EDWARD BALL

The Great Sideshow of the Situationist International

> Then appeared for the first time the disquieting figures of the "Situationist International." How many are there? Where do they come from? No one knows.
>
> —*Le Républicain Lorrain*, 28 June 1967

SIRE, I AM FROM THE OTHER COUNTRY

Throughout the fifteen years of their public activity, the Situationist International—the political-artistic cell that operated in Paris and elsewhere from 1957 to 1972—refused the identities pressed upon them by the discourses around art, politics, and philosophy. The Situationists understood what Hegel called "the cunning of history"—that process by which historical actors undertake a project whose consequences result in something completely different from their intentions. History snatches defeat from the jaws of victory. As an example of this reversal it is plain to see how the Dadaist attack on the institutions of "Art" was soon assimilated and naturalized by the art-critical establishment itself. One merely has to visit a museum where Dada artifacts are on display to find them represented in a strange ideological confinement—either as another testimony to the glory of artistic expression, or as a crucial moment in the development of the modernist canon (or both). The Situationists sensed that dominant institutions control the emergence of their own opposition as a matter of course, and so like the Dadaists, they adopted tactics meant to preempt their own success on the terrain of respectable culture.

The problem of their historical representation may be more onerous in view of the fact that so few critical writings have gathered around the Situationist International since the group disbanded in 1972. In the English language, there is very little commentary on the group in either the academic or the critical press—a fact which, for the situationists stands as evidence of their aberrant success. Certainly, few anglophones are at all familiar with the some fifteen years of situationist activity in France and, to a lesser degree, in other parts of Europe and the United States. Only scattered references to that activity appeared in American journalism of the late 1960s, especially around the time of May, 1968:

> Those who want to understand the ideas behind the student revolts in the Old World ought to pay serious attention not only to the writing of Adorno and of the three M's—Marx, Mao, and Marcuse—but above all to the literature of the situationists. . . . [*The New York Times*, 21 April 1968]

"Inside, in jampacked auditoriums, thousands applauded all-night debates that ranged over every conceivable topic, from the "anesthesia of influence," to the elimination of "bourgeois spectacles" and how to share their "revolution" with the mass of French workers. . . . There were Maoists, Trotskyists, ordinary communists, anarchists, and "situationists"—a tag for those without preconceived ideologies who judge each situation as it arises" (*Time*, 24 May 1968).[1] In these few sentences, one can see the situationists staring back at the puzzled gaze of American news journalism, which barely recognizes its subject.

In France, due to their leading role in the events of May 1968, the situationists have been promoted into popular memory and cant. At the end of the 1960s, situationist slogans covered the walls of Paris;[2] situationist political tactics had been popularized on the left, and the group itself was besieged by activists who wanted to sign on to its notoriety. Yet despite their strong profile, situationist writings have remained too extreme for much academic debate.[3] In the Situationist International, we are describing people who lived their history in large part outside of the legitimate press. The situationists drew the attention of the mass media, but aroused little curiosity among philosophers; they helped to shape the near revolution of 1968, but one finds them conspicuously absent from the historical narrative; they worked with activists and trade unions, but were passed over by political analysts. The history of the Situationist International is as yet unwritten.

THE SITUATIONISTS DO PARIS

The Situationist International (the "S.I.") constituted itself and began to publish a journal of the same name in 1957. This action came after several

1. Cited in Ken Knabb, ed. and trans., *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981—no copyright).

2. The situationists were irrepressible sloganeers who seemed to submerge an entire politics in each sentence. In one phrase, "Sous les pavés, la plage" [Under the cobble stones, the beach], one can see, all at once, the political idealism of the group, its realism about transforming a society as inflexible as the street itself, and a program for street action (cobble stones are typically used against the police by demonstrators).

3. There are some exceptions to this. For example, in the handful of academic or quasi-academic accounts written by ex-members of the Situationist International, two come to mind: Jean-Jacques Raspaud and Jean-Pierre Voyer's *L'Internationale Situationniste: protagonistes, chronologie, bibliographie (avec un index des noms insultés)*, (Paris: Champ Libre, 1971); and René Vienet's *Enragés et situationnistes dans le mouvement des occupations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).

years of art-making, casual research, and *agit-prop* interventions on the part of its founding members. In July 1957, a handful of European avant-garde groups convened at Cosio d'Arroscia in Italy. Present were delegates from *L'Internationale Lettriste* (the Lettrist International, a cell of artists), from the German and Scandinavian movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, and from the "London Psychogeographical Committee." These groups, which were by and large known only to their members, decided to amalgamate. They convened as *L'Internationale Situationniste.*

For the next decade and a half, the S.I. developed and practiced an aggressive critique of industrial culture of both the East (its state socialist variant) and the West (its capitalist variant). This critique pulsed into wide circulation during the dislocations in French social and economic life in the period March–June 1968. Then, situationist tactics and ideology animated the events in the universities which led to a general strike and nationwide occupation of factories and offices. Following that May, the S.I. was pushed forward to a position of romantic notoriety in the French left. The group had sought to avoid party leadership status in political life. Yet, now their ideas were "in everyone's heads," as they used to claim. The last congress of the situationists was convened in order to disband the group. In 1972, the S.I. was formally dissolved in Paris.

