



# AFTER WORD, THOUGHT, LIFE: A STROLL IN PARISIAN PARKS

**Michaela Giebelhausen**

*This afterword takes the reader on a lyrical psychogeographic drift (dérive) through Paris' green spaces, from the Buttes-Chaumont of Aragon's Paris Peasant back through the jardin anglais of the Parc Monceau and the grounds of colonial expositions to the bright red follies of the late twentieth-century Parc de la Villette. The pavilions met with here are like relics, living out their afterlives, triggering memories and imagination, reminding the reader of the changeability of function and meaning that makes it so difficult to pin down such structures.*

Keywords: pavilion, Paris, Parc Monceau, Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, Parc de la Villette, folly, monument, picturesque, psychogeography.

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## **After Word, Thought, Life: A Stroll In Parisian Parks**

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# AFTER WORD, THOUGHT, LIFE: A STROLL IN PARISIAN PARKS

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## Abstract

*This afterword takes the reader on a lyrical psychogeographic drift (dérive) through Paris' green spaces, from the Buttes-Chaumont of Aragon's Paris Peasant back through the jardin anglais of the Parc Monceau and the grounds of colonial expositions to the bright red follies of the late twentieth-century Parc de la Villette. The pavilions met with here are like relics, living out their afterlives, triggering memories and imagination, reminding the reader of the changeability of function and meaning that makes it so difficult to pin down such structures.*

Standing at the foot of Montmartre, in the rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, Louis Aragon, André Breton and Marcel Noll debated where to go and spend the rest of their evening. You can just see them emphatically pointing in different directions: to Montmartre, Montparnasse, and to the Buttes-Chaumont. Readers of Aragon's *Paris Peasant* (1926) know that the lure of the east and of nature prevailed. The three friends climbed into a cab and instructed the driver to take them to the Buttes-Chaumont.

On tumbling out of the taxi, Aragon, Breton and Noll find the gates of the Buttes-Chaumont still open. Their *impromptu* visit captures a sense of excitement, which left the friends 'feeling like conquerors and quite drunk with open-mindedness' (Aragon [1926] 1994, p. 137). In the surrealist imagination the park 'stirred a mirage', configuring 'a field of experiment where it was unthinkable that we should not receive countless surprises' while its structures trigger a conversation on obsessive irrationalities (p. 133). The three friends strike a myriad of matches to read the detailed inscriptions on the monument, outlining the infrastructure of the 19<sup>th</sup> arrondissement: information ranging from the practical to the scientific, including the number of kindergartens and railway stops as well as altitudes above Seine and sea. They also ruminate on the so-called suicide bridge from which even unsuspecting strollers were rumoured to plunge headlong into the lake below. One moment, the friends dwell on the irrational power of this bridge which had lured passers-by to their sudden deaths like the vertiginous pull of some mythical Loreley. The next, they're deciphering

the lengthy inscriptions. Aragon's stark contrast of the total oblivion of death with the meticulous reclaiming of history's minutiae turns the Buttes-Chaumont into one of those parks that 'opened their hearts to forgetfulness as well as to memory' (p. 147). The night-time excursion engendered reverie in which time and place shimmered between past and present, vision and promise.

A stroll in the park is always a historical excursion. The surrealists valued the surprising and playful, and for them a promenade in the park became an imaginary voyage of discovery. So let us begin our own stroll in the affluent Haussmannised west of the city. At the metro stop Monceau you climb up into the sunshine blinking to find yourself at the splendid iron gold-tipped gates of the park. Here you encounter the remnants of an eighteenth-century fantasy landscape. It was dreamt up by the Duc d'Orleans and his collaborator, the writer and painter, Louis Carrogis Carmontelle in the 1770s. English landscape gardens such as Stowe in Buckinghamshire served as a major source of inspiration. The pavilion is at home here. This is one of its classic habitats, one it shares with follies and all sorts of small scale commemorative structures. Time has substantially altered the park's original design, overlaying it with things new and old. As you pass through the gates you're greeted by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's rotunda built as one of the many toll booths encircling the city and making it murmur with revolt in the 1780s. Ledoux's radical classicism has since been softened by a dome. The structure's stylistic lineage runs right back to Bramante's Tempietto and the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli. But such echoes of antiquity and the Renaissance are trumped by a down-to-earth sense of utility. [figure 17.1]

