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Heterotopias, Non-Places and Other Chiasmi

Abstract

This paper investigates the dichotomy between Dismaland, a dystopian inversion of Disneyland, and Disneyland as an enduring bastion of joyous illusion. Through the lenses of heterotopia, non-places, and chiasmus, it explores how their coexistence authentically grounds one while estranging the other. Banksy's inadvertent use of a chiasmic structure in transforming Dismaland is analyzed for its reorganizational logic, and challenging norms. Drawing on Lefebvre, Foucault, Rancière, and Nikolchina, the paper examines cultural representations, spaces, and social relations. The analysis extends to non-places vs. heterotopias, emphasizing Dismaland's resistance to non-place classification. The paper advocates for heterotopias, like Dismaland, to challenge norms and foster alternative cultural production, critiquing interpretations of Situationist theories and proposing Rancière's spatial occupation. The conclusion explores how chiasmic structure and heterotopian thinking fuel Dismaland's revolutionary potential, challenging predetermined environments, and underscores art's transformative role in societal evolution towards a renewed existence.

Keywords: Dismaland; Disneyland; heterotopia; dystopia; chiasmic structure; non-places

Резюме

Хетеротопии, не-места и други хиазми

Следната статия разглежда дихотомията между Dismaland, като дистопична инверсия на Дисниленд, а Дисниленд като траен бастион на радостна илюзия. През оптиката на хетеротопията, не-местата и хиазма, тя изследва как тяхното съвместно съществуване автентично основава едното, докато отчуждава другото. Неволното използване на хиастична структура от Банкси при трансформирането на Dismaland се анализира за неговата реорганизационна логика и предизвикателни норми. Опирайки се на Льофевр, Фуко, Рансиер и Николчина, статията разглежда културни репрезентации, пространства и социални отношения. Анализът се простира до не-места срещу хетеротопии, подчертавайки съпротивата на Dismaland срещу не-местната класификация. Статията се застъпва за хетеротопии, като Dismaland, за оспорване на нормите и насърчаване на алтернативно културно производство, критикувайки интерпретациите на ситуационистките теории и предлагайки пространствената окупация на Рансиер. Заключението изследва как хиастичната структура и хетеротопичното мислене подхранват революционния потенциал на Dismaland, предизвиквайки предварително определени среди и подчертава трансформиращата роля на изкуството в обществената еволюция към обновено съществуване.

Ключови думи: Dismaland; Дисниленд; хетеротопия; дистопия; хиастична структура; не-места

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Introduction

Dismaland, a temporary art installation created by the renowned British Street artist Banksy in 2015, materialized as a paradoxical blend of fiction and reality. Located in the coastal town of Weston-super-Mare, England, it offered visitors an immersive experience into a dystopian landscape of decay and horror. Originally conceived as an inverted reference to Disneyland, Dismaland was meant to be ephemeral, and its eventual dismantling and repurposing as a shelter, marked a stark of departure from the enduring presence of Disneyland. Unlike Disneyland, which symbolizes an unshakable world of fantasy and joyous illusion, Dismaland's evolution into a utilitarian structure highlights a dynamic contrast between the nature of catastrophic imagination and the permanence of reality. Such a juxtaposition sheds light on the interaction between the imaginary and the tangible, revealing some novel modes of perceiving the real world and its places.

In a famous example of a similar coexistence of un/real places, Baudrillard notes that the fact that Las Vegas exists as a concrete negative concerning other cities, such as Los Angeles,² and that the fact they both exist simultaneously, makes one place become real, while the other is its alienation. This not only confirms the factuality of one place and the fictionality of the other – rather, during the time of their coexistence, Disneyland and its direct critique, Dismaland, made Disneyland real in its undisputed importance as a recognized and necessary alienation of a world of illusion that one could visit to escape the cruel reality of real life. Thus, to reiterate, the coexistence of these places contributes to the realness of one and the alienation of the other. Dismaland and Disneyland are respectively, the nightmares of each other. However, only Disneyland and its elements still persist on the real-world map.

