

Marc Tuters

The Situational Sublime: Positionality as Critical Media Practice

(doi: 10.2383/82478)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2015

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

The Situational Sublime: Positionality as Critical Media Practice

by Marc Tuters

doi: 10.2383/82478

1. Lost in Hyperspace

I'm all lost in the supermarket, I can no longer shop happily [Strummer and Jones 1979]

The political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spatial scale [Jameson 1984b, 92].

In *Postmodernism as the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, initially published as an essay [1984b] and subsequently expanded into a book of the same name [1991], Fredric Jameson developed a reading of postmodern aesthetics through the lens of Marxist literary theory that would go on to frame decades of debate in cultural theory. Jameson's theory of postmodernism emerged from his attempt to intervene into cultural theory debates around the concept of postmodernism famously summed-up by French philosopher Francois Lyotard's as an "incredulity towards meta-narratives" [Lyotard 1984, xxiv]. In contrast to the latter, Jameson's approach was in fact to treat postmodern culture as a kind of symptom for the underlying pathology of *late capitalism*, a concept he borrowed, with minimal alteration, from Ernest Mandel's Marxist world systems meta-narrative.¹ Jameson thus drew a direct relationship between

¹ Mandel's deterministic theory of economic and social change held that new technologies increased the rate of profit leading to a period of growth until their advantages were exhausted leading to a period of recession, followed eventually by a new cycle of growth. In an attempt to explain the

transformations in capitalism's historical modes of production and aesthetic transformations in the sphere of culture. In Jameson's analysis culture had come to constitute a kind of second nature in late capitalism, expanding to incorporate everything

as the purest form of capital yet to have emerged [and] a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas [1984b, 78].

As such, he saw the stakes of his project in terms of a grand world historical political struggle, in which popular cultural constituted the ideological battleground.

Jameson developed a metaphysical if not esoteric argument that material reality and sensual experience had effectively bifurcated, leading him to develop a critical approach focused on the idea of positioning the individual. Fundamental to his diagnosis was the idea that the built environment could be read as symptomatic of the general problematic of late capitalism. To this end Jameson painted an elaborate picture of what he called "hyperspace" [1984b, 80], packed with stimulus but devoid of meaning, in which he evoked a figure –resembling the *transcendental subject* of Eighteenth century metaphysical philosophy – who was lost, as it were, in a kind 1980s American shopping mall. In his analysis Jameson singled out architecture as what he called late capitalism's "privileged aesthetic language" [*ibidem*, 79], claiming that of, all the arts, it was the

closest constitutively to the economic, with which, in the form of commissions and land values, it has a virtually unmediated relationship [*ibidem*, 56].²

Indeed, on evidence of citation alone it has been observed that the essay is perhaps best remembered for "the great set-piece" at its centre [Anderson 1998, 58], Jameson's famous observations regarding the architectural interior of the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, which he presents as a kind of iconic representation of the "new spatial logic of the simulacrum" [1984b, 66].³ In this passage Jameson offered

worldwide economic crisis of the early 1970s, Mandel adapted Soviet economist Nikolai Kondratiev's long wave world system theory, shortening the intervals from approximately fifty to twenty years in duration, and periodizing the beginning of the late capitalist wave to approximately the postwar period – Jameson would instead periodize its beginning to the late 1960s [1984a].

² The interest turned out to be mutual, with Jameson's diagnosis becoming a touchstone for architectural theorists, so that, over a quarter century later, his essay would still be identified with having articulated a "historical shift in the organization of power and knowledge into increasingly horizontal, pattern-based networks of control" [Martin 2010, 37].

³ With its primary entrances connecting, via passageways, to other buildings rather than to the street, what seemed to fascinate Jameson about the hotel's design was the extent to which this building appeared to create an autonomous world within and yet somehow separate from the surround city in which it was located, "aspir[ing] to being a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city" [1984a, 81]. Considering that one of Jameson's critics referred to his reading of Bonaventure's interior as "a claustrophobic space colony [... that] reconstructs a nostalgic Southern California in

an account of his own experience of getting lost in the Bonaventure's confusing spatial layout as an allegory for the subject's inability to position itself in relation to the complexities of late capitalism. The inability to navigate postmodern hyperspace was thus conceptualized as an obstacle to be overcome in order to manifest meaningful political action.

