

*Correspondence: The Foundation of the Situationist International (June 1957–August 1960)*, Guy Debord, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009.

*All the King's Horses*, Michèle Bernstein, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008.

*50 Years of Recuperation of the Situationist International*, McKenzie Wark, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008.

#### Abstract

This review-essay looks at three texts from, or about, the early days of the Situationist International. The first volume of Guy Debord's *Correspondence* reveals the SI's internal discussions during their decisive first three years; Bernstein's book represents an example of the continued relevance of the technique of *détournement*; while Wark's text demonstrates both the breadth of the Situationist project and that, despite being continually mined by the academy, activists, the creative industries, and other more sinister recuperators, their work has not been depleted of its vitality. Taken together, the three books undermine a series of preconceptions about the SI, namely in terms of Debord's role at the centre of the group and the SI's engagement with the forces of the 'spectacle'.

#### Keywords

Guy Debord; Situationist International; Michèle Bernstein; *détournement*; McKenzie Wark; recuperation

In a letter from 1959, Guy Debord asserts that, in their journal, the Situationist International (SI) 'have published several texts that in thirty years will still be the basis for the creative movement that will not fail to constitute itself' (p. 278). Just over fifty years since their founding in Cosio d'Arroscia in Italy in 1957, this claim sounds as prescient as it does bombastic. The steady flow of texts related to either Guy Debord and/or the situationists shows no sign of abating, nor does their influence in the art-world or radical circles. Large portions of this work are derivative, of course, and some of it is quite simply poor, but there are enough high-quality texts emerging to suggest that Debord and the situationists have not yet been exhausted. In the second half of 2008 and early 2009, three situationist-related books were released in English: *50 Years of Recuperation of the Situationist International* by McKenzie Wark; Michèle Bernstein's novel *All the King's Horses*; and Guy Debord's *Correspondence*. These three works are not only worth discussing together because of the proximity of their publication dates and relation to the Situationist International; all three focus on the early, 'artistic' SI and demonstrate or elucidate previously under-discussed and under-appreciated aspects of the movement. The *Correspondence* offers an inside-look at the inner workings of the SI and Debord's leadership of the group during its fledgling stages; much of *50 Years of Recuperation* highlights the works of many of the more minor situationists or individuals who made an early split with the group; while *All the King's Horses* marks the first English publication of one of these 'minor' situationists. There is an additional degree of overlap as Wark also wrote the introduction to *Correspondence*, and Bernstein's book is covered in *50 Years of Recuperation*.

*Correspondence* is the English translation of the first of the seven volumes of Guy Debord's letters that have been published in France since 1999.<sup>1</sup> These seven volumes are considerably longer than Debord's complete *Œuvres* and this volume of his correspondence, covering the period of the SI's founding in June 1957 to August 1960, is by far the thickest of his books in English at just under four-hundred pages (albeit an amply-spaced four-hundred pages with wide margins). During this time, the first half of what Debord later called the first period of the SI (1957–62), the SI was primarily concerned with 'the supersession of art'.<sup>2</sup> Founded as a fusion of three small avant-garde groups – Debord's Lettrist International, Asger Jorn and Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio's International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, and the London Psychogeographical Association (with English artist Ralph Rumney as its sole member) – over the course of its fifteen-year existence its focus gradually shifted away from artistic concerns to total critique and social revolution, playing a role in the build-up to the events of May '68 in Paris.<sup>3</sup> The SI saw themselves as the inheritors of the legacy of the historical avant-garde, particularly dada and surrealism, and sought to transcend the constraints of art. Key to this project was the notion of the 'constructed situation', which gave the movement its name. Defined as a 'moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambience and a game of events', their creation would involve a complex interplay between a collective group of 'livers' (rather than 'actors') and the physical environment.<sup>4</sup>

Right from the beginning, the *Correspondence* shows Debord and the SI trying to be at the forefront of the most advanced experiments in contemporary art. As Debord asks in a debate with the Dutch architect Constant and the Danish painter Jorn, 'what might the experimental art of our era be and how can we make it?' (p. 160) They seek to move away from the utopian revolutionary art of the surrealists to what Debord repeatedly calls 'an experimental revolutionary art' (p. 149). Jettisoning any conceptions of artistic genius ('it seems to me that we already have amongst us too many young artistic elderly who have missed out on their own 19th century' [p. 293]), the SI wanted to harness the latest developments in technology and industry to study, fulfil, and play with their desires – and generate new ones:

All art that wants to cling to an outmoded artisanal freedom is lost in advance. In the future, a free art will be an art that dominates and employs all the new

1. It should be noted that the New York-based group 'Not Bored' has been translating and publishing online all of Debord's correspondence for years, with an emphasis on Debord's largely neglected writings on terrorism and the Red Brigades. Not Bored has considerable problems with the editing ('systematic omissions') of the *Correspondence* in French, Alice Debord's role, as well as Semiotext(e) publishing the letters without commenting on the battle over the letters. See Not Bored 2009.

