

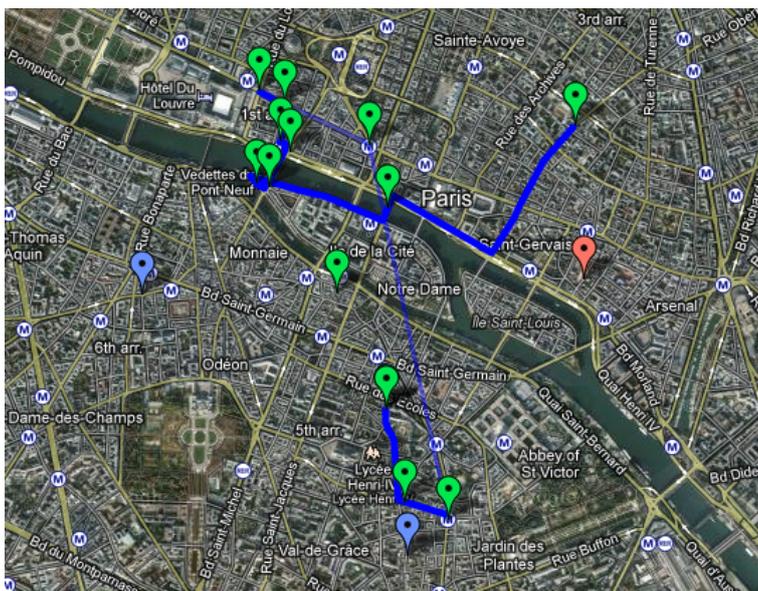
Paranoid Disorientation: The Wandering of Ivan Chtcheglov

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During this presentation, there will be some eliding of the terms Lettrist and Situationist. This is partly due to the writing of others, but not helped by Lettrist texts being published in early issues of the Situationist International journal. I also apologise if I accidentally pronounce any French words or names correctly.

I want to begin with a brief, but familiar, description of the psychogeographical practice of the *dérive*, before moving on to written records of *dérives* carried out by members of the Lettrist International. These include first-hand accounts by Guy Debord and secondary accounts by Tom McDonough in *Delirious Paris: Mapping as a Paranoiac-Critical Activity* (2004a) and Jean-Marie Apostolides and Boris Donné in *Ivan Chtcheglov, Profil Perdu* (2006). I then want to explore the possible relationship between Chtcheglov's mental illness and the Lettrist development of the *dérive*.

The *dérive* is often described, by artists, as a drifting walk in response to urban environments and variations on the *dérive* are employed to explore the city in ways that run counter to prescribed activities such as shopping or other forms of consumption. This is the kind of art practice characterised by use of locative media, such as GPS, to track movements in space, often doing little more than accumulate data for display. However, the *dérive* is not just walking around in the "celebrated aimless stroll" of the Surrealists, but is characterised by Debord as the rapid flight from one ambience to another (Debord 1958/2006), which is a dimension of the *dérive* that seems to have been lost in contemporary variants.



I had intended to draw parallels between the Lettrist and Situationist practice of drifting, sometimes for as long as 'three or four months straight' (Knabb 2006), and the extended periods of mania associated with bi-polar disorder and schizo-affective disorder.

Having discussed the matter with people on a bipolar disorder discussion forum, I have to acknowledge that even an expert on

mania could not have access to Chtcheglov's mental state, and so the *dérive* cannot be conclusively

linked to his later diagnosis of schizophrenia. Instead, I will recount several dérives and attempt to identify what was peculiar to those conducted by Chtcheglov and what was lost to the Lettrists and Situationists by his exclusion for ‘mythomania, interpretative delirium, lack of revolutionary consciousness’ (Wolman 1954).

While doctors regard hallucinations and delusions as psychotic symptoms, many people with mental health diagnoses disagree. Some consider that the medical model dismisses theirs and others’ experiences as out of touch with reality, arguing instead that reality is a subjective experience. This social model of mental health suggests that people are not disabled by their mental illness, but by society’s inability to accommodate this extent of difference from norms (Mind 2012). Delusions associated with schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorder fall into two types: Paranoia (usually meaning thinking someone is trying to harm you) and delusions of reference (thinking that common objects and places hold special messages for you) (MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia 2012). I think it is clear from the following accounts of the Lettrist dérives that both types of delusion were significant influences.