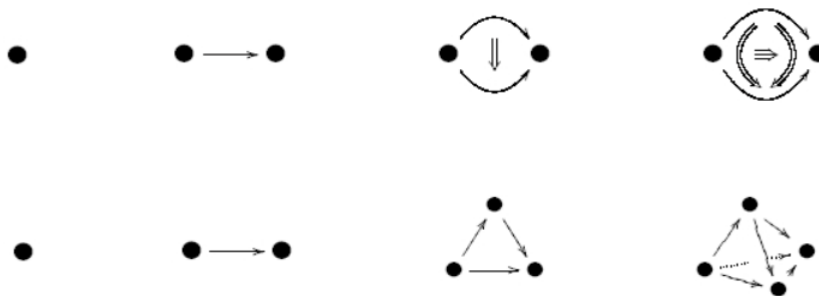


Figure 1: *The Homotopy Hypothesis*, courtesy of John Baez, Aaron Lauda © 2007

² Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. University of Michigan Press, 1994, pp. 10-11.

In this context, Dismaland is conceived as a dystopian theme park and parodic inversion not only of Disneyland—renowned as an iconic haven of happiness and magical (albeit fictional) experiences - but also as a satirical look at everything that constitutes the reality of lived experience. Through the use of the chiasmic device, the inversion of the supporting structure, Dismaland can be described as a 'homotopia' of Disneyland. This term implies a similarity in many aspects, but with a twisted, inverted version of the familiar themes and experiences. Accordingly, the term 'homotopy' helps build visual parallels between the two parks, and thus might be imaginatively translated as the mathematical connotation that suggests the continuous deformation of two objects within space.

Accordingly, with the case of the two parks, this deformation takes place both when they coexist and when only one of them remains as it was, after the destruction of its referent and counterpart. Both places are therefore, in mathematical terminology, homotopies in relation to each other, for a homotopy is a space that transforms and with this change also the perception of the points that construct it, or whenever a single point of their frame moves in space. In a broader linguistic and philosophical sense, however, I will also refer to Dismaland as a “heterotopia” as employed by Lefebvre, Foucault, Rancière and Nikolchina and their theories of the production of spaces and their meaning concerning the production and emergence of social relations. By examining the relationships between these concepts, we can also better understand how both physical or immaterial spaces and cultural representations interact with and reinforce each other.

For example, it is argued that ‘non-places’ can reinforce cultural representations of fragmentation and isolation, while heterotopias can challenge and subvert dominant cultural representations of space by providing alternative spaces for alternative cultural production. The term 'utopia', on the other hand, refers to an ideal or perfect place that does not exist in reality. The concept of utopia has been used throughout history to imagine and describe a society or community characterized by perfect social and political conditions. However, it is heterotopian thinking rather than utopian thinking that can provide a vision of what is possible and that can inspire individuals to envision a better future. According to Rancière, utopia is the space in which only the non-polemical finds a place.³ In contrast, in a heterotopia the polemical tension is always present, in a state of unresolved antagonism. This tension, represented here by the imaginary metaphor of the chiasm and the chiasmic structures, is thus a figure of balanced tension between stasis and action and an oscillating force that always keeps this tension stable.

³ Rancière, Jacques. The Senses and Uses of Utopia: Political Uses of Utopia. – In: *New Marxist, Anarchist, and Radical Democratic Perspectives*. Ed. S. D. Chrostowska and J. D. Ingram. New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2017, pp. 219-232.

For this reason, in the following paper, I will also discuss how chiasmus — a rhetorical device for inverting the structure that contains predetermined conceptual elements— is also found in the relationship between imaginary and real places, serving as a means of questioning the established order of the world and its predetermined elements. Chiasmus is thus a means of reorganizing the carrying structures of what is known with certainty about the world.⁴

Since, the chiasmus functions as a logical arrangement in which the repetition of concepts rather than material elements serves to enable a reversal of perspective, the chiastic structure thus allows Banksy to preserve the negative space of Dismaland and transform it into a realm of unfulfilled joy and playfulness.

Dismaland, as opposed to Disneyland...

The parallels between Banksy's art installation and Disneyland are evident in their contrasting atmospheres—while Dismaland exudes a negative vibe, it juxtaposes the familiar elements, laying bare their original meaning, and inverting them within a framework reminiscent of Disneyland's language, which defines its world. What is explicit in Dismaland and in Jenny Holzer's truisms which are disseminated throughout Dismaland, is the presentation of the familiar and known, reflecting thus the familiarity of the everyday. Implicit is the reason for this brutalization of the familiar elements — the ambiguity as to their exact meaning as an unmasked reality, or as a pursuit of transformation and transition into a similar future through imaginative destruction.

