, p. 525). And this requires not only sensory acuity and attention, in order to keep one’s way in the city labyrinth and decipher its signs, but also the empathic aptitude to feel the pulse and “streams” of the city life. These opposite requirements result in a certain ambivalence of strolling: on one side, flânerie is practiced with an almost physiological intensity, as a sensual-erotic ecstasy of being chased on streets; on the other side, the hunted is hunting himself impressions and adventures, being driven by the typical hunter’s *flair* (Benjamin 1989, p. 647, p. 969). Put it in other words, floating on a sea of impressions does not exclude to seek on streets “characters” of the real *Comédie humaine*. The flâneur’s psychological distance reminds of the indifferent *Blasiertheit*. Georg Simmel (1995, p. 116) had ascribed to the citizen of metropolis, the means by which they protect themselves against the torrents of changing stimuli and the obtrusive physical nearness of the crowd. The reverse concerns the flâneur’s “empathic *ivresse*” (Benjamin 1989, p. 562), which is epitomized by Balzac, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Valéry, and other *peintres de la vie moderne*.

Nevertheless, the empathy is confined to observation: the stroller carries out “studies” of the street life, by reading the passers-byes’ feelings, thoughts and past in their physical aspect, yet he refrains himself from interfering with their lives. The flâneur never takes the leap from observation into (artistic) intervention; he is a master of the aesthetic distance and regards everything through the glasses of aestheticism.

As for the relation between *otium* and *negotium*, it has to be warned against the plain equation of the flânerie with idleness; for example, unlike the dandy, the flâneur is a “diligent and productive” drifter (Benjamin 1989, p. 567). The street is not only the stage for his aesthetic *Selbstinszenierungen*, but also a market to conquer (Benjamin 1989, p. 537), and his sensitivity includes the feeling for social trends. Only this gift for trend-scouting enabled the flâneur to gain recognition and make his living by “aimlessly” hanging around. In other words, he succeeded to change the

side and convert himself from a customer into a merchandise (Benjamin 1989, p. 93). By that, he has broken with the consumer's passivity and displays actively his products on the market of ideas.

## ***II. The Social Reporter : Hostage of Impressions***

This complex interpretation undergoes a substantial impoverishment in Siegfried Kracauer's reportages on Paris, which describe how the journalist is carried away by the "ecstasy of the street" and drifts aimlessly. The flâneur's unstable balance between intentionality and impressionability according to Benjamin inclines towards passivity, and the stroller experiences captivation as a painful binding: "The street where I was did not let me free." (Kracauer 1992, p. 45) Also Kracauer manifests a clear preference for poor neighbourhoods, who charm him less by their semantic complexity than by the intensity of the atmospheres they irradiate (mostly, of uncanny, which makes another difference to Benjamin). Thus Kracauer's melancholic flâneur is terrified by the potential violence of the city and shivers only by recalling the dark passages of his Berliner childhood and its quarters that used to be considered hotbeds of hold-ups.

Yet drifting cannot be practiced *methodically* by a stroller who has lost self-control and is haunted by nightmarish visions. For this reason, such social reportages seem less to be addressed to a market of anonymous readers, but are meant to liberate their author from the compelling fascination of his impressions. Nevertheless, they still aim to sensitize the public opinion for acute social problems and draw the attention to the loss of humanity which can only consternate an ethical flâneur.

## ***III. Constructing Situations***

Also for the situationists the issue at stake was "primarily ethical" (Debord 2002, p. 14), yet they went further than Kracauer and called for a programme of action. By that, they distanced themselves from the classical flâneur's principle of aesthetic distance, spectacle and non-intervention and focussed on the use and discovery of means of action.

The situationist movement emerged as a reaction against the crisis of the modern culture, against functionalist architecture and consumerism, which had allegedly repressed the instinct of play and stifled creativity. On the contrary, the situationists claimed the suppression of any difference between life/work and play/leisure; correspondingly, art should help to create new forms of life, by producing playful environments (Debord 1958) and a “completely construction of lifestyles” (Debord 2002, p. 123). Whereas the society of the spectacle was ascribing humans only the role of passive, uncreative consumers, Debord’s fellow-combatants insisted that the most honest way of life consists in commitment and participation, that is, by bringing audience on stage. Concretely, the situationists ascribed to themselves the function of a political avant-garde that was able to stir a cultural revolution and mobilise the proletariat (a class without past and historic prejudices) to produce art (Debord 1958a).

