

Aestheticizing the political, politicizing the aesthetic:

Reactions to the disappearance of representation in the French avant-garde, 1951-1962



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Undergraduate Senior Thesis
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Columbia University
29 March 2021

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Acknowledgements

If I thanked everyone who deserved it, this section would need to be its own chapter. In a year like this one, I find myself first wanting to thank my support system—my family. Without their love and support (not to mention free proofreading), this thesis couldn't have happened. My second reader, Dr. Mark Lilla, provided insightful comments on early drafts, proposed useful secondary sources, and helped answer my many questions. Above all else, Dr. Lilla challenged me to make this thesis the best that it could be. My seminar advisor, Dr. Jude Webre, taught me how to turn ideas into words and pages. Furthermore, in leading our classes, Dr. Webre somehow managed to form a tightknit, scholarly community despite the technological mediation. I only wish I could take one of his courses in person. Dr. Aubrey Gabel was my second-year Contemporary Civilization professor, and while that course is sometimes dismissed as merely a requirement of the Core Curriculum, it had such a profound impact on the rest of my academic career. I am very thankful to have been placed into Dr. Gabel's section.

Lastly, I want to thank the History Department faculty and staff who indirectly have contributed to this thesis. An essay that I wrote for Dr. Camille Robcis's course, European Intellectual History, about Marx and de Tocqueville's reactions to the 1848 revolutions inspired the subject of this thesis, and it began my interest in the concept of the political. To Cody, Lawino, Sia, Pat, and Edyaline—I never would have chosen history as a major if I hadn't worked with you all. Thank you for being you.

Introduction

When I tell someone that I am writing a thesis about the Situationist International, there is usually one of three responses. The first and most likely is a polite follow-up, “and what is that?” When I’m around fellow history students, though, most have heard of the group but, more often than not, can’t seem to specify what it was beyond “something to do with May ‘68” or “one of those postwar Dada groups.” Neither of these statements are wrong, per se, and many of the professional academic descriptions of the Situationist International are merely the summation of these two characteristics. David Penner, author of *Rethinking the Spectacle: Guy Debord, Radical Democracy, and the Digital Age*, describes the group as “a highly exclusionary avant-garde organization” with a “short incursion onto the French political scene.”¹ And the contemporary academy reflects this general sentiment, as the two disciplines that still do most of the research on the Situationist International (SI) are aesthetic and political theory.² But even when the group escapes direct interpretation from these two camps, it is often recuperated somewhere else along an axis between the two. Likewise, there is a tendency for historians who study the SI to suggest a linear narrative “of the group from being more concerned with art to being more concerned with politics.”³ While I cannot take issue with the historical accuracy of their accounts or the validity of their primary sources, this thesis serves to explain how these details are framed into a broader history that verges dangerously on anachronism.

1. David Penner, “Guy Debord and the Politics of Play,” in *Thinking Radical Democracy: The Return to Politics in Post-War France*, eds. Martin Breugh, Christopher Holman, Rachel Magnusson, Paul Mazzocchi, Devin Penner (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 165.

2. The situationist archive at Virginia Tech, for example, is housed in the Department of Political Science.

3. Anthony Paul Hayes, “How the Situationist International became what it was,” PhD diss., (Australian National University, April 2017).

Whether political or artistic, the SI is well known today for its role in the student uprisings in Paris of May 1968 but, before that, it was known by its journal, *Internationale Situationniste*, which began publishing in June 1958. However, very few historians begin their histories of the situationists on this date because the formation of the SI came soon after the collapse of a related group—the Lettrist International (LI). Guy Debord was the founder of both, and most members followed him from one to the other. Debord even published explicitly situationist essays before the Lettrist International officially collapsed in 1957.⁴ Given their overlap in membership, publishing timeline, and theoretical beliefs, it becomes difficult to differentiate between the Situationist and Lettrist Internationals meaningfully. For this reason, it seems reasonable that many historians would trace the seeds of the situationist political program to the Lettrist International. Jennifer Wild even suggests that a film criticism from the LI in 1952 should be placed “alongside political economy and urbanism.” Such an exercise of seeing political value in art is productive in its own ways.⁵ Nevertheless, this perspective is limited by a narrative predetermined by hindsight and retrospection. In a sizeable amount of scholarship that surrounds the pre-1958 situationist history, authors assign political value to the actions of the LI based on events that are still decades away. This method not only reduces the significance of historical events to a single month in the late-1960s, but it ignores the history of the LI itself.

Like the Situationist International, the Lettrist International was itself formed out of another, remarkably similar group—so similar that its name was merely modified. The predecessor of the Lettrist International, Lettrism, was formed by Isidore Isou soon after the end

4. “Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organization and Action” and “One More Try if You Want to be Situationists (The S.I. in and against Decomposition)” were both published in 1957. The latter was even published in the LI’s journal, *Potlatch*.

5. Jennifer Wild, “The Chaplin Files, 1952,” *October* 160 (Spring 2017): 65.

of the war as a collective of artists who experimented with new film technology. Unlike the traditional narrative associated with the SI, Lettrism was less concerned with direct political praxis. Debord founded the LI in 1952 and took with him half a dozen Lettrist members, the group's name, and a substantial portion of their ideas. Like the confusion between the SI and LI, it becomes understandable that scholarship often makes it hard to differentiate between Lettrism and the LI. Regardless of the intermediary equivalence (SI = LI and Lettrism = LI), there is still an idea that something fundamentally changed from beginning to end (SI \neq Lettrism). In the traditional narrative, the situationist teleology somehow runs smoothly from something distinctly artistic in the early-1950s (Lettrism) to something wholly within the realm of partisan politics by the late-1960s (the Situationist International).

The problem with historical teleology, though, is that everything becomes framed through the lens of the telos. Because most historians end their situationist histories with May '68, its predecessors and their artifacts are studied for their value in relation to that event. Historical teleology also presupposes some distance between beginning and end (in this case, between art and politics). But the common element that unites these three groups—Lettrism, the Lettrist International, and the Situationist International—is the very rejection of this separation.

This thesis posits that Lettrism and its subsequent iterations were reactions to a phenomenon observed since the turn of the twentieth century: the disappearance of representation. Discerning this phenomenon was nothing new. Walter Benjamin's 1931 essay, "A Small History of Photography," quoted an article from the Leipzig Advertiser in 1912. In it, a German journalist suggests that the inclination of photographers and experimentalists "to fix fleeting reflections" was "not merely an impossible quest" but that "the very wish to do so is blasphemous" because "the human is created in the image of God and God's image cannot be

captured by any man-made machine.”⁶ At the time of the article’s publication, the camera was quite common in artistic circles and increasingly became available to more casual consumers. But people weren’t sure what they should be used for.

In the early years of its use among artists, photography was not used as a legitimate medium onto itself but as a benchmark to later evaluate an artist’s representational abilities in another. Benjamin describes how painters across Europe would photograph their subject and compare the image to their finished painting “as evidence of the artistry of the painter.”⁷ To many German aesthetic theorists, this quality elevated the artist to a divine status. “The divine artist,” as the same Leipzig reporter goes on to say, “rapt with heavenly inspiration, might dare to reproduce theandric features, in a moment of intense devotion, at the command of his genius.”⁸ This artistry and the art that it creates are God-given gifts to the world, and they function as the very bridge between Him and us. According to this reactionary response, German theorists believed photography removes the artist from the process of representing, and with them goes God. They are replaced with a “mechanical aid” that promises to compensate for the secular artist’s inadequacies.⁹ However, “as thorough German investigations have established,” it will never compare to the spiritual bridge that was severed. Benjamin implies that the inclusion of the Leipzig reporter’s national pride was purposeful, as the German media “thought it had to counter the French art of the Devil right from the start.”¹⁰

In its theological conception, the photograph was likened to a Platonic form, an unmediated and total encapsulation of the subject. The painting (in addition to other

6. Walter Benjamin, “Small History of Photography,” in *On Photography*, trans. Esther Leslie (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 62.

7. Benjamin, “Small History of Photography,” 65-66.

8. Benjamin, “Small History of Photography,” 62.

9 Benjamin, “Small History of Photography,” 62.

10 Benjamin, “Small History of Photography,” 62.

predecessors) was the subjective approximation of it, filtered through the painter's mind and formal techniques. Experiencing the subject of a painting required the spectator's labor of interpretation—synthesizing the subjective elements to arrive at their understanding of the subject. Consequently, the subject of representation for this medium was whatever the spectator made it out to be, whether or not their understanding corresponded with its material referent. The photograph and the painting were, according to Benjamin, theorized in opposition to one another—the latter an imperfect approximation of the former. Rather than a wholly separate history, Benjamin set out to explain how photography and painting are situated within the same project that sought to gradually rid art of its representational mediation.

The notion that technology can capture the subject objectively (whatever that means), like the painters who used it as evidence of their artistry believed, is similarly mistaken. Early photographers believed that photographs, unlike paintings or poems, were supposedly incapable of narrative or exaggeration—hence why even painters would photograph their subject for reference. It was a medium that did not require representational mediation in the same way others would need to be interpreted. As many aesthetic theorists have noted, etymologically, no medium can replace representation with reality. “Re-presenting” a moment that has passed necessarily means that the subject is no longer present; otherwise, the prefix is meaningless. Though a photograph may visually correspond to material reality does not mean that the photograph constitutes material reality. A photograph of a four-course meal, for example, does nothing to satiate someone who is starving to death. No, photographic technology is not without representational mediation—it is the pinnacle of it.

The diminishing distance between a subject and its representation would come to embody the gradually decreasing distinction between politics and art. While focusing on a political

history might accurately convey the material facts of this subject, this thesis aligns with an aesthetic project that seeks to understand the representational element of politics. Categorizing Lettrism, the Lettrist International, and the Situationist International into art-or-politics obfuscates the underlying purpose of these groups, which was ultimately to destroy the imposed distinction and provide a leftist rejoinder to Benjamin's famous warning: "Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life."¹¹ To the post-1958 situationists, the exact opposite would become more tenable, that the imposition of a distinction is fascist. Using Debord as a marker for intellectual groups that concerned themselves with the implications of representational disappearance, this thesis posits that the Situationist International was one of many groups that pushed the limitations of political and aesthetic representation. And while many of their later organizational practices compromised the purity of their theoretical work, I will argue that the Situationist International nonetheless provides a necessary framework for material action within a society that becomes dominated by representation, mediation, and spectacle. A history that doesn't valorize the situationist project through a romantic lens of May '68 is needed to evaluate their progression.

Along the way, detours from related characters and intellectuals suggest a different path than the one that Debord chose to take. Blinded by teleology and the hindsight of how history unfolded, it is common practice to dismiss those whom Debord dismissed. At a certain point, though, that list grows to include the likes of Jean-Paul Sartre, Henri Lefebvre, Claude Lefort, and Jean-François Lyotard, among other intellectual heavy-weights. It is important to remember that most of the Lettrists and situationists were young and without formal education beyond

11. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Marxists Internet Archive*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hanah Arendt, 1936, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>.

secondary school and were, therefore, “indifferent to the institutional forms of the academy or art world.”¹² This indifference “escapes the institutionalization of high theory,” but it also often naively proclaims its particularity and, consequently, its inability to be reconciled with any other contention.

This thesis is divided into two halves: the first half presents an aesthetic genealogy of representation and the second half excavates how its disappearance assumed political significance. While many intellectuals studied the effect of new technology on culture and politics, the situationist perspective was heavily influenced by an early mentor to Debord: Isidore Isou, founder of Lettrism. Unlike many of their contemporaries, the Lettrists were less interested in what the disappearance of representation meant for the production of art and were more concerned with its effect on the spectator: namely, making them more passive and servile. The first chapter introduces this new logic that governs how the spectator consumes art, but it also observes a simultaneous trend in the opposite direction. Even as Isou set out to liberate the spectator, he became a force that suppressed creative agency and policed his own members’ behavior. Nonetheless, Isou was successful in creating a way to interrupt the unconscious consumption of art—so successful that members of his organization used his method against him and founded a competing organization, the Lettrist International. The second chapter covers the Chaplin Affair, an inflection point in situationist organizational history and an event inspired by the desire for creative liberty. The Chaplin Affair also engendered a realization that would have drastic political implications: mediation exists even when the subject isn’t being represented through an artistic medium. The newly formed Lettrist International responded to these

12. McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of The Situationist International* (New York: Verso, 2011), 3.

mediating forces by negating everything they thought was mediated and, as Greil Marcus argues, quickly recognized the need for something beyond negation.