To approach the situationists, one cannot begin with the usual secondary source material. It does not (yet) exist. One must turn to their own self-published texts. The journal *L'Internationale Situationniste* was written and published collectively between 1958 and 1969.[4] Many of its articles appeared unsigned. This anonymity was partly collectivist in inspiration and partly an effort to produce an undifferentiated front of situationist activity. In its manifestoes, pamphlets, posters, and in the journal *L'Internationale Situationniste* itself, the S.I. copyrighted none of their writings, which were typically accompanied by an inscription encouraging the use of the text, "even without mentioning the source."

In its early years, the membership of the S.I. could gather in a small café. The cell was run, and decisions were made, by ballot. But as in most collectivities in a monadic or individualistic society (our own), the claim of equality disguised a de facto hierarchy, at the top of which was Guy Debord. Debord was to the S.I. what André Breton was to the early surrealists: its prime mover, its chief polemicist, the commissar or head of the cadre. Debord is best known today for his 1967 *Society of the Spectacle,* a bulletin of numbered theses that has received the widest circulation of any situationist text in the English-speaking world.

Situationist ideology—and we may use this word, since the writings

4. The journal *L'Internationale situationniste,* published irregularly in Paris between 1957 and 1969, and largely unavailable in American libraries, has been reissued in one volume, *Internationale Situationniste: 1958–69* (Paris: Champ Libre, first published by Van Gennep, Amsterdam, 1970).

supply both a diagnosis of modern social conditions and a program for their transformation—came together at the intersection of a range of discourses on art, politics, and social formations. From the Dadaist vanguard of the teens and twenties they took an urge to destroy art; from the surrealists, an aim to reconstitute it at the level of everyday life. From modernism in architecture they developed a utopian urbanism, in part derived from the Bauhaus, but superseding it in an effort to widen its formalist and populist tendencies into a general political study of urban space. Out of these positions, the S.I. developed a kind of phenomenology of urban life. One of the alternatives to the alienations of the city, they reasoned, should be the conscious construction of "situations," or theatrical environments inside the urban environment—acts of cultural sabotage or diversions that might strengthen the growing bohemian subculture. "Psychogeography" was the word introduced to foreground the whole area of mental states and spatial ambiences produced by the material arrangements of the urban scene. Guy Debord suggested that a psychogeography

> could set up for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotion and behavior of individuals. . . . [F]rom any standpoint other than that of police control, Haussman's Paris is a city built by idiots, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.[5]

Psychogeography provided the theoretical sanction for great delinquent play. In 1950, an event occurred in Paris that would become a legend in the ranks of the S.I. On Easter Sunday, miscreants, two of whom would later join a handful of the protosituationist Lettrist International, entered the sacristy of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris just before high mass. There they detained the priest and donned clerical vestments. One of the group proceeded to the pulpit and, before a vast congregation on this holiest day of the Christian calendar, began to preach on Nietzsche and the death of God. After a few minutes, the gathering in the nave sensed foul play. The congregation chased the bunch of saboteurs through the cathedral and out into the streets.

In their daily lives, the situationists refined bohemian solipsism and negation into an idealist stance: they were *déclassés* intellectuals and artists, outside of the academic circuit, out of the reach of the popular press, and fiercely marginal, ". . . in the catacombs of visible culture."[6] A kind of separatist morale animates situationist writings, as if the cell is speaking from exile in its own culture. Their solidarity depended on a rigid control of membership, which gave rise to a cadre mentality common to twentieth-century avant-garde movements. Expulsion of mem-

5. This comes from a text which antedates the start-up of the S.I. Guy Debord, "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography," *Les Lèvres nues* no. 6 (September, 1955).

6. Ken Knabb, op. cit., 60.

bers was ordinary—business as usual—and helped the Situationist International to represent itself as an urban *bande à part* within the general social hegemony. This last tactic (the exclusion of members who had drifted from situationist ideology) was inherited from the surrealists as well as being a common device in leftist party politics. One can see that the situationists reached in every direction to shape an identity: toward the Bauhaus, Dada, phenomenology, and, above all in the 1960s, as we will see in a moment, toward Marxism.

It is apparent today that the story of the Situationist International is also the story of a long and wide transformation that has been making itself visible in industrialized societies since the mid 1950s. Some thirty years ago situationists announced a critique that has recently emerged as a definition of our so-called "postmodern" culture. This is not to say that the situationists were "the first postmoderns." Such a group would only be rhetorically identified by a historicism that dotes on originality. Yet the current critique adopted among political theorists, philosophers, and cultural and art historians as one or another theory of postmodernism was fully articulated in theory and practice by the S.I. long before our own allegedly postmodern times. What's more, the situationist program of cultural infidelity and sabotage has, over a relatively brief period of time, been massively incorporated into styles of discursive production (art, literature, cinema) and even, in wider areas of exchange, into methods of product development and marketing strategies in the consumer economy. It sounds like a familiar story: what was once subversive now turns a profit. Yet there is more. The situationists, as we will see, did not themselves become marketable; rather, they taught an ensuing generation how to recycle the detritus of official learning; how to reinscribe texts, figures, and artifacts so as to empower them with new meanings; and, despite their precautions, how to make new products out of the leftovers of the commodity economy.

