

# REAPPROPRIATING THE SPECTACLE: THE SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL 1957-1972

"La vie privée est privée de quoi? De la vie tout simplement." – Guy Debord [1]

## 1. What was the Situationist International?

The Situationist International ("SI") was a group of European artists and political thinkers founded in 1957 and best known for their humanistic critique of consumerism and of the role of the mass media and their influence on the May 1968 student uprisings in Paris. The movement (if such it was) dissipated shortly afterwards, but its legacy has continued to be felt in fields as diverse as urban planning, social theory and cultural studies, cinema and punk rock. The Situationists always disputed that there was, or could be, such a thing as "Situationism", as they were philosophically opposed to all ideologies [2]; I will nevertheless use the term to refer loosely to their ideas in the aggregate. The best-known Situationists were Frenchman Guy Debord and Belgian Raoul Vaneigem, authors respectively of the two key Situationist texts *The Society of the Spectacle* (*La Société du Spectacle*, 1967) and *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (*Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations*, 1967). [3]

The members of the SI drew on an eclectic set of ideas, which, together with the evidently rather prickly personality of Debord himself and a certain tendency to a siege mentality, may well explain its centripetal tendencies. Artistically it grew out of [Dadaism](#) and [Surrealism](#), being more immediately prefigured by [Lettrism](#), a relatively minor avant-garde artistic movement of the 1940s and 50s; philosophically its roots are in phenomenology. In terms of its social thought it can be seen as an attempt to reconcile Marxist social critique with social anarchism.

The movement is usually divided into three phases, an "artistic" phase to which the main esthetic ideas of the group can be dated, a "political" phase which lasted until the May 1968 student uprisings in Paris, and then a phase of gradual unwinding of the movement. These discussion notes are also divided into three parts corresponding to each of these phases but incorporating a more general discussion of the legacy of the Situationists and their place in social and political thought. This I think will bring out the main points for discussion.

As I usually do, since most of us probably understand or aim to understand French, quotations in French are mostly not translated in the body of the text; there are English translations (usually my own) in the endnotes. Some of the suggested videos have multi-language subtitles or are available in other languages on Youtube. While the videos provide further interesting background, the text is nevertheless designed to be self-standing. Links in the text are to Wikipedia or other encyclopedic sources and selectively provided for convenience only.

Those who want may like to start with this short documentary on the movement. It's in three parts, but the first two are sufficient to get the story.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SvdWk8zRrI>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yN8TcEBhxY0>

## 2. The 'artistic' phase and the esthetic disposition of the Situationists (1957-62)

When the SI was first formed, it had a predominantly artistic focus, taking a particular interest in architecture and urban planning.

Guy Debord (1931-1994), self-styled "*docteur en rien*", started out studying film, but rapidly acquired a distaste for conventional filmmaking. It has been said that "*il a fait peu d'art, mais il l'a fait extreme*" [4]. His first film, *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* (1952) has no images; instead, it shows a bright white screen when there is speaking and black when there is not. Long silences separate speaking parts, and the film ends with 24 minutes of black silence. Riveting viewing (or listening) it is not, but one can sense that Debord was trying to apply similar ideas to those that characterized [John Cage](#) or [Marcel Duchamp](#) to the much more recent, and no doubt fundamentally different, art of cinematography. It seems fair to say that this effort has not been accorded a prominent place in the history of the seventh art. In any case, it is largely derivative of the work of [Isidore Isou](#), the founder of Lettrism. Debord was an early member of the [Lettriste Internationale](#), and briefly the leader of one of its factions. Although the SI grew out of Lettrism, it later broke with it [5] and Isou became one of the most vocal opponents of the SI. Debord's [original film is available on Vimeo](#) if you want to convince yourself of its artistic merits.

Lettrism grew out of a Marxist critique of Surrealism. For the Situationists, the insistence of the Surrealists, following Freud and Jung, on the wealth of resources available in the subconscious was misguided. In their view, "*we now know that the unconscious imagination is poor, that automatic writing is monotonous, and that the whole ostentatious genre of would-be "strange" and "shocking" surrealist creations has ceased to be very surprising... The discovery of the role of the unconscious was indeed a surprise and an innovation; but it was not a law of future surprises and innovations.*" [6]

Although highly critical of Soviet attitudes to art, the Situationists seem to have shared the view that art is only valid insofar as it serves a revolutionary purpose. It is on this basis that they critique Dadaism and Surrealism, as well as all "recuperation" of art by cultural institutions and the market. Typical views on art which they come to enunciate are that "*there are no longer any artists, for all have become artists*", "*the creation is less important than the process which engenders the work, that is, the act of creating*", "*the contemplative attitude before a work was the first stone thrown at its creator*", and "*there can no longer be works of art... poetry is elsewhere, in the facts, in the event which is created*" [7].

The SI had a number of artistic figures other than Debord, of which the best known and most prominent in the organization were Dutch painter and architect [Constant Nieuwenhuys](#) and Danish painter and sculptor [Asger Jorn](#). Both had also been founding members of the influential, albeit ephemeral [CoBrA group](#) (1948-51), named for the initials of Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam, which drew inspiration from Dadaism and pioneered European [abstract expressionism](#).

The creation of the Situationist International is considered to have coincided with the publication of the *Report on the Construction of Situations* (the "Report") in 1957. Constant left the SI in 1960, however, and Jorn in 1961 (he went on to form a splinter Scandinavian faction with [Jørgen Nash](#), who was expelled from the SI in 1962). By the end of 1962, Debord himself was the only remaining 'artistic' member of the group.

### **Reframing and *détournement***

Situationism continues to be known for the artistic/critical concepts of *détournement* ("reappropriation") and *derive* ("drift"), both of them methods intended to implement the characteristic attitude of Situationism which is to solicit cognitive dislocations ("reframing" in modern parlance) in order to deprogram conditioned ways of viewing the world, an attitude it took over from Surrealism which stressed "*the sovereignty of desire and surprise*"[8]. Nevertheless, the *Report* acknowledges that "*Situationist techniques have yet to be invented*" and states that "*in pushing ever further the game of creating new, emotionally provocative situations, the Situationists are gambling that change will usually be for the better. In the short term the odds are obviously against that bet. But even if we have to lose it a thousand times, we see no other choice for a progressive attitude.*" (This attitude, it might be said in passing, seems to me also to owe a debt to [gestalt therapy](#), which sought to challenge acquired dispositions by exposing the patient to simulated situations in which those dispositions revealed themselves to be dysfunctional. Gestalt therapy itself of course was very much influenced by the existentialists – whom the Situationists abhorred even if there are obvious similarities [9] – with their emphasis on personal responsibility, the malleability of experience and the here and now.)

Notwithstanding their popularity, both concepts (usually left untranslated in English texts) remain fluid however, particularly in their usage by Debord. *Détournement* is commonly thought of as the reappropriation of language and other symbolic material outside of its context, thereby juxtaposing it to dissonant influences and allowing its meaning to shift. This is a strategy used extensively by rights activists seeking to reclaim language or imagery subject to social opprobrium (the [Slutwalk](#) movement for example), or in the visual arts (with different goals) by, for example, Andy Warhol and Marcel Duchamp, or with more explicit political intent by Pussy Riot or Femen. Vaneigem speaks of "*l'éveil par le choc qualitative*" and "*le geste par lequel l'unité ludique s'empare des êtres et des choses figées*" [10]. Thus *détournement* relies on a shared understanding of the original referent, which is replaced in an ironic or otherwise unexpected context. Debord's definition is less clear: for him it is "*le contraire de la citation, de l'autorité théorique toujours falsifiée du seul fait qu'elle est devenue citation ; fragment arraché à son contexte, à son mouvement, et finalement à son époque comme référence globale et à l'option précise qu'elle était à l'intérieur de cette référence, exactement reconnue ou erronée. Le détournement est le langage fluide de l'anti-idéologie ...[II] n'a fondé sa cause sur rien d'extérieur à sa propre vérité comme critique présente.*" [11]

In this definition, Debord betrays, perhaps, his Lettrist roots; it is not the particular meaning of language or symbols that he objects to, but meaning as such and the very idea that meaning can be pinned down once and for all (the Lettrists were so called because they wanted to focus not on words but on the letters which compose them as arbitrary symbols). While therefore aware that knowledge is power, it seems less clear what Debord's use of *détournement* brings to the table in

deconstructing power relations, as I think we see in his film version of the *Société du Spectacle* discussed below.

