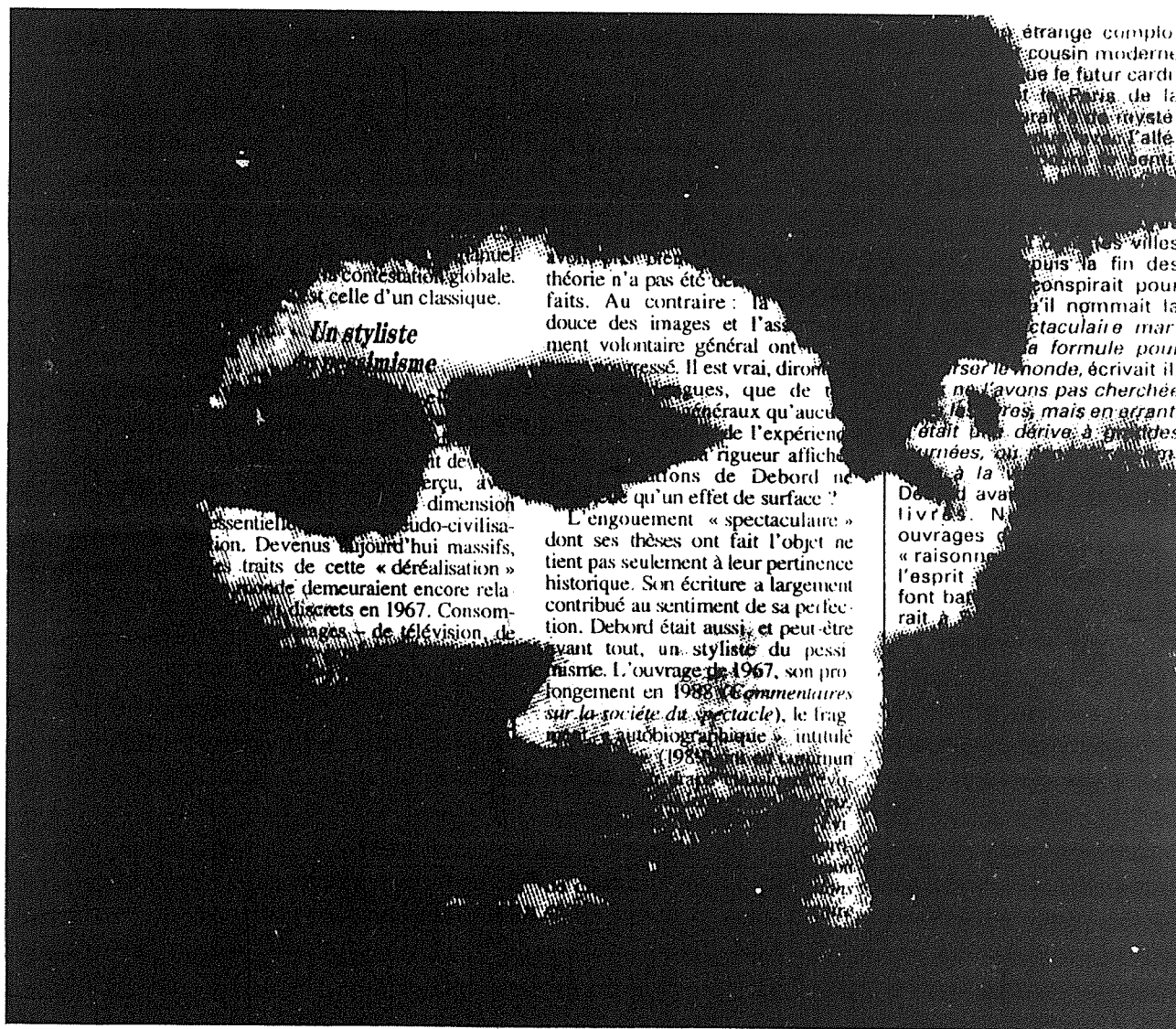


HERE AND NOW

GUY DEBORD
Supplement



Deaths of the Authors
Origins of the Spectacle
Situationist Contradictions
After Debord

SUPPLEMENT On Guy Debord

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Thanks to the Surrealist Group in Leeds for some of the images

'A Posthumous Fame'?

Preface to a Few Retrospectives on Guy Debord

In the fight between you and the world, back the world.
Kafka


The writings of Guy Debord will pass on as a small hermetic corpus destined to be used by a very few people over a long period of time. Their origins lie in the forgotten age *before* 1968 and therefore can only gain in relevance as the triumph of amnesia makes historical memory a more and more pressing need. Only those who succeed in growing up have more of a future than such overgrown "lost children" as Malcolm McLaren or Stewart Home who demonstrably have nothing new to say, and find themselves having to make a (more or less profitable) living acting out adolescent attitudes they can by now barely remember. Capital will do everything to perpetuate the infantilism on which it now depends. "A critique capable of surpassing the spectacle must *know how to bide its time.*"

The texts are few, but concentrated like those poisons meant to be undetectable. The effect of reading Debord on those able to decipher him is a bit like those legendary elixirs of immortality: once it has started to take effect, the reader ascends to a vantage-point upon the present as a moment in *history*. It is difficult to describe this to those who are happy to be "contemporary" with society as it imagines itself — that is, whose minds and desires have been formed without remainder, by capitalism and its culture. It is no exaggeration to say that Debord's writings are defiantly inaccessible to those in tune with their times, who, in other words, see themselves through capitalism's eyes. Anyone who, for whatever reason, has begun to have doubts about where it is taking us, or who has let a foot drag on the ground outside the vehicle, is at risk of falling under Debord's spell.

My own appreciation of Debord's writings has hardly been consistent. A heavily-annotated Black and Red translation from 1970 attests to an early, admiringly semi-comprehending encounter. Another twenty five years of remorseless Marxist education enabled me to be quite unexpectedly reinvigorated by a return bout. How did he suss all that out, and so young? My re-reading correlates inversely with the spectacular rise and fall of Academic Marxism — itself led by the trendy intelligentsia's fickle relationship to capitalism. As the erstwhile Left at large (talkin 'bout my generation here) was quietly making its peace with capital ten years ago, I found myself going against the grain in becoming more and more impressed by a Debord who never

entertained anything less than revolutionary expectations. In the vicarious afterglow of '1968' — and it has to be remembered that *nothing happened here* — the intellectual fashions hastily brought over were mostly the crap *against which* the situationists had revolted. So you had the bizarre resurgence in Britain of an Althusserian academicism no longer tolerable in its homeland, while its pushers cashed in on the illusion that what had stifled revolt there could somehow instigate it here. By the 1980s, when these cocky francophile marxists now lay like a thick carapace of tenured scum across the commanding heights of the academic world, their 'marxism' was so shrivelled and vestigial it could quietly be sloughed off. And then they cynically reinvented the wheel of liberalism, discovered consumer choice or desire or pleasure, and blithely rewrote their entire lives.

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hypertrendiness of those who want nothing more than to be, however briefly, beyond where everyone else will be in fifteen minutes. The avant-garde sleaze-pit overflows with stenching corpses, and Debord's saving grace was his refusal to leap into it mindlessly. Those who will gather at the Hacienda in January will never in a million years be able to imagine the possibility of doing anything of their own, because they will never grasp what can be radical in the acceptance of limits or what can be truly *revolutionary* about nostalgia (unless, that is, the media or the academic glamour machine decides such things one day to be fashionable). If you want to see real conservatism at work today, try criticising the petulant subjectivism of those who confuse their desires with reality, or whose all-consuming egotism is the baseline of their denunciations of the bourgeois ego. Yes, Debord bequeathed a lot of bad habits sure enough.

Debord's writing will nevertheless endure — the word itself sounds so strange today because, like the very dialectic that is preserved intact in Debord's texts, the faculty of *endurance* has been decreed unfashionable — since it is beyond both modernity and postmodernity: it is *classical*. Every sentence Debord produced was dedicated to making *history* possible again. One thing is for sure, every word uttered by every single academic expert on any subject whatever during the present age is nothing more than a lie paid by a publisher, policed by professors, and fortunately not even read by anybody with any other expectation.

In retrospect, Debord's record stands strikingly consistent — words like uncompromising or intransigent come to mind (ambiguous epithets, implying inflexibility — failure to adjust instinctively to the dictates of capital). Maybe it's because he was never an academic. Today everyone is an academic even if not directly employed in a diploma factory. But the recuperation of seventies radicalism isn't entirely explainable by the successful careerism of some of its intellectual spokespersons. There were other forces at work, not least the wholesale dismantling of the metropolitan proletariat. Unlike the sixties, nobody now ponders the grim riddle of what has happened to the working class. The very question is unofficially unaskable: those who have to work have no time to ask idle questions. And few work harder than ambitious young academics who have replaced the need for personal memory by pre-coded summaries and are unembarrassed to imagine that the world has always been like this.

It wouldn't be fair to abstain from criticism, even if on balance the failings are outweighed by the strengths: I could say that of the evils that live on, not the least is the particularly virulent and pointless sectarianism. Even more tiresome is that stultifying

The essay by Steve Turner in this supplement reasserts, for the benefit of those not familiar with this larger context, Debord's place in the philosophical pantheon of Marxism: it is no accident that today's fashionable anti-rational post-structuralism and post-Marxism descend directly from a scientistic phobia for the Hegelian dialectic. Phil Edwards, on the other hand, gives a closer interrogation of the contradictoriness of Debord's 'modernism', an analysis which will no doubt be developed further in Phil's forthcoming book, to be published by Pluto next year. Other articles in this supplement include Luther Blisset's ingenious exploration of the prehistory of spectacular power and some refreshingly anti-hagiographic commentaries from Stewart Home and Mark Goodall.

Guy Debord and the Metaphysics of Marxism

Steve Turner

Time, as Hegel showed, is the necessary alienation, the environment where the subject realizes itself by losing itself, where it becomes other in order to become truly itself.

Even disinterested commentators have been forced to conclude that the death of Guy Debord surely marks the "end of an era" in French cultural and political history: the passing of a man who was the "epitome of intellectual radicalism". Debord's status as arguably one of the "great" figures of revolutionary theory was always belied by his conspicuous absence from public life: a grave gesture to the historical conditions of modern society. This quite self-consciously cultivated sense of authority was always accompanied by the conspiratorial allure of an enigma:

We had never been seen to be involved in the affairs, quibbles and business of the radical left politicians and the progressive intelligentsia. And now that we can flatter ourselves that we have achieved the most shocking notoriety amongst this riff-raff, we will become even less accessible, we will go even more underground. The more famous our theses become, the more obscure we ourselves will be.

The Veritable Split in the International

It is not the purpose of this article to deal with the reputation and the myths which envelop Debord. I shall try rather simply to define the more neglected matter of his theoretical legacy: his place in history. All that I can hope to describe are its key features.

Despite the recent appreciations, I believe that Debord's ideas are still far from fully understood. Critics and commentators often evoke the "chiliastic serenity" and "crystalline perfection" of his prose, the artistry of its construction and the diamond-like intensity of its style. This dialectical density is what fascinates some while intimidating others, hungry to grasp at its ultimate meaning; "density" is probably the most fitting description, as few writers have condensed so much analysis into such compact and concise writing. Its enduring quality lies precisely in the fact that the attraction does not diminish with re-reading, but enriches as the full force of what is being said becomes apparent.

It is now commonplace to note that the publication of the notorious *Society of the Spectacle* (Buchet-Castel, 1967) not only coincided with the rising discontent and radicalisation which culminated in the events of May 1968 — a movement which the Situationist International predicted and participated in ("where there was fire we brought petrol") — but was also timed to recall the publication, exactly a century before, of Marx's *Capital*. Debord was echoing Hegel's observation that:

Since in all periods of the world a political revolution is sanctioned in men's opinions when it repeats itself. Thus Napoleon was twice defeated and the Bourbons twice expelled.