THE GREAT SHOW OF REIFICATION

To understand these strange reversals and their relationship to the emergence of the new industries of postmodernism, we must first look at the components of situationist politics. The greatest momentum for the mature situationist critique came from Marxism. Throughout its history, the Situationist International operated from the understanding that capitalism has established for itself a virtually totalized social field, one in which all areas of life are articulated for the survival of the given means and relations of production. This is in line with the updating or revision of the Marxist problematic generally undertaken by the Frankfurt School and many other critics since the 1930s. It is a defensive position that first arose out of the failure of the Marxist ideology to detonate the revolution in the West, a Marxism that grew up when the European left stared into

the face of fascism and was forced to explain it. It is, however, not a fatalistic Marxism, but one which sees social life in a state of (putative, reversible) occupation or domination by capitalism. For the S.I., this domination has been combatted historically by insufficient and bureaucratic forms of socialist opposition, and must now be met everywhere by new forms of rebellion, new ideologies, new criticism.

The Marxism of the Situationist International developed around an idiom that has gone under the name of the critique of *reification*. The notion of reification comes strongly into view with Hegel, whose *verdinglichung* [turning into a concrete thing or object] describes the manifestation of the Idea [*Geist*] as it is realized in material forms and in social life. Marx put this concept to practical work by inverting it. For Marx, *versachlichung* [thingification: turning into an abstract thing or matter] describes the process by which the concrete products of history (social forms, commodities) are abstracted and frozen in an ideational state, where they acquire the aura of "nature" or permanence. For example, the notion of "freedom," the ideological defense for unregulated commerce which the bourgeoisie used as a weapon against the ancien régime, has since been hypostasized and raised to the status of a universal ideal.

Since Marx's day, materialist criticism has widened its discussion of reification. By reification, critical theory has tried to designate a vast operation carried out in all capitalist economies, and on the basis of this analysis has made extended claims about seemingly disconnected social facts. For a certain brand of Marxism, *versachlichung* [thingification] has meant the strategic division of lived experience into a set of neutral abstractions, as an effort undertaken so as to remove impediments to commerce and profit taking. As described by Fredric Jameson, the process of reification is:

> . . . the analytical dismantling of the various traditional or "natural" [*naturwuchsige*] unities (social groups, institutions, human relationships, forms of authority, activities of a cultural and ideological as well as of a productive nature) into their component parts with a view toward their "taylorization," that is, their reorganization into more efficient systems which function according to an instrumental, or binary, means/ends logic.[7]

This version of reification identifies a massive process of post-Enlightenment times, as wide as the entire social formation, with which capitalism has sought to consolidate its position by displacing ways of life impertinent to the production and exchange of goods and services. Elsewhere, the sociologist Max Weber named a coequal phenomenon in his discussion of the dynamic of *rationalization*. Weber theorized that a systematic

7. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 227.

quantification of human experience was being carried out in the terms of some newly emergent social logic. A plain example of rationalization would be the enterprise of demographics, the study of populations by means of income statistics, ethnic and gender profiles, etc. The term has elsewhere been aired in the popular critique of "dehumanization." For Weber, rationalization would in part mean the reorganization of former means of livelihood according to the needs of capitalist commerce. Cottage industry, or domestic production, then, was easily dismantled (but not eradicated) by capitalism, which has instead rearticulated it into a new social value or instrument ("folk art," crafts, etc.), with its own limited sphere of operation alongside other spheres. Leisure, labor, sport, religion, the intellect—these rough market-capitalist divisions eventually give way to the razorsharp specializations of our time, where each activity is cut off from the one next to it, while the broader movement of their relations in the totality cannot be seen from any one site in the social field.

In one definition, then, reification (to return to the Marxist vocabulary), is the division of human experience gone haywire. Social life is shattered into an ensemble of hermetic points for the purpose of organizing a higher unity, that is, the analytic arrangement of experience that capitalism requires for its smoothest operation. As a consequence of this enterprise, reification redefines earlier social forms and ways of life so that they appear to us in a diminished state, as a kind of image or frozen tableau. This remarkable feature of reification, its cannibalization of history, is paramount to understanding the work of the Situationist International.

The situationists built their critique on the theory of reification, a concept underestimated by proponents of a more traditional historical materialism. We have tried to describe this transformation as the fracturing and rearticulation (the 'thingification') of the social field for the historical purpose of enabling the hegemony of the capitalist mode of production—a process which, it must be said, is never completed. To strengthen their analysis and popularize its rhetoric, the situationists reached into the body of consumer culture to explore two symptoms of its disease: alienation and commodification.