However, the means of action developed by the situationists revolve merely around the conditioning of affective dispositions, as the following paraphrase of Marx shows: „The passions have been sufficiently interpreted; the point now is to discover new ones.“ (Debord 1958c) Instead of evoking emotions in beautiful works of art, the situationist strollers were driven by the ambition to shape the humans’ behaviour — and this required to develop new methods to explore the city. The main one was *dérive*, “a technique of purposeless changing of place” under the effect of the scenery (Debord 2002, p. 78), “a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances” (Debord 1958b), and “the practice of a passional journey out of the ordinary through a rapid changing of ambiances” (Debord 1958c). Like other strollers, the situationist is fond of the urban heterogeneity, yet the rapid tempo of his escapades contradicts the classical flâneur’s leisurely pace. But most important is that in order to practice *dérive* — this contradictory deliberate straying, search for accident and well-thought spontaneity —, the stroller has to achieve first a state of enjoyable disorientation, which enables him the leap into passivity.

Moreover, the emphasis put on emotional behaviour distinguishes the French situationism from other streams of the urban studies. For example, Kevin Lynch asked the urban planners in 1960 to produce clear, “Cartesian” images of cities, that enable the citizens’ orientation and identification with their city of residence. And although he agreed that people may

enjoy losing their way, if this enables them to discover new sites, in the end, the need for security and legibility of the city prevails (Lynch 1989, p. 13). On the contrary, the situationists discarded no means of bringing about insecurity and disorientation, from taxi tours to the use of alcohol and narcotics. And still their textual description of *dérives*, some of which had lasted several days, make no allusion to any bodily efforts or failures, as if the strollers were wandering through the city like some sort of incorporeal, energetic arrows. Once again these *enfants terribles* remind of Rimbaud's poetical manifesto for a "long, huge and rational disturbance (*dérèglement*) of all senses" (Rimbaud 1961, p. 28). The same "extension of life" Rimbaud was aiming at was inscribed in the situationist programme (Debord 1958d).

But whereas the post-romantic *poètes maudits* opposed the poetry of metropolis to the scientific positivism and rationalism, the situationists dreamt of conciliating art and science. Their alliance should lead to the foundation of a new science, called psychogeography, which had to determine the "exact laws and specific effects of geographical environments, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals" (Debord 1958c). For that purpose, the situationists started by drawing so-called psychogeographical city maps, on which they recorded the itineraries of their drifting. Occasionally they even stated that the city should be divided into "'states-of-mind' quarters" (areas with different atmospheres and emotional intensities), so that each district "would be designed to provoke a specific basic sentiment to which people would knowingly expose themselves" (Debord 1958c). Also, given that the psychogeography was only at the beginning, Debord claimed that a preliminary phase of "small-scale experimentation" (Debord 1958c) was necessary, during which the situationists would construct and perform theatrical situations before a passive audience. Although this acting was meant to be abolished later by a gradual activation of the audience, the reports of their initial experiments still cannot conceal a certain methodical deficiency: The descriptions of places namely refer exclusively to the artists' impressions and take no interest in the residents' life, as if they had been moving through an empty city. Thus they resemble to still-life photography, where traces of people's lives alone suggest that these places are really inhabited. The real agents of the social life are reduced to a theatrical dec-

oration, and the situationists enjoy less the other people's presence than their self-enjoyment — and all this in spite of their radical critique against the aestheticism of the bourgeois culture.

Let us return now to the physics of drifting. Drifting is the result of the intervention of an external disturbing factor, that influences for a certain period the subject's behaviour (mostly, by deviating its movement from the original course). Therefore a *dérive* takes place under two conditions: the intervention cannot be anticipated due to the complexity of the context (situation); and the duration of the influence has to be limited in time (transience). To play *dérive* implies not only to select certain city districts for their imaginative and emotional potential, carry out "field research", collect empirical data, and finally record them in a graphic, verbal or cinematic form, but also to construct situations which are able to bring about new emotional qualities. Unfortunately, the situationists' texts do not allow any precise representation about how can be constructed situations and emotional ambiances. Debord himself mentioned two strategies of intervention, yet without providing further details: by changing the material context (e.g. to redesign the site) and by influencing the human behaviour (which basically may be attained also through other methods) (Debord 1958c). In any case, the results have to remain mere ephemeral „passages“.

