

## Still Drifting? Expanded Situationism and Filmic *Dérive*

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That of “expanded cinema” is a fascinating and elusive concept that has been in use since the 1970s but not in an wholly coherent way; while having been applied to a rather vast range of artistic experiences, the following definition by Jackie Hatfield is helpful, in that it highlights some of the concepts that most frequently recur in the critical literature and that better capture the prevailing idea of this complex phenomenon:

Not without ambiguities, expanded cinema as a term generally describes synaesthetic cinematic spectacle (spectacle meaning exhibition, rather than simply an issue of projection or scale), whereby the notions of conventional filmic language (for example dramaturgy, narrative, structure, technology) are either extended or interrogated outside the *single-screen* space. (Hatfield 2005, 5; emphasis in original)

While in this article I consciously do not engage with expanded cinema strictly speaking, at least not according to Hatfield’s definition, I will focus on notions of a participative spectacle that is filmic in nature or origin, but that expands beyond the typical cinema screen consumption to inform a new spectatorial perception of space and time. The field I am interested in here is one that can be seen as the manifestation of a consciousness which is based on filmic models — something that finds an echo in Gene Youngblood’s famous definition of expanded cinema as not “a movie at all: like life it’s a process of becoming, man’s ongoing historical drive to manifest his consciousness outside of his mind, in front of his eyes” (Youngblood 1970, 41).

The phenomenon I want to engage with is that of situationist *dérive*, seen as a form of production at once cultural and critical that attempts to create a participative spectatorial experience and that is profoundly connected, I argue, to a filmic consciousness “outside the mind” — one which has today expanded beyond the cinema screen. Hence, ideas connected to expanded cinema are helpful in identifying the aesthetics and ideology of a use of technology that is no longer filmic, but that derives from it, while having never been a cinematic genre or form in itself. Expanded cinema’s emphasis on participation, on performance and on an adapted experience of space and time are equally useful to an understanding of the contemporary phenomenon of post-situationist *dérive*. My point is that *dérive* can be seen, in some of its manifestations at least, as a filmic concept; but

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one that does not associate itself with the cinema as a historicised technology of projection and a place.

### ***Dérive*, today: a post-Debordian scenario**

Defined by Guy Debord as “technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances” that requires a “playful-constructive behavior” (Debord 2006, 62) and an awareness of the psychogeographical effects of urban areas, *dérive* was understood by the Situationists as an operation that tends to reorganize and change the city, rebuilding it as a potential space, at once open and new. *Dérive* has come into being in at least three different ways: first, as an experience made by individuals or groups of Situationists devoted to the practice of the quick passage through urban environments, guided by the attractions of the area itself and by occasional encounters; second, as a theoretical and critical activity that focuses on capitalist society and on the space capitalism forges and controls; and, third, as reflexive and cultural forms of production, for example the reports of specific experiences of *dérive*, such as those published by Debord and Marcel Mariën in 1956 in *Les lèvres nues* (Debord 2001), or maps like the famous *The Naked City*, first published in 1957 and consisting of nineteen fragments of the map of Paris connected by directional arrows.

These three emanations of the concept of *dérive* certainly work at different levels. *Dérive* itself is not just a technique but it is also an action, an experience and, as such, is actualized and consumed in the space and time dedicated to it by the individual or by the group.<sup>2</sup> The critical-theoretical activity, on the other hand, manifests itself in a mediated way, through language and writing, and has its own times of production, circulation and reception; similarly, the cartographic activity is also a form of conceptualization and representation, which can come either before the *dérive* (and therefore guide it) or after it (in this case representing it). Bearing these three different (though strongly interlinked) levels in mind — the level of experience, the level of theorization, and what I would call the level of cultural production — what interests me here is to reflect on some current practices of *dérive*. My aim is to outline a post-Debordian scenario which is today in great expansion, and which finds in the Internet in particular its designated space; and to reflect on how this scenario comments on *dérive* itself as a practice that expands cinema beyond the film screen.