The first chapter of the second half, “Situating the situationists,” discusses the formation of the Situationists International in 1958 as an alternative to other contemporary aesthetic-political frameworks and a replacement to the recently failed Lettrist International. All of the alternatives agreed with Debord that they were profoundly alienated from the world around them, but their solution relied on what the situationists called a “Zhdanovist” impulse to negate the present form of mediation and embrace another.¹³ But instead of arriving in a zone of integral reality, as Debord and his associates learned from their time in the Lettrist International, negating the present only alienates us further from the world around us. Though they advertised themselves as a preferable option, the situationists were still figuring out how to organize beyond the structures that mediated the world.

The following chapter, “Superseding Zhdanovism,” probes this early period when the situationists were looking for help in answering these questions. During these years, the Situationist International spent much of the time clarifying what they were not: not surrealism, not Dada, not just another doctrine.¹⁴ Thinking that they had found answers to their lingering questions in a Trotskyist political organization that denounced the “bureaucratic capitalism” of

13. Zhdanov comes up several times in their writing, see “Meaning of Decay in Art.”

14. Hastings-Knight categorizes distinct phases of the Situationist International. Of the first phase, he writes: “The first three issues of IS can be understood as the organization’s attempt to fashion its own contexts and anticipate/shape its reception. This strategic operation was carried out on two fronts: relative to the art contexts from which the Situationists emerged, and relative to the social space from which they hoped to speak or act. Linking the two was the repertoire of properly situationist concepts and tactics. The art referents were Dada and Surrealism. Debord and the other writers who contributed to these early issues were informed by these earlier avant-garde movements, even as they tried to distinguish themselves from them on generational and tactical grounds,” 43. Stephen Hastings-Knight, “L’Internationale Situationiste, Socialisme ou Barbarie, and the Crisis of the Marxist Imaginary,” *SubStance* 90, vol. 28, no. 3 (1999), 26-54.

the Soviet Union, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, the situationists announced an alliance with the group in 1960. In the penultimate chapter, I narrate Debord's time in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and the group's own challenges with organizing politically beyond mediation. While the alliance was short-lived, ending in mid-1961, it culminated in a critical programmatic statement that presented the "unity of revolutionary programming." The final chapter argues that while the statement does not provide explicit instructions for organizing beyond mediation, it successfully draws a contrast between all-encompassing, teleological narratives that limit instead of liberating possibilities. Although the Situationist International would later revert to something antithetical to this innovative methodology, their project of traversing the traditional parameters of aesthetic and political action inspired a new era of intellectuals that were similarly skeptical of all structures, even the ones previously deemed to be endemic to people, society, and culture.

An aesthetic genealogy of representational mediation

Traité de bave et d'éternité: the Lettrist critique of spectatorship

In his essay, “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin noticed that technological reproducibility led to “a qualitative transformation of [art’s] nature.”¹⁵ Rather than a private feature of ritual, art had become valued for its ability to be exhibited. And while a painting often invites contemplation when it is exhibited, “before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed.”¹⁶ Especially in photography and film, later avant-garde groups argued that art was reduced to a producer-consumer relationship in which the artist has power and agency while the spectator passively absorbs what is presented to them. With artistic mediums that were able to transparently represent the subject, the spectator no longer needed to use their labor of interpretation.

Lettrism, a multimedia art collective founded by Isidore Isou, arose in the late-1940s in order to challenge this dynamic. In the tradition of Antonin Artaud’s “theatre of cruelty,” the Lettrists sought to interrupt passive consumption by provoking the spectators. The purpose of such a provocation was unclear, though, even among like-minded Lettrists. The most famous of their cultural contributions came in the form of sound film, a relatively new technology that made advances beyond the photograph. It promised to seamlessly integrate sound, image, and written text into a single entity that had the same level of objectivity as a photograph, if not more. The Lettrists believed that filmic elements inform one another in conveying semantic meaning to the spectator: seeing what produces a sound (whether transmitted by a human voice or machine, whether live or reproduced mechanically) affects how an audience interprets the

15. Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

16. Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

sound itself, giving it a clearer representation of the subject and further diminishing the need for a labor of interpretation. Isidore Isou, in response to this development, “displayed a sustained commitment to the medium (film) in addition to the social and historically specific practices it entailed.”¹⁷ This commitment, though, was one that “refused to be governed by the film as spectacle or propaganda.”¹⁸ Isou’s project would thus exist both within and outside of the conventions that regulated representation, incorporating elements of French avant-garde theory with a bohemian low theory that rejected institutional norms and appealed to people outside of traditional intellectual networks. He gained a following in the early-1950s after developing a filmmaking technique that interrupted the integration of filmic elements into something cohesive and transparent. His first film, *Traité de bave et d’éternité*,¹⁹ debuted in 1951.

A canonical Lettrist film, *Traité* utilizes Isou’s technique of discrepant media: the words spoken do not correspond to the mouths of the characters on visual display, the subtitles don’t match the soundtrack, the images themselves are shown only momentarily and do not compose a broader plot. This technique, according to Isou, “diverts the tracks and makes them indifferent to each other.”²⁰ Instead of subverting this convention by placing sound into a privileged position relative to the image, Isou severs their relationship altogether so that sound “does not relate to, define, or otherwise inflect an image’s meaning.”²¹ The filmic elements do not inform one another so that their sum is greater than the constituent parts but rather “listening to a recorded voice that insisted on speech’s material source” meant that “the very body...was negated by the

17. Kaira M. Cabañas, *Off-Screen Cinema: Isidore Isou and the Lettrist Avant-Garde* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), 19.

18. Cabañas, *Off-screen Cinema*, 19.

19. Sometimes translated as *Treatise on Slobber and Eternity* and other times as *Treatise on Venom and Eternity*, I will refer to Isou’s film as *Traité*.

20. Cabañas, *Off-screen Cinema*, 15.

21. Cabañas, *Off-screen Cinema*, 16.

absence of a visual image.”²² The two have no symbiosis. In fact, they reveal the insufficiencies of one another in their ability to correctly identify the subject. The result is an internal discordance that the spectator is supposed to try and reconcile. Even if a spectator’s labor of interpretation doesn’t absolutely decode the subject of *Traité* so that it appears them as if it were unmediated by Isou’s manipulation, they arrive at their own unique understanding. What is ultimately consumed by the spectator, accordingly, is a product of their own labor of interpretation, not that of the producer or director. Isou enlisted the audience members to be “viewers of images, readers of text, and interpreters of textual marks and signs that interrupt filmed images, just as they are auditors of a debate and subject to the interruption of linguistic meaning by the eruption of seemingly senseless sounds.”²³ At one point in *Traité*, a character voiced by Isou but played by another actor proclaims that “we should leave the cinema with a headache!”²⁴ In this regard, Isou was successful, and the pain his audiences felt was a testament to their labor.

The broader political implications of Isou’s *Traité* are found in his interrogation of media, medium, and mediation. Isou used existing footage from news programs, government archives, well-known celebrities, and other culturally identifiable sources in order to create an implicit relationship between his film and historical reality, participating in “the conceit of documentary realism, whereby archival shots...are understood to emanate from concrete historical referents.”²⁵ This method directly informed the situationist technique that would later be referred to as *detournement*, “the integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior

22. Cabañas, *Off-screen Cinema*, 27.

23. Cabañas, *Off-screen Cinema*, 17.

24. Cabañas, *Off-screen Cinema*, 16.

25. Cabañas, *Off-screen Cinema*, 36.

construction of a milieu.”²⁶ The essence of realism conferred by this conceit deceives the audience into thinking that what they are seeing is unmediated reality when, actually, they are watching something that has been carefully crafted by a team of producers, directors, and writers to elicit a certain response or realization in the viewer. Even a single photo has a certain perspective, a unique vantage, and formal elements that are subjectively determined.

Isou wanted to emphasize this aspect of the artistic process, the presumably neutral act of an author arranging disparate pieces of information to create a cohesive entity for the eventual consumption of a passive spectator. As opposed to the news media and documentaries that try to hide this process from the audience in the name of objectivity, Isou announced his presence by drawing directly on the celluloid, obscuring parts of the images behind scribbles and symbols.²⁷ This method—what Isou called “chiseling”—has the dual function of taking away the semantic content of what is hidden behind the scribbles and yet adds a new layer of significance on the very material level of the film itself. It substitutes representation with an organic, material intervention.²⁸ His mediation—his chiseling—upsets the mediation that the original author imbued into the image. In her book, *Off-screen Cinema: Isidore Isou and the Lettrist Avant-Garde*, Kaira Cabañas relates chiseling to his discrepant technique: by scribbling over the faces of actors, for example, the spectators have no material referent for association.²⁹ They can’t be seduced by their cultural or celebrity status. Like the internal discordance caused by the discrepant elements of the film, foreclosing the possibility of referential association forces the spectators into an active position, aware of their role as interpreters. As Cabañas explains, Isou

26. “Definitions,” *Internationale Situationniste* #1 (June 1958), Situationist International Online, trans. Ken Knabb, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/definitions.html>.

27. Cabañas, *Off-screen Cinema*, 37.

28. Cabañas, *Off-screen Cinema*, 37.

29. Cabañas, *Off-screen Cinema*, 44.

would use this method of interrupting passive spectatorship to subvert and criticize the French government's occupation of Indochina.



Figure 1. Examples of “chiseling” in Isou’s *Traité de bave et d’éternité*.³⁰

Using the official newsreels that documented the arrival of France’s General de Lattre de Tassigny in Vietnam, Isou once again chiseled away at the image on the celluloid. In each frame, there is a different target of his pen. Sometimes his focus is on the faces of French soldiers and other times he makes the setting less identifiable, chiseling away a flag or a sign. While this technique of introducing obscurity might have been employed so that Isou avoided prosecution from a defensive French government, it also serves as “a redirection of attention away from individual identity to the subject of discourse, from individual acts to the discursive context in which the customs, gestures, and movements of an event unfold.”³¹ The individual actions of one soldier or another are less important than the fact that such an event actually happened, that our current cultural-political conventions and institutions made possible such an event. Isou’s chiseling demands the spectators to direct their “attention away from the *what* of the image to the

30 Jean Isidore Isou, *Traité de bave et d’éternité*, Internet Archive, 1951, film, 2:03:41, <https://archive.org/details/1951jeanisidoreisoutraitedebaveetdeternite>.

31. Cabañas, *Off-screen Cinema*, 46.

how of the footage’s framing but also—and this is crucial—the event’s staging.”³² This redirection, according to Cabañas, anticipates Foucault’s articulation of the archive: “that which defines the mode of occurrence of the statement-thing: it is *the system of its functioning*.”³³ In aesthetic theory, like the psychoanalysts say, the subject is not self-constituting: it is defined merely by its representation, which is inevitably lacking. The power lies in the ability to represent the subject and, in doing so, defining the subject.



Figure 2. “Chiseling” Vietnam in Isou’s *Traité de bave et d’éternité*.³⁴

The French government broadcasted an image of a grateful, bicultural Vietnam whose people welcomed the prospect of new technology and culture. The film not only shows a large welcome party for the French diplomats but also narrates a redemptive story of progress and modernization with the arrival of French industrialization.³⁵ The audience, primarily movie theater attendees in France, were told that such was the case throughout Indochina. There was no mention of the French military activity in the region nor the fomenting internal liberation

32. Cabañas, *Off-screen Cinema*, 47.

33. Cabañas, *Off-screen Cinema*, 47.

34. Isou, *Traité de bave et d’éternité*, 1951, <https://archive.org/details/1951jeanisidoreisoutraitedebaveetdetermite>.