#### ***IV. The Stroller's Freedom***

But do the situationist manifests still have a liberating effect nowadays? Firstly, the contemporary slick commercialization of emotions is based precisely on the *construction of situations*. Both the architecture of wellness and happiness and the event marketing have specialized in the design of environments which evoke specific moods/atmospheres and in the production of a changing scenery for the "collectors of feelings" (Bauman 2007, p. 180).

A second reason to doubt the contemporary opposition between the situationist programme and the commercial culture concerns the stroller's ethics. Whereas Zygmunt Bauman (2007, p. 213) regards the (postmodernist) flâneur as an avatar of the aesthetic consciousness, Christian Höller (2004, p. 42) sees in him a forerunner of the artistic activism and interventionism.

And thirdly the practise of flânerie has always been possible only under the condition of leisure, of a relative economic freedom and of the political right to move freely through the city. In other words, the stroller is never exposed to any concrete dangers, keeps permanently under control the situation he runs into and exerts bodily self-control. His body is always bursting of motivation, awake, alert and vigilant, in perpetual receptivity, similar to what Bauman (2007, p. 188) called the “fitness” of the consumer’s body. What we usually regard as passive receptivity for stimuli turns out to be an achievement, a performance, the result of physic-psychological discipline and training. And this is the moment in which the tramp, as prototype of the anti-flâneur, gets on stage: for no one knows better than him which amount of bodily and psychological engagement is necessary when living on the street has become a permanent condition.

### ***V. Hobo and Urban Research***

In 1938 Robert E. Park was extolled in a student’s poem as a “tramper through cities” (cited in Lindner 1990, pp. 136 —140). Indeed, the founder of the Chicago School of Sociology used to recommend his students to “go into the district”, in order to “get the feeling” and “become acquainted with the people” (cited in Lindner 1990, p. 118). But even though the urban sociologists’ methods include the disinterested observation of the street life, their investigations still differ from both flânerie and the tramp’s wandering, since they neither drift, nor hang around, but rather sneak and sniff/snoop around, more like journalists or detectives. Such work method is primarily intentional and not steered by casualness or chance.

In certain respects Park was indeed a “tramper through cities”. Yet there is another aspect that makes him even more interesting for our topic, namely his research on the wandering workers or tramps. For example, the article *The Mind of the Hobo: Reflections upon the Relation between Mentality and Locomotion*, argues that “mind is an incident of locomotion” (Park 1967a, p. 156) and that physical mobility has a positive influence on the mental activity and the progress of the social organism. But how is then possible that the hobo has “been able to contribute so little to our

actual knowledge of life” (Park 1967a, p. 158), in spite of his high mobility, plenty of leisure and rich experience in diverse social milieus? The answer refers to his “lack of vocation” and disorientation: the hobo is “always on the move, but he has no destination [...]. He has gained his freedom, but he has lost his direction.” (Park 1967a, p. 158) The flight from routine is consumed non-productively, exclusively in physical restlessness and without learning from experience. The “Wanderlust” converted itself into a vicious circle the hobo cannot break off any more, like a formal repetition or a bad infinity without progression. He has nothing left but to leave again and again, which means, following Kierkegaard, to flee from his self. According to Park, the wandering worker is an individualist who sacrificed any social binding to a romantic passion for freedom, but lost any possible home and is condemned to an essential homelessness. Like Rimbaud’s ship, he is *à la dérive*, without a destination or harbour he can return to, “a man without a cause and without a country” (Park 1967a, p. 159).

Therefore the reader may well be surprised that Park rehabilitates the hobo at the end of his article and ascribes an “artistic temperament” to him: “[...] for the hobo is the bohemian in the ranks of common labor” (Park 1967a, p.160). Finally, examples of *hobo poets* (Whitman, Villon) confirm that poetry represents the tramp’s only contribution to culture.

## **VI. The Tramp’s Improvisations**

The hobo introduces us to the *real dérive*, to the existential drifting that is born of disorientation and the experience of sheer contingency (*Faktizität*). In 1915, the same year in which Park’s article about the hobo’s mind was published in Chicago, the short movies shot by Charles Chaplin in Hollywood were making the Tramp worldwide-famous. His character is not exempt of a certain ambiguity: on one side, he takes over requisites of the classical flâneur, on the other side he parodies the dandy’s elegance. The Tramp’s talent for mimicry enables him to move freely among all social classes, yet without sharing their values and without adapting himself to the social surroundings. This Proteus remains deep inside an intruder, resistant against any methods of education and reluctant against any attempts to get rid of him. His origins are unclear, and he can hardly

be assigned a social category by his profession, environment, relatives or friends, not even age. His life is confined to *hic et nunc*, without memories and future plans.

