

# The Situationist International: A Case of Spectacular Neglect

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The recent exhibitions of Situationist art and paraphernalia in London, Paris, and Boston, have given the Situationist International (SI) an unprecedented academic and cultural profile. Even during the movement's most active period, when many of its ideas and practices were realised in the events in France 1968, it received little serious appraisal; to some extent this was because of its insistence that it should be incapable of definition in terms other than its own, but it was also due to the unique quality and nature of its research and the uncomfortable implications of its theses for the cultural and academic establishment. The Situationist International was established in 1957 and published twelve issues of a journal, *Internationale Situationniste*, until 1969.<sup>1</sup> Bringing together the Marxist and avant-garde traditions in a critique of the totality of everyday life, the movement developed a project of extraordinary scope and ambition which transcended traditional demarcations between disciplines and at the same time developed an overt commitment to social revolution.

There remains a reluctance to consider the full spectrum of Situationist ideas today. The movement is still presented as an artistic or cultural school akin to Surrealism, and the philosophical and political problems with which it engaged are largely ignored. The following discussion goes some way towards correcting this neglect with an indication of the relevance of Situationist ideas to contemporary political and philosophical debate and a consideration of the historical and intellectual contexts in which the Situationists worked.

## **The Society of the Spectacle**

Many political theorists of the postwar period produced critiques of the 'consumer society' in their efforts to adapt or supersede the Marxist analysis of capitalism. Marcuse, Cardon, and Lefebvre were amongst those who considered the buoyancy of the economy and the apparent changes in class and political structure to be the real and enduring features of capitalist society; for some, such as Marcuse, this involved the postulation of the end or transformation of the working class and necessitated a radical revision of ideas about social revolution. The Situationists agreed that consumption was assuming an unprecedented significance in the postwar period, but they used this position to argue for an extension of the notion of the proletariat to include all those who experienced a loss of control over their lives, whether as consumers or producers of commodities. They applied the Marxist conception of alienation to every area of everyday life and argued that the development of capitalism entailed the extension of

the means, the objects, and intensity of alienated experience. For the Situationists, no area of experience is free from the permeation of capitalist relations of production and consumption; the members of capitalist societies are reduced to the level of spectators of a world which precludes their participation.

The SI argued that every experience of absence and alienation is produced by the capitalist system of relations, so that, although specific to class society, alienation appears to bear all the attributes of an inevitable and all-pervasive human condition. They characterised capitalism as the society of the spectacle: a realm in which everything is removed from real experience and becomes an inverted representation of itself. The spectacle circumscribes reality and any experience or discourse which arises within it becomes spectacularised. Ordinary gestures and the activities of daily life are packaged as glamorous and seductive; commodities come complete with preordained roles and lifestyles; and even dissent and critique are commodified and sold to those who experience and produce them. The conformist, the nihilist and the revolutionary are amongst the roles which can be chosen within the spectacle; commodified and alienated, they have an equivalence which denies their intrinsic significance. The most banal of gestures is glamorised and imposed: washing powders, confectionery, drinks and household appliances are advertised along with idealised images of those who use them and the homes, relationships, and patterns of behaviour in which they do so.

This makes it increasingly difficult to use an advertised commodity without assuming or rejecting the projected image; either way, one acts with reference to it. 'The mechanism of the spectacle wields such force that private life reaches the point of being defined as that which is deprived of spectacle; the fact that one escapes roles and categories is experienced as an additional privation.'<sup>2</sup> Similarly, just as new students acquire superfluous collections of paper, pens, books which will never be read, filofaxes, suitable wardrobes and record collections, any role is accompanied by a host of often unwanted commodities, attitudes and gestures which constitute the badge of participation and promise some reality to one's life.

The Situationists argued that such spectacularised roles are offered as the end of isolation and alienation: consume these goods, and you will be really in the world. The consumption of alienated goods, roles, and lifestyles is the only available antidote to alienation, and this means that the experience of the spectacle is intrinsically unsatisfying. Even in the midst of the appropriate commodities, life remains empty

and unfulfilling. Nevertheless, the proliferation of goods and roles responds to desires for real participation: commodities are marketed as the key to an exciting/interesting/respected/dignified life of real social involvement. Cars, holidays, and washing powders promise the fulfilment of dreams and the realisation of fantasies. Such goods are quickly superseded by their new and improved counterparts, and more dreams of salvation through consumption are hopelessly chased. Regardless of people's ability to acquire them, the proliferation of commodities ensures that the imperative of work for survival is maintained even in the absence of its material necessity. Everyday life is impoverished, and the available means for its improvement are products of the same system of alienated relations.