35. Isou, *Traité de bave et d’éternité*, 1951, <https://archive.org/details/1951jeanisidoreisoutraitedebaveetdetermite>.

movement that resisted their occupation. As far as the French theater-goers knew, their government's occupation of Southeast Asia was, at the very least, benign.³⁶ The reality of Vietnam was “discursively organized by techniques of power” to elicit a certain response or, in this case, a non-response from the French people.³⁷ In his own re-presentation of these official reels, Isou's chiseling draws attention to how film can be used to “regulate the perception of war” and “frame reality in a determinate way.”³⁸ His marks expose the hidden process of transforming reality into representation that is usually only known to the producer or director.



Figure 3. More “chiseling” Southeast Asia in Isou's *Traité de bave et d'éternité*.³⁹

Isou sought to give agency to the audience by giving them a reason to use their labor of interpretation to synthesize the discrepant elements that he exposed, interrupting the monotony of passive consumption. To clarify one misinterpretation, Isou does not mean to say that *all*

36. The French government famously refused to acknowledge the reality of their overseas occupations. Ironically when 121 prominent French intellectuals tried to publish “Declaration on the Right to Insubordination in the War in Algeria” in 1960, a manifesto that demanded the Gaullist government acknowledge their abuses in Algeria, it was promptly censored from newspapers and other media sources. <https://www.marxists.org/history/france/algerian-war/1960/manifesto-121.htm>. “Declaration on the Right to Insubordination in the War in Algeria (The Manifesto of the 121),” in *Marxists Internet Archive*, trans. Mitch Abidor, 1936, updated 2004, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>.

37. Cabañas, *Off-screen Cinema*, 48.

38. Cabañas, *Off-screen Cinema*, 47.

39. Isou, *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, 1951, <https://archive.org/details/1951jeanisidoreisoutraitedebaveetdetermite>.

passive consumption is bad or dangerous but that people not being aware of their capacity for interpretation makes them (more) servile to existing authority, whether that be aesthetic convention or state propaganda. The audience who watches *Traité* might not produce a clear image of the subject, but it will result in what Cabañas calls “an alternative politics of what looking at archival images as images of history might mean.”⁴⁰ Like an image, history itself is organized in such a way that it appears to be neutral when it is actually re-presented and, necessarily, mediated. *Traité*, with its Lettrist method of discrepant media and chiseling, is a practice session for the spectator. In this relationship, although the audience has agency, Isou is still exalted above them as their coach and creator, animating them like God creating Adam and Eve. His message is clear, that there is a danger in passively accepting reality as (re-)presented.

Debuting at the Cannes Film Festival in 1951, the premiere of the first chapter of *Traité de bave et d'éternité* accompanied several changes to Lettrism as an organization: namely, centralizing power in Isou's hands. After publishing *Isou, ou La mécanique des femmes (Isou, or The Mechanics of Women)* in 1949 landed him in a French prison for decency laws, Isou was weary of publicizing his work.⁴¹ In his place, he sent less prominent Lettrists to promote *Traité*. Initially, the organizers of the Cannes Film Festival refused to show the film. Even though it wasn't part of their pre-planned lineup, the persistence of the Lettrists was bothersome to the organizers. After a few days of promotional work, the organizers eventually caved and gave the Lettrists the Vox theater so that they could screen *Traité*.⁴² By the time of its showing, Isou had arrived in Cannes in order to deliver a preamble to the film. “Isou's initial nonappearance,” however, “raised doubts as to his actual attendance.”⁴³ There is a double irony in this regard. The

40. Cabañas, *Off-screen Cinema*, 48.

41. Cabañas, *Off-screen Cinema*, 22.

42. Cabañas, *Off-screen Cinema*, 23.

43. Cabañas, *Off-screen Cinema*, 22.

first is that the Lettrists demanded to be included in the Festival even while Isou himself initially refused to go. Like the chiseling technique that detracted from the subject's semantic meaning while adding a new layer of significance, Isou's initial absence had a counterintuitive effect. His absence intensified intrigue surrounding the strangely promoted *Traité*—why was he hiding? Did his absence somehow relate to the subject of the film? The people in Cannes needed to see for themselves. Second, the Lettrists sought to insert the “most revolting film in the history of cinema” (as they proudly proclaimed *Traité* to be) into one of the most traditional, prestigious film institutions: the Cannes Film Festival.⁴⁴ Similar to their use of found-footage, the Festival conferred some immaterial essence of legitimacy to the film and its novel techniques. *Traité*, in its utter absurdity, was always already a critique of how arbitrary institutions that we perceive as being gatekeepers of credibility can confer significance and meaning on something that is otherwise insignificant and meaningless. In having their film accepted (albeit reluctantly) by the Cannes Film Festival, the Lettrists forced the mutability of tradition and exposed the arbitrariness of cultural authority.

While the premiere of *Traité* would go on to leave audiences confused and upset, many Lettrists thought that Isou had exalted himself to such a level that would ultimately be detrimental to the movement. By 1952, there were organizational and ideological disagreements between some of the most prominent members. The criticism would fall on Isou:

At this state, Lettrist activity in Paris was almost exclusively controlled by Isou and his chief lieutenants... This meant that not only did the execution of collective tasks need to be shaped by the principles of Isou's “system,” which he alone could change or modify, but that even individual activities, such as the construction of metagraphic collage or the composition of a poem had to be judged by the shifting criteria defined by Isou... The ultimate aim of Lettrist activity was now to replace God as the central creative agent in

44. Cabañas, *Off-screen Cinema*, 31.

the universe; with this solipsistic approach, the Lettrist group seemed to be taking on all the attributes of a cult with “Le Dieu-Isou” as its godhead.⁴⁵

Such intellectual suppression, as this faction of Lettrists saw it, was only more pernicious given the ongoing ideological dispute. Isou’s contentedness with merely being aware, they insisted, contradicted his earlier criticism of the postwar cultural insistence on a passive audience—spectators are aware of what they’re consuming but they can’t change their position, just their perception. And in this arrangement, Isou still makes the audience reliant on him for access to their agency. Other Lettrists believed that they could go further, afford more agency to the spectator, and inspire revolutionary fervor.

Re-Presenting: The Lettrist International (and Charlie Chaplin)

Guy Debord was still quite young when he led a revolt against Isou from within Lettrism. But by 1952, he was already looking for ways to resist “what appeared to him as a mortal threat to his own sovereignty, namely, Isou’s vision for a contemporary avant-garde.”⁴⁶ He was joined by some other disgruntled Lettrists: Serge Berna, Jean-L. Brau, and Gil Wolman. Relations with Isou deteriorated after his screening at Cannes, so Debord and his faction of Lettrists decided that it was finally time to revolt “against the cult that one communely [*sic*] rendered to this director, Jean-Isidore Isou.”⁴⁷ Their technique for doing so, although similar to some of the elements found in *Traité*, “privilege[d] the live, cultural spectacle” that mediated our relations even when the subject is materially present.⁴⁸ Using a performative utterance aimed at the *célébrité* of

45. Andrew Hussey, *The Game of War: The Life and Death of Guy Debord* (London: Pimlico, 2002), 67.

46. Wild, “The Chaplin Files, 1952,” 56.

47. “The position of the Lettrist International,” in *Internationale Lettriste* #1 (November 1952), Situationist International Online, trans. Sophie Rosenberg, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/position.html>.

48. Wild, “The Chaplin Files, 1952,” 54.

Charlie Chaplin, they declared themselves to be independent from Isou's Lettrism and announced the formation of the Lettrist International (LI).

In October 1952, at the Hôtel Ritz Paris, Charlie Chaplin was scheduled to attend a press event promoting the European premiere of his newest film, *Limelight*. Sometime after the event began, the group of four men rushed the stage, stole the microphone, began hurling insults at the aging Chaplin, and distributed pamphlets of their newest publication, "No More Flat Feet." The event was cancelled and the four Lettrists escaped from the law. In the pamphlet, Chaplin and the public were surprised to see personal attacks, as if these Lettrists were old-friends-turned-enemies with Chaplin. In the last line before concluding, they write: "The footlights have melted the make-up of the supposedly brilliant mime. All we can see now is a lugubrious and mercenary old man."⁴⁹ The response by all parties was confusing and confused, in part because Isou's criticism of what they did was published before Debord and his associations could distribute their own manifesto. How was the spectator to interpret this?

In the next issue of *Combat*, a leftist French newspaper, Isou clarified that "only the Lettrists who signed the tract against Chaplin are responsible for the extreme and confused content of their manifesto."⁵⁰ In distancing himself and his organization from the Chaplin tract, he says that Lettrists "revoke our solidarity from the tract of our friends and we associate ourselves with the homage rendered to Chaplin by the entire populace."⁵¹ Throughout his statement, Isou refers to Chaplin by both his legal name and by the French name of his most

49. Serge Berna, Jean-Louis Brau, Guy-Ernest Debord, and Gil J. Wolman, "No More Flat Feet," in *Internationale Lettriste* #1 (November 1952), Situationist International Online, trans. Sophie Rosenberg, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/flatfeet.html>.

50. Jean-Isidore Isou, Maurice Lemaitre, and Gabriel Pomerand, "The Lettrists disavow the insulters of Chaplin" in *Combat* (November 1952), trans. NOT BORED! <http://www.notbored.org/lettrist-disavowal.html>.

51. "The Lettrists disavow the insulters of Chaplin," in *Combat* (November 1952).

famous character: Charlot.⁵² He tells the reader that “if Charlot must receive mud, it won’t be us who throw it at him.”⁵³ By using Chaplin and Charlot interchangeably, Isou reifies the correspondence between Chaplin the mortal man and Charlot the immortal concept—the exact opposite of what Debord and the others did at the Ritz Paris and what he himself accomplished with *Traité*. Just as Isou severed the filmic elements and made them “indifferent to each other,” the resistant Lettrists severed the representational mediation of Charlot from the fleshly body of Chaplin.

When someone thinks of Charlie Chaplin, their mind conjures a black-and-white image of a young man with a toothbrush mustache, never mind that Chaplin the man has aged, shaved, and wears a surprisingly colorful wardrobe. There is an immaterial layer that brought people to the press event in the first place. It is this aura—his cultural significance, his celebrity status, his role as producer (rather than consumer) of art, and his image in the memory of fans—that surrounds and defines him, not material reality but a representation of some past moment(s). Those involved with the scandal applied Isou’s technique of discrepant media onto material reality. In *Traité*, Isou severed relations between the filmic elements that re-presented the subject in order to expose how representation distorts and redefines the subject. The Chaplin Affair, as historians refer to it, was an inversion of this equation: they focused entirely on the subject, exposing the absurdity of the mediation that conferred status to Chaplin. They specifically did not attack Charlot. They attacked Chaplin, the “lugubrious and mercenary old man” behind the melted make-up. By showing the inadequacies of the subject to live up to their representation, the spectators are able to see the absurdity of the mediation that once aggrandized Chaplin’s image. Debord and the others “negat[ed...] the value of the previous organization of

52. In English, this character is known as the Tramp.

53. “The Lettrists disavow the insulters of Chaplin,” in *Combat* (November 1952).

expression”⁵⁴ by having the spectators question why they should value this old man before them. They undermine the power of those producers, directors, and writers—the whole culture machine—who presume their representation will be unconditionally accepted by a passive audience. And just like the indifferent film elements in *Traité*, the symbiosis between Chaplin and Charlot became dialectical, revealing the shortcomings of both in their ability to correctly identify Chaplin.

Although the LI was still aligned with the central tenets of Isou’s theoretical project, the Chaplin Affair marked a departure from his dogma in at least two ways. In the first, the Lettrist International extended the notion of representational mediation to the immediate realm, where the subject is still materially present. Their commitment to immediacy cut through the mediation caused by a work of art’s temporal displacement (the image showing a previous moment, re-presenting it) and perspectival subjectivity (the cinematography, the camera’s vantage point). In this regard, the Chaplin tract of Lettrists seemed to refute Walter Benjamin’s claim that “even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space.”⁵⁵ Even with Chaplin’s presence in time and space, something “clings to the image,” namely “idolatry and mythic enthrallment.”⁵⁶ They discovered that some mediation exists within and determines social relations, and everyone seems to be totally unaware of it. What this mediation is has been the subject of much Leftist intellectual debate: orthodox Marxists blame class-based alienation, Debord goes on to coin the “spectacle,” and Jean Baudrillard expands it into an overarching “hyperreality.” Most scholarship on the relationship between these concepts emphasizes their respective critiques of contemporary political economy, but this historiographic

54. Wild, “The Chaplin Files, 1952,” 54.

55. Benjamin, “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

56. Theodore Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 205.

perspective ignores their shared aesthetic qualities. Many historians, for example, discuss Lettrism and the LI using explicitly situationist terms, a movement that hadn't formed yet. The issue with this perspective is not that it is presentist (which it is) but that it doesn't account for how notions of authority and power themselves have changed beyond formal institutions and social policy. Once again, Debord will anticipate Foucault—this time his thesis on power. Like Foucault, Debord theorizes a paradigm of authority that is diffuse and internalized rather than concentrated and imposed from above.