But what Dismaland eliminates in relation to its opposite, is solely the element of pleasure and happiness, which departs from the Hegelian sublation and the seamless movement of the Spirit. In this context, it is helpful to imagine a chiastic structure within which the opposites are mirrored and by this also reversed. Similarly, the chiastic structure would not exist if the opposites did not mutually recognize their existence and thus their significance in relation to each other.⁵ This is also reminiscent of the Hegelian master-slave relation, but emphasizes an oscillating movement between the two states of existence and the fight for recognition of the two simultaneous existences. Indeed, the Hegelian master-slave dialectic involves a complex process of mutual recognition and the development of self-consciousness through the confrontation between a master and a slave, whereby the direction of movement is based on a hierarchical structure.

Although there is no hierarchical arrangement of elements within the chiasmus, such a dynamic can still be considered chiastic, as the process involves a reversal or overlapping of roles and

⁴ See Isar, Nicoletta. Undoing Forgetfulness: Chiasmus of Poetical Mind: A Cultural Paradigm of Archetypal Imagination – In: *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 2005, 1(3) Available at:

<https://ejop.psychopen.eu/index.php/ejop/article/view/370/370.html> (20.01.2024)

⁵ Ibidem.

expectations between the interacting elements. The traditional power structure is thus turned on its head and both parties undergo a transformation. The chiasmic structure is thus evident in the reversal of the initial power dynamic, which leads to a more equal and reciprocal relationship at the end of the dialectic. Furthermore, the need for mutual recognition, both in a chiasmus and the Hegelian master-slave dialectic is fundamental to maintaining equilibrium in this structure. The chiasmic thinking and its underlying movement is thus a specific logic of arrangement and “confronts us with experiences of reversal”.⁶

Since the chiasmic structure both establishes and requires balance in order to exist as such, as Isar states, it is important to consider the presence of the element “and” between the two self-reflecting elements in a chiasmic relation. The relationship, that is this rhizomatic relationship, in which the simultaneous existence of the opposing elements facing each other is fundamental, entails the inversion of their structure. Moreover, according to the scholar, “the chiasmic reversal involves a twist and a rotation – a revolutionary one.”⁷ The beginning rotates and meets the end, which in turn is the beginning, but the end is shifted slightly forward from the position at the beginning. So it was with the disappearance of Dismaland, one month after its beginning. Its disappearance and the reiteration of its artistic status as a mere installation have changed the way Disneyland or other such places are perceived according to the homotopic definition. While the homotopy is the simultaneous and reflected transformation of objects in space, the chiasmus is thus a precise logic of rearrangement and its oscillating movement is a rhizomatic conversation, not governed by hierarchical laws, between the elements that confront each other and remain in a constant unresolved tension.

The above use of the example of chiasmic logic aims to better understand the symbolic interconnectedness between the dark and inverted ambience of Dismaland as the opposite of Disneyland, which could include or exclude possibilities of a different perspective on reality. Following Rancière, who states that “the ‘fictions’ of art and politics [...] are heterotopias rather than utopias,”⁸ it is easy to see that utopia in its essence resembles a non-place rather than a heterotopia, because as a non-place, utopia also commits to the constant and continuous maintenance of its goals and functions (to be utopia), because if this does not happen, utopia would lose its most important point of reference.

Furthermore, Banksy's installation also appears as a heterotopia within the already established borders of consumer culture: following Lefebvre, heterotopias, as David Harvey emphasizes,⁹ are

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Gabriel Rockhill trans. London, Continuum Press, 2004, p. 41.

⁹ Harvey, David. *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. Kindle edition, 2012, loc. 117/4328.

spaces of relationships rather than actual geographical spaces. Heterotopias here are *liminal* spaces created by the specific interaction of people who choose to relate to each other in pursuit of a particular goal, rather than waiting for a place to provide the material space for such relationships to begin.

Thus, Dismaland also resists classification as an Augenian 'non-place' due to the indeterminate and undefined nature of its meaning in the present and the abundance of detached yet recognizable cultural symbols that merge into a distinct social identity while translating a part of our social present.

