



**A University of Sussex DPhil thesis**

Available online via Sussex Research Online:

<http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/>

This thesis is protected by copyright which belongs to the author.

This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the Author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the Author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

Please visit Sussex Research Online for more information and further details

**'A Lot to Answer for':**  
**The English Legacy of the Situationist International**

Thesis submitted by Samuel Martin Cooper  
Literature, Film and Visual Culture DPhil  
University of Sussex  
May 2012

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

**Signature:**

**University of Sussex**

**Samuel Martin Cooper**

**Literature, Film and Visual Culture DPhil**

**‘A Lot to Answer for’: The English Legacy of the Situationist International**

This thesis draws attention to the overlooked period of English avant-garde activity that arose in response to the Situationist International (SI, 1957-1972). I attempt to consolidate the continued literary, political and artistic relevance of the disparate manifestations of English Situationist practices, while reflecting more broadly on the Anglicisation of Continental avant-garde traditions. The thesis contributes also to the ongoing re-evaluation of the SI through its peripheral and international permutations.

The thesis presents an historical narrative in four stages. The first follows the formation of the Surrealist Group in England and its transformation into Mass-Observation. This activity in the Thirties is both prolepsis to and prehistory of the English Situationist tradition, which begins at the thesis's second stage, in the early Sixties, with the novelist and cultural organiser Alexander Trocchi, one of the first British members of the SI. The third stage introduces the short-lived English Section of the SI and its immediate precursor and successor groups of the late Sixties, all of whom undertook a cultural translation of the SI's project. The thesis's final stage identifies contemporary manifestations of what I argue is an English Situationist poetics, which exists independently of self-identifying avant-garde groups.

Interwoven through my historical narrative are investigations of three recurring problems: the problem of 'Englishness', and its perceived incompatibility with Continental avant-gardism; the problem of influence, whereby neo-avant-gardism is dismissed as the hollow repetition of early twentieth century formations; and the Situationist problem of the radical aesthetic object's subsumption to a commodity economy. I offer readings of novels, films and visual materials; of tracts, manifestos and journal debates; and of theorists (especially Rancière) whose perspectives on history and political aesthetics are productively dissonant with those of the SI. Anglicised Situationist practices, I propose, are valuable precisely for their contestation of and movement through Situationist theory.

## **Acknowledgements**

My debt to Dr. John David Rhodes is immeasurable. His guidance, encouragement, and friendship predate this project, and I hope that something of his commitment to academic study as a means of illuminating and understanding the worlds in which we live shines through this work.

I would like to thank Dr. Rosalind Galt for her valuable feedback at a decisive moment in the thesis's composition. I am grateful also to the AHRC for funding the project. I am fortunate to have been able to investigate a topic which attracts great enthusiasm from places not limited to academia, and so I would like to thank and acknowledge my debt to everyone who supplied me with materials, conversations, and opportunities to share my ideas in an exciting variety of forums. Of particular note, Charles Radcliffe and David and Stuart Wise kindly discussed their activities with neither nostalgia nor a sense of finitude.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents for their unwavering support and my friends for the same.

## **Contents**

<b>Abbreviations .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1.1 Surrealism in England; or, English Surrealism.....</b>	<b>12</b>
Dialectical Genealogies.....	13
The Problems of Political Commitment .....	26
The Social Presence of English Surrealism .....	32
<b>1.2 Surrealism Put to Work: Mass-Observation.....</b>	<b>37</b>
Surrealist Methodologies .....	39
Mass-Observation's Political Ambiguity.....	44
<b>2.1 Alexander Trocchi and the Dissolution of the Avant-Garde.....</b>	<b>48</b>
Trocchi and the Situationist International.....	50
From Young Adam to Cain's Book .....	53
Place(lessness).....	64
The Limits of Literature .....	70
<b>2.2 Alexander Trocchi's Invisible Insurrection .....</b>	<b>72</b>
The Situationist Basis of sigma .....	74
sigma as Situation.....	77
The Sigma Folio.....	80
The Invisible Avant-Garde .....	87
<b>3.1 Charles Radcliffe and the English Section of the Situationist International.....</b>	<b>90</b>
Rebel Worker and Heatwave .....	91
The Seeds of Social Destruction .....	93
New Leftisms.....	100
Negative Identity .....	104
The English Section of the Situationist International .....	105
The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution .....	111
The Negation of Style and the Style of Negation.....	117
Historical Repetition and Reversal.....	120
Expulsion.....	122
<b>3.2 King Mob.....</b>	<b>126</b>
His Majesty King Mob .....	128
King Mob Echo.....	131
Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker.....	136

We're Looking for People Who Like to Draw .....	140
The Negation of Language and the Language of Negation.....	147
King Mob's Peculiar Romanticism.....	152
The Wordsworthian Authentic .....	157
Blake's Infernal Method.....	165
The End of Art .....	169
<b>4.1 English Situationist Poetics .....</b>	<b>174</b>
The Poetics of English Situationist Practice .....	176
The Paths Not Taken.....	177
The Psychogeography of English Situationist Poetics.....	182
Stewart Home and the Self-Hating Commodity .....	185
Patrick Keiller and the Peculiarly English .....	193
<b>4.2 The Spectre of English Situationism .....</b>	<b>207</b>
Spectres and Savage Messiahs .....	210
Revolution(ary) Anxiety.....	213
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>216</b>

**Abbreviations**

CPP – Roger Roughton (ed.), *Contemporary Poetry and Prose May 1936 – Autumn 1937: Ten Numbers in One Volume* (London: Frank Cass and Company Ltd. 1968).

KME – Tom Vague (ed.), *King Mob Echo: English Section of the Situationist International* (London: Dark Star 2000).

SIA – Ken Knabb (ed.), *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets 2006).

SoS – Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press 2005).



## **Introduction**

‘Seen from over here’, an anonymous English ex-member of the Situationist International (SI) wrote in 1974,

the SI has a lot to answer for: it has spawned a whole stew of “revolutionary organisations”, usually composed of half a dozen moralists of the transparent relationship; these have inevitably foundered after a few months—though not without bequeathing weighty self-criticisms to a breathless posterity. Idiots. Worse: cures. Yet their traits are undoubtedly linked organically, genetically, to the original SI in its negative effects: the SI is responsible for its negative offspring.<sup>1</sup>

This dismissive verdict was made two years after the SI had been dissolved, and seven years after its English Section had been expelled. I want to offer a rather more forgiving account of the SI’s English legacy, an account that extends past 1974, that looks beyond ‘revolutionary organisations’ to survey a broader vista of practices, and that identifies more disparate networks of influence than the direct, mimetic, relationship that so troubles the observer above.

The SI was founded in 1957 through the unification of a number of European avant-garde groups of varying obscurity, though it was principally the continuation of the Paris-based Lettrist International. The scope of the SI’s interests and activities is reflected in the diversity of thinkers and practitioners who have found the SI to intervene into their work— from artists to philosophers, architects to protestors, marketing executives to insurrectionary anarchists. Less is known, however, about the specifically English strains of Situationist activity, and what is known is known cloudily. Because there are so many accounts of the SI, because its array of interventions refuse one comprehensive account of its history, and because its English strains can only be identified in relation to their source (perhaps negatively, as the observer above suggests), I offer below a judicious chronology of the particular moments in the SI’s history which are decisive for my study, and which will be discussed in more detail as my study progresses:

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Christopher Gray, ““Those who make half a revolution only dig their own graves”: The Situationists since 1969”, in *Leaving the Twentieth Century: The Incomplete Work of the Situationist International* (London: Rebel Press 1998), 135.

1957—when the SI broke from the Lettrist International in order to formalise the latter’s post-Dada artistic experimentations into a consolidated political programme.

The period from 1960 to 1962—when the SI became increasingly sceptical of the collusion between the socio-political order that it labelled ‘the spectacle’ and even the most radical artistic practices. The SI subsequently expelled its artistic factions in order to focus on what it saw as a more expressly political critique of capitalism.

1967—when Guy Debord’s *La Société du spectacle* (hereafter, *Society of the Spectacle*) and Raoul Vaneigem’s *Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations* (hereafter, its most common English translation, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*) were published. By 1967, the SI’s pamphlets *Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy* (1965) and *On the Poverty of Student Life* (1966) had also attracted attention, once translated, in the Anglophonic world, where the SI attempted to extend its activities by briefly maintaining an English Section.<sup>2</sup>

1972—when, after the groundshifts of 1968, the SI claimed that its presence as an organisation would only hinder the dissemination of its ideas, and subsequently dissolved.

I trace the reception of Situationist theory by English practitioners at different moments in this chronology. However, that reception is also a mode of production, of an identifiable English Situationist tradition and practice. The irreducibility of the SI’s history is matched by the pliancy of its conceptual product. Across its existence, the concepts which the SI discussed were differently prioritised, reworked, and sometimes dropped from its programme. Those concepts become even more slippery when they are considered in light of their Anglophonic interpretation and historicised in that divergent tradition, though that Anglicisation simultaneously reveals the applications and aporias of the SI’s original articulation of those concepts. The Situationist concepts

---

<sup>2</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press 2005); Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Rebel Press 2006); Situationist International, ‘Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy’ and ‘On the Poverty of Student Life’ both in Ken Knabb (ed.) *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets 2006), 194-203 and 408-430.

which concern me are those of ‘spectacle’ and ‘situation’, ‘*récupération*’ and ‘*détournement*’, and ‘*dérive*’ and ‘psychogeography’. I shall, however, leave those concepts to be introduced in situ, so to speak, in the histories that (re)produced them.

Nonetheless, my principle intervention is into the SI’s aesthetic theory, and specifically its anxiety regarding the subsumption of aesthetic objects into capitalist, commodity, economies—particularly the phase thereof that the SI labelled as the spectacle. The SI was hyperbolic (tactically so, perhaps) about the extent of this subsumption that renders redundant whatever antagonistic impulse the aesthetic object may declare. English Situationist practice, I argue, can be understood as an acute response to the anxiety that the SI demonstrated about the inevitability of this subsumption. More specifically, I intervene in debates about the SI’s aesthetic theory through the question of the literary. This study proposes that the practices of the SI and of English Situationists are intrinsically literary, though in different ways. Not only are their critiques of capitalism mostly written critiques, but they are critiques that acknowledge and play on their own textuality. I evaluate the stakes of these different types of literariness in relation to the SI’s pronouncements on specialisation. In this respect, my study is heretical because, contrary to the SI’s extra-disciplinary claims, I suggest that its critique is an essentially literary one, which mobilises various ‘literary’ modes of textual representation that resist—or infer a different ontology to—the spectacular phase of capitalism and its appropriation of other (particularly visual) forms of representation. Again, I shall introduce these modes in situ.

My focus on the literary, as a plurality of modes of textual representation, is not meant to draw a sharp distinction between the SI’s political and artistic contributions. It is not unusual to approach the SI through a particular set of concerns: Sadie Plant has concentrated on the SI’s legacy in postmodern theory; Tom McDonough on art history and visual culture; Richard Gilman-Opalsky on Debord’s relevance to philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Though my ‘angle’ on the SI is through its English reception and reproduction, my focus on textual practices is not meant to privilege its cultural

---

<sup>3</sup> Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge 1992); Tom McDonough, ‘The Beautiful Language of My Century’: *Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945–1968* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2007); Tom McDonough (ed.), *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2004) and *The Situationists and the City: A Reader* (London: Verso 2010); Richard Gilman-Opalsky, *Spectacular Capitalism: Guy Debord & the Practice of Radical Philosophy* (London: Minor Compositions 2011).

or literary afterlives over any others, nor to imply that the SI is less relevant to expressly 'political' discourse. In opposition to the definite categorisation of different critical practices, I want to explore how 'artistic' texts reflect on problems that are 'political', and vice versa. 'The point', Vaneigem once proposed, 'is not to elaborate the spectacle of refusal, but to refuse the spectacle.'<sup>4</sup> To employ another chiasmus, I shall investigate the politics of Situationist aesthetics, but also the aesthetics of Situationist politics.

This study does not, however, remain focused only on the SI and its aesthetic theory. The study's other concerns can be formulated as problems. Firstly, there is the problem of influence and the avant-garde. In his landmark *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger identifies the 'historical avant-garde' as the activity, particularly of Dada and then Surrealism in the first third of the twentieth century, which sought 'the destruction of art as an institution set off from the praxis of life'<sup>5</sup>. Bürger dismisses the 'neo-avant-garde' of the later twentieth century because it receives the historical avant-garde as an influence, and in turn 'institutionalizes the avant-garde as art and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions'<sup>6</sup>. The Dadaist Hans Richter offers a similar account: neo-Dadaist practices, for him, represent 'neither non-art nor anti-art but objects to be enjoyed [...] uncompromising revolt has been replaced by unconditional adjustment'<sup>7</sup>. These accounts of historical influence as hollow repetition have been disputed by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Hal Foster. Buchloh critiques Bürger's 'fiction of the origin as a moment of irretrievable plenitude and truth'<sup>8</sup>. Foster, similarly, queries Bürger's division of historical and neo-avant-gardes, to argue that the influence is more critical and, in fact, that the neo-avant-garde may not cancel the project of the historical avant-garde but comprehend it for the first time.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Situationist International, 'The Fifth SI Conference in Göteborg' (1962), in *SIA*, 115.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1984), 83.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 58.

<sup>7</sup> Hans Richter, *dada: art and anti-art*, trans. David Britt (London: Thames and Hudson 2007), 203.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'The Primary Colours for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde', *October* 37 (Summer 1986): 41-52. See also *Neo-Avant-Garde and Culture Industry* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Hal Foster, 'What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?' *October* 70 (Autumn 1994): 5-32. See also *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1996).

My objects of study occupy a different temporality to the historical/neo one discussed after Bürger—the SI and its English descendents might be described as successive waves of neo-avant-gardes—but the relationship between them presents the same problems of influence. Following Buchloh, I do not privilege a particular period of avant-gardism as its purest expression. I regard avant-gardism as a certain mode of critique and opposition that engages with political and aesthetic problems that have endured beyond the avant-garde’s ‘historical’ phase. Much of my effort to trace the English legacy of the SI, which presented itself as the last avant-garde and as the culmination of the projects of Dada and Surrealism, is to locate how *avant-garde practices* are maintained in the absence of self-identifying *avant-garde groups*—and then to explore the political value of those uprooted practices.

The second problem, related to that of influence, is of ‘Englishness’ and the presumption of its incompatibility with avant-garde activity from the Continent. Such presumptions are usually based on stereotyped representations of Englishness versus, say, Frenchness, as exemplified by an account of May ’68 in the underground newspaper *International Times*, in which Heathcote Williams describes ‘a small group of embittered scene-creamers who called themselves the Situationists, and who tried in typically French fashion to intellectualise the whole mood out of existence, and with their very name tried to colonise it’<sup>10</sup>. While English Situationists have frequently been complicit in the construction of such stereotypes, they have also anglicised Situationist theory mindful and in anticipation of objections such as those voiced by Williams. For most of this study, I avoid the term Situationism, which is a term that the SI forbade: it was understood to signal only the ossification of the SI’s critique. When the term does appear in my study, usually as ‘English Situationism’, it is meant to signify an anglicised variant of the SI’s practice, as one of the ‘Situationisms’ whose possibility is signalled by Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Jakob Jakobsen.<sup>11</sup> Their study of Scandinavian Situationisms is analogous to mine of English ones; both works reevaluate the SI through its peripheral and international permutations. The development of English Situationisms does not (or does not only) represent a dogmatisation of the SI’s critique, but also its productive misreading into new forms. In making sense of this, I

---

<sup>10</sup> Heathcote Williams, ‘The Illegible Split in the Situationist International’, *International Times* 4:1 (1978): 26.

<sup>11</sup> See Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Jakob Jakobsen (eds), *Expect Anything Fear Nothing: The Situationist Movement in Scandinavia and Elsewhere* (New York: Autonomedia 2011).

have found Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (itself a product of the period of Oedipal revolt on which I am concentrating) to be of continued if belated relevance.<sup>12</sup>

Another problem of Englishness more specific to my study relates to why I have chosen to frame my investigation in terms of Englishness and not Britishness. After all, the first member of the SI on whom I focus, Alexander Trocchi, was born in Scotland. I have chosen Englishness because the activity which I document mostly occurred in England. Trocchi was ambivalent about his Scottishness, and his important work was not produced in a Scottish context. Also, I don't want to forego the possibility of Scottish, Welsh, or Irish Situationist traditions that might be entirely unique to themselves and anterior to the English one that I document. Most of the English Situationists whose works I have chosen to include were based in the South-East, and their works have reproduced that same geographical bias. I do not claim to document exhaustively all manifestations of English Situationisms, only a handful of connected instances, with emphasis on the patterns of influence between them and their precedents. In an equally reductive yet necessary way, I sometimes resort to using Debord's Parisian faction as synecdoche of the SI *in toto*, despite the growing body of work (to which I hope I am contributing) that attempts to contest such an assumption. Perhaps this study should really present itself as another tale of those two cities, London and Paris.