Emerging out of a number of avant-garde currents, the Situationist International developed the Dadaist and Surrealist attempts to subvert the banality of daily life by realising artistic experience within it. The transcendence of the distinction between art and life has long been the dream of the avant-garde – both the Dadaists and Surrealists had advocated a poetry made by all, an environment of artistic experience, and the end of cultural elites and specialisation. The Situationists equated the free creation of art with the free creation of society, and developed these ideas in their agitations for a world of genuine participation in which people would control their own lives and literally 'create situations'.

These ideas were furthered in Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, which pursued many of the ideas in Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* to argue that capitalist society must be conceived not as an immutable and discontinuous given, but an interconnected totality constituted by a system of alienated production and always open to historical change. Consciousness of the historical nature of the spectacle is constantly subject to a denial which precludes the possibility of wholesale and structural change. The spectacle, wrote Debord, presents itself as the end of history, whereas it is really a mere moment in historical time, capable of transformation and supersession no less than any other epoch.

Debord argued that historical consciousness is inevitably produced by the exigencies of the system: constant change and innovation, as Marx and Engels pointed out in *The Communist Manifesto*, are the hallmarks of bourgeois relations. The accelerated production of gadgets, entertainments, and lifestyles means that the possibilities of fundamental change are increasingly obvious. In the postwar period, new technology presented the possibility of a world of unalienated labour, and the capacity for the alleviation of material and spiritual impoverishment was clear. This situation necessitated the development of unprecedented mechanisms of concealment and distortion of the possibilities of social change; for the Situationists, this was achieved through the commodification of criticism and dissent, in which all attempts to reach consciousness of the possibilities of structural change are thwarted at their inception. The process of commodification presents all aspects of experience – events, goods, roles and issues – with an equivalence which denies their peculiarity. Items of news are presented without regard for their significance, issues come and go with the apparent whim of fashion, and even the most critical of ideas can assume the banality of a weather forecast.

The Situationists defined this loss of meaning as *recuperation*, a term which, popularised by Raoul Vaneigem's *Revolution of Everyday Life*, has since assumed some currency in debates about the fate of critical discourse. Recuperation signifies not merely the integration or co-option of criti-



cism, but suggests that it is actually turned to the advantage of the structures and institutions it intends to negate. The use of revolutionary propaganda to advertise such commodities as beer (Watney's Red Label in the 1960s) or commercial services (NatWest's 'Student 88' campaign) are amongst the most blatant examples of this process, but the term also expresses more subtle diversions of discourse and suggests that critical ideas and practices are subjected to the same alienation as that faced by material commodities: removed from the control of those who developed them, they are packaged and sold back in spectacularised forms.

This scenario presents huge difficulties for critical discourse. Intending to place itself in a relation of contradiction to its object, critical thought or practice finds itself in an internal relation in which its role is supportive rather than hostile. According to the Situationist thesis, recuperation constitutes one of the most subtle and important ways by which the capitalist system of relations perpetuates itself beyond the period of its legitimacy as a guarantor of material improvement. Having achieved the potential for the satisfaction of basic material needs on which the early capitalist economy was dependent, the imperative of work for survival is maintained with the extension of commodification to all areas of life. Requiring the continued circulation of goods, capitalist society brings all experiences and discourses into this alienated play. Dissatisfaction is packaged and returned to those who experience it in the form of badges and T-shirts; critical theory is conducted within the confines of an academic establishment which extends a form of Marcusean 'repressive tolerance'; and critiques which identify a totality of mutable relations are diffused and defused by their fragmented reception and presentation.

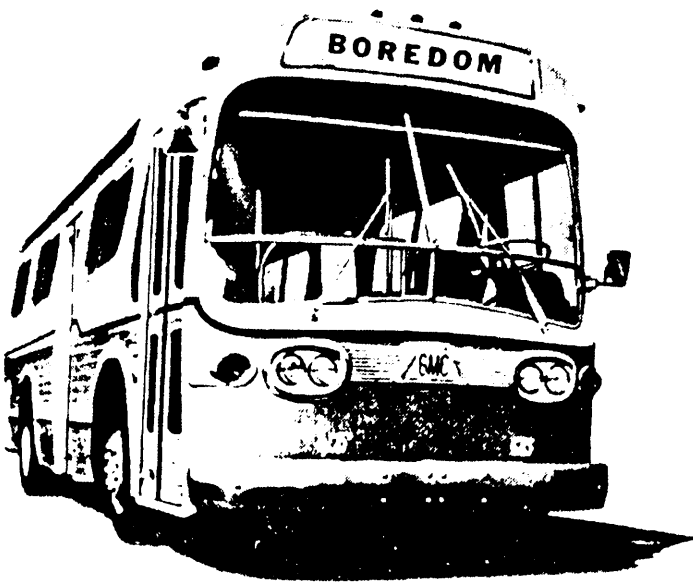
### The Avant-garde Tradition

These were problems faced by the avant-garde tradition which formed an important part of the Situationist heritage. Dada and Surrealism were continually presented with the integration of their critiques of the totality of social and discursive relations within its confines, and both movements were engaged in a constant battle for autonomy and self-definition. The Surrealists, for example, continually claimed that they were not an artistic movement, and yet their onslaught on the

totality was diverted into the structure of art and literature against which they worked. These problems determined the course of both Dada and Surrealism; everything was done with the intention of evading such recuperation on the grounds that it weakened and fragmented their attack.