The second departure from Isou's dogma took issue with the way that he assumed a specialized vanguard position in the producer-spectator relationship and within the Lettrist organization, re-entrenching the very hierarchy that he hoped to upset. When they were finally able to publish their manifesto, the newly formed Lettrist International proclaimed that “the most urgent exercise of freedom is the destruction of idols, especially when they represent freedom.”⁵⁷ Isou, the only Lettrist who could approve organizational activity, “represent[ed] freedom” insofar as he was a barrier to the agency of the spectator and his colleagues. By subverting his permission process before executing the Chaplin Affair, the Lettrist International performatively destroyed the material effect of his idolatry—his power and authority over them. This kind of performative deicide mirrors many of the thinkers from “oppositional Surrealism,” especially Georges Bataille's more mystical emphasis on sacrifice and unproductive expenditure. He suggests that someone can regain their “absolute sovereignty” and become godlike themselves by killing the God who has dominion over them.⁵⁸ In negating the value of the existing

57. “The position of the Lettrist International,” in *Internationale Lettriste* #1 (November 1952).

58. Alexander Irwin, “Exercises in Inutility,” *Saints of the Impossible: Bataille, Weil, and the Politics of the Sacred* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press), 139-140. Irwin continues: “Dying with God, the mystic becomes God, that is, lays claim to an absolute sovereignty: the pure, tragic (and laughing) freedom imparted by death. The principle of the experience is infinite contestation. Bataille understands mystical practice as a radical questioning not only of specific contents of knowledge, but of

mediation—whether Isou’s or Chaplin’s idolatry—the Lettrist International intended to create the conditions for the possibility of new, original forms of affirmation to replace the former mediation. But it turns out that destroying idols can only go so far.

The Lettrist International would subsequently bring this destructive stance to all of those “process[es] that ordinarily took place without consciousness.”⁵⁹ While they authored a few manifestos and essays, Greil Marcus, a contemporary American cultural critic and journalist, posits that they spent most of their time undergoing “a radical deconditioning” from the presuppositions that they had learned and inherited and then negated over and over again.⁶⁰ In negating the existing organization, they continued a process that destroys and creates new forms of mediations that would organize “wishes, pains, fears, hopes, ambitions, limits, social relationships, and identities.”⁶¹ These new organizations would necessarily be temporary, otherwise they would become just another engrained, unconscious presupposition that would need to be destroyed and replaced anew. In order to find new mediations and organizations, they would go on *dérives*: aimlessly drifting throughout Paris for an indefinite amount of time looking for forms of mediation that subverted or rebelled against, and were thus being suppressed by, the existing organization of society. While it might sound intellectually sophisticated, in practice it often just meant that someone would frequently get intoxicated and live homelessly for a period of time.

the fundamental structures and operations that make claims to ‘knowledge’ possible: including the ordering structures of language and the coherent identity of the knowing subject.”

59. Greil Marcus, “The Long Walk of the Situationist International,” in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 5.

60. Marcus, “The Long Walk of the Situationist International,” 7.

61. Marcus, “The Long Walk of the Situationist International,” 5.

After years of heavy drinking, substance abuse, arrests, incarcerations, homelessness, suicide attempts, and excommunications, the Lettrist International project had devolved into what Marcus termed “bohemian solipsism,” whereby almost all behavior could have been rationalized and justified as being in service to the virtuous cause.⁶² As a result, their movement never really caught on. Even though they would continue to disrupt well-attended events, their group never grew beyond a handful of people and was “known mostly to itself.”⁶³ While I will discuss the theoretical departure that marked the Situationist International (SI) in the next chapter, there are many contributing factors for the dissolution of the LI. Marcus proposes that it was the anarchic disorganization of the group that prompted the collapse of the LI and the establishment of the SI: “such a project, no matter how poorly defined or mysterious, was either a revolutionary project or it was nothing. It was a recognition that the experiments of the *dérive*...had to be transformed into a general contestation of that society.”⁶⁴ They needed more order. In stark contrast to the formation of the Lettrist International, Marcus is therefore arguing that the founding of the Situationist International was, at least in part, a move toward a more centralized authority structure—antithetical to the principles they expressed in their break from Isou in October 1952.

62. Marcus, “The Long Walk of the Situationist International,” 7.

63. Marcus, “The Long Walk of the Situationist International,” 7. Marcus seems to be referencing Debord, who would later use Marx’s famous “is revolutionary or it is nothing” quote in “Reports,” among other works.

64. Marcus, “The Long Walk of the Situationist International,” 7.

Toward a politics of negated negation

“We all laid, and *were bound* to lay, the main emphasis, in the first place, on the *derivation* of political, juridical and other ideological notions, and of actions arising through the medium of these notions, from basic economic facts. But in so doing we neglected the formal side—the ways and means by which these notions, etc., come about—for the sake of the content.”

– Friedrich Engels writing to Franz Mehring, July 14, 1893, London.⁶⁵

Situating the situationists: an alternative to “the confused reign of reactionary imbecility”

The idea that inspired the creation of the Lettrist International remained mostly intact: there was a mediating force in the world alienating people from each other and their own authentic lives. The members spent much of the early-1950s negating the current organization of society—refusing to get a job and rent an apartment. Their art was expression of overwhelming negation. Debord would produce a film, *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* (1952), that had no images. His colleague in the Lettrist International, Asger Jorn, took negation one step further, authoring a book of incomplete fragments with sandpaper jackets “so that when placed in a bookshelf it would eat other books.”⁶⁶ But even if they could negate the mediation that organized their lives, they never seemed to escape it. Their years of vagrancy left many members of the Lettrist International incarcerated, in a state more restrained than ever before.⁶⁷ And while their “deconditioning” brought the Lettrist International hardship, other leftist groups had successfully mobilized against colonial and capitalist interests.

Two years before the publication of the first issue of *Internationale Situationniste*, the remaining members of the nearly-defeated Lettrist International attended a conference of leftist aesthetes and theorists in Alba, Italy to discuss the year’s accomplishments: mass mobilizations

65. Friedrich Engels, “Engels to Franz Mehring,” in *Marxists Internet Archive*, trans. Donne Torr, July 14, 1893, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93_07_14.htm

66. Marcus, “The Long Walk of the Situationist International,” 5.

67. Marcus, “The Long Walk of the Situationist International,” 7.

against authoritarianism in the Soviet Union, Poland, and Hungary; the enormous labor strikes in Spain; and the successful advances made by Algerian anti-colonialists. To the LI, these successes demonstrated the vulnerability of the contemporary organization of society and the beginnings of its general collapse. Even such a momentous year, the delegate representing the Lettrist International, Gil J. Wolman, predicted that it would be their address at the Alba Conference that “will probably one day be seen as a key moment” in the fight to create a new culture.⁶⁸

It is in this late-Lettrist International and early-Situationist International period that Debord begins referring to the mediation and the organization of life that it entailed “the spectacle.” In his address to the conference, Wolman opens with what seems to be an imprecise articulation of this concept: “the parallel crises presently affecting all modes of artistic creation are determined by general, interrelated tendencies and cannot be resolved outside a comprehensive general perspective.”⁶⁹ His description lays out an important distinction with the LI’s earlier work. Instead of a mediating institution that could be negated, Wolman identifies the cause of alienation as a set of “general” tendencies that required a “general perspective.” This general perspective would presumably include “the formal side” of power relations, the side that Friedrich Engels admitted to neglecting in his work with Marx. According to Engels, his own perspective failed to address “the ways and means by which these notions [...] come about.”⁷⁰ The situationists will spend much of the early years systematizing their analysis of “the formal side” and later discuss how to organize within and beyond it.

While the first issue of their journal, *Internationale Situationniste*, included a dictionary of important situationist terms, “the spectacle” is not one of them. The wording of these

68. “The Alba Platform” in *Potlatch* #27 (November 1956), Situationist International Online, trans. Ken Knabb, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/alba.html>.

69. “The Alba Platform” in *Potlatch* #27 (November 1956).

70. “Engels to Franz Mehring,” 14 July 1893.

definitions comes directly from some of their first few published essays. Their definition of “culture,” for example, is “the reflection and prefiguration of the possibilities of organization of everyday life in a given historical moment; a complex of aesthetics, feelings and mores through which a collectivity reacts on the life that is objectively determined by its economy,” and it comes directly from Debord’s “Report.”⁷¹ Of course, Debord will go on to write *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967, but the earlier days of the Situationist International were marked by theoretical agonism—sharpening vague concepts through written and oral contestation. The spectacle was born almost directly from what Debord realized as a result of the Chaplin Affair: mediation existed even with the presence of the subject. Notably, one of the first articulations of the spectacle comes from an early situationist essay on the relationship between spectator and film.⁷² But ever since the Chaplin Affair, Debord and his followers had recognized the need for a new aesthetic-political framework for combatting and subverting this force. In his 1957 essay, “Report on the Constructions of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organization and Action,” Debord claim the postwar period marked a particular “stage of ideological absence in which advertising has become the only active factor, overriding any preexisting critical judgment or transforming such judgment into a mere conditioned reflex.”⁷³ As he will write elsewhere, the spectacle encouraged “non-participation” in the same way that photography and film supposedly didn’t require interpretation.⁷⁴ Indeed, one of the most insidious aspects of the spectacle is its ability to hide its own appearance, dissolving into

71. “Definitions,” *Internationale Situationniste* #1 (June 1958), Situationist International Online, trans. Ken Knabb, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/definitions.html>.

72. “In and Against Cinema,” *Internationale Situationniste* #1 (June 1958), Situationist International Online, trans. Reuben Kaheen, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/cinema.html>.

73. Guy Debord, “Report on the Constructions of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organization and Action,” June 1957, Situationist International Online, trans. Ken Knabb, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/report.html>.

74. “In and Against Cinema,” *Internationale Situationniste* #1 (June 1958).

those aspects of society that we deem to be natural or essential features. The spectacle, therefore, is not a recognizably combative force but rather something that each of us are involuntarily “integrated into”⁷⁵ and participate in as spectators.⁷⁶

Equally concerning to the new stage of history characterized by the spectacle is the realization that the prevailing intellectual frameworks for resistance were wholly insufficient, especially because most leftists identified individual structures (capitalism, finance, government, etc.) as the sole locus of power rather than a diffuse organizing paradigm for the entirety of society. The situationists identify three futile movements that were originally conceived of as viable methods to challenge the spectacle, though they would each use a different word. The first is a familiar player: surrealism. Since the interwar period, there had been a lane of surrealism that “fought against the fictions of representation in favor of the facts of material life.”⁷⁷ Surrealism’s failure, according to the situationists, can be attributed to its totalizing belief “that the unconscious was the finally discovered ultimate force of life.”⁷⁸ If we could only traverse the mediation that organized our consciousness, then we might be able to arrive in a zone of integral reality and *tabula rasa*, never mind the fact that the spectacle operates as a logic on the unconscious level.⁷⁹ In addition, Debord suggests that critics question whether the unconscious is an effective site for struggle considering that we now know “the unconscious imagination is poor” among its other limitations.⁸⁰ By 1956, surrealism was largely dismissed by activists and

75. “In and Against Cinema,” *Internationale Situationniste* #1 (June 1958).

76. Note the etymological similarity between “spectacle” and “spectator.”

77. Wild, “The Chaplin Files, 1952,” 53.

78. Guy Debord, “Report on the Constructions of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organization and Action,” June 1957.

79. Guy Debord, “Report.”

80. Guy Debord, “Report.”

artists alike. The other two movements, though, reached their peak of popularity in the 1950s and 1960s.