In spite of his prominent influence on subsequent theorists of the built environment [Soja 1989; Dear 2000], Jameson may himself be understood to have nurtured a somewhat idiosyncratic conception of space. Identifying what he esoterically referred to as "a mutation in the object, unaccompanied as yet by an equivalent mutation in the subject" [1984b, 80], Jameson's "spatial dialectic" – as he would later come to refer to his approach [Jameson 2009, 66] – can be understood as relating to a metaphysical strain of Marxist thought that extends the process by which capital comes to dominate economic exchange – what Marx referred to as "subsumption" [1992, 645] – to all aspects of reality. While Marx himself recognized many things as existing outside of capitalism [1992, 131], this approach sees subsumption as a process of semiotic escalation, which ultimately results in a separation between the subject and the object, what the Marxist philosopher and founding member of the Situationists Guy Debord referred to as

eliminat[ing] geographical distance only to reap distance internally in the form of spectacular separation. [1995, 120].

As an avant-garde artist committed to implementing his critique in the form of practice, Debord sought to develop new aesthetic forms, often at the level urban spatial practices, that were nevertheless addressed to the totality of society [Debord and Knabb 2003], an idea that Jameson can be understood to in turn have adapted with his own claim that

a model of political culture appropriate to our own situation will necessarily have to raise spatial issues as its fundamental organizing concern [1984b, 89].

At the conclusion of his original essay on postmodernism Jameson evoked the work of the urban planner Kevin Lynch [1960] who coined the terms "wayfinding" as well as "imageability" in reference to the navigational habits of city dwellers – concepts that subsequently became central in interface design. For reasons that Jameson has never made clear, in referring to Lynch's work, he chose however to use the term cognitive mapping. Although the idea that humans make use of mental representations of their everyday spatial environments in order to acquire, navigate and store

aspic" [Davis 1985, 112], it is amusing that the building's interior features as a portal to outer space in Christopher Nolan's 2014 film *Interstellar* [2014].

information can be dated back to antiquity – the memory palace being a mnemonic devices used by the ancient Greeks and Romans [O’Keefe and Nadel 1978, 201] – the specific term “cognitive mapping” comes from a branch of psychology known as purposive behaviourism where it refers to place learning behaviour [Tolman 1948]. Jameson thus concluded his famed postmodernism essay with a call for the development of a “new [and hypothetical] cultural form” [1984b, 89], a “representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp” [1984b, 79-80] that would render the complexities at the economic base of late capitalism somehow conceivable in order for subjects to thereby meaningfully position themselves in relation to their environments. So while Jameson’s evocative use of the term cognitive mapping certainly signifies that he was inspired by the idea of spatial apperception, his allegorical use of the term should however not be confused with the former experimental tradition, instead signifying a rather specific if not somewhat arcane offshoot of the term. For Jameson, then, postmodernism signified a

mutation in space [that] has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world [1984b, 83].

In an attempt to remedy this diagnosis, Jameson’s project can, arguably, be understood in relation to on Debord’s interpretation of Marx – that an aesthetic representation of totality constitutes the antithesis to spectacular separation – which in turn can be traced back to Georg Lukács’ dialectic of reification and totality.

2. The Situational Sublime

From the ethical point of view, no one can escape responsibility with the excuse that he is only an individual, on whom the fate of the world does not depend [Lukács 1972, 8].

While Jameson’s cognitive mapping has been described as “one of the most influential” concept in postmodern social and cultural theory [Tally 1996, 399], it has also, however, been described as one of “the least articulated” of his concepts [MacCabe 1992, xiv]. Defined by Jameson as an “extrapolation of Lynch’s spatial analysis to the realm of social structure” [Jameson 1988, 353] cognitive mapping can be understood as essentially concerned with the problem of situating meaning within a universal historical framework, in which, according to Jameson, “[o]nly Marxism can give us an adequate sense of the essential mystery of the cultural past” [1983, 3] as

Marxism alone offers a view onto history as “vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot” [*ibidem*, 4].