Until its final chapter, my study is arranged as a historical narrative in which various constellations are charted. These constellations indicate the disparate influences that bear on English Situationist traditions. Those traditions are never based solely on a Franco-Anglo axis, and are never a direct, causal, relationship between pure source and compromised second-wave. The various Situationisms cannot be comprehended *only* through Situationist theory. As such, my study takes recourse to various Continental and Anglophonic theorists who occupy traditions different from those of the SI but who, despite the SI's protestations of autonomy, illuminate other perspectives on similar problems. Again, my work is here heretical, as I identify what is dogmatic about the SI, and push against that by associating the tradition with others which it dismissed and from which it distanced itself.

---

<sup>12</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997).

Chapter One serves as prolepsis to the eventual migration of Situationist practice to England, and as precursory moment in the *longue durée* of the English Situationist tradition. In its first half ('Surrealism in England; or, English Surrealism'), the chapter focuses on the period from 1929 to 1937 which saw the formation and dissolution of the Surrealist Group in England. English Surrealism is used as a prolepsis rather than, say, Blast because the SI saw itself as a continuation (really, an improvement) of the project of Surrealism, more so than of Futurism, or Constructivism, or any more painterly or literary movement originating in France. The chapter's second half ('Surrealism Put to Work: Mass-Observation') follows the application of Surrealist principles in the development of Mass-Observation's domestic anthropology, which forced together those old antagonists, French abstraction and English empiricism. This chapter revisits debates on the compatibility of dialectics and genealogy and of aesthetic innovation and political commitment. The SI is rarely mentioned, but like a musical overture the first chapter introduces phrases, themes, and motifs that will be articulated more fully later.

Chapter Two examines Alexander Trocchi's maverick attempts in the 1950s and early 1960s to apply Situationist theory to his novels ('Alexander Trocchi and the Dissolution of the Avant-Garde') and, later, to his countercultural projects ('Alexander Trocchi's Invisible Insurrection'). Trocchi's activities are read alongside the contemporaneous shift from the Lettrist to the Situationist International; he offers some Anglophonic responses to the aesthetic-political problems to which that shift was itself a response. The chapter pivots from a discourse of literary polyphony and poetic misprision to one of subjective dissolution and the possibility of an anti-aesthetic cultural practice.

Chapter Three's first half ('Charles Radcliffe and the English Section of the Situationist International') turns to the texts produced in 1966 and 1967 by Charles Radcliffe and the English Section of the SI, with particular emphasis on their relation to contemporaneous Marxist and cultural theory, and on the gradual development of a specifically English Situationist aesthetic. The chapter's second half ('King Mob'), which moves from 1967 to 1968, concurrent with the SI's aforementioned heroic period, focuses on the project of King Mob, the group formed after the expulsion of the English Section. King Mob is read as, variously: an application of Situationist tactics to the SI's own work; an Anglicisation of certain American anarchist perspectives; and

a revaluation of the aesthetic-political projects of various historical English revolutionaries, particularly early English Romantic poets.

Chapter Four ('English Situationist Poetics'), whose second half serves as a conclusion ('The Spectre of English Situationism'), breaks from the preceding historical narrative in order to conceptualise contemporary English Situationist poetics that are, I argue, the most recent culmination of the tradition previously charted. These poetics, borne from a critical engagement with the SI's practice of psychogeography, are illustrated in the work of the novelist Stewart Home, the filmmaker Patrick Keiller, and the artist Laura Oldfield Ford. Their vitally agonised work self-consciously exhibits an influence from anglicised Situationist traditions and responds to the dilemmas and anxieties of Situationist aesthetic theory—particularly the enduring problem of the co-optation of radical aesthetics in an age of spectacle. The benefit of having chosen these three to represent English Situationist poetics is partly in that they demonstrate a range of disciplines and practices, and partly in that they are, at the time of writing, in the process of receiving recognition beyond coterie or cult audiences, which makes the issue of recuperation particularly imposing. I am, however, more interested in elaborating English Situationist poetics than cataloguing everyone to whom that framework might apply. I certainly do not mean to suggest that anyone whose practice does not straightforwardly resemble or communicate with that of Home, Keiller, or Oldfield Ford is necessarily excluded from the tradition I chart—but, hopefully, the explication of English Situationist poetics might serve to historicise or understand work beyond that which I address.



### **1.1 Surrealism in England; or, English Surrealism**

‘A starting point is a point that one leaves behind.’  
Edouard Roditi, ‘A New Reality’ (1929)<sup>1</sup>

In 1924, André Breton published his first ‘Manifesto of Surrealism’, which along with the opening of the Bureau of Surrealist Research in Paris inaugurated the French Surrealist group of which he was the main organiser. Groups following Breton’s model rapidly appeared across Europe, but it was over a decade before Surrealism made its first public appearance in England, at the International Surrealist Exhibition in London in 1936. The seven years preceding that exhibition saw fierce disputes in literary and artistic publications as to how Surrealism might be anglicised, and why that Anglicisation had not already occurred. This chapter will revisit those disputes to offer a narrative of Surrealism’s Anglicisation. This narrative serves as a prolepsis to the eventual migration of Situationist practice to England. The English Surrealists faced many of the same challenges that English Situationists would two decades later: challenges inherent to the avant-garde practices they adopted, and challenges specific to the idea of an English version distinct from the Continental articulation—to produce not just Surrealism in England, but English Surrealism.

The proleptic narrative of English Surrealism infers a generalised pattern of Franco-Anglo and intergenerational avant-garde exchange. Despite their continually-reworked efforts to explicate the specificities of their ‘-ism’, practitioners of the Dada-Surrealist-Situationist lineage have acted consciously of their inherited tradition. The period of Surrealism’s Anglicisation is of particular importance because the ostentatious world-historical and internationalist rhetoric of Breton was regarded with suspicion by English Surrealists, who recognised the specific cultural context and the deeper historical conditions from which he spoke. English Surrealism emerged through a curious interplay of its general programme and its particular, vernacular identity: despite a fundamental agreement on Surrealist principles, what took the name Surrealism in France in 1924 was very different to what took the name Surrealism in England in 1936. In this chapter, I am concerned with that process of avant-garde identity formation in two respects: the *historical* identity of English

---

<sup>1</sup> Edouard Roditi, ‘A New Reality’, *The Oxford Outlook* X:49 (Summer 1929): 296.

Surrealism, and how practitioners attempted to recognise a genealogy through which their movement was not simply one imported from France; and the political identity of English Surrealism, which was discussed in the wake of Soviet Russia's rejection of Breton's group.

### **Dialectical Genealogies**

The effort to bring Surrealism to England was begun across various journals by many of those who would later constitute the Surrealist Group in England. The journals included Cambridge's *Experiment*, the *Transatlantic Review*, *transition*, *New Verse*, and the writings of the Unit One group<sup>2</sup>; but the catalysis of English Surrealism as such is usually located at the meeting in Paris in July 1935 of the painter Roland Penrose and the poet David Gascoyne, when they decided, 'Something's got to be done'<sup>3</sup>. Breton's earliest definitions of Surrealism had stressed its dialectical genesis as a synthesis of Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxian historical materialism:

I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality, if one may so speak.<sup>4</sup>

In the lead-up to the exhibition in London, a rush of publications offered a crash course in Surrealism for an English audience underexposed to the movement. Of these, David Gascoyne's *A Short Survey of Surrealism* (1936) echoes Breton's verdict on the movement's dialectical character, while emphasising its immediate prehistory in Dada:

As we have seen, they [the French Surrealists] were perhaps the least Dada elements of the movement (which wasn't a movement), the non-conforming Dadaists, who became Surrealists. So I think we can say that the development from Dadaism to Surrealism was *dialectical*. Dada: negation. Surrealism: negation of negation; a new affirmation, that is.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Comprehensive accounts of the movement are offered in Michel Remy, *Surrealism in Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate 1999), Rob Jackaman, *The Course of English Surrealist Poetry Since the 1930s* (Lampeter: Mellen 1989), Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: Bodley Head 1979), and P.C. Ray, *The Surrealist Movement in England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1971).

<sup>3</sup> Remy, *Surrealism in Britain*, 63; David Gascoyne, *A Short Survey of Surrealism* (London: Enitharmon Press 2000), 13.

<sup>4</sup> André Breton, 'Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)', in *Manifestos of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Michigan: University of Michigan Press 1972), 14.

<sup>5</sup> Gascoyne, *A Short Survey of Surrealism*, 48.

The various efforts to define English Surrealism agreed that it was a dialectical response to *something*—but that *something* varied. The dialectical method was important to Surrealists, English and French, as a means of historicising their own practice and of justifying their authenticity to Marxist-Leninist authorities. English Surrealism emerged with a heightened awareness of its political character because Breton's French movement by the mid-1930s had experienced a long-running yet fraught relationship with the Third International and the French Communist Party.<sup>6</sup> By 1935, *Surréalisme* had moved (or been pushed) away from an orthodox Marxism as dictated by Moscow, with the latter unreceptive towards an aesthetic movement so distanced from its own conception of proletarian art. Breton had adopted a Trotskyite position, in terms of Left Opposition and the rejection of Zhdanovite Socialist Realism.<sup>7</sup> While English Surrealism never engaged political party affiliations so directly, not least because the British Communist Party was never as prominent as its French comrades, it still negotiated the French movement's difficult relationship with doctrinaire Socialist Realism, which had become Soviet state policy in 1932.<sup>8</sup> Because of their geopolitical distance from actually existing socialism, the English Surrealists generally paid more attention to Marxist philosophy, particularly its philosophy of history, than to the type of tactical political manoeuvring that came to preoccupy Breton. Abstract dialectical materialism was more of a driving force to Surrealist activity in England than was the development of proletarian art or the maintenance of Party allegiances.

The earliest questions that the soon-to-be English Situationists discussed were these: firstly, why had Surrealism had not become manifest in England already? Secondly, could—or, more precisely, *how could*—Surrealism be introduced to 'the English'? In the mid-1930s, the small amount of English popular attention that Surrealism had received voiced confusion about what this neologism meant, and even how it should be spelt. The English Surrealists never produced their own manifesto, partly because the practice they imported had long grown out of its immaturity. Breton's first manifesto offers the most succinct definition, by way of a proposed encyclopaedia entry:

---

<sup>6</sup> See Helena Lewis, *Dada Turns Red: The Politics of Surrealism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1990).

<sup>7</sup> In 1938, Trotsky and Breton would together write the manifesto, 'Towards a Free Revolutionary Art'.

<sup>8</sup> See Maxim Gorky et al., *Soviet Writer's Congress 1934* (London: Lawrence and Wishart 1977).

ENCYCLOPEDIA. Philosophy. Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life.<sup>9</sup>

His second manifesto, written five years later, grounds Surrealism in the revolutionary movement by emphasising its Hegelian origins and practical potential.<sup>10</sup> The international recognition of Surrealism today is testament to its success in making itself known, but the version of Surrealism that is known today is testament to the success of the culture against which Surrealism originally acted in appropriating and reshaping Surrealism for itself.

The version of Surrealism with which the English Surrealists were concerned was principally a literary one. Unlike the celebrities of the French movement, the English Surrealists were mostly young poets rather than established painters. Surrealism in France had its own dedicated journals (*La Révolution surréaliste*, *La Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, *Minotaure*); Surrealism in England slowly infiltrated modernism's 'little magazines'<sup>11</sup>, and it did so with little emphasis on painting, collage, or even characteristically Surrealist typographical experimentation. The editorials, opinion and correspondence pieces in those little magazines were the discursive space from which English Surrealism arose, even if this was often little more than a handful of acquaintances contributing to a handful of journals in a brief war of position. As I am concerned with the process of avant-garde identity formation, I shall privilege that discursive space over the artistic or literary production proper of the English Surrealists, and in those discourses, I shall pay particular attention to how the movement's relationship with its native literary predecessors was imagined. The elision of actual English Surrealist art will postpone my discussion of the aesthetic for practitioners later in the twentieth century and more directly linked to the SI; for the moment, I want only to introduce (in the manner, as described above, of a musical overture) particular themes, phrases, and debates that will recur in the formation of English Situationisms.

---

<sup>9</sup> Breton, 'Manifesto of Surrealism', 26.

<sup>10</sup> André Breton, 'Second Manifesto of Surrealism (1929)', in *Manifestos of Surrealism*, 140-141.

<sup>11</sup> *New Verse*, *Left Review*, and *This Quarter* all had features on the possibilities of Surrealism in England during 1935 and 1936.

A review of Gascoyne's *A Short Survey of Surrealism* by Cyril Connolly, titled 'It's got here at last!' and published on 14<sup>th</sup> December 1935, attests to an extra-literariness of English Surrealism. Connolly is not interested in the movement's literary productions, 'for much of Surrealist literature is fatuous and pretentious nonsense'<sup>12</sup>. He celebrates,

the pugnacious side of the movement. You sign manifestos and send indecent postcards to people you don't like, tease writers, frighten parents, attend meetings, expel heretics (and there are always plenty), play practical jokes, table-turn, and generally tweak the tail of that old circus lion, the British Bourgeoisie.<sup>13</sup>

Connolly recognises the ludic ethos of Surrealism, its wilfully juvenile desire to provoke and its mischievousness, which preserves what he identifies as an instinctive but easily forgotten 'hatred of stupidity, injustice, and stagnation'<sup>14</sup>. To those who were receptive, in England in the mid-1930s Surrealism offered a form of resistance to or at least distraction from what Breton called the 'lusterless fate'<sup>15</sup> of bourgeois society. Like Connolly, I am for the moment more interested in the forms and methods of English Surrealism than its immediate content. As such, English Surrealism might remain vague, especially compared to the overdetermination of *Surréalisme* in and beyond the re-articulations of Breton's manifestos. This lingering vagueness, however, should act against Surrealism's problematic tendency to produce doctrines and canons—as the Situationists later recognised, that is how movements become ossified.<sup>16</sup>

The Surrealist Group in England did not exist long enough for its movement to be ossified. It formed as the organising committee for the International Surrealist Exhibition of June and July 1936, it produced one issue of a journal, and its members acted as signatories to a couple of declarations published in journals to which they

---

<sup>12</sup> Cyril Connolly, 'It's got here at last!', *New Statesman and Nation*, December 14<sup>th</sup>, 1935. The *New Statesman and Nation* was a left-wing weekly notably receptive to Surrealism, whose correspondence pages later saw the birth of Mass-Observation.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Breton, 'Manifesto of Surrealism', 4.

<sup>16</sup> Also, these early phases of English Surrealism (as, later, English Situationism) were concerned with establishing a certain rhetorical mode which, I shall suggest as this study progresses, might most productively be considered a literary mode, whereby a pamphlet might be regarded with a similar critical approach to, say, a poem.

contributed individually anyway.<sup>17</sup> They rarely agreed on aesthetic or political premises, and certainly never courted anything like the intrigue and scandal attracted by the French group. Fittingly, the text that is now regarded as the first appearance of English Surrealism was actually produced by an American student at Oxford unconnected to any practising group, and the only text to claim to be a manifesto of English Surrealism (though it too was written by an autonomous individual) was published only in France and in French. Michel Remy writes that the latter text reflects English Surrealism's 'difficulty in defining its own identity'<sup>18</sup>.