The level on which I will focus my attention is, therefore, that of the cultural production — namely reports, representations and mappings, which I will read as a crucial link between *dérive* as a con-

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<sup>2</sup> Debord in fact advised to practice *dérive* in “small groups of two or three people who have reached the same level of awareness” (Debord 2006, 63).

cept and *dérive* as experience. It is the production of representations of *dérive* that allows us to configure an act that is always and inevitably personal (even when experienced as the member of a group) and ephemeral (for Debord, the ideal *dérive* lasts one day; see Debord 2006, 64) as an activity that is communicated and shared beyond its specific, immediate temporality, and that therefore extends (expands) into a form of reflection and into theory. Without representations, *dérive* would remain a personal experience and, as such, it would be unlikely to produce the social change sought both by the Situationists and by many of those who practice it today. To conceptualize *dérive* it is necessary to represent it; however, the limitations of symbolic representation in adequately capturing and communicating this lived experience of a modified space and time, this form of psychogeographic consciousness, are not irrelevant.

Cartography, for example, is both an art and a technology, and as such it produces a metaphoric and rhetorical textuality (Harley 1989).<sup>3</sup> Today, the art of mapping is deeply dependent on digital technology and on the Geographic Information System (GIS). And it is precisely GIS that has played a central role in the revival of the situationist *dérive* as a critical artistic practice in the contemporary world. The situationist urban *dérive* has strongly returned to the fore today thanks to the development of technologies that offer alternative, individual, customizable ways of interacting with space, of mapping it and of recording one's daily presence in it. The examples are endless; as Karen O'Rourke has suggested in her monograph on the art of walking and mapping, some contemporary artists use GPS in an emotional way, some use it at the purpose of creating landscapes of data, while others do so to produce speculative mappings (O'Rourke 2013).

It is not only artists, however, who have recovered situationist techniques as a result of the impetus provided by GIS and GPS. I think here, for example, of two apps for the iPhone: Situationist and WalkSpace. Situationist (situationistapp.com) was developed by Benrik, namely Ben Carey and Henrik Delehag, a creative duo whose purpose, as stated on their website, is to encourage "people to reinvent themselves every day of their lives" (www.adbenrik). Situationist allows strangers to meet in an arbitrary and random way and "break the routine of contemporary capitalist life". GPS technology is thus used by this app to help the user to locate and meet people willing to interact with him or her in random situations, from the most friendly to the more subversive — as in the example in which the user seeks the help of a stranger to "rouse everyone around us into revolutionary fervour and storm the nearest TV station" (situationistapp.com). As reported by its creators, Apple

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<sup>3</sup> On some connections between cartography, film and *dérive*, see Castro (2010).

removed the app because of its unauthorized use of their locative services; for Benrik, however, the motivation provided by Apple was “a mere pretext for the capitalist suppression of a post-Marxist subversive use of their fetishistic technology” ([www.adbenrik.com](http://www.adbenrik.com)).

Another situationist app for iPhone is WalkSpace, created by Irish artist and professor of digital practices at the University of Denver, Conor McGarrigle, which is described by its creator as an alternative way to navigate the city of Dublin that is new and unpredictable. A selection of walks through Dublin, including art routes and other more ordinary ones, are available to the user, who can also customize and, thus, expand them, for instance by adding new photographs and by sharing them with others online. While WalkSpace sounds more like a tourist app than a post-Marxist and post-Debordian one, McGarrigle is also responsible for other projects that employ GPS in a potentially more subversive way, such as *WalkSpace: Beirut-Venice*, a project presented at the Lebanese pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 2011, which invites participants to stroll in Venice but guided from Beirut, or in Beirut but guided from Venice. The project is thus described by the artist:

Two interconnected groups of participants will walk in each city, each receiving instruction and guidance from the other as they wander, get lost and explore the psychogeographical ambience of the city.

The progress of each group will be broadcast as a live video stream via Bambuser, tracked in realtime on a map with Google latitude and tweeted with followers having the option of giving instructions via twitter.