Setting aside for a moment Jameson’s steadfast devotion to the explanatory power of Marxist historiography, the concept of cognitive mapping may be understood as playing a similar structural role in Jameson’s metaphysics as the concept of the sublime in Kant’s metaphysics, positing an ideal relationship between the individual and the totality that is mediated by the “free play” of the faculty of imagining in the contemplation of the aesthetics of the sublime [Kant 2000, 102-103]. In attempting to make sense out of an overwhelming aesthetic experience of seemingly infinite complexity, Kant associated the sublime with the imagination’s movement from a state of confusion to one in which the mind reflected on its underlying moral rational framework, what he called its “supersensible vocation” [Kant 2000, 141]. The momentary experience of self-abnegation induced by the sublime thus paradoxically grounded Kant’s “transcendental” subject within a universal moral order, the latter of which Jameson, for his part, figured in terms of an awareness of one’s position within the true system of economic relations.⁴

Jameson’s intellectual project is thus perhaps best understood in terms of a metaphysical discourse concerned with identifying an underlying principle governing the relationship between things’ appearances and their true position in the big picture of economic relations, a project associated with Western Marxism – of which Jameson is considered a foremost contemporary exemplar [Anderson 1998, 74] – but which Jameson can in turn be understood to have adapted from one of the initiators of this particular discourse, Georg Lukács [Kellner and Homer 2004, 29] who developed the concepts of reification and of totality in *History and Class Consciousness* [1971]. Taken from the German word for objectification, reification was Lukács’ term for the process of subsumption through which objects were transformed into subjects and subjects are turned into objects, while he defined totality as

the system of production at a given moment in history and the resulting divisions of society into classes [1971, 50].

In extending the commodity form into a “universal category of society as a whole” [1971, 86] it has thus been claimed that Lukács inaugurated all subsequent Western Marxist thought [Anderson 1987, 24-48] and “the central problem” of critical theory [Stahl 2013]. Following Engels’ assertion that the proletariat was “pre-

⁴ In *The Postmodern Condition* [Lyotard 1984], a text which stands alongside Jameson’s as amongst the most influential in the debates on postmodernism, Francois Lyotard also put forth an association between postmodernism and sublime aesthetics [1984, 81]. However, since Lyotard rejected the presumed universality of meta-narratives, his concept of the sublime denied any notion of solace.

scribed, irrevocably and obviously, in its own situation in life as well as in the entire organization of contemporary civil society” [Engels and Marx 1956, 134–135], Lukács claimed that totality in fact lay dormant in those very commodities which Marx had theorized as “external to man, and therefore alienable” [1992, 182]. Indeed, for Lukács, reification contained within it the roots of its own overcoming through what he conceptualized, in a Kantian turn, as the coming to self-awareness of the commodity form itself. According to this seemingly paradoxical view, adopted in turn by Jameson, it was out of the total subjugation to the commodity form, that a truly universal class consciousness would emerge, or in the original language of Marx and Engels, that would compel man, “to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life” [2012, 12]. Jameson would himself describe Lukács’ concept of reification as

a process that affects our cognitive relationship with the social totality [...] a disease of that mapping function whereby the individual subject projects and models his or her insertion into the collectivity [2008, 447]

thereby implicitly framing cognitive mapping as a remedy to the aforementioned diagnosis,

stressing the gap between the local positioning of the individual subject and the totality of class structures in which he or she is situated, a gap between phenomenological perception and a reality that transcends all individual thinking or experience [Jameson 1988, 353].

Described by the noted art historian Peter Wollen as representing “the summation of Western Marxism” [1993, 124], Situationism can be said to have adapted Lukács’ concepts of reification and of totality in the service of critical art practice. Though having begun as an extremely marginal and highly elitist art movement [Sadler 1999, 20], Situationist ideas made an indelible mark on their time, particularly in the May ’68 movement in Paris, having formed part of a narrative concerning a golden era of political radicalism of which Jameson is himself avowedly nostalgic. Exemplary of the idea of revolutionary praxis – as captured in Marx’s famous slogan that “philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it” [1998, 571] – Guy Debord defined their objective of Situationism as “the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality” [1957].

Perhaps surprisingly for an art movement, art as an end in itself was in fact of relatively little interest to the Situationists. Instead they considered that “[t]he artists’ task [was] to invent new techniques and to utilize light, sound, movement and any invention whatsoever which might influence ambience” [Nieuwenhuys 1958], developing their own applied vision of Lukács’ totality which they defined as “the

complex, ongoing activity that consciously recreates man's environment according to the most advanced conceptions in every domain" [Debord and Nieuwenhuys 1958].