In France during the 1950s and 1960s, the notion of alienation was mainly employed in its postwar career as the preferred term of existentialist philosophy. In fact, the journal *L'Internationale Situationniste* is rife with the cant of Marxist existentialism that was reigning at the time, with many articles given over to fierce diatribes against the new forms of alienation in social life. For the S.I., the main feature and symptom of contemporary alienation is the glorious apotheosis of the commodity form. In twentieth-century Marxist critique, reification has walked in lockstep with the concept of commodification. The two notions are integrated by a means/ends logic, the one (reification) providing a basis or

precedent for the other (commodification: the translation of human experience into product form). The commodity is found in the center of the situationist critique under the disguise of a new name: the "spectacle." The first thesis of Debord's *Society of the Spectacle,* paraphrases the first sentence in Marx's chapter on "Commodities and Money" (*Capital,* volume 1), substituting for Marx's word "commodity" the revised notion of "spectacle":

> The entire life of societies in which modern conditions of production reign announces itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles.* Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.[8]

Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation. The older unities of past cultures and of lived experience appear to us today as a kind of phantasm or image. The commodity used to be a material thing; now it is a spectacular event. The *spectacle* is the commodity that has left its material body on earth and risen to a new ethereal presence. One does not buy objects; one buys images connected to them. One does not buy the utility of goods; one buys the evanescent experience of ownership. Everywhere, one buys the spectacle.

In this profile of the capitalist economy there is a sense of modern debasement that tends to mark all commentary on reification. This debasement is by and large a semiotic event. Today the widening field of commodification is commonly spoken of as the spread of so-called "consumer culture" or "media culture" since the Second World War. Yet these terms fall short of describing the phenomenon they purport to name. Debord renders this late evolution or refinement of capitalism in a memorable formula:

> The first phases of the domination of the economy over social life had brought into the definition of all human realization an obvious degradation of *being* into *having.* The present phase of total occupation of social life by the accumulated results of the economy leads to a generalized sliding of *having* into *appearing,* from which all actual "having" must draw its immediate prestige and its ultimate function.[9]

The image, severed from all reference, is the most recent (final?) form of reification, where the commodity becomes a kind of cinematic spectacle that presses back on the hard facts of simple possession. In this world, human experience is a (marketable) copy for which the original has been lost or never even existed. For Marx, writing in the 1860s, the commodity form had already begun to recast the very relations between people and things, subjects and objects. In *Capital,* volume 1, Marx writes: "The commodity is a mysterious thing. . . . There it is a definite social relation

8. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle,* trans. anon. (Detroit: Black and Red, 1970—no copyright), thesis no. 1.

9. Debord, ibid., thesis no. 17.

between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things."[10] To this analysis the situationists would add the caveat that today's commodities bear resemblance to a language of images. "[The spectacle is] capital accumulated to such a degree that it becomes an image."[11] The material fact of a product is superseded by its ability to signify.

Jean Baudrillard, writing at the same time as Debord, discovered a similar continent in his book *Le Système des objets: la consommation des signes* (1968). For Baudrillard, commodification is at a flood mark when products begin to articulate all forms of social desire: "The system of [historical, social] needs now become less coherent than the system of objects itself . . ."[12] In Baudrillard's explanation the commodity/spectacle is the antihero in the drama of reification: even as older forms of culture are being dismantled, a new unity, the unity of the object world, rises up to displace them and take its leading historical role.

In an orthodox Marxism, the locale of power and the site of its challenge are focused in the means of production. Revisionist Marxism since 1917 has relocated its emphasis out and away from the production economy and toward a zone where the economic contradictions are represented and, in these accounts, actually come into conflict. The labels which variously describe this arena are "culture," "leisure," and the larger system of consumption and exchange. An early discussion of the question arose in German sociology at the turn of the twentieth century. *Das Alltagsleben*—everyday life—was the term applied to designate the myriad of pastimes and nonproductive activities that fill the days and nights of women and men when they are not, strictly speaking, at work selling their labor power. Another discussion of everyday life comes from the philosopher Henri Lefebvre, who first identified *la vie quotidienne* as an area for critique in *Introduction à la critique de la vie quotidienne* (1947). The very date of Lefebvre's book radiates with the aura of peacetime desire in postwar Europe for the rededication of economic energies away from the war economy and toward leisure and consumption. *La Vie quotidienne* of 1947 appears to us now as the dim prehistory of our "society of consumption," to use one of Baudrillard's phrases. In another academic tradition, *la vie quotidienne* may be familiar to English readers as the target of critique within the body of "Cultural Studies" that has grown up in Britain since the 1950s. Cultural Studies first got underway as the effort to understand the immersion of "working class culture" in the flood of postwar commodification. What was lost, the question went, in the triumph of the new consumerism?

10. Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: International Publishers, 1967), vol. 1, 72.