2. Debord 2006, p. 380.

3. Debord writes in his autobiography that 'grave responsibility' is 'often attributed' to him for the 'origins, or even for the command, of the May 1968 revolt'. This may sound like megalomania, but Debord was actually spoken of in these terms by the tabloid-press among others, particularly following the assassination of his publisher Gérard Lebovici in 1984. Debord 2004, p. 22.

4. Situationist International 2006, p. 51.

techniques of conditioning. Outside of this perspective there is only the artificially revived slavery of the past, and business. (p. 159.)

All artistic techniques would be at the service of constructed situations – art would not simply be made in order to be contemplated by a viewer, but used instead in the creation of situations of increasing duration and ambition. While, in the early days of the SI, their activity was very much focused on being at the forefront of the art-world and the concept of the constructed situation still seemed to resemble a more radical version of a ‘happening’ (the SI claimed that ‘happenings’ should be seen as an attempt ‘to construct a situation in isolation’, as ‘an instance of the old artistic spectacle pushed to an extreme’), the SI’s eventual expulsion of all practising artists and its transition from an avant-garde art-movement to a more directly political-theoretical vanguard is foreshadowed in these letters.<sup>5</sup>

While Debord’s most systematic work, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), is ‘ostentatiously and obviously’ embedded in the tradition of Hegelian Marxism, during the period covered by this edition of the *Correspondence*, Debord’s direct engagement with the Marxist tradition is negligible.<sup>6</sup> During the early days of the SI, he had read relatively little Marx, and certainly had not studied Marx systematically.<sup>7</sup> He had read Lukács over this period, however, as testified by a text in *Situationist International* from June 1960, where Debord favourably quotes Lukács’s statement that: ‘The primacy of the category of totality is the bearer of the principle of revolution in science.’<sup>8</sup> As Anselm Jappe writes in his valuable intellectual biography of Debord, which focuses on his relation to the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, Lukács influenced Debord profoundly and provided the foundation for his development of Marxist themes.<sup>9</sup> Although the journal *Arguments* had published a few chapters in the late 1950s, the first pirate French edition of Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* did not appear until 1960, and other than referring several times to the concept of totality, the references to the primacy of the commodity that are so foundational to *The Society of the Spectacle* are entirely absent from the *Correspondence*. Lefebvre and Debord were friendly at this point (prior to their acrimonious split in 1962), but Lefebvre is also barely present here, except as the recipient of a letter on revolutionary romanticism and a few points where Debord mentions reading Lefebvre’s *La Somme et le Reste*. Interestingly, in a connection I have never seen examined, Debord also seems to have been an admirer of Lucien Goldmann, describing him in a letter to Jorn as ‘very important and original in independent Marxist thought’ (he even appears to encourage Jorn to agree with him as ‘this

5. Situationist International 2006, p. 143.

6. As T.J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith write, *The Society of the Spectacle* was written in ‘the moment when the very word *totality*, and the very idea of trying to articulate those forces and relations of production that were giving capitalism a newly unified and unifying form, were tabooed (as they largely still are) as remnant of a discredited “Hegelian” tradition. [...] It was intended to keep the habit of totalization alive – but of course to express, in every detail of its verbal texture and overall structure, what a labor of rediscovery and revoicing (indeed, of restating the obvious) that project would now involve’. Clark and Nicholson-Smith 2002, pp. 478–9.

7. He was more familiar with Hegel, though, who he had first encountered through the work of Jean Hyppolite and also through the Surrealists and Bataille, who were heavily influenced by Kojève, and from whom Debord acquired the focus on negation. See Hussey 2002, pp. 114–16.

8. Lukács 1971, p. 27. Quoted in Debord 1997, p. 139.

9. Jappe 1999, pp. 20–1.

would be very positive, at least for our relationship with the Parisian intelligentsia' (p. 264). There is no discussion of Marx or Marxism with any theoretical depth in the *Correspondence*, but Debord, in a letter to Constant in April 1959, expresses his admiration for dialectical materialism: 'I believe that the importance of dialectical materialism, its decisive (but still barely exploited) progress in the history of ideas, is above all the *supremacy of practice*, the notion of *praxis* that *contains and supersedes* theoretical reflection and which is itself always inseparable from a praxis' (p. 244). He felt the SI at this stage were lacking this theoretical and conceptual sophistication – or a cogent way of coupling their avant-garde, experimental activity with a nuanced critique – and as he writes later in the same letter, 'what is still very much missing in the SI is dialectics'.