Where Marx had theorized capitalism as alienating workers by dividing their time, the Situationists extended this diagnosis to space whilst envisioning its eventual overcoming in the creation of new forms of space in which "separations such as work/leisure or public/private will finally be dissolved" [Debord 1959]. Taking as their subject "[t]he study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals" [Debord 1955], the Situationists may thus be understood to have prototyped the notion of positionality as a critical practice through their development of a variety of artistic tactics, most famously perhaps through their notion of the *dérive*, a practice of purposefully getting lost in urban space. But while cognitive mapping can be understood in relation to this romantic critique of alienation, in formulating the concept Jameson also drew on the ideas of a somewhat different strain of Marxist thought influential in the period leading up to May '68 milieu, associated with the dour figure of Louis Althusser.

3. Mapping Ideology

O man full of arts, to one is it given to create the things of art, and to another to judge what measure of harm and of profit they have for those that shall employ them. [Plato 1972, 275].

Louis Althusser was opposed to what he saw as the romanticism of Lukács [2005, 221-231] in favour of what he framed as a scientific and anti-humanist approach to Marxism. Rejecting subject centred approach to Marxist metaphysics, Althusser argued that all entities at all scales were in fact merely the product of historical forces that could be understood to actively produce human subjectivity through a process that he referred to as interpellation. As part of his famous ideology theory, Althusser thus rethought ideology as an active system of representations, as opposed to a veil of illusion, that constituted a kind of interface to the actual conditions of existence, what he called "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" [Althusser 1994], without which, he argued, politics of any form would be impossible. According to Althusser interpellation involved the subject's self-recognition as a certain type of person in responding to the address of an ideological authority, whose objective was to reproduce itself thereby reproducing

existing social relations.⁵ While there were bad ideologies and good ideologies, for Althusser, as opposed to for Lukács and the Situationists, there was however no utopian state of collective being somewhere beyond the reach of ideology. In order to reveal these ideological authorities at work in culture, Althusser developed a hermeneutical method that he referred to as “symptomatic reading” [Althusser and Balibar 1970, 32].⁶ Concerned with revealing the hidden biases in texts through attention to their gaps and contradictions, with this technique Althusser argued that the idea of representing totality, so central to Lukács for example, was essentially impossible since it would not, in any case, be graspable by the human mind. Following Althusser, Jameson frequently acknowledged the impossibility of totality, referring for example at one point, to cognitive mapping as

a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and *properly un-representable* totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole [1991, 51, emphasis mine]

and as an attempt at

systematizing something that is resolutely unsystematic [1991, 418].

But while claiming to reject the idea of “some privileged bird’s eye view of the whole” [1991, 340], Jameson’s project is nevertheless unthinkable without the idea of totality –indeed, it has been observed, that Jameson’s dialectical thought seems capable of absorbing and resolving all kinds of seemingly contradictory ideas [Tally 2011].

As Jameson would come to describe the concept, cognitive mapping sought to

to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us in a late twentieth century [1992, 3].

While Jameson and his acolytes have used the term to refer to a particular approach to literary and film analysis, a strain of contemporary media theory has developed a somewhat different interpretation of the concept – based on Jameson’s initial description of cognitive mapping as “a whole new technology, which is itself a reflection, or way to deal with a whole new economic world” [1984b, 58] – in order to frame critical art practices that attempt to map the topological dynamics of late capit-

⁵ It has been noted, that there is a logical paradox in Althusser’s concept of interpellation that implied a subject that somehow predates its own existence, otherwise “how does the individual human being recognize and respond to the ‘hailing’ which makes it a subject if it is not a subject already?” [Eagleton 1991, 143].

⁶ Having famously demonstrated this technique in his reading of Marx’s oeuvre, much later in life Althusser admitted to not, in fact, having read many of those same texts [see: Wheen 2008, 107-111].