*Détournement* is also often thought of as the opposite of [recuperation](#), the process by which mass sanctioned culture may take over critical ideas, more or less sanitizing them in the process. A good example of this would be Ronald Reagan's ex-post endorsement of US popular musical culture as a key factor in undermining the Soviet system, notwithstanding the considerable hostility with which these new musical genres were met at their onset [12]. The Situationists described recuperation as one leg in a two-pronged counter-revolutionary strategy designed to neutralize any perceived source of radical social change. "*The ruling ideology sees to it that subversive discoveries are trivialized and sterilized, after which they can be safely spectacularized [sic]. It even manages to make use of subversive individuals — by falsifying their works after their death, or, while they are still alive, by taking advantage of the general ideological confusion and drugging them with one or another of the many mystiques at their disposal... While [the bourgeoisie] respects the abstract principle of intellectual and artistic creation, it resists actual creations when they first appear, then eventually exploits them. This is because it needs to maintain a certain degree of criticality and experimental research among a minority, but must take care to channel this activity into narrowly compartmentalized utilitarian disciplines and avert any holistic critique and experimentation.*" [13].

### **Psychogeography and the *dérive***

The idea of the *dérive* could be paraphrased as an invitation to eschew established canons and abandon oneself to the immanent and organically unfolding experience of a lived reality, a sort of aimless but nevertheless conscious wandering, typically through urban landscapes. "*In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.*" [14]

The term is not employed in *Société du Spectacle* and appears less organically linked to the political thought of the group. It is not clear (to me at least) whether the early Situationists viewed the *dérive* as an activity valuable in itself, as the only legitimate way to experience the urban environment (that is to say, that all guidance necessarily distorts the immanence of experience), or as a tool to uncover the "psychogeography" of urban spaces in order to guide more humanistic urban planning; there seem to be elements of all three. Debord's definition of psychogeography, characteristically pompous since hardly realizable, was "*the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.*" [15]

Once again, the idea of the *dérive* does not seem particularly original to the Situationists, having precedents in the thought of Lettrist poet Ivan Chtcheglov, known for his aborted plan to blow up the Eiffel Tower, the reason given apparently being that "*elle réfléchissait la lumière dans leur chambre commune et les empêchait de dormir la nuit.*" [16] The *dérive* in fact is the archetypal activity and mindset of the *flâneur*, as portrayed by Baudelaire in his *Painter of Modern Life* (1863):

*"Pour le parfait flâneur, pour l'observateur passionné, c'est une immense jouissance que d'élire domicile dans le nombre, dans l'ondoyant, dans le mouvement, dans le fugitif et l'infini.*

*Être hors de chez soi, et pourtant se sentir partout chez soi ; voir le monde, être au centre du monde et rester caché au monde, tels sont quelques-uns des moindres plaisirs de ces esprits indépendants, passionnés, impartiaux, que la langue ne peut que maladroitement définir. L'observateur est un prince qui jouit partout de son incognito. L'amateur de la vie fait du monde sa famille, comme l'amateur du beau sexe compose sa famille de toutes les beautés trouvées, trouvables et introuvables ; comme l'amateur de tableaux vit dans une société enchantée de rêves peints sur toile. Ainsi l'amoureux de la vie universelle entre dans la foule comme dans un immense réservoir d'électricité." [17]*

### 3. The theory of the spectacle and the May 1968 uprisings

The relationship between the artistic roots of the SI and the political thought it went on to develop is a complex one. Whilst conceptually the link is perhaps somewhat tenuous, their artistic notions nevertheless furnished them with a vocabulary and frame of reference which significantly marks their writings, even if a number of other important influences can be detected as further discussed below.

#### The theory of the spectacle

*La Société du Spectacle*, Debord's *chef-d'oeuvre*, was published in 1967. As a book, it is aphoristic, declamatory, rhetorical, jargon-ridden and frequently obscure, no doubt living up to Debord's maxim that critical theory should be "*dialectic not only in its content but also in its form*" [18].

Debord argues that spectacle (which he never really defines) [19] affirms appearance over reality and therefore reinterprets human life in society as consisting solely in appearance. [20] The spectacle is the opposite of dialogue [21] and "*le soleil qui ne couche jamais sur l'empire de la passivité moderne*". [22] The spectacle is not a superficial aspect or epiphenomenon of contemporary capitalism but, according to Debord, has come to dominate economic exchange and social life. This is because the value even of material objects has become essentially determined by discursive fiat (such as advertising) and simultaneously consists primarily in what it represents (social status, identity). As such, Debord is able to assimilate large parts of the consumer economy to an expression of spectacle. [23] The society of the spectacle, according to Debord, represents a second major historical shift in socioeconomic organization, the first having taken place with the institution of property relations (qualified by him as a "*dégradation de l'être en avoir*" [24]) whilst this second phase consists in a "*glissement généralisé de l'avoir au paraître*" [25]. The result of this is that images take on a life of their own and come to predominate as a source of motivation of economic behavior.

The framework through which Debord interprets the social role of spectacle is Marxist in origin. The book starts with the words "*Toute la vie des sociétés dans lesquelles règnent les conditions modernes de production s'annonce comme une immense accumulation de spectacles. Tout ce qui était directement vécu s'est éloigné dans une représentation.*" [26]. This is a *détournement* of the opening words of Marx's *Das Kapital*, which read in French "*La richesse des sociétés dans lesquelles règne le mode de production capitaliste s'annonce comme une immense accumulation de marchandises.*" [27] Debord therefore posits that capitalist society has entered, in effect, a new, post-materialist, today we might say 'virtual', phase in which the desire to amass material possessions has been, if not

supplanted, at least supplemented, and increasingly dominated, by a desire to amass vicarious and therefore purely illusory experience through, or under the influence of, electronic media. "*La prolifération des 'pseudo-événements' préfabriqués... découle de ce simple fait que les hommes, dans la réalité massive de la vie sociale actuelle, ne vivent pas eux-mêmes des événements*". [28]

Whilst Debord borrows extensively from Marxist social thought, however, he is also strenuously opposed to any form of ideology or hierarchy: "*il n'y a pas d'autorité en dehors de mon expérience vécue*" as Vaneigem would put it. [29] Debord thereby situates himself, perhaps, closer to the militant collectivist anarchist thought often associated with the idea of *propaganda of the deed*, as represented by such figures as [Johann Most](#), [Nestor Makhno](#), [Peter Kropotkin](#), [Paul Brousse](#), [Ravachol](#) and [Mikhail Bakunin](#) and by the [Paris Commune](#), the anarchist structure which briefly ruled Paris for ten weeks in 1871 [30]. According to [Ken Knabb](#), "*The anarchists rightly criticized the authoritarian and narrowly economic tendencies in Marxism, but they generally did so in an undialectical, moralistic, ahistorical manner, contraposing various absolute dualisms (Freedom versus Authority, Individualism versus Collectivism, Centralization versus Decentralization, etc.) and leaving Marx and a few of the more radical Marxists with a virtual monopoly on coherent dialectical analysis — until the Situationists finally brought the libertarian and dialectical aspects back together again.*" [31] *Société du Spectacle*, nevertheless, is so laden down with Marxist jargon that it is very difficult for an average reader to determine what degree of success Debord may or may not have had in achieving this perhaps unlikely synthesis. In any case, Debord argues that anarchism was not anti-ideological but merely failed to be self-aware of its ideology [32]; for this reason, his anti-ideological position would seem in a certain, important sense – and leaving aside all questions of its own coherence – to be less of a synthesis of these two schools of thought than rather to reject them both equally.