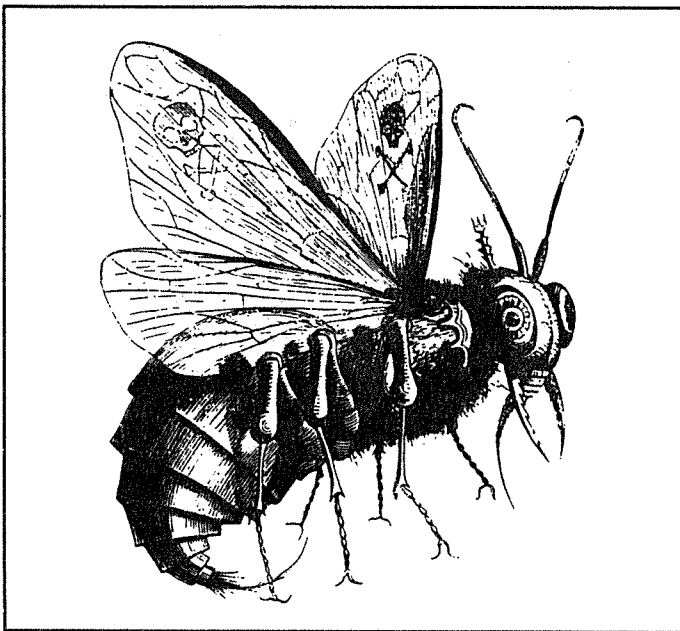
This, of course, is the point which Marx took up (on Engels' prompting) adding his own well-known caustic twist at the beginning of *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* that all the great events and characters of world history indeed occur twice... "the first time as tragedy, the second as farce." This deliberate mimicry and sense of re-enactment (a key theme featured in the entire history of the SI) served to establish it within the trajectory of Western Marxism as the staking a bold claim to be the true heir to the deformed project of the workers' movement as well as the auto-destruction of modern art.

The Society of the Spectacle is a reflection of the period from which it was composed. After the Second World War, Paris had become a laboratory of intense artistic and intellectual experimentation, producing both cultural and political movements. In this fertility, "where one could so easily pass unnoticed", Debord's rare quality was the curious way he straddled both



milieux, in a distinct though removed manner, as the nucleus of an obscure organisation combining the talents of the artistic avant-garde, largely jettisoned by the early sixties, with a rising generation of theoretical militants. This circumstance was later to contribute to the "conspiracy of silence" to which Debord was subjected, while most of his theoretical rivals were established academics — usually professors of philosophy: from Althusser to Lefebvre. The singular exception was Sartre, whose literary and philosophical stature dominated the period.

It was the renaissance of Hegel, and rediscovery of the profoundly Hegelian roots of Marxism that shaped the intellectual cross-currents of this period. And it was the critical encounter between Marx and Hegel that was to forge almost the whole constellation of theoretical and methodological position-taking in this era. As Merleau-Ponty recognised: "All the great philosophical ideas of the past century — the philosophies of Marx and Nietzsche, phenomenology, existentialism, psychoanalysis — had their beginnings in Hegel" (*Sense and Non-Sense*, 1964).



It was another of Merleau-Ponty's works, *Adventures of the Dialectic* that focused attention on the book that was to provide the foundation for the *Society of the Spectacle*: the essays by Georg Lukacs published thirty years earlier under the title *History and Class Consciousness*.

In the fifties and sixties Paris became a theatre of philosophical revisionism, with attempts to salvage Marxism from the ideological deformations of Stalinism. In the attempt to rescue a materialist conception of history, and with it the prospects of the workers' movement, intense interest was centred on the history of Marxism — its genesis and mutations, to discover the origins of its corruption. Here the rediscovery of Lukacs was to provide valuable material for the rethinking of Marxism itself, which was bolstered by the translation and publication of a number of the early, so called "humanist" works of the young Marx, namely the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, as well as *The German Ideology* which had been unpublished

during Marx's lifetime. The great appeal of Lukacs was that he was the first major Marxist thinker, who through his comprehensive knowledge of classical philosophy, was to reawaken interest in the origins of Marxism in German Idealism, re-establishing Hegel as the central precursor:

Our underlying premise here is the belief that in Marx's theory and method, the true method by which to understand society has finally been discovered.

This identification of Marxism with the consistent application of Hegelian dialectic was also embraced by Debord and heralded as the essence of *critical* Marxism.

To Debord it was precisely the estrangement of Marxism from its roots in dialectical method which fed into its degeneration in the hands of the socialists of the Second International, as much in Kautsky, whose scientific conception of socialism was founded on a mechanical and evolutionary model of history, borrowed mainly from Darwin, as in Bernstein whose disaffection from this "scientific socialism" into complete revisionism and reformism was the first evidence of the theory's breach with reality:

The inseparability of Marx's theory from the Hegelian method is itself inseparable from the revolutionary character of the theory, namely its truth.

Debord

Lukacs' position in the early twenties was echoed by the contemporaneous work of Karl Korsch, whose unorthodox *Marxism and Philosophy* was published in the same year. While Lukacs concentrated on founding a new theory of consciousness, Korsch scrutinised the history of Marxism itself. To Korsch, theory was the conceptual expression of the real movement of history, in contradistinction to ideology, which was a partial and frozen apprehension of reality. His dialectical examination of Marxism led him to formulate a periodization of its development and its relationship to the proletariat. In the first period, leading up to 1848, with the outbreak of the various European revolutions, Marxism represented an integrated critique.

The second stage corresponded with the ebbing of the workers' movement and the years of political reaction during which Marx devoted himself to the principal science of capitalist society, political economy. As the science of history became fragmented, with the critique of the economy taking centre stage, Marxism lost its philosophical dimension, culminating in its positivistic "orthodoxy" within the Second International:

Marx and Engels themselves always denied that scientific socialism was any longer a philosophy, but it is easy to show, irrefutably, by reference to the sources, that what the revolutionary dialecticians Marx and Engels meant by the opposite of philosophy was something very different from what it meant to later vulgar Marxism. Nothing was further from them than the claims to impartial, pure, theoretical study, above class differences.

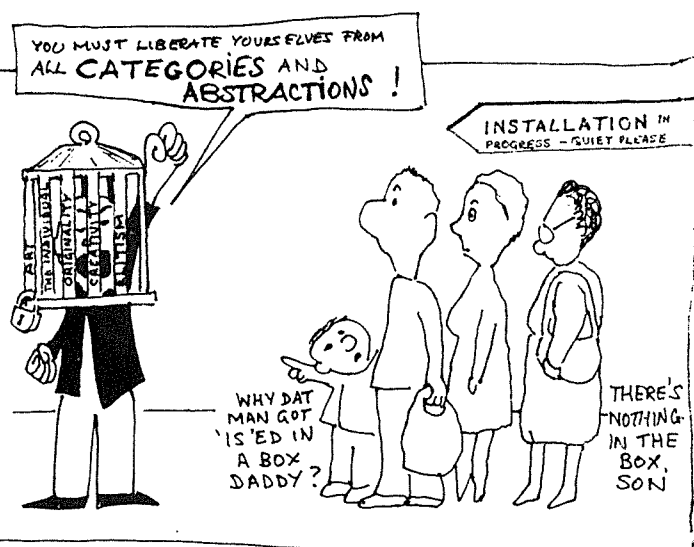
Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*

The third period of Marxism Korsch identified with the revolutionary projects of Luxembour and Lenin; Korsch held that the continuation of both the state and philosophy as separate spheres was characteristic of the 2nd International theorists:

Throughout his life, Marx maintained a unitary point of view in his theory, but the exposition of the theory was carried out on the terrain of the dominant thought and became precise in the form of critiques of particular disciplines, principally the critique of the fundamental science of bourgeois society, political economy. It is this mutilation, later accepted as definitive, which has constituted "Marxism"

Society of the Spectacle

The traces of this approach are embedded in the most famous chapter of *The Society of the Spectacle*: 'The Proletariat as Subject and as Representation', where Debord not only uncovered the degeneracy of European reformism but equally of its parallel: Marxist-Leninism.



The key organisational lessons Debord drew from the monstrous miscarriage of leninism were from the works of the philosophical revisionists, who were essentially most favourable to the practice of council communism as the true model of proletarian revolution - in which theory and practice could be adequate for each other. When Debord reformulated the current stage of the class struggle in modern society as the struggle for *autogestion* (complete and generalised self-management) he identified this with the formation of workers' councils. Throughout the fifties and sixties the SI was to conduct its attack on modern consumer capitalism. Debord adopted much of the critique of Lukacs:

Just as the capitalist system continually produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks deeper, more fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness of man.

Lukacs, *History & Class Consciousness*

Debord was to adopt this perspective as the basis of his critique of modern consumerist capitalism, in which alienated labour was not alleviated by the expanding terrain of consumption, but rather complemented and reinforced. The rise of consumer society was thus an extension and deepening of the economy of production. Despite the material enrichment that accompanies the mass production of commodities, this development can in fact be no more than an extension of *survival*, leaving the conditions of production, and the quality of *life*, unchanged. In fact the greater the extent of the conquest of the commodity, the more removed, more estranged will people be from control of their own existence:

The spectacle within society corresponds to a concrete manufacture of alienation. Economic expansion is mainly the expansion of this specific industrial production. What grows with the economy in motion for itself can only be the very alienation which was at its origin.

Society of the Spectacle

On this premise Debord founded his critique of all aspects of life in modern society, in a quest to identify the burgeoning unreality of modern life, its pseudo-quality, boredom and banality. The decline and decomposition of everyday life was viewed as a result of its colonization by the commodity and the subordination of human needs to its logic. The dehumanization of modern life.

In this environment, where consumption was the ultimate goal of social life, life becomes a parade where all merchandise battles for recognition with increasing claims of total satisfaction. This tendency would find its *nec plus ultra* in the rise of information technology, a medium whose very form exemplified its social content.

The key concept was of course the *spectacle*. This term denoted both a general and a specific form: at the general level it is the whole process whereby human production had become transformed into instruments for the creation of separations; more specifically it defines an inversion or rupture within reality created by spectacular society. This rupture was actually the outcome of independent *representation* and its disjunction of the totality.

Reality considered *partially* unfolds, in its own general unity, as a pseudo-world *apart*, an object of mere contemplation. The specialisation of images of the world is completed in the world of the autonomous image, where the liar has lied to himself.

What is being defined is *not* principally the medium itself *in the abstract* so much as the social relation it embodies.

The overall structure of the book is actually derived from Hegel's 'Lesser Logic', the First Part of his *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830), which is a condensed version of the monumental *Science of Logic*.

The Hegelian character of Debord is also conspicuous in its most neglected, but central concern, the nature of time and history:

The sensation of time slipping has always been a keen one for me and I have been attracted to it, just as others are attracted to the void or water.

In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni

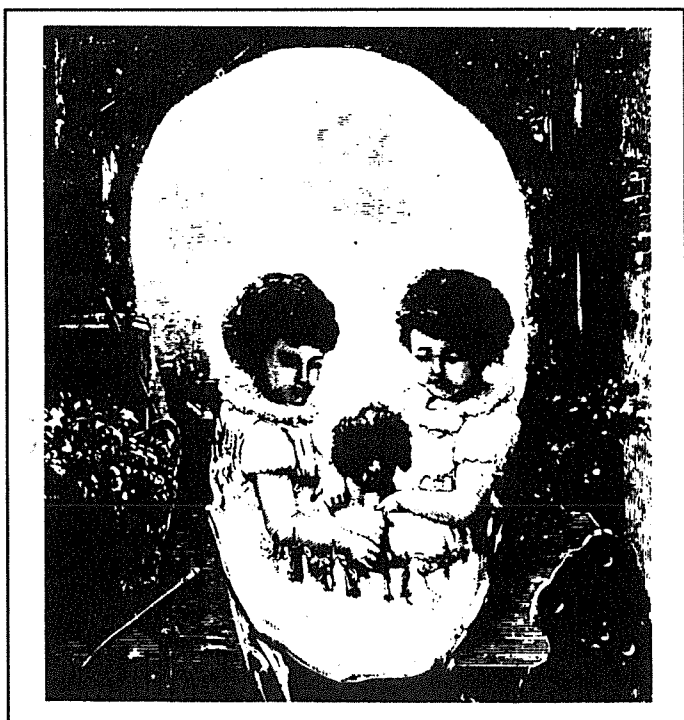
The central chapter 'Time and History' begins with:

History is itself a real part of natural history, of the transformation of nature into man" (Marx). Inversely, this 'natural history' has no actual existence other than through the process of human history, the only part which captures this historical totality, like the modern telescope whose sight captures, *in time*, the retreat of nebulae at the periphery of the universe. History has always existed, but not always in a historical form.

Society of The Spectacle

The *Society of the Spectacle* has now passed into that most peculiar of literary categories: it has become an obscure classic. Its status has been a peculiar product of its history, and has remained largely outside the academic canon.

In 1988 Debord extended the work with his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle...* The style remained the same, though the tone has changed. Gone is the totalising Lukacsianism of the earlier work on the conjunction of theory and history. His countenance is now that of a classical historian recording for posterity the notable events of his epoch: "thus ended the second year of the war of which Thucydides has written the history." Not only has the spectacle recovered from the assault that shook its foundations, now it has advanced, and through a kind of chemical combination of its two complementary forms, the diffuse and the concentrated, merged to form a strengthened *integrated* spectacular. Though the message is grave, it is far from fatalistic.