11. Debord, op. cit., thesis no. 34.

12. Jean Baudrillard, *Le Système des objets: la consommation des signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 222.

Among all of these treatments of the concept—German sociology, cultural studies, *la vie quotidienne*—it is Lefebvre's portrayal that frames things most handily by defining everyday life as that social experience which is left after all specialized activities (paradigmatically: labor) have been removed. Depending on one's theoretical position, these leftovers could include a great deal, or they could merely mean the unformulated social libido in a state prior to its articulation (what, in social life, is "unspecialized"?). Whatever the case, everyday life for many generations was (continues to be) the blind spot of Marxist analysis. It was rumored that nothing of importance occurs there, or anywhere in fact away from the furnaces of production.

The goal for Henri Lefebvre is to conceive everyday life in such a way as to retrieve it from its modern state of colonization by the commodity form and other modes of reification. A critique of the Everyday can be generated only by a kind of alienation effect, insofar as it is put into contact with its own radical *other*, such as an eradicated past (e.g. precapitalist or so-called "folk" culture), or an imagined future (certain utopian projections, which can be glimpsed in Lefebvre's *Le droit à la ville*). In this way, the Everyday becomes a term with a double meaning. It is at one and the same time a word of opprobrium (currently, everyday life is bad), and a naming of the place where alternative social forms might be organized: "[After the war,] alienation assumed a new and deeper significance; it deprived everyday life of its power, disregarding its productive and creative potentialities, completely devaluing it and smothering it under the spurious glamour of ideologies."[13] Unfortunately, this kind of Marxism shows signs of a prisoner's mentality, a feeling of impossible confinement which is rather common in the general theory of reification. But one would hope that critics only write about degraded realities as a polemic to empower some attempt to transform social life. Here, the reconstruction of everyday life can be seen as a potentially revolutionary project. Take Lefebvre's reading of the Paris Commune. The 1871 Commune can be viewed as a vast act of a politics from below, so to speak, which for a short time rescued quotidian experience from the grip of alienation. In the Commune one can recognize a kind of festival (Lefebvre's word) in which the reigning forms of experience (the lived relation to state power and to the urban milieu) were suddenly turned back in an explosion of disalienation and popular sovereignty. The notion of a festival or revolt returns to us today in our selective memory of the counterculture or, to use a better word, the subcultures of the 1960s. In these environs, the Situationist International was immensely important in France. For the situationists, rebellion will be a festival or it will be nothing at all.

13. Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 33.

DETOURNEMENT AND THE POSTMODERN

We've taken a long detour through these debates only in order to return to the Situationist International, which realized and practiced a critique of reification that previously had lived only at the level of discourse.

It is no accident that the key figures in the S.I. during the 1950s passed under the influence of Henri Lefebvre, who briefly worked with the group and whose texts fueled the situationist writings on urban and industrial life. Situationist ideology shared with Lefebvre and others the view that consumer capitalism is a bedeviled world and an alienated spectacle, but a world in which the possibility for an alternative social life has not yet been foreclosed. The situationists knew how much capitalism had changed since Marx's time: "Not that it has become more tolerable. Revolution has to be reinvented, that's all."[14]

In the 1950s and 1960s, the S.I. developed the first explosive aesthetic politics since the surrealist experiments of the twenties. It was an "aesthetic" strategy in the sense that its opposition was raised on the terrain proposed by consumer capitalism itself, the terrain of the commodity and of reified daily experience. A pessimistic critique would abandon history to the frozen dialectic of consumerism, which is believed to arrest politics in a spectacular tableau of material abundance. But the S.I. celebrated the prospect of sustained opposition in all its forms. If a revolution of production is no longer in reach, one can begin with a revolution of consumption. The premise: politics is in part the problem of the use or reading of objects. The program: the reign of the spectacular commodity may be combatted by the intentional misrecognition of exchange values.

Beginning with this article of faith, the S.I. attempted to tease out of social life its hidden aberrations and moments of resistance. They developed the technique of the *dérive,* the day- or week-long "drift" through everyday life, a kind of roving research along the margins of dominant culture. For the situationists, *dérivisme* is an extension of the bohemian lifestyle into criticism, where the *dérive* is intended to turn up symptoms of the breakdown of reification. The *dériviste* would be a twentieth-century version of Baudelaire's *flâneur,* who has left the boulevards and taken a garret apartment on the Left Bank, and whose promenades now range all over Paris. The *dérive,* an aimless drift through the urban landscape, offers evidence that capitalism occasionally stammers in its own monologue on the proper means of living. And evidence was uncovered. This collective article dated 1962 celebrates the spreading forms of guerrilla tactics in the domain of politics and art:

14. Anon., "Instructions for Taking Up Arms," *Internationale Situationniste* no. 6 (August 1961), in Knabb, op cit., 63.