The negative identity of English Surrealism—the social conditions that it opposed and sought to provoke—was rather more easily defined. To avoid confusion I shall defer introducing these texts until I look at each individually, but what follow are extracts from articles discussing the possibility of English Surrealism that attest to a pervasive discourse of national character, specifically, of English conservatism. 'The Surrealist Muse', one text complains,

does not often descend upon English soil; for she is terrified of the poet laureate, the censor, the conservative association, buy British goods, empire day, do your Christmas shopping early, the Queen's doll's house, sales on now, why not wear the boston garter.<sup>19</sup>

The images of middle-class society reflect something of the class background and cultural capital of the (soon-to-be) English Surrealists. Nonetheless, another author voices his distaste at the preparations for King George V's Silver Jubilee: 'when a country is invited by its government to such a parody of rejoicing in the name of patriotism and imperialism, despair is the first reaction of the poet.'<sup>20</sup> English conservatism, as represented by its enduring monarchy in contrast to republican France, becomes a sign of both England's tardiness in revolutionary matters and the need for something as irrational and irreverent as Surrealism. The British monarchy provided a powerful image of a society pervaded by class antagonism, conspicuous privilege, and the rule of the old world, and was invoked at later, decisive, moments in

---

<sup>17</sup> The Surrealist Group In England are the signatories to: 'Declaration on Spain', *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* 7 (November 1936) and a broadsheet from 1937 on the Spanish Civil War titled 'We ask for your attention', in Remy, *Surrealism in Britain*, 111; as well as the *International Surrealist Bulletin* 4 (September 1936).

<sup>18</sup> Remy, *Surrealism in Britain*, 71.

<sup>19</sup> Roditi, 'A New Reality', 295.

<sup>20</sup> David Gascoyne, 'Premier Manifeste Anglais du Surréalisme (fragment)', *Cahiers d'art* 10 (June 1935): 106. My translation.

this tradition: Mass-Observation was prompted by the abdication of King Edward VIII; and punk's earliest infamy came by way of its sardonic response to the Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II in 1977.

Another author extends the accusation of conservatism to England's aesthetic sensibility:

I do not say that the English have bad taste—that, perhaps, might be said of other nations—but simply that they do not exercise those faculties of sensibility and selection which make for good taste. Our condition is neutral—an immense indifference to questions of art.<sup>21</sup>

This author argues that the conflux of Puritanism and Capitalism has inflicted upon England a national character that is artless and mediocre, which is manifest in the Englishman's humour and common sense, both of which acquiesce to staid notions of what is and isn't 'normal'<sup>22</sup>. In another text, the author relents slightly, and attributes some of this conservatism to the geopolitical anxieties of the interwar period:

Bull-necked demagogues inject a poisonous propaganda into our minds and then the storm of steel breaks above us; our bodies become so much manure for an acid soil, and our aspirations, the whole structure of our civilisation, becomes a history which the future may not even record.<sup>23</sup>

The aforementioned earliest English Surrealist text was Edouard Roditi's 'The New Reality', published in *The Oxford Outlook* in June 1929, where it commanded little attention. Nonetheless, Roditi recognises the double ancestry of English Surrealism: on the one hand, the French ancestry, including Breton's group and its prehistory of Sade, Lautréamont, and Rimbaud; on the other hand, the Anglophonic literary modernists, 'Eliot, Miss Stein, James Joyce, Cummings, Ezra Pound'<sup>24</sup>. The text's uncited epigraph anticipates English Surrealism's uncertain relationship with English literary canons: 'One cannot revolt without having at some time conformed'<sup>25</sup>. Unlike the aggressive demands of the historical avant-garde to overcome history, exemplified by Marinetti's 'Futurist Manifesto' (1909), English Surrealism arrived hesitantly, with a quiet respect for its literary inheritance. Roditi does declare, however, that Anglo-American literary

---

<sup>21</sup> Herbert Read, 'Why the English have no taste', *Minotaure* 7 (June 1935): 67.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Herbert Read, *Surrealism* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd. 1936), 35.

<sup>24</sup> Roditi, 'A New Reality', 295.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

modernism has lost its vitality, and its authors exhausted their purpose: 'the Sitwells and Harold Acton are beginning to be rather *vieux jeu*'<sup>26</sup>. Roditi proposes that Surrealism must replace literary high modernism; his model is of straightforward linear succession, no discussion yet of dialectical syntheses. He was, of course, rather zealous in announcing the succession of the old guard, but his declarations do give a sense of how the relationship between the modernist canon and the Dada-Surrealist avant-garde was perceived as a hostile one, at least to a contemporary student of literature.

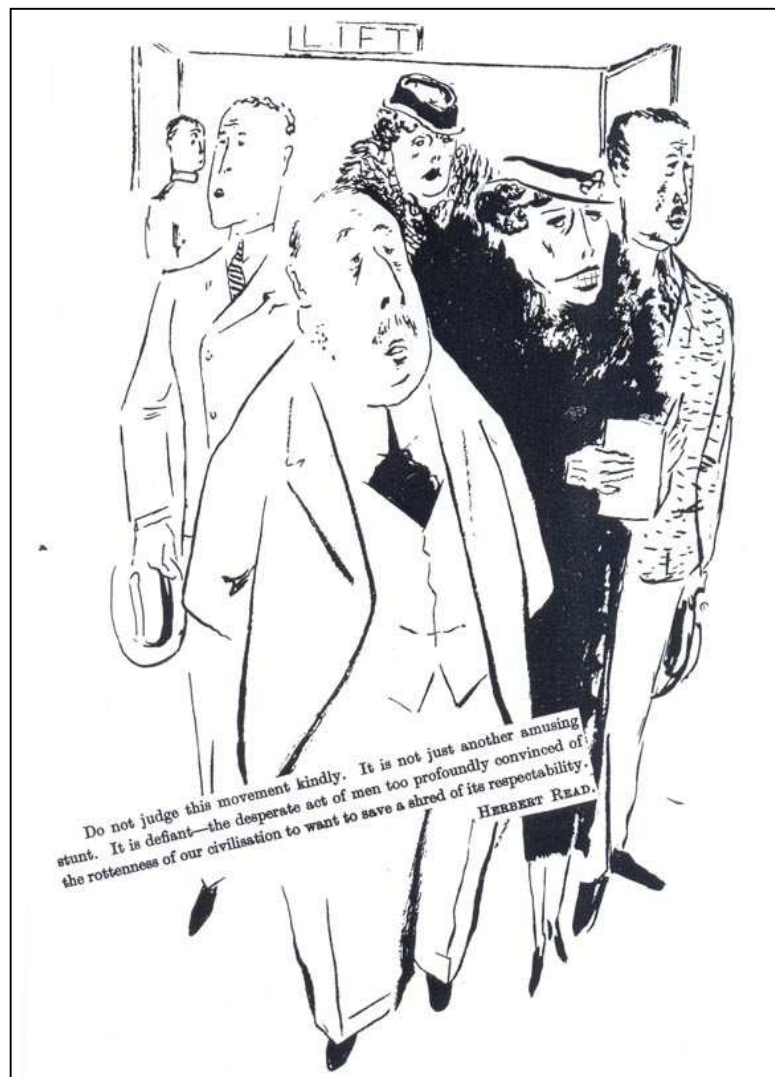


Fig. 1: Attendees of the International Surrealist Exhibition<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> From a supplement to *Left Review* (July 1936).



Equally as obscure as Roditi's text, the first manifesto of English Surrealism was written by David Gascoyne, a month before his meeting with Penrose in Paris. Gascoyne's 'Premier Manifeste Anglais du Surréalisme', published in the French journal *Cahiers d'art* (June 1935), problematised the Anglicisation of Surrealism no more than did Roditi. Gascoyne mostly declares adherence to the principles of Breton's manifestos. He insists on the world-historical character of Surrealism, which is not a 'school of literature' but 'an international system of ideas determined by the particular conditions of our epoch'.<sup>28</sup> Published a year later, Gascoyne's *A Short Survey of Surrealism* reiterates Breton's doxa, and likens the possibility of Surrealism being rejected in England because of it being perceived as an exclusively French philosophy to the evidently incorrect assumption that psychoanalysis should be rejected for its being imagined as solely relevant in Austria. Rather weakly, Gascoyne argues that it would even be unfair to characterise Surrealism as French, as it includes German traditions from Marx, Hegel, Feuerbach, and Engels, and Spanish traditions via Dalí, Míro, and Picasso.<sup>29</sup> I say 'weakly' because multinational inheritance does not preclude an identifiable national identity. The notion of English Surrealism, as opposed to Surrealism in England, suggests that influence drawn from many different national contexts and historical moments might be fused (dialectically, according would-be English Surrealists other than Gascoyne) into something new that retains something specific to the cultural, historical, political and class contexts that inform how that act of fusing is made to occur. In his manifesto and survey, Gascoyne refuses to recognise the necessity of developing an English strain of Surrealism and maintains what Remy describes as a belief in the 'natural inevitability of Surrealism'<sup>30</sup>.

Because he does not recognise that Surrealism is rooted in the particular conditions of post-war France (and neighbouring countries), Gascoyne sees no problem in simply transplanting *Surréalisme* to England. His effort towards a Surrealist dialectic, above, is inconsistent and certainly not materialist. If not discounted entirely as an empty signifier of Marxist authenticity, his mention of dialectics is simply part of his parroting of Breton. Rob Jackaman explains that through his friendship with and translation of the original French Surrealists, Gascoyne was 'closer to the orthodox

---

<sup>28</sup> Gascoyne, 'Premier Manifeste Anglais du Surréalisme', 106.

<sup>29</sup> Gascoyne, *A Short Survey of Surrealism*, 94.

<sup>30</sup> Michel Remy, 'The Entrance of the Medium', in Gascoyne, *A Short Survey of Surrealism*, 20.

continental model than was any other English Surrealist in the decade [...] and his own poetry sometimes reflects a “purer” Surrealism than is usual in England<sup>31</sup>.

Various answers to the questions of ‘why now?’ and ‘why here?’ appeared from Herbert Read, another figure central to English Surrealism, but who was older and more institutionalised than Roditi and Gascoyne. Read had previously been Professor of Fine Arts at Edinburgh University and editor of the prestigious journal, *The Burlington Magazine*. One of Read’s articles was the provocatively titled ‘Why the English have no taste’, which appeared in *Minotaure*, a journal edited by Breton; another was his lengthy introduction to his edited collection titled simply *Surrealism* (1936), which proved to be something of a companion piece to Gascoyne’s *A Short Survey*. Like Gascoyne, Read insists that ‘from the moment of its birth Surrealism was an international phenomenon’ and ‘it would therefore be contrary to the nature of the movement at present, as some have suggested, a specifically English edition of Surrealism’<sup>32</sup>. Yet Read then concedes, ‘nonetheless, there is an English contribution to be made to this effort, and its strength and validity can only be shown by tracing its sources in the native tradition of our art and literature’<sup>33</sup>. Thus, Read catalogues disparate moments in English literary history in which embryonic forms of Surrealism have existed. His attention is directed at the canon: he includes early ballad writers, Shakespeare, metaphysical poets, and Byron. Though Read maintains that Surrealism ‘has no respect for any academic tradition, least of all for the classical-capitalist tradition of the last four hundred years’<sup>34</sup>, he paradoxically portrays Surrealism as the filter through which received cultural forms might be re-energised, and their faded radicality revamped.

Read, like Gascoyne, repeats much of Breton’s rhetoric (‘Reality transformed by the imagination – that is the definition of art and the aim of Surrealism’<sup>35</sup>) but transplants it into a different cultural heritage. Read is particularly keen on presenting Surrealism as the rejuvenation of English Romanticism, which he takes as all that is imaginative, creative, and emancipatory, against classicism which represents order, control, and

---

<sup>31</sup> Jackaman, *The Course of English Surrealist Poetry Since the 1930s*, 77.

<sup>32</sup> Read, *Surrealism*, 20.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>35</sup> Herbert Read, ‘Surrealism – the dialectic of art’, *Supplement to Left Review* (July 1936): iii.

repression.<sup>36</sup> Eventually, Read explicitly rejects a dialectical model of Surrealism's genealogy:

In dialectics the thesis and the antithesis are both objective facts, and the necessity for a resolution or synthesis is due to the real existence of a contradiction. But 'classic' and 'romantic' do not represent such a contradiction. They correspond rather to the husk and the seed, the shell and the kernel.<sup>37</sup>

Surrealism, for Read, is not dialectically-composed nor is it antithetical or incommensurable with English culture, but it is the return to the essence of a transhistorical, though still antagonistic, cultural impulse. Read's formula is thus consistent with Roditi and Gascoyne, who both locate Surrealism in historical currents. For Roditi, Gascoyne, and Read, English Surrealism is the continuation and renewal of something already existent.

In his first manifesto, Breton seems to make a similar claim regarding Surrealism's pre-existence. He includes a list of proto-Surrealist, mostly French, writers:

Swift is Surrealist in malice,  
Sade is Surrealist in sadism.  
Chateaubriand is Surrealist in exoticism.  
Hugo is Surrealist when he isn't stupid.  
Desborders-Valmore is Surrealist in love.  
Bertrand is Surrealist in the past  
[...]  
Roussel is Surrealist as a storyteller.  
Etc.<sup>38</sup>

Martin Puchner explains that Breton's Surrealist prehistories construct 'a history of Surrealism *avant la lettre* [...] as in the case of the Communist Manifesto and most manifestos since, the foundational present and the envisioned future are grounded in a history that prefigures them both'<sup>39</sup>. However, I want to propose that Roditi, Gascoyne, and Read misread Breton. They each maintain models of linear succession, in which each manifestation of a long tradition is exhausted only to be

---

<sup>36</sup> Read, *Surrealism*, 26.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Breton, 'Manifesto of Surrealism', 26-27.

<sup>39</sup> Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006), 185.

replaced by a new ‘-ism’. Rob Jackaman offers a diagrammatic version of this understanding of cultural succession, which begins with the three ancestries mentioned by Roditi, Read, and Gascoyne, and makes a rather unconvincing effort to plot the dialectical supersession of English Surrealism (Fig. 2).

Breton, conversely, uses his historical co-ordinates to plot a constellation, a disparate and multi-layered arrangement of influences made up of many isolated individuals who are then synthesised in Surrealism to form a new and distinct entity. Antitheses are established and a dialectic is maintained, in a more complex form than binary thesis-antithesis opposition. In his second manifesto, Breton writes that ‘when it comes to revolt, none of us must have any need of ancestors’<sup>40</sup>: his first manifesto does not provide ancestors, but catalysts; not lineages, but co-ordinates.

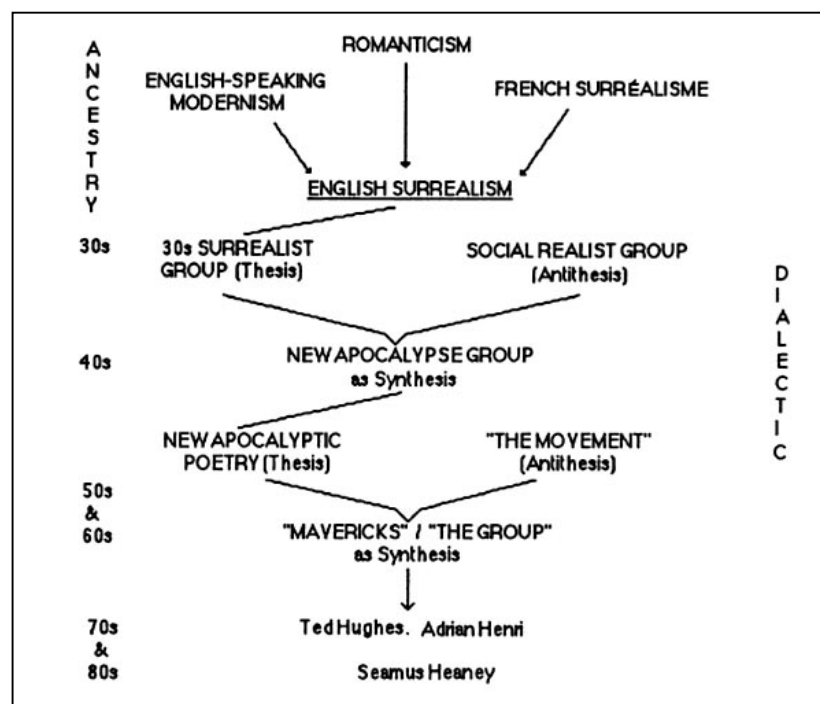


Fig. 2: Rob Jackaman's diagram of the English Surrealist historical dialectic.<sup>41</sup>

My valorisation of Breton's model of Surrealism's genealogy as a constellation rather than a family tree is informed by Walter Benjamin's historical method. Benjamin, however, was ultimately critical of Surrealism. For Benjamin, Surrealism had failed to

<sup>40</sup> Breton, 'Second Manifesto of Surrealism', 127.