The object is not to create a finite discrete work but to create a peripatetic relational space which can evolve and respond to the situation, the desires of its participants and serendipity, with the work being created through the actions of its participants. The space is furthermore overlaid with a hybrid, networked space connecting both cities and augmenting each space with the absent presence of the other. ([www.conormcgarrigle.com/venice.html](http://www.conormcgarrigle.com/venice.html))

The emphasis is, therefore, on participation and on the expansion of the space-time experience of the city which, one would imagine, was experienced by those who undertook the *dérive*. Such expansion is strongly predicated on the use of audiovisual technology (the live video stream) and of the social media (Twitter). My focus is, however, on the representation/communication of the experience of this *dérive*, in this case through video and other interactive documentation.

A viewing of the promotional videos of the WalkSpace app and of the *WalkSpace: Beirut-Venice* project, both of which are available on the Internet, raises some doubts about the ability of such videos to capture, encapsulate and communicate the experience of *dérive*. In the example of the promotional video of the app, the image of a passer-by who, while walking, looks fixedly at the screen of his iPhone instead of the city, guided by the GPS' rendering of his route, raises questions not only about the mediation of experience through technology, but also about the transfer of the experience itself to the

Internet. Where is the *dérive* guided or recorded by GPS technology? Is it in the city or on the web? Or nowhere?

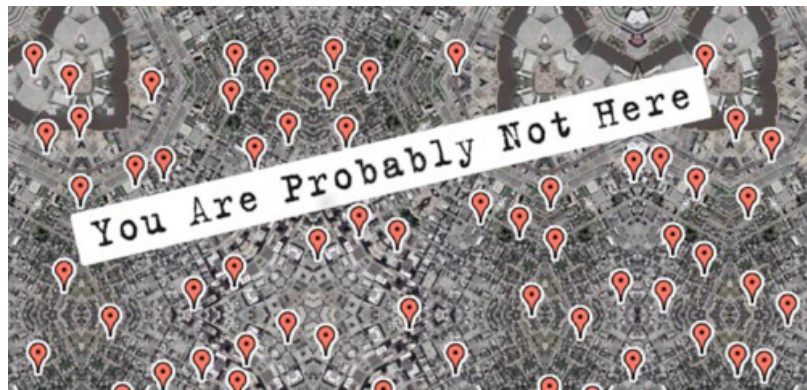


Image 1: Nikolas R. Schiller, *Postmodern Cartography: You Are Probably Not Here*.  
© Nikolas R. Schiller ([www.nikolasschiller.com](http://www.nikolasschiller.com)).

An image by Nikolas Schiller I serendipitously encountered while surfing the net, titled “Postmodern Cartography: You Are Probably Not Here”, seems to suggest the dystopian option: we are neither in the city nor in the web. The same image can also be read against the grain, in a way that suggests our ability to remain invisible and escape the grids, the technological mappings, the striation of space, to use Deleuze and Guattari’s famous expression (1988); but most of all, I think, this image describes the impotence of technologies based on GPS to capture and contain our experience.

### ***Dérive* and GPS: a situationist mannerism?**

Despite the post-situationist fervour that is spreading through the Internet, and the interest of many contemporary artists in the use of GPS applied to mapping and city walks, some critics have questioned the opportunity of linking these new artistic forms to situationism, for instance the philosopher Simon Critchley, who has adopted the term “situationist mannerism”, thus alluding to a phenomenon that is late, decadent and compromised with respect to the original Situationist International (Critchley 2006, 5). The problems identified by critics include the calculative logic that characterizes the GPS as a technology of military origin; “an emphasis on data patterns over essence” (Crandall 2006); and, in more general terms, the impossibility of developing a dimension that is truly foreign to the capital, to science and technology, and to the highly mediated reality in which we live today. In this sense, the locative media have been read by some of their harshest critics as “the avant-garde of a control society” (Tuters 2012, 270).