> On 4 August in France, striking miners at Merlebach attacked twenty-one cars parked in front of the management buildings. . . . Who can fail to see in this—over and beyond the innumerable reasons that always justify aggression on the part of the exploited—a gesture of self-defense against the central object of consumer alienation? . . . But it isn't only industrial workers who are fighting against brutalization. The Berlin actor Wolfgang Neuss perpetrated a most suggestive act of sabotage in January by placing a notice in the paper *Der Abend* giving away the identity of the killer in a television detective serial that had been keeping the masses in suspense for weeks.[15]

For the situationists, such episodes as these were not quixotic disturbances, but potentially revolutionary acts.

Situationist practice advocates a kind of guerilla warfare that unites forms of art with collective forms of provocation: ". . . introducing the aggressivity of the delinquents onto the plane of ideas."[16] The byword for these tactics is *détournement*. The most persuasive evidence that everyday life has been homogenized is the fact that the slightest deviation sometimes reverberates far beyond its space of emergence. Clearly, any offense against the commodity form does have potentially "global implications." This state of affairs provides a warrant for the practice of *détournement*. The French *détournement* is sometimes translated as "diversion," but this rendering omits the word's connotations (in the original language) of illicit appropriation and piracy. In English, *détournement* should evoke a chain of reference that includes the metonymies of detouring, deflection, and the sudden reversal of a previous articulation or purpose.

Situationist detournement began as a theory of sabotage at the level of so-called "high" culture. Literature was its first target. In a 1957 experiment, artist Asger Jorn and Guy Debord produced a book, *Mémoires*, that consisted entirely of pirated elements. On its pages, the print ran in all directions, and the relations among the various quoted fragments were left unexplained (sentences broken off, texts superimposed, etc.). As a final gesture they bound the book with a sandpaper jacket, so that when it was shelved, it damaged other books.

In this and other projects one notices the hand of early surrealism tutoring the situationists. Take this passage, from "Methods of Detournement," a 1956 article by Guy Debord and Gil Wolman:

> Any elements, no matter where they are taken from, can serve in making new combinations. The discoveries of modern poetry regarding the analogical structure of images demonstrate that when two objects are

15. Anon., "The Bad Days Will End," *Internationale Situationiste* no. 7 (April 1962), in Knabb, op cit., 83–84.

16. "The Bad Days Will End," 87.

> brought together, no matter how far apart their original contexts may be, a relationship is always formed. . . . Anything can be used.[17]

But the surrealist program remained an aesthete's project first and a political act only secondarily, while detournement arises out of the effort to confront systems of power with new forms of opposition, in the belief that the older forms of resistance—organized labor, party structures—have themselves become part of an expanded hegemony.

The *détourniste* begins by declaring that "culture" (in the old sense of high culture and text-making) is not an autonomous sphere of activity, separate from other kinds of commerce. In the spectacular society everything is "cultural," which is to say a potential text, an exchange value, and a commodity all at the same time. Jean Baudrillard has described these conditions as the result of a shift in capitalism from limited commodity production into a kind of hyperproduction or excessive exchange. Hyperproduction—arguably the state in which we now find ourselves—collapses the forms of the linguistic sign and the commodity onto one another for the apotheosis of unlimited commerce:

> This mutation concerns the passage from the form-commodity to the form-sign, from the abstraction of the exchange of material products under the law of general equivalence to the operationalization of all exchange value under the law of the code . . . *the political economy of the sign.*[18]

For Baudrillard, the capitalist dream of social life as a vast (semiotic) pool of exchangeable artifacts has already been realized. This same analysis rises up in recent debates surrounding the concept of the Postmodern, which, if we accept that such a social formation exists, depends upon the positioning of a break in the history of industrialism, generally set in the period 1950–60. This break marks an intense heating-up of production and consumption and the subsequent removal of a set of older prohibitions to exchange that stood in the path of the great postwar swelling in commodification. The trademark of the postmodern is the miscegenation of previously opposed levels of culture, which now become functionally equivalent: commodities/signs, high art/mass culture, news/entertainment, etc. Evidence of the postmodern is everywhere that accelerated commerce can be found. One example would be the 1960s phenomenon of Pop Art, which drew momentum from the new confusion between mass-produced items and the sacred art object with its singular aura. And then there is the (postmodern) "discipline" of semiotics: an

17. Guy Debord, Gil J. Wolman, "Methods of Détournement," in Knabb, op. cit., 9; first published in *Les Lèvres nues* no. 8 (May 1956).

18. Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975), 121.

academic field that studies "everything that can be taken as a sign,"[19] and includes Roland Barthes's readings of fashion, food, cars, etc. as signifying systems.[20] A metadiscourse such as this has only been made possible by a new variation in the economy, a stepping up of reification that allows the process of abstraction to go forward over all obstacles.