<sup>41</sup> Jackaman, *The Course of English Surrealist Poetry Since the 1930s*, 2.

distance itself from ‘the phantasmagoria of modernity’<sup>42</sup>. ‘Aragon persistently remains in the realm of dreams,’ Benjamin wrote, but ‘here it is a question of finding the constellation of awakening’<sup>43</sup>. Whereas Breton claims that Surrealism is the synthesis of dreamt and waking life, Benjamin discussed the use of dream-images to reawaken history from the slumber and stasis of capitalist temporality. In ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century’, the ‘exposé’ of 1935 that prefigured his Arcades Project, Benjamin proposes that society dreams the image of its own succession, and that ‘the realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up, is the paradigm of dialectical thinking’<sup>44</sup>.

Theodor Adorno was also critical of early Surrealism, though this time for its intentionality. He accused Surrealist symbolism of being ‘much too rationalistic’ and expressing ‘what is strange and surprising in terms of what is already familiar’<sup>45</sup>. He would describe Stravinsky’s *Histoire du soldat* (1918) as ‘the only convincing surrealist manifesto’ for its expression of a ‘convulsive, dreamlike compulsion imparting to music an inkling of negative truth’<sup>46</sup>. Even though Adorno reformulated Benjamin’s constellation to downplay the role of Surrealist chance, so its arrangement of historical objects (in my application, historical co-ordinates) was conscious and deliberate, in *Negative Dialectics* he offers a fine articulation of the constellation’s work.<sup>47</sup> Adorno writes:

The cognition of the object in its constellation is that of the process, which it has stored up within itself. As a constellation the theoretical thought circles around the concept, which it would like to open, hoping, that it springs ajar like the lock of a heavily guarded safe: only not by means of a single key or a single number, but by a number-combination.<sup>48</sup>

Breton’s Surrealist prehistories are the equivalent of this ‘combination of numbers’ which together and dialectically release Surrealism. Roditi, Gascoyne, and Read

---

<sup>42</sup> Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory* (Oxford: Routledge 2002), 83.

<sup>43</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Konvolut N1, 9’, in *The Arcades Project* trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Harvard: Belknap Press 2002), 458.

<sup>44</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century’, in *The Arcades Project*, 13.

<sup>45</sup> Theodor Adorno, ‘Looking Back on Surrealism’, in *Notes to Literature Vol. 1* trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Colombia University Press 1991), 86–87.

<sup>46</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso 2002), 50.

<sup>47</sup> See Theodor Adorno, ‘Letter to Walter Benjamin 10<sup>th</sup> November 1938’, in Theodor Adorno et al. *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso 2007), 128.

<sup>48</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. Dennis Redmond (2001), available at <http://members.efn.org/~dredmond/ndtrans.html> [accessed 10/05/2012].

construct timelines which do not promise to divert the course of history but propel it: theirs are interpellative gestures, retroactive interpretations of older aesthetics to be dusted off, re-identified, and incorporated into new ideological schema. Their (unconscious) conservatism is partly explained by the less revolutionary context of English Surrealism, its geopolitical distance from actually existing socialisms, and, in more aesthetic terms, by 'the prior mini-revolution of English modernism'<sup>49</sup> which had already appropriated certain iconoclastic interventions that English Surrealism might have liked to claim as its own. The simple fact that French Surrealism was now into its second wave meant that English Surrealism was not arriving as an unprecedented revolutionary avant-garde. Jackaman explains that,

the English, perennial late arrivals when anything avant-garde is concerned, were presumably more influenced by the latter, reasoning period [of French Surrealism] than by the earlier, intuitive period when they became interested in Surrealism in the early thirties. By this time, virtually all the Dada extremities had been worn off *Surréalisme*, and the English practitioners consequently inherited a much more moderate kind of philosophy from the French.<sup>50</sup>

Altogether different responses to the question of English Surrealism's historical identity were offered by Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings, both of whom were members of the Surrealist Group in England, and subsequently formed Mass-Observation together. An article titled 'Surrealism for the English' by Madge was published in *New Verse* in December 1936. Madge worries about the limitations of simply importing a foreign cultural movement and warns,

before exposing ourselves to a ten-years-belated imitation of Paris, there is need of perspective and a remedying of our own ignorance [... English Surrealism's] aims are not best served if English writers imitate the work of French ones, nor if they simply adopt the name "Surrealist."<sup>51</sup>

If Surrealism is to advance itself as a dialectical response to specific cultural and social conditions, Madge argues, then English Surrealism must necessarily be different to French Surrealism, because it is coming from a different time and place. English Surrealism must therefore dialectically mediate *Surréalisme* and Anglophonic literary culture—the English content must be played against the French form:

---

<sup>49</sup> Jackaman, *The Course of English Surrealist Poetry Since the 1930s*, 9.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Charles Madge, 'Surrealism for the English', *New Verse* 6 (December 1933): 14.

Close study of the philosophical position of the French surrealists is needed to extract the essential purpose from the formal appearance of their work. But English writers will need something more: namely, a knowledge of their own language and literature.<sup>52</sup>

Madge's insistence on the necessarily vernacular character of English Surrealism was corroborated by Jennings in a December 1936 review of Read's *Surrealism* published in the recently (May 1936) founded journal *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, which would frequently include contributions from the central figures of English Surrealism as well as more famous modernist figures like Ezra Pound and E.E. Cummings. In his review, Jennings voices 'really grave doubts already existent about the use of Surrealism in this country'<sup>53</sup>. Jennings accuses Read and the other contributors to his *Surrealism* collection of using Surrealism as they would any other literary movement, so that writing about Surrealism becomes 'an excuse for another affirmation of their favourite theses [...] Mr Read's [article becomes] a defence of Romanticism'<sup>54</sup>.

Jennings, echoing Madge, emphasises the necessary but complicated *Englishness* of English Surrealism, but for Jennings this vernacularisation can only occur in practice, not theory. English Surrealism, Jennings argues, must reject existing traditions and forget 'all "beliefs" preceding the picture, which would deny the promise of the unknown'<sup>55</sup>. In a prescient anticipation of the Situationist problem of recuperation, Jennings warns that the development of a Surrealism that is just another literary movement would be to allow its co-optation and nullification by what he calls the 'classical-military-capitalist-ecclesiastical racket'<sup>56</sup>.

### **The Problems of Political Commitment**

Two months prior to the publication of Jennings's objections in *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, the fourth issue of the *International Surrealist Bulletin* had been issued by 'the Surrealist Group in England', the organising committee of the International Surrealist Exhibition at the New Burlington Galleries earlier in 1936. The exhibition had proved very popular. It had attracted 23,000 visitors, and had included the work of 69 artists

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Humphrey Jennings, 'Review of *Surrealism* by Herbert Read', in *CPP*, 167.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 167.

of 14 nationalities, of whom 27 were British. Although the Parisian art scene at the time was dominated by Surrealism, this was the first British exhibition to pay attention to the movement.<sup>57</sup> The organising committee had included Gascoyne, Read, Madge, and Jennings, as well as Hugh Sykes Davies, Rupert Lee, Diana Brinton Lee, Henry Moore, Paul Nash, and Roland Penrose, as well as a small French contingent. Even though I have been at pains to detail some of the differences of opinion that existed between these individuals, this bulletin offers the closest to a *de facto* manifesto of English Surrealism. Importantly, the bulletin and reactions to the bulletin reveal how the group struggled to legitimise English Surrealism's political identity. This episode also marks the historical obsolescence of a particular type of avant-gardist political commitment based on Party allegiance, which left an aporia for later English Situationists.

The first part of the bulletin is an introduction to the group under the heading, 'THE SITUATION IN ENGLAND, THE INTELLECTUAL POSITION WITH REGARD TO SURREALISM; THE FORMATION OF AN ENGLISH GROUP; IMMEDIATE ACTIVITIES'<sup>58</sup>. On the problem of tradition, the bulletin acknowledges historical manifestations of proto-Surrealism, which it treats not as solutions to but articulations of a problem:

the general character of the English imagination has been very much in the direction of Surrealism, and there have been many individuals in the post-war period who have not allowed themselves to be diverted from the problems handed down to us historically by the nineteenth century: problems the solution of which inevitably takes us very near Surrealism.<sup>59</sup>

The bulletin also offers some contextual explanation as to why Surrealism had not already appeared in England, listing: a 'pathological individualism' inherent to English culture; the deep-rootedness of capitalism, and the shipping away of class struggle that is afforded by Empire; and the 'moral, ideological and political irresponsibility' of most English art.<sup>60</sup> This first section of the bulletin ends by asserting the necessity of forcing 'a dialectical solution [to] a series of existing conflicts'<sup>61</sup>, which reflects back

---

<sup>57</sup> Remy, *Surrealism in Britain*, 77–78.

<sup>58</sup> Surrealist Group in England, *International Surrealist Bulletin* 4 (September 1936): 2.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–6

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*



onto the conflicted identity of English Surrealism—despite a lack of theoretical consensus, the English Surrealists had decided to act anyway.

Also included in the *International Surrealist Bulletin* is a transcription of a speech given by Read after the exhibition. Read justifies Surrealism's association with the Communist movement by speaking of the necessity of revolutionary art. He picks up on what was by 1936 the most contentious issue in French Surrealism: the antagonism between the Third International and Breton's group. The latter tried desperately to appease the Communists. In 1925, in the fifth issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*, the French Surrealists had declared their adherence to the principles of Marxism-Leninism with an article titled 'La Révolution d'abord et toujours'. Breton's concession of artistic freedom and radical vanguardism to political discipline was demonstrated in the ideological shift from his first manifesto and the first journal, *La Révolution surréaliste*, to the second manifesto and the second journal, *La Surréalisme au service de la révolution*. In five years, the notion of a specifically Surrealist revolution had mutated into Surrealism's rearguard position, behind the revolutionary movement led by the Third International.

Breton joined the Communist Party in 1927 and left it in 1935, and the announcements and denouncements during this period are followed in great detail in Gascoyne's *A Short Survey of Surrealism* and, later, Helena Lewis's *Dada turns Red*. Lewis explains the incompatibility of Surrealism with the Soviet Communist Party through the former's unwillingness to make any sacrifices to the latter's Popular Front absolutism:

In reality, the Surrealists were expelled not primarily because of political differences, but because of their stubborn, and public opposition to socialist realism, and to any constraints whatsoever upon their artistic freedom. They had even dared to propound the view that their "research" had great revolutionary value, and that their poetry was a real contribution to the Revolution.<sup>62</sup>

Breton's attempted defence of Surrealism to the Communists was twofold. Firstly, he insisted on the contribution that Surrealism could make to the revolutionary struggle in terms of the subjective liberation that must precede collective action. Secondly, he

---

<sup>62</sup> Lewis, *Dada turns Red*, 153.

tried to expose the limitations and fallacies of Socialist Realism as a form of bourgeois realism whose time was out of joint with dialectical materialism.<sup>63</sup>

Read's uncharacteristically militant speech reprinted in the *International Surrealist Bulletin* picks up on the themes of Breton's address to the Congress of Writers. He defends the idea of a truly revolutionary art in opposition to the 'vulgar ineptitude'<sup>64</sup> of Socialist Realism. In a very different tone to his aforementioned articles, Read warns that Surrealism is something that the bourgeoisie should fear, that it will destroy before it creates because in capitalist society the conditions do not exist for a 'satisfactory basis'<sup>65</sup> for a fully realised art. The creation of those conditions is the task of Surrealism, which must confront all aspects of social life. Read's sudden shift from gentle Romantic to rousing revolutionary did not go unnoticed, with one reviewer of the bulletin calling him a 'politico-esthetic chameleon'<sup>66</sup>.

Objections to English Surrealism from the Marxist and Communist press were reprinted at the end of the bulletin, alongside retorts from the Surrealists. Papers such as *The Spectator* and the *Daily Worker* accused the Surrealists of using inaccessible jargon, of being individualistic, and of refusing to tackle serious matters. Another criticism of the English Surrealists came from Lord Hastings in *Left Review*, who claims to recognise that Surrealism is 'a revolt against the smug ineffectualness of bourgeois art' but cannot identify any particular political program: 'there seems to be no evidence for its claims of being proletarian, Marxist, or more revolutionary than the communist party'<sup>67</sup>.

A more prescient objection to Read's speech came from Roger Roughton, Surrealist poet, editor of *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, and dedicated member of the Communist Party. In his speech, Read declares that 'the Surrealist is naturally a Marxian Socialist, and generally claims to be a more consistent Communist than many who submit to all manner of compromise with the aesthetic culture and moral conventions of capitalism'<sup>68</sup>. Socialist Realism, for Read, reflects a politics of lowest common denominators which erodes the necessary complexities of Marxist thought.

---

<sup>63</sup> See André Breton, 'Speech to the Congress of Writers (1935)', in *Manifestos of Surrealism*, 234-242.

<sup>64</sup> Surrealist Group in England, *International Surrealist Bulletin*, 12.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>66</sup> Geoffrey Grigson, 'Letter from England', *Poetry (Chicago)* 49 (November 1936): 101-102.

<sup>67</sup> Lord Hastings, 'The Surrealists', *Left Review* 2:4 (January 1936): 186.

<sup>68</sup> Surrealist Group in England, *International Surrealist Bulletin*, 9.

Roughton objects, and accuses Read of inciting an individualistic rejection of the Popular Front. In the editorial to the fourth *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* (August-September 1936), a themed issue on 'Surrealism and Communism', Roughton warns that Read's 'Trotskyist "more communist than the communists" attitude must be carefully guarded against' and states his own dedication to the Communist Party as 'the most democratic organisation today'.<sup>69</sup>

This orthodox-versus-dissident dynamic had already been played out in the French Surrealist movement, when Louis Aragon renounced Breton and Surrealism in order to devote himself to the dictates of the Comintern. Aragon went from writing Surrealist poetry to producing pure yet benign Socialist Realism. His defection became known as the Aragon Affair and sparked a debate on revolutionary art that penetrated many of France's intellectual and artistic circles. The incident attracted so much attention largely due to a petition authorised by Breton prior to Aragon's defection, which called for the police to drop charges against Aragon after arresting him for incitement to murder with his poem, 'Le Front rouge'. The irony is that this poem was itself pallid Socialist Realism. Gascoyne's *A Short Survey of Surrealism* would later summarise the Aragon Affair as being centred on one question: 'Is a militant Communist poet justified in writing any but propaganda poems or poems bearing directly on the working-class struggle? Yes, say the Surrealists; and no, say Aragon, Sadoul, Alexandre and a few others'<sup>70</sup>. Roughton would most certainly have sided with Aragon and the Party. He was forced to clarify his position in a rejoinder to an attack published by Ezra Pound. The latter's 'The Coward Surrealists' and Roughton's 'Eyewash, Do You? A reply to Mr Pound' were published together in the seventh *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* (November 1936).

Pound reiterates the accusation that the Surrealists use jargon and rhetoric to hide the fact they have little to say on empirical matters of political economy and history. His objections echo those of the orthodox Marxist press, though the accusation of difficulty having replaced integrity was the same accusation that his generation of modernists had faced from the literary establishment in the 1920s.<sup>71</sup> Pound ends the article with the sarcastic remark that 'the intellectual timidity of the pseudolutionists

---

<sup>69</sup> Roger Roughton, 'Surrealism and Communism', in CPP, 74.

<sup>70</sup> Gascoyne, *A Short Survey of Surrealism*, 87.

<sup>71</sup> See Leonard Diepeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism* (London: Routledge 2003), especially its first chapter, 'Difficulty as Fashion'.

gives me a pain in the neck'<sup>72</sup>. A more theatrical or combative Surrealist than Roughton might have dismissed these accusations, and said perhaps that Pound had missed the fundamental Surrealist point that matters of the imagination are of equal revolutionary value to matters of production and economy; and besides, the Surrealists were at this time more keen on approval from the left than from someone like Pound whom Roughton introduces in a footnote as the 'great uncle of modern English poetry' and 'admirer of Mussolini'<sup>73</sup>. Nonetheless, Roughton defends himself, not by strenuously advocating Surrealism's contribution to political discourse, but by downplaying the importance of Surrealism. Roughton concedes that, yes, some Surrealists wrap bad politics in confusing rhetoric, and reasserts his unhappiness with Read's 'individualistic, anarchic trotskyism'<sup>74</sup>. He even criticises Breton for daring to question the Soviet Union and the Moscow Trials, 'now when democracy and socialism are fighting for their life against international fascism'<sup>75</sup>.