Postscript

The French version of existentialism, lacking any sense of excess, could not contain Debord. We, however, are witness to an amusing, paradoxical spectacle. On the one hand, Sartre, whose first concern was to write for future generations, and who was propelled step by step into the arms of the contemporary, drowning in an ever-widening sea of current affairs. On the other hand, Debord, who was only interested in current affairs and who finds himself condemned to work towards a distant future where he faces a posthumous fame, which — if I know him — leaves him cold.

Asger Jorn, 1964.

So, the inevitable question is begged - does the death of Debord really bring to a close a chapter in the history of political theory? Or, conversely, does it rather serve as a poignant symbol for the current *impasse* of revolutionary theory and thereby simply confirm the almost unparalleled accuracy of his prognoses; and equally the gravity of the consequences which flow from this? No doubt this question will be answered according to the tastes and temperaments of his contemporaries — who will position themselves accordingly along this wide spectrum of opinion. Surely, many will find themselves in broad agreement with the fact that the heavy symbolism of his death sharply focuses the current crisis of the revolutionary movement, and Western Marxism in general but even the question as to where the very epicentre of this debate lies will itself be subject to some disagreement: that is, what was the key feature of Debord's contribution and consequently what is the current significance of his legacy, its contemporary relevance? What to most of his readers will surely characterise Debord's prose, his striking originality, was his demarcation of the age of the media as a radical break with the course of previous history — the dawn of a new era. Some will no doubt find it droll that his own lifetime coincided with this passage of time. Debord's sense of style seemed to originate from what seemed his grasp, or intuitive sense, of the essence of an age: the pivot of his analysis being that the cultural hegemony of the mass media signified a qualitative departure within human history:

In a world which *really is topsy-turvy*, the true is a moment of the false.

The central theme of his critique is that the unfolding relations and mediations of modern consumer capitalism had acceded to the stage of a fully unified, self-perpetuating system. Through this social process a cleavage within human praxis had been created in which conscious intervention was thwarted, through the establishment of fully autonomous representation. The essential nature and purpose of this medium was to provide a surrogate world of entertainment: consumption, which itself would feed dialectically upon the corroding social fabric, like a parasitic proliferation. It would indeed seem that the current trajectory of modern technology was not only fulfilling this chilling diagnosis, but was equally seeking to outbid its most perceptive critic in illustrating and confirming his theory: "the loss of self in the aimless and unconscious creation of a world beyond the control of its creators."

The present 'information revolution' along with the accelerating pace of digital technology has helped generate the now galloping impetus of this global trend—a trend increasingly approximating to its ultimate rationale of a world of unified media relations—; a homogeneous proxy environment detached entirely from all social reality.

All of this is no doubt a commonplace of situationist theory, though, as Hegel noted, the familiar is not necessarily understood just because it is familiar. It is my contention that at the base of all these social developments lies the social process which was first elaborated by Lukacs as the process of *reification*. The accelerating alienation at the heart of modern society (manifest in all the separate domains of human reality: from the urban and natural environment to the occult concentration of power within supposed modern democracies) is simply a corollary of the frenzied production of goods irrespective of their social value: "a market economy gone mad". It is precisely this which makes Debord remain all-too topical: the kaleidoscopic unreality of modern life, an unreality which can only grow more profound, transforming not only the nature of modern society, but equally the perceptions and consciousness of its participants.

Perhaps one of the most sinister aspects of this is not the particular juncture of global events and the current machinations of power-politics, but rather the formation of an entire generation, conditioned and developed under the tutelage of the media: a generation whose very perceptions, desires and thoughts have been trained by media discourse. Debord evokes the sense of the "end of history" as principally determined by the complete immersion of social life within the process of consumption:

When the spectacle stops talking about something for three days, it is as if it does not exist. For then it has gone on to talk about something else, and that which henceforth, in short exists. The practical consequences, as we see, are enormous.

The current stasis of the revolutionary movement must inevitably recognise that it is *these* very cultural conditions which have contributed so largely to the increasing atomization of society: the de-socialisation, and not merely the depoliticisation, of 'society', which unbends the springs of any oppositional 'movement'. What remains undeniably, however, is an amorphous undercurrent of rebellion, unfocused and sporadic. A profound re-questioning is a necessary strategic prerequisite for exploring this elemental discontent.

The crisis of the revolutionary movement can in many ways be seen as a crisis of consciousness. The Lukacsian theme of the *Society of the Spectacle* was drawn mainly from *History and Class Consciousness*: the thesis that the historical movement of capitalism would generate its own negation through alienated labour coming to consciousness, that the self-revelation of capitalist society would be the "self-consciousness of the commodity". The proletariat would thereby define itself as the sole force capable of dissolving this mystification and establishing society on a rational basis. The past twenty years have witnessed, however, not any political ascendancy of the proletariat but simply an

ascending reaction, and the decimation of the workers' movement at the hands of spectacular power, a development astutely chronicled in the *Comments*.

Despite many of the gloomy conclusions which are drawn from contemporary developments, in one of his last published pieces Debord wrote, it could be said that the spectacle is at risk from its very success. In the *Preface to the Third French Edition of the Society of the Spectacle*, Debord reflects on the recent collapse of the Eastern Bloc and its 'totalitarian bureaucracy'. This global unification returns us in many ways to the classical Marxism in which capitalism was considered a global hegemonic system which was incapable of infinite expansion. Debord had always stressed how the rival power of Russian state-capitalism had only served to buttress Western capitalism, both as a pseudo-model of proletarian power, and equally as a competitive frontier of markets beyond its access. The repercussions of these events are certain to explode the instant prognoses of official commentators.

Again, the cycle of history turns, and there are precedents for the economic modernization of the East:

The crumbling of the worldwide alliance founded on bureaucratic mystification is in the last analysis the most unfavourable portent for the future development of capitalist society.

One interesting touchstone of the debate concerning the crisis of Marxism is a book by Leonard Jackson *The Dematerialization of Karl Marx*, which, whilst apparently oblivious to the contribution of Debord, makes a perceptive assessment of the current state of Western Marxism. Though the book's preoccupation is with literary theory, it does give a fairly accurate and comprehensive survey of the theoretical application of key features of Marxism and their relevance or obsolescence, eg. it questions the economic theory of *Capital*, though vindicating historical materialism.

An interesting parallel is drawn between the rise of Post-Structuralism and the phenomenon of the Young Hegelianism of the 1840s. Jackson's contention is that with the fall of the great totalising systems (Marxism as well as Structuralism) a fragmentation occurred in which a number of independent critiques flourished without any unitary theory. I found the analogy between Structuralism and Kant, and between Post-Structuralism and the Hegelian critique of Kant were forceful, but he failed to convince me how Marxism supposedly coexisted alongside them.

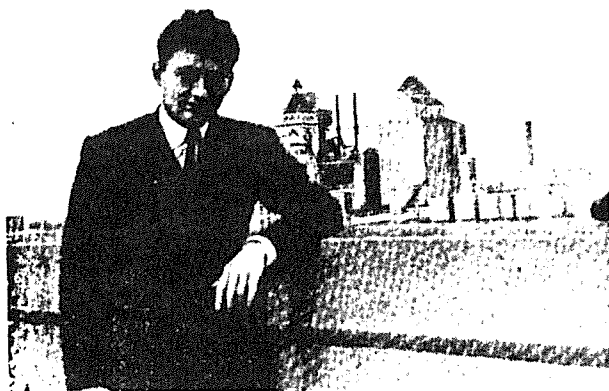
To return to Debord, the framework on which he constructed his theoretical work, as I hope I have shown, was the conceptual application of Hegelian Marxism, to which he would remain faithful throughout his life.

Deaths of the Authors

Mark Goodall conducts an autopsy on the French intellectual way of death.

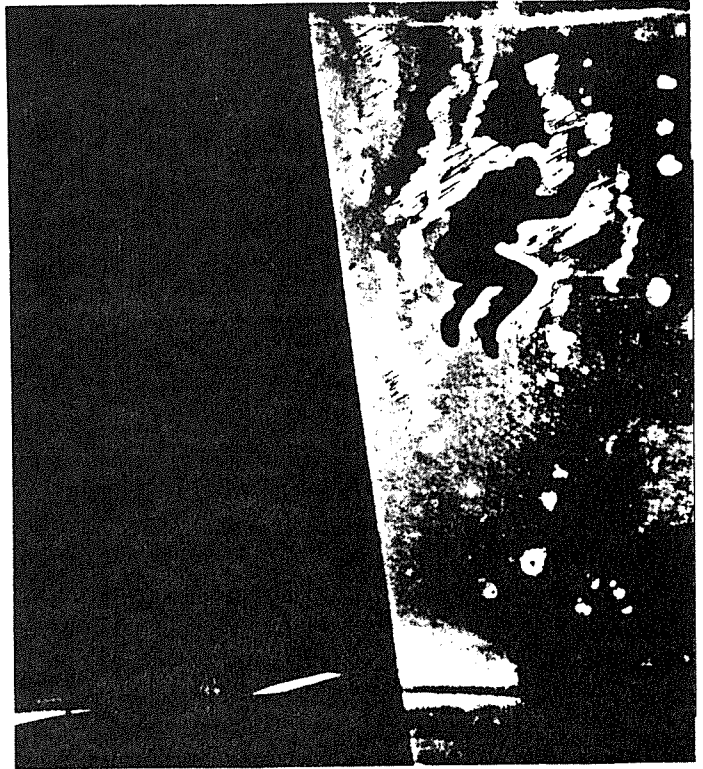
When the French writer and critic Guy Debord was found dead on 30th November 1994 several eyebrows were raised. Firstly Debord had just completed one of his extremely rare forays into the world of film, rarer still an autobiography. Secondly, two other French writers linked to Debord's publishing house were found dead by suicide the same week. Conspiracy theories abounded.

Thirdly, the manner of Debord's death, a suicide by gunshot seemed a frighteningly curt and brutal gesture from one who was confidently expected to fritter his time away meaninglessly and stupidly in a slow alcoholic haze. However to those with even a meagre grasp of the delicacies of twentieth century French literary and critical writing Debord's death came as no surprise at all. It has been known and documented for some time that a mangled, brutal and untimely death is a mandatory aspect of that particular vocation known as French intellectual. Compared to the sedate world of English writing (particularly philosophizing) the French equivalent seems notably deranged. While native sages live to be a crusty and tweedy white-haired ninety-odd their Gallic counterparts drop like flies in a Pigalle brothel. While the great thinkers of these shores ponder away analytically and



interminably, French thinking incorporates a much faster, richer and looser vein of insanity. Qualifications required for a career in English philosophy are traditional, rigorous and steeped in old boy networks. In contrast the french critic must be acquainted with mental illness, suicide, depression, fighting, abuse and addiction. Debord, who celebrated the obscene, was just another example of this rich alternative history and tradition.

The forbears of Debord's Situationist International, Dada and Surrealism, both contained within their ranks many subscrib-



ers to the belief in an existential death. That is a death as shocking and silly as the theories expounded by the thinker him/herself while fully conscious. Untimely deaths are an integral part of the fabric of french intellectual life and have been so for some time. For every lament of Debord (and there were some, although many were too cool to admit it) there must be an equal reminder as to how this type of death neatly fits in to the overall picture of the tradition from which Debord emerged.

As early as 1916 Jacques Vache, the first Dada hero, was threatening to shape his life as a vast ubu-esque comedy. Famous for chronic idling and threatening theatre audiences with a loaded revolver Vache eventually in 1919 took an overdose of opium having administered the same dose to two of his friends who had come along only for the trip. Later other Dadaists reiterated Vache's early promise. Arthur Cravan consistently insulted lecture audiences and once fought world heavyweight champion Jack London² before disappearing in the Gulf of Mexico as a missing presumed suicide.

In 1929 Jacques Rigaut's suicide after destroying all his written works heralded the cessation of Dada. But in the subsequent surrealist revolution the careful study of violent death was continued. An early surrealist symposium asked *Is Suicide a Solution?* to which many replied firmly 'yes'. One of these was Rene Crevel who flashed briefly by as a precursor, in death, to Debord during the recent obituary rounds. Crevel's description of the 'perfect death' exemplifies the latent romanticism inherent in even the most bitter radical of french 'literary' life:

A pot of tea on the gas stove; the window tightly closed, I turn on the gas; I forget to light the match. Reputation safe and the time to say one's confiteor...

In fact when Cravel did commit suicide in 1936 his farewell note was less flowery. It said:

Disgust; please burn me.

