

Miegunyah Student Award Project Report 2019 | Hunter Reyne

This report is the outcome of a 2019 Miegunyah Student Project Award, and is the result of independent research undertaken by the student.

An investigation of the spatial atmospheres of an artwork can lead to new and exciting discoveries, of not only the intentions and ideas embedded in the art itself but of the perceptions and behaviours relating to the subject's very relationship to the work. In psychogeographic thought, emotionally-attuned movement through atmosphere is taken to be the fundamental state of being.¹ French activist, artist, and philosopher Guy Debord is the originator and best articulator of this theory, and it is worth quoting him at length:

“[Psychogeography is] the sudden change in ambience in a street within the space of a few metres; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres; the path of least resistance that is automatically followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the physical contour of the terrain); the appealing of repelling character of certain places”.²

Thus, it is unhelpful, even useless, to speak of the subject without considering the space around them, and of a space without the subject as an emotional body cohabiting and reflecting upon its atmospheres. Furthermore, atmospheres can be considered *quasi-things*, substances generated from objects that are spilled out into space.³ It seems intuitive that some of the most richly atmospheric objects are artworks.

In my research project for the Russel and Mab Grimwade Miegunyah Award I drew on Debord's theory as a way of bringing forth what I believe to be the lively and

¹ Debord, 2006.

² Ibid.

³ Griffero, 2017, p. 11.

at times volatile atmospheres embedded within historical artworks: at the same time, I aim to argue for a subjective positionality within the gallery space that can benefit from a psychogeographic view of ‘embeddedness’ within these atmospheric environments. Philosopher Peter Sloterdijk’s theory of spherological spaces proved useful in articulating the ways subjects (both living and artistically depicted) are beholden to a space in a way that affects and motivates their very subjecthood.⁴ In every environment, new relationships between subjects and objects are formed and expressed through performances of movement.

I applied this psychogeographic paradigm to three landscape works in the Miegunyah collection. What could have been a jarring clash of eras and theories instead revealed nuances and deeply resonant textures from both this underutilised philosophical theory and in the artworks themselves. Three works from the mid-19th century were transformed into psychogeographic time machines, living organisms of oil and fabric and paper spilling into the artistic space. Landscape works such as these offer significant psychogeographic atmospherics to draw from. The viewing subject, faced with a garden stretching into the distance, for example, with hills and cottages rolling into the background, often cannot help but want to step into the painting itself, or move in such a way that expresses the physical depth evident. This could be seen to be the base psychogeographic expression: a desire for movement, inspired by artistic-atmospheric spillage.

⁴ Sloterdijk, 2012.

Henry Gritten's *Melbourne from the Botanical Gardens* of 1865 (fig. 1)⁵ is particularly instructive through the psychogeographic approach. Leisurely figures occupy the beautiful and open botanical gardens. Melbourne, in its post-gold rush era, stretches magnificently behind them. Viewing this traditional oil work in a contemporary gallery setting could not help but be discontinuous to the psychogeographically-attuned subject. What if the oppressive atmospheres of the white cube were transfigured, through joint performances of movement and collective embodied responsiveness, into the holistic and decidedly more democratic atmospheres of the public garden, as depicted to holistically in Gritten's painting?

John Sedding, a popular garden-theorist of the late 19th Century, reveals a garden's innate sense of "betweenity", of its existence "between heaven and earth".⁶ In a garden, subjects brush their hands through leaves, they smell different plants, they might sit in some shade or run their hands through the soil. There is a far greater connectedness, in both an earthly and an artistic sense (perhaps these are the same!) in a garden than in a gallery.

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur, in his work *Time and Narrative*, reveals how subjective experience of time is necessarily structured through personalised and non-linear narrative progressions.⁷ James Adamson, John Carmichael and Raphael Clint use similar narrative techniques to depict forceful psychogeographic carvings within the early Melbourne landscape itself in *Melbourne from the South Side of the Yarra*

⁵ Henry Gritten, *Melbourne from the Botanical Gardens*, 1865. 52.4 x 77.8 cm. Oil on canvas. Melbourne, The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Purchased 2018, the Russel and Mab Grimwade Miegunyah Fund.

⁶ Sedding, 1895.

⁷ Ricoeur, 1984.

Yarra, from 1839 (fig. 2).⁸ Psychogeography is thus an imaginative process, whereupon narratives simultaneously work to influence and are influenced by spatial atmospheres. The figures in the work display heroic poses, resting proudly in the tradition of social realism, while the rapidly industrialising city stretches across the hills behind them. Yet in this heroism there is violence, and contemporary subjects cannot help but think of the massacres and displacements that these colonialists inflicted upon indigenous populations, and in such a forcefully psychogeographic way. This piece shows that Melbourne's transformation into a Western-style industrial city in the 19th century was a transformation of atmospherics above all else.

The possessiveness so evident in Adamson, Carmichael and Clint's work, that psychogeographic entrapment of land, indicates, I think, a problem with the approach as put forward by Debord. Indeed, Debord's thought itself has been noted for its almost militant possessiveness, a desire to reclaim and capture his native Parisian streets in an ideological way.⁹ No more evident is the sad culmination of this aspect of psychogeography than in another work from the Grimwade collection, John Skinner Prout's lithograph *Melbourne from Collingwood 1847* (fig. 3).¹⁰ There is a dialectic present between the inhabitations of space in the work. The First Nations figures in the foreground, collected around what Sloterdijk positions as a cultural epicentre--the

⁸ James Adamson, John Carmichael & Raphael Clint, *Melbourne from the South Side of the Yarra Yarra*, 1839. 20.3 x 35.5 cm. Engraving. Melbourne, The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russel and Mab Grimwade Bequest, 1973.

⁹ Sadler, 1982, p. 81.

¹⁰ John Skinner Prout, *Melbourne from Collingwood 1847*, 1847. 22.8 x 37.6 cm. Lithograph and watercolour. Melbourne, The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest, 1973.

thermotopic hearth, the place of stories and warmth and relaxation and friendliness-- are contrasted in a spatial manner with the harsh industrialisations behind them.

These three psychogeographic explorations have, I think, been instructive in showing only a few of the facets of this underutilised theory. For Debord, psychogeography was a radical way to reclaim capitalistic spaces through a violent possessiveness of his own. Perhaps what is needed instead is a wholly empathetic and holistic spatial awareness, more cohabitations around the atmospheres of the hearth: a being-embedded within artistic spaces of culture and becoming.

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List of figures:



Fig. 1: Henry Gritten, *Melbourne from the Botanical Gardens*, 1865. 52.4 x 77.8 cm. Oil on canvas. Melbourne, The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Purchased 2018, the Russel and Mab Grimwade Miegunyah Fund.



Fig. 2: James Adamson, John Carmicahel & Raphael Clint, *Melbourne from the South Side of the Yarra Yarra*, 1839. 20.3 x 35.5 cm. Engraving. Melbourne, The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russel and Mab Grimwade Bequest, 1973.



Fig. 3: John Skinner Prout, *Melbourne from Collingwood 1847*, 1847. 22.8 x 37.6 cm.

Lithograph and watercolour. Melbourne, The University of Melbourne Art Collection.

Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest, 1973.