For Roughton, the revolutionary role of Surrealism is 'of limited but certain importance'<sup>76</sup>:

Too much is often made of the directly revolutionary significance of present-day Surrealism: the part it has to play in helping to bring over a small section of that small section of the bourgeoisie which in times of capitalist crisis joins the class-conscious militant workers, that part in comparison with the direct impact of economic circumstances is very minute; but the role exists and the revolutionary sincerity of its players is usually genuine.<sup>77</sup>

The diminishing importance Roughton gives to English Surrealism's political agency echoes Breton's experience in France, from Surrealist vanguard to Surrealist rearguard. In England, Surrealist discourse which was initially concerned with consolidating the movement's revolutionary character switched to downplaying and backpedalling by the end of 1936 when faced with heavy contradictions generated internally and externally. Introducing the movement to England had become defending the movement from England.

---

<sup>72</sup> Ezra Pound, 'The Coward Surrealists', in CPP, 136.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Roger Roughton, 'Eyewash, Do You?: A Reply to Mr Pound', in CPP, 137.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 138.

Roughton was to conclude *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* after its tenth issue (Autumn 1937), and drifted away from the Surrealists. At that time, Breton was forming alliances with Trotsky and looking for other ways to justify Surrealism's political commitment beyond compromise with the Popular Front. (Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* [1924] had already warned of the fallacies of a manufactured proletarian culture). Read had also moved in a different ideological direction, and soon published *Poetry and Anarchism* (1938), which began his long-standing association with the English anarchist movement. The 'politico-aesthetic chameleon' was knighted by Winston Churchill in 1953 for services to literature.

Met with an inhospitable cultural climate and with a lack of consensus as to English Surrealism's historical and political identities, many of the movement's central figures began to drift away from the group after 1937. This is not to say that English Surrealism vanished. Rather, it was recognised that what was incommensurable with 'the English' was the idea of a politically committed Surrealist Group in England modelled on Breton's group. Surrealism as an aesthetic form had not been disproved or invalidated, but it had become clear that the social presence of English Surrealism could not simply replicate the form it had taken in France.

### **The Social Presence of English Surrealism**

The situation that stalled the first wave of English Surrealism is represented microcosmically by Roger Roughton's *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*. English Surrealism never managed to theorise an art form that was both aesthetically challenging and politically committed (or, at least, welcomed by the ideologues to whom English Surrealism addressed itself). This division is palpable in the layout of the journal. At the beginning and end of each issue, in the editorial and the comments, exist the overtly political matter (with, on occasion, a centrefold political declaration); the content, the eponymous poetry and prose, represents the artistic matter. Samuel Hynes argues that 'Surrealism and politics co-exist in *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, but without touching', and that 'the harmony that Roughton imagined between the two terms was to be achieved simply by submerging the art-term into the political-term'<sup>78</sup>. The intransigence between the aesthetic movement and the political sphere was twofold: English Surrealism would not engage with party politics, and party politics would not entertain Surrealism. Hynes contends that, 'One might argue that the Marxists had

---

<sup>78</sup> Hynes, *The Auden Generation*, 222.

won, and by refusing to accept Surrealism as a potential ally had defeated its claim to be taken seriously'<sup>79</sup>.

However, the dialectical shortcomings and unconsolidated, chaotically multiplicitous identity of early English Surrealism do not consign the movement to being merely the pale cousin of French Surrealism; English Surrealism was simply different. Despite Breton's insistence that Surrealism was not manoeuvred by an individual, the movement was never to achieve the rhizomatic form that he envisioned, partly because his manifestos stamp his personal identity onto *Surréalisme*. The social presence of French Surrealism in the mid-1930s was embodied, represented by a specific group of people acting, purportedly, in accordance with prescribed principles laid out by a figure of authority. The *Surréalistes* were ambassadors of their various manifestos. They were enlisted disciples rather than autonomous seers. English Surrealism lacked both a leader and a manifesto, and thus had no internal voice of authority. Without its own organ, such as a dedicated journal, English Surrealism lacked also a voice of authority to speak outwardly. Remy explains:

In its own workings, the British Surrealist group unwittingly showed how impossible it was for any such body to have a definitive presence. A locus of forces, a forum of spectral voices, it represented in the very fallibility and resistance of its members the difficulty of repeatedly confronting visions that were thought-defeating in their constitutive evanescence and their uniqueness.<sup>80</sup>

It is this 'forum of spectral voices' that I wish to emphasise as the nature of Surrealism in England around 1936: a group that never became a group; or, to paraphrase Gascoyne's introductory remarks, the movement (that was not a movement). Jackaman adds that 'there was not in England a highly organised group orthodoxy protected like a pseudo-political "cell"'<sup>81</sup>. English Surrealism was always about to arrive; it never reached political maturity. Even its chief ideologues never claimed to represent Surrealism in the same manner that Breton did, as reflected in Read's insistent use of 'superrealism' rather than Surrealism until such a distinction became meaninglessly contrarian.

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>80</sup> Remy, *Surrealism in Britain*, 21.

<sup>81</sup> Jackaman, *The Course of English Surrealist Poetry Since the 1930s*, 97.

English Surrealism likewise had no clearly delimited boundaries like those produced through Breton's conflicts with defectors like Aragon. The Surrealist Group in England coalesced only briefly, and only in an administrative capacity as signatories and organisers. However, in avoiding the theoretical compromise of the movement becoming personified through particular individuals, English Surrealism comes to offer a different model for art's socio-political engagement, one that avoids replicating hierarchical power structures.

The social presence of English Surrealism in its first incarnation was diffuse and spectral. Although this insubstantiality undermined the possibility of immediate political commitment, English Surrealism was experienced instead as a phantom of opposition that was to linger beyond the presence of a specific group of Surrealists. This shadowy, negative, and peripheral presence is comparable with the antihero Maldoror of Lautréamont's novel: an incarnation of pure evil, which appears randomly to wreak havoc then recede back into the shadows.<sup>82</sup> Hynes associates Surrealism, generally, with a modernist tradition of 'history as nightmare'. Surrealism, he writes, was 'a means of expressing not political ideas, but the emotions behind 'thirties politics [...] of possible violence and outrage beyond the projections of reason'<sup>83</sup>. Similarly, Puchner reads Surrealism as a 'message from nowhere', the work of 'the avant-garde at large', and a manifestation of a 'travelling culture'.<sup>84</sup> The political value of this type of spectral social presence is of a different order to that of a group aligned with a 'regular' political organisation; it is more poetic than programmatic.

The Surrealist attraction to spectrality is vividly represented in one of the many stunts of the International Surrealist Exhibition. Alongside various absurdist moments, such as Dalí giving a lecture in a deep-sea diving costume (which not only made him inaudible, but began to suffocate him) and Dylan Thomas offering teacups of boiled string to visitors, the English Surrealist Sheila Legge stalked the crowd dressed as 'the Surrealist Phantom'. She wore a 'long white satin dress with coral-coloured belt and

---

<sup>82</sup> Comte de Lautréamont, *Maldoror and the Complete Works*, trans. Alexis Lykiard (Cambridge: Exact Change 1994).

<sup>83</sup> Hynes, *The Auden Generation*, 226.

<sup>84</sup> Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*, 188-189. These conclusions are drawn from readings of James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1997) and Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1996).

shoes, her face completely covered with roses'<sup>85</sup>. A photograph of the Surrealist Phantom was chosen for the cover of the English Surrealists' *International Surrealist Bulletin* (Fig. 3). The figure of the Surrealist Phantom looks particularly incongruous, like a statue from another world, standing among the pigeons in Trafalgar Square. The Surrealist Phantom's foreboding and threatening presence is suggestive of how the English Surrealists seemed to have imagined their own enforced isolation. These spectres will return with the English Situationists.



Fig.3: Sheila Legge as the Surrealist Phantom<sup>86</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Remy, *Surrealism in Britain*, 76.

<sup>86</sup> Surrealist Group in England, *International Surrealist Bulletin*, 1.



Breton ends his first manifesto with the cryptic claim that 'existence is elsewhere'<sup>87</sup>. Surrealism claims an otherworldliness that is more accurately represented by the *becoming* or the *never-quite-realised-ness* of English Surrealism, the spectre that haunts culture, than by the tangible social and bodily presence, the *being*, of the French Surrealist group. The non-organisation and *group* (not *group*) of English Surrealism can therefore be read as political praxis and aesthetic gesture: Surrealism as a spectral presence, not a political cell. The English Surrealists may not have been, as Read understood them, more Communist than the Communists, but they almost proved themselves more Surrealist than the *Surréalistes*.

---

<sup>87</sup> Breton, 'Manifesto of Surrealism', 47.

## **1.2 Surrealism Put to Work: Mass-Observation**

'The inchoate desire to express themselves, especially among young people, who would be better employed doing something useful, seems the malaise of the times.'

The Star (23<sup>rd</sup> September 1937)<sup>1</sup>

The Surrealist Group in England was still meeting into 1937, although most of its members had moved onto other projects. David Gascoyne's diaries suggest that the participants felt that English Surrealism had run its course. On the 8<sup>th</sup> April 1937, he records that he 'had been wondering how to get out of' the group, which he had 'long since had no truck with'<sup>2</sup>. That day, Roger Roughton and Humphrey Jennings had called a meeting to disband the group. Herbert Read and others objected, so Roughton and Jennings quit, before the whole party 'went downstairs to drink beer and whiskey'<sup>3</sup>. Mass-Observation was borne of this informal milieu, the same group of friends who had been involved in the English Surrealist group and its meetings in Jennings and Charles Madge's homes in Blackheath, London.

The Mass-Observation project was heralded in the correspondence pages of the *New Statesman and Nation*. A letter from Geoffrey Pyke on the 12<sup>th</sup> December 1936 had called for 'an anthropological study of our own civilisation'<sup>4</sup> after the abdication crisis of King Edward VIII. Madge replied to say that a group with precisely that intention was already meeting and formulating means to collect and analyse public reaction to events such as 'the Crystal Palace-Abdication symbolic situations'<sup>5</sup>. Titled 'Anthropology at Home' and dated 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1937, Madge's letter introduces Surrealist imagery to a discussion of domestic anthropology. Madge writes that his group will collect 'evidence of mass wish-situations'<sup>6</sup>. The Surrealist coincidence—derived from Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901) which speaks of repressed desire as the underlying cause of every error or seemingly inconsequential event—is taken as object and means of anthropological study, recast as 'the hidden wish'<sup>7</sup> of

---

<sup>1</sup> Mass-Observation, *First Year's Work 1937-1938* ed. Charles Madge and Tom Harrison (London: Lindsay Drummond 1938), 48.

<sup>2</sup> David Gascoyne, *Collected Journals: 1936-1942* (London: Skoob Books 1991), 73.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Pyke, 'King and Country', *New Statesman and Nation*, December 12<sup>th</sup> 1936.

<sup>5</sup> The Crystal Palace had burnt down on 30<sup>th</sup> December 1936.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Madge, 'Anthropology at Home', *New Statesman and Nation*, January 2<sup>nd</sup> 1937.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

society. Madge's letter establishes the basic programme of Mass-Observation at its inception: the application of a Surrealist methodology to an empirical field of study.

A third letter in the *New Statesman and Nation*, dated 30<sup>th</sup> January 1937, announces the formation of Mass-Observation itself, signed now by Madge, Jennings, and Tom Harrisson. Harrisson was a young and well-published ornithologist, who had recently returned from an expedition to the New Hebrides in order to begin a study of the English working-class in Bolton. As a prescient coincidence, one of Harrisson's poems about his New Hebridean experiences had been published alongside Madge's first letter, so he contacted the Blackheath group to combine projects. Mass-Observation was, therefore, a combination of different projects and disciplinary methodologies. It introduced itself in this jointly-signed letter as developing 'out of anthropology, psychology, and the sciences which study man'<sup>8</sup>.

Early Mass-Observation was chaotically heterogeneous in its operations. Its practices included sending out day-surveys to volunteers to record their thoughts and actions as they went about a typical day, as well as embedding observers (volunteers and employees) in everyday situations to report on their experiences. Mass-Observation's cross-disciplinary appeal is reflected by the various contexts into which it has been historicised. Mass-Observation relates to the documentary movement of the Thirties and Forties, to anthropology's reverse-focus from the colonial to the domestic Other (particularly the Northern working-class), and to the broad social-democratic cultural movement that encompasses the Left Book Club, the *Picture Post*, and Penguin books. Mass-Observation also figures prominently in the biographies of its illustrious founders: it was the social anthropological justification for Harrisson's undercover self-immersion in Bolton working-class life, a project analogous to George Orwell's time in Wigan; and it reflects Madge and Jennings' interest in devising a post-Surrealist 'popular poetry' through their experiences working for the *Daily Mirror* and the GPO film unit respectively.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Tom Harrisson, Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge, 'Anthropology at Home', *New Statesman and Nation*, January 30<sup>th</sup> 1937.

<sup>9</sup> Histories of Mass-Observation include: in relation to everyday life, Nick Hubble, *Mass-Observation and Everyday Life: Culture, History, Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2006) and Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*; and in relation to British Cultural Studies, Tom Jeffrey, *Mass-Observation: A Short History* (Mass Observation Occasional Paper No. 10, University of Sussex Library 1999) and Jeremy MacClancy, 'Brief Encounter: The Meeting, in Mass-Observation, of British Surrealism and Popular Anthropology', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropology Institute* 1: 3 (September 1995): 495-512.

## Surrealist Methodologies

Ben Highmore and Nick Hubble have both argued that Mass-Observation was a means of studying the everyday as the site of an oppositional politics, with particular emphasis on countering the (mis-)representations of the mainstream media. Highmore plots a similar trajectory to my present study and understands Mass-Observation as a synthesis of Surrealism (though not specifically English) and Benjamin's historical materialism. The Benjamin-Adorno connection is actually indicated by Mass-Observation itself, whose introductory pamphlet, titled simply *Mass-Observation* (January-April 1937), lists the Institute of Social Research (the Frankfurt School) as an organisation 'with similar aims'<sup>10</sup> to its own. Mass-Observation's first phase, from January to September 1937, saw two publications: the aforementioned introductory pamphlet; and *May the Twelfth* (hereafter *May 12<sup>th</sup>*), the publication of the results of an intensive study of the coronation of George VI on the 12<sup>th</sup> May 1937, undertaken through press cuttings, day-surveys, and roaming observer reports. After *May 12<sup>th</sup>*, Jennings left Mass-Observation and the project slowly shook off its Surrealist inheritance to move towards institutionalised market research. A division exists in Mass-Observation's identity at these early stages between the Surrealist Blackheath group led by Madge and Jennings, who co-ordinated the day-surveys, and Harrison's Bolton (renamed Worktown) project rooted in anthropological methods of inquiry. To identify Mass-Observation's use of Madge and Jennings' Surrealist experiences, I shall restrict my attention to the Blackheath group's contributions to the project.

I do not mean to imply that Mass-Observation's two arms of operation were mutually exclusive. Rather, its internal antagonisms, like those of English Surrealism, were precisely what produced its initial period of pioneering and highly reflexive work, yet they would also catalyse the implosion of the Madge-Jennings-Harrison structure prior to Mass-Observation's co-option by market forces and the re-direction of its energies. Mass-Observation's internal antagonisms can be summarised as the disjuncture between its Surrealist willingness to embrace contradiction and fragmentation, and its early anthropological effort to categorise social inconsequentialities into a meaningful system. This internal dialectic has divided critical attention to Mass-Observation. Highmore argues that Mass-Observation's

---

<sup>10</sup> Charles Madge and Tom Harrison, *Mass-Observation* (London: Frederick Muller Ltd. 1937), 60.

identity was ‘necessarily unstable’<sup>11</sup>, while Samuel Hynes reduces the project to ‘a complex example of the confusions of young intellectuals of the time’<sup>12</sup>. As early as the first pamphlet, Madge and Harrisson recognise that,

Already, differences within the group have been a fruitful source of new ideas and new methods of approach. Provided they do not lead to the formation of factions, such differences will continue to be our life-blood, and the guarantee that we do not become incapable of development.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, one of Harrisson’s anthropologist friends, the Australian Jock Marshall, records in his diary on 14<sup>th</sup> February 1937: ‘Catchword at the moment: “esoteric synthesis”’<sup>14</sup>.

The *Mass-Observation* pamphlet introduces the project differently according to Madge and Harrisson’s personal interpretations (Jennings was not involved with this pamphlet): ‘Tom Harrisson believes that Mass-Observation, by laying open to doubt all existing philosophies of life as possibly incomplete, yet by refusing to neglect the significance of any of them, may make a new synthesis’; while, ‘In the other author’s opinion [Madge], Mass-Observation is an instrument for collecting facts, not a means for producing a synthetic philosophy, a super-science or super-politics’<sup>15</sup>. Curiously, Madge as the empiricist and Harrisson as the dialectician is the reverse of what one would have expected from the communist poet and the anthropologist who prided himself on non-interventionist observation. May 12<sup>th</sup> (September 1937) establishes Mass-Observation’s ‘tripartite division of labour’<sup>16</sup>, with Jennings’s contribution as the aesthetic ‘business of presenting results’<sup>17</sup>.