While subsequent French writers and creators have failed to romanticise early death as vibrantly as the Dadaists and Surrealists, their demises have been nonetheless equally sensational. French and American existentialism were united in the spectacular death of Albert Camus. Echoing James Dean, Camus' career was brief and powerful. Camus looked like a film star but was a philosopher; Dean was a film star who in his roles philosophized. In September 1955 Dean died after horrifically crashing his silver Porsche at Chalome while cornering at eighty-five miles an hour. In 1960 Camus suffered the same fate but was clever enough to have carried an unfinished manuscript in the car with him. This was eventually published in 1994 as *Le Premier Homme*. Curiously (given his accredited dispatch of existentialism) Roland Barthes also suffered at the wheels of a motorised vehicle. The great structuralist was killed while waiting to cross the road by an out of control laundry van which with hindsight displayed a remarkable sense of free will. That was in 1980.

Four years later another intellectual demigod Michel Foucault died in a manner resembling more the self-created theatrical suicides of the Dada and surrealist past. After extended periods of experimentation with illicit substances (most notably acid in the California desert), Foucault is rumoured to have topped his



wide-ranging studies in power (and himself) by deliberately contracting the AIDS virus which ultimately led to his demise. In fact death as the final act of creation is a theme as specific and integral to French thought as the tendency to upstage one another in everything. Take Louis Althusser. The last great Marxist theoretician (Alexei Sayle notwithstanding) was not content merely with hastening the end of his own life (or to put it another way, was not content to take one bottle into the shower when two would do) when he strangled his wife Helene

in a fit of insanity before succumbing himself. Althusser's mental problems went a long way back and can be seen as responsible for many of the torments he endured as he set himself up in his struggle for a 'return to Marx'.

So Debord was the next in a long line of great French thinkers to have bitten the dust. The great trick all these French writers possess is the ability to turn their mental illness into one more aspect of their art. They have not shied away from the unbearable internal struggles which have plagued creative individuals throughout the history of sedition but have 'masterfully'



metamorphosed it into a final 'fuck you'. We English are incapable of such a show of emotion and are more inclined to bottle up and deny suffering perhaps choosing to buy a new corduroy jacket instead.

Finally, what other response is there for these leaders of thought who see their great aims and visions disintegrate before them? Debord spent his life, as did many other French critics, defining the absurdities of modern existence. In the end the utter lack and failure of credible solutions to the increasingly complex and integrated brutality of capitalism leads to bitterness, dissolution and depression especially amongst those who have set themselves up as its enemies. Remember too that Debord and the situationists lived as Vache, Rimbaud, and Lautreamont (it was Debord who quotes from Lautreamont "Beautiful as the trembling of the hands in alcoholism" in his autobiographical work *Panegyric*) and were studious self-chroniclers of their infamy. Debord was arrogant enough to believe he was the last great poetic rebel and that his suicide marked the end of death as an article of artistic faith. While there is still Bernard Henry-Lévy, fast cars and laundry vans there is redemption. We must be patient.⁴

Notes.

1. I specify English rather than British because of R.D. Laing.
2. In 1917. Cravan was knocked out in the first round.
3. From *Detours*.
4. Readers probably already know that the well-known post-structuralist philosopher Gilles Deleuze continued the great tradition of French intellectual suicide by auto-defenestration.

NO USELESS LENIENCY

On 30 November 1994, Guy Debord killed himself, apparently without reason. He was 62 years old and had been a bohemian intellectual for the past forty years. The 'avant-garde' essayist had secured himself a major publishing deal, attractively furnished homes in Paris and Champot, televisions, washing machines, refrigerators, garbage disposal units, and even an aquarium. While the funeral orations and other 'tributes' are still ringing in our ears, the Neoist Alliance asserts that the most urgent task of those defending freedom is the destruction of idols, and the suppression of corpses, especially when, as in Debord's case, they present themselves in the name of liberty. Let the dead bury their dead, we will blaze a trail to new modes of being.

Debord did not die for our sins, this non-man killed himself so that his highly spectacular image could be reproduced everywhere. The cultural assassin re-emerges, not as the vengeance of Dada, but as the cutting edge of recuperation! Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation. The Spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement of the non-living. Death obliterates the boundaries between self and other, true and false, reducing Debord's suicide to the level of self-serving rhetoric. Only the Neoist Alliance has grasped the necessary conjunction between nihilism and historical consciousness, now allowing a new generation to spit on the graves of neo-surrealist epigones.

OVERTHROW THE HUMAN RACE

THE HEALING POWER OF DOUBT

Anyone can be killed for any reason, but start by killing yourself. The moralists of left, right and centre all do their collective part, despite the fact that they imagine themselves to be motivated by the very beliefs we will ultimately negate. "Self-destruction" is a semantic swindle. Rhetoric against suicide is simply a reactionary resistance to change. Only total opposition, both theoretical and practical (i.e. death), is irrecuperable. Anything else will necessarily appear absolutist and contradictory.

THOSE ABOUT TO DIE

Guy Debord	Richard Butts
Bruce Kent	P. J. O'Rourke
Alain de Benoist	Salman Rushdie
Tony Blair	Ronald Reagan
Ian Bone	Martin Amis
Peter Lamborn Wilson	Auberon Waugh

BELIEF IS THE ENEMY

Issued by the Neoist Alliance, BM Senior, London WC1N 3XX, UK.

END SOCIAL RELATIONS

ART KILLING SHOCKS CULT UNDERGROUND



Speculation intensified last night surrounding the mysterious death of Stewart Home, 32, controversial 'anti-artist' and self-proclaimed doyen of London's cultural underground. Friends at first presumed that the killing reported on Bonfire Night was just another of the tasteless stunts which Home, celebrated plagiarist and author of a string of best-selling pseudo-pornographic novels, had been perpetrating in recent years. But when police began questioning several members of his so-called 'Neoist Alliance' on Sunday, after the coroner returned an open verdict, rumours began circulating immediately. It is widely suspected, for example, that Home staged his own suicide to boost the audience for the special two-hour documentary on his life and work to be broadcast on Tuesday, as part of BBC2's 'Assaults on Culture' series. This theory has not gone unchallenged.

'Cry For Help'

One acquaintance, who refused to be identified, said "Stewart had been increasingly depressed for several months. He'd been circulating leaflets calling on artists and poets to kill themselves, and some of us began to wonder if this wasn't a sort of coded cry for help. His interventions in recent months had begun to lose their humour, and he was said to be

worried that his activities were becoming irrelevant and pointless." Another associate, who gave her name simply as 'Karen' admitted that Home had spoken to her several times before Bonfire Night about hearing voices and claiming there was a sophisticated mind-control plot against him. She had assumed this was just a joke, but when Home kept going on about it, she suspected he was beginning to buckle under the pressure of all the publicity he had courted for so long. "It was obvious the strain of keeping up his defiant pose as an *enfant terrible* was beginning to tell on him. His obsessive desire to control all the information he produced about himself was getting out of hand. He was bound to crack in the end." Support for this view comes from Dr Lawrence O'Hara, chief political psychiatrist at the Bedlam Institute, who claims the death may have been a sado-masochistic sex-ritual gone wrong: "There is conclusive clinical evidence that Home was a long-term deep-entryist, employed by MI5 to corrupt British youth. His latest attacks on me were final proof of his insanity."

Murder Claim

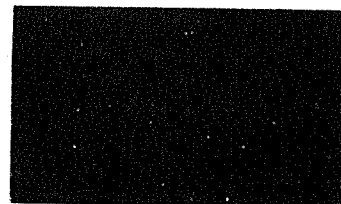
Others in the subterranean milieu, however, remain convinced that his death was not a suicide at all, but that Home was in fact murdered. Innumerable organisations have already claimed responsibility, as has Dr. O'Hara himself. There are, moreover, some strange coincidences which have fed these rumours. The body was discovered hanging from a pendulum on the exact site of a particularly gruesome multiple-murder in the East End in 1811 -the so-called "Wapping murders" (the case immortalised in Thomas de Quincey's *Murder Considered*

As One Of The Fine Arts). The skull had been completely smashed in and there were signs of the body having been ritually disembowelled. So similar were the injuries to some of the most graphic scenes in Home's own novels that the police are working on the theory that the murder was carried out by members of Home's own cult. "We are not ruling out the possibility that Mr Home was himself a willing participant in this strange ceremony", said Inspector Muriel Gray, who is leading the investigation.



Revenge Threat!

Another twist in this bizarre tale was revealed yesterday, when a poster appeared on the streets of Poplar signed by a group calling itself Adam Weishaupt and the Bavarian Illuminati (believed by the police to be a local skinhead pop-group connected with the British National Party, which is active in this area). The poster declares "The suicide of Home will be avenged! Red London will not Rest in Peace until the last Neoist is strangled with the guts of the last Conspiracy Theorist." The Bavarian Illuminati were not available for comment. Police inquiries are continuing.



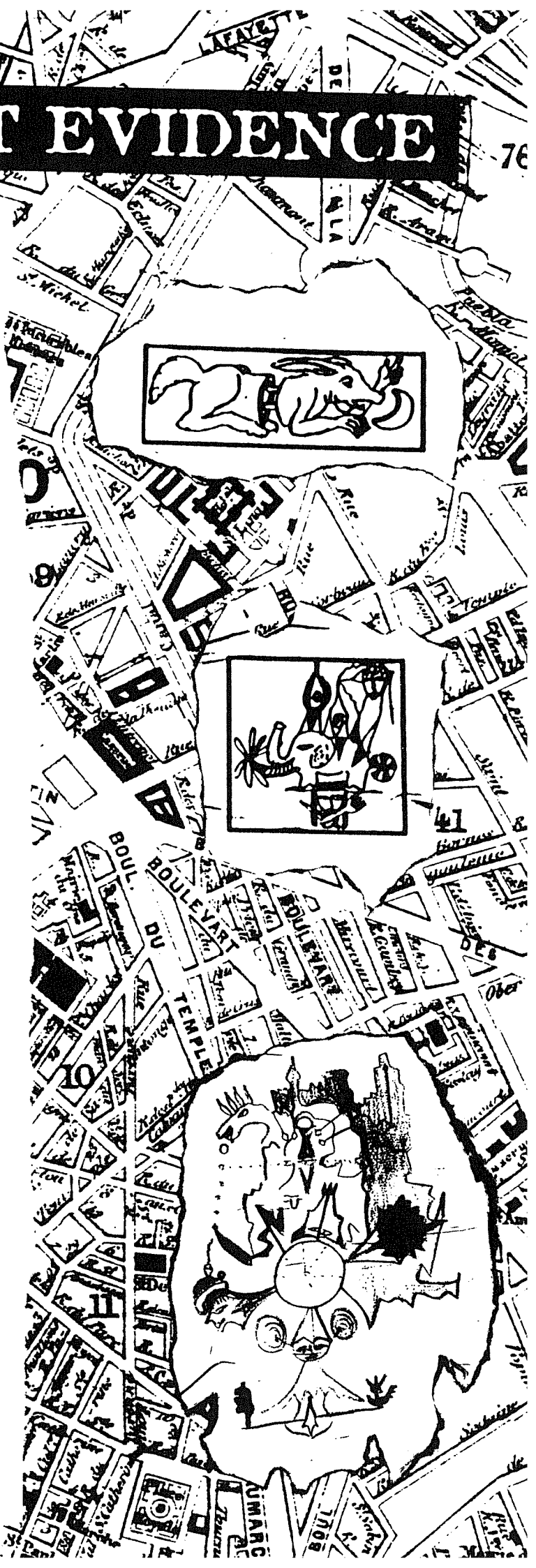
SURREALIST EVIDENCE

Custom requires that on the 1st April pranks and tricks are played against the melancholy of those who strive to keep up with the times in which they live. At the end of last Winter, some wild spirits proposed by word of mouth to those who wish to strengthen their voices in this base epoch that on the eve of April 1st the city be covered with posters: insolent or ferocious, sarcastic or oneiric, provided that they all be directed towards a criticism of this dog's world. Amongst the different groups and collectives which responded favourably to this project, the Paris Group of the Surrealist Movement produced four illustrated posters which said:

- *Sexually Transmittable Marvellous*
- *Imaginary wild boar, beat the omelette of time*
- *Ready to leap at the throats of houses. The red-hot white of the eye.*
- *Make all the rivers chime. The movements of reality have not been doubted enough.*

Of what operation of chance was this April Poison the plaything? Throughout the month of March riots adorned the student demonstrations. On the night of March 31st, when surrealists dispersed to stick up their posters throughout Paris, the day's revolts were still resounding. Venomous flowers, our fists of ivy claw at the walls of resignation.

Guy Girard
Paris



erveilleux
Sexuellement
Transmissible

POISON D'AVRIL



Faites sonner toutes les
rivières. On n'a pas
encore assez douté des
mouvements de la réalité.

POISON D'AVRIL

APRIL POETRY

Debord: the aesthetic, the political and the passage of time



Old books and old buildings

G.E. Debord declares himself for the total destruction of religious buildings of all denominations. (Not a trace should be left, and the space should be re-used).