Indeed, Marc Augé's concept of 'non-places' refers to transitory and impersonal spaces that lack any specific social and cultural reference or meaning typically associated with places. Augé's non-places are self-referential. They always point to themselves, in a closed circle, and their aim is to be preserved and maintained as such. They oblige their temporary inhabitants to extend this aim through the practices they impose within their boundaries. Augé cites airports, highways and shopping malls as examples of non-places¹⁰ – spaces that serve specific functional purposes but offer no possibilities for the creation of alternative or novel social relations or cultural expressions other than the repetition of their nature as transit spaces. Augé argues that non-places are a hallmark of modern society, reflecting the decline of communal ties and the rise of individualism – or reinforcing the fragmentation and isolation of the individual. Non-places are thus characterized by their impersonality and their lack of social meaning beyond the maintenance of the prevailing arrangement of existing reality. On the other hand, heterotopias such as Dismaland facilitate the conscious execution of the Situationist *dérive*. Moreover, since such a practice requires an obligatory 'dropping off' of any kind of prior mental and/or physical engagement to a previous mental state, it is a displacement of boundaries that occurs by allowing oneself to be guided by the feelings that one's environment triggers in the individual. Much like the chiasmic structures, then, the structure of Dismaland provides a constructed site for the construction of situations. To put it in Lefebvrian terms, heterotopias are the places – psychological or geographical - where communities are formed. Heterotopias give individuals the right to the city, which is to create and individualize their own space in which they live and relate to the world.

Perhaps, it is worth noticing that, as also Harvey observes the way in which Lefebvre conceptualizes heterotopia differs from the Foucauldian notion of heterotopia. The former definition is based on the possibility of creating *difference* through action and interaction within the spaces formed, while the latter focuses on the inherent meaninglessness of a space that lies in-between the observer of the space and the observed object within the space. Foucault famously uses the example of the mirror in which an object is reflected, and so the heterotopia is the space located in/between these two positions. The Lefebvrian *heterotopia* is thus a real path of realizing "revolutionary

¹⁰ Augé, Marc. *Non-Places: Introduction to an anthropology of Supermodernity*, London, Verso Books, 1995, p. 34.

trajectories” that could change the meaning of space and adapt it to the acting subject. Here, in fact, this notion could coincide with Bourriaud’s notion of “relational aesthetics” (Relational Aesthetics, 1998), drawn from the Situationist theory of the *dérive*, as a space fundamental to the constitution of productive and creative intersubjective relations, and with his concept of “interstice”, derived from Marx (in relation to the production of an alternative economic system in the spaces that are not dominated by a legislation – the *in-between*) and détourned by the curator to describe an art form of social relations that is still practiced in institutional spaces and that is situated between the norms of gallery and museum art, but not outside of the norms that these institutions demand of visitors.¹¹ Bourriaud’s misconception of the *dérive* thus helps to perpetuate the system that the Situationists primarily denounced through the use of their theories, and thus also reinforces the power of non-places and the way they shape the individual by continuing to isolate the category of life within the spaces of the art-world. But with his own interpretation of Situationist theories, Bourriaud proves that experience has become another fetish object of consumer society, instead of cultivating the individual to realize and create oneself.

In this sense, what Bourriaud proposes with his theory of “relational aesthetics” was also suggested by Rancière, albeit differently and more correctly in relation to the Situationist theories. While Bourriaud has been widely criticized for having misinterpreted the most fundamental Situationist ideas (the construction of situations and the *dérive*),¹² or more precisely, for not dissolving any link between art and institutions, merging art with the creative endeavor of building a pleasant and unconstrained life, Rancière’s proposal, on the other hand, is precisely to occupy spaces contrary to their original function and thus boycott any institutional regulation linked to their use.¹³ Dismaland, for example, occupies the space of a past economic utopia: a tourist lido of leisure and pleasant idleness. However, to return to Foucault, he defines “heterotopias of crises”, which are places where something must take place in time, but not in space. “In our society, where leisure is the rule, idleness is a kind of deviation”¹⁴ In Disneyland, idleness is indeed imposed on visitors, as the arrangement within the facility prohibits them from consuming pleasurable experiences or goods. While Dismaland is a fictional place of real idleness, where the decay of culture finds its final grave in the art world, for Foucault the perfect example of a heterotopia is the cemetery, or rather, the cenotaph. Perhaps Dismaland presents itself in this sense as a *cenotaph*. The memorial for the dead who died elsewhere.