How did Mass-Observation put to work the lessons of Surrealist political aesthetics and/or Frankfurt School historical materialism, and to what English conditions were those lessons applied? The Surrealist influence is most evident in the lists of social phenomenon that Madge, Jennings, and Harrisson propose to be Mass-Observation’s objects of study. One such list is offered in the third *New Statesman and Nation* letter, which presents Mass-Observation’s interests:

---

<sup>11</sup> Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 77.

<sup>12</sup> Hynes, *The Auden Generation*, 279.

<sup>13</sup> Madge and Harrisson, *Mass-Observation*, 33.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Hubble, *Mass-Observation and Everyday Life: Culture, History, Theory*, 116.

<sup>15</sup> Madge and Harrisson, *Mass-Observation*, 47.

<sup>16</sup> Hubble, *Mass-Observation and Everyday Life: Culture, History, Theory*, 116.

<sup>17</sup> Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge, *May the Twelfth: Mass-Observation Day-Surveys 1937 by over two hundred observers* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd. 1937), x.

Behaviour of people at war memorials.  
 Shouts and gestures of motorists.  
 The aspidistra cult.  
 Anthropology of football pools.  
 Bathroom behaviour.  
 Beards, armpits, eyebrows.  
 Anti-semitism.  
 Distribution, diffusion and significance of the dirty joke.  
 Funerals and undertakers.  
 Female taboos about eating.  
 The private lives of midwives.<sup>18</sup>

Breton's first Surrealist manifesto used the same technique of juxtaposing moments of heightened emotional significance and arbitrary, banal, and everyday phenomena. The Mass-Observation list enacts a radical compression of the hierarchy of social forms, in which anti-Semitism is sandwiched between body hair and dirty jokes.<sup>19</sup> Mass-Observation remaps the political to make prominent everyday experiences and desires and to diminish that which constitutes politics for the mainstream media. Mass-Observation's list anticipates its broader project of constructing constellations of what it called 'mass wish-situations'. Thus, Mass-Observation adopts Benjamin-Adorno's constellation as the aesthetic representation of socio-historical processes, instead of the diagrammatic and crude-dialectical family tree model previously discussed. Astrological and meteorological metaphors recur in Mass-Observation's founding documents. The third letter to the newspaper promises that Mass-Observation's 'observers will also provide the points from which can be plotted weather-maps of public feeling in a crisis'<sup>20</sup>; the pamphlet describes participants as 'the meteorological stations from whose reports a weather-map of popular feeling can be compiled'<sup>21</sup>.

Mass-Observation sought a radically democratic and participatory means of writing history. The May 12<sup>th</sup> project constellated 43 observer reports, 77 questionnaire replies, and 12 reports from Mass-Observation operatives (including Jennings himself) into sections minimally arranged according to location and chronology. The text indicates something of Madge's interest in a popular poetry and, like Benjamin's dialectical image and Adorno's constellation, inserts itself into a modernist tradition of collage. May 12<sup>th</sup> constellates but does not interpret its raw data in order to produce an image that is faithful to the diversity and discrepancies of the social. Mass-Observation

<sup>18</sup> Harrison, Jennings and Madge, 'Anthropology at Home'.

<sup>19</sup> Gascoyne's diaries record the Surrealists' involvement in demonstrations against Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts in the East End in late 1936. Gascoyne, *Collected Journals: 1936-1942*, 20.

<sup>20</sup> Harrison, Jennings and Madge, 'Anthropology at Home'.

<sup>21</sup> Madge and Harrison, *Mass-Observation*, 30.

explains, ‘The image, in our sense, is something between an idea and a sensation. It is more vivid than an abstract idea; it is more intangible than a concrete sensation’<sup>22</sup>. The pamphlet also quotes Rimbaud, ‘J’ai seul la clé de cette parade sauvage’<sup>23</sup>—a phrase that anticipates Adorno’s account of the constellation as the ‘number-combination’ that will unlock the ‘heavily guarded safe’ of history.

Its quasi-Surrealist concept of ‘the image’ is carried into Mass-Observation largely by Jennings. His absence from later Mass-Observation publications, especially *First Year’s Work* (1938) and *Britain* (1939), is felt in their mediation and systematic arrangement of data, which indicates a greater authorial presence. Jeremy MacClancy explains Jennings’s faith in the Surrealist image:

While basing his ideas of the image on Breton’s conception of “the Surrealist object” (i.e. of a person’s unconscious thought made concrete), Jennings held that the image, to be valid, had to be discovered, not invented.<sup>24</sup>

For Jennings, this elusive image was to be found through constellated raw data, and could only be struck upon through coincidence. In his review of Read’s *Surrealism in Contemporary Poetry and Prose* (where Jennings had previously published proto-Mass-Observation ‘Reports’), in which he accuses Read of using Surrealism, Jennings had refuted the role of intentionality in Surrealism:

“Coincidences” have the infinite freedom of appearing anywhere, anytime, to anyone: in broad daylight to those whom we most despise in places we must have loathed: not even to us at all: probably least to petty seekers after mystery and poetry on deserted sea-shores and in misty junk shops.<sup>25</sup>

Jennings’ faith in the Surrealist coincidence led to frictions with Harrison for whom, understandably, ‘coincidence’ did not provide a stable methodological framework.

Jennings’ adaption of Surrealism is analogous to that of Benjamin. The latter’s Arcades Project has a similar, constellated, form to Mass-Observation’s May 12<sup>th</sup> text, but Jennings’ own *Pandæmonium: Coming of the Machine as seen by Contemporary Observers* (posthumously arranged and published in 1985) bears even greater similarities to the project that occupied the last decade of Benjamin’s life. Jennings intended *Pandæmonium*

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>24</sup> MacClancy, ‘Brief Encounter’, 497.

<sup>25</sup> Jennings, ‘Review of Surrealism by Herbert Read,’ 168.

to be a sprawling collection of quotes from disparate texts that charted the arrival of the industrial age. In his introduction, Jennings promises to ‘present an imaginative history’ of the Industrial Revolution via ‘what I call Images’; he emphasises that he writes ‘present, not describe or analyse’.<sup>26</sup> An introduction by his daughter, Mary-Lou Jennings, compares the book with her father’s wartime film output, particularly *Listen to Britain* (1941), as ‘a series of images carefully placed to illuminate not just themselves in isolation but each other’<sup>27</sup>. Another introduction, from Madge, is more explicit about the affinities between this project and Benjamin’s:

They [the passages of Jennings’ book] are what later poets have called “illuminations”, “Moments of Vision”—some obviously clearer than others—some intentional, others unintentional—but all in some degree with this window-opening quality—it is this which differentiates these pieces of writing from purely economic or political, or social analyses.<sup>28</sup>

Jennings’s involvement in English Surrealism clearly prefigures Mass-Observation’s May 12<sup>th</sup>, which itself prefigures his own *Pandæmonium*. Mass-Observation was also able to answer a pair of questions that had dogged English Surrealism: why now, and why here? Mass-Observation recognised and exacerbated a moment of historical rupture that might allow for the interruption of the continuum of history and a moment of dialectical, profane, illumination. This rupture was the abdication crisis that had prompted the foundation of Mass-Observation. An icon of English conservative anachrony had faltered, the King was no longer the king, and the time was out of joint.

The Mass-Observation pamphlet recognises the shock of the moment: ‘At last England had to face a situation to which there was no stock response’<sup>29</sup>. The historical disjuncture, though, was rapidly glazed over. The dominant image was replaced, and modernised, through the spectacular coronation of the new king. May 12<sup>th</sup> investigated how English people experienced that return of the monarchical icon, which it did to contest the constructions of the event in the mass-media which were in thrall to hierarchical power. The collage form of May 12<sup>th</sup> was Jennings’s doing, and emphasises the disjuncture of the moment, as opposed to the narrativising impulse of the mainstream media. Highmore describes Jennings’ dialectical image ‘as a dynamic

<sup>26</sup> Humphrey Jennings, *Pandæmonium 1660-1886: The Coming of the Machine as seen by Contemporary Observers* (London: André Deutsch 1985), xxxv.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxvi.

<sup>29</sup> Madge and Harrison, *Mass-Observation*, 9.



moment capable of interrupting historical narratives of progress<sup>30</sup>. In his own explanation of the formal arrangement of *May 12<sup>th</sup>*, Jennings registers his debt to avant-garde aesthetics in the technical language of ‘close-up and long shot, detail and ensemble’<sup>31</sup>.

Early Mass-Observation managed to adopt Surrealist tactics without attracting the accusations of obscurantism and over-intellectualisation that Surrealism, French and English, had received. Mass-Observation put Surrealism to work with vigorously populist intentions. The pamphlet emphasises the importance of verbal clarity: ‘The facts must be made accessible in plain English which everyone can understand’<sup>32</sup>. The democratic and slightly naive charm of *May 12<sup>th</sup>* is evident in the array of topics to which it pays attention, from the Vegetarian Society, to Haile Selassie, to dog behaviour; and despite its oppositional politics, the text conveys the atmosphere of enthusiasm and revelry of coronation day. The text pays attention to the bus driver strikes that mainstream accounts of the day excluded, and is, as such, faithful to Mass-Observation’s promise of indiscriminate, demotic, reportage. The pages of semi-anonymous reports quite literally produce a form of collective authorship that preserves what Hubble calls ‘the necessity for simultaneous multiple personalities’<sup>33</sup> that Mass-Observation inherited from Lautréamont via Surrealism. Unfortunately, the text sold only about 800 copies due to its size and price, and it damaged Mass-Observation’s reputation because many of its contributors, its compendium of authors, could not actually afford it.<sup>34</sup>

### **Mass-Observation’s Political Ambiguity**

Mass-Observation’s Surrealist inheritance included the latter’s uncertain sense of its own political agency. The problems of party allegiance faced by the Surrealist movements became in Mass-Observation problems of class perspective. Mass-Observation claimed to be anti-specialist and unaffiliatedly democratic, which Tom Jeffrey describes as Mass-Observation’s faith in the truthfulness of unmediated forms of representation, the ‘populist demand that democracy should mean what it says, rule by the people, appraised of the facts’<sup>35</sup>. However, Mass-Observation’s assumption of a

---

<sup>30</sup> Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 93.

<sup>31</sup> Jennings and Madge, *May the Twelfth*, 90.

<sup>32</sup> Madge and Harrison, *Mass-Observation*, 40.

<sup>33</sup> Hubble, *Mass-Observation and Everyday Life: Culture, History, Theory*, 87.

<sup>34</sup> Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 95–96.

<sup>35</sup> Jeffrey, *Mass-Observation: A Short History*, 3.

host of ideological abstractions—not least ‘the facts’ and ‘the people’—indicates a discrepancy between its rhetoric and its practice.

In the pamphlet, Madge and Harrison introduce Mass-Observation as politically uncommitted and aiming simply to contribute to ‘the social consciousness of the time’<sup>36</sup>. They recognise the political polyvalence of unmediated data, and write that the information generated by Mass-Observation would be of equal use to ‘the pacifist who wishes to prevent recruiting and to the War Office which wants to stimulate it’<sup>37</sup>. A review reprinted in *First Year’s Work* from the *Daily Worker* (16<sup>th</sup> June 1937), written by Madge and Jennings’ old Surrealist colleague and committed Communist Roger Roughton, approves of this non-partisan position: ‘A means to widening our social consciousness. This is the merit of the movement’<sup>38</sup>. However, Mass-Observation’s objectivity is compromised by the gaze of its embedded observers: the Mass-Observer is, necessarily, an outsider to working-class communities; Mass-Observation’s founders were middle-class and Oxbridge-educated. Like the ambiguity of Orwell’s attention to the miners’ bodies in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), Mass-Observation tends to treat the working-class as something unfamiliar and primal. In its description of what Mass-Observers will do, the pamphlet makes the bestial metaphor explicit: ‘His squalid boarding-house will become for the observer what the entrails of the dog-fish are to the zoologist—the material of science and the source of its divina voluptas’<sup>39</sup>.

Press reaction to May 12<sup>th</sup> is recorded in the post-Jennings text, *First Year’s Work*. The reprinted reviews serve as a reflexive reversal of Mass-Observation’s gaze, from social phenomena to Mass-Observation itself, Mass-Observation as a social phenomenon. Mass-Observation’s political ambiguity is reflected in the range of criticism, which admonishes its excessively polemical perspective (*The Spectator*: ‘Aggressively leftish’<sup>40</sup>) and also faults its lack of ideological mediation (*Listener*: ‘The facts simply multiply like maggots’<sup>41</sup>). Madge and Harrison seem surprised that the left should be so wary of Mass-Observation, and they write that this is where their political sympathies remain: ‘The left, in dailies as well as non-, are the more ready to be hostile. This is the reverse of what we expected when we inaugurated Mass-

---

<sup>36</sup> Madge and Harrison, *Mass-Observation*, 47.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>38</sup> *Mass-Observation, First Year’s Work 1937-1938*, 61.

<sup>39</sup> Madge and Harrison, *Mass-Observation*, 30.

<sup>40</sup> *Mass-Observation, First Year’s Work 1937-1938*, 56.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

Observation'<sup>42</sup>. Tom Jeffrey suggests that not only were Mass-Observation's organisers politically biased, but so were its volunteers: 'Of the very small number of lower middle-class diarists who were members of political parties, most were members of the Communist Party'<sup>43</sup>. To claim absolute political impartiality is a naive gesture, especially in light of the founders' political connections (Madge was a member of the Communist Party) and the wider social democratic project into which Mass-Observation fits. Likewise, Mass-Observation's is a fundamentally anti-authoritarian impulse—the desire to counteract mass-media representations. Jennings's early departure cut short the initial trajectory of Mass-Observation, and any autonomous political position it might have claimed was debunked upon its co-optation by the government and the market.

Jennings left Mass-Observation because, according to Madge, he shied away from what he felt to be a banal streak in Harrisson's 'expressionist quasi-anthropology'<sup>44</sup>. He felt that the original Surrealist-anthropological dialectic of Mass-Observation had been undermined. Madge remained in a (generally losing) power battle with Harrisson (who had not been involved with May 12<sup>th</sup>) 'and so the Surrealist potential of Mass-Observation was totally neglected for the sake of more mundane and narrowly empirical work'<sup>45</sup>. Madge left Mass-Observation in 1940. During the war, Mass-Observation was put to work under the Home Intelligence Department of the Ministry of Information. After the war, and after Harrisson's departure, Mass-Observation was registered as a limited company and turned to market research. Interestingly, after leaving Mass-Observation both Madge and Jennings worked in some capacity for the government: Jennings continued to make films for the GPO Film Unit (later the Crown Film Unit); and Madge produced research for the National Council for Social and Economic Research under J.M. Keynes.

In its transition from avant-gardist site of contestation to organ of government and market expansion, Mass-Observation shifted from observing the masses from within the mass (however naively it tried to do so) to occupying a position of privilege and detachment, where censure and reform replaced the drive to reawaken a tranquilised society or affect structural change. Paradoxically, the project slowly

---

<sup>42</sup> Madge and Harrisson, *Mass-Observation*, 54.

<sup>43</sup> Jeffrey, *Mass-Observation: A Short History*, 30.

<sup>44</sup> Charles Madge, 'The Birth of Mass Observation', *Times Literary Supplement* (November 5<sup>th</sup> 1976), quoted in Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 76.

<sup>45</sup> MacClancy, 'Brief Encounter', 503.

moved closer to the political agency that it had sought since its Surrealist beginnings, but at the cost of jettisoning its aesthetic and oppositional concerns. Highmore has speculated that, 'If Mass-Observation is an example of an avant-garde "going public", then perhaps the tendency towards bureaucracy was an inevitable condition of its continuation (Mass-Observation as an arm of government or commercial research)'<sup>46</sup>.

Ringling in the ears of those sympathetic to Surrealism at this point should be Jennings's early warnings about the use of Surrealism in England. Mass-Observation, decreasingly, can be seen to have put Surrealism to work in a grounded, empirical, and socially democratic way; yet its potential for changing the world in new and unforeseen ways was slowly eliminated as it diverged from the Surrealist project of synthesising dreamt and waking life and even from Benjamin-Adorno's vision of radical social change through autonomously determined forms of representation. Dialectical antagonism was replaced by gentle reformism.