To some extent, the Surrealists were already confined to the cultural realm by the nature of their practices; the success of their attempt to realise art was dependent on the achievement of a social revolution with which they had every sympathy but little influence. Asserting that the Surrealist project to transform the experience of everyday life was fundamentally that of the proletarian revolution, they enjoyed a problematic relationship with the French Communist Party; willing to work as Surrealists within the Party, they were less receptive to the PCF's insistence that the Surrealist project should be abandoned until 'after the revolution'. They argued that the subversion of the totality of capitalist relations should be conducted on any and every front.

The difficulty and necessity of maintaining such a broad opposition to the totality was the primary concern of the



Situationists. Much Situationist theory developed out of the techniques used by the avant-garde; where these had been used in the artistic and literary realms, the Situationists applied them to all areas of criticism. The practice of *détournement*, a turning round or subversion, was developed as the most effective means of countering recuperation. The found or 'ready-made' objects presented by both the Dadaists and Surrealists provide excellent examples of this practice. Marcel Duchamp's infamous *Fountain*, a urinal turned on its back and signed R. Mutt, was shocking because of its challenge to the artistic values of creativity, originality, and form. For Duchamp, the urinal illustrated the essentially ready-made character of all art; he pointed out that every painting uses 'ready-made' materials and merely decontextualises and rearranges familiar objects. Another of Duchamp's well-known images, the moustached Mona Lisa, subverted a hallowed incarnation of genius with the subtlest of alterations. Such practices undermined the pejorative meaning of plagiarism by bringing the notions of originality into question, and challenged notions of genius and talent by their presentation of a

creativity open to all. They provided a constant challenge to art to justify itself as a specialised and élite practice separated from everyday existence.

The Situationists advocated this sort of *détournement* of all established values, symbols, and relations. The city environment, with which the Dadaists and the Surrealists had already played, was subverted by the Situationist *dérive*, a drifting walk which put the functional design of the city to a poetic use in accordance with the wanderer's desires. This was developed into the 'psychogeographical' study of subjective relationships with the city which facilitated much imaginative exploration of the possibilities for environmental transformation. Chtcheglov's 'Formula for a New Urbanism' declared 'we are bored in the city', and presented a world in which 'everyone would live in his own cathedral', in a changeable environment developed harmoniously with the desires of the inhabitants and conducive to the 'construction of situations'. Such speculations furthered the Situationist intention to bring even the wildest dreams into the realm of the possible and 'flood the market with a propaganda of desire', raising expectations far beyond those realisable within the capitalist system of relations.<sup>3</sup>

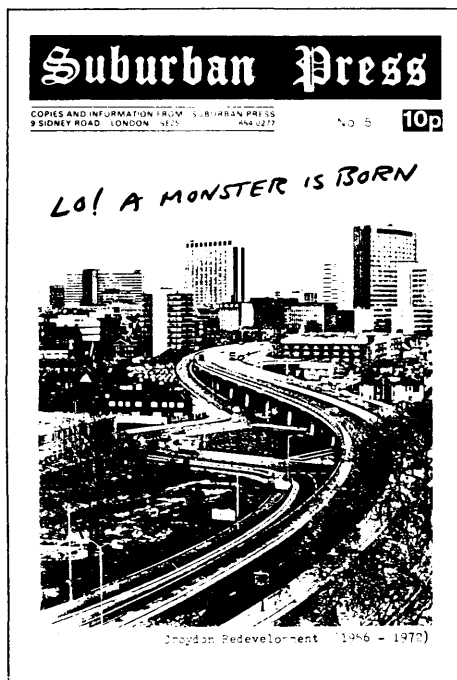
This was also true of the Situationist conception of poetry as a *détournement* of functional language, exemplified by the Dadaist subversions of official propaganda during the First World War, when newspaper articles were cut up and rearranged with wild variations in type face, and photomontages and collages of published photographs and advertisements were accompanied by the repetition of 'Dada', whose very meaninglessness was a *détournement* of cultural convention. The Surrealist engagement in automatic writing was a similar subversion; although the Situationists distrusted the Freudian principles with which the Surrealists had worked, they were interested in Surrealist practices because they were conducted on principles other than those of artistic, literary and social convention. The International Lettrists, one of the groups which had formed the Situationist International, had practised the *détournement* of the comic strip, and the Situationists delighted in adding revolutionary dialogue to cartoons. The emphasis was always on the use of existing material to ends other than those for which it had been intended, and the Situationists produced a stream of illustrations of the possibility of a new world built 'on the ruins of the spectacle'.