Moreover, while the flâneur invariably returns *chez lui* from his wandering, the spectacle of the street is the Tramp's "natural place". From there he peers with curiosity through the shop windows and even succeeds now and then to slip inside for a while. For street can never be a real home; dangers lurk everywhere, disguised as delinquents or policemen. Unlike the flâneur — a respectable citizen —, the Tramp makes daily the experience of insecurity, and no institution protects him if he enters by chance *no-go*-neighbourhoods (like in *Easy Street*). The differences that nurtured the flâneur's aesthetic pleasure turn out to be social contrasts.

Compared to the common urbanites, the Tramp stands out by his strong passion for individual freedom, in relation to which affluence and work are mere instruments. And this lack of work ethos reminds that the flâneur had been initially suspected of social parasitism. (See a comment in *City Lights*: "Determined to help the girl, he finds a job." — Only Eros can compete with the irrepressible impetus to freedom.) On one side, Chaplin identifies himself in his early films with no social group; on the other side, his Tramp feels morally compelled to intervene for strangers who are in trouble. While the Vagabond often acts passively when it comes to his life, he is subject to a sudden metamorphosis and acts decidedly when the others' happiness is at stake. The reasonable, interested and egocentric attitude that characterizes for Simmel (1995, p. 118) the dweller of the metropolis fits to the Tramp as little as Kracauer's non-acting, intellectual sympathy or the hobo's inner drifting. Nevertheless, in spite of its affective intensity, the Vagabond's engaged solidarity still remains episodic and has, like the Tramp's entire life, the character of a *project* that is limited in time. Once the 'mission' accomplished, he moves further —alone. Thus the Tramp's life course looks like a series of adventures and "fortuitous and casual relationships", which are typical for the city life in general (Park 1967, pp. 40 —41).

Yet urbanity cannot be ascribed to the Tramp without any further comments, since he wanders with the same nonchalance on city boulevards and through well-off suburbia as he rambles through city slums or on dusty country roads. Paradoxically, he succeeds to become a binder of the social

net precisely because of his lack of identity and apparent insignificance (Kracauer 1992, p. 324). Therefore drifting has in film the function of a *narrative technique*; the protagonist's strolling at random offers the ideal stratagem to connect heterogeneous milieus and to present them from an eternal outsider's perspective.

But can the Tramp be really considered a victim of the social order? Chaplin's later films witness the radicalization of the socio-political critique; however, in the short movies shot between 1915 and 1918, *the Vagabond always runs into a situation he has constructed himself*, and enjoys playing disinterestedly, according to rules which he set by his own. This subtle power did not escape the situationists' notice. During a press conference given by Chaplin in 1952 in Paris, Debord and a few colleagues share a flyer against Chaplin, in which they accuse him of being a swindler of feelings and of having benefited financially from his talent to impress the audience up to tears (Debord 2002, p. 253). The proper answer to sufferance can only be a "revolution". And still the situationists had obvious affinities with Chaplin's Tramp through their impetus to anarchy, the part of troublemaker they assumed, a non-continuous and playful conception of life, not to mention the prospective look.

Emblematic for the Tramp's basic belief in future is the end of Chaplin's short films, with the road that opens itself, or the final scene of *The Circus* (1928), where Chaplin impersonates the Tramp who plays at his turn for a while an artist. Kracauer (1992, p. 324) commented as following this last scene: "A vagabond is this conqueror, a beggar who has his country nowhere and everywhere. The fact that he lacks what the others possess is precisely one of the secrets of his power."

To sum up, the previous considerations referred to artistic representations of characters whose urban strolling defines both a profession and a way of life. Commented city walks represent a method which in different forms (*flânerie*, field research, *dérive*, drifting) has been practiced by artists. My lecture aimed to illustrate how activity and passivity interfere in both professional strolling and existential drifting: receptivity and empathy suggest rather passive attitudes, whereas the spirit of observation, emotional self-control, bodily self-discipline, and the interpretation of the cityscape require the stroller's active engagement with the environment. Also the

above-mentioned case studies contradict the usual approach to drifting as a non-productive pastime, and emphasize how drifting may be linked to a creative work, serve as a preliminary study for interventions in the city fabric, and express the uncompromising preservation of the individual freedom.

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