According to Jean-Michel Mension, the first dérives happened more or less by accident during the rail strike in the summer of 1953. Mension recalls hitchhiking back and forth across the city with Debord and others, getting drunk and disorientated (Mension 2001: 102), hardly walking at all. In fact, Mension points out that he personally got very tired walking

and that distances seemed longer because they were drunk most of the time (Mension 2001: 102-5).

The first reference to the dérive in situationist literature is Chtcheglov’s *Formulary for a New Urbanism* (1953/2006) in the first issue of the Situationist International journal (1958), the text having been written five years earlier in 1953 during the Lettrist International period. In the originally published, abridged version of the text the practice is not expanded upon much beyond the statement that it involves the ‘changing of landscapes from one hour to the next’ resulting in ‘total disorientation’ (Chtcheglov 1953/2006: 7). However, the original full text of the *Formulary* includes references to a ‘magical group

spirit' functioning in an 'ethic of drifting', an 'aesthetic of behaviours' and the statement that 'a *dérive* is a good replacement for a Mass' (Chtcheglov 1953/2006: 7). It may be telling that the Situationists chose to remove these sections, seeking to distance themselves from Chtcheglov's often spiritual inflection, while retaining the main sections about the mobile and changeable 'new urbanism' designed to promote 'free play'. Debord writes that Situationist theory was in favour of a noncontinuous conception of life: a life made up of a series of discrete moments or situations (Debord 1957/2006: 41-2) and to this end he also includes static *dérives* and the 'possible rendezvous' as forms of behavioural disorientation.

For Debord, the *dérive* is not only 'a passional journey out of the ordinary through a rapid changing of ambiances' but is also 'a means of psychogeographical study and of situationist psychology' (Debord 1957/2006). Based mainly on the first of Debord's *Two Accounts of the Dérive* (Debord 1956), McDonough suggests that, in addition to gathering material for the production of 'psychogeographical' maps, a significant part of the purpose of the *dérive*, inspired by the surrealists' writing on paranoia, was to develop a 'a kind of systematization of the practice of disorientation' (McDonough 2004a). This disorientation is imagined as playful and the *dérive* is presented as a *ludic* tactic that takes place in the *strategic* space of the city (McDonough 2004b: 259).

The *dérive* is described by Debord and, through him, McDonough as a militaristic and political tactic for undermining capitalist organisations of space, while for Chtcheglov it is an almost spiritual and certainly psychological practice. If there is a Situationist aesthetics, it is probably what Chtcheglov calls an 'aesthetic of behaviors' (Chtcheglov 1953/2006: 7) In 1963, Chtcheglov wrote to Debord: 'We practiced in 1953-1954, three or four months [of continual *dérive*], it is the extreme limit, the critical point. It's a miracle we're not dead' (Apostolidès and Donné 2006: 66) suggesting instead that the average duration for a *dérive* should be a week, a month at most (Chtcheglov 1964).

There is a marked difference between the two accounts of *dérives* given by Debord in *Les Livres Neus*, the first of which was undertaken by Debord, Chtcheglov and Gaëtan Langlais, and the second by Debord and Gil Wolman (Debord 1956). The first *dérive*, further discussed by McDonough in *Delirious Paris* (McDonough 2004a), had the character of a series of paranoid encounters from a film noir. Like André Breton and Louis Aragon's accounts of wandering the streets of Paris, it featured 'uncanny encounters with strangers who seem to hold the keys to unlocking the city's mysteries' (McDonough 2004a: 75-6)

The second account, without Chtcheglov, had a much more planned and analytical feel to it during which nothing really seemed to happen, with Debord and Wolman reflecting on the experience as being ‘of little interest as such’ and drawing up future routes in response (Debord 1956).

Chtcheglov writes in the *Formulary* that ‘experience demonstrates that a *dérive* is a good replacement for a mass’ seducing people to enter into collective behaviours (Chtcheglov 1953/2006: 7). It is clear from the account presented by Apostolidès and Donn  that for Chtcheglov there was a spiritual and ritualistic, even Voodoo, dimension to the *dérive* (Apostolidès and Donn  2006: 66).