The Situationist development of both the avant-garde and Marxism was not uncritical. Applauding the avant-garde's techniques and tactics, they argued against its confinement to the literary and artistic sphere, and in relation to Marxism, they rejected vanguardism and advocated a system of workers' councils and direct participation. The SI was always small and it had no pretensions to an embryonic revolutionary organisation. Its members were propagandists working towards 'a new revolution that must surge over that central terrain which until now has been sheltered from revolutionary upheavals: the conquest of everyday life. *We will only organise the detonation: the free explosion must escape us and any other control forever.*'<sup>4</sup> The Situationists defined themselves as the 'last specialists', and were determined not to be stars of any revolutionary movement, seeking notoriety for their ideas rather than themselves. This course resulted in a series of exclusions and internal disputes; some of these were exaggerated by Debord's assumption of unofficial leadership, but mostly they were the consequence of the Situationists' attempts to avoid recuperation as 'spectacularised' revolutionaries, intellectuals, artists, or any other fragmented and specialised role.

This preoccupation with the maintenance of an effec-

tive critical role has undoubtedly contributed to the obscurity of the movement: they were so successful in sidestepping categorisation and integration that they were largely ignored. Nevertheless, the Situationists' awareness of the vulnerability of critical discourse to recuperation within the structures they addressed gave many of their insights an unusual quality. The Situationists were perhaps the only theorists who were not surprised by the revolutionary situation in 1968. Unconvinced by arguments that the relative prosperity of the working class heralded its end, they argued that life was becoming more and more impoverished: 'to be rich today is to possess the largest number of poor objects.'<sup>5</sup> The Situationist conviction that this poverty would not go unchallenged by those who experienced it bemused those who argued before and after the events that they were *impensable*, unthinkable. Henri Lefebvre, with whom Debord had studied, wrote of the group: 'Do they really imagine that one fine day or one decisive evening people will look at each other and say, "Enough! We're fed up with work and boredom! Let's put an end to them!" and that they will then proceed to the eternal Festival and the creation of situations?'<sup>6</sup> For their part, the Situationists declared: 'We had prophesied nothing. We simply pointed out what was already present.'<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in the strike pamphlets, the practices, and the theoretical preoccupations which emerged in 1968, the political attitudes cultivated by the Situationists in the preceding decade emerged with an unprecedented clarity.

This is not the place for a resumé of the events of 1968; 1988 was the year for nostalgic reflection, and even though many of the anniversary discussions succeeded in concealing more than they exposed, there are many reliable accounts available.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, some important aspects of the events continue to be ignored: the student influence is prioritised above that of the workers, in spite of the fact that the general strike lasted for more than three weeks and brought ten million workers out. The prosperity of the time is also often overplayed: French workers were among the lowest paid and the highest taxed in Europe, and the general impoverishment identified by the Situationists was often experienced in addition to material privation. In the present context, however, the significance of the Situationists' role in the detonation of the events is most striking.



## Under the Cobblestones...

*The Society of the Spectacle* and *The Revolution of Everyday Life* were published in 1967 at a time when the movement had already achieved some practical success in the Strasbourg scandal of 1966. Working with the SI, students at Strasbourg produced a pamphlet, *On the Poverty of Student Life*, which constituted a damning indictment of the student's role as a passive spectator of capitalist society. The text, funded by the Student's Union to which its authors had been elected as a result of the apathy of its moderate membership, provoked the outrage of the authorities and a major court case of the misuse of student funds. Ironically, the judge's summation, which is still published in most new editions of the text, was quite accurate in its condemnation: 'perplexed by the drab monotony of their everyday life', and 'rejecting all morality and restraint', he pronounced, 'these cynics do not hesitate to commend theft, the destruction of scholarship, the abolition of work, total subversion, and a world-wide proletarian revolution with "unlicensed pleasure" as its only goal.'<sup>9</sup>

The arguments of *On the Poverty of Student Life* set the tone for agitations in French universities throughout the following year, and in the period of strikes, occupations, and rioting, when de Gaulle travelled to Germany to find loyal army units willing to enter Paris, the Situationist analyses seemed entirely appropriate. Within the emergence of a strong mass revolutionary movement, the 'unthinkable' had happened. Parisian graffiti declared: 'They're buying your happiness. Steal it!', 'I take my desires for reality because I believe in the reality of my desires' and 'Run for it! the old world is behind you.'<sup>10</sup> This injection of Surrealism into revolutionary propaganda was indicative of the period's imaginative confusion of previously separated concerns. All aspects of social experience were questioned: footballers demanded the sacking of their managers; musicians called for 'wild and ephemeral music'; and doctors and psychiatric nurses demanded the release of their charges. University campuses and factories were subverted by calls for 'self-management'; cars became barricades in the streets and turned the city's conventions upside down; cobblestones became the ultimate 'ready-made' weapons against the CRS; and costumes taken from the occupied Odeon theatre gave the revolutionaries a garb as extraordinary as that donned by the police.