If the situationists did not have a theory of the postmodern, it was because they practiced it. The situationist program starts up when one confuses two levels of activity: detournement makes *politics* (level one) out of *plagiarism* and *misinterpretation* (level two). The *détourniste* understands that every consumable object is imbedded in strict ensembles of interpretation and value. An automobile may be driven or it may represent its owner's class alignments (it is a commodity and a sign), but it may not be put to other uses (lived in, or destroyed before a certain amount of decay, etc.). (Fig. 1.) One kind of detournement, then, becomes the hijacking of commodities (that carry with them a prescribed reading or utility) into heavily coded, unfamiliar contexts. In a word, detournement is the reterritorialization of the object. With verbal texts, the *détourniste* gets underway by taking an overdetermined text (a cartoon, a bestseller) and subjecting it to a systematic misreading. This reinscription of texts was a favorite situationist pastime, and the S.I. may have originated (if that word can be applied here) the technique of recaptioning photographs and comics that was popularized in the pasteboard politics of the 1960s.

It would be possible, though not desirable, to understand detournement as a kind of reading procedure. In this sense, the text is any object whose use has been prescribed for it (it carries a reading that is foreclosed). Detournement would be the intentional disarticulation of the text and its rearticulation elsewhere in a new set of reading conditions. Irony would be a main feature of this practice, insofar as the text is submitted to a double reading, first in its sanctioned context (the prescribed use of the text) and next to a pirate reading that contradicts the first. Finally, this overall business would have to be distinguished from the related practice of (academic) deconstruction, which shatters the text as an intellectual exercise and offers the alternative pleasure of dispersing meaning through a gridwork of adjacent discourses.

Detournement, then, is the tactic of recycling objects for specific disjunctive effects—a method that can be repeated, and easily taught. At this point we should remind ourselves that the recycling of the object has been a standard operation, normalized in the art world since the first experiments of the twentieth-century avant-garde, from Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades on up throughout the career of Andy Warhol. The

19. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 7.

20. Cf. especially the middle section of Roland Barthes's *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

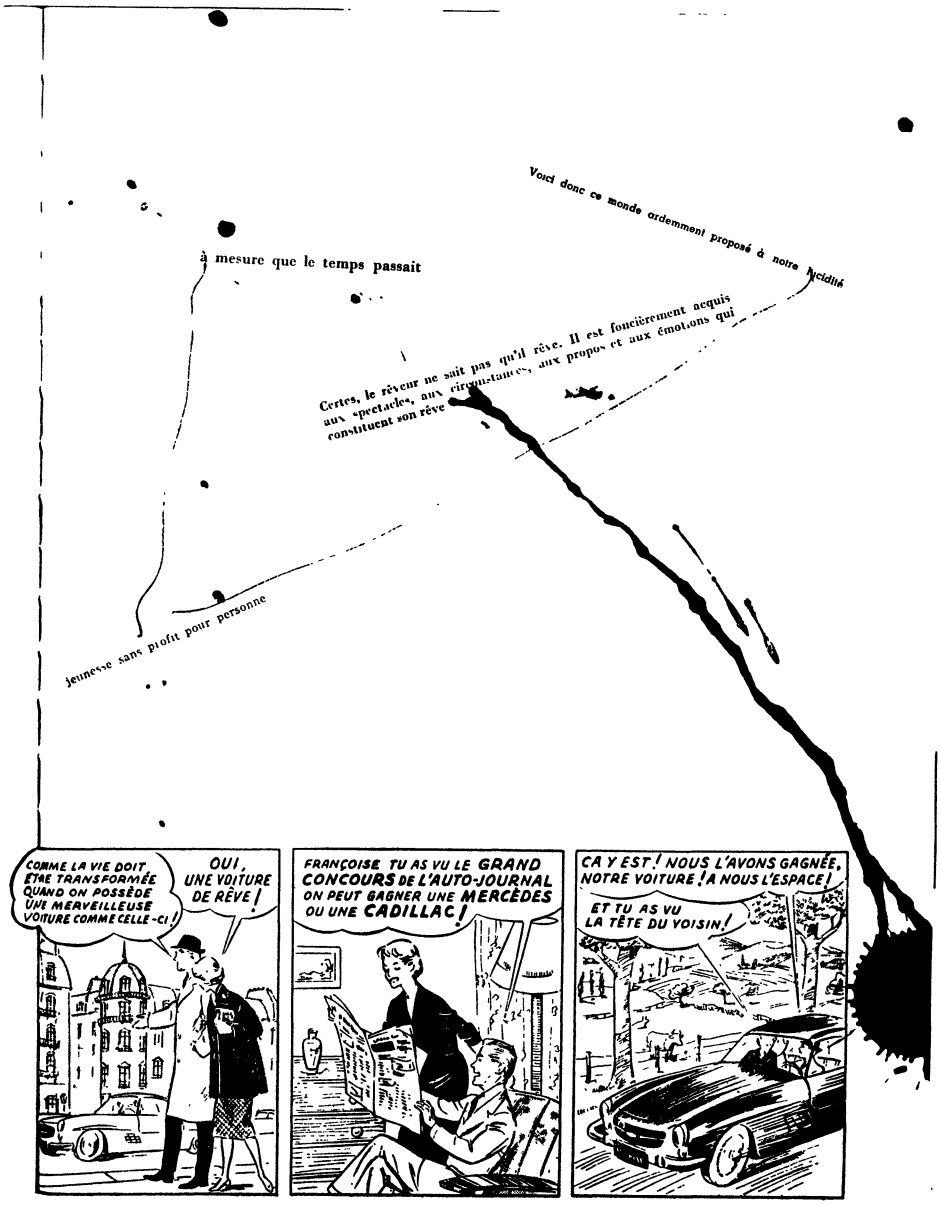

Figure 1. Mémoires: structures portantes d'Asger Jorn. Paris: Internationale situationniste. Distribution in the United States: Wittenborn, N.Y., 1969. No copyright. "Cet ouvrage est entièrement composé d'éléments préfabriqués."