alism as instances of cognitive mapping. Claiming that “the major intellectual project of the worldwide Left in the 1990s was to map out the political economy of neoliberal capitalism” [Holmes 2000], the art critic and political activist Brian Holmes is an often referenced voice in these debates [Mitew 2008; Warf and Arias 2008; Galloway 2013]. Drawing heavily on Jameson’s framework, Holmes celebrates the “aesthetics of critical and dissident cartography” [2009, 52] as “a way for an individual subject to grasp the complexity” [*ibidem*, 53] of a world in which “[n]etworks have become the dominant structures of cultural, economic and military power” [*ibidem*, 47]. The media theorist Wendy Chun however questions the critical purchase of this particular interpretation of Jameson’s cognitive mapping project. Given the ease with which conventional software interfaces permit users to topologically map their position within a networks of relations, Chun speculates on whether software may ironically be contributing to the very depoliticization of ideology critique [2011, 92]. In Chun’s estimation, what has changed since the time Jameson, then, is that:

instead of a situation in which the production of cognitive maps is impossible, we are locked in a situation in which we produce them – or at the very least approximations of them – all the time, in which the founding gesture of ideology critique is simulated by something that also pleasurably mimics ideology [2011, 71].

As such, Chun effectively claims that a kind of cognitive mapping has ironically become a paradigmatic tool of neoliberal self-governance. In an apparent attempt to address what is seen by some as the tendency for this Foucauldian type of governmentality critique to foreclose resistance [McNay 2009, 56; Said 2014, 208], Chun turns to Situationist-inspired critical art practices as developed by contemporary locative media artists [Chun 2011, 95] –thereby repeating an association between locative media and Situationism that has been made as often as it has been criticized [Sant 2006; Tuters and Varnelis 2006; Greenfield and Shepard 2007; Mitew 2008; Bleecker and Nova 2009; Flanagan 2009; McGarrigle 2010]. From a critique of capitalism to a description of capitalism, debates around cognitive mapping thus provide an object lesson in the valences of critique and its complicated relationship with the idea of critical practice.

4. Conclusion: The Valences of Critical Practice

The trajectory of Situationist discourse – stemming from an avant-garde artistic movement in the post-war period, developing into a radical critique of politics in the 1960s, and absorbed today into the routine of the disenchanting discourse that acts as the critical stand-in for the existing order – is undoubtedly symptomatic of the

contemporary ebb and flow of aesthetics and politics, and of the transformations of avant-garde thinking into nostalgia [Rancière 2004, 9].

Considering themselves to be “the last avant-garde, overturning current practices of history, theory, politics, art architecture and everyday life” [Sadler 1999, 1], a commitment to critique drove the Situationists to gradually abandon their earlier utopian ideas of interventions in favour of a completely conceptual practice [Tuters and Varnelis 2006, 359], anticipating a turn both towards the “dematerialization of the art work” [Kwon 2004, 24] that came to characterize much contemporary art in the early 1970s. Whereas, in the late 1950s, the Situationists had imagined the creation of re-enchanted types of urban environments, by the early 1960s they claimed to offer no more than “a critique of urbanism” [Anonymous 1961], a position that, by the end of the decade, became systematized into a kind of party line amongst Marxist architecture critics, in the assertion

there can never be an aesthetics, art or architecture of class, but only a class critique of aesthetics [Tafuri 2000, 32].

What seemed to contribute to this radicalization of critique was an awareness of the inevitability of its recuperation by increasingly dynamic forms of capitalism. While the Situationists had theorized their practices as fundamentally oppositional, they did so however in relation to a type of capitalism that has arguably subsequently undergone a fundamental transformation. Today, it is claimed that capitalism has developed the capacity to integrate, reify and normalize forms of dissent and critique, thereby constituting a

new enemy [that] not only is resistant to the old weapons but actually thrives on them [Hardt and Negri 2000, 138].

This narrative tends to locate a symbolic defeat of the left as having occurred in the late 1960s or early 1970s after which point an epistemological rupture took place, such that advocates of the strong version of this postmodern periodization narrative are said to believe that “the world changed completely” [Graeber 2008]. Out of this morass of decline and recuperation, Marxism is thus held up as

the untouched master (of) theory – a tool of diagnosis and analysis that presumes to judge theory and finds it wanting [Noys 2010, 3].

As typified by Jameson’s cognitive mapping project, which seeks to position the individual in relation to a Marxist conception of totality, the legend of the unfulfilled promises of May ’68 has been nurtured within Anglo-American humanities departments throughout the 1980s where it said to have acquired a quasi-religious tone

written in the demiurgic language of words ending in -ism [Cusset 2008, 215].