This decade and the next saw the rise of Third-Worldism, an alternative to the hegemony of Soviet-style (authoritarian) communism and American free-market (bourgeois) capitalism. Many French leftists, after seeing what they took to be the successes of Mao in China, readily accepted this alternative as a kind of libertarian reconciliation of socialism.⁸¹ At the same time, there was a trend in the French academy to identify primitive societies as an ideal that people should be striving toward. The scholarship that comes from this era relies heavily on anthropologists like Ferdinand de Saussure (mapping language) and Marcel Mauss (gift exchange). Both of these trends have their problems. For one, their admiration for Mao was predicated on false pretenses. More broadly, however, these romanticized images of primitive societies and Chinese peasant revolutionaries alienated the contemporary spectator from their present conditions. While there are many figures who are sympathetic to situationist ideas and who subscribe to this method of resistance—Bataille and Baudrillard among them—Debord tells them that “we need to go forward, not backward.”⁸²

The last method of resistance was one that had been gaining traction in the years following the war: existentialism. Perhaps because it dominated the Parisian intellectual scene, Debord was not-so-subtly jealous of existentialism’s success compared to the failure of the Lettrist International. His critique of existentialism, at this early point in the situationist project, was less analytical than his critique of the other two. He writes that existentialists had “reproduced, under the cover of borrowed philosophy, the most mediocre aspects of the cultural

81. Belden Fields, “French Maoism,” *Social Text: The 60s without Apology*, no. 9/10 (Spring-Summer 1984), 148.

82. Guy Debord, “Report.”

evolution of the preceding three decades and augmented its mass-media-based notoriety by doses of fake Marxism and psychoanalysis and by successive announcements of more or less arbitrary political engagements and resignations.”⁸³ In observing an incoherent combination of pseudo-Marxism, psychoanalysis, and a seemingly arbitrary political program, Debord laments that “these tactics have generated a very large number of followers, avowed and unacknowledged.”⁸⁴ His implication is that existentialism is undeserving of this attention because it’s merely a novel combination of the previous generation’s degraded philosophy. Once again, Debord seems to be telling existentialists what he once told Isou, that familiar phrase: “truths which are no longer interesting turn into lies!”

These three aesthetic-political frameworks, according to Debord, are not unlike Soviet-style Socialist Realism in that they observe a state of cultural degradation and, while evoking revolutionary justifications for doing so, respond with a reactionary political program. Andrei Zhdanov, Second Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party from 1939 to 1948, is Debord’s key analogy. In 1948, Zhdanov warned the Conference of Soviet Composers of a bourgeois cabal that “amounted to the liquidation of painting.” Subsequently, he embarked on “an authoritarian restoration” of pre-capitalist Russian culture⁸⁵ —banning most practices associated with the avant-garde and all other forms of “internationalism.”⁸⁶ By fixing the one-to-one correspondence between representation (Soviet cultural products) and what Zhdanov says is the true referent (‘real art,’ pre-capitalist culture), he tries to deny one representation by imposing another representation. To Debord, the entire arsenal of leftist opposition was tantamount to a Zhdanovist

83. Guy Debord, “Report.”

84. Guy Debord, “Report.”

85. Guy Debord, “Report.”

86. Andrei Zhdanov, “Speech at a General Assembly of Soviet Composers,” *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, ed. Nicolas Slonimsky (February 17, 1948), <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1947-2/zhdanov/zhdanov-texts/discussion-at-a-general-assembly-of-soviet-composers/>.

nostalgia that taught its adherents to “evade the general problems of this era” by “return[ing] to the study of superseded problems after having repressed all the conclusions that history has previously drawn from those problems.”⁸⁷ If the past was unhelpful in avoiding our present situation, then why would we want to return to it? This Zhdanovist “conservative cultural position” pervaded ideological lines and national boundaries, as Debord notes that regimes and intellectuals alike would identify an idealistic past era and work toward bringing it forth by repressing the present.⁸⁸ Although he positions surrealism, primitivism, and existentialism at the center of this “conservative cultural position,” it is difficult to read his critique without thinking of the Lettrist International’s “radical deconditioning.”

Above all else, Debord’s “Report” is an explanation for the dissolution of the Lettrist International. Though his organization was, by all accounts, collapsing at the very time of its publication, Debord mentions the LI in only a handful of sentences in this six-chapter essay. Other than saying when it was founded, one of the only details that he includes is that “the quest for new methods of intervention in everyday life was pursued amidst sharp struggles among different tendencies.”⁸⁹ This detail seemingly supports Greil Marcus’s suggestion that organizational disorder was an outsized contributing factor to their failure. Each of the three aesthetic-political frameworks that he criticizes has a shared characteristic with the Lettrist International, and he seemingly addresses his qualms with his own organization allegorically through the others. Like existentialism, Lettrism was quite literally a “borrowed philosophy” from Isou, though “stolen” is probably more accurate. Like surrealism, the members of the Lettrist International believed they could traverse mediation by “radical[ly] deconditioning”

87. Guy Debord, “Report.”

88. Guy Debord, “Report.”

89. Guy Debord, “Report.”

themselves from the current organization of society.⁹⁰ And, like primitivism, the Lettrist International refused to behave according to rules of contemporary civilization. While they did not romanticize the past, they were just as critical of the present and refused to participate in it. Indeed, the Lettrist International fell into the same Zhdanovist trap of reacting to negation and repression with negation and repression.

Too proud to acknowledge his own complicity, Debord nonetheless seems to clarify to himself and others: “a negation of Zhdanovism objectively means the negation of the Zhdanovist negation of ‘liquidation.’”⁹¹ In negating liquidation, Zhdanov rushed to impose “19th-century cultural values” and repress anything that deviated from his vision.⁹² Negating Zhdanovist negation requires not only the destruction of these imposed bourgeois values but also the negation of repression itself—an ability to “exercise” freedom.⁹³ This conception of liberation was distinct from the Lettrist International’s, because it moves beyond pure negation, and more similar to Isou’s project of giving agency to the spectator. Contemporary resistance movements, including the LI, Debord admits, were quite successful at the former, yet they all struggled to create the conditions for the latter. The organizational inadequacies that Greil Marcus believes led to the Lettrist International’s collapse are thus the material manifestations of the group’s confused, Zhdanovist (pure negation) project. If the LI was the acknowledgment that “society was organized as appearance, and could be contested on the field of appearance,” then the SI “was a quest for a new language of action,” conceived out of an experiment to negate negation itself.⁹⁴

90. Marcus, “The Long Walk of the Situationist International,” 7.

91. Guy Debord, “Report.”

92. Guy Debord, “Report.”

93. Guy Debord, “Report.”

94. Marcus, “The Long Walk of the Situationist International,” 12.

Superseding Zhdanovism: cultural decay as political opportunity

Zhdanov's initial premise, that there was an ongoing "liquidation" of art, was readily observable throughout Western Europe but perhaps most obviously in the French tradition. In one of the earliest issues of *Internationale Situationniste*, the editorial team seems to reference Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," when they argue that cultural dissolution "first manifested at the starting point for the productive forces of modern society."⁹⁵ Benjamin's 1936 essay suggests that, by the turn of the century, productive forces had attained such a level of technical mastery that "permitted it to reproduce all transmitted works of art" with formal perfection.⁹⁶ This mechanical reproducibility, he continues, meant that there was nothing distinguishing the "artistic value of a painting versus photography."⁹⁷ In other words, "the semblance of [art's] autonomy disappeared forever."⁹⁸ There was almost nothing that formally distinguished a work of art from its reproduction, and the early situationists believed that this quality had become integral to the project of modernism.

If Benjamin explained art's lack of autonomy in order to defend photography as an equally (il)legitimate art, then many in the postwar avant-garde asked themselves: what is not a legitimate art? A little more than two decades after Benjamin wrote his essay, the early situationists declared that contemporary culture faced "the shipwreck of expression as an autonomous sphere and absolute goal; and by the slow emergence of other dimensions of activity."⁹⁹ Published in 1959, the third issue of *Internationale Situationniste* was also the first of each subsequent situationist journal marked with the label: "All texts published in *Internationale*

95. "Meaning of Decay in Art," in *Internationale Situationniste* #3 (December 1959), Situationist International Online, trans. John Shepley, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/decay.html>.

96. Benjamin, "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

97. Benjamin, "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

98. Benjamin, "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

99. "Meaning of Decay in Art," in *Internationale Situationniste* #3 (December 1959).

Situationniste may be freely reproduced, translated or adapted, even without indication of origin.”¹⁰⁰ Alongside them, like the French experimentalists of Benjamin’s history of photography who tried to bridge the gap between subject and artistic representation, there was an early-20th century movement of French “readymade” artists who attempted to bridge the gap between a mere found object (a subject) and its status as cultural capital (its spectacularized representation as art).

The contemporary avant-garde, according to the newly formed Situationist International, were tasked with inflating the concept of art by making “revolutionary claim[s] to other professions,” playing with the ability to confer cultural value to the commonplace. Soon afterward, though, these values would once again require negation or risk becoming yet another engrained, unconscious value that would have to be destroyed and replaced anew. In this regard, the situationists were inspired by the cultural critics Henri Lefebvre and Lucien Goldmann, who they thought made “important appeals to progressive truth at a moment when the ideology of the left is lost in a sense of confusion.”¹⁰¹ But they were disappointed that the revolutionary intellectuals were “absent or insufficient when two kinds of questions [came] up: the organization of a political force, and the discovery of cultural means of action.”¹⁰² The situationists were particularly disappointed because they similarly did not have answers to these questions, even though they were “essential and inseparable elements of the transitory action that would be needed.”¹⁰³

100. *Internationale Situationniste* #3, Situationist International Online, ed. G.-E. Debord, December 1959, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/is3.html>.

101. “Meaning of Decay in Art,” in *Internationale Situationniste* #3 (December 1959).

102. “Meaning of Decay in Art,” in *Internationale Situationniste* #3 (December 1959).

103. “Meaning of Decay in Art,” in *Internationale Situationniste* #3 (December 1959).

Lefebvre had only finished the first of three volumes of his magnum opus, *Critique of Everyday Life*, when the Situationist International was founded. Like many leftists, the situationists thought that Lefebvre had properly diagnosed the realm of everyday life as an undertheorized site of struggle. They broke with Lefebvre, however, on the normative obligations of modern artists. He proposed a “revolutionary-romantic” conception of art that the early situationists said was based “on the historical model of 1925, and, as for the effective level attained by this formula, at the lowest.”¹⁰⁴ A Zhdanovist tendency emerged from Lefebvre’s work when “he advises artists to come back to this style of expression—or to others still older—to express the profound feeling of life, and the contradictions of men ahead of their time.”¹⁰⁵

The SI’s editorial team also pointed out a contradiction in Lefebvre’s work: he correctly points out that “every great period of art has been a funeral rite in honor of a vanished moment” but fails to see how “this is also true on the individual scale, where every work is a funeral and memorial celebration of a vanished moment in one’s life.”¹⁰⁶ The situationists condemned it as counter-revolutionary, and they criticized Lefebvre in the very first issue of their journal, saying that he “renounces beforehand all experiments toward profound cultural change while remaining satisfied with a content.”¹⁰⁷ To them, the problem was not the style of expression but the alienation caused by expression itself. Instead of imposing one cultural value system, whether it is Zhdanov’s or Lefebvre’s, the situationists maintained that their project was “conceived as the opposite of works of art, which are attempts at absolute valorization and preservation of the

104. “Meaning of Decay in Art,” in *Internationale Situationniste* #3 (December 1959).

105. “Meaning of Decay in Art,” in *Internationale Situationniste* #3 (December 1959).

106. “Meaning of Decay in Art,” in *Internationale Situationniste* #3 (December 1959).

107. Guy Debord, “Theses on Cultural Revolution,” in *Internationale Situationniste* #1 (June 1958), Situationist International Online, trans. John Shepley, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theses.html>.

present moment.”¹⁰⁸ But this position presented its own problems: how could there be cultural revolution without a fixed stasis to organize around?