In the society of the spectacle, Debord argues that real social ties are dissolved due in large part to increasing economic specialization, which ruptures the relationship between producer and produced. This essentially takes over Marx's theory of alienation: "*The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power of its own confronting him*" [33]. For Debord, however, an illusory unity is recreated mediated through spectacle. In this mediatized world "*la consommation aliénée devient pour les masses un devoir supplémentaire à la production aliénée*" [34]

Debord reserves particular criticism for the mediatization of culture. Culture, he says, assumed a relative autonomy in historical times only at the cost of an estrangement which could only eventually suffocate it. This is because people necessarily look to culture, and accordingly constitute it, in order to achieve a restoration of an archaic sense of unity. By insisting on its independence, however, culture rules out the possibility of playing this role. This contradiction can only prove fatal. Culture is "*the meaning of a world which has too little meaning*" [35] and its demise through the "end of art" offers humanity a choice: either an overthrowing of culture's artificial apartness or its maintenance "*en tant qu'objet mort, dans la contemplation spectaculaire*" [36]. The latter strategy is that to which the system tends when class power seeks to maintain itself. Debord also points out that mediatized culture presents itself as an atemporal and decontextualized smorgasbord of options which obfuscates history and meaning, becoming a pure object of consumption. [37]

Although the strategies he proposes are far from obviously efficacious, Debord does not consider that the economic order of the society of the spectacle cannot be overthrown. Perhaps on the contrary, it may contain within itself the seeds of its own destruction (a position Vaneigem affirms more explicitly): "*Le monde possède déjà le rêve d'un temps dont il doit maintenant posséder la conscience pour le vivre réellement*" [38]. Similarly, Debord berates structuralism for what he calls its ahistorical and self-serving assumption that social systems are static, preferring to qualify the society of the spectacle as "*une courte période de gel du temps historique*" [39]. In order to overthrow this system, "*men will be needed who put into action a practical force*", Debord's contribution, as he sees it, having merely been to dismantle the seeming inevitability of the existing order and uncover the mechanisms of repression inherent within it, thereby making it possible to "*relaunch the revolutionary class struggle*"[40] Moreover, "*la critique qui va au-delà du spectacle doit savoir attendre*" [41]. He steadfastly refuses to ally himself with ideology, which he views as inevitably totalitarian because it is a fragmentary and therefore false knowledge of an artificially frozen reality. [42] Any ideology must inevitably ally itself with spectacle and therefore with alienation.

In 1973, after the SI had disbanded, Debord made a "film version" of *La Société du Spectacle*. It isn't, on the face of it, a great work of cinematic art, consisting mainly of Debord himself intoning rather monotonously passages from the book to a backdrop of archive film footage, which includes a striking amount of female nudity; striking because Debord seems to have little to say about patriarchy and therefore one is left wondering if this is meant to be *détournement* and, if so, how it is meant to work. Although dense and jargon-ridden, with a tendency to privilege rhetorical flourishes over the substance of the argument (such as it is), the film is nevertheless worth at least dipping into for a glimpse into Debord's thinking and mind. One can't, either, avoid the irony that here is Debord himself, offering us a *spectacle*. It's up to you if you find it "*a well done piece of radical documentary*" or "*hypnotic and meaningless, though oddly depressing*", to quote the only two reviews of the film I have found online [43]. Perhaps both are true.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laHMgToJlJA>

Debord committed suicide in 1994 at the age of 62 – it is still debated whether as a political act or one of desperation. Perhaps, again, both.

### **Raoul Vaneigem and the *Treatise***

Whilst Debord is the better known of the two, Raoul Vaneigem has a distinctive voice which has continued to evolve: he is still writing today. Despite their association, the two had "*very different temperaments*" [44].

The *Treatise*, also published in 1967, is a more accessible text than *Society of the Spectacle*. As Vaneigem says, "*j'aurais souhaité qu'un tel livre fut accessible aux têtes les moins rompues au jargon des idées. J'espère n'avoir échoué qu'au deuxième degré.*" [45] The *Treatise* is also a more practical work, and one which conveys a much greater degree of optimism as to the ultimate inevitability of the social changes which it prefigures and solicits ("*le mur à abattre est immense, mais tant de brèches l'ont ébranlé qu'il suffira bientôt d'un seul cri pour le voir effondre*" [46]). Nevertheless, like Debord's work it also contains long and dreary sections built up on Marxist models which are of

dubious theoretical relevance, and, again in common with Debord, Vaneigem in the *Treatise* also has an inexplicable fondness for chiasmic turns of phrase in which meaning is of secondary importance ("*rien ne sauvera de la culture du passé le passé de la culture*", "*il faut bien que les armes de la critique rejoignent la critique des armes*"...). I will focus, however, on what seems to me of enduring value, and most likely to have been influential in fact, for, at its best, the *Treatise* is fluid, poetic and inspiring.

Much more clearly than Debord's, Vaneigem's utopia is one built upon a passionate affirmation of life: "*renforcer la part de joie et de fête authentiques ressemble à s'y méprendre aux apprêts d'une insurrection générale*" [47]. For him, the revolutionary attitude is individual. He criticizes loyalty to any kind of imagined community, be it the nation or the proletariat, as a mystification. "*Je ne reconnais d'autre égalité que celle que ma volonté de vivre selon mes désirs reconnaît dans la volonté de vivre des autres*" [48]. He recognizes, reminding one of the analysis which Bourdieu was to go on to make, that revolutionaries and the established order agree on certain "rules of the game", which accordingly past revolutions were never able to change – "*dans le miroir des maîtres présents se reflètent déjà les maîtres futurs*" [49]. Rather than the simple replacement of one hierarchy by another, he appeals for a revolution against the principle of hierarchy itself, astutely noting that "*de l'espoir d'évasion qu'entretiennent les prisons dépend la docilité du prisonnier*" [50].

The spirit of sacrifice required by devotion to a Cause is, for Vaneigem, in total contradiction with the vital and playful attitude from which true revolution springs [51]. One should not be mistaken, however – no more than Debord, Vaneigem is certainly not a pacifist and does not eschew violent revolt – "*rien ne résiste à la créativité armée*" [52]; his heroes include the Ukrainian anarcho-communist military leader Nestor Makhno (who was singularly unsuccessful, although the odds were certainly stacked against him). For Vaneigem, violence is not only understandable, but salutary, a catharsis of the kind he (inaccurately or opportunistically) attributed to [Wilhelm Reich](#): "*c'est précisément le vaccin contre la froide atrocité des forces de l'ordre et de l'oppression hiérarchisée... Trois mille ans d'enténébrement ne résisteront pas à dix jours de violence révolutionnaire*" [53]. Vaneigem's revolutionary "poetry" included sabotage and could be decidedly gory – the "*criterion of efficacy must always be pre-eminent*". [54] The proletariat, once in power, has no other alternative than "serenely" but rapidly to liquidate all that which continues to define its existence as a class using means which are "*as bloody as the circumstances may or may not require*". [55]