Two discrete signs indicate *toilettes hommes*, with an arrow pointing to the right, while *toilettes dames* points in the opposite direction. Modern mass culture has asserted its presence in the Elysian Fields you've entered. You got here just ahead of the noon crowds of office workers on their hurried lunchbreak. Soon they'll be sprawling on the lawns, scoffing takeaway noodles and sandwiches. As free patches of green become as rare as seats in your local brasserie, the toilets in Ledoux's rotunda, a sacrilege at first, are beginning to make sense. Modernity meets antiquity. A miniature pyramid erected in 1778 evokes ancient Egypt as much as imperial Rome [figure 17.2]. The ruined colonnade at the end of the oval basin is also part of the park's original design and reminiscent of the Villa Hadriana at Tivoli [figure 17.3]. Close by is a solitary arch of the Hôtel de Ville, re-erected here after it burnt down in the civil war of 1871 [figure 17.4]. Paris in ruins was



Figure 17.1 Claude Nicolas Ledoux, Rotonde (1787), part of the Farmers-General wall, Parc Monceau. Photograph: Uwe Bennert.



Figure 17.2 Classical Colonnade (1778), Parc Monceau. Photograph: Michaela Giebelhausen.





Figure 17.3 Egyptian Pyramid (1778), Parc Monceau. Photograph: Michaela Giebelhausen.

frequently compared to antique Rome or Pompeii. The park's structures invoke a kind of time travel, or feigned voyage. They make manifest the symbolic aspiration of Paris as a new Rome as well as the tragedy of such a claim.

The pavilion's power to conjure imagined worlds blends with artificial fragments as well as real ruins, enabling a sense of history that is fluid, meandering and full of associations. These structures are in effect wormholes in time; they fill the present with resonances of the past. Only when the Parc Monceau teems with Parisians on their lunch break are such temporal oscillations inappropriate. Forgetfulness and memory are less dramatically contrasted in the Parc Monceau at mid-day. But here too memories are symbolic, aspirational and historical, and mostly embodied in the park's structures.

In the surrealist imagination pavilion and monument meet their alter ego: the folly, a structure which Bernard Tschumi explored in the Parc de la Villette. Jacques Derrida reminded us that Tschumi's folly isn't a singular madness, but 'folies' designed to challenge the meaning of architecture (Tschumi, 1986, p.7). These madresses take a single form and the challenge to architecture is staged through the pavilion, a structure which has been denied the status of architecture. The red cubes are, in fact, pavilions. In eighteenth-century parks, the pavilion has been shelter and *Fata Morgana* of different times and places. Often it has been a royal

plaything, most famously perhaps in Marie-Antoinette's fantasy village tucked away in the far reaches of the formal gardens at Versailles. Tschumi also introduces an element of play in the Parc de la Villette. His notion of the 'case vide', the empty field on the game board to which pieces might migrate in clever moves, simultaneously highlights the grid and the game – certainty and chance (Tschumi, 1986, p.3). When the figure of M challenges X to a mathematical game in Alain Resnais' *L'Année dernier à Marienbad*, the game of chance becomes one of irrational certainty. M claims to never lose. Indeed, M never does. Less certain though is his victory in the game of love played out in the modern-day memories of the *fêtes gallantes* lingering in the park.

If the pavilion and the monument inevitably conjure the folly, so the red cubes of Tschumi's 'folies' offer a mathematical certainty that is diametrically opposed to Aragon's frenzied excitement of the true gambler whose body is the roulette wheel and who is betting on red (Aragon, 1994, p.7). Instead, Tschumi offers us a cerebral game of cube and variation: the denial of function and thwarting of meaning. Whilst the pavilion is a built allusion, (illusion, a time- or a dream machine) Tschumi's 'folies' expose the madness of such thinking. Derrida's insistence on the '*maintenant*' of these structures frees them from the oscillations of time and place; frees them also from the possibility of nostalgia and overt signification. They are structures in a game





Figure 17.4 Fragment of the Hôtel de Ville, destroyed in the civil war of 1871. Photograph: Michaela Giebelhausen.



Figure 17.5 Bernard Tschumi, 'folie', Parc de la Villette (1982-87). Photograph: Uwe Bennert.