The SI’s organizational model had always been vague, partly because they never wanted to replicate the authoritarianism of Isou, the aimlessness of the Lettrist International, nor the repression of contemporary imposed Zhdanovism. The title of Debord’s 1957 essay, “Report,” describes their project as a “situationist tendency,” though the connotations of the French word *la tendance* are more similar to a temporary fashion trend or a fad.¹⁰⁹ They would go on to clarify that, while something could be characterized as situationist, “there is no such thing as situationism, which would mean a doctrine for interpreting existing conditions.”¹¹⁰ To this end, many of the greatest debates within the Situationist International surrounded what exactly they were, or at least how to actualize something without themselves becoming a fixed doctrine.

After the collapse of the Lettrist International into “bohemian solipsism,” many Lettrists joined the situationists with a firm “recognition the experiments of the *dérive*...had to be transformed into a general contestation of that society.”¹¹¹ And while the early situationists praised Lefebvre for identifying the problem, he provided no answers to the “question [that came] up: the organization of a political force, and the discovery of cultural means of action.”¹¹² Looking for answers elsewhere in 1959, Debord began to correspond with other situationists about a small but longstanding libertarian leftist organization that recently came under new management.

108. “Meaning of Decay in Art,” in *Internationale Situationniste* #3 (December 1959).

109. Untranslated, the piece is titled: “Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l’organisation et de l’action de la tendance situationniste international.”

110. “Definitions,” *Internationale Situationniste* #1 (June 1958), Situationist International Online, trans. Ken Knabb, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/definitions.html>.

111. Marcus, “The Long Walk of the Situationist International,” 7.

112. “Meaning of Decay in Art,” in *Internationale Situationniste* #3 (December 1959).

Claude Lefort, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and Early Situationist Politics

In 1959, the same year that *Internationale Situationniste* published their criticism of Lefebvre, Guy Debord wrote to his situationist colleague, Andre Franklin, to discuss his thoughts on some of their intellectual competitors. As he explains, *Arguments* “was never brilliant nor even very consequential,” *The 14th of July* was headed by a “grotesque” intellectual leader, but *Socialisme ou Barbarie* was making “progress in the last two issues of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, after the departure of C. Lefort and the enraged wing of anti-organizationals [*sic*].”¹¹³

Originally founded in 1946 by Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort as a faction within the Trotskyist Parti Communiste Internationaliste (PCI), *Socialisme ou Barbarie* gained early notoriety for its sophisticated criticism of the Soviet Union and the Stalinist Parti Communiste Français (PCF).¹¹⁴ Castoriadis and Lefort developed the concept of “bureaucratic capitalism,” a libertarian Marxist critique that decoupled the notion of class from ownership over the means of production. As *Socialisme ou Barbarie* suggested, property was merely the juridical manifestation of social hierarchies and the real struggle “is no longer between property owners and proletarians but between directors or ‘order givers’ and executants or ‘order takers’ [*dirigeants et exécutants*].”¹¹⁵

Perhaps due to their criticism of bureaucratic organization, there was a constant tension between Castoriadis and Lefort over what *Socialisme ou Barbarie* fundamentally was and how it was to operate. Lefort was, according to Debord’s letter, a member of the “enraged wing of anti-

113. Guy Debord, *Guy Debord to Andre Franklin*, Letter, 15 July 1959. From NOT BORED! <http://www.notbored.org/debord-15July1959.html>

114. Stephen Hastings-Knight, “L’Internationale Situationniste, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and the Crisis of the Marxist Imaginary,” *SubStance* 90, vol. 28, no. 3 (1999), 27.

115. “French Editors Preface.” In *A Socialisme ou Barbarie Anthology: Autonomy, Critique, and Revolution in the Age of Bureaucratic Capitalism*. NOT BORED! (La Bussière: Acratie, 2007), xii, <http://www.notbored.org/SouBA.pdf>.

organizational [sic].”¹¹⁶ And Lefort himself might have been sympathetic to this categorization, as he reflected in a 1975 interview that he was “not weighed down with the project of the construction of an organization and was reticent toward anything that might appear to be a new Manifesto or programmatic conception.”¹¹⁷ His 1952 essay, “The Proletarian Experience,” was written partially in response to Sartre, who had been a public supporter of the PCF. In the essay, Lefort articulates a critique of political representation that is reminiscent of the Lettrist International: authentic representation of the proletariat is impossible and legitimation of “the parties and institutions that claim to embody it” only alienates them further from political revolution.¹¹⁸ Unlike Sartre, who believed that economic and cultural fragmentation of the proletariat “could only obtain unity and consistency as a class through the synthetic, transcendental action of the Communist Party,” Lefort contended that this formulation was merely a euphemized form of alienation.¹¹⁹ The unity and consistency of the proletariat that Sartre found in an external body was precisely this economic and cultural fragmentation, their immanent “experience”: “the way in which the working class gives meaning to the objective conditions in which the development of capitalism places it.”¹²⁰ Needless to say, he was highly skeptical of all parties that claimed to be revolutionary, even those that were Trotskyist.

Though Lefort had always been the intellectual leader of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, by 1958, there was a growing majority of members who became resentful of him as a barrier to the creation of an explicitly partisan organization. Even his co-founder, Castoriadis, seemed to have

116. Debord, *Guy Debord to Andre Franklin*, Letter, 15 July 1959.

117. Antoine Chollet, “Claude Lefort: An Intruder in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*?” in *Journal of the CIPH 2*, vol. 96 (2019): 46.

118. Alexandre Feron, “Sartre vs. Lefort: The Meaning of Proletarian Experience,” in *Journal of the CIPH 2*, vol. 96 (2019): 71.

119. Feron, “Sartre vs. Lefort: The Meaning of Proletarian Experience,” 70.

120. Feron, “Sartre vs. Lefort: The Meaning of Proletarian Experience,” 71.

been pushing in this direction, as he granted membership in 1958 to militant ex-Bordigists along with Jean-Françoise Lyotard and Pierre Souyri, who were in favor of transforming the journal into something that more closely resembled a political party.¹²¹ That same year, Lefort—along with the intellectual restraint he brought to the group—resigned from the organization that he created, clearing the way for several major changes.

With the wave of new anti-Soviet Marxists in the late-1950s (given the Khrushchev speech and aforementioned successes of resistance) many were drawn to the “bureaucratic capitalism” thesis of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, as it provided a dual critique of Western bourgeois society and Eastern authoritarianism.¹²² Furthermore, with a renewed commitment to direct political praxis after Lefort’s resignation in 1958, they began publishing *Pouvoir Ouvrier*, a journal “designed to reach a working-class audience, and retained the traditional look of militant publications: cheap paper, typescript text reproduced on mimeograph or roneotype, primitive or hand drawn graphics, when any were used.”¹²³ It was during this period of rebranding that Debord officially joined *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and he came searching for answers that he thought Lefebvre failed to answer and Lefort cowardly abandoned.¹²⁴

Just a few months after writing to Andre Franklin and about a year after Lefort’s departure, Debord had officially joined *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. He was immediately drawn to the group’s more militant, distinctly proletarian publication, *Pouvoir Ouvrier*, which began publishing only a few months before he joined.¹²⁵ But his involvement in this group was not

121. Chollett, “Claude Lefort: An Intruder in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*?” 47-48.

122. Hastings-King, “Crisis of the Marxist Imaginary,” 27.

123. Hastings-King, 32-33.

124. Though the Situationist International revered Lefebvre for identifying the realm of everyday life as a site for further analysis, they did not seem to be as sympathetic to Lefort’s career, at least at this point in the late-1950s.

125. Hastings-Knight, 36.

limited to publishing, something that further distinguished him from the Lefort-styled revolutionary intellectual. In February 1961, Debord even served as a delegate on behalf of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* to survey the aftermath of the recent general strike in Belgium.¹²⁶ At the height of his involvement, only a few months into his membership, he co-authored a programmatic statement with Daniel Blanchard: “Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program.”¹²⁷ The statement is divided into two parts. The first, “Capitalism: A Society Without Culture,” is written primarily by Debord while the second, “Culture and Revolutionary Politics,” by Blanchard.¹²⁸ Stephen Hastings-King, historian of modern Europe, suggests that the discrepancy between these two sections “indicates the complementarity of the projects,” but it also exposes a central characteristic of the political realm that has always made radical revolutionaries weary—compromise. Nonetheless, Debord systematizes the isolated critiques that he made of individual thinkers—from Isou to Lefebvre—into a coherent and general critique of culture, culminating in a condition of possibility for Blanchard to describe a political program.

“Preliminaries” is probably the most direct expression of a situationists politics that exists within a single text for two reasons. First, the situationists actively worked against becoming encoded and fixed in the spectacle as just another dogmatic doctrine. Rather than creating ‘official’ situationist documents with explicit rules and planks which they would condemn as imposed Zhdanovism, Debord relishes in the “vastness of new possibilities.”¹²⁹ Blanchard veers

126. Hastings-Knight, 36.

127. Blanchard, a member of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* since 1957, was Debord’s friend since at least 1959. In this statement, like many of his independent publications, Blanchard uses the pseudonym Pierre Canjeurs.

128. Hastings-Knight, 35.

129. Pierre Canjeurs [Daniel Blanchard] and Guy Debord, “Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program,” July 1960, Situationist International Online, trans. Ken Knabb, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/program.html>.

into a slightly more centralized organizational trajectory, saying that a “historical utopianism” is necessary to imagine and experiment with “solutions to current problems without being preoccupied with whether or not the conditions for their realization are immediately present.”¹³⁰ Though Blanchard might be less ambiguous than Debord, the point is that neither are explicitly prescriptive: they both leave open the level of cultural content while providing a formal mechanism for revolution.

Second, the post-*Socialisme ou Barbarie* period was yet another inflection point for Debord and the Situationist International. Their short-term political success in the lead up to the events of May 1968 drove Debord to further compromise situationist theory for the expediency of revolution. Hastings-Knight notes that, in wake of leaving *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, “Debord began his period of ‘megalomaniac’ ambition to be the revolutionary vanguard,” a position he had explicitly rejected since breaking with Isou in 1952.¹³¹ When viewed from the frame of May 1968, historians often interpret this post-*Socialisme ou Barbarie* situationist vanguardism as an endemic feature of their political radicalization—making the step from libertarianism to vanguardism appears logical, smooth, and teleologically expected. This thesis takes the position that it was rather an aberration, or at least a deviation, from their anti-doctrinal doctrine. In 1972, when he dissolves the SI, Debord himself would acknowledge that while “the SI has always been anti-hierarchal,” it had perpetually failed in “*seeing and talking about* the partially inevitable and partially circumstantial obstacles that it encountered in this domain more thoroughly.”¹³² In the

130. Blanchard, “Culture and Revolutionary Politics,” from “Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program,” co-authored with Debord, July 1960.

131. Hastings-Knight, 50.

132. Guy Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti, “Theses on the Situationist International and its Time.” In *La Veritable Scission dans l'Internationale*. Translated by Christopher Winks and Lucy Forsythe. Situationist International Online (1972). <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/sistime.html>.

same essay, though, he attributes his massive following to this compromised practice, saying that “enthusiastic spectators of the SI have existed since 1960,” the year he joined *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and authored “Preliminaries.” Even in retirement, Debord seems to be trying to reconcile the compromising nature of popular political mobilization with theoretical purity. Like the historians that have the disadvantage of hindsight, Debord’s writing after May 1968 combines nostalgia with an anachronistic teleological narrative that ends with this singular event. Escaping from this frame, though, requires going back to July 1960, when situationist politics were not framed in relation to one moment but rather the “vastness of new possibilities.”