¹¹ Harvey, David. *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. Kindle edition, 2012, loc. 117/4328.

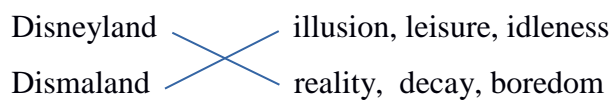
¹² See, Stob, Jennifer. The Paradigms of Nicolas Bourriaud: Situationists as Vanishing Point. – In: *Evental Aesthetics*, 2014, no.4, p. 23-54. Also Claire Bishop holds a similar stance, See, Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London, Verso Books, 2012, p. 2; 11 and especially p. 28.

¹³ Cf. Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Gabriel Rockhill trans. London, Continuum Press, 2004, p. 80.

¹⁴ Foucault, Michel. Heterotopias, of Other Spaces. – In: *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, 1984, no. 5, p. 46-49.

If this is the case, then Dismaland could also be interpreted as wishful thinking. As a ritual of symbolic assassination of culture and the elements that make up its language. But if Dismaland wants to be the concrete mirror and not the space between the observer of a decaying culture (the interstice) and the culture in decay, then Dismaland must be viewed as a *dystopia*. The dystopia is then our world, which finds its place in Dismaland.

By using the metaphorical logic of the chiasmic structure to imagine Dismaland as the specular reflection of the real and tangible world, and by following Foucault's definition of heterotopia, the device of the chiasmus reveals once again, that on the other side of these reflections, leisure and idleness stand in relation to work and boredom and decay.



However, the chiasmic structure only remains stable when in the presence of its opposite (Disneyland opposed to Dismaland)—and they need to simultaneously coexist.

The chiasmus, which offers an experiential insight into the dynamic of a revolution, achieves balance at the point where the lines of the X in the chiasmic structure intersect – this is the interstice. This point of convergence and *con-versation* is the perfect specularity where everything is exchangeable in its position – it is the point of friction.

Indeed, there is no doubt that the historical avant-gardes have used various the techniques of alienation and distancing to overcome the hypnotic state of alienating illusion in which the contemporary world is trapped. Instead of a mere montage of concepts, it serves as a space for reshaping the visible and the liveable, because it takes two opposing forces to cause friction. And since the chiasmus confronts its observers with experiences of revolution, in order to understand it, the elements of irony and subversion present in Dismaland's organization already disrupts the expected experience of a theme park and allows for a *dérive*, a drift, through the space that can lead to a deeper understanding of the cultural representations of utopia and the ways in which they are shaped by political and economic forces, exemplified by the familiar objects, standing there in decay.

The construction of a situation, for the Situationists, was not merely a necessary act directed in the construction of a tool for the free and experimental re-creation of life, but was also considered to be the *place* of events that contributes to creating inputs, oriented towards the conditioning of imagination. Consequently, if Disneyland imagines on behalf of people, thus numbing and rendering obsolete one's capacity of imagination, Dismaland could be the place of the return of collective

imagination of what could be after the decay. Ultimately it can be stated that Dismaland's main structure is based on the material and matter of the habitual “organized appearance”.¹⁵ Thus the instillation offers “a terrain of experimentation for new values”, because something new can be built “only on the ruins of the spectacle.”¹⁶ Dismaland and its reconfiguration, diverging from a traditional theme park, creates a precise situation that embraces the possibility of a real psychogeographic exploration of the space, in which a situation is to be constructed precisely on the site of Dismaland, that is precisely a place filled with the “ruins of the spectacle” and its culture, available to the free constructive imagination of all.¹⁷

And because the constructed situation is brought to life in this way by its constructors and “the role of the ‘public,’ if not passive, then at least as spectators, must ever diminish, while the share of those who cannot be called actors, but in a new meaning of the term as ‘livers,’ (viveurs) will increase.”¹⁸ The reappropriation of the space of existence and dwelling, translates into the reintegration of the active subject into their own place which is formed by their thoughts and desires. And here, in another chiasmic structure, one can see how, as Isar notes, in the two contradictions between the Hegelian consciousness that determines the environment and the Marxian environment that determines consciousness, there is an overcoming of these antithetical statements in the chiasmic structure in which the Situationist techniques of *détournement*, *dérive* and psychogeography offer the balancing “and” necessary to maintain equilibrium. For if psychogeography and the *dérive* were conceived by the Situationists as an antidote to the conditioning force of the predetermined environment on the subject's demarcation, it is precisely through these techniques that one acts on the environment in order to change it, in order to change the way in which one's environment shapes one's consciousness. It is therefore true that one produces oneself through one's environment *and* one is produced by one's environment – in a continuous and incessant conversation and dialog, as the *dérive* and psychogeography have always attempted to achieve.