Michele Bernstein asks that churches be partially destroyed, in such a way that the ruins remaining would no longer evince their original purpose... The perfect solution would be to raze the church completely and reconstruct ruins on its site... All agree to reject aesthetic objections... Beauty, when it is not a promise of happiness, must be destroyed. And what represents misery better than this sort of monument to everything in the world which has yet to be mastered, to the great inhuman element of life?

'Project for rational embellishments of the city of Paris', *Potlatch* 23

We hold that the so-called modern town-planning which you recommend is fatuously idealistic and reactionary... Anyway it is inconvenient that this Chinese quarter of London should be destroyed before we have the opportunity to visit it and carry out certain psycho-geographical experiments we are at present undertaking. Finally, if modernisation appears to you, as it does to us, to be historically necessary, we would counsel you to carry your enthusiasm into areas more urgently in need of it, that is to say, to your political and moral institutions

'Letter to The Times', *Potlatch* 23

Beyond a legacy of old books and old buildings, still of some significance but destined to continual reduction... there remains nothing, in culture or in nature, which has not been transformed, and polluted, according to the means and interests of modern industry.

Comments on the Society of the Spectacle.

Much later, when the tide of destruction, pollution and falsification had conquered the whole surface of the planet... I could return to the ruins that remained of Paris

Panegyric

Phil Edwards

History

A concept of progress towards evolution — of history as a process which both exacerbates the conditions of existing society and swells the class with an interest in its overthrow — was integral to Debord's writing in the 1960s. From Marx Debord took the idea that capitalism had created its own proletarian grave-diggers; from Castoriadis, the idea that capitalism had developed to the point of material abundance, so that only ruling class domination stood in the way of leisure for all. The concept of the spectacle made spectatorship the paradigm of both disempowerment and deprivation: this sharpened both contradictions and ripened the time still further. Henceforth the only precondition for revolution was that people collectively disengage from the spectacle, which — hastened by the diffusion of situationist theory — could happen at any time. This would constitute the genuine 'modernisation' which was 'historically necessary', as opposed to the 'idealistic and reactionary' modernisation of spectacular society itself.

After 1971, by contrast, it appears that the further the contradictions of spectacular society develop *the less likely any challenge becomes*: we pass from the 'spectacle in crisis' (1979) to the fragile perfection of the 'integrated spectacle' of 1988 (in which *conditions have never been so seriously revolutionary, but it is only governments who think so*), and so on to 1989's bleak summing up: *Le monde n'est qu'abusion*. Accordingly, the ranks of the potentially revolutionary class were progressively narrowed after the defeat of 1968. In 1979 Debord could still write that the inhabitants of the existing society "are divided in two parts, one of which wants it to disappear." In 1985 he judged that "the reigning imposture will have been able to have the approval of each and every one; it will have had to do without mine."

The success and defeat of the SI

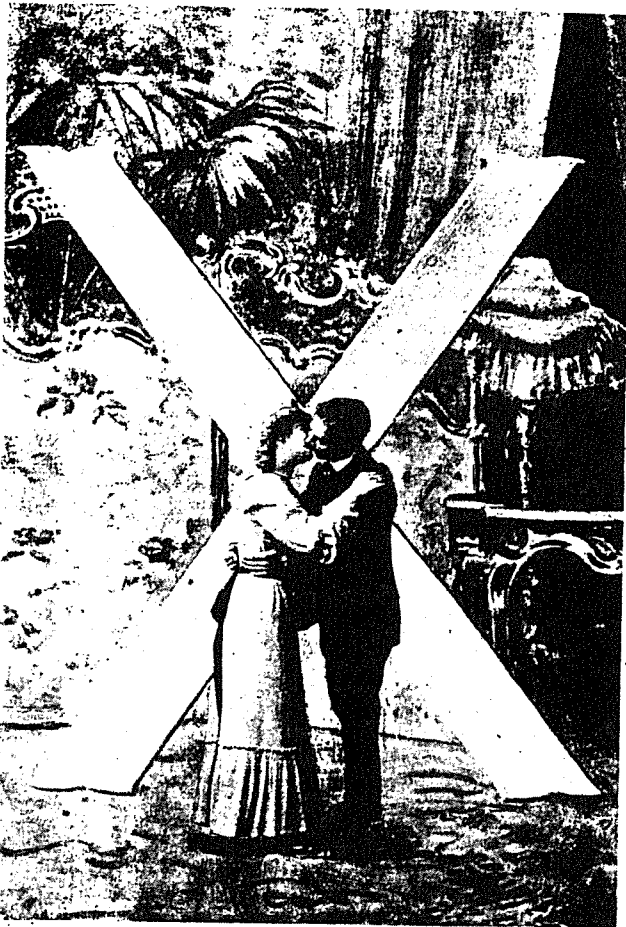
In *The Veritable Split* Debord and Sanguinetti pursue two, apparently contradictory arguments. On one hand, the SI has dissolved just when it is no longer needed: "The new epoch is profoundly revolutionary, and knows that it is" (emphasis in original). On the other, the SI had suffered a major and disabling failure — in the paradoxical shape of the situationists' success on the level of ideology — in the face of which the organisation could only be destroyed. However objectively revolutionary the epoch might be, the new-found capacity of situationist theory to attract fans and followers meant that it could no longer be used in earnest — or not under that name. Debord argued:

If we have *defended* the title 'situationist' by different means... it is only to prevent it becoming 'valorised' *against us*. It is not with the aim of valorising it for ourselves.

(emphases in the original)

It is this contradiction between the potential of the historical period and the poverty of the theoretical means available, given the recuperation of the situationist project, which underlies the bleaker visions of the 1980s.

The SI had had one previous brush with success at the end of the



Xchange is no Robbery.

1950s: the spectre of 'situationist art' led to a — veritable- split in the SI, Debord taking the side of the theorists and zealots against the artists. Attila Kotanyi proposed terms:

While various confused artists nostalgic for a positive art call themselves situationist, *anti-situationist* art will be the mark of the best artists.

Art carrying the 'situationist' label would be positive, hence complicit with the existing order, hence reactionary; revolutionary art must therefore be anti-situationist — whatever that meant.

In 1971, faced with the much more significant and widespread success of situationist ideas, a proposal that henceforth the best theory would be *anti-situationist* might have been of some use. However, as the *Encyclopedie des Nuisances* notes (under "Abrege"), Debord was "at the same time the best critic of 'situationist mythology' and its main producer." While the name of 'situationist' may have been abandoned as an encumbrance, the idea that radical theory and practice might exist outside and against the legacy of the SI was not seriously entertained. Regarding the SI itself, Debord's attachment to *what it was to have been* meant that he could only attack *what it had become* by attacking the individuals responsible. Hence the proprietorial zeal of *The Veritable Split* in its quest for the 'pro-situ': a pursuit which sits oddly with the book's ascription to an 'International' consisting of two people (Raspaud and Voyer suggest a figure of four, on the basis that neither J.V.Martin nor the long-absent Chtcheglov ever left the SI; Debord and Sanguinetti appear to have worked on the basis of the lower figure).

The detoured revolution

This inverse relationship between the SI's doctrinal purity and the size of its membership wasn't a new phenomenon. Membership of the SI implied a dedication to *actively living* the organisation's programme. Consequently exclusions were a programmatic necessity: anyone whose life was not in accord with the SI's project (as currently revealed) might sully (or call into question) the organisation, and must be cast out. Numbers were never large. At its founding the SI had thirteen members, five of whom were excluded within the next year. A subsequent influx of German and Scandinavian artists was followed by a matching series of expulsions. From 1962 to 1968, the number of people who were members of the SI throughout a given year never reached double figures.

It has been argued that the SI's writing was insufficiently programmatic; that Debord's vision of the proletariat was at best over-generalised, at worst a mythical beast and that, faced with a *near-revolutionary* situation in 1968, the organisation was blinkered by its belief in total class conflict. However, judging the SI as a political organisation misses much of what was important about it. Something of the singularity of the SI's project can be gauged from the importance of *detournement*. The re-use and revalorisation of existing elements was a revolutionary activity itself; it was a medium of propaganda and, crucially, it was a way of writing theory. While in places Debord's use of existing material can be brought under the heading of quotation (Marx's

"Chinese walls", De Quincey's "North West Passage") in others Debord's reappropriation of his source is precise and pointed: "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relationship between people, mediated by images" reworks Marx's definition of capital, as if to supersede it. Even the SI's organisational practices, which imitated the Leninist milieu with a fidelity verging on mockery, can be viewed in this light; not so much a parody of the revolutionary left, more a *detournement*.



What seems to be at stake here is a remaking of the revolutionary heritage in the situationist image: as if there were only one revolutionary challenge, from the Free Spirit to Kronstadt to Barcelona, and as if this challenge itself were embodied in the SI. Hence, perhaps, the austere beauty of Debord's writing. The situationist project, on this reading, would always be an aesthetic phenomenon; it would make converts not by proposing a course of action or even an attitude towards existing society, but by offering new visions (or rather, revitalised and redirected versions of existing visions). That something of this sort could flood the French market in ideas so rapidly after 1966 should not, perhaps, be too surprising; nor should we be surprised that the SI, thrown for once onto the terrain of the positive, proved unable to move on; or that Debord was subsequently reduced to recapitulating former glories.

Strategy, contingency and passing time

Against this charge of aestheticising politics must be placed Debord's longstanding interest in strategy, exemplified in his invention of a 'war game' through which a battlefield engagement can be played out. This, as with the related conception of history as a game, is less Olympian — less aesthetic — than might at first appear. War, Debord writes in *Panegyric*, is:

The domain of danger and deception, which is to say, the domain of contingency: the contradictory necessities which impose themselves on both parties.

On the battlefield, unequal physical conditions are compensated or exacerbated by unequal forces; strategy, tactics and improvisation coexist; and countless contingent factors go to determine the final result (it is said that when the battle of Waterloo is refought it is almost impossible for Napoleon to lose). Moreover, the outcome of this chancy and unpredictable process determines political power.

The battlefield is a paradigm of the actual conditions of historical action: a revolutionary movement is always confronted by a specific array of forces, by contingent factors and by its own weaknesses. As in war, a choice of strategy will affect, but cannot of itself determine, the outcome of political conflict; as in war, choices and actions once taken cannot be called back and may be determining. This kind of thinking can be traced in Debord's other writings and in his activities: if the appeal of the situationist project was visionary and aesthetic, its pursuit was cold-bloodedly strategic.

The two sides of Debord's thinking — the aestheticising vision of revolution, the strategic conception of history — can perhaps be brought together by the reference to another theme of his work: the passage of time. The sensation of passing time is the awareness of time becoming available, life freed momentarily from the reigning social order: a 'constructed situation' was defined, back in 1958, as "a moment of life constructed through the collective creation of a unitary ambience and a game of events" (my emphasis). However, the passage of time means the return of (or into) historical time: if now is the moment when revolution becomes possible, now is also the moment in which the balance of forces for and against revolution must be weighed up. Once in lifetime the result is favourable; the rest is just lost time:

All that concerns the sphere of loss, that is to say, what I have lost of myself, past time; as well as disappearance, escape and more generally the flowing past of things... meets curiously, in that old military expression 'en enfants perdus', the sphere of discovery, exploration of unknown territory; all the forms of research, adventure, avant-garde. At this crossroads we have found and lost ourselves.

Critique of Separation

I quickly grew to love what is beyond violent drunkenness, when that stage has been passed: a magnificent and terrible peace, the true taste of the passage of time.

Panegyric

I have let time go. I have allowed what should have been guarded to be lost.

Critique of Separation

The world turns as if nothing happened.

Internationale Lettriste 2

The Situationists as Rosicrucians

Luther Blisset

It was inevitable that as the student radicals made the long march through the corridors of learning that the concepts of the situationists would be absorbed into the flotsam and jetsam of academic discourse. Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* would be placed on reading lists as a work of philosophy. The situationist critique of the spectacle would be absorbed *as spectacle*.

The advent of information technology within the groves of academia has accelerated the decomposition of humanistic research. Post-modernist 'critiques' are wedded to cyberbabble, and the poor darlings hope to cloak their wretchedness with a veneer of radicality by dropping in a quote from Debord. The situation has been exacerbated by the fall of the 'Soviet' Union. Marxism is no longer trendy, not because these creeps suddenly came to understand how repressive the 'Soviet' regime was, but because its failure as a repressive state sapped its charismatic power in validating the lefty academics existence.