Having failed to change the world when it briefly had its chance to do so, within the subsequent “political radicalization of academic discourse” [Cusset 2008, 8] Situationism has thus retroactively been canonized as a kind of high-water mark for both critical art and for left-wing politics whose memory is carefully curated as signifying “the overcoming of separate and specialized knowledge, and *has to be recalled in that spirit*” [Wark 2011, 3, emphasis mine], as opposed to the misuse and recuperation of their memory by subsequent generations which, it is alleged,

silences, ignores, and forgets [in a sort of pre-meditated amnesia] the profound theoretical and political insights that underpinned these excursions into new forms of urban practice and living [Swyngedouw 2002, 154].

In defending the ongoing radical potential of Situationism against contemporary usurpers, it could be argued that these critics are however engaging in what analytic philosophers refer to as a genetic fallacy – a form of argument based on an appeal to origins, which overlooks how ideas change over the course of time. It might, for example, be claimed that what we have learned, over the course of time, is that there is in fact nothing inherently emancipatory in the tactics and techniques of critical positionality, be they Jameson’s cognitive mapping, or the Situationist derive – consider here, for example, how the latter has been cited as the source of inspiration in the development of counterinsurgency tactics to advance troops, seemingly invisibly, through urban space by breaking through the interior walls between residential units [Weizman 2006, 56]. If, as Foucault suggests that “one should totally and absolutely suspect anything that claims to be a return” [2001, 359], then, in the end, we could perhaps look upon the ideas of positionality as a critical practice discussed in this essay as concepts formulated by avant-gardes of another period, which may themselves have been overtaken by history – an argument, which, as we have seen, Wendy Chun offers in arguing that cognitive mapping has paradoxically become the paradigmatic tool of neoliberal self-governance. The question, then, for scholars of contemporary critical media practices would be to identify how it is that current avant-gardes – if such may still be thought to exist at all – are adapting the ambitious philosophical project of the arguably outmoded practices of positionality discussed in this essay to the contemporary situation, for as Guy Debord himself eventually came to acknowledge:

[a]vant-gardes have only one time; and the best thing that can happen to them is to have enlivened their time without outliving it [Debord and Knabb 2003, 182].

References

- Althusser, L.
1994 "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation.)" Pp. 100-140 in *Mapping Ideology*, edited by S. Žižek. New York: Verso.
2005 *For Marx*. New York: Verso. [Translated by B. Brewster].
- Althusser, L., Balibar, E.
1970 *Reading Capital*. London: New Left Books. [Translated by Ben Brewster].
- Anderson, P.
1987 *Considerations on Western Marxism*. London: New Left Books.
1998 *The Origins of Postmodernity*. New York: Verso.
- Anonymous
1961 "Critique of Urbanism." *Internationale Situationniste* 6. [Translated by Mark Shepley]. Available at: <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/critique.html>
- American Comparative Literature Association
2013 *Global Positioning Systems. Proceedings for the Annual Meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association*. Toronto: Self-Published.
- Bleecker, J., Nova, N.
2009 *A Synchronicity: Design Fictions for Asynchronous Urban Computing*. New York: Architectural League of New York.
- Chun, W.H.K.
2011 *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Cusset, F.
2008 *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Davis, M.
1985 "Urban Renaissance and the Spirit of Post." *New Left Review* I 151 (May): 106-113.
- Dear, M.J.
2000 *The Postmodern Urban Condition*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Debord, G.
1955 "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography." *Les Lèvres Nues* 6. [Translated by Ken Knabb]. Available at: <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/2>
1957 *Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action*. Paris: Self-published. [Translated by Ken Knabb]. <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/report.html>
1959 "Situationist Theses on Traffic." *Internationale Situationniste* 3. [Translated by Ken Knabb]. Available at: <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/traffic.html>
1995 *Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books. [Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith].
- Debord, G., Knabb, K.
2003 *Complete Cinematic Works: Scripts, Stills, Documents*. Oakland: AK Press.