In the *Treatise*, Vaneigem makes more explicit the critique of work implicit in Debord's theory of the spectacle. The Situationist critique of work, although it clearly draws on Marx's theory of alienation, can be seen as radical in relation to both the practice and rhetoric of contemporary socialism which glorified work in both the Soviet bloc and the Western labor movement (this is part of Marx's acceptance of certain economic "rules of the game"). Under the conditions of modern production, Vaneigem argues, there is, however, no longer any economic need for full-time employment; it persists because it pursues a *cultural* purpose in propagating existing power relations and for this reason it remains indispensable to the established order. Vaneigem says that the purpose of work is no more to produce than the purpose of sex is to procreate. In the contemporary economy, he argues that the promise of a "better future" has taken over the role previously played by the religious promise of salvation: in both cases, the present moment remains under a yoke of oppression. Work has as its purpose to undermine vitality and to ensure subordination. This is why the working class has in fact never been the trigger of revolution. Wealth is generated by creativity,

not productivity. Vaneigem dreams of a world in which workers would go on strike for more automation and less work. [56] More recently, he has aligned himself with emerging currents in contemporary "paleo-restorationist" thinking:

*"The system of exploitation of nature and man, starting in the Middle Neolithic with intensive farming, caused an involution in which creativity—a quality specific to humans—was supplanted by work, by the production of a covetous power. Creative life, as had begun to unfold during the Paleolithic, declined and gave way to a brutish struggle for subsistence. From then on, predation... became the generator of all economic mechanisms."* [57]

Vaneigem argues that material welfare has exacted a heavy psychic toll, condemning modern man to a life without passion, machine-like and alienating, inducing a state of *survie* (survival) which is antinomial to *vie* (life), representing a tiny fraction of its potential [58]: a theme and opposition which it is clear he takes over from Reich.

Although Vaneigem hardly disavows the theory of the spectacle, it seems fair to say that it assumes a much less central role in his thinking. Alongside the repressive mechanisms of consumer psychology and of work, he also points to manipulation by fear, specifically the "*carefully cultivated fear of thermonuclear disaster*" [59].

In Vaneigem's view, social power has become diffuse, no longer residing with feudal lords or with capitalist industrialists, but with technicians who organize society "rationally", but inhumanely. This new type of power no longer protects its 'subjects' but only itself. [60] This state of affairs creates, however, a new vulnerability insofar as the new 'masters' derive no sadistic gratification from their role, nor are they personally enriched by it. [61] Whilst feudal aristocracy at least had a sense of nobility and adventure, and sufficient resources at its disposal not to have to reify wealth for its own sake – "*Qui refuserait d'accorder quelque charme a la vie d'un oisif, un tant soit peu désabusé?*" [62] – bourgeois society is characterized only by mediocrity, whilst the promise that members of the working classes may occasionally accede to the bourgeoisie if they play by its rules is not, or no longer, an attractive one, relying on an ideology of progress – a "*metaphysics of movement*" – which in fact only serves immobility. [63] This might seem to raise the question of whether the proletariat was in fact better off under feudalism, but elsewhere Vaneigem denies this, saying only that awareness of the unbearable of its condition, and not this condition itself, was a relatively recent development. [64]

The freedom afforded by Western democracies operates for Vaneigem within a suffocating structure of constraints. It is a 'freedom' only to do what is permitted, legal, tolerable and tolerated, a kind of [Faustian bargain](#) in which true creativity is sacrificed and neutered. Despite this, striking a Freudian note, Vaneigem argues that what people do in the light of day is nothing compared to what they do in secret, driven by their drives, desires and dreams. All this covert mental activity, which is denied full expression but nevertheless never ceases to dream of a different world, is irrecoverable by the established order and contains potent seeds of revolution. The more it is denied and forced underground, the greater the potential force waiting to break through. Indeed, the recuperation of art can never be complete because the freedom which is accorded always generates a thirst for more. When people become aware of their own creative power they will not be content just to "*daub the walls of their prison*". This means that the strategy of recuperation cannot be extended *ad infinitum*. [65]

Just as *Société du Spectacle* started with a détournement of the first sentence of Marx's Das Kapital, the *Treatise* ends with a similar détournement of the final words of the Communist Manifesto (admittedly in a postscript only added in 1972): "*Pour un monde de jouissances a gagner, nous n'avons a perdre que l'ennui*". [66]

### The events of May 1968

The Situationists and their thought played a major role in the iconic May 1968 uprisings in Paris and across France, which began in the universities but then rapidly spread to factories, with strikes involving up to 11 million workers continuing for two weeks. Political leaders at the time feared civil war or revolution; the national government itself momentarily ceased to function after President de Gaulle secretly left France for a few hours. Although the events sometimes turned violent, they also had artistic and festive aspects with numerous quasi-improvised debates and assemblies, songs, imaginative graffiti, posters and slogans. [67] [Steven Erlanger](#) notes that "*France was where the protests of the baby-boom generation came closest to a real political revolution*" [68]. Some of the atmosphere of the time with plenty of original footage is captured in this very good English-language documentary:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6UP3RLGmciM>

The interpretation of these events and their cultural and political impact remains a subject of great controversy in France even today, with Nicolas Sarkozy for example having described the events of the period as a "*crisis of morality, authority, work and national identity*". [69]. Whilst the unprecedented size of the victory of the Gaullists in the elections which were then rapidly called has been cited as evidence that French public opinion pulled back from the brink of the abyss, the failure in 1969 of De Gaulle's [constitutional referendum](#), which led to his resignation, may suggest a more nuanced conclusion. But this is, in any case, to confine the impact unduly to the political sphere and the short term. According to student leaders, "*The explosion was of words and symbols, not dynamite and gunshots*" and it was an "*exercise in political education*". In its lack of 'demands', May 1968 was very much like the SI itself, and prefigured later movements such as Occupy, in relation to which much the same discussion is taking place today.

The very different scope of the Paris uprisings compared to the contemporary developments in youth counterculture in the USA may also dissimulate a number of similarities both in the form these movements took and the social impact which they ultimately had. Whilst Debord gives the subject a wide berth, Vaneigem gave central importance in the *Treatise* to the revolutionary implications of free love, the human passion which in his view is, in relative terms, least corrupted by capitalist society. He adopts an explicitly hedonistic approach, lauding the Freudian pleasure principle, opining that "*il n'y a d'autre guide que le plaisir*" [70] and similarly "*dans l'érotique, il n'y a d'autre perversion que la négation du plaisir*" [71]. At the same time, he ignores the Freudian "reality principle" which in the Freudian scheme governs the ego and critiques, in terms he clearly takes from Reich, the whole notion of the death principle (*Todestrieb*), this "*ontological curse*" [72] which Freud ultimately came to postulate as a countervailing force to the pleasure principle (In *Character Analysis*, Reich reinterprets the Freudian death principle as a masochistic internalization). Rather than Freud's notion of sexual sublimation as essential to civilization, Vaneigem prefers to postulate that there is a second

order of emotional blockage at the social level as a result of which "*la crise sociale actuelle est aussi une crise de type orgastique*" [73] and that this can be overcome by a "*radical subjectivity*" (a term which sounds almost Sartrean) which creates the circumstances necessary to bridge the post-coital "rupture" of the state of ecstatic union. Accordingly, he prescribes "*de favoriser les expériences collectives de réalisation individuelle, et de multiplier ainsi les rencontres amoureuses en réunissant une grande variété de partenaires valables*" [74] and "*de recréer dans la vie sociale les conditions qui sont celles de la jouissance parfaite dans le moment de l'amour*" [75]. Sociologists have argued that the ripples of May 1968, just as those of the summer of love, continued to ripple and change societal attitudes long after the spectacular aspects of these movements were repressed or had gone underground. [76]

The May 68 movement, as any movement, was recuperated, but only insofar as it could be. In essence, a new equilibrium was negotiated. Certainly, on a practical level it may be true that, as the Situationists later suggested, the movement was the subject of recuperation by the trade union movement and the *Parti communiste française* as well as by the media which sought to portray it as merely a "student" uprising. It is less clear whether that could have been otherwise. [Alain Geismar](#) - one of the leaders of the time - however argued that the movement succeeded "*as a social revolution, not as a political one*", breaking the hold of the Communist party - which mistrusted the insurrection - over the unions and liberalizing political culture to the point where the private lives of politicians have been no obstacle to their exercising public office - including, ironically given his comments reported above, in the case of Sarkozy himself. [77]

After 1968, the SI soon fell apart; but that was a process which seems to have been inherent from the outset. In the *Treatise*, Vaneigem defended the extreme obsession with ideological purity which led to the endless ruptures seen within the SI in its few years of existence [78], which in hindsight to us must seem illusory and the fruit of a somewhat paranoid siege mentality. The "*absolute refusal of any hierarchy in the group*" [79] must have been much easier when it came to number only two or one. Eventually, after leaving the SI, Vaneigem changed his mind, however:

*"By showing its limits and its weaknesses, the Situationist experience can also be seen as a critical meditation on the new type of society sketched out by the Paris Commune [and similar experiments...]. The Situationist project is not about what happens once consumer society is rejected and a genuinely human society has emerged. Rather, it illuminates now how lifestyle can supersede survival, predatory behavior, power, trade and the death-reflex."* [80]

Perhaps it is not too out of place on my part to suggest that the Paris Commune may already have been a sufficiently "critical meditation" on itself.