The Situationists considered the events to be the realisation of the avant-garde practices of the *dérive*, *détournement* and the wholesale questioning of values and meaning, as well as the culmination of a tradition of working class resistance, sabotage, and forms of organisation. The predominant structures were councilist, with most of the strikes sustained without official union backing. The PCF and its union, the CGT, were hostile to the workers' actions; they repeatedly warned against provocateurs and, regardless of the fact that pay was not a primary concern of the strikers, negotiated the large pay increase which encouraged the eventual return to work. All the documents of the period suggest that the primary cause of the discontent was the loss of control and the absence of participation experienced throughout French society: the events demonstrated the need for participation and the immediacy of real experience, as well as the will to achieve a revolution in the totality of capitalist relations. These were attitudes as dangerous to the PCF and the unions as to the government.

The hostility to the rigidity of authority and hierarchy which characterised the May events has since received its philosophical expression in the poststructuralist genre, dominated by rejections of theoretical authority, the validity of

truth, and a stable and accessible notion of reality. Jean-François Lyotard, who had been involved in the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* movement in the 1950s and was active in the *Mouvement du 22 Mars* in 1968, often refers to the May events in his critiques of dialectical thought, and Foucault's advocacy of autonomous resistance to an infinity of relations of power and knowledge is indebted to the forms of organisation developed at the time.<sup>11</sup>

Their reflections on the pervasion and multiplicity of forms of domination revealed by the May events have led to the assertion that critical theory and practice are always in an internal relation of complicity to their object. The tools and techniques of criticism are 'always already' defined by the dominant system of relations so that the dialectical conception of criticism arising in a logical contradiction to its object is redundant. They also argue that the dialectical identification of a totality of relations is untenable, suggesting that such 'grand narratives' as Marxism do not uncover the reality of a system founded upon a particular mode of production but rather constitute and impose it. There is no social whole, and therefore there can be no social revolution.

In Foucault's work, the transformation of the 'general effect' of the networks of power he identifies is not precluded. But the political implications of his work are that tactics of resistance must be cultivated to expose and undermine specific relations of power which, although they are interconnected, are not determined by the economic or any other base. The alienation experienced within capitalism is not specific to it; rather, it is bound up with the discursive nature of reality. Discourse constitutes reality, and the raw immediacy of the experience craved by the revolutionaries of 1968 is forever removed and absent. The beach under the cobblestones made famous by graffiti on the walls of Paris is a chimera; there is no beach, and no post-revolutionary paradise attainable by people fundamentally alienated by their discursive reality.

### Surface Similarities, Deep Discontinuities

Many of the political implications of poststructuralism are not particularly innovative: the notion that there is no social whole to criticise has its precedent – and its contemporary manifestation – in all bourgeois theory. Nevertheless, the philosophical foundation of this position requires some consideration. The assumptions and preconditions of dialectical thought have been thrown into question by poststructuralism and the whole postmodernist genre; the possibilities of defining underlying structures, truths, and meaning, and identifying historical purpose, direction, and reality, have all been seriously undermined. These are complex issues to which attention has been turned in detail beyond the scope of this discussion, but the relation between Situationist theory and the problems raised by poststructuralism can be identified quite simply.

The SI's analysis of the difficulties of sustaining critical discourse, and the poststructuralist identification of a 'crisis of criticism', share many common foundations. Many of the avant-garde techniques considered above have found their way into poststructuralist philosophy. Lyotard's drifting thought, which accepts no truth value and undermines the legitimations of those discourses which do so, is a theoretical translation of the Situationist *dérive*; similarly, the language and multiplicity of desire which underlies his work is a development of the emphasis placed on play, pleasure and adventure by both the Surrealists and the Situationists. Foucault's work continually returns to the notions of sabotage, resistance, and the possibility of counter-discourse, all of which



were developed by the Dadaists in relation to the cultural values they attacked.

Moreover, the avant-garde's awareness of the difficulties of criticism has resurfaced in poststructuralism. The necessity of uncovering structures and relations of domination in all areas of social and discursive life is a major preoccupation of both genres. Both developed criticisms of the forms and assumptions of political organisation and the validity of critical discourse in terms of its integration with the structures it opposes. Foucault follows the example of the avant-garde and the Situationists in his determination to evade the categorisation of his life and work, and all poststructuralist work has an antipathy to stability and petrification manifest in its hostility to theory.