Figure 17.6 Claude Nicolas Ledoux, Rotonde de la Villette (1884-88), part of Farmers-General wall, Place Stalingrad. Photograph: Michaela Giebelhausen.

whose rules we don't quite know. And yet, walking among Tschumi's signal-red folies whose 'madness' he instilled in an interview (Tschumi, 1986, p. 26), I cannot help but be reminded of Aragon's ruminations on modernity which conclude with the evocation of 'an essentially modern tragic symbol: ... a sort of large wheel which is spinning and which is no longer being steered by a hand' (Aragon, 1994, p. 118). The 'folie' which sits along the east side of the grande halle, the former abbatoir, has a giant water wheel, spinning unsteered [figure 17.5]. Might this be another game of signification, one that taunts the notion that there is none to be found in Tschumi's folies?

Distractions are inevitable at the Parc de la Villette. As I contemplate Tschumi's zero degree (or not?) pavilions, another of Ledoux's toll booths makes its presence felt. The magnificent rotonde de la Villette at the end of the canal de l'Ourcq reminds me of the pavilion's potential for the picturesque, the classical and the ideal. But approach the Villette rotonde at your peril! [figure 17.6]. Close up, the metro's elevated tracks swerve just clear of it. A hesitant row of trees dolefully tries to soften the encounter of modern engineering and eighteenth-century radical classicism. Guy Debord found the charm of the rotonda 'singularly enhanced by the curve of the elevated subway line that passes by at close distance' (Debord, 1956). It reminded him of Toukhachevsky's proposal to improve the park of Versailles by erecting a factory in the terrain between

the palace and the water basin. The clash between Ledoux's rotonda and the twentieth-century modernity of the elevated metro line is further orchestrated by the confluence of several busy streets either side of the rotonda.

The raw brutality of the location is perhaps best epitomised in the nearby metro stop's evocation of besieged and war-torn Stalingrad. From the backseat of the taxi that took him and his two friends to the Buttes-Chaumont, Aragon had similarly mused on the discordant collage of this part of Paris. He characteristically delighted in the idiosyncracies of urban naming, remarking that the metro 'reunites ridiculously those two extremes, Nation and Dauphine' (Aragon, 1994, p. 135).<sup>1</sup> The violent juxtapositions, which marked the city as war zone and site of revolutions, excited both Aragon and Debord who also commented on the psychogeographical confluences of the canal and various roads and streets. They reminded him of the didactic simplicity of illustrations in children's books, uniting 'a harbor, a mountain, an isthmus, a forest, a river, a dike ... a bridge, a ship' (Debord, 1956). In Debord's mind these accessories evoked the paintings of Claude. But the Claude-like ideal was here inflected by the jarring modernity of the city. The elevated metro train still rattles past Ledoux's rotonda which is no longer 'a virtual ruin left in an incredible state of abandonment'

<sup>1</sup> Nation and Porte Dauphine are the final destinations of metro line 2.



Figure 17.7 Chinese wooden gate, constructed for the Exposition Coloniale 1907, Jardin d'agronomie tropicale, Bois de Vincennes, Nogent-sur-Marne. Photograph: Michaela Giebelhausen.



Figure 17.8 Monument to the war dead from Cambodia and Laos (1927), Jardin d'agronomie tropicale, Bois de Vincennes, Nogent-sur-Marne. Photograph: Michaela Giebelhausen.

that had fascinated Debord. From the hip hangout, now a restaurant and bar, boom the heavy rhythms of dance music and a changing rainbow of colours illuminates the rotonda at night.

Let's leave these modern-day Elysian Fields with their echoes of antiquity and the past, and go East, further east still than Aragon and his two friends. At the far end of the Bois de Vincennes, a RER train ride from the city centre, lies the Jardin d'agronomie tropicale. It was established in 1899 with the aim to research the possibilities of cultivating tropical plants on French soil. En route from the train station at Nogent-sur-Marne signs give directions to the Pavilion Baltard. The sleepy suburb is home also to a tiny part of the belly of nineteenth-century Paris, one of the iron umbrellas of Les Halles has been re-erected here. But Baltard has to wait.