- Debord, G., Nieuwenhuys, C.
 1958 "The Amsterdam Declaration." *Internationale Situationniste* 2. [Translated by Paul Hammond]. Available at: <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/amsterdam.html>
- Eagleton, T.
 1991 *Ideology: an Introduction*. New York: Verso.
- Engels, F., Marx, K.
 1956 *The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Critique*. Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House. [1st ed. 1845]
- Flanagan, M.
 2009 *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Foucault, M.
 2001 *Power Volume 3: the Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, edited by J.D Faubion. New York: The New Press.
- Galloway, A.R.
 2013 *The Interface Effect*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Graeber, D.
 2008 *The Sadness of Post-Workerism or 'Art and Immaterial Labour' Conference: a Sort of Review*. Commoner.org.Uk. Available at: <http://www.commoner.org.uk/?p=33>
- Greenfield, A., Shepard, M.
 2007 *Urban Computing and Its Discontents*. New York: Architectural League of New York.
- Haraway, D.
 1988 "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question In Feminism And The Privilege Of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14: 575-599
- Hardt, M., Negri, A.
 2000 *Empire. Fourth Printing*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Holmes, B.
 2000 *Imaginary Maps, Global Solidarities*. Brianholmes Wordpress.com. Available at: <https://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2000/10/20/imaginary-maps-global-solidarities/>
 2009 *Escape the Overcode: Activist Art in the Control Society*. Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum in collaboration with WHW.
- Jameson, F.
 1983 *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. London & New York: Routledge.
 1984a "Periodizing the 60s." *Social Text* 9/10 (June): 178-209.
 1984b "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review* 146 (July): 53-92.
 1988 "Cognitive Mapping." Pp. 347-358 in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by C. Nelson, and L. Grossberg. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
 1991 *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
 1992 *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
 2008 *The Ideologies of Theory*. New York: Verso.

- 2009 *Valences of the Dialectic*. New York: Verso.
- Kant, I.
- 2000 *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, edited and translated by P. Guyer and A. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [1st ed. 1790].
- Kellner, D., Homer, S.
- 2004 *Fredric Jameson: a Critical Reader*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Kwon, M.
- 2004 *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Lukács, G.
- 1971 *History and Class Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- 1972 *Tactics and Ethics: Political Writings, 1919-1929*, edited by R. Livingstone. London: NLB.
- Lynch, K.
- 1960 *The Image of the City*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Lyotard, J.F.
- 1984 *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*. [Translated by G. Bennington and B. Massumi]. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- MacCabe, C.
- 1992 "Preface" to *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, edited by F. Jameson. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Martin, R.
- 2010 *Utopia's Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Marx, K.
- 1992 *Capital: Volume 1*. [Translated by Ben Fowkes]. London & New York: Penguin Classics. [1st ed. 1867]
- 1998 *The German Ideology: Including Theses on Feuerbach and Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books.
- Marx, K., Engels, F.
- 2012 *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*. New York: International Publishers [1st ed. 1848].
- McGarrigle, C.
- 2010 "The Construction of Locative Situations: Locative Media and the Situationist International, Recuperation or Redux?." *Digital Arts and Culture* 21(1): 55-62.
- McNay, L.
- 2009 "Self as Enterprise: Dilemmas of Control and Resistance in Foucault's the Birth of Biopolitics." *Theory, Culture & Society* 26 (6): 55-77.
- Mitew, T.E.
- 2008 "Repopulating the Map. Why Subjects and Things are Never Alone." *The Fibreculture Journal* 13: 15 pp. Available at: <http://thirteen.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-089-repopulating-the-map-why-subjects-and-things-are-never-alone/>

- Nieuwenhuys, C.
 1958 "On Our Means and Our Perspectives." *Internationale Situationniste* 2. [Translated by P. Hammond]. Available at: <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/means.html>
- Nolan, C. (ed.)
 2014 *Interstellar*. Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures.
- Noys, B.
 2010 *The Persistence of the Negative*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- O'Keefe, J., Nadel, L.
 1978 *The Hippocampus as a Cognitive Map*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Plato
 1972 *Phaedrus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rancière, J.
 2004 *The Politics of Aesthetics*. London & New York: Continuum. [Translated by Gabriel Rockhill].
- Rose, G.
 1999 "Situating Knowledges: Positionality, Reflexivities and Other Tactics." *Progress in Human Geography* 21 (3): 305-320.
- Sadler, S.
 1999 *The Situationist City*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Said, E.W.
 2014 *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said*, edited by G. Viswanathan. London: A&C Black.
- Sant, A.
 2006 "Redefining the Basemap." Intelligentagent.com. Available at: http://www.intelligentagent.com/archive/Vol6_No2_interactive_city_sant.htm
- Soja, E.W.
 1989 *Postmodern Geographies*. New York: Verso.
- Stahl T.
 2013 "Georg [György] Lukács." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/lukacs/>
- Strummer, J., Jones, M.
 1979 *Lost in the Supermarket*. Produced by G. Stevens. *London Calling*. Wessex: CBS.
- Swyngedouw, E.
 2002 "The Strange Respectability of the Situationist City in the Society of the Spectacle." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 26 (1): 153-165.
- Tafuri, M.
 2000 "Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology. *Contropiano* 1 (January-April 1969)." Pp. 2-35 in *Architecture Theory Since 1968*, edited by K.M. Hays. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Tally, R.