If traces of this heritage appear throughout poststructuralism, the very tracks of the Situationist International can be read in the work of Jean Baudrillard, whose postulation of a 'hyperreality' develops the spectacle to a point at which there is no notion of reality to which it may be opposed.<sup>12</sup> Baudrillard argues that the discursive nature of reality is complete; the notion of power used by Foucault, and Lyotard's conception of desire, are criticised for their status as pre-discursive constructions whose imposition is also illegitimate. The absence of meaning which this entails leads Baudrillard to a position which precludes the validity of any criticism, since there are no structures, values, or purposes with which it can proceed. The spectacle is no longer an alienated inversion of reality, but its total substitution.

Like the Situationists, Baudrillard considers that capitalist society offers a form of pseudo-participation, in which only the appearance of involvement is maintained. Whereas the Situationists opposed this with arguments for the conscious engagement in the construction of experience, Baudrillard argues that this 'real' participation can have no reality or meaning beyond that presently conferred upon it. The feelings of the loss and absence of real experience are not specific to capitalism; since only appearance is 'real', alienated experience will persist as long as lamentations for a reality which has never existed continue.

Baudrillard effectively takes the Situationist thesis to an extreme by arguing that if the spectacle is all-encompassing so that, in Debord's words, 'reality rises up within the

spectacle and only the spectacle is real',<sup>13</sup> there can be no possibility of any critical discourse. Baudrillard considers that the passivity and disengagement of the 'silent majorities' is second only to death in the validity of their resistance. Any active attempts to identify and negate the existing state of affairs is undermined. On what grounds, and with what justification, do they present the 'more real' reality of history? On what basis do they identify class? And how is the definition of society as a unified totality constituted by an economic system legitimated? Such would be the tenor of Baudrillard's criticisms if he but acknowledged his engagement with the Situationist International.<sup>14</sup>

The problem of the recuperation of critical discourse identified by the Situationists is answered by poststructuralist philosophers in terms of the inevitability of criticism arising in an internal relation to its object. They argue that if reality is discursive, any discourse will participate in the construction of the world it describes or criticises. To speak of a discourse being integrated or co-opted is to mistakenly assume that it once had a freedom or reality which has since been removed, as though critical discourse is at first in a relation of opposition, and only later assumes one of complicity. From this perspective, a concern with recuperation is quite mistaken. A discourse which sets itself up in contradiction to a dominant structure is 'always already' integrated in the discontinuous series of relations it mistakenly defines as a totality. No values or meanings can bear a truth beyond that which is defined within the complexity of existing discourse.

The implications drawn by poststructuralist philosophers from this argument are that dialectical criticism is impossible since the critical distance it requires is unattainable. Alienation cannot be criticised because the authenticity to which it must be opposed is meaningless. But this position assumes that some sort of Archimedean point, outside and untarnished by the structures it opposes, is necessary to the adoption of a critical perspective. Practitioners of dialectical criticism have always recognised that the language and values with which criticism is expressed are defined by the existing totality of social and discursive relations. The Situationists, for example, argued that this situation reinforces the need for a critical attitude to all existing conceptualisations and values, since these are necessarily the tools with which the existing reality must be undermined and must be used against the structures within which they have developed.

Critical theory and practice does not conjure its techniques and materials out of thin air, but subverts and rearranges those which already exist. Its antagonism is developed out of the contradictions it perceives in the existing reality, such as the discrepancy between what is offered within a given society and what it is possible to take. The freedom, choice, and participation offered by the spectacle are responses to the demands and desires produced by this society. Since these remain unsatisfied by the spectacle, commodification is accelerated; new desires are produced whose fulfilment is thwarted once more, and the experience of alienation persists. The criticism of such a society is fuelled not by the assertion of any natural desires or authentic human condition; the values, needs, and desires by which existing society can be measured are those which it promotes itself. A critical discourse cannot pretend immunity to the all-encompassing totality of alienated relations in which it operates, but it can involve itself in the simultaneous subversion and exposure of the alienating reception given to critical ideas. 'It is obvious,' wrote Debord, 'that no idea can lead beyond the existing spectacle, but only beyond the existing ideas on the spectacle.'<sup>15</sup>

The ability to identify and criticise the relations which constitute reality is dependent on the identification of some notion of reality, meaning and truth. This is essential to the maintenance of any discourse, whether critical or otherwise; it is, moreover, a position which even the poststructuralist philosophers considered here cannot completely avoid. Lyotard and Foucault constantly return to some conception of reality on which discourse imposes itself, and Baudrillard's hyperreality is meaningless without some reference to reality, even if this is conceived as an absence or impossibility. This is particularly true of those poststructuralist writings which bear the appearance of radicalism whilst at the same time undermining the legitimacy of their political claims. When Baudrillard, for example, speaks of the masses' passive resistance, he is left without any means by which the purpose or foundation of either the relations they resist or their resistance itself might be defined. Similarly, Foucault argues that a counter-discourse which preserves the specificity and immediacy of reality is possible, but he finds it impossible to identify a reason for this resistance to the relations of power/knowledge which therefore becomes a purely reactive and unintentional response.