The argument that sees evil in GPS because of the element of surveillance and control — encapsulated by the idea of this technolo-

gy as “Big Brother” — can be offset by considering that subversion is intrinsic to the use that some artists and activists make of technologies which were originally developed for radically different purposes — obviously, a concept that is all but alien to the Situationist International itself, if one simply thinks of the key situationist technique of *détournement*, seen as an act of deviation and subversion turning “the expressions of the capitalist system against itself” (Holt 2010, 252). Among other arguments, it has been hypothesized by some commentators that locative media have emerged as a consequence of and a response to climate change and global warming, in order to provide people with the means to create alternative versions and counter-mappings of the world (Thielmann 2010, 9); in this sense, subversion would already be inscribed in the medium itself. What interests me here most of the critique of the phenomenon of the use of GPS to create situationist-inspired *dérive*, however, is the emphasis that this “technology of production”, to use Foucault’s expression, which permits us “to produce, transform, manipulate things” (Foucault 1988, 18), places on the collection and the patterns of data rather than on what Crandall has called, as we have seen, the “essence” of the *dérive*, and that I would call its “experience”.

Many of these projects are recorded and communicated to the public through one of the following methods: graphic syntheses of movements first recorded by means of GPS, like in the case of the walks by Thorsten Knaub ([www.thorstenknaub.com](http://www.thorstenknaub.com)); maps, for example *Traverse Me*, a situationist mapping of the campus of the University of Warwick commissioned by the Maed Gallery to British artist and cartographer Jeremy Wood; or blogs that may include some or all of the following records: diary writing, maps, data, photographs and videos — such is the case, for instance, of the *Urban Drifts* cycling *dérive* by Ryan Raffa (viewable on the artist’s website: [www.ryanraffa.com](http://www.ryanraffa.com)). All these methods of recording, reporting and communication contain specific traces of the *dérive* and the experience made by the drifting person or group. In particular, the graphic syntheses and maps often are fascinating aesthetic objects, and can certainly change our mental image of a city or urban area, but it is not immediately evident that they bring us substantially closer to the experience of the *dérive*; at most, they offer of it an abstract image, as seen from above, so to speak.

Blogs or multimedia projects in this sense are more informative and complete reports than maps are; but it is the videos that promise a more faithful image and more direct, personal and synesthetic involvement in the experience of *dérive*. A telling example is provided by a project of Social Agency Lab, a collective of North American designers and planners, intent in developing new ways to design the city. In particular, I refer to the multimedia project *Divergent Metropolis* and the video of a *dérive* through Houston that accompanies the description of the project online (viewable on the

site [socialagencylab.org](http://socialagencylab.org)). Although fascinating, the video of *Divergent Metropolis*, I would argue, is far from being a complete and persuasive recreation of the experience of this particular *dérive*. Still, while offering less data than the maps, the graphical representations and the accumulations and analyses of data mentioned above, this video undeniably provides many more experiential traces of the *dérive*. What is most striking, however, is not so much the accumulation of indexical traces of this specific drift; but that the filmic language is here fully mobilised to suggest a participative state, and to make manifest a consciousness outside of the mind, so to speak. This is achieved in particular through the uniquely texturized grain and colour of the image produced by an infrared camera; the shakiness of the hand-held camera; the speeding up of the image; and the emotional commentary provided by the music added in postproduction.

These semiotic codes of the audiovisual language are exploited to create a range of effects, and above all a sense of immediacy, of randomness and unpredictability, of physical presence and proximity to the group on their *dérive* — as well as of subjectivity of the image and of the vision, and of shared emotion. The filmic language, in other words, provides a deeply effective (and affective) way of manifesting the psychogeographical drift through the city as a shared consciousness. Other codes, then, and specifically the linguistic code supported by the captions, are used to characterize this night walk in Houston as a *dérive* of situationist inspiration, and to communicate its results and meanings to the spectator. It is the linguistic message that, to use a concept of Roland Barthes (1977), anchors the images and determines their meaning of document of a *dérive*; but it is the audiovisual codes that denote the indexical trace of the image as an experience of *dérive*, and that expand its experience to and for the spectator.

### Filmic *dérive*: experience and performativity

These considerations lead one to reflect on the intrinsic strengths of film and video in representing *dérive* and in reproducing it both emotionally and conceptually for an audience that did not participate in it. The privileged use of film that Debord himself made in his own cultural and critical production seems to suggest the affinity of the audiovisual media with situationist ideas and practices, as well as its ability to be employed as a tool for critical discourse. The hypothesis that I want to explore is that it is precisely through a deployment of filmic language that we can more effectively approach and share in the experience of *dérive* — of course short of participating in one in first person. First, a methodological proviso: given the purposes of my analysis, I will not make distinctions between professional and amateur films, and will place on the same level commercial productions, occasional videos, and experimental films. This is because

what I am interested in here is not production values, but in placing the accent on a filmic imagination as expression of a consciousness that is pervasive and expansive, and that exists across and beyond screens.