In another sense, in the transition from *Surréalisme* to English Surrealism to early Mass-Observation to Mass-Observation Ltd., we can observe the process of an aesthetic concept being modified, localised and vernacularised, then put to work, and eventually co-opted by the market. A concept is embodied, and later ossified. Jeffrey contends that Mass-Observation's original objectives were made redundant not through changes in its own identity, but due to a broader shift in social organisation across the second world war: 'It is not so much that Mass-Observation moved away from its original power base and closer to the centre of power, but that power moved to that centre ground of which Mass-Observation was, in a complex and sometimes marginal way, a part'<sup>47</sup>. However, it seems less that changes in the social formation of power occupied the space of Mass-Observation, and more that established social powers simply reached out, incorporated, and suppressed Mass-Observation as an oppositional voice. Given a concrete social presence—spectral Surrealism embodied and put to work—Mass-Observation was unable to escape the co-optation of oppositional voices by a society whose totalising drives were precisely what the Surrealist project had initially set out to counteract.

---

<sup>46</sup> Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 111.

<sup>47</sup> Jeffrey, *Mass-Observation: A Short History*, 7.

## **2.1 Alexander Trocchi and the Dissolution of the Avant-Garde**

*'I'm all the time aware that it's reality and not literature I'm engaged in.'*  
Alexander Trocchi, *Cain's Book* (1960)<sup>1</sup>

The gradual transformation from first-wave English Surrealism to Mass Observation Ltd. demonstrates how avant-garde tactics can be put to work for the very same social conditions that they originally sought to challenge. Such moments prefigure what the Situationist International (SI) would later call recuperation: the process by which the hegemonic order can incorporate and deradicalise even the most lucid critical and oppositional voices. Recuperation is the self-defence mechanism of what Guy Debord called the society of the spectacle, the equivalent to censorship or physical coercion in more overtly authoritarian societies. Recuperation reduces political antagonisms to commodifiable images, and jettisons whatever kernel of radicality may have been contained therein. Debord claimed that the spectacle uses 'culture to bury all historical memory'<sup>2</sup>: oppositional voices, which typically represent oppositional histories, are submerged into the spectacle's amorphous flow of images which regulate the desires of the subjects of consumer capitalism.

Debord's exposition of the spectacle corresponds with a number of critiques that have made the accusation of an increasing aestheticisation of politics in the twentieth century. Benjamin famously called for a politicisation of aesthetics in retaliation<sup>3</sup>; the 'historical avant-garde' as identified by Bürger attempted much the same task. Debord locates the origins of the spectacle in the same historical moment from which arose the historical avant-garde, yet the spectacle was to develop far beyond and far faster than the avant-garde critique. The spectacle affected bloodless conquests over each successive avant-garde manifestation by hypostatizing and canonising those movements, that is, by maintaining 'art as an institution set off from the praxis of life'.

The SI was conscious of its inheritance from those avant-garde traditions, and was painfully aware of the inevitability of its own recuperation. Nonetheless, its

---

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Trocchi, *Cain's Book* (New York: Grove Press 1961), 232.

<sup>2</sup> SoS, thesis 192. I use Knabb's translation of Debord, which I consider the truest to Debord's inimitable style, but cite the thesis rather than the page number to allow for easier cross-referencing between the original and translations.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico 1999).

rhetoric maintained a millenarian self-confidence: 'The situationists, of whom you believe yourselves perhaps to be the judges, will one day judge you'<sup>4</sup>. The SI did not abandon but sought to refine the project of the historical avant-garde. In *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Debord asserts what is vital about the SI in relation to its predecessors:

Dadaism sought to abolish art without realizing it; surrealism sought to realize art without abolishing it. The critical position since developed by the situationists has shown that the abolition and realization of art are inseparable aspects of a single transcendence of art.<sup>5</sup>

Debord's verdict matches Bürger's, but Debord expands the concept of art from its capital-A institutional presence to its more general character in capitalist society. In its correction of the historical avant-garde's dialectic of negation, the SI posited itself as the culmination and conclusion of the avant-garde project.

The SI's self-identification as the last avant-garde seems arrogant, or at least blindly optimistic. However, to put aside the SI's eschatological pronouncements, it is a seductive proposal on two counts. Firstly, the SI stood at a historical juncture when it could, like Benjamin's angel of history, look backwards and recognise its own genealogy. This historicising perspective allowed for Debord's re-evaluation of the Dada-Surrealist project. 'For the first time in history', Debord wrote,

the arts of all ages and civilizations can be known and accepted together, and the fact that it has become possible to collect and recollect all these art-historical memories marks the end of the world of art. In this age of museums in which artistic communication is no longer possible, all the previous expressions of art can be accepted equally, because whatever particular communication problems they may have had are eclipsed by all the present-day obstacles to communication in general.<sup>6</sup>

Today, with the benefit of forty more years of hindsight, we might speculate that in the early 1960s, with the overdetermination of avant-garde identity and the abundance of artistic '-isms', the SI did not represent the end of art, but the end of the age of heralding the end of art.

---

<sup>4</sup> Situationist International, 'Manifeste', *Internationale Situationniste* 4 (Juin 1960): 38. Also available at the 'Situationist International Archive', Centre for Digital Discourse and Culture at Virginia Tech, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/manifesto.html> [accessed 10/05/2012].

<sup>5</sup> SoS, thesis 191.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., thesis 189.

My second reason for entertaining the SI's self-identification as the culmination of a certain avant-garde lineage is also epistemological in nature. After the events of 1968 and 1989 in particular, geopolitics has frequently been discussed in terms of the decline of the nation-state, and thus the transformation of the principle entity against which the historical avant-garde defined itself. The historical conditions that produced the historical avant-garde's ideological consciousness, such as Surrealism's insistence on internationalism or, conversely, Italian Futurism's nationalism, have changed. As we imagine ourselves to move further into an age characterised by post-statist politics and post-national identity, it follows that we might have entered an age of the post-avant-garde. This epistemological shift has produced what I shall call the *dissolution of avant-garde social presence*, a phrase which I shall use to denote the shift in avant-garde organisation away from political cell formations common to Bürger's historical avant-garde groups and towards more diffuse, spectral, and rhizomatic forms of avant-garde praxis. The principle manifestation of this change is that contemporary avant-gardist practitioners have shunned the type of organisation that modelled itself upon the vanguard political party as demonstrated by Breton's French Surrealist Group up to 1935. The SI stands on the cusp between embodied historical avant-garde groups and less identitarian, more amorphous, avant-garde formations which do not necessarily insist upon their recognition as a particular '-ism'.

For the SI, the dissolution of the avant-garde was a tactical move, a going-underground to evade the threat of recuperation—a response to the rise of the spectacle which had transformed the terrain on which aesthetics and politics meet. I shall continue to focus on debates around organisation, identification, and social presence, though I am now in a position to address the *aesthetic formations* that have emerged from dissolute avant-gardes, and to consider what is specific to those aesthetic formations that might have been unavailable to the vanguardist movements of the earlier twentieth century. Avant-gardist impulses, I suggest, remain locked in a dialectical relationship with art-as-an-institution as long as the latter withstands the calls for its own supersession. In this chapter I shall attempt to establish a means of thinking about how avant-gardist impulses operate in culture after the dissolution of avant-garde social presence.

### **Trocchi and the Situationist International**

Critical attention to the historical avant-gardes has frequently reduced each movement to a figurehead or representative grouping, which was often encouraged by

the authors of the various manifestos. Breton, for example, becomes Surrealism; though I hope to have demonstrated in the rise and fall of the first wave of English Surrealism the avant-gardist capacity for multiple identities under a common name. A similar phenomenon, not unforeseen by the Situationists, has occurred in relation to the SI. Although composed of sections from across Europe alongside American, African, and Israeli members, and constantly (rhetorically, at least) attempting to eschew leadership or hierarchy, the SI has often come to be known as the small group centred on Paris, headed by Guy Debord. Of course, metonyms are necessary when speaking of things as slippery as Situationist theory. Likewise, the SI was, arguably, at its most dynamic and critically agile under Debord's Parisian faction. But to restrict our attention to the SI, or any other movement, to one particular historical-geographical manifestation would be to lose the nuances of materialist critique that directly address other cultural contexts. Of course, some avant-gardist activity has been defined according to its specific manifestations, such as the distinction between Zurich Dada and Berlin Dada. In my discussion of English Situationist practices, I want to make the complementary gesture of illuminating a localised iteration of a base model while also reflecting on the master narrative of Situationism in the abstract, with all its productive contradictions, contingencies, and compromises.

Anglicised Situationist practices did not begin with belated efforts to establish an English Situationist group, as was the case with English Surrealism.<sup>7</sup> Instead, Situationist practices were anglicised contemporaneously with the founding of the SI in Cosio d'Arroscia, Italy, in 1957.<sup>8</sup> It emerged from a conglomeration of avant-garde groups, though the SI principally continued the project of the Lettrist International which had itself broken away from Isidore Isou's Lettrism movement in 1952 with the declaration that 'we believe that the most urgent expression of freedom is the destruction of idols, especially when they claim to represent freedom'.<sup>9</sup> At the conference in Cosio d'Arroscia, there was one English founder member, Ralph Rumney, who represented the London Psychogeographical Association, of which he

---

<sup>7</sup> Accounts of the founding of the Situationist International can be found in: Stewart Home, *The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War* (Stirling: AK Press 1991); Andrew Hussey, *The Game of War: The Life and Death of Guy Debord* (London: Pimlico 2002); Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Faber and Faber 2001).

<sup>8</sup> The Cosio d'Arroscia conference led to the production of the document 'Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action' (1957), in *SIA*, 25-43.

<sup>9</sup> Serge Berna, Jean-L. Brau, Guy-Ernest Debord, Gil J. Wolman, 'Position de l'International Lettriste', *Internationale Lettriste* 1 (Nov 1952), in Guy Debord, *Œuvres* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard 2006), 86.



was the only member. Rumney's involvement with the fledgling SI was soon curtailed when he was expelled for the heinous crime of failing to submit on time a psychogeographical report on Venice.

The only other British member of the SI in its beginnings was the Scot Alexander Trocchi. Born in Glasgow in 1925, Trocchi's life was full of international travels. After university, and after a brief stint in the Royal Navy, he became editor of an influential literary review, before writing novels of varying levels of seditiousness, of which the most famous (and least seditious) are *Young Adam* (1954) and *Cain's Book* (1960). Trocchi lived in Paris, Mexico, and the United States. After his involvement with its counterculture in the 1960s, Trocchi ended up running a small antiquarian book stall in London. For most of his adult life, Trocchi was also addicted to heroin. He was affiliated with the SI for roughly a decade, from his encounters with the Lettrist International beginning in October 1955<sup>10</sup> to his expulsion from the SI in 1964<sup>11</sup>. Membership of the SI was always precarious, so Trocchi's was a fairly long innings, though he was mostly a Situationist in *absentia*.

I shall be accounting for Trocchi's progression from novelist to organiser and 'cosmonaut of inner space' of the sigma project, a perennially vague project of radical cultural reorganisation.<sup>12</sup> A biographical focus is necessary, as Trocchi insisted on the mutual identity of his work and his life. His fiction is directly informed by his experiences in the Parisian literary scene of the early 1950s, the New York and San Francisco beatnik and junkie scenes of the late 1950s, and the hip circles of West London in the early 1960s. I shall read Trocchi's individual progression alongside the shift from the art-based provocations of the Lettrist International to the formulation of a unified theoretical program in the early SI. Trocchi represents the earliest British interpretation of Situationist practice, and he stands at the boundary between the historical avant-garde and its dissolution. Trocchi never attempted to establish an English section of the SI, though this happened without him in 1967—he was recorded as being of 'no section'<sup>13</sup>. In his literary practice and his later experiments

---

<sup>10</sup> Home, *The Assault on Culture*, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Trocchi's expulsion was announced in 1966, in 'Sur des Publications de l'I.S.', *Internationale Situationniste* 10 (March 1966): 83.

<sup>12</sup> Trocchi asks for sigma not to be capitalised. Alexander Trocchi, 'Sigma: A Tactical Blueprint' (1962), in Andrew Murray Scott (ed.), *Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds: A Trocchi Reader* (Edinburgh: Polygon 1991), 193.

<sup>13</sup> Gray, *Leaving the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, 132.

with radical organisation, Trocchi began the Anglicisation of Situationist theory that would form the basis of a distinctly English movement.

Trocchi productively complicates the relationship that I have so far characterised as one of Franco-Anglo transition. Trocchi's fiction in particular undertakes an Anglicisation of Continental avant-garde practices that is neither straightforward mimicry nor the transplantation of Continental tropes into an Anglophonic context. The transition is neither direct nor undisturbed; it is subject to a host of other influences. Through his association in Paris with figures like Sartre, Genet, and Beckett, and in America with Ginsberg and Burroughs, Trocchi's writings were produced as amalgams of stylistic influence, yet they maintained a dialogue with Situationist theory that eventually overtook their engagement with literature as such. However, his legacy is now an abject one: materially abject, with many unrealised projects; and critically abject, with many of his pursuits not seeming to transcend their particular historical moment (in simpler terms, it is easy to write Trocchi off as a hippie who wrote for other hippies). Accounts of Trocchi's life and analyses of his work are typically only included as anecdotes or footnotes in broader histories of the 1960s London counterculture, or as defensive accounts of his influence on Scottish pop culture. In such circumstances, my project assumes other responsibilities, as I need to contest the anti-scholarly overtones of his intellectual legacy while also asserting that the immateriality of Trocchi's archive is not a failing on his part but symptomatic of the (anti-)aesthetic labour than he practiced.

### **From *Young Adam* to *Cain's Book***

Trocchi first met Debord when Trocchi was living in Paris after having worked as a founding editor of the literary review *Merlin*. Andrew Murray Scott locates the meeting with Debord and the Lettrists as a turning point for Trocchi, though *Merlin* had ended in 1954 and Trocchi would leave for New York in 1956. In letters to his brother and his girlfriend, Trocchi adopted a fiery political tone that had been absent from his *Merlin* editorials, which is something that Scott attributes to Trocchi's encounter with the Lettrists' revolutionary ideas. Trocchi declares, 'I reject the entire system [...] the answer is revolution. Not in the objective, idealistic sense, but there in the heart of everyman [...] the Revolution has already taken place in me'<sup>14</sup>. The guardedly autobiographical *Cain's Book* suggests that Trocchi gravitated towards the

---

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Andrew Murray Scott, *Alexander Trocchi: The Making of the Monster* (Edinburgh: Polygon 1991), 64.

Lettrists because he had exhausted the options open to him as editor of a literary journal. The novel's pseudonymous narrator Joe Necchi confesses, 'During my last year in Paris I had drifted away from my former acquaintances. I could no longer share a common purpose with them'<sup>15</sup>.

Scott's biography of Trocchi, the only substantial biography currently available, is typical of the aforementioned abjection of Trocchi scholarship. Scott's depiction of the Lettrist-Situationist Internationals, for instance, is erroneous: he mislabels the offshoot Lettrist International as 'Lettrisme International'<sup>16</sup>; and he locates the SI at 'the heart of existentialism'<sup>17</sup>, failing to mention that the movement had emerged in a youthful, Oedipal, rebellion against the older literary-philosophical movement. The Lettrists' rejection of Existentialism was symbolised in their patronage of down-and-out cafés around Saint-Germain-des-Près, specifically Chez Moineau, in defiance of the touristic Existential scene that centred on the famous Café des Deux Magots and the Café de Flore, Sartre's haunts. Scott's edited collection of Trocchi's own ephemeral writings is rather more useful than his biography. In one letter, Trocchi, as early as October 1950, recognises that the Existentialist base of Café des Deux Magots was in intellectual decline: 'It is all the long hair, the talk, the obvious tourist traps, that lead me to think (I may change my mind) that the creative centre is in the process of moving on'<sup>18</sup>.

Trocchi was not exclusively or successively an Existentialist, a Lettrist, or a Situationist. I want to reveal the constellation of Trocchi's influences. His fiction signals its Existential, Lettrist, and Situationist inheritances simultaneously but clearly demarcated from each other. Nonetheless, Existentialism retained a dominant position in Trocchi's constellation prior to his Lettrist conversion, and continued to shape his prose thereafter. His engagement with Existentialism, outside of his *Merlin* editorials, is most obvious in *Young Adam*. By the time of *Cain's Book*, Trocchi's constellation includes American Beat literature and the SI.