### The Hype and the Heritage

Regardless of these problems of meaning and purpose, poststructuralist philosophy has found a place in British political theory. *Marxism Today's* characterisation of the 'new times' emphasises the political significance of Foucault's work and gives some credence to Baudrillard's philosophical play.<sup>16</sup> Providing a legitimation for autonomous struggle and refusing the 'grand narrative' of Marxism, Foucault's work offers a philosophy of discontinuity, fragmentation, and dispersal to support the notion of a 'post-Fordist' economy; it nevertheless undermines both the possibility and necessity of a wholesale transformation in the totality of social and discursive relations between appearance and reality, or alienation and real experience, poststructuralism collapses such distinctions and







has no reason to choose, evaluate or even deconstruct one phenomenon or relation rather than another. By their own standards, poststructuralist claims about social and discursive relations are without legitimation. Lacking any critical distance from the relations it observes poststructuralism engages in the affirmation of that which exists. It sees marginalisation and fragmentation, and inevitably assumes that these are not merely the contingent characteristics of a particular historical moment, but the principles on which contemporary relations are based. Some form of alienation is the inevitable attribute of human experience. While it is true that the poststructuralists have no reason to think otherwise, neither have they any reason to suggest this to be the case.

For the Situationists, glimpses of authentic experience are present in moments of artistic expression, political struggle, and self-absorbed play; alienation is the experience of removal and absence, the supersession of which is experienced in the practice of the conscious creation of situations. These absences are theorised as inevitable by poststructuralism. But with no material obstacle to the extension of moments of real participation to all areas of experience, the Situationists attempted to overcome its political and philosophical barriers by distinguishing the claims made by spectacular society from their fulfilment. They attacked its tolerance as offering a chimerical and debilitating sanctuary to ideas and practices which might undermine it; its choices as being circumscribed by the spectacle's necessity of the reproduction of alienation; and, most significantly, its ability to spectacularise or commodify criticism by separating it from the practice it advocates and placing it in the petrified ahistoricism of the spectacle.

Criticism can always be recuperated, but its commodified forms can also be subverted and reclaimed. That the

values, practices and conceptualisations with which criticism operates are predetermined by the dominant organisation of social and discursive relations does not mean that there is no possibility of using these constructions to think beyond the ends to which they are presently employed. Desires, needs, and the resources to fulfil them already exist; they are promoted, in alienated but recognisable forms, within the spectacle. What is denied is the historical consciousness of the possibility of their authentic realisation.

Situationist propaganda in favour of this consciousness may not have had a mass readership, although Debord claims that the movement's work, condemned as unreadable to academic Marxists, was widely read and easily understood by workers who 'know the subject well enough to have been able to benefit from the theses of *The Society of the Spectacle*.'<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, much philosophical discourse is indebted to its terms and its influence on subsequent cultural movements is widely acknowledged by those who pursue its project. Familiar with the SI, Malcolm McClaren and Jamie Reid injected punk with Situationist imagery and an enthusiasm for the anarchist tradition of abundant independent publishing, and Tony Wilson's Manchester club, the Hacienda, takes its name and original intentions from Chtcheglov's 'Formula for a New Urbanism'.

Some of the most interesting developments of Situationist ideas suggest that the movement was too concerned with mediations such as creativity, spontaneity, and desire, so that new pedestals, not least that of the SI itself, were substituted for those it undermined. Magazines such as *Variant*, *Vague*, and the multiple paper *Smile* offer critical developments of the Situationists' artistic and cultural concerns, while the Leeds and Glasgow based *Here and Now* pursues the more pertinent aspects of their awareness of the problems of social and political criticism. While these tendencies often reject and certainly aim to supersede Situationist ideas, they continue to further the movement's attempts to expose and evade the recuperation of radical ideas within mainstream culture.