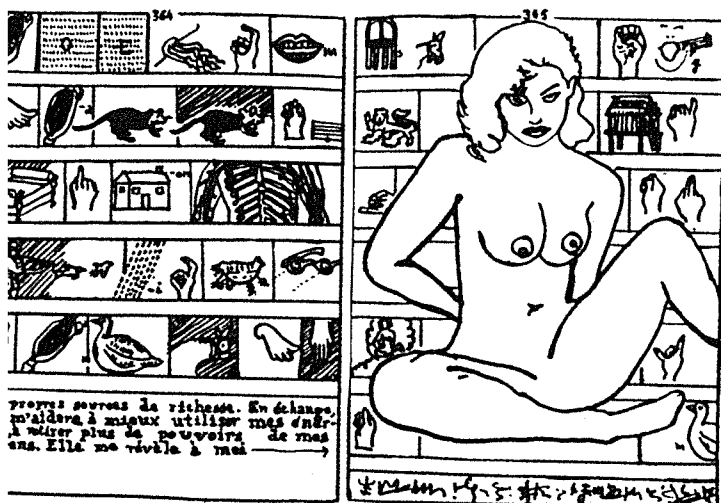
the struggles of the sixties, our aim must be to supersede them not revere them. We must subject them to critique in order to escape their shortcomings.

Following Guy Debord's suicide amongst the clumsy obituaries, there was one which referred to his critique of show-biz society which raised a few knowing titters. In fact this arose from some hack dredging up a reference in *The Times* from the sixties. However this facetious reference contains a kernel of truth. Present in Debord's film *Hurlings in favour of De Sade* (I use *hurlings* as a translation of *hurlements* not simply for its obvious linguistic precision, but also from a traditional name for the peasant's revolt — *The Great Hurling*) is an attempt to grapple with the theatrical form. In fact by constructing a film with no images, merely a commentary and illuminated screen broken up by dark silence, Debord was turning Cinema into Theatre. Whilst it has often been passed off as a joke, it functions more as a *ludibrium*.

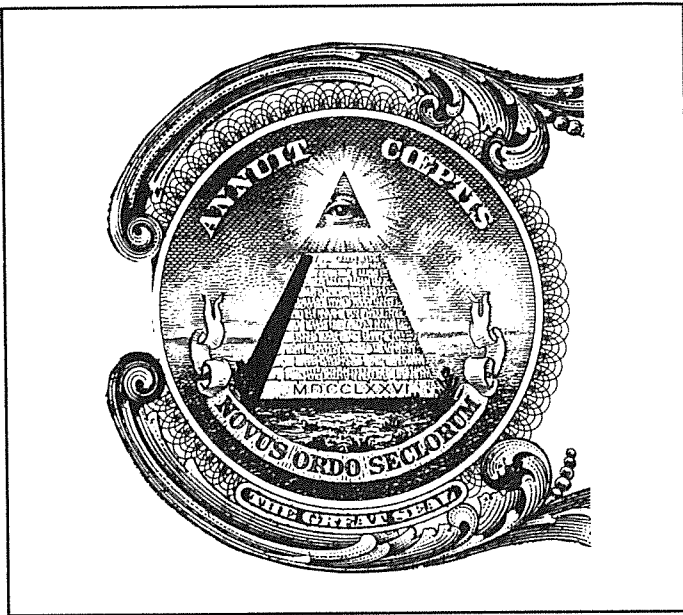
A ludibrium is something which takes the form of a joke but which is used to convey a weightier substance. It can access a way of thinking which is impossible in straight forward rational discourse. It is placed on the boundaries of reality, something intrinsic to theatre at its most intense, in that through the deceit of acting, the actors can discuss matters which could never be discussed openly in real life. Thus Hamlet's soliloquy exteriorises his inner thoughts, and thus makes them social, real, but the drama proceeds on the basis that the audience is not real, i.e. won't intervene in the unfolding action. In *Hurlings in favour of De Sade* the dark silences confront the audience with their own inner thoughts — well, at least the sorts of audience who go to the ICA. For proletarians for whom the back rows of the cinema constituted one of the few places of privacy to which they had access, the lack of action in the film would be made up by that at the rear of the auditorium.

The film thus turns the audience into actors — a situation is created. As the experience breaks away from what was expected i.e. that the screen would be filled with images — the audience as an audience is broken up. Unsure as to whether they 'get it' (i.e., is there something too subtle here for them to consume), the audience transforms itself as individuals start to examine each other's reactions. As this process continues, many in the audience, who now find themselves the objects of other's gaze, are upset — they had come simply for passive consumption. The bubble bursts, there is uproar, the audience walks out. Debord has successfully manipulated the audience and turned cinema into theatre.

In using the term ludibrium to describe this process, I'm not deliberately going for a piece of obscurantism. The term was used by one of the pioneers of *unitary urbanism*, the seventeenth century writer, Johan Valentin Andreae. His book *Reipublicae Christianopolitanae Descriptio* (Strasbourg, 1619) — hereafter referred to as *Christianopolis* — is a description of a city organised along Hermetic-Cabalistic principles to achieve a harmony between the macrocosm and the microcosm, between the universe and man. It is clearly influenced by Tomasso Campanella's *City of*



This de-politicising of situationist thought has left on the one hand outmoded pro-situs who absorbed situationist ideas as part of radical activist politics in the seventies, but have failed to develop them; and on the other pseudo-radical academics who are trying to use situationist ideas to prop up their careers in an increasingly meaningless post-modern academic environment. However, any renewal of the revolutionary struggle against capital cannot be furthered by either of these approaches. Seeing the ideas of the Situationist International as a high water mark in



the Sun (1623)¹ in such things as the use of images on the walls for education, as well as by Thomas More's *Utopia* (1515) which initiated the genre.

A close study of Ivan Shcheglov's *Formulary for a New Urbanism* (1953), a key text for the development of unitary urbanism and other important situationist ideas, reveals it to have also been substantially influenced by Campanella's *City of the Sun*.² Frances Yates has shown in her various books how various strands of hermetic thought came together in the Rosicrucian movement of the early seventeenth century. This movement has been shrouded in mystery for four hundred years. It was founded in the cave at Royston. This cave is located underneath the cross-roads of Ermine Street and the Icknield way, and is decorated with mediaeval carvings linked to the Knights Templar. Originally the location was known as Rosia's Cross. James I bought a palace here, and it was in Royston that he negotiated for the marriage of his daughter, Elizabeth, to Frederick IV of the Elector of the Palatinate in 1612, the year of the first Rosicrucian manifesto. (Incidentally this was the occasion of the first Christmas Card, sent by Michael Maier, also connected with the Rosicrucian *Furore*, to James I.) The movement spread through Germany providing propaganda for Frederick's attempt to become the first Protestant Holy Roman Emperor. The Emperor was chosen by seven electors. By seizing the throne of Bohemia, Frederick hoped to gain an extra vote, enough to oust the Hapsburg, Ferdinand II. Ferdinand invaded Bohemia in 1620, and defeated Frederick at the Battle of White Mountain. The Jesuit trained monarch then proceeded to violently suppress all forms of Protestantism in Bohemia. This opened the Thirty Years War, which devastated Germany. The population of Germany was reduced to a quarter of the 1620 figure, and Germany was prevented from becoming a continental power until the rise of Prussia.

The principal dividing line (and excuse for massacres) was the catholic/protestant divide. In the middle of this the Rosicrucians had been pushing forward a very strange brand of Christianity based on secret knowledge passed on by 'magia' in the North

African town of Fez. Internal evidence clearly identifies these magia as Sufis. The manifestos describe how Christian Rosenkreuz had brought this secret knowledge to Europe many years before. After his death, his grave supposedly remained hidden for 120 years before its rediscovery and the publication of the manifestos.

Andreae was certainly the author of one of the key Rosicrucian texts, and may have also written both of the manifestos. In their project of universal reformation (a term which in those days meant restructuring society rather than tinkering with the system like modern day reformists), books like *City of the Sun*, *Christianopolis*, and Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, offered a vision beyond simple utopianism, one of unitary urbanism. Their roots lay more in Plato's *Timaeus*, where he recounts the Egyptian account of Atlantis as a magical city, than in *The Republic*, which constitutes more of a rational than magical blue print.³ The situationists revived a sense of overcoming alienation in the ordering of the urban environment, which had been lost and forgotten in the socialist movement.

I would take the parallel between the Rosicrucians and the Situationists further. Yates discusses whether the Rosicrucians really existed. Certainly in 1623 placards appeared in Paris announcing that the Brotherhood of the Rosicrucians was present visibly and invisibly. And this compares with the claim in 1968 that the situationists' ideas were in everybody's heads. While it is clear that the Situationist International did exist as a real organisation, perhaps we can better consider it as a dramatic form which strutted its stuff upon the theatre of the world, not content with either stage or silver screen. This makes sense considering the small number of the cast. We can then regard the exclusions as emanating from Debord the playwright, who now appears on stage directing the play as it is in progress — exeunt Nashists stage right:

A certain Fraternity, in my opinion a joke, but according to theologians a serious matter... promised... the greatest and most unusual things, even those things which men generally want, it added also the exceptional hope of the correction of the present corrupted state of affairs, and... the imitation of the acts of Christ. What a confusion among men followed the report of the thing, what an unrest and commotion of impostors and swindlers, it is entirely needless to say... Some... in this blind terror wished to have their old, out-of-date and entirely falsified affairs entirely retained and defended by force. Some hastened to surrender their opinions and... to reach out after freedom. Some... made accusations against the principles of christian life as heresy and fanaticism... While the people quarrelled among themselves and crowded the shops, they gave others leisure to look into and judge those questions.⁴

Allowing for the universal expression of schemes for social change being wrapped up in religious terminology at this period, this brief account of the Rosicrucians by Andreae, could just as well describe the SI in the late sixties. Let's take this a stage further. Asger Jorn left the SI in 1961 as a row was brewing which would end up with the departure of most of the Scandinavian and

German members. Let us script into his mouth another passage from Andreae:

When it came about, not a long time since, that some on the literary stage were arranging a play scene of certain ingenious parts, I stood aside as one who looks on, having regard to the fashion of the age which seizes with avidity on new-fangled notions. As spectator, it was not without a certain quality of zest that I beheld the battle of books and marked subsequently an entire change of actors. But seeing that at present the theatre is filled with altercations, with a great clash of opinions, that the fight is carried on by vague hints and malicious conjectures, I have withdrawn myself utterly, that I may not be involved in so dubious and slippery a concern.⁵

(There will no doubt be those who see this parallel between the Situationists and the Rosicrucians as somewhat tendentious. However, when we examine how this parallel is mirrored by that between Isidore Isou and John Dee, such criticism will quickly be overshadowed. Isou, the founder of the Lettrist movement, within which Debord, Bernstein and Shcheglov started out, based his theory on the reduction of poetry to letters, destroying words and taking all letters as a whole. Dee created a lavish theory around his development of the *Monas Heiroglyphica*, a letter formed out of several elements, to which Dee attached enormous power. Dee also produced a *Hieroglyphic of Britain* in 1577. Dee was himself influential on the Rosicrucians who flourished shortly after his death.)

Theatre of the World

Although there will no doubt be those moaning minnies who pour scorn on rescripting the situationist stage in this way, this is in fact far more benign than that carried out by the counter-revolutionary, Jean Baudrillard. In *Fatal Strategies* (1990) Baudrillard writes:

For something to be meaningful, there has to be a scene, and for there to be a scene there has to be an illusion, a minimum of illusion, of imaginary movement, of defiance to the real, which carries you off, seduces or revolts you.⁶

Like Karl Popper, in his critic of Marxism, Baudrillard assigns the 'revolutionary' with the task of trying to realise an ideal community, only to then describe this process as hopeless as deals are only mental phenomena. Compare this with Du Perron's eulogy upon the death of the important sixteenth century poet Ronsard: "He no longer sees God in enigmas and y reflection, but face to face, and enjoys that primacy and familiarity which the angels have with him, and in this sovereign cause of causes, in this universal mirror, in this shining polished glass, he recognises the ideas and forms of all things."⁷ For Du Perron, through death Ronsard meets God without mediation, and then God becomes the perfect mediation through which ideas and forms can be seen. God becomes the transparent relation. Expressed here as a heavenly ideal realised outside the mortality of time, this has been translated into an ideal goal of social revolution. Baudrillard uses this conservative technique of

mobilising tradition in order to weigh down the Situationist project with such excess baggage.

The process of propping the state up with ideologies is seen as inevitable. Thus the development of revolutionary theory is seen as the creation of a new ideology. And in truth, this process



happens, for instance with the Bolshevik appropriation of Communism as a state ideology. However such a deceit is a process of counter-revolution not revolution. The insurgent class is once again corralled by experts in manipulating jargon, just as priests in an earlier epoch contained revolutionary zeal with their lies.