It is around this time that Debord begins his relationship with Cornelius Castoriadis's Socialisme ou Barbarie. While in a letter from 1958 he refers to them as 'idiots' (p. 151), in late 1960 Debord would formally join the group and, despite the fact that this relationship was short-lived (Debord was only in the group for a few months), Socialisme ou Barbarie would turn out to be key for the development of the SI.<sup>10</sup> Not only was the SI's eventual stress on the importance of workers' councils taken from Socialisme ou Barbarie, but, as Stephen Hastings-King writes in his history of the relation between the SI and Socialisme ou Barbarie, '*Socialisme ou Barbarie* functions as an Archimedean point around which the SItus tried to pivot from art and cultural dissent into revolutionary politics'.<sup>11</sup> This pivot can be seen quite clearly in texts like 'Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program' and 'For a Revolutionary Judgement of Art', from July 1960 and February 1961 respectively. In a language clearly influenced by Castoriadis's group, Debord mapped the director-executant relationship into the world of culture, seeing authors and spectators as affected by an analogous relationship of power.<sup>12</sup> It was here that Debord was able to begin to reformulate his avant-gardist assault on society and its institutions in a more Marxian vocabulary.

In the tradition of the Russian constructivists, German dada and the surrealists, Debord vaguely envisioned a liaison between the most radical avant-garde in the field of cultural production and the revolutionary subject of the proletariat. As Debord writes to Constant in 1959, 'it seems to me that turning to the workers' movement is the most scandalous thing in the decomposed modern art world, which has become generally apolitical and fascistic. It's the best defence against the "pictorial" tendency' (p. 228). The interaction between culture and politics may be nothing new, claims Debord, but it is the interaction between the most radical, revolutionary enclaves of each sphere that is historically novel, even if the conditions for this interaction existed as early as the 1920s. As he would later theorise in *The Society of the Spectacle*:

The two currents that marked the end of modern art were dadaism and surrealism. Though they were only partially conscious of it, they paralleled the proletarian revolutionary movement's last great offensive; and the halting of that movement,

10. In a later letter, Debord claims that even after withdrawing from the group he remained 'as sympathetic as possible'. [Reference for this needed?]

11. Hastings-King 1999, p. 26.

12. Canjuers and Debord 2006, p. 392.

which left them trapped within the very artistic sphere that they had declared dead and buried, was the fundamental cause of their own immobilization.<sup>13</sup>

This liaison would not simply consist of the SI writing protest-slogans, propagandising for the workers' councils in journals, and designing workers' clubs, but being at the forefront of the cultural revolution: 'Revolutionary artists are those who call for intervention, and who have themselves intervened in the spectacle in order to disrupt and destroy it.'<sup>14</sup> The workers' movement and the vanguard of experimental artists would have a symbiotic relationship, as each needed the other to create the conditions for the realisation of autonomy and free creativity. As Debord and Daniel Blanchard from *Socialisme ou Barbarie* put it in a co-written article: 'Those seeking an experimental culture cannot hope to realize it without the triumph of the revolutionary movement, while the latter cannot itself establish authentic revolutionary conditions without resuming the efforts of the cultural avant-garde toward the critique of everyday life and its free reconstruction.'<sup>15</sup> If too many artists had missed out on their own nineteenth century, the SI was trying to refigure the role of the artists who would lead the way out of the twentieth.