1996 "Jameson's Cognitive Mapping Project: a Critical Engagement." Pp 399-416 in *Social Cartography: Mapping Ways of Seeing Social and Educational Changes*, edited by R.G. Paulson. New York: Garland.

2011 "Valences of the Dialectic - Review." *Marxandphilosophy.org.Uk*. Available at: <http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2011/258>

Tolman, E.C.

1948 "Cognitive Maps in Rats and Men." *The Psychological Review* 55(4): 189-208.

Tuters, M., Varnelis, K.

2006 "Beyond Locative Media." *Leonardo* 39 (4): 357-363.

Warf, B., Arias, S.

2008 *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. London & New York: Routledge.

Wark, M.

2011 *The Beach Beneath the Street: the Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International*. New York: Verso.

Weizman, E.

2006 "Lethal Theory." *LOG Magazine* 7: 53-78.

Wheen, F.

2008 *Marx's Das Kapital: a Biography*. New York: Grove Press.

Wollen, P.

1993 *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on the Twentieth Century*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

The Situational Sublime: Positionality as Critical Media Practice

Abstract: In recent years, a thriving genre of scholarship has emerged around the concept of locative media in which the latter is often framed in relation to a critical tradition of site-specificity as a kind of remedy to a cultural diagnosis concerning the negative effects of mediation on place. By way of contrast this paper's approach may be understood as departing instead from the grammatical definition of "locative," corresponding, as it does, to the prepositions "in," "on," "at," and "by," and denoting the idea of positionality. In particular I look at how the concept of positionality is developed within a tradition of philosophical critique associated with – though not identical to – Fredric Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping. In this essay, then, I discuss: how Jameson envisioned an aesthetic practice that sought to map totality as a remedy to his famous cultural diagnosis of postmodernism; how the notion of positionality may be understood in relation to a tradition of Marxist metaphysics; and how the idea has subsequently been taken up as well as critiqued within contemporary debates in media theory. This essay thus concerns the relationship between cultural critiques broadly concerned with the problem of disorientation and remedies figured in terms of positioning the individual in relation to an objectively mappable and comprehensible external reality. Whereas the concept of positionality has been developed as a sort of term of art within feminist geography – in reference to a reflexive approach to the production of academic knowledge opposed to "the god-trick of claiming to see the whole world while remaining distanced from it" [Rose 1999, 308], as well as in feminist science and technology studies [Haraway 1988] – it should be noted that, with some minor reservations, Jameson's project is committed to the global perspective, an arguably legitimate use of the term in light of how recent debates in literary theory seems to have endorsed this particular interpretation ("*Global Positioning Systems*" was, for example, the topic of a major international literary theory conference in 2013, featuring a track entitled: "*Fredric Jameson's Spatial Dialectic as Global Positioning System*," at which I presented an early version of the present article [American Comparative Literature Association 2013, 168]). In this essay, then, I explore how aesthetic theories and avant-garde practices have sought to develop global solutions to the search for place in a networked age, by tracing a lineage from Kant's concept of the sublime via Lukács' concept of totality through Situationist avant-garde art practice to contemporary digital mapping practices, concluding by questioning the extent to which these practices remain wedded to their initial critical intent.

Keywords: Cognitive Mapping; Situationism; Locative Media; Totality; Recuperation.

Prior to a career in education, **Marc Tuters** developed the concept of "locative media" through art-based research projects based in Montreal, Banff, Riga and Los Angeles. From fantasies of architectural utopias in the 1960s, to contemporary interface technologies that fetishize the idea of "the local," his PhD dissertation, at the University of Amsterdam, entitled *Kosmoikos: The Search for Location in a Networked Age*, considers a variety of spatial practices as attempts to address the philosophical question of where we are – and in relation to which scale.