What distinguishes the revolutionary process is that it proceeds from actual behaviour, with a time lag for the reflective consciousness. Class forces propel people into action, not the ideas they have in their heads. The heat of struggle imposes a theoretical refinement. The goal of revolution is simply the overthrow of class society rather than, for instance, the erasure of all human conflict, of all suffering, the creation of heaven on earth. Revolution is not the realisation of the Christian mission, but without Christ, it is a particular response to a whole range of problems which stem from the functioning of capital.

When counter-revolutionaries like Baudrillard pooh-pooh revolution for its inability to resolve fictive problems, he is rescripting the revolutionary project, he is determining it as a hopeless idealism. Having so shackled the revolution, he can then preach acceptance of existing social relations. Sadie Plant shows how he suggests "The spectacle is not to be decried, but celebrated as the inevitable theatre of all existence."⁸ Such terminology takes right back to the *Theatre of the World*, a renaissance theme which Frances Yates has explored in a book of that name (1969). She was drawn to this from studying the way the theatre was used in magical memory systems wherein the entire world could be located in a structured way within a theatre:

Is the Shakespearean stage a Renaissance and Hermetic transformation of the old religious stage. Are its levels (...) a presentation of the relation of the divine to the human seen through the world in its threefold character? The

elemental and subcelestial world would be the square stage on which man plays his parts. The round celestial world hangs above it, not as astrologically determining man's fate but as the 'shadow of ideas', the vestige of the divine. Whilst above the 'heavens' would be the supercelestial world of the ideas which pours its effluxes down through the medium of the heavens, and whither ascent is made by the same steps as those of the descent, that is through the world of nature.⁹

This comes from a discussion of the evolution of the Hermetic tradition and its influence on renaissance Theatre. In *Theatre of the World*, she examines how Inigo Jones, the seventeenth century architect and stage builder, used the description of the Roman Theatre by Vitruvius to describe Stonehenge as containing within it all the principles of astrology. By using this principle of constructing a microcosm of the world at large, Fludd described a magical system whereby sympathetic magic could enable the theatre as a crucible to become a microcosm to the macrocosm of the universe. By using these techniques ideas could be projected into the world and become real. This is the theory of the spectacle.

Strong on the Spectacle

It is my aim to ensure that future discussion of the spectacle takes account of its origin in the fusion of renaissance neo-platonism with mediaeval court practices. This is because this is the process whereby the monarchy reformed itself in line with the developing capitalist relations. Whereas Baudrillard amongst others wants to pose timeless problems of 'la condition humaine', the use of the spectacle as an analytical tool for revolutionaries lies precisely in seeing it as a specifically capitalist development. Such a task is not hard, as it happens to be the case. Roy Strong, in particular, has presented a study of the spectacle in the fifteenth and sixteenth century.

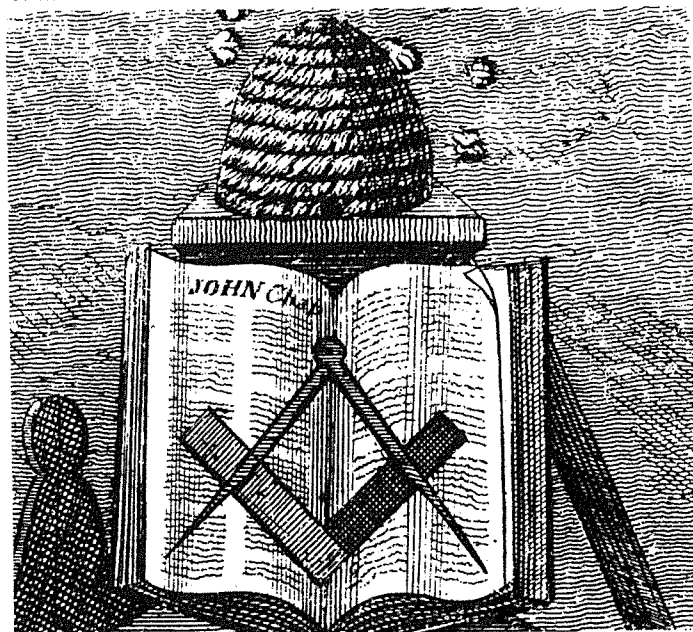
Strong is an establishment figure whose roles have ranged from being director of the Victoria & Albert Museum to advising upon the architectural plans of Canary Wharf. His books include many renaissance themes overlapping with the work of Yates. Yet while her scholarship travels through the hermetic undergrowth, Strong 'celebrates the spectacle' as a function of court life of the Valois and Stuart monarchies.

In *Splendour at Court*, he describes how before the mass media the new art forms of the renaissance were used to transform the monarch into an image of social cohesion. This was evident in the new architecture — the Louvre, Queen Anne's House, the Escorial — as well as the use of emblems in portrait painting. The court fête was transformed into the spectacle. At once continuing from the mediaeval tournament, this material was recast using pagan imagery which involved the representation of such ideas as fortitude, prudence, justice, war combined in a way to recreate the lost festival forms of antiquity.

While mediaeval royal entry of a monarch was transformed into a classical triumph, illustrated books would embellish illustrations of the triumph with glorious accounts peppered with mythological allusions. A revival of chivalry was glossed with neo-

platonian philosophy as shown in Spencer's *Faerie Queen*. Around Elizabeth I an elaborate cult developed. With the suppression of catholicism, the cult of Virgin Mary was superseded by that of the Virgin Queen. This involved invoking a passage from the classical era, where Astrea, a constellation in the heavens is prophesied as coming down to earth. Identifying Astrea with Elizabeth I was part of a syncretic technique whereby pagan themes were fused with Christianity by both Catholic and Protestant alike.

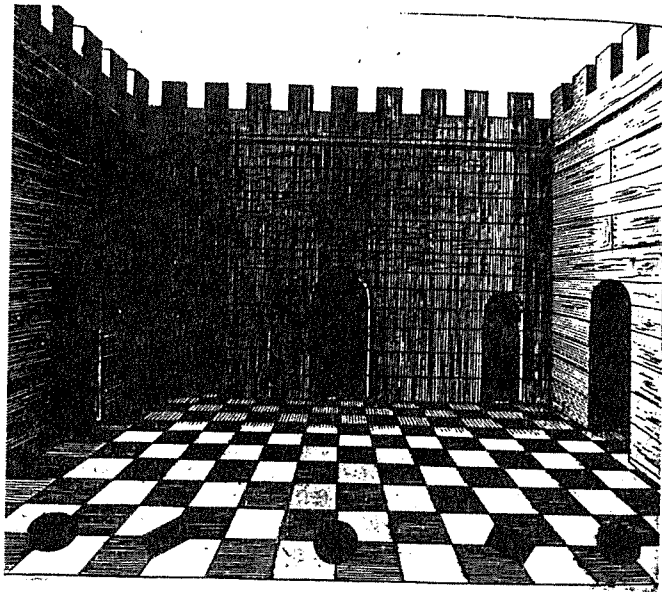
In Protestant England the reign of Elizabeth was celebrated with Accession Day tilts where many of the themes of Elizabethan poetry were acted out. In France Catherine de Medici tried to reconcile the tension between Catholic and Protestant. This broke down during the celebration of the marriage of the Protestant Henri of Navarre to the French Princess Marguerite. During five days of festivities, Protestant and Catholic nobles acted out scenes devised by Baif's *Academy of Poetry and Music*. One of these scenes was to involve mock battles, only to be interrupted by the descent of Mercury from the heavens to preach the virtues of love. Twelve nymphs were then released from the Elysian fields and then engaged in a complicated dance. The defeated knights were then released amidst a display of fireworks.



This elaborate spectacle was designed to unify the court, placing religious differences on the back burner and consolidating the state. Two days later the French court was shattered by the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, which started with the murder of Protestant nobles at the Court, and led to the massacre of 20,000 - 30,000 citizens. Although a failure — a catastrophic failure — the use of the spectacle to hold together social tensions remains important.

In his 1973 book *Splendour at Court*, Strong discusses the masque as it evolved under Charles I in Britain. Between 1629-1640, dubbed the 'Eleven Years of Tyranny' by his critics, Charles I ruled without parliament. This was the heyday of the Stuart masque. In a sense, Charles tried to substitute this mummery for the considerations of parliament. The masques became celebrations of the divine right of kings and weaved it in with a surfeit of neo-platonian themes: power is love, the king is order. The

Empire of Great Britain, proclaimed in 1604, was eulogised in *Coeleum Britannicum* (1634), with the personification of the Genius of Britain. Charles and twelve courtiers emerge to dance an epitome of a reborn heroic age. These techniques are identical to those used both by Hollywood and the German state film industry under Goebbels during the Second World War. In the closing months of the war in Germany, cinema was such an important pacifier of social discontent, that Goebbels drafted frontline troops to play as extras in his films, at a time when the German army was mobilising the old, children and the infirm to prevent their army from collapsing.



Prince Henry died of typhoid during the celebration of his sister's marriage to the champion of German Protestantism, Frederick IV of the palatinate. Several historical consequences result. Britain stayed out of the Thirty Years War. Charles I's weary rule broke down in the English Revolution. Strong further analyses Prince Henry's court as being a centre for late renaissance learning, following in the hermetic tradition of Ficino, Giordano Bruno and John Dee which was in the process of giving birth to modern science. From Dee's introduction to the English translation of Euclid, we see a programme of popular education in mechanical science, particularly engineering, navigation and ship architecture. All these features were essential to Dee's programme for a nautical British Empire — and returned as a theme when England became the workshop of the world following the industrial revolution.

Eclipse and re-emergence of the hermetic-scientific movement

In Prince Henry's court, the use of spectacle was working hand in hand with new mathematical manipulations, which enabled all sorts of mechanical implementation. His death in 1612 left the protestant cause in Germany under the weak leadership of Frederick IV, until the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus intervened in 1630. It also meant that the Rosicrucian movement in Germany floundered in the disasters of war. In Britain, the surgeon Robert Fludd tirelessly published hermetic texts, and maintained a dispute with Kepler on the role of symbols in mathematics. Yet the hermetic-scientific current was unable to find a focus until Sir Christopher Wren used his lectures at Gresham College in London to found the Royal Society under the patronage of the newly restored King Charles II.

And in Wren we find the fusion of varied seventeenth century tendencies. He was linked with the Order of the Garter, having grown up in Windsor castle where his father was registrar to the order (in fact Wren looked after the records of this organisation during the commonwealth). As an architect, he inherited the mantle of Inigo Jones who had initiated the classical revival of renaissance architecture in England. Likewise he gained access to the verbal traditions of masonry which constituted an unwritten science which had enabled the construction of castle and cathedral alike throughout the middle ages. These had been re-invigorated through the publication of Euclid in English and the popularisation of Dee's preface amongst building workers.

From his position as Gresham professor, he was linked to the City of London which controls this college. With the 'Glorious Revolution' — in fact a coup staged by the City of London after James II had removed their rights to elect their own representatives in the livery companies — bourgeois power was consolidated. The monarchy was contained. Spectacular show was as much a province of the Lord Mayor's show, and other displays by the livery companies as an attribute of the monarchy.

Wren's coterie of freemasons instrumentalised Bacon's notion of Salomon's House as described in *New Atlantis* (1629). Banning discussion of theology or civil business, they concentrated on

The pathetic image of Goebbels, or Charles I, trying to stave off defeat by a retreat into an imaginal realm reflects a form of spectacle at the point of collapse. In *Splendour at Court*, Strong is still caught up in cataloguing images, he is still dazzled by the splendour. His later book (1986) *Henry Prince of Wales and England's Lost Renaissance*, is more of a wistful look at Charles I's elder brother. Behind it lurks a sympathetic musing as to what would have happened if Prince Henry had not died at age eighteen in 1612. Prince Henry had become the focus of militant protestantism, and his installation as Prince of Wales in 1610 was preceded by indoor spectacular fights which served to present him as lieutenant to Henry IV of France's proposed crusade against the Hapsburgs and Catholicism. Henry IV's assassination led to the diffusion of this crusade, and the themes used in the spectacles around the installation were much more muted.

Strong discusses the tension between the war faction centred around Henry's court at St. James, and King James' desire to remain out of continental conflicts. The aestheticism of his earlier book is superseded by an understanding of the difficulties that Ben Jonson had in producing masques for the prince which would not undermine the King. Here the spectacle is not the overblown self-aggrandisement of the Caroline court, but a subtler representation of political propaganda, where the images were invested with political significance, where they mediated political actions. Charles' absolutism flattened the political perspective of the masque, allowing only minor oppositional themes, and so eventually becoming irrelevant.