Such a project of total revolution obviously entailed a great deal of work, and for someone who once scrawled 'Ne travaillez jamais' on a wall in Paris, Debord's correspondence makes him appear surprisingly busy. Obviously, what he was doing was not wage-labour – Debord bragged of never having received a salary and preferred to work with a patron on the Renaissance-model (his publisher Lebovici played this role later on, here perhaps Jorn) – but it still refutes the somewhat romantic image of the SI as irresponsible, drunken libertines and loafers, hanging out in a then-still-bohemian Paris while plotting total revolution. In fact, Debord gives the impression that part of the rationale behind the decision to leave the Lettrist International and found the Situationist International was to move from the margins of society and culture, with the freedom which that allowed, to a position closer to the centre. In a letter to Alexander Trocchi, the author of *Young Adam* and *Cain's Book*, and an honorary situationist not granted full membership because of his drug problems, Debord writes: 'The era of that lost generation we knew does seem to be gradually coming to an end here, in obliviousness and indifference' (p. 142). The time of 'prodigious inactivity' was over. The task of superseding art and changing the world would need a new discipline and severity. As Wark's introduction to the *Correspondence*, 'The Secretary', emphasises, Debord did not just play a major theoretical role in the SI's development; rather, his organisational work held it together as a group spread across Europe, with Debord in conversation with potential members in Canada and Israel. This is made all the more impressive by the fact that Debord – born in 1931 – was dealing with considerably older established artists (Constant was twelve years older, Asger Jorn eighteen, and Pinot-Gallizio thirty). When Jorn – who over this period is thought to have been financing the SI through the sale of his paintings – misses a meeting Debord sends him a stern letter with the ultimatum: 'I'll expect you again at my place on Thursday at 3, and will wait only a half an hour. Be sure that I will not propose another meeting' (p. 84).

13. Debord 1994, paragraph 191.

14. Canjuers and Debord 2006, p. 391.

15. Canjuers and Debord 2006, p. 390.

So much at this stage revolves around art and the art-world, the name of the SI spreading largely through exhibitions by various members. Despite their rhetorical opposition to the media and the art-industry, Debord displays an obvious enjoyment in creating scandal to generate publicity, and his wish to get SI-related events to appear on radio and television is evident (pp. 122–3, 125). When planning a scandal at a meeting of art-critics in Brussels, Debord says, ‘it’s imperative that the SI end up being the *subject* of a story in the international press’ (p. 71, Debord’s emphasis). Pinot is asked to make *stunning, shocking* paintings, and told that ‘*nothing can be too violent*’ (p. 72, Debord’s emphasis), and Debord even congratulates Pinot, using an exclamation-mark, for having a painting purchased by the Carnegie Institute (p. 146). Similarly, upon hearing that a member (the Belgian Andre Franklin) is going to be putting on a play, Debord remarks that although he has not read the play yet, ‘[i]t is in any case excellent that our presence be extended little by little in all the existing areas of the arts. Through this progression, we will be able to impose a field of group action’ (p. 371). What comes out clearly is, first, that the SI’s stringency was strategic rather than principled, which makes its adoption by different variants of their followers seem all the more like a caricature. Second, the SI’s critique of the spectacle was an immanent critique: there was no escaping the spectacle and it was a question of either existing in relative, yet perhaps stultifying or fleeting, freedom at its outskirts or contesting the spectacle from its centre.

In these early days, the SI had several imperatives. The first was to establish its coherence as a group, externally as much as internally. Debord was tasked with responsibility for the ‘ideological coherence’ of the journal (p. 125). Two months after their founding, Debord writes to Jorn, ‘a new legend must be created immediately around us’ (p. 46). Debord tells the group’s members to continually stress the centralised aspect of the group in interviews, meetings and texts: they are not simply a loose fraternity of individual artists sympathetic to each others’ respective projects, but rather an ensemble in ‘the common experience of a movement’ (p. 102). As Debord proclaims: ‘The “I” without the “we” falls back into the prefabricated mass’ (p. 209). Simultaneously, however, in a point also made in several texts in their journal, they were to avoid any notion of ‘situationism’. Debord writes: ‘The main point to emphasize is that *situationism*, as a body of doctrine, does not exist and must not exist. What exists is a *Situationist* experimental attitude, defined *organizationally* (precisely in the form of an international Association)’ (p. 42). Instead of a new ‘ism’, what held the group together was a solidarity around a set of perspectives (p. 178).

Right from the beginning, a key part of managing the SI’s coherence involved the use of expulsions, the details of which will likely be of particular interest to those familiar with the SI’s tumultuous history. Echoing Bernstein’s 1958 text ‘No Useless Leniency’, Debord claims there is a need to expel members with detachment and to see it as ‘a suppression of reciprocal obligations, and in no way an aggression’ (p. 370). Debord has a reputation for being cantankerous, yet, in the vast majority of his letters, even the excommunications, he is civil and gracious. Considering the effort both Debord and the SI put into controlling their public image, in cultivating their legend, the *Correspondence* is especially revealing in that it shows their internal dynamic and the group’s private rationale, or at least Debord’s, behind many of the early expulsions (Rumney, Constant, Pinot). Above all, it shows the struggle to make a movement with a staggering amount of ambition out of a small, ragtag-group of artists spread throughout Western Europe, with what at most can be called similar concerns.