Two types of film, I argue, are available for the analysis. The first distinction I propose is between films that are more openly related to the practice of *dérive* and others that, while not making explicit reference to the Situationist International, remind us of *dérive*, and illustrate the experience of going adrift. The second essential distinction is between those films that arise at the purpose of documentation, such as the previously mentioned *Divergent Metropolis* video, and films that are not documents of a drift, which in fact never took place, but that nevertheless build and, so to speak, stage one. The films in the latter group are a fascinating case, because, as I will suggest, they are themselves a *dérive*; watching these films, the viewer makes, experiences a *dérive*, almost synesthetically. The emphasis here is not on dramaturgy, genre, or narrative, but on filmic experience.

Among the examples of the first type of film, i.e. the ones that aim to document a *dérive* which has truly taken place, I wish to pause on *High Wycombe: Psychogeography/Nodules of Energy Walk* (2004), a video uploaded on YouTube by Fuguer, a pseudonym under which a British brother and sister, Cathy and John Rogers, jointly operate. The video is part of a project sponsored by the British Arts Council and inspired by British writer and filmmaker Ian Sinclair (as announced by the Rogers on their blog, [remappinghighwycombe.blogspot.ie](http://remappinghighwycombe.blogspot.ie)). It consists of the psychogeographic remapping the English town of High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, an area designated for a process of urban regeneration. Originally shot in Super 8, and then converted to digital video, *High Wycombe: Psychogeography/Nodules of Energy Walk* is a psychogeographic research of the “nodules of energy” of the area. In this case, so, the film is the document of a walk made during the Winter solstice of 2004, one that followed a ley line, that is a straight line that passes through three or more prehistoric or ancient sites, associated by some to vectors of energy and other paranormal phenomena.





Image 2: *High Wycombe: Psychogeography/Nodules of Energy Walk* (2004).  
© Cathy & John Rogers.

*High Wycombe: Psychogeography/Nodules of Energy Walk* is decidedly more sophisticated than the video of *Divergent Metropolis*, but the linguistic codes that it uses are similar. The subjective and handheld camera produces a sense of physical presence, personal participation, and emotion; the fast editing mimics the situationist technique of the rapid passage and of differentials of speed, “change of scenery” and “disorientation” (Ivain 2001, 22). Moreover, the quality of the Super 8, an amateur format of the past, conveys a sense of intimacy and familiarity, on account of its strong association with (our memories of) the family movie, while at the same time adding an unusual temporal displacement and obsolescence to the geographical disorientation created by the editing. *High Wycombe: Psychogeography/Nodules of Energy Walk* is a document in a different way from *Divergent Metropolis*; the dissimilarity lies mainly in the higher levels of aesthetic and formal research that are evident in the Fuguer film. In the difference between the two films we recognize the emergence not only of an authorship, but also of an intentionality aiming to recreate as accurately as possible through the medium, by making the most of its linguistic codes, the feeling, emotion, participation, in other words the experience of the *dérive*. The film therefore can be fully assimilated to the category of a cultural-artistic production that is inspired by the theory of *dérive*, and that goes beyond its simple documentation, for its aim is to expand the experience to the spectator.

*High Wycombe: Psychogeography/Nodules of Energy Walk* can be positioned between the amateur film and the experimental film, an interface highly valued and valorized by avant-garde directors like Jonas Mekas and Stan Brakhage, who has also directly theorized it (Brakhage 2001). But even films of *dérive* made by professional directors with the support of official producers make use of exactly the same linguistic codes. Among the examples that can be mentioned here are: *Cycling the Frame* (1988) and *The Invisible Frame* (2009) by

Cynthia Beatt, a couple of films that follow actress Tilda Swinton cycling along the Berlin Wall, before and after its fall; *London Orbital* (2002), a co-creation of writer/director Chris Petit and Iain Sinclair, shot along the London M25 ring road; and the first episode of *Dear Diary* (*Caro diario*, 1993), which follows a *dérive* of Nanni Moretti on his Vespa through the streets of a summertime Rome. These films create the synesthetic sensation of *dérive* as a cinematic spectacle also achieved through hand-held camera, fast editing, and subjective tracking shots of rows of buildings.