Moreover, as Marc Augé observes, the strolling individual always establishes a relationship between one's gaze and the surrounding landscape. Perhaps one should behave in the world not as a tourist, but as a dweller, to transform one's space and not just consume it.¹⁹ In the structure of Dismaland, where the “image of a society happily united by consumption”²⁰ is conspicuously absent

¹⁵ Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. K. Knabb. Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014, thesis 10.

¹⁶ Debord, Guy. Questionnaire SI. – In: *Internationale Situationniste*, 1964, n.9, Available online at: <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/questionnaire.html> (11.01.2024).

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Debord, Guy. Report on the Construction of Situation: Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents. Ed. T. McDonough. London, The MIT Press, 2002, p. 47.

¹⁹ See, Augé, Marc. *Non-Places: Introduction to an anthropology of Supermodernity*. London, Verso Books, 1995, p. 86.

²⁰ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. K. Knabb. Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014, thesis 69.

and considered impossible — action then becomes an imperative. As the SI states, revolutionary artists, for their part, must actively work on the decomposition of the spectacle. This, according to them, is also an effort that culminates in overcoming nihilism by confronting the proposed 'anticipation of total destruction', as is the case with the landscape of Dismaland.²¹ In contrast, although rebellious by nature, melancholic art lacks the power to initiate a revolution. Its tendency to complain and accuse those who do not share its melancholy condemns them to remain in the same stagnant situation.²²

And if, catastrophic imaginaries are to be considered as a sudden rupture with a present unable to lead to the desired future, Rancière explains that:

*There are two ways of coping with the rupture. The first counter-pose to the undecidable effect of the representational mediation is a 'being together' without mediation. [...] The evil consists not only in the content of the representation but in its very structure. It consists of the separation between the stage and the audience, between the performance of the body on the stage, and the passivity of the spectators in the theatre. What must replace the mimetic mediation is the immediate ethical performance of a collective that knows no separation between performing actors and passive spectators.*²³

In this context, art takes on the role of organizing communal life. Its responsibility goes beyond the vision of revolution. It must actively accompany its realization and show the necessary plans and strategies. In this way, art becomes the first step in the practice of revolution, which is oriented towards the transformation process of society. Through this development, art ceases to exist as a separate entity and blends seamlessly into the life of the renewed society.

Interestingly, Žižek proposes a departure from the conventional approach of evoking impending catastrophes merely through kairoic tones and threats, such as the symbolic "minutes to midnight", which point to environmental catastrophes, ecological collapses and impending crises. Instead, the philosopher proposes to embrace the notion of already being beyond midnight, fully immersed in the dystopian and catastrophic, in order to consistently live one's life in a state of readiness within such a landscape. According to Žižek, those who wish to be revolutionaries do not need to imagine utopias in order to bring about positive change; rather, true revolutionaries live consciously and voluntarily in a dystopian reality. They are comparable to the "viveurs" of Dismaland.

²¹ Debord, Guy. Questionnaire SI. — In: *Internationale Situationniste*, 1964, n.9, Available online at: <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/questionnaire.html> (11.01.2024).

²² Perniola, Mario. *Art and Its Shadows*. London, Continuum Press, 2004, p. 68.

²³ Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. My emphasis. London, Verso Books, 2008, p. 62.

In this line of thought, Vaneigem advocates adopting the perspective of those who courageously look down and initiate the descent, as opposed to those, akin to Disney characters, remain suspended in mid-air, refusing to acknowledge their precarious situation until they take their eyes off the abyss.²⁴

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²⁴ Vaneigem, Raoul. *Vaneigem, Raoul. The Revolution of Everyday Life*, Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. London, Rebel Press, 2012. p. 6.

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