The first of Debord’s *Two Accounts of the D rive* (1956) is the one that McDonough chooses to discuss. The account of the fantasised *d rive* offered by McDonough valorises Debord and almost presents Chtcheglov as a mere companion. However, I would like to suggest that the *d rives* with this disorientated quality were actually driven by Chtcheglov rather than Debord. It took place before the formation of the Situationist International, around the New Year of 1953/4 during which Debord and Chtcheglov had a sequence of paranoid encounters in bars. On 2nd January, after a tense exchange with a Yiddish speaking man in a bar, they were chased through the streets by two unknown pursuers, which the two friends reimagined as the plot from an American film noir (McDonough 2004a: 76).



According to Mension, Chtcheglov was extraordinarily well read and came from a family of intellectuals (Mension 2001: 97), he also had a nervous tic that consisted of his repeating the phrase ‘I have a tic’, sometimes for the duration of a whole metro journey (Mension 2001: 97). Debord was very close to Chtcheglov and paid ‘very close attention’ to him. Mension reflects that, because he was a visionary and his ideas were already formed, Chtcheglov helped Debord a

great deal in making progress on the issues of urbanism and the relationship between art and life (Mension 2001: 101).

For Chtcheglov, the transition from one year to another was an important moment that focused the mind on the flow of time. During the *dérive* at the close of 1953, Langlais abandoned along the way because of the increasingly uncontrolled meetings in shady bars. Chtcheglov and Debord, in almost constant drunkenness, ‘sought to erase the boundaries between day and night, between licit and illicit, between fraternity and hostility, and even between the living and the dead’ (Apostolidès and Donn  2006: 66). The themes of voodoo and zombies throughout this *dérive*, quite foreign to Debord’s sensibilities, show the influence of Artaud on Chtcheglov: a magical view of the world and an irrational belief in the power of spells (Apostolidès and Donn  2006: 66).



The same mystical beliefs and voodoo theme appear in the account of a *dérive* of several weeks with Debord over the new year 1955-56, as told by Chtcheglov to a friend of Patrick Straram. The discovery of small canoe-shaped patterns, interpreted as animal tracks, reminded the Lettrists of the nave where Joseph of Arimathea carried the Grail and led to the fortified city of Carcassonne. The *dérive* apparently ended ‘on the ramparts of the city with the

mystical murder of a little girl represented by a doll.’ (Apostolidès and Donn  2006: 66)

It is clear that Chtcheglov’s experience of the world was unusual and in different contexts or cultures he may have been viewed as a visionary or a seer, but in 20th Century Paris he was an uncomfortable fit. In one anecdote about Chtcheglov he planned to blow up the Eiffel Tower, with Henry de B arn, using dynamite stolen from a building site, not as a political act, but because its light kept them awake (Hussey 2002: 51). They boasted about their plan in a bar and were soon arrested before they could follow through.

‘Sometimes Chtcheglov would find it impossible to stay in one place for more than a few minutes and would wander through the city for days in a kind of trance, hallucinating from fatigue and lack of food, in pursuit of “the hacienda”’ (Hussey 2002: 94) He was obsessed by occultism and claimed his actions were controlled by Tibetan Lamas (Hussey 2002: 94) who he and Langlais saw all over the place, which Debord felt was altogether too surrealist, leading to Chtcheglov’s exclusion (Mension 2001: 98).

In 1959, Chtcheglov was arrested by police and confined in a mental hospital. Accounts of his arrest and incarceration differ. According to Mension, Chtcheglov wrecked an entire billiards bar room while drunk, which led to someone calling the police and his being forcibly committed to a mental hospital. Mension clearly blames Chtcheglov's wife, Stella, for signing the committal papers and suggests that it was treatment at hospital that caused Chtcheglov to be 'destroyed' (Mension 2001: 100-1). However, according to Apostolidès and Donn , it would be wrong to present the episode as being a forced committal ordered by Stella. In their version of the incident, Chtcheglov was in the midst of a full-blown psychotic episode and he attacked the companion of actor and writer Arlette Reinerg with such violence that it came to a doctor's attention. The doctor called the police who claimed to be doctors when they arrived, so the dazed Chtcheglov followed them to their car. He was taken to mental hospital where he was diagnosed with schizophrenia. (Apostolid s and Donn  2006: 85)