I would now like to focus on a few examples of the second type of film described above, namely the films for which a *dérive* has never existed. Among these, I would like to mention in particular the trilogy of essay films by English architect-filmmaker Patrick Keiller: *London* (1994), *Robinson in Space* (1997) and *Robinson in Ruins* (2010). A true psychogeography is produced through a series of static sequences accompanied by the voiceover of a fictional narrator, who follows the trail of the elusive Robinson and his research on “the problem of London” first, and then of England. A counter-reading of the last English century is produced, seen through the traces left by capitalism and imperialism, and by the policy of the Conservative Party on both urban and extra-urban space.



Image 3: Patrick Keiller, *London* (1994). © BFI Production.

Keiller's trilogy is ideologically close to the situationists and their critique/destruction of bourgeois values, of capitalism and colonialism, even if in a more disenchanted, sceptical and postmodern tone. However, being a reconstruction at one temporal remove of the routes already travelled by the character Robinson, it adopts a style that is wholly dissimilar from the videos and films previously considered: the trilogy is composed of long sequences of images shot with a fixed camera, which observes without ever moving. In this case, the films do not bring us closer to Robinson's *dérive*, as experienced from

a subjective point of view, but they propose some disjointed traces of that *dérive*, focusing, to use Debord's terminology, on the "centres of attraction". The movement of the *dérive*, produced by "currents" and "vortexes" (Debord 2006, 63), was deleted from the visual representation, but is rather suggested by the narrator's voiceover, and mentally reconstructed by the spectator.

In other words, the *dérive* here is entirely mental; it transfers to the spectator's consciousness. One would be tempted to compare Keiller's films to situationist psychogeographical maps, which must be read and interpreted; here, the interpretation is offered by the narrator's voiceover, which helps the viewer to reconnect the Debordian "fixed points" (Debord 2006, 63), and to sense and grasp the attraction they have exercised on Robinson. The case of Keiller's films, in which a *dérive*, whether fictional or not, never took place, demonstrate how it is the film itself that produces a *dérive*, experienced by the viewer in a space of consciousness that is located in between screen and mind. In this sense, Keiller's films are deeply performative; they are the performance of a *dérive* which is entirely filmic, and that has existed and exists only as a film.

It is precisely around concepts of performance and performativity that ideas of expanded cinema help us to better understand filmed *dérive* as a (post)filmic phenomenon that is experienced somewhere between screen and mind. In all these examples, cinema and video push beyond the screen and use distinctively filmic means to produce an experience that is mediated through performance — a performance of the camera, of filmic codes, of the film itself. Maxine Segalowitz's *Dérive* (2013), an experimental video uploaded on YouTube by the young artist, is a very effective exemplification of the performativity of filmic *dérive*.



Image 4: Maxine Segalowitz, *Dérive* (2013). © Maxine Segalowitz.

As Segalowitz explains on YouTube, she engaged in a situationist *dérive* and then documented it through a performance: “I went on a *dérive* and found myself finishing in a place I didn’t expect. I recounted my adventure and recorded the tale. Here is a repeated movement sequence of my animated gestures.”

Traditionally, in performative art the performance itself, and the body of the artist, are considered as an art form. However, as persuasively argued by Philip Auslander, the documentation of a performance through film and photographs does not so much try to capture in an ethnographic way the occurrence of an event, but to reproduce the work, in order to make it accessible to a wider audience than it was originally performed for. However, it is the case of performances without a public (those that are solely performed for a photographic or a movie camera, as is the case of the video of Maxine Segalowitz) that clarifies beyond any doubt how “performance art is constituted as such through the performativity of its documentation” (Auslander 2006, 7); in other words, how the document is the performance — and how, in this case, the film is the *dérive*.

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