In many ways, nevertheless, 1968 continues to echo today - perhaps even more insistently. As Vaneigem has written recently - and who cannot hope on some level he is right:

*"Even if we are today seeing recycled ideologies and old religious infirmities being patched up in a hurry and tossed out to feed a general despair, which our ruling wheelers and dealers cash in on, they cannot conceal for long the shift in civilization revealed by May 1968. The break with patriarchal values is final. We are moving toward the end of the exploitation of nature, of work, of trade, of predation, of separation from the self, of sacrifice, of guilt, of the forsaking of happiness, of the fetishizing of money, of power, of hierarchy, of contempt for*

*and fear of women, of the misleading of children, of intellectual dominion, of military and police despotism, of religions, of ideologies, of repression and the deadly resolutions of psychic tensions. This is not a fact I am describing, but an ongoing process that simply requires from us increased vigilance, awareness, and solidarity with life. We have to regroup ourselves in order to rebuild—on human foundations—a world that has been ruined by the inhumanity of the cult of the commodity." [81]*

## **The Situationists in context**

Debord acknowledges few contemporary influences in *La Société du Spectacle*. This fact presumably left him unperturbed: for him, "*Le plagiat est nécessaire. Le progrès l'implique.*" [82] Nevertheless, it is important to place the Situationists in context and within the history of ideas. Little of what they argued – even those points which may seem to us the most outlandish – was particularly original, with their influence being more due, I would argue, to the way in which Debord hit on a version of Marxist critical theory which young people of his time could relate to, at least in some popularized version, and in which Vaneigem appealed beyond ideology to instincts and repressed aspirations, inviting the dispossessed, together with a utopian post-war generation, to believe in their human potential and the possibility of change from the values of their parents which many felt had plunged Europe into fratricidal chaos. In short, the SI appealed viscerally and in terms of its imagery – it was *spectaculaire*.

In terms of their social theory, the Situationists owe an obvious debt to [Roland Barthes](#)' explorations of the meaning of consumption in bourgeois society from a semiotic standpoint [83], and also echo some of the ideas already sent out in [Georges Bataille](#)'s analysis of the shift from production to consumption as the driving economic force in advanced capitalist societies and the dissatisfaction which nevertheless continued to plague human consciousness. Vaneigem, together with many revolutionary thinkers of his time on both sides of the Atlantic, also owes a clear debt to **Wilhelm Reich**, even if he shows little deep insight into Reich's thought: Reich was popular with many for his critique of the conservative bias inherent in Freud's account of sublimation, his (perceived) support for sexual freedom and his critique of fascism; less so for his own psychoanalytic theories.

Vaneigem is also much influenced by **Nietzsche**, even if he rejects the latter's exceptionalism. He takes over from the [Genealogy of Morals](#) its familiar discussion of slave morality: "*il entre bien dans la mentalité d'un esclave d'associer le pouvoir à la seule forme de vie possible*" [84]. There is also a discussion in the *Treatise* of what he sees as the failure of Nietzsche's concept of [Will to Power](#) to account for the need to act outside of the framework bequeathed by society [85], a criticism which, on balance, seems hardly fair even if one can well understand why the heroic Nietzschean figure so dear to the libertarian [Ayn Rand](#) sat uncomfortably with Vaneigem's faith in the creative and revolutionary potential of the common man. The will to power does contain, under its "*protective wrapping, a certain dose of the will to live*" [86] but it is a reductive simplification. In any case, the ambitious figures of today, captains of industry, mercenaries and other fraudsters, hardly represent the best of a realized humanity: Nietzsche is "*crucified by his own illusion*" and his 'death' is "*a new and more telling, more spiritual, version of the comedy of Golgotha*". [87]

Debord's preoccupation with the social impact of mass media was not new either. **Marshall McLuhan**, a Canadian philosopher and social theorist, published *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* already in 1951. McLuhan was a devout Catholic convert and admirer of the Jesuit mystic [Teilhard de Chardin](#); it was he who coined the familiar expressions "*the medium is the message*", and the "*global village*", and is said to have predicted the World Wide Web almost thirty years before it was invented. This video, although rudimentary in its production, is the most cogent up-to-date summary of his thought which I have found:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1w1JTaldC4> :

Though they concurred as to its importance, McLuhan and Debord had rather different perspectives on the question of the impact of the mass media. At one point, in characteristic Debordian fashion, he referred to McLuhan as "*the spectacle's first apologist ... the most convinced imbecile of the century*" [88]. In at least one sense, though, the analysis of the Situationists converges with that of McLuhan: for both of them, the undermining of natural community brought about by the mass media leaves only self-reflection as an adequate basis for identity. McLuhan believed that, in the global village, in the long run historical identities would no longer be fit for purpose and would wither away. What would replace them had to be something fundamentally new and it had to be created by each person individually, drawing on essential aspects of human nature. The Situationists, given their Marxist heritage, are more conflicted about espousing anthropological essentialism but it does seem that Vaneigem, at least, has a mystical faith in the inherent creativity of man and considers that there is a buried resource in human nature which has the power both to overthrow the power relations inherent in post-agricultural economic organization and to put an alternative model of society in its place. He acknowledges that the diffusion of power in contemporary society has a positive side in that "*chacun prend conscience, dans l'extrême isolement, de la nécessité de se sauver d'abord, de se choisir comme centre, de construire au départ du subjectif un monde où l'on puisse être partout chez soi. Le retour lucide à soi est le retour à la source des autres, à la source du social.*" [89].

Both McLuhan and Debord clearly also share the view that media have transformed how people relate to each other – but in very different ways. For example, McLuhan could surely have agreed that "*Le spectacle se présente à la fois comme la société même, comme une partie de la société, et comme instrument d'unification.*" [90]. Nevertheless, for McLuhan the media was an evolutionary extension of man, a step on the way to the [omega point](#). For Debord, it was an iron cage.