We have come to visit the remnants of the 1907 Exposition Coloniale and to explore the pavilion's flair for the exotic and other cultures. Some of the pavilions are boarded up, the paint peeling, the structures themselves crumbling and decayed. World's Fairs there have been many as well as Colonial Exhibitions, but few are the vestiges that have survived into our own day. Through the wooden Chinese gate, a faded red, we enter another world [figure 17.7]. The pavilions dotted about the park offer echoes of empire that no longer register on a modern map. Indochine was a French invention, a region jointly named after its neighbours, India and China. Such naming betrays the west's crude understanding of the colonised territories which comprised Laos, Cambodia and parts of Vietnam. French imperial power also operated closer to home on the African continent, in Algeria, Tunisia and the Congo. The 1907 exhibition celebrated every corner of the French empire with pavilions dedicated to each country and region. Today one walks amongst a collection of semi-derelict structures. The pavilions here speak of a concrete French past, not some vague invocation of antiquity. Dreams and realities of empire were enacted here. In 1914 a military hospital was erected in the grounds of the park.<sup>2</sup> As the wounded of the colonial regiments started arriving, the hospital quickly became too small, adding almost 300 beds to the original 49. By the time it closed in 1919, it had taken in some 4813 soldiers, mostly from the colonies. Those who could not be nursed back to health here were buried in the military section of the nearby cemetery of Nogent-sur-Marne. Their contributions to the French war efforts are commemorated in several of the park's monuments. As one stops to read the

<sup>2</sup> The information on the park is taken from the notice boards dotted around it.

inscriptions, the extent of the colonies' involvement in the French military action becomes painfully apparent [figure 17.8]. Aragon and his friends would no doubt have lingered longer than I did, deciphering every bit of each monument as they had in the Buttes-Chaumont. The park combines several moments of France's imperial past. Exhibition pavilion and war memorial sit side by side. Both share the fate of not quite being architecture. But they're also far more single-minded and expressive structures for that. Together they accentuate a landscape originally designed to understand and exploit, celebrate and commemorate France's imperial episodes. Indochine is the first of the pavilions to have recently been restored. It will once more serve as a temporary exhibition space.<sup>3</sup>

On their way to the Buttes-Chaumont Aragon and his friends might have passed the location of another reappropriated pavilion. Konstantin Melnikov's Soviet pavilion had originally been created for the Exposition des Arts Décoratifs in 1925. It won a gold medal and was greatly admired by modernist architects such as Josef Hoffmann who had himself designed the show's Austrian pavilion. After the exhibition had closed, the Soviets relocated the wood-and-glass structure to the 19<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, close to the Buttes-Chaumont (Mileaf, 2010, pp. 127-128; Blake, 2002, p.40). Just a few years after the friends' midnight ramble in the park, Melnikov's pavilion was to house an anti-colonialist exhibition which the surrealists had helped set up. *La vérité sur les colonies* ran from September 1931 to February 1932, attracting over 4000 visitors (Morton, 2000, p.103). The exhibition parodied the colonising discourse and its values, aiming to challenge the positive spin of the 1931 International Colonial Exposition. Aragon and Breton were among the Surrealists who signed the manifesto, *Ne visitez pas l'Exposition Coloniale*, which drew attention to the brutal reality of French colonial rule. Not a week passes that there aren't killings in the colonies, the manifesto poignantly proclaimed.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the surrealists' strongly worded exhortation not to visit the International Colonial Exposition, its lure was hard to resist. Official records list some 33 million entries into the vast exhibition grounds at the western end of the Bois de Vincennes (Morton,

3 For images and project description of the restoration see: [www.leplusarchitectes.com](http://www.leplusarchitectes.com).

4 'Le dogme de l'intégrité du territoire national invoqué pour donner à ces massacres une justification morale, est basé sur un jeu de mots insuffisant pour faire oublier qu'il n'est pas de semaine où l'on ne tue aux colonies.' The full text of the manifesto *Ne visitez pas l'exposition coloniale* is found at: <http://faculty.virginia.edu/ajmlevine/880/Readings/nevisitezpas.html>.

1998, p.357). For the best part of 1931, from May to November, the Exposition promised visitors 'le tour du monde en un jour' (Morton, 2000, p.3). The one-day world tour was designed to reinforce and legitimise the West's domination of its colonies. In the accurately modelled and scaled structures, such as the Kmer temples at Angkor Wat or populated Senegalese villages, the exhibition quite literally brought the colonies to Paris. It attempted to create a visual imaginary of 'la plus grande France', a greater France which included its far-flung colonies. The exhibition organisers were keen to distance the displays from those of the fairground, while still offering 'a simulation of colonial life' (Mileaf, 2010, p.133). Much attention was lavished on the 'authenticity' of its architecture and educational displays. The architecture of the pavilions provided the language through which 'the artistic achievements of each indigenous culture, ranked according to European standards' was meant to be read (Morton, 2000, p.180). Thus the pavilions formed part of a collection that carefully mapped and measured the varying degrees of civilisation and evolution throughout the world.