Marx, Benjamin, Debord and the unity of revolutionary programming

While he was always quick to denounce other cultural diagnosticians for their naivete or dogmatism, Debord never missed the opportunity to incorporate some of their ideas into his own work—more often than not without credit. The first three sentences of “Preliminaries” situate Debord’s revolutionary cultural theory firmly within the intellectual tradition of Lefebvre, Lefort, and Castoriadis. Lefort’s definition of the “proletarian experience,” for example, which is “the way in which the working class gives meaning to the objective conditions in which the development of capitalism places it,”¹³³ is transposed to a cultural context for Debord’s definition of “culture,” which he says is “the ensemble of means through which a society thinks of itself and shows itself to itself.”¹³⁴ Lefort’s idea that the proletariat “gives meaning to [their] objective conditions” is perhaps an even better descriptor than Debord’s “society thinks of itself and shows itself to itself,” because, as Debord goes on to say, it conveys a notion of alienation or a distance that exists between people and their experience. Debord adds that culture “is the

133. Feron, “Sartre vs. Lefort: The Meaning of Proletarian Experience,” 71.

134. Debord, “Capitalism: A Society Without Culture,” from “Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program,” co-authored with Blanchard, July 1960.

organization of everything over and beyond the immediate necessities of the society's reproduction," echoing Lefebvre's realm of everyday life.¹³⁵ Updating Lefebvre, however, Debord assumes the unique *Socialisme ou Barbarie* language of bureaucratic capitalism but expands it to incorporate some elements of the Lettrist critique of spectatorship, saying that the "division between directors and executants" parallels "the separation between 'understanding' and 'doing'" in the cultural realm.¹³⁶ The specialization and crystallization of these two groups, Debord argues, has been the natural byproduct of representational disappearance, but it has a distinct genealogy from the spectacle that he theorized before.

It is hard to know exactly when Debord is referring to when he writes that "the activity of the offices and laboratories is integrated into the overall functioning of capitalism."¹³⁷ It is clear that he means the integration is still ongoing, but it is probable that he is referring to World War II. The war effort in each country transformed every industry, especially science laboratories, into factories that produced weapons and goods for soldiers but also pulled their own domestic populations out of the Depression. The capitalist reorganization of the sciences during and after the war effort into distinct specializations, modelled after an efficient division of labor, rendered scientists unable to understand the relationship between the part and the whole, between their specialization and science writ large. Indeed, "science no longer comprehends itself."¹³⁸ Like Sartre and Lefort's observation of a fragmented proletarian class, Debord seems to be saying that this fragmentation is an active force that accompanies capitalism in all industries and that, like

135. Debord, "Capitalism: A Society Without Culture," from "Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program," co-authored with Blanchard, July 1960.

136. Debord, "Preliminaries," July 1960.

137. Debord, "Preliminaries."

138. Debord, "Preliminaries."

the bureaucratic capitalism thesis, it isn't predicated on the ownership of property but on the desire for transparent knowledge itself.

Specialization is motivated by a desire for specialized knowledge but, counterproductively, results in less and less understanding. In pursuit of transparency, specialization “has destroyed the old representations without being able to provide new ones.”¹³⁹ Nietzsche answered the question of what God's death meant for morality, and Debord attempts to answer the question of what representation's death means for culture. When the entirety of the world is a “unified totality,” it actually “becomes undecipherable” because the few specialists that exist only have “fragments of rationality” that they are “incapable of communicating, even to each other.”¹⁴⁰ And it is this void, this “general lack of culture at all levels of knowledge,” that clears the way for the spectacle to enter as an overarching and undergirding rationality onto itself.¹⁴¹ While it might manifest itself in tangible commodities and material conditions, the spectacle is primarily a formal layer that exists between and determines social relations. In “Preliminaries,” Debord compares it to the concept of consumption, which he says is the spectacularized (and therefore alienated) analogue of authentic desires—fulfillment of which constrained to marketed commodities. Instead of freedom and agency, the spectacle sublimates these desires into the freedom associated with a sleek automobile or the power of a telephone. As a result, the spectacle never “appear[s] to the public as a mere capitalistic delirium; it must involve the public by incorporating elements of representation that correspond—in fragments—to social rationality.”¹⁴² Political revolutionaries, though well-intentioned, miss this formal

139. Debord, “Capitalism: A Society Without Culture,” from “Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program,” co-authored with Blanchard, July 1960.

140. Debord, “Preliminaries,” July 1960.

141. Debord, “Preliminaries.”

142. Debord, “Preliminaries.”

element. Instead of competing on the level of representation and “understanding,” politics attack isolated institutions (the film industry, property owners, and other “doers”). Political revolution, in this sense, is a nominal progression insofar as it does nothing to challenge the imposed formal limitations on society—that rationality itself has become bounded by the market and that reality is constrained to an alienated realm of sublimated desires. Debord’s last paragraph, however, outlines a means to accomplish authentic revolution.

Art history, its archive, is regulated by the spectacle, conferring cultural value to one artifact or another. But, “as an alibi for the alienation of all other activities,” the spectacle “grants art a perpetual privileged concession: that of pure creative activity.”¹⁴³ Since art is the realm concerned with how something appears, “capitalistic delirium” could not have a highly visible presence or else the spectacle would become external to the social rationality that art exists within. The spectacle began where artistic production ended. And while the creation of art might be liberating, its reception is mediated and alienated by representation. The solution was simple: reception must become creation and art must overtake the political “through the abolition of all specialized directors.”¹⁴⁴ The situationists did not pivot from aesthetes to politics, they got rid of the distinction. When the political becomes art, revolutionary practice embodies authentic desires—namely, freedom—instead of commodities embodying an alienated desire (like status, or something that is only valuable through its relation with something else). Revolutionary art is thus intended to decondition spectators from the spectacle.

Blanchard’s section, “Culture and Revolutionary Politics,” is much shorter than Debord’s, about half as long. Given his longtime affiliation with *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, a

143. Debord, “Capitalism: A Society Without Culture,” from “Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program,” co-authored with Blanchard, July 1960.

144. Debord, “Preliminaries,” July 1960.

political organization that didn't usually concern itself with cultural criticism, there are fewer obvious references to his theoretical interlocutors, making interpretation of his writing all the more difficult. It is also unclear how much coordination there was between Debord and Blanchard in planning this statement or if there was any such coordination at all. For all of his discrepancies with Debord's section, he excelled in reconfiguring his co-author's criticism of capitalist specialization into the context of political economy:

THE REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT can be nothing less than the struggle of the proletariat for the actual domination and deliberate transformation of all aspects of social life—beginning with the management of production and work by the workers themselves, directly deciding everything. Such a change would immediately imply a radical transformation of the nature of work and the development of a new technology designed to ensure the workers' domination over the machines.

This radical transformation of the meaning of work will lead to a number of consequences, the main one of which is undoubtedly the shifting of the center of interest of life from passive leisure to the new type of productive activity. This does not mean that overnight all productive activities will become in themselves passionately interesting. But to work toward making them so, by a general and ongoing reconversion of the ends as well as the means of industrial work, will in any case be the minimum passion of a free society.

In such a society, all activities will tend to blend the life previously separated between leisure and work into a single but infinitely diversified flow. Production and consumption will merge and be superseded in the creative use of the goods of the society.¹⁴⁵

Yet even in this short excerpt, the many formal inconsistencies become glaringly apparent, especially when in stark contrast to Debord's purposefully worded section that immediately precedes it. In the statement that was supposed to present a "unitary revolutionary program" between the situationists and *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, proxies for art and politics, the discordance undermines both of their theses but particularly Debord's, whose entire point was that these formal elements are more determinative than is commonly believed.

145. Blanchard, "Culture and Revolutionary Politics," from "Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program," co-authored with Debord, July 1960.

From the beginning, Debord makes deliberate rhetorical choices in order to align himself with the thesis of bureaucratic capitalism and against the Marxist orthodoxy. He seems to consciously employ the terminology of Lefort and Castoriadis by changing common revolutionary Marxist clichés into original phraseology. Meanwhile, in the latter section, Blanchard makes a sharp formal departure by identifying “the struggle of the proletariat” as the key dynamic in society (as opposed to between “understanders” and “doers”) and by “beginning [his revolutionary program] with production and work by the workers themselves.”¹⁴⁶ This understanding of revolution places Blanchard firmly within Marxist dogma and, as we would expect Debord to argue, at a distinct disadvantage because it fails to address how that production is received or consumed within an alienating spectacle. Debord makes this expectation into a reality when he writes to Blanchard a year later. In that letter from June 1961, he bemoans “a certain theoretical antiquity” conserved by the less culturally-minded members of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and, though not explicitly, by his co-author in in “Preliminaries.”¹⁴⁷ But when the organization eventually bifurcates into Marxists (led by Vega) and non-Marxists (led by Castoriadis) in 1964, Debord will finally take sides on the issue, assuming the conservative Sartrean role of safeguarding the existing Marxist party doctrine.¹⁴⁸ This conservative reaction coincided with his megalomaniacal phase, and Debord’s own writing would come to more fully correspond with Blanchard’s—the former compromising his form for the latter’s content.

To the Old Left and the Marxist orthodoxy that they adhered to, the initial distinction amounted to little more than formal changes: substituting “proletariat” for “doers” seems like a

146. Blanchard, “Culture and Revolutionary Politics,” from “Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program,” co-authored with Debord, July 1960.

147. Guy Debord, *Guy Debord to Daniel Blanchard*, Letter, 13 June 1961. From NOT BORED! http://www.notbored.org/debord-13June1961.html#_edn3.

148. Hastings-Knight, 48.

minor concession and one that doesn't affect the organization beyond discursive practices. This naivete toward the power of form is exactly what Cabañas references when she suggests that the Left was unable to properly deal with the fact that Vietnam was "discursively organized by techniques of power," which frames how people respond to an image (even if that response is apathy).¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, Blanchard's form adhered to Marxism in another important regard: its teleological historical model. Debord sticks to positive statements, like when he states that "the spectacle is the dominant mode through which people relate to each other."¹⁵⁰ He even couches his normative statements into positive ones. The last line of his section, what is usually reserved for a call to action, concludes with: "revolutionary artists are those who call for intervention, and who have themselves intervened in the spectacle in order to disrupt and destroy it."¹⁵¹

Blanchard's concluding paragraph, contrastingly, is a pair of statements of what "must" happen followed by a prediction of the future: "revolutionary movement must thus itself become an experimental movement" and "it must develop and resolve as profoundly as possible the problems of a revolutionary micro-society."¹⁵² Under these conditions, "politics culminates in the moment of revolutionary action" and "one day" they will be successful.¹⁵³ For Blanchard, there is little ambiguity toward the future: these specific actions will be taken and then something eschatological will bring about liberation. Such a formulation seems to formally contradict Debord's own thinking on the matter, impinging upon the "pure creative activity" that he so covets and constraining the "vastness of new possibilities" to a single path forward.

149. Cabañas, *Off-Screen Cinema*, 48.

150. Debord, "Capitalism: A Society Without Culture," from "Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program," co-authored with Blanchard, July 1960.

151. Debord, "Preliminaries," July 1960.

152. Blanchard, "Culture and Revolutionary Politics," from "Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program," co-authored with Debord, July 1960.

153. Blanchard, "Preliminaries," July 1960.

Conclusion

In the original French, “*Preliminaire pour une définition de l’unité du programme révolutionnaire*,” it is clearer that Debord and Blanchard’s statement is not merely the addition of two distinct revolutionary programs. Rather than a “unitary revolutionary program,” a more literal translation might be “the unity of revolutionary programming.” In this translation, the focus of the statement is on the noun, “unity,” and not the other, “program,” which verges on the situationist disdain for any “doctrine for interpreting existing conditions.”¹⁵⁴ For all of their ideological solidarity, though, their formal discrepancies suggest that there is a broader methodological difference. At least superficially, Blanchard follows a historical model that more closely resembles Walter Benjamin’s project to reconcile historical materialism with cultural theory. There are important differences, certainly. But, as opposed to Debord’s ambiguity, Blanchard has a more familiar model of history.

Walter Benjamin argued that revolution is not predicated on a historical narrative of progress nor aligning with any particular teleology—it is predicated on the exact opposite, rupturing the current trajectory and causing “the continuum of history [to] explode.”¹⁵⁵ Breaking with the Old Left, Benjamin says that Marx was wrong to assume that “revolutions are the locomotives of world history.”¹⁵⁶ Instead, “revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency break.”¹⁵⁷ Blanchard, like Benjamin,

154. “Definitions,” *Internationale Situationniste* #1 (June 1958), Situationist International Online, trans. Ken Knabb, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/definitions.html>.

155. Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 395.

156. Walter Benjamin, “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History,’” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 402.