In his system Art reaches its highest point in poetry, which in turn peaks with drama. But at this point "poetry is at the same time the dissolution of art and the transition to a higher phase of spirit — religion."¹³ For Hegel, Art is a combination of spiritual content and sensuous form. He then distinguishes between the sensuous image (*Bild*) and absolute thought expressed in way partly sensuous and partly rational, *Vorstellung*. This may be translated as figurative thought. Art, through its particularity, still lacks the essence of spirit, universality. Even where, through poetry, the image is no longer tied to an outward sense object and becomes an inwardly perceived subjective mental image, this is still a mental picture. According to Hegel's elitism, the contradictions of art can be resolved by religion, which serves as the highest kind of thinking of which the masses are capable. Philosophy is reserved for the elite.

Debord takes Hegel's *Vorstellung* and puts it the right way up — "The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as all of society, as part of society, and as *instrument of unification*,"¹⁴ "The spectacle is not a collection of images but a social relation among people, mediated by images."¹⁵ Whereas secularisation has restricted religion as such within the particularities of its various traditions, its officinary role has been democratised. *Vorstellung* reappears as the spectacle, a critical point where consciousness is blunted through the internalisation of a social drama whose narrative structure is determined by the market. It becomes the soulless heart of the heartless soul of capitalism.

One more push, Situationists, if you are to become revolutionary

When the high priests of pro-situationism criticise Eric Cantona for failing to "know that art is dead and that it needs to be superseded"¹⁶ they betray their failure to grasp what Debord was about. Debord followed Hegel, reworking *Vorstellung* as the supercession of art to find salvation in the realisation of true philosophy. The creation of a situation uses the *Ludibrium* as the application of the Socratic dialectic through deeds rather than words. This technique was preserved amongst the sufis before being re-introduced to Europe by the Rosicrucians. But as with such renaissance hermeticists, Debord can be seen as restating the neo-platonism of Plotinus. If we look at this 3rd century philosopher's account of matter, we discover a marked similarity with Debord's view of the Spectacle:

It is an image and phantom of corporeal mass, a mere tendency to substantial existence, static but without position; it is invisible in itself, eluding all attempts to observe it, present yet unseen, however intent we gaze; [...] Its every proclamation is a lie. ; if it appears large, it is small, if more, less; its semblance of Being is no Being, but a fleeting trick, and all the forms it seems to hold are tricks, nothing but phantoms in a phantom like a reflection in a mirror which appears were it is not. It appears filled and possessed of everything; yet it is empty.¹⁷

Whether approached through art, philosophy or politics, that which must be superseded is the subordination of social activity to the law of value. Without that all movements are still-born; they merely turn in on themselves and reproduce the dominant

culture. And such a transformation can only happen upon the world level. History poses this question precisely at the time when the world market has unified itself, when all those social institutions, such as the nation state, even the multi-national company, are giving way to the movement of vast sums of capital through the new technology highways where money has become digitised. As capital reaches its apogee, it is losing its substance. It has become liquified, it is becoming chaotic.

The post-modernist fad amongst intellectuals reveals their decomposition. They deny class consciousness as a false universal, and instead wish to mobilise competing communities of the repressed in a never ending quadrille. Those who dance to the post-modernist tune gyrate around a key theme: the abolition of capital. Such a theme is the only theme which can unify the dispossessed, which is why the process of unification has been made a taboo, why it has been presented as a glorification of outmoded notions of class. But the drive to such unification will not derive from abstract calls to unity, which are always suspect. It will arise from the convergence of struggles, whereby the kernel of the movement of value lies secreted in whatever husk social oppression may first appear.

Notes

1. Although published after *Reipublicae Christianopolitanae Descriptio, City of the Sun* had been written in jail in Rome in 1600. Tobias Adami had brought the manuscript to Germany. See Frances Yates *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London & Chicago 1964) p.373.
2. See again Frances Yates (*ibid*), where she discusses Campanella, and his source, the *Picatrix*, a twelfth century Arabic text. When I first read the extract from the *Picatrix* concerning the city of Adocentyn (p.54) I had to reach immediately for Shcheglov's *Formulary for a New Urbanism* to overcome the sense of *deja vu*. Perhaps Shcheglov was familiar with the *Picatrix*. Bearing in mind the Lettrist's involvement with Michel Mourre, a former Dominican monk, it is possible that he introduced them to Campanella, who like Giordano Bruno, was a Dominican.
3. But see *The Secret of the West*, Dmitri Merezhkovsky, London 1933, where he describes Atlantis as Plato's example of *The Republic* as practical reality.
4. Preface to *Christianopolis* as quoted in Frances Yates *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London 1972), p.185.
5. J.V.Andreae, *Mythologiae Christiana* (Strasburg 1618) as quoted in Frances Yates *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London 1972), p.183.
6. *Fatal Strategies* (New York & London 1990) p.42.
7. *Oraison funèbre sur la mort de Monsieur de Ronsard Par I.D. du Perron, Lecteur de la Chambre du Roy* (Paris 1586) as quoted in *The French Academies of the Sixteenth Century* by Frances Yates (London 1947) p.183 (1988 edition).
8. Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture* (London 1992) p.158.
9. Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London & Chicago 1966) p.351.
10. Thomas Sprat, *The History of the Royal Society of London, for the Improving of Natural Knowledge* (London 1667).
11. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* (Knox translation, Oxford 1952).
12. Karl Marx, *Capital Vol I*, p.457, (Penguin Edition, Harmondsworth 1976).
13. W.T. Stace, *The Philosophy of Hegel* (London 1924).
14. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit 1977) Thesis 3.
15. *ibid* Thesis 4.
16. F.A.Kicker, *The Misery of Football considered in all its forms and a few remedies offered* (London 1995).
17. Plotinus, *Enneads III*, 6, vii.

A PERSONAL VIEW

Guy Debord (1931-1994)

On November 30th 1994, Guy Debord blew his brains out, with his shotgun, in his house in the Haute-Loire in France. His manner of death was as uncompromising as his life.

When I first visited Guy Debord and his partner Alice Becker-Ho, in 1981, with my companion of the time, Michel Prigent, they were living for the winter in a small house in the old part of Arles, former host to Van Gogh and Gauguin - about which the locals used to boast without knowing quite who else was living in their midst. He had always struck me as one of the most interesting writers and thinkers that our epoch has produced, whose writings and ideas deserved to be published in English and discussed seriously, and I was doing what I could to enable this.

He was a charming and interesting conversationalist, and liked to talk as much about personal matters as about wider topics. He and Alice lived in such a way as to allow for their own freedom of desire in their personal relationships.

Debord will be chiefly remembered as a writer, thinker, and instigator of the concept of *the spectacle* - which can be thought of as an allegory of the present advanced state of capitalism and its mode of representation. Debord always referred to himself with some irony as a film-maker. None of his films from the experimental *Screams in Favour of De Sade* (1952) to *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni* (1978)¹ contain any acted-out narratives of the types of mainstream film, and he turned the cinematic form into a mixture of essay, treatise and memoir.

His role in the shaping of the direction of the Situationist International (1957-72) is not unknown to the readers of *Here & Now*. The SI's most important contributions to the left have been, firstly to foreground the need for creativity and control in our work, as well as in other aspects of our lives, secondly their critique of the former Soviet Union and other forms of bureaucratic State capitalism, and thirdly as an inspiration for imaginative revolt.

The concept of the spectacle provides a unifying shorthand to designate the global domination of capital and those whose interests it serves, over our lives. In *The Society of the Spectacle* the spectacle is described in terms of its moments, which are not linked together, but argued rhetorically. It has a poetic resonance as a conceptual tool to provide a language to critique the present organisation of existence. But it is too



monolithic in my opinion, and leads to the vague call for the "abolition of the separation of individuals, the commodity and the State" to be achieved through a formulaic notion of workers councils.

Debord was just about to turn 50 during our visit, and had just published anonymously *Appels de la prison de Segovie* in France through his friend and publisher, the film impresario Gerard Lebovici's *Editions Champ Libre*. In it he called for a support campaign for 50 Spanish Robin Hood-type anarchist 'libertarians' who had been robbing banks and distributing the proceeds to strikers and the unemployed. Debord's support for them was romantic in the best sense of the word, but abstract in the sense that he thought (and hoped) there was a space for some social movement echoing 1936 to emerge in Spain, in its phase of modernisation. This type of naive optimism was perhaps the flip side of the pessimism of *Commentaries on 'The Society of the Spectacle'* (1988) in which he maintains that capitalism and its spectacle has obtained complete closure on any kind of meaningful opposition and change, through having ensured a complete language and system of domination, and by having reared an entire generation (in the West) "obedient to its laws". Could this be perhaps one of the factors of despair which has driven him to his suicide? A fierce polemicist and an implacable opponent of capitalism has been lost.

Part of the problem with the situationist legacy is that in the attempt to control its representation by others, all criticisms of it have automatically been dubbed 'anti-situationist'. We have to get beyond this. I think it is time for a serious, yet critical reconsideration of the situationist legacy - a day conference would be useful.

Lucy Forsyth.

A conference will be held at The Hacienda, Manchester. England on 27 & 28th Jan. 1996

Notes.

1. Available from Pelagian Press, BCM Signpost.

AFTER DEBORD

He who lies low, lives well (Roman Proverb)

Describing a system is dangerous. It excludes all those awkward little things too insignificant to alter the big picture, which, however grim, must always be pleasing to its author. The desire for coherence must take a writer further from the truth. Debord believed to the end that the Spectacle had eradicated everyday life, that "reality no longer confronts the integrated spectacle as something alien". This deeply conservative critique of the times followed directly from the radical progressivism of his earlier writings. The problem at the heart of this lament is that a reality which actually confronted the Spectacle must surely be profoundly *unspectacular*, so unostentatious that it might have entirely escaped the notice of Theory.

The worst thing that could happen to Debord is for people to take him at his word. But the displacement of concrete reality by abstract categories is not as modern as he would have his readers believe. Religion, Science, Money, the Nation have all done this, and all have had their resisters, not just among marginal intellectuals. To take Debord literally can produce the cynicism of all-knowing but impotent thinkers, deploying their erudition, but secure in the knowledge that they bear no responsibility for their utterances, since there is no "reality" to take them up on their words.

What would it be like for Debord's *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* to be generally believed? The slimness of the probability should not rule out this speculation: Debord's voice retains influence in certain quarters. Despite the tone of lamentation, there is no sense in this book of the durability and resistance of everyday life. The spectacle is theorised so completely that nothing exists independently of it. This is not pessimism, but slanted vision. If the Spectacle is a mediating force, it must have something to mediate. Far from seeking the erasure of lived moments and direct experience, it depends upon them. Its operation is more fragile than he sees: witness the constant anxiety of its managers that something might escape their notice. The Spectacle is a static term for a fluid process, constantly threatened by outbreaks of sanity. A committed reader of Debord would necessarily not notice these things. The sense of loss, of a totally hollowed-out humanity, would extinguish the necessary principle of hope, without which there can be nothing wrong in this world and nothing to be done about it.

Debord's abstract concept of the proletariat -defined entirely in terms of its consciousness, or at least by how much situationist theory it manifests in its actions- reaffirms rather than rejects the primacy of the intellectual in the history of revolt. If the proletariat is the subject of a universal history concealed from the individuals who constitute it, then it is only intellectuals like Debord who are really in the know and can guide it.

No doubt the Hollywood epic *Spartacus* is an instance of the recuperation of revolt, of the endless assimilation of revolution into the heritage industry, the better to perpetuate present misery. But this imaginary cretinisation misses the point completely. During the miners' strike of 1984, pickets at Allerton Bywater, just south of Leeds, had placed barricades across the pithead and had successfully resisted police efforts to remove them. When the police demanded to know who was responsible, a voice from the crowd shouted "I'm Spartacus!" - a refrain that was gradually and tumultuously taken up by the crowd. This gesture of mimetic originality demolishes any theory of the proletariat as victims or stooges of power. Not even Hollywood can preclude the sharpness and life-enhancing nature of an actual moment like this.

Debord belonged to the last days of an age that still thought its intellectuals had the independence and the integrity to pass on something of use to the rest of us. Faced with the armies of academic businesspeople, ultra-specialists and well-funded "subversives" who make up the intellectual class today, such delusions are impossible to sustain. But he remains a beacon when perhaps the only useful knowledge now being produced should be kept quiet, passed on through holes in walls and never allowed near the trading floors of academia. People will still be attracted by his extremity. Living in an extremist system like this gives everyone a taste for it. But a predilection for extremes is no more the path to a better life than is the strategy of the bureaucratic pseudo-left, which at best only seeks a more equitable distribution of whatever already exists. The first step to social conformism is to write off the potential of the ordinary - a necessary precondition for enrolment in the army of managers, journalists, politicians and therapists trying to run the show. Everyday life was always the source of revolt, and once it was the Situationists who had to remind everyone else of this. Now theory has taken its revenge, as they were all too aware it would.