success of the *pasticheur* in art history would seem to displace the later claims of the *détourniste.* But detournement, situationist theory claims, is not the same as pastiche or collage, since it adds two caveats for the (proper) misuse of the object, neither of which is observed by pastiche aesthetics. These are: 1) the proliferation of cultural piracy on a mass scale, and 2) this piracy as a collective and anonymous activity.

THE SOCIETY OF THE SITUATIONIST

What is to be said for this behavior? Has it arisen elsewhere, outside of the local scene of Paris, 1960–70? Yes, of course, and massively. Take the case of capitalism's "untouchables," its subcultures. In *Subculture: the Meaning of Style,* Dick Hebdige uses Lévi-Strauss's notion of *bricolage* to characterize the lifestyles and the fashions of rebellious young people in Britain from the 1950s forward. These ersatz collectivities, the Mods and the Rockers, punks and Teddy Boys, have one after another played with the style and poses of the dominant culture in aberrant ways so as to foreground their own status as misfits (detourned subjects?). The book gives an exhaustive catalog of modern gestures of transgression, which have widened in scope and appeal since the 1960s. For Hebdige, the birthmark of a subculture is its maverick use of "style":

> By repositioning and re-contextualizing commodities, by subverting their conventional uses and inventing new ones, the subcultural stylist . . . opens up the world of objects to new and covertly oppositional readings.[21]

But it is not, as *Subculture* suggests, merely in the excluded wings of societies that the bricoleur does his/her work, or at least it is not any longer. What the situationists held out as a populist revolutionary politics has now been turned into commerce, is a roaring success, a standardized format throughout the leading capitalist nations. We are now living in the society of the *détourniste.* Detournement has become axiomatic to profit-making, and like surrealism, a mass phenomenon. The cult of the displaced object has developed the contours of an industry in design, in clothing, in architecture, even food—in short, in every marketplace of postwar capitalism. Everything that was once made now reappears as a fragment in the hands of the *pasticheur.* What could not be converted into cash flow used to be expendable, but this problem has been solved: thanks to detournement, everything may stay in the stream of the economy, even the expendable. In France, one hears of *le rétro,* the dusting-off and rehabilitation of dead texts, dead commodities, dead forms in design, dead lifestyles. *Le rétro* is detournement as a bottom-line enterprise, a going concern. *Le rétro,* in a pleasant paradox, is easily recognized in the

21. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Methuen, 1979), 102.

prefix "*neo*-." Neorealism, neoart deco, neogreaser, neo-1960s—soon it will be, no doubt, neo-Depression, neo-Navajo, neo-Eisenhower . . . , and there is plenty of room for more. This is not to say that the recycling of cultural elements no longer destabilizes institutions; it may still present a menace, at least in its most aggressive forms. On the other hand, a theorist of reification might have foreseen, in a kind of worst-case flash-forward, the assimilation of this explosive politics into a profitable venture, a recuperation that the situationists fiercely resisted.

How can one explain this gigantic spreading-out of detournement? To answer this question, we would do well to return to a traditional Marxist paradigm. It is necessary for capitalism to reproduce and extend itself, but this is not easily accomplished. In peacetime especially, the continuous expansion of production may pose a threat by overwhelming insufficient demand. At this point, the need for continued exchange (the only de jure axiom in capitalism: that one exchanges) arouses a search for other saleable items. The commodity form goes hunting. The marketplace throws open the doors of history to march out dead forms, so that production and consumption can once again be rejuvenated. This moment is the birth of Baudrillard's well-known simulacrum, the moment when reification and commodification meet and converge, where they had previously lived only in friendly solidarity.

One should not (as I have done just now) make a fairy tale out of these operations, which otherwise make up a highly rational, and today global, enterprise. On the other hand, the network of things under discussion here—the situationist project, the cult and the culture of the displaced object (of which detournement is merely a part), the cannibalization of history—this entire arrangement may be just the outside contour of a much larger historical process or curvature, a new social formation which is marked by the visibility of all things and by the conversion of all activity into gesture and into performance for the streamlining of exchange, an overall movement whose delirium Henri Lefebvre once sensed in "the consuming of displays, displays of consuming, consuming of displays of consuming, consuming of signs, signs of consuming." Consuming of signs of consuming.