More fundamentally, when Debord declares that "*Le spectacle n'est pas un ensemble d'images, mais un rapport social entre des personnes, médiatisé par des images*" [91] he reminds us, as Stuart Murray has noted [92], of Nietzsche's observation that truth is "*a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are.*" This is the same position as taken, around the same time as Debord, by Michel Foucault. In this perspective, the asserted singularity of the role of the mass media has at least to be placed into a social/linguistic context in which there is always a struggle for meaning and it is always the locus of a relationship of power and subordination. If the means have changed, and continue to do so, with all the effects that may have, the game has not. One is reminded of McLuhan's analysis of the social impact of print media in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and his precocious recognition that, already in his time, major changes were afoot:

*"The world has become a computer, an electronic brain... Unless aware of this dynamic, we shall at once move into a phase of panic terrors, exactly befitting a small world of tribal drums, total interdependence, and superimposed co-existence... Terror is the normal state of any oral society, for in it everything affects everything all the time... In our long striving to recover for the Western world a unity of sensibility and of thought and feeling we have no more been prepared to accept the tribal consequences of such unity than we were ready for the fragmentation of the human psyche by print culture... Print is the extreme phase of alphabet culture that detribalizes or decollectivizes man in the first instance. ... [It] carries the individuating power of the phonetic alphabet much further than manuscript culture could ever do. Print is the technology of individualism. If men decided to modify this visual technology by an electric technology, individualism would also be modified."*

Lastly, the notion of the revolutionary potential of **free love** obviously has also a long history, having long been nurtured in Bohemian circles, where it was frequently a very deliberate choice, conceived of as artistic, to shock bourgeois values. The anarchists Emile Armand and Charles Fourier are acknowledged immediate sources of inspiration in this regard, and Vaneigem has a rare moment of agreement with André Breton whose exhortation "*Amants, faites-vous de plus en plus jouir*" he cites favourably. [93]

## 4. Rereading the Situationists

The notion of the SI as a discrete movement which began in 1957 and ended with its dissolution in 1972 is, it seems to me, an artefact of Debord's own mediatic construction, since Situationism was neither unprecedented and fundamentally original, nor were its insights lost from subsequent debate. There remains, however, a fundamental freshness and contemporary relevance to the texts, in places at least, which merits their rereading. For example:

*"The story of terrorism is written by the state and it is therefore highly instructive. The spectators must certainly never know everything about terrorism, but they must always know enough to convince them that, compared with terrorism, everything else must be acceptable, or in any case more rational and democratic."* [94]

Part of this appeal, ironically perhaps, comes precisely from the ways in which the Situationists departed from Marxist materialism and the disappointments in Debord seem always to come back to his rendering of Marxist concepts such as that of the proletariat, the class struggle, a rendering which lacks the insight into the mechanisms of the social production of meaning deriving from Saussure and Barthes and developed subsequently in the work of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu.

Of particular interest in this regard is the work of [Antonio Negri](#) and [Michael Hardt](#) (*Empire*, 2001), which builds on Foucault's concept of a historical shift from societies of punishment to societies of control. [95] Their assessment of *Occupy* could be a mere restatement, in contemporary terms, of the conclusions on May 1968 to which Vaneigem ultimately came:

*"One of the most radical and far-reaching elements of this cycle of movements, for example, has been the rejection of representation and the construction instead of schemas of*

*democratic participation. These movements also give new meanings to freedom, our relation to the common, and a series of central political arrangements, which far exceed the bounds of the current republican constitutions. These meanings are now already becoming part of a new common sense. They are foundational principles that we already take to be inalienable rights, like those that were heralded in the course of the eighteenth-century revolutions. The task is not to codify new social relations in a fixed order, but instead to create a constituent process that organizes those relations and makes them lasting while also fostering future innovations and remaining open to the desires of the multitude. The movements have declared a new independence, and a constituent power must carry that forward."*[96]

For those who are interested, this hour-long interview with Michael Hardt is informative:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zs7RfGbDfgE>

One may of course also wonder to what extent that which Debord – or for that matter Foucault – is describing is in fact really new and indeed a qualitative rupture from the past. The symbolic value of economic goods reaches far back into pre-agricultural history and indeed (as David Graeber has shown [97]) predates considerably economic exchange on the basis of use value, notwithstanding Debord's claims to the contrary. [98] Storytelling, music and drama are ancient human arts; in medieval times the church was the locus for mythopoeic representation designed to underpin the existing order (and carnival and other popular festive occasions for representations designed to challenge it). [Gilles Deleuze](#) differed from Foucault in locating the transition to the society of control in the post-war period as opposed to the 19th century, but in fact language has always been in a dialectic relationship with the form of culture and Debord at no point sets out in what way he considers that the technologies of communication which characterized the 1960s brought about a fundamental break. Indeed, the world of material economic exchange which he seems to view as preferable is a straw man rather than anything that historically existed or is intrinsic to the human condition – symbolic exchange appears at least as old as the species.

As contemporary media scholar Paul Levinson has pointed out, the impact of the mass medium has historically been indeterminate, used for both good and bad. Hitler came to power on the back of the media, but without it the efficacy of Stalin's resistance to the Nazis is also unthinkable. Churchill similarly made able use of the media to maintain the war effort [99], and it has been argued that TV coverage of the events in [Birmingham, Alabama](#) were key to ending [Jim Crow](#) and advancing the civil rights cause in the US. [100] Other examples that spring to mind of mass movements having been able to connect with citizens despite having had difficulty in accessing traditional media are the [Cinque Stelle](#) movement in Italy, [Podemos](#) in Spain, and the Scottish independence movement during the recent [referendum campaign](#).

The struggle to reclaim public space and the media constitutes an ongoing cultural battleground, though as [Naomi Klein](#) notes in chapter 12 of her critique of consumerism, *No Logo*, it also has a long history. One manifestation has been the movement of so-called **culture jamming**, also known as subvertising or adbusting, which took off in the late 1980s [101], as practised notably by artist [Jorge Rodriguez-Gerada](#). Similar sentiments lie behind the modern phenomenon of '[hacktivism](#)'. "*Culture jamming*", writes Klein, "*baldly rejects the idea that marketing — because it buys its way into our public spaces — must be passively accepted as a one-way information flow*". She notes "*the belief among many jammers that*

concentration of media ownership has successfully devalued the right to free speech by severing it from the right to be heard," or in other words that "free speech is meaningless if the commercial cacophony has risen to the point that no one can hear you"; though one might also conjecture that in these days of information overload on the internet, this problem increasingly affects advertisers too.



Klein notes, though, that the effectiveness of culture jamming is always mitigated by the risk of reification of the spectacle and of at least partial recuperation by the advertising industry. The Situationist strategy is rendered far less effective because "the real truth is that, as a culture, we seem to be capable of absorbing limitless amounts of cognitive dissonance on our TV sets... In these information-numb times, we are beyond being abruptly awakened by a startling image, a sharp juxtaposition or even a fabulously clever détournement." Some powerful examples of *détournement* nevertheless still come to mind: the appropriation, for example, by anti-racist punks of the swastika [102] or that by Pussy Riot of religious symbolism, as [Slavoj Žižek](#) has noted [103].

This discussion would be incomplete without reference also to [Jean Baudrillard's](#) more epistemological concept of [hyperreality](#). According to Baudrillard, the search for meaning is essentially a bug in the human psyche as, due to the nature of language, no holistic apprehension of reality is possible. The proliferation of signs through the media inevitably undermines human functioning in the world, but also the ability to push messages of any sophistication through the media.

It might be argued, however, that Debord, Klein and Baudrillard have all been less prescient than McLuhan, insofar as none of the former theorists really foresaw or analysed the current morphing of media into two-way, decentralized means of communication which have turned consumers back into producers and publishers. What does this change? McLuhan never took a view on whether this development would be good or bad, only that it was inevitable. The impression though is that he viewed it positively, since, for him, even TV was a less manipulative, more 'democratic' medium than radio or the cinema – and we've noted some evidence which seems to support that view. Certainly, Web 2.0 media give a creative voice to anyone. So should one remain, with Debord, pessimistic or has something fundamentally changed? After all, as Vaneigem himself said, "*Negativity is the alibi of a resignation never to be oneself, never to lay claim to the richness of ones own life*". [104] In this video, [Paul Levinson](#) offers an updated reading of the impact of new media from a McLuhanian perspective:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aqZNGYit3kY>.