About the possible contradiction between the loose ideological coherence and ‘no useless leniency’ concerning the group’s membership, Hal Foster asks, ‘if there was no doctrine, why so many apostates?’<sup>16</sup> One of the most interesting threads throughout the letters shows the group trying to find this balance between compromise and stringency in building an organisation with a level of ambition that from today’s jaded perspective seems slightly ludicrous, particularly in the art-world. For the SI, critique was all or nothing. ‘Our necessary activity is dominated by the question of the *totality*’, as Debord writes (p. 235). The choice facing every individual was ‘suicide or revolution’,<sup>17</sup> and their position was a ‘systematic rejection of all forms of social and political organization in the West and the East, and of all the groups that are currently trying to change them’, as one commentator laconically put it.<sup>18</sup> *The Society of the Spectacle* – Debord’s 1967 book of theory, which over the course of its 212 theses puts forward the SI’s critique of advanced capitalism in its most systemic guise – is an indictment of the society which they despised and had been organising to destroy in its totality. The spectacle is the world of Brezhnev, de Gaulle, and Lyndon Johnson, of Le Corbusier and shantytowns, of the Rolling Stones and the Parisian Opera, of Godard and Hollywood. The concept of the spectacle was supposed to identify and attack everything wrong with the present organisation of life.

It is from this perspective, coupled with the notion of moving from the margins of culture to the centre, that the SI’s organisational discipline and rhetorical combativeness makes sense:

To reach this superior cultural creation – what we call the Situationist game – we now think it is necessary to be an active force in the actual sphere of this era’s culture (and not on the fringes of it, as we cheerfully were in 1952–3). This real action is not devoid of risks: the ideological and material powers of artistic commerce might in the end win and dissolve us. (p. 164.)

The slightest *appearance* of compromise with the existing spectacle – anything from the careerism of individual members, a painter having a commercial exhibition or an architect designing a church – had to be expunged from the situationist legend. Considering the continued importance of their legacy, one perhaps has to say that, for the most part, they got it right and that the expulsions did serve their purpose. The SI abandoned any position of cultural or subjective purity, but it is their maintenance of a rhetoric of complete distance and superiority from the dominant spectacle that, as Steven Shaviro has noted, has contributed to them being one of the most ‘commercially successful “memes” or “brands” of the past half-century, for better or for worse’.<sup>19</sup> Yet, as the most stimulating exchanges are – not quite by far, but almost – those between Debord and Constant, one cannot help but wonder what might have been created had some of these collaborations been allowed to continue (not just Debord and Constant, but also between the SI and figures like

16. Foster 2009, p. 6.

17. Vaneigem 2006, p. 121.

18. *Le Monde*, 9 December 1966, quoted in Situationist International 2006, p. 500.

19. One perhaps has to define ‘situationism’ incredibly loosely to consider it commercially successful, but Shaviro’s point is otherwise well taken. See Shaviro 2009.

Lefebvre). Whether this would have dissolved their critical edge and turned them into a more Gallic and slightly angrier Fluxus we can only speculate.

Beyond this, there are plenty of insignificant but entertaining details in the *Correspondence*. Debord's constant haranguing of Pinot evokes a few laughs. There is the revelation that Debord and friends used the term 'marsupial' to refer young women of their liking. More than just random slang, it was a concept developed by Lettrist fellow-traveller Ivan Chtcheglov to refer to an 'antiwoman': 'She is ugly and beautiful. She is like everything we love today' (p. 57, n. 2). A subplot throughout the letters is the plight of the SI's printer who has a nervous breakdown of sorts while printing their journal. There is also a surreal moment where, in a line reminiscent of Kant's footnote on aliens in his essay 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose', Debord asks Constant to reword a passage so as not to suggest that the SI were opposed to interplanetary adventures. All in all, this first volume of Debord's *Correspondence* is a welcome addition to the English language material on the situationists, but it would likely be a tedious read for anyone who does not already have a good familiarity with the group's early days (a glossary of names would have been extremely helpful in this regard).

Debord, both as the group's only constant from its founding to its dissolution and in his role as 'secretary', was in a privileged position to contribute to the legend of the SI and of his own role as its prime mover. As such it is not surprising that the majority of texts on the SI focus on Debord's role. If the *Correspondence* inevitably frames the early SI from Debord's perspective, Wark's *50 Years of Recuperation* is an appropriate complement. The book is not so much an academic study of the group, but a meandering essay that touches on many under-researched aspects of the movement. Wark has been engaged with the situationists for some time now and has addressed various aspects of their work in each of his four books.<sup>20</sup> *50 Years of Recuperation* is short, containing forty pages of text, followed by thirty-two pages of glossy images. Wark attempts to cover so much ground – the fifty years of the title – that it often feels as though he is spreading himself too thin. This is a shame because he does touch on a considerable amount of inadequately researched aspects of the SI and their legacy (Bernstein's novels, for example, get seven pages). After the book's introductory remarks, and a chapter that briefly names a few of the writers, collectives, and artists who have recuperated the SI, small chapters are devoted, respectively, to: Pinot's industrial painting; Jorn's interest in topology; Constant's *New Babylon*; the board game Debord designed together with his second wife Alice Becker-Ho (*The Game of War*); Bernstein's novels; and Jacqueline de Jong's journal/zine *The Situationist Times*.