In his *Principles of Human Geography* (1926) Paul Vidal had characterised the differences between an African and a European village as one of accidental temporality versus permanence. A European village's history, he claimed, 'is traceable for thousands of years'. In the case of the African village the 'site may be changed by a mere accident' (Morton, 2000, p.183).<sup>5</sup> For all its rhetoric of Western evolutionary superiority, the International Colonial Exposition was just such an African village. The spectacular structures left few permanent traces. Theirs had been a fugitive gathering, an ideological mirage in the working-class East end of Paris. The exuberant art deco building of the Palais des Colonies (now known as the Palais de la Porte Dorée) offered a more permanent form of collecting the colonies. It exemplified an up-to-the-minute architectural vernacular that framed a sculpted tapestry of colonial motives and was designed to house the Musée des Colonies et de la France extérieure. In a post-colonial age, the questions we ask of history have been rephrased. The stories we want to tell and hear seem more fluid, focusing on movement and cultural hybridity. Since 2007 the Palais de la Porte Dorée has been home to the Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration.

5 'The African village whose site may be changed by a mere accident, and the European village whose history is traceable for thousands of years, is as widely different as the city of antiquity and the immense metropolis of today. The distance is that between a rudimentary and an advanced stage of civilisation' (Vidal, 1926, p.163).





Figure 17.9 Pavillon Baltard, originally one of the pavilions of Les Halles (c. 1863), Nogent-sur-Marne.  
Photograph: Michaela Giebelhausen.

I have taken you to places which now figure on your mental map of Paris. When arriving in Nogent-sur-Marne we resisted the lure of the *dérive* and headed straight for the Jardin d'agriculture tropicale. But Baltard must no longer wait. On the way back to the train station I detoured to pay a visit to the Baltard pavilion, the only one to survive the demolition of Les Halles in 1971; remnants of another now reside in Yokohama [figure 17.9]. The giant pavilion serves as an event space not dissimilar to the Parc de la Villette's central grande halle. However, the programme is pitifully sparse (<http://pavillonbaltard.fr/>). The pavilion is fenced off and uninviting. Nothing here speaks of its former function as a place of trade, exchange, encounter and consumption. It is hard to imagine the formidable fish wives' daily bickering and haggling so vividly recounted in Zolas' *Belly of Paris* (1873). Just outside the tall industrial gate nestles an odd assemblage of Haussmannian street furniture: lamp posts and iron benches, an advertising column and even a rubbish bin [figure 17.10]. These forlorn relics of nineteenth-century Paris are tied together in a nostalgic and inept gesture. The space in which the street furniture purposelessly congregates is called 'Square du Vieux Paris' [figure 17.11]. Nothing could be further from the truth. But that is not what I came here for.

On the monument in the Buttes-Chaumont whose inscriptions Aragon and his two friends deciphered with the reverence of modern-day Champollions, the city remains unmapped. Two blanks still await the plan of the nineteenth arrondissement and of Paris, which were to be raised by subscription. The benefactor's generosity in charting and communicating the facts of the nineteenth arrondissement with such meticulous care has not been matched by his neighbours. In this stroll through Parisian parks searching for pavilions and the traces they have left behind, not least 'on the town's collective unconscious', we have by default been latecomers to the stories they tell (Aragon, 1994, p.136).

Aragon's roulette wheel is not the only game of chance on offer. Turn away from the page and the night, and stick a pin into a map of *Paris et ses environs*, piercing the paper at points west, north-east and east. Our stroll in Parisian parks can be dictated by chance, but wherever we go we are only witnesses to the pavilion's afterlife, be that neglect, decay, half-hearted resuscitation or miraculous resurrection. After words and thoughts there remains the humbling admission, borrowed from Aragon: 'I have said scarcely anything about this garden [for garden read park or pavilion], I have neglected all the essential features' (Aragon, 1994, p.185). But who is to say what is essential about the pavilion and its urban afterlife?





Figure 17.10 Haussmannian street furniture, reassembled in Nogent-sur-Marne. Photograph: Michaela Giebelhausen.



Figure 17.11 Street sign, 'Square du vieux Paris', Nogent-sur-Marne. Photograph: Michaela Giebelhausen.



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