So what balance, if any, can be drawn of the Situationist project since May 1968? Vaneigem, writing in 1991, remained endearingly optimistic: "*Le monde a subi en trente ans plus de bouleversements qu'en plusieurs millénaires*," he states audaciously. "*Que le Traité ne soit pas tout à fait étranger à l'accélération soudainement imprimée aux circonstances m'apporte, au fond, moins de satisfaction que de voir se tracer – en quelques individus et sociétés – les cheminements qui conduisent de la primauté enfin consentie au vivant à la création probable d'une authentique espèce humaine. Mai*

1968 a définitivement décanté de la révolution que les révolutionnaires entreprennent contre eux-mêmes la révolution permanente pour la souveraineté de la vie." [105] Indeed, whereas in the case of all previous revolutions there was a "rapid and bloody repression of libidinal exuberance" [106], 1968 was different: and *that* revolution is still ongoing. For Vaneigem, the cat is out of the bag, and neoliberalism is playing a game of catch-up and recuperation which it cannot ultimately win. "Never before has desire... been endowed with such a potential to overthrow that which opposes and denies it and turns it into an object of exchange." Indeed, "Today something is coming to pass for which no imagination ever dared to hope: the process of personal alchemy is giving rise to nothing less than the transformation of inhuman history into a realization of humanity". [107] Perhaps, then, the dissatisfaction of many of us with the contemporary state of the world is just a failure of imagination, just a manifestation of that well-known cognitive bias designed mercifully by evolution to erase the memory of suffering: perhaps, in other words, we underestimate just how bleak the human condition appeared to committed social thinkers in even recent history. As Vaneigem said in the *Treatise*, "je me flatte que les conditions présentes s'effaceront de la mémoire des hommes" [108].

In the light of all this, another reading of the spectacle seems possible, however. As Vaneigem himself seems to acknowledge, the society of the spectacle, with its hedonistic overtones, constituted in fact a significant break with the Puritanism imagined to constitute a fundamental aspect of the Protestant work ethic as described by [Weber](#). Perhaps, indeed, this development has occurred only because there is no work left to do and it must be invented, and because the accumulation of capital no longer makes macroeconomic sense. But it does not seem preordained that people should remain passive spectators of what, through representation, nevertheless takes on a greater reality than if it were totally absent.

Finally, given the reliance that Vaneigem places on Reich, it's hard to resist a little Reichian character analysis of our own. Vaneigem praises Sade, and his own notion of exuberance and vitality, once unleashed, overflowing into violent "poetry" has obviously sadistic overtones. "Today, the true seducer is the sadist, the one who cannot forgive the desired one for being an object", he writes. [109] The social orgasmic release which the oppressed multitudes seek must, in his view, have a sadistic character. [110] His failure of self-awareness in this regard leads to conclusions which Reich would have comprehensively disavowed, for Reich's view was that "only the liberation of the natural capacity for love in human beings can master their sadistic destructiveness." [111] The prison of the spectacle is hardly perceived, for either Vaneigem or Debord, in its patriarchal aspect; given their characterological conditioning this blind spot seems inevitable. Nevertheless, it is clear that in his later thought Vaneigem came to a much clearer understanding of the centrality of patriarchy in the constitution of the social structures of power which he sought – and still seeks – to overthrow.

## 5. Suggested points for discussion

### ART AND POLITICAL ACTION

- In your view, was Debord an artist or an "anti-artist"?
- Did the artistic positioning of the Situationists contain something original and enduring, or has it been a blind alley?

- What other examples can you find of *détournement* and its opposite, recuperation? How effective is it as a strategy?
- What links do you see between the Situationists' artistic disposition and their political aims?

## THE TEXTS

- It has been suggested that Debord's notion of the spectacle was more an "intuition" than a theory. What do you think?
- Is it possible to conceive of a revolution without hierarchy or against hierarchy, as the Situationists sought to argue?
- Whether or not we believe that the Situationists had a compelling theory of it, the persistence of work despite the advances of automation, and contrary to the predictions of many of their contemporaries, certainly merits explanation. How would you explain it?
- To what extent has there been a recuperation of Situationism or of the events of May 1968? Is this a universal law, and is it entirely negative?
- Is Debord's concern really with spectacle *per se*, rather than with particular discourses which have privileged access to media channels?
- How convincing do you find Debord's criticism of culture, its "democratization" and mediatisation?

## THE ROLE OF MASS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

- What in your view explains the fascination of television, or audiovisual content more generally, and of video games? Why might people be content to accept their substitution to a more 'authentic' social life?
- In the light of Marshall McLuhan's claim that media is an "extension of man" and therefore a factor which contributes to the social construction of our own subjectivity, can a revolution against the spectacle be conceived at all, and if so what form might it take and what strategies are open to it?
- How have reality TV and then social media reinforced, undermined or transformed Debord's notion of spectacle? To what extent has the content of the spectacle now become negotiated, or at least negotiable, with the spectator? Is the expected demise of linear TV a good or bad thing?

- What parallels or contrasts do you see between the intellectual environment of the 1968 uprisings in France and the countercultural movements in the United States at the same time?
- Do you think that conspicuous consumption is as important today as it was in the 1960s? Does advertising really predominantly play on the drive for status?
- Vaneigem has recently stated that "*never in Europe have the forces of repression been so weakened, yet never have the exploited masses been so passive*" [112] Do you agree? What do you think explains the apparent lack of rage today ?
- How useful do you think the concepts developed by the Situationists are for navigating the contemporary world? What would you take from some of the other thinkers mentioned or known to you?

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## ENDNOTES

1 "*Of what is private life deprived? Simply of life itself.*" See the documentary on Debord "*Une vie, une œuvre*" broadcast on France Culture, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNYzLMsCE4E>

2 In Vaneigem's words, "*the term 'situationist' was ever only a token of identification. Its particularity kept us from being mistaken for the throngs of ideologues. I have nothing in common with the spectacular recuperation of a project that, in my case, has remained revolutionary throughout. My participation in a group that has now disappeared was an important moment in my personal evolution, an evolution I have personally pressed on with in the spirit of the situationist project at its most revolutionary. My own radicality absolves me from any label.*" See Hans Ulrich Obrist In Conversation with Raoul Vaneigem, available at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-conversation-with-raoul-vaneigem/>.

3 Cited as SS and TSV below. TSV page references are to the second edition, Paris: Gallimard [1967]1992.

4 "*He made little art, but that art which he did make was extreme*". See the 1996 documentary "Guy Debord: Son Art, Son Temps", available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sFgvdzUAzFc>

5 Asger Jorn, "Originality and Magnitude (on Isou's System)", in *Internationale Situationniste* #4 (June 1960), available at <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/originality.html>

6 *Report on the Construction of Situations*

7 TSV, ch. 20

8 *Report on the Construction of Situations*

9 See the *Report on the Construction of Situations*

10 TSV p.342

11 SS, proposition 208: *Détournement* is the antithesis of quotation, of a theoretical authority invariably tainted if only because it has become quotable, because it is now a fragment torn away from its context, from its own movement, and ultimately from the overall frame of reference of its period and from the precise option that it constituted within that framework, exactly recognized or mistaken. *Détournement* is the fluid language of anti-ideology...it makes its case on nothing external to its own truth as a present critique.

12 See on this Thaddeus Russell, *A Renegade History of the United States*

13 The second part of the strategy would be "a deliberately anticultural, industrially facilitated production (novels, films), the latter being a natural continuation of the imbecilization of young people begun in their schools and families". See *Report on the Construction of Situations*, available at <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/report.htm>

14 Knabb, Ken, ed. (1995). *Situationist International Anthology*, Berkeley, p. 50

15 Guy Debord (1955), *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography*

16 "*Its reflected light shone into their shared attic room and kept them awake at night*". HUSSEY, A. (2002) *The Game of War: The Life and Death of Guy Debord*, London, Pimlico. p. 51

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17 "For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world—impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito. The lover of life makes the whole world his family, just like the lover of the fair sex who builds up his family from all the beautiful women that he has ever found, or that are or are not—to be found; or the lover of pictures who lives in a magical society of dreams painted on canvas. Thus the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy." Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life", New York: Da Capo Press, 1964, translated from the French original published in Le Figaro in 1863.