Terrified of being labelled hagiography and mildly concerned with being viewed as 'academic' (or vice versa), much of the work on the SI is excruciatingly repetitive and lacks both the polemical passion of the fans and the depth of the scholars. Too often, texts on the SI are drawn to either extreme reverence or irreverence: pro-situ texts that feel the need to treat the SI's texts as gospel or else people like the collective Luther Blissett/Wu Ming, who refer to Debord as 'Guy the Bore' in an attempt to mimic the severity of the SI's polemics and provoke the fans.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, Wark strikes a good balance between these extremes and the tone of his work is refreshing. As he reveals early on: 'I'm interested in those who, like me, read Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* at an impressionable age, and decided

20. See Wark 1994, 2002, 2004, and 2007.

21. Blissett 1995.

thereafter to do something with it, even if we were not sure what' (p. 9). This characterises a large contingent of the contemporary art-world and radical Left, and one wishes that this was the real subject of this book: a survey of those who, since the founding of the SI, have most cogently sought to utilise or develop their ideas and practices. Those influenced by the SI – Wark lists Bernadette Corporation, Critical Arts Ensemble, Luther Blissett and several others – are only mentioned, and despite what the title of the book seems to suggest, Wark's gaze is almost exclusively directed to the late fifties and early sixties. Rather than the ups and downs of fifty years of recuperation, we are once again treated to another release of *SI: The Early Years*, only this time, instead of the hits, we get the B-sides and rarities.

This is not a problem per se but it is compounded by the fact that Wark himself does not really seem to be sure what to do with this text. Large portions are insightful, yet its size and the range it is attempting to cover make it read like an introduction to something like a situationist retrospective or a detailed course-syllabus rather than a stand-alone work. Some parts are détourned (from *détournement*, a technique of creative plagiarism or appropriation, dealt with in detail below) from situationist texts and lines are used without citation (in a footnote, Wark admits that this is true of many of the book's best lines), but this is done with a knowing wink to readers familiar with Debord and the SI's *œuvre*, instead of as a productive provocation.<sup>22</sup> In the end, the most important feature of *50 Years of Recuperation* is that it points towards new possibilities for research into the SI and the book can be recommended for those with an interest in the situationists who may not be acquainted with the movement's minor figures.

One hopes that this interest in the minor situationists will also be encouraged by the release of *All the King's Horses*, Michèle Bernstein's first novel, originally published in France in 1960 but basically unavailable until its reprinting in 2004. Bernstein's precise influence on the movement in its early stages remains somewhat obscure because of her refusal to have Debord's letters to her published in the *Correspondence* (although she was a founding member, published a few texts in the journal, and, as an oft-cited titbit has it, her astrology columns for race-horses helped finance the SI in the early days).<sup>23</sup> This absence might be inevitable, as Debord probably did not write many letters to his wife, who he lived with at the time; but, as Wark notes, it still serves to make *All the King's Horses* work in many ways as a companion-piece to the *Correspondence*. Classifiable as 'autofiction' – Gilles and Geneviève instead of Guy and Michèle – Bernstein's novel is usually read by those interested in Debord in order to get a feeling for Debord and Bernstein's – famously open – relationship (they were married in 1954 and divorced in 1972, the same year as the SI's auto-dissolution), rather than on its own literary merits. As if Semiotext(e) were trying to undermine the relevance of Bernstein's novel as anything but a means to access intimate details about the young Debord, *All the King's Horses* is published together with a rather mediocre essay by Odile Passot first published over a decade ago, 'Portrait of Guy Debord as a Young Libertine'. Considering the SI's reputation as a group whose female members' main function was to cook and type, this decision can appear more problematic than it might have been

22. Writing a so-called scholarly work utilising the same methods would create a dangerous precedent, undermining regulatory exercises like the Research Excellence Framework in UK universities. The *Situationist International Anthology* has no copyright and 'any of the texts may be freely reproduced, translated or adapted, even without mentioning the source'.