The ICA exhibition of Situationist work does of course constitute such recuperation, and an article such as this may also be seen to do so. But the mere discussion of a critical movement does not necessarily undermine it; what is important is that the practice is not divorced from the theory. As long as those who do involve themselves in such discussions continue to engage in the subversions they promote in theory, the problems of a Situationist industry akin to that surrounding Marxism are easy to avoid. As Vaneigem declared:

What prevents what we say on the construction of everyday life from being recuperated by the cultural establishment ... is that fact that all Situationist ideas are nothing other than faithful developments of acts attempted constantly by thousands of people to try and prevent another day from being no more than twenty-four hours of wasted time.<sup>18</sup>

Some of the intellectual credibility assumed by poststructuralist philosophy and postmodernist art is lost when their debt to the critical tradition they deny is realised. These genres cannot provide the meaning, purpose, and grasp of reality which all discourse requires if it is to be put to any critical use in the understanding and transformation of experience. The Situationist thesis does not escape the problems of legitimation faced by any critical discourse, but it does represent one of the few serious attempts to overcome them and provides a valuable legacy for those still willing to address the complexities of contemporary society.

**Notes**

- 1 The twelve issues of the journal are collected in *Internationale Situationniste 1958-1969* (Champ Libre, Paris, 1975), and substantial excerpts are collected in the *Situationist International Anthology*, edited and translated by Ken Knabb (Bureau of Public Secrets, Berkeley, 1981). The edition which preceded Ken Knabb's anthology was *Leaving the Twentieth Century: The Incomplete Work of the Situationist International* edited by Christopher Gray and published in London by Free Fall Press, 1974. A full index, bibliography, list of members, and chronology of the movement is published by Jean-Jacques Raspaud and Jean-Pierre Voyer, *L'Internationale Situationniste: protagonistes, chronologies, bibliographie (avec un index des noms insultés)* (Champ Libre, Paris, 1971), and a thorough history of the movement from 1952 to 1972 is presented in Jean-François Martos, *Histoire de L'Internationale Situationniste* Editions Gérard Lebovici, Paris, 1989). The major texts published by the movement are Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Black and Red, Detroit, no date), and Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Left Bank Books and Rebel Press, no place, 1983).
- 2 Raoul Vaneigem, 'Banalités de Base', *Internationale Situationniste* No. 8, 1963, translated as 'Basic Banalities' in *Situationist International Anthology*, *op. cit.*, p. 129.
- 3 Ivan Chtcheglov, 'Formulaire pour un Urbanisme Nouveau', *Internationale Situationniste*, No. 1, 1958, translated as 'Formula for a New Urbanism' in *Situationist International Anthology*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-4.
- 4 'L'Operation Contr-Situationniste dans Divers Pays', *Internationale Situationniste*, No. 8, 1963, translated as 'The Countersituationist Campaign in Various Countries', *op. cit.*, p. 113.
- 5 'Basic Banalities', *op. cit.*, p. 92.
- 6 'Le Commencement d'une Epoque', *Internationale Situationniste*, No. 12, 1969, translated as 'The Beginning of an Era' in *Situationist International Anthology*, *op. cit.*, p. 228.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 227.
- 8 The eyewitness account published by Solidarity in 1968 and reissued by Dark Star Press and Rebel Press in 1986 remains invaluable. René Viénet provides a fascinating account of the Situationist involvement in the events in *The Enragés and the Situationists in the Occupation Movement, May-June 1968* (Tiger Papers Publications, York, no date).
- 9 *On the Poverty of Student Life, considered in its economic, psychological, sexual, and particularly intellectual aspects, and a modest proposal for its remedy* has been published in numerous editions; the most readily available is issued by Black & Red, Michigan, 1973.
- 10 For a thorough collection of Parisian graffiti, see Walter Lewino, *L'imagination au Pouvoir* (Le Terrain Vague, Paris, 1968).
- 11 These ideas can be found in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition, A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester University Press, 1984), and *Driftworks* (Semiotext(e), New York, 1984); Michel Foucault's *Power/Knowledge*, translated by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mephram, Kate Soper (Harvester, Brighton, 1986) contains the central themes discussed here.
- 12 Jean Baudrillard's development of these ideas can be traced in *The Ecstasy of Communication* (Semiotext(e), New York, 1988); *Forget Foucault* (Semiotext(e), New York, 1987); and *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (Semiotext(e), New York, 1983).
- 13 *The Society of the Spectacle*, *op. cit.*, para. 8.
- 14 Keith Reader refers to the 'burglary operation' conducted by Baudrillard on the Situationist thesis in *Intellectuals and the Left in France Since 1968* (Macmillan, London, 1987), pp. 131-32.
- 15 *The Society of the Spectacle*, *op. cit.*, para. 203.
- 16 See, for example, 'Guide to New Times, A user-friendly guide to the new world of the 1990s', *Marxism Today*, October 1988, p. 5, and *Marxism Today*, January 1989, special issue on postmodernism which includes an interview with Jean Baudrillard.
- 17 Guy Debord, *Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of 'The Society of the Spectacle'* (Chronos, London, 1979), pp. 7-8.
- 18 'Basic Banalities', *op. cit.*, pp. 122-23.

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