McDonough has Debord describing aspects of the *d rive* as dedicated 'to atheism, oblivion and to the disorientation of customary routines' (McDonough 2004a: 76) while it is clear from Debord's text that he is actually referring to a particular neighbourhood (Debord 1955: 8). McDonough uses this notion of the *d rive* as a means of systematically producing disorientation to argue that Debord is engaging in a modified form of Salvador Dali's paranoiac critical method. For Dali, paranoia was both a tool for developing visual imagery and an interpretive method that can be applied to the world (McDonough 2004a: 76). Stewart Home describes McDonough's essay as a 'puff piece' on his hero Debord (Home 2005) and, indeed, McDonough does seem to be at pains to connect the *d rive* with surrealist practice, possibly as a form of aesthetic legitimisation. He presents a romanticised account of extreme paranoia as an artistic practice by Debord and Chtcheglov in which paranoia is 'deliberately induced' (McDonough 2004a: 76), but for Chtcheglov paranoia was probably not a choice.

While it is fair to say that Debord was aware of surrealist practices and was influenced by them, it seems unconvincing to suggest that he appropriated the paranoiac critical method in this way. Debord denounced the surrealists repeatedly and was keen to distance the Lettrists and Situationists from

association with anything that seemed irrational, which is one of the reasons Chtcheglov was excluded from the group.

While I am sceptical about McDonough linking the Lettrist dérives with Dali (he acknowledges it is problematic too), John Cussans provides a much more convincing intersection between the dérive and the paranoid critical method. Cussans' Paranoid Critical Theory is his attempt to combine Dali's method with the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt school to develop a research methodology outside academia's insistence on 'reason'. He uses the kind of 'linguistic-substitutional' process found in Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, to link texts with locations in cities in which he has lived and to travel 'beneath the surface' of his own psychogeographical associations (Cussans 2010: 20). This may provide an important key in understanding the lettrist and situationist experiments in psychogeography; that they had a pre-existing relationship to the neighbourhoods they drifted through. In the New Year 1954 dérive referred to in Debord's *Accounts*, there is a clear geographical knowledge concerning the steps leading from Square du Vert Galant up to Pont Neuf, which is unknown to their supposed pursuers (Debord 1956). They were not drifting through completely unknown territory. In Cussans' psychogeography, particular texts or associations relate to specific geographical locations, for instance he links Richard Nixon and the Watergate tapes with his secondary school metalwork room. He cannot say why that association exists because it is clouded by his unconscious (Cussans 2010: 40: n.7). As clusters of associations begin to form, they consequently affect reading of texts that become linked with that location in future. Cussans' approach as described in *The Para-Psychic Properties of Marmelade* (2010), involves the individual development of a nodal matrix of ideas and associations related to real territories. However, he also carries out collective dérives or 'outings' as part of The Bughouse, which are collective, future-orientated, psychic explorations of the city.



The art group AAS, of which I am a member, undertook to explore the practice of the dérive and has, at times, fallen into the same error as many other artists in thinking of the dérive as simply being a directionless exploration of urban space. However, through a series of experiments into a combination of walking and fabulation, some genuinely collective states of creative paranoia emerged, the most notable being the

Woeley Castle intersection. After arriving at Woeley Castle, just as the clocks went back, at about 1am, during a 24 hour *dérive* that had started at 9am the previous day, we found a secret message from John Cussans encoded on some loose video tape hanging from a birch tree. The message was later decoded during a *séance* as containing references to the vision quest itself, the clocks going back, spirit guides called *pookahs*, and a cat that we had encountered at intervals on the *dérive*. We sent our findings to Cussans.

While many artists are engaged in forms of psychogeography that use walking, sometimes even drifting or meandering as in the case of a range of data-heavy artists, such as Blast Theory, Jodi, or Heath Bunting, very few use the *dérive* in manner demonstrated by Chtcheglov, as a means of collectively entering into a paranoid group fantasy to explore not only the city, but our own collective unconscious. Some notable exceptions being the London Psychogeographical Association, Stewart Home and Iain Sinclair (with Marc Atkins), who use the same kind of occultist, fabulating *dérive* as Chtcheglov, in the manner discussed by Cussans. They reemphasise the psychological part of the portmanteau 'psychogeography', rescuing it from a flat pseudoscience reliant on an overabundance of locative media.

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