23. See Ross 2002, p. 268.

otherwise.<sup>24</sup> In any case, anyone looking for personal details about Debord not revealed in his texts and films should look to the myriad of biographies or intellectual biographies that have appeared in English and French. Assuming *All the King's Horses* is in fact an accurate depiction of Guy and Michèle's lives at the time, all one really learns of Guy is that he was thought to be rather charming and liked young girls and walking.

This framing of the novel through the persona of Debord is disappointing because *All the King's Horses* is engaging in its own right. While Bernstein was composing it, the SI had declared *détournement* to be 'the essential mode of action in a transitional culture' (Debord, p. 196). Tom McDonough sees the concept of *détournement* – what he refers to as 'class struggle in language' – as 'the most vital aspect of [the Situationists'] legacy, and the one with the greatest lessons for the present'.<sup>25</sup> The technique is used throughout Debord's texts and films (as well as those of René Viénet, like the surprisingly engaging *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* [1973]), and *détourned* advertisements and comics often featured on the pages of *Internationale Situationniste*, but Bernstein's book is the first instance of a situationist applying the technique to the novel. The use of *détournement* is made clear within the book's first few pages as the narrator claims 'novels and paintings follow whichever recipe is convenient at the moment. In any case, there's something to be said for cleverly using the clichés of one's time'. In this case, the clichés of the time are those of the cheap paperback youth-novels flooding France in the fifties and, particularly, novels such as Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* (1954). Spanning a few months in the life of a young woman in an open marriage in late-fifties Paris, it follows her relationship with her husband's young lover, as well as two affairs of her own.

Bernstein has dismissed the artistic merit of *All the King's Horses* and her other novel published the following year, *La Nuit* (1961), as hackwork written to pay the bills, but this should not necessarily lead us to disregard these works. As McDonough writes:

The strategy of appropriation [the SI] outlined was meant to finally put an end to the artisanal production of culture: no longer the scribe in his study, laboriously creating the unique 'work', but a mass-produced flood of cheap literary products, accessible (on the level of production as well as consumption) to all, and hence perhaps less the antithesis of the cultural commodity than its sublation.<sup>26</sup>

As McDonough emphasises, the SI, following Baudelaire, never saw themselves above, or beyond, the spectacle. He writes about Debord and Jorn's *Mémoires* (1959), 'it was a declaration that a critique of the world of spectacle could be articulated only through the components of spectacle itself, that there was no lofty height from which social analysis could be pursued, but that only by working through the surfaces of social life could a critical position be found'.<sup>27</sup> A novel like this obviously runs the risk of becoming, or at

24. See Rumney 1989. For more on the SI and gender see Baum 2008.

25. McDonough 2007, pp. 26, 6.

26. McDonough 2007, p. 35.

27. McDonough 2007, p. 6. This could possibly be compared and contrasted with Debord's later 'literary' works like *Panegyric*, written with a classically cold and aristocratic detachment. Debord's prose is considerably different from Bernstein's but, as his 'On the Difficulties of Translating *Panegyrique*' reveals, the text makes constant use of *détournement*, and the very tone of Debord's 'classical French' can be seen to experiment with notions of autobiography and

least being mistaken for, the texts it is détourning, but the SI would see this as an inevitable hazard of entering the cultural civil war.

Bernstein's novel may, at first glance, seem to be quite an anodyne narrative about the romantic entanglements of a *jeune fille*, but with the context in which it was written in mind, its themes acquire greater significance. Wark quotes Kristin Ross:

The construction of the new French couple is not only a class necessity but a national necessity as well, linked to the state-led modernization effort. Called upon to lead France into the future, these couples are the class whose very way of life is based on the wish to make the world futureless and at that price buy security.<sup>28</sup>

As such, *All the King's Horses* can clearly be situated in the 'battle for leisure' that Debord claims the SI was the first revolutionary organisation to emphasise in late 1958 (p. 190). A few years earlier, Lettrist fellow travel Ivan Chtcheglov wrote:

Presented with the alternative of love or a garbage disposal unit, young people of all countries have chosen the garbage disposal unit. It has become essential to provoke a complete spiritual transformation by bringing to light forgotten desires and by creating entirely new ones. And by carrying out an *intensive propaganda* in favor of these desires.<sup>29</sup>

*All the King's Horses* makes use of the popular literary forms of the day, détourning not only contemporary novels like *Bonjour Tristesse*, but also works like Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's eighteenth-century novel *Dangerous Liaisons* – to propagandise for adventurous love, so to speak. Like the characters in *Dangerous Liaisons*, Geneviève and Gilles are engaged in games of seduction, but the malevolence is replaced with a conception of love that is open, playful, and bound to the conception of potlatch so vital to the early SI. *All the King's Horses* is unapologetically seductive, but its refusal to take itself too seriously – its refusal to be sincere – creates a sort of alienation-effect.<sup>30</sup> This allows the novel to also provide a subtle critique of both the more utopian pretensions of the SI's discourse and of a certain kind of situationist-influenced lifestyle-politics.