157. Benjamin, “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History,’” 402.

describes the “moment of revolutionary action...when the masses abruptly intervene to make history.”¹⁵⁸ This vocabulary that revolves around the instantaneity of revolution serves a similar purpose in both. Benjamin’s usage seems to be in reference to Marx’s warning in the “Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon” when he writes that “the social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future.”¹⁵⁹ Indeed, he feared that relying on the past would make it more difficult to “activate the emergency break” of history. Blanchard’s usage seems to be deferential to his co-author, who was hesitant of creating anything that lasted beyond the present moment.

To be clear, Benjamin and Debord agreed on much. As cultural critics with a Marxist flair, they were both among the twentieth century European intelligentsia that analyzed the contemporary disappearance (and profusion) of representation.¹⁶⁰ Their most successful publications directly deal with this phenomenon and its implications for culture and political economy. Both of them suggest that the disappearance of representation is paired with “the desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly,” approaching the subject of representation.¹⁶¹ Benjamin wrote in 1936 that modern technology afforded the masses this possibility: precisely “because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment,” we are now able to create “an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment.”¹⁶² In the prewar era when he was drafting his essays, the newest medium for representing was film.

158. Blanchard, “Culture and Revolutionary Politics,” from “Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program,” co-authored with Debord, July 1960.

159. Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon,” in Marxists Internet Archive, eds. Brian Baggins and Alex Blain, 1852, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>. This intertextual connection was made by Aaron Greenberg in their essay “Making Way for Tomorrow: Benjamin and Foucault on History and Freedom” (cited below).

160. Among them you could add Adorno, Lefort, Baudrillard, Barthes, Bataille, and many subsequent semiologists.

161. Benjamin, “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

162. Benjamin, “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

This change was accompanied by the rise of the passive spectator: “The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested.” But, as Debord learned from Isou, just because a photograph was not filtered through the artistic abilities of a painter does not mean that there is no mediating force, in fact the opposite.

Ultimately, though, Benjamin fears that repressing the disconnect between subject and representation (unconscious consumption) will pervade society until the masses are contented with mere “expression while preserving property.”¹⁶³ The aestheticization of politics, an advanced stage of fascism, confers aesthetic value to political decisions. Benjamin noticed this phenomenon in the Italian Futurists, who justified a colonial invasion of Ethiopia by proclaiming that “war is beautiful” and creating a nationalist “aesthetics of war” in their manifesto.¹⁶⁴ As a paradigm of governance, fascism assumes the characteristic of “*l’art pour l’art*” and reigns for the sake of mastery itself. But the primary value of art “in age of mechanical reproduction” is expression for expression’s sake, and Benjamin saw that fascist political action similarly capitalized on new technology to make this possible. The Nazis recognized the ability to transparently mediate between representation and subject, and they were able to exploit the ambiguity by fixing the referent (Aryan, *volk* German) and claiming that only they were the honest representation. The masses wanted themselves expressed and faithfully represented in politics, and Nazis embodied this expression in their “Führer cult.”¹⁶⁵ Fascist political action, then, is valued in its ability to reify the aesthetic value of the subject.

163. Benjamin, “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

164. Benjamin, “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

165. Benjamin, “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

In an early issue of *Internationale Situationniste*, the group seemed to concur with Benjamin's thesis of fascism when they suggested that "it is solely in the presence of fascism that the workers' movement encountered in practical terms the problem of the formal 'mode of appearance' of a political idea. It found itself poorly equipped to deal with it."¹⁶⁶ In the years since the War, though, Benjamin's "aestheticization of the political" thesis would need to be supplemented. To the situationists, even if Benjamin was correct that fascism culminates in political action being done for its aesthetic value (like the Italian Futurists), it seemed the governing paradigm of postwar Europe had changed to aesthetic action being done for political value. Unlike under fascism, Western Europe used the aesthetic domain to accomplish political tasks: like how the French state framed Vietnam to generate passivity in filmgoers and how authentic desires are sublimated into consumption. In his 1967 magnum opus, *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord identified two distinct forms of the spectacle: concentrated and diffuse. The former, exemplified by Nazi Germany and Stalinist Soviet Union, is the era to which Benjamin was responding. The postwar period in Western Europe ushered in the hegemony of the diffuse spectacle, an organization of society that doesn't directly impose one particular interpretation of a referent but instead governs by first denying authentic desires (liberation, understanding, etc.) and then placating in the form of consumption.¹⁶⁷

In societies characterized by the diffuse spectacle, this governing logic appears to be natural and unalienated, arising from the people themselves. While Benjamin suggests that

166. "Meaning of Decay in Art," in *Internationale Situationniste* #3 (December 1959), Situationist International Online, trans. John Shepley, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/decay.html>.

167. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Black & Red (1977), ed. Greg Adargo, *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1967, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>.

fascist transparent mediation is an imposed logic,¹⁶⁸ Debord makes clear that the diffuse spectacle is even less visible because the logic comes from within the individual as a concessionary pleasure. Often what people identify as unmediated, natural structures—some surrealists might say the unconscious, primitivists might look to pre-civilization societies, Zhdanovists might suggest some pre-capitalist era—are not imposed but are themselves constructed according to the logic of the diffuse spectacle. The situationist rejection of this logic anticipates poststructuralism, a French intellectual tradition that began in the late-1960s.

Poststructuralist ideas and thinkers are complex and have little in common other than a shared opposition to the notion that there are invariant structures endemic to people, society, and culture. Even the members of the Lettrist International believed that, in the absence of concentrated spectacle, people organized around structures for the sake of intelligibility: expression reduced to linguistics, chaos simplified into religion, human subjectivity into the laws of psychology and anthropology. The latter structures mediate our experience with the former phenomena. But it is the mediation that confers their meaning: expression governed by the rules of grammar and conventions of semantics, the disorder of life given theological significance, and unconscious behavior transformed into scientific universalisms. As many poststructuralists will go on to argue, it becomes indeterminate which one gives rise to the other: representation becomes reality. While the Lettrist International was committed to negating these structures and returning to authentic life, the Situationist International aimed their attention at the spectacle that undergirded them—not to create new structures but to create the conditions for their abolition. Their affiliation with ideologically diverse groups and early organizational ambiguity suggest

168. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin quotes Georges Duhamel, a French author and critic who was critical of film technology: “I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images.”

that the situationists were unsure how they would accomplish this task. In their critique of Lucien Goldmann and Henri Lefebvre, for example, they even admitted that their disappointment arose out of their own inadequacies.

In this moment of confusion between tradition and the avant-garde in its truest sense, Debord would back the situationists into an ideological corner after defending the orthodox Marxist sect of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. By assuming this position of final arbiter for questions of culture and politics, Debord became a spectacularized caricature of himself whereby others appeal to his persona and he doles out some of his cultural capital. Instead of breaking structures and allowing creative freedom, the situationists would institute a program of revolutionary vanguardism and begin policing who was allowed in the Parisian Left.¹⁶⁹ Not only did the Situationist International become the very structure that they criticized, an institution of specialized revolutionaries who are the gatekeepers of political value, they seemed to undergo a reverse-Chaplin Affair in the years following their departure from *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. As their celebrity status aggrandized, “the make-up of the [...] brilliant mime” grew thicker and thicker.¹⁷⁰ And rather than seeing Debord the man, historians primarily remember Debord as this larger-than-life concept.

In the *Journal of Political Thought*, Aaron Greenberg places Walter Benjamin in conversation with Michel Foucault and proposes that their “divergent political programs” actually share many of the same “emphases.”¹⁷¹ But they also share an intellectual history connected by the situationists. According to SI, the disappearance of representation cultivated a

169. Hastings-Knight, 48.

170. Serge Berna, Jean-Louis Brau, Guy-Ernest Debord, and Gil J. Wolman, “No More Flat Feet,” in *Internationale Lettriste* #1 (November 1952), Situationist International Online, trans. Sophie Rosenberg, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/flatfeet.html>.

171. Aaron Greenberg, “Making Way for Tomorrow: Benjamin and Foucault on History and Freedom,” *Journal of Political Thought*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 22.

particular logic that engrained certain structures and limited possibility for creative experimentation. In the first three years of the group's existence (1958-1961), the members were concerned with building a movement that did not rely on these structures nor would create new ones. They instead fought to create the conditions for the "vastness of new possibilities."¹⁷² And while their ideological reversion to orthodox Marxism in 1962 foreclosed many of these possibilities, a wave of poststructuralists would pick up where they left off. In particular, Foucault "inject[s] the present with the uncertainty, precarity, and potential political mobility" by reading history as "a collection of accidents which, through technologies of power and discourses of truth, impress themselves as necessary and attach themselves to subjects as natural."¹⁷³ Put into situationist terms, Foucault exposes the diffuse spectacle and reads history—not to find an authoritative counternarrative—but to "introduc[e] contingency where there was necessity, perspective where there was objectivity, arbitrariness where there was telos, and dissolution where there was immutability."¹⁷⁴ Although Foucault distanced himself from the situationists in his 1974 book, *Discipline and Punish*, his genealogical method nonetheless fulfills Debord's "vastness of new possibilities."¹⁷⁵ Unfortunately, most scholarship on the

172. Pierre Canjeurs [Daniel Blanchard] and Guy Debord, "Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program," July 1960, Situationist International Online, trans. Ken Knabb, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/program.html>.

173. Aaron Greenberg, "Making Way for Tomorrow: Benjamin and Foucault on History and Freedom," *Journal of Political Thought*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 31-33.

174. Greenberg, "Making Way for Tomorrow," 33.

175. A neo-situationist group, NOT BORED!, criticized Foucault's 1974 book in 2004: "The flaws of *Discipline and Punish*, which was published in France in 1974, derive from the fact that its author clearly sees Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, published in France in 1967, as competition, that is, as a work that must be discredited, rather than commented upon, supplemented or corrected. Given the nature of the French intellectual scene, perhaps this aspect of competition was inevitable. In any event, unlike Guy Debord, who always mentioned by name those he was criticizing or dismissing, Michel Foucault doesn't mention Debord by name in *Discipline and Punish*; instead, he attempts to appropriate and alter the meaning of what Debord called 'the spectacle.'"

situationists emphasizes their vanguard persona that developed in the late-1960s, and as a result, their firm position against specialization is often lost, along with their contemporary relevance.

Benjamin thought that, at some point, inevitable capitalist crises would engender a collective realization for humanity “to activate the emergency break.”¹⁷⁶ And while the Nazis were defeated after Benjamin was murdered by them in 1940, there hasn’t yet been an explosion in “the continuum of history.”¹⁷⁷ Eighty-five years after the publication of, “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin’s description of fascism looks less and less like ancient history. All around the globe, from a politics that culminated in neoliberal globalization toward the end of the last century, there arises a politics of “*l’art pour l’art*,” where authentic representation of an image is valued above all else. In the United States, for example, President Trump garnered support by appealing to an image that his supporters could rally behind. One study suggests that more than 60% of his supporters cited “his personality and approach to the job” as their primary reason for voting for him, as opposed to 20% who cite “his policies.”¹⁷⁸ While Debord thought it was necessary to update Benjamin’s thesis for the “diffuse spectacle” of postwar Western Europe, perhaps it is time to look back.

The contemporary political scene revolves around truth and how it is represented: alternative facts, fake news, misinformation—elections have become a referendum on reality itself. As the Right increasingly generates compelling political fictions that enhance the truth of

176. Walter Benjamin, “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History,’” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 402.

177. Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 395.

178. Phillip Bump, “By a 3-to-1 margin, Trump supporters embrace his personality over his policies,” *The Washington Post*, August 23, 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2018/08/23/by-a-3-to-1-margin-trump-supporters-embrace-his-personality-over-his-policies/>.

their narrative, the Left has reacted by backing into the corner of objectivity. American President Joe Biden suggested that truth itself has come under attack and it was each citizen's obligation "to defend the truth and defeat the lies."¹⁷⁹ And while this technocratic sentiment is useful for averting the worst consequences of climate change or a global pandemic, it is not very useful for inspiring a movement. By defending one interpretation of objectivity, the Left misses an important lesson: that all of history is discursively organized.

179. Deb Riechman, "'Defeat the lies': Biden speaks of duty to defend the truth," *Associated Press*, January 20, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-biden-inauguration-joe-biden-donald-trump-elections-43a799feb50af727b091081aaf2c80f7>.

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