18 SS, prop. 204

19 At SS, prop. 24 he confirms that mass communication media constitute a restricted aspect of the spectacle, defined nevertheless as "its most crushing superficial manifestation"; more generally the spectacle is "le discours ininterrompu que l'ordre présent tient sur lui-même" ("the uninterrupted discourse of the present order over itself"), which hardly seems to count as a definition.

20 SS, proposition 10

21 SS, prop. 18

22 "The sun which never sets on the empire of modern passivity", SS, prop. 13

23 SS, propositions 14-15

24 "Degradation of being into having". Loc. cit.

25 "Generalized shift from having into appearing". Debord plays on the euphony between *être* and *paraître*.

26 "The whole life of societies subject to modern conditions of production presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything which was once experienced directly is separated out into a representation". SS, proposition 1

27 "The wealth of societies subject to the capitalist mode of production presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities"

28 "The proliferation of prefabricated 'pseudo-events' is a simple result of the fact that people, in the massive reality of contemporary social life, do not themselves participate in events", SS, prop. 200

29 "There is no authority outside of my own lived experience." TSV, p. 253

30 TSV, p.133

31 [http://www.bopsecrets.org/PS/joyrev2.htm#N\\_3](http://www.bopsecrets.org/PS/joyrev2.htm#N_3)

32 SS, prop. 93

33 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 1844, p. 108; some argue that Marx later abandoned the notion of alienation because it seemed to presuppose (as it certainly did for Feuerbach) an essentialist view of human nature incompatible with the materialist view of the human condition being fully determined by the conditions of social life.

34 "Alienated consumption becomes, for the masses, a duty on top of alienated production". SS, prop. 42

35 SS, prop. 183

36 "As a dead object, in spectacular contemplation". SS, prop. 184

37 SS, prop. 192

38 "The world already possesses the dream of a [humanistic conception of] time; now it needs to possess the consciousness needed in order to realize it in reality", SS, prop. 164

39 "A short period during which historical time is frozen", SS, prop. 201

40 SS, prop. 203

41 "The critique which overcomes the spectacle must be able to be patient", SS, prop. 220

42 SS, prop. 214

43 <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0070712/reviews>

44 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-conversation-with-raoul-vaneigem/>

45 "I would have wished for such a book to be accessible to those who are least familiar with ideological jargon. I hope to have been no more than a relative failure in this respect." TSV, p. 19

46 "The wall which needs to be demolished is immense, but it has already been shaken by so many breaches that soon a single cry will suffice to bring it tumbling down". TSV, p. 81.

47 "To increase the share of authentic joy and celebration is strikingly similar to making preparations for general insurrection". TSV, p. 66

48 "I recognize no other equality than that which my will to live in accordance with my desires recognizes in the will to live of others". TSV, p. 64

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49 "In the mirror of today's masters one can already see the reflection of the masters of tomorrow". TSV p. 76  
50 "Prisoners are only docile insofar as prison permits them the hope of escape". TSV, p. 75  
51 TSV, p. 335  
52 TSV, p. 338  
53 "It's exactly the vaccine which is needed against the cold atrocity of the forces of order and of hierarchical oppression... Three thousand years of darkness will not resist to ten days of revolutionary violence". TSV, p.349  
54 TSV, p. 258  
55 TSV, pp. 278-9  
56 TSV, ch. 5  
57 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-conversation-with-raoul-vaneigem/>  
58 TSV, p. 210  
59 TSV, p. 126  
60 TSV, p. 126  
61 TSV, pp. 268-272  
62 "Who would not acknowledge that the life of an idle man, even if he is a little cynical, has a certain charm?" TSV, p. 115  
63 TSV, pp. 91, 206-7  
64 TSV, p. 205  
65 TSV, p. 246  
66 "To gain a world of pleasures, all we have to lose is our boredom." TSV, p. 361. The word *jouissance* also has a sexual meaning. The French text of the Communist Manifesto has "Les prolétaires n'y ont rien à perdre que leurs chaînes. Ils ont un monde à y gagner."  
67 Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/May\\_1968\\_events\\_in\\_France](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/May_1968_events_in_France)  
68 <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/29/world/europe/29iht-france.4.12440504.html>  
69 Loc.cit.  
70 "There is no other guide than pleasure". TSV, p.328  
71 "In the erotic realm, the sole perversion is the denial of pleasure". TSV, p.330  
72 TSV, p. 208  
73 "The current social crisis is also a crisis which is orgasmic in nature". Loc.cit.  
74 "To promote collective experiences of personal realization, and greatly to increase the number of amorous encounters bringing together a wide variety of valid partners". TSV, p.326  
75 "To recreate in social life the conditions of perfect plenitude which characterize the act of love." In French, the word *jouissance* means both "enjoyment" and "orgasm". TSV, p.328  
76 Patrick Rotman, *Mai 68 raconté à ceux qui ne l'ont pas vécu*, Paris: Seuil, 2008.  
77 New York Times, 29 April 2008, loc. cit.  
78 TSV, p. 257  
79 TSV, p. 278  
80 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-conversation-with-raoul-vaneigem/>  
81 Loc. cit.  
82 "Plagiarism is necessary. Progress requires it.", SS, prop. 207; the sentiment is apparently drawn from Lautréamont  
83 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 1957; *Systeme de la Mode*, 1967  
84 TSV, p. 125  
85 TSV, pp. 309-310  
86 Loc. cit.  
87 Loc. cit.  
88 Debord (1990), *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. M. Imrie. London and New York: Verso, p.36  
89 TSV p. 313  
90 SS, propositions 3 & 4  
91 SS, proposition 4  
92 Editorial introduction, *MediaTropes eJournal*, Vol II, No 1 (2009), [www.mediatropes.com](http://www.mediatropes.com)  
93 "Lovers, bring each other more and more often to orgasm". TSV, p. 329  
94 Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, 1988  
95 *Empire*, Harvard University Press 2001

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- 96 M. Hardt and A. Negri, "Take Up The Baton" (2012), available at <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2012/05/take-up-the-baton/>
- 97 D. Graeber, *Debt: The First Five Thousand Years*
- 98 SS, prop. 46
- 99 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVX5m7P0Zsg>
- 100 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkXFb1sMa38>
- 101 <http://depts.washington.edu/ccce/polcommcampaigns/CultureJamming.htm>
- 102 R. Pope, "Realizing the Scene; Punk and Meaning's Demise", in *International Journal of Zizek Studies*, Vol. 3, <http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/article/download/76/267>
- 103 [http://www.lacan.com/thesymptom/?page\\_id=2364](http://www.lacan.com/thesymptom/?page_id=2364)
- 104 "Le négatif est l'alibi d'une résignation à n'être jamais soi, à ne saisir jamais sa propre richesse de vie"
- 105 : "In thirty years, the world has undergone more fundamental changes than previously in several millennia. The fact that the Treatise may have had something to do with this sudden acceleration of history brings me, in the final analysis, less satisfaction than to observe – on the part of certain individuals and societies – those developments which lead from the primacy which has finally been accorded to the living to the probable creation of an authentic human being. May 1968 constitutes a definitive shift from the sort of revolution which revolutionaries previously undertook against themselves to a permanent revolution for the sovereignty of life." Preface to the 2nd edition of TSV, p.12
- 106 *ibid*, p.15
- 107 *ibid*, p.17
- 108 "I dare to presume that current conditions will at some point in the future be erased from human memory", TSV, p. 19
- 109 TSV, p. 325
- 110 TSV, p. 328. To be fair, Reich's theory of the orgasm, which is somewhat crude, is not foreign to such a misuse and Vaneigem struggles with the question of how to "prolong" the moment of orgasmic ecstasy.
- 111 Reich, *Character Analysis*, ch. 5
- 112 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-conversation-with-raoul-vaneigem/>