Reading these three works together, a number of issues, themes, and questions emerge. First is the sheer ambition of the situationist project. Wark writes in the introduction to the *Correspondence*, '[o]ne makes a movement with what one has' (p. 7), and the fact that Debord and company were able to string together an international organisation that has had such a lasting influence with such modest means and experience is astounding. Second, one is struck by the depth and breadth of their project, as highlighted by Wark and the

legacy under conditions of spectacle. The same can be said of Debord's films, with *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978) functioning as a transitional work that combines a narration similar in tone to *Panegyric* with clips from Hollywood-films and advertisements (among other things). Debord 2004, p. 171.

28. Ross 1998, p. 148.

29. Chtcheglov 2006, p. 4.

30. McDonough suggests that *détournement* can potentially be subsumed under the Brechtian strategy of the 'alienation-effect'. See McDonough 2007, p. 42.

publication of Bernstein's novel. The SI is too often thought of as Debord's project, and while the *Correspondence* suggests that this is not without considerable justification, the activities of their lesser-known members, while they were in the group or after they parted ways, are still worthy of more scrutiny from scholars, artists and activists. Third, despite the fact that the situationist targeting of the totality is a large part of their appeal, their humbler works – works like *All the King's Horses* – can provide a cogent inspiration for oppositional cultural production today. It is the novel's lack of sincerity, its embodiment of the contradictions of producing culture as a commodity, which makes it so readable and relevant today. The SI is often portrayed as a group that magically escaped the oppressive force of spectacle (or arrogantly and naïvely believed themselves to have escaped it), but these works make it clear that their position was one of immanent and engaged critique.

The Retort Collective, who employ Debord, and particularly the concept of the spectacle, in their 2005 *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in the New Age of War*, speak of the need to de-sacralise the concept, to dirty it with real-world analysis. Those working with the situationists within the academy and the art-world – usually those who have been 'fans' of the group<sup>31</sup> – seem to have an insurmountable urge to excuse or justify themselves for partaking in an act of potential recuperation and sanitisation of their revolutionary thought and practice. As Wark writes: 'The Situationists are nobody's property. They belong now to the very "literary communism" that Debord and company announced before the movement had even really begun' (p. 44). A recently started clothing company in California takes the name 'Society of the Spectacle Clothing', Israel Defence Forces strategists study the SI for purposes of urban warfare, and Debord and the SI are taught on foundational Media and Communications and Fine Art courses around the world, often in distorted form.<sup>32</sup> Simultaneously, the SI's particular interpretation of the project of 'the ruthless criticism of all things existing' is clearly important – stylistically, as well as theoretically – for groups ranging from Adbusters to CrimethInc and the Invisible Committee.<sup>33</sup> The situationists write in a commentary on the events surrounding the publication of their infamous pamphlet 'On the Poverty of Student Life': 'We want ideas to become dangerous again.'<sup>34</sup> Those who do wish not simply to reflect upon but to develop the project of Debord and/or the situationists perhaps need to have the faith that the ideas of the SI are *still* dangerous enough to make them volatile even in the hands of their most insidious recuperators – and, in this epoch, it can get a whole lot more insidious than academic journals, media-theory, and art-schools. As we have seen, the SI was aware of this danger. They write with characteristicchutzpah:

It is quite natural that our enemies succeed in partially using us. We are neither going to leave the present field of culture to them nor mix with them. . . . Like the proletariat, we cannot claim to be unexploitable in the present conditions; we

31. 'Fans' is here not being used in the pejorative sense, but, following Mark Fisher, to identify those who have had a 'libidinal investment' in the work of the SI. See Fisher 2009.

32. See Weizman 2007.

33. See Invisible Committee 2009.

34. Situationist International 2006, p. 272.

must simply work to make any such exploitation entail the greatest possible risk for the exploiters.<sup>35</sup>

Quite simply, if the SI's thought and techniques are still relevant, there is still something dangerous about it, something dangerous enough to survive these trends. This is amply demonstrated by these three new publications. Here is to fifty more years of recuperation!

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35. Situationist International 2006, p. 136.

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