In 1953, Trocchi wrote a 'Letter from Paris' for the journal *NIMBUS* which praised and historicised the prevalent Existentialist movement. Trocchi traces its genesis in the defeat of Nazism and moved through to Sartre's recent attack on Camus

---

<sup>15</sup> Trocchi, *Cain's Book*, 195.

<sup>16</sup> Scott, *Alexander Trocchi*, 64. Isou's original group became known simply as the Lettrisme Movement, with no explicit aspirations towards internationalism.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>18</sup> Alexander Trocchi, 'Letter to Jack', in Scott (ed.), *Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds*, 72.

in *Les Temps modernes*. He argues, 'Sartre and Existentialism replaced Breton and Surrealism as the most powerful single force in French letters'<sup>19</sup>. This supersession, as Trocchi saw it, was because Surrealism was 'a largely negative attitude' while Existentialism was 'vibrant and a philosophy of action'<sup>20</sup>.

The first issue of *Merlin* was published in spring 1952 with a print run of one thousand copies. *Merlin* and its imprint Collection *Merlin* were financed by Maurice Girodias and his Olympia Press, in exchange for pornographic 'dirty books' written by the *Merlin* editors.<sup>21</sup> Collection *Merlin* was to publish some of the first English translations of Samuel Beckett's French novels (e.g. *Molloy* [1955], also the English *Watt* [1953]), Jean Genet's *Thief's Journal* (1954) and Austryn Wainhouse's translation of Sade's *Justine* (1953), as well as William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959). The first issue of *Merlin* contained Trocchi's own short story, 'The Meeting', some reprints of Sartre from *Les Temps modernes*, and an essay titled 'Some Aspects of Existentialism' by Trocchi's favourite philosopher, A.J. Ayer.<sup>22</sup>

Ayer's article introduces Existentialist thought in relation to logical positivism, his preferred mode of philosophical inquiry. Ayer attempts to reveal a contradiction in Sartre's 'doctrine of "engagement"', which he sees as 'an obvious inconsistency' if it is taken to represent the decision to either take up political commitment or not.<sup>23</sup> Ayer argues that to reject politics is itself a committed decision and a form of (non-)politics: 'the refusal to choose is itself to be regarded as a form of choice'<sup>24</sup>. The writer is always already engaged, inescapably so, and the Existentialists create a 'false dichotomy'<sup>25</sup>. Ayer argues that 'it is not the habit of the Existentialists to concern themselves overmuch with logic. What they strive for and obtain is an emotional effect'<sup>26</sup>. As such, Ayer suggests that the favouring of emotional effect over logical clarity accounts for the disparity in Existentialist activity between France and England,

---

<sup>19</sup> Alexander Trocchi, 'Letter from Paris', *NIMBUS* 2:1 (June-August 1953): 48.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> See John de St. Jorre, *The Good Ship Venus: The Erotic Voyage of Maurice Girodias and the Olympia Press* (London: Faber & Faber 2009). Trocchi's 'dirty books' include *Helen and Desire* (1954), *White Thighs* (1955), *School for Wives* (1955), *Thongs* (1955) and *Sappho of Lesbos* (1960).

<sup>22</sup> See Christopher Logue, 'Alexander Trocchi and the beginning of *Merlin*', in Allan Campbell and Tim Niel (eds), *A Life in Pieces: Reflections on Alexander Trocchi* (Edinburgh: Rebel Inc. 1997), 45.

<sup>23</sup> A.J. Ayer, 'Some Aspects of Existentialism', *Merlin* 1 (Spring 1952): 49.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

and in doing so resorts to a somewhat clichéd distinction between English pragmatic rationalism and French romantic radicalism.

In his 'Letter from Paris', Trocchi's account of the Existentialist movement is altogether more optimistic. Trocchi identifies with Sartre regarding the necessity of an engaged political consciousness:

The fact is that politics pervades the existence of every man, circumscribing action, defining and limiting personal possibilities, and to say that one is not interested in politics is tantamount to saying that one is not interested in life.<sup>27</sup>

Trocchi's allusion to Samuel Johnson's verdict on London seems to playfully deny the incompatibility of Englishness with romantic radicalism. Trocchi declares himself as *engagé* yet also circumvents what Ayer calls the false dichotomy of commitment. Trocchi affirms that it is indeed impossible to jettison political consciousness, but that does not undermine Sartre's ideological commitment as Ayer implies. This type of associative gesture characterises Trocchi's thought. *Merlin*, Trocchi announces in the second issue's editorial, will 'hit at all clots of rigid categories in criticism and life, and all that is unintelligently partisan'<sup>28</sup>.

The particular Frenchness of Existentialism, in Trocchi's formulation, is not due to its doctrine of commitment, but to socio-historical conditions. For the most prominent Existentialists, who had fought in the Resistance, commitment meant more than political posturing. England lacked the immediate and heavy weight of this history and, as such, Trocchi deplored the London literary scene, in which he describes the writer as a 'frail exile in his own city'<sup>29</sup>. Parisian writers, Trocchi felt, had a political presence that leant itself to Existential philosophy, while writers in London lack that historically-achieved agency. Existentialism's presence in France but not in England was due to history, not inherent national character as Ayer speculated.

It is not surprising, then, that like Joyce and Beckett's reactions against the cultural restraints of their homeland, Trocchi should adopt a Francophilic literary register in his first novel, *Young Adam*.<sup>30</sup> The novel's narrator is Joe, who works on a canal barge between Glasgow and Edinburgh with a husband and wife. A woman's

---

<sup>27</sup> Trocchi, 'Letter from Paris', 50.

<sup>28</sup> Alexander Trocchi, 'Editorial', *Merlin* 2 (Autumn 1952): 57.

<sup>29</sup> Trocchi, 'Letter from Paris', 52.

<sup>30</sup> The setting of *Young Adam*, the claustrophobic environs of a working barge, is reminiscent, for instance, of Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante* (1934).

dead body is found in the canal, and it becomes apparent that Joe is responsible in some way for her death. The novel concludes with Joe watching the trial of Goon, falsely-accused and condemned to hang. The story's setting is drawn from Trocchi's experiences in Scotland and on ships, but its sparse style owes more to trends in Continental literature than to what Trocchi felt to be the parochial nationalism of contemporary Scottish writers, epitomised by Hugh MacDiarmid and the Scottish Renaissance. Most obviously, in story and style, *Young Adam* initiates a dialogue with Albert Camus's *The Outsider* (1942), which also features a man contemplating the absurdity of social and juridical relations.

A comparison of *Young Adam* and *The Outsider* will reveal what Trocchi retained and what he discarded from (Camus') Existentialism. The two novels are most proximate when they arrive at their respective trial episodes, when their protagonists ruminate on the authority of the court and the disconnection between its rigid formality and the unstructured nature of their own lives. Neither protagonist, Joe nor Meursault, can identify with the well-rehearsed routines of the courtroom and the symbolic operations of the law. The juridical proceedings fail to properly address the accused, and serve to exclude the subject from both the event (the murder) and its representation (the trial). Meursault observes that, 'Things were happening without me even intervening. My fate was being decided without anyone asking my opinion'<sup>31</sup>. Meursault's lawyer even begins speaking on his behalf without consultation, and so ventriloquism becomes 'another way of excluding me from the proceedings, reducing me to insignificance'<sup>32</sup>.

These sentiments are echoed in *Young Adam*, but in this case the man on trial is Goon, whom we know is wrongly-accused because Joe has confessed to the crime, albeit obliquely, in the narration. Goon's very name, of course, tells of his victimhood. Joe's narration even begins to assume Goon's perspective, which constitutes another degree of misrepresentation. Like Meursault's jurors, as readers of *Young Adam* we are only ever presented with an image that has passed through multiple layers of mediation. Joe states,

Throughout the trial, it was quite clear they were not talking about Goon at all. The victim created in the speeches of the

---

<sup>31</sup> Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, trans. Joseph Laredo (London: Penguin Classics 2000), 95.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

procurator to fit the sea of evidence had nothing to do with any self Goon was conscious of.<sup>33</sup>

In both of these episodes, but particularly in *Young Adam* where the misrepresentation is perpetuated even by the narrator-protagonist, a version of the SI's concept of spectacle is prefigured. Debord describes the spectacle as a 'social relation between people that is mediated by images'<sup>34</sup>. *The Outsider* and *Young Adam* do not encounter the spectacle's emphatic viscosity, but they do attest to multiple layers of misrepresentation that obfuscate the social relations in the courtrooms. Debord describes the powerlessness of the individual subject:

The spectacle's estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual's gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the fact that Trocchi had not yet made contact with the Lettrist International which had not yet become the Situationist International and developed the term, he anticipates the concept of spectacle. *Young Adam* is concerned precisely with a loss of selfhood through misrepresentation. Goon is sacrificed to the symbolic order of justice that Joe describes as an 'impersonal machine'<sup>36</sup>. The operation of the law in the courtroom is, like the spectacle, the *appearance* of cohesion and authority with little human agency guiding it.

Meursault's lawyer declares that in their trial 'everything is true and yet nothing is true'<sup>37</sup>, but there is no doubt that society (even though Meursault rejects 'so vague an entity'<sup>38</sup>) is in that instance fulfilling its own criteria. It is punishing the man who committed the crime. Camus expresses the absurdity of the human condition, but his attention remains introspective. Meursault is alienated by the courtroom, as he is by workaday society, but the social structures are ultimately effective. Meursault has failed to adjust. In contrast, Trocchi's protagonist maintains an internal clarity, a self-consciousness that, however hypocritically, saves his life. The spectacle of the trial in *Young Adam* is doubly rotten as the wrong man is being convicted. Though Joe knows that he could confess and save Goon's life, his victory against the spectacle would be fleeting, not only because he would be hanged himself, but because the spectacle

---

<sup>33</sup> Alexander Trocchi, *Young Adam* (London: John Calder 1983), 152.

<sup>34</sup> SoS, thesis 4.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., thesis 30.

<sup>36</sup> Trocchi, *Young Adam*, 97.

<sup>37</sup> Camus, *The Outsider*, 88.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 105.

would still claim its symbolic sacrifice and prove its own efficiency. Joe considers his options:

Confess? In practice I knew it would prove fatal to me. In principle it would have been in an indirect but very fundamental way to affirm the validity of the particular social structure I wished to deny.<sup>39</sup>

As Trocchi adopts Camus's story so closely, Joe's escape from spectacular justice is quite surprising. Trocchi's derivation then digression from his source enacts a pattern of influence described in Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), though Trocchi displays remarkably little of the actual anxiety of influence that Bloom considers such a productive force in poetry. Bloom describes the 'clinamen' and the 'tessera', the former as a corrective moment in which a writer swerves away from her precursor, and the latter as the rebuilding of a fragment into a new ensemble.<sup>40</sup> Both of these models, but particularly clinamen, apply to *Young Adam's* engagement with *The Outsider*, as Trocchi makes obvious his debt to Camus but nonetheless produces something different, something adapted rather than simply adopted.

Though *Young Adam* formulates a version of the Situationist spectacle *avant la lettre*, Trocchi's relationship with the French avant-garde is more evident in terms of prose style than philosophical concept. The crises of social representation experienced by Joe and Meursault in both cases lead to feelings of dehumanisation. Both men, as they are refused satisfactory representation in the courtroom, find themselves associating with the inhuman, material, inert things that surround them. Meursault says that he would,

remember every piece of furniture, and on every piece of furniture, every object and, on every object, every detail, every mark, crack or chip, and then even the colour or the grain of the wood. At the same time, I'd try not to lose track of my inventory, to enumerate everything.<sup>41</sup>

*Young Adam's* narrator repeats this gesture,

In a way, I was bored, I hadn't realized how utterly dependent on things I had become, even if only to catalogue them, saying over and over again, the door, the seat, the boots, the mirror, the thing to wash in; if I had had a big ledger I could have drawn up an inventory of things, neatly arranging the columns

---

<sup>39</sup> Trocchi, *Young Adam*, 156.

<sup>40</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), 13-14.

<sup>41</sup> Camus, *The Outsider*, 77.



of the names of microscopic objects, which, with the courtroom about me, formed so large a part of my experience.<sup>42</sup>

In both texts, the protagonists become bored with events and focus instead on inert physical objects which they regard to hold the same level of agency that they command over their own fates. Meursault and Joe obsess over increasingly microscopic details in the objects that surround them, and both (like Robinson Crusoe on his desert island) begin to catalogue their environments in comprehensive yet redundant inventories. And while both narrators allude to these inventories, neither represents that inventorying itself. They both report that they would do such-and-such, yet neither demonstrates such-and-such being done. These occlusions undermine the implied immediate identity between the narration and the protagonist's subjectivity, which allows the texts to perform, as well as comment on, a modernist crisis of representation.

In his essay, 'Are some things unrepresentable?' Jacques Rancière attempts to account for the specific literary register that is commonly adopted to depict events that are said to evade representation. This register is characterised by the unemotional recounting of facts in Robert Antelme's account of life in a concentration camp in *The Human Race* (1947), of which Rancière writes,

This is commonly regarded as a form of writing that corresponds to a significant experience – the experience of a life reduced to its most basic aspects, stripped of any horizon of expectations, and merely connecting simple actions and perceptions one after the other. Corresponding to this experience is the paratactic linking of simple perceptions. And the writing evinces the specific form of resistance that Robert Antelme wants to highlight: the one that transforms the concentration camp's reduction of life to naked existence into the affirmation of fundamental membership of the human race, even in its most basic gestures. Yet it is clear that this paratactic writing is not born out of the camp experience. It is also the style of writing of Camus's *L'Étranger* and the American behaviourist novel. To go back further, it is the Flaubertian writing style of small perceptions placed side by side.<sup>43</sup>

Rancière recognises that those experiences which are supposed to surpass artistic representation, most notably the horrors of the concentration camp, are commonly communicated via a form of writing that at once seems inappropriate in its lack of

---

<sup>42</sup> Trocchi, *Young Adam*, 150.

<sup>43</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso 2009), 124–125.

affective register yet also appropriately evocative in its silences and gaps.<sup>44</sup> This is the paratactic form of *The Outsider*, picked up by *Young Adam*, and is a result of alienation and the process of 'becoming-inhuman'<sup>45</sup>, but also a form of resistance to those conditions: a human protest against dehumanisation.

Trocchi's engagement with his literary precursors extended beyond Camus and Existentialism. *Young Adam* draws directly from *The Outsider*'s narrative style and plot devices, but Trocchi also mires Camus's relatively uncomplicated story in the contingencies and aberrations of the material world, not least the court's injustice and the protagonist's extramarital affairs. In *Cain's Book*, such contingencies and aberrations accumulate and make impossible the type of dialogue with a single text that *Young Adam* attempts. To accommodate these contingencies and interruptions, Trocchi's own prose draws from a much wider range of sources. *Cain's Book* thus channels a disparate array of influences, and ricochets throughout with Trocchi's attempts to ventriloquise other writers and their attendant literary traditions. *Cain's Book* is polyvocal in its narration, heterogeneous in its sources—a Barthesian 'tissue of quotations'<sup>46</sup>. *Cain's Book* theatricalises another type of parataxis: not a diegetic parataxis as in *Young Adam*, but a stylistic parataxis in which the author mimics unabashedly a host of other writers. The ominous final sentence of *Young Adam* signals Trocchi's recognition of the unsuitability of ascribing to a singular literary tradition to represent a world that cannot be reduced to a singular mode of thought: 'the disintegration was already taking place'<sup>47</sup>.

*Young Adam* functions as Trocchi's apprenticeship under Camus, or as Trocchi's study in literary imitation as a tactic unto itself. This is not to suggest that the later *Cain's Book* is therefore the masterpiece. The usual verdict on Trocchi as a novelist is that he never met his literary potential and deferred writing 'proper' fiction after *Cain's Book* for so long that it became his last novel by default.<sup>48</sup> *Cain's Book* exhausts much of

---

<sup>44</sup> Under Trocchi's editorship, *Merlin* published an early account of Auschwitz, 'The journal of a doctor deported to the Auschwitz crematorium (conclusion)'. See Dr. Miklos Nyiszli, 'SS. Obersturmführer Doktor Mengele (Conclusion)', *Merlin* 2:1 (Spring-Summer 1953): 48-72.

<sup>45</sup> Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, 126.

<sup>46</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text* trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana 1977), 146.

<sup>47</sup> Trocchi, *Young Adam*, 160.

<sup>48</sup> John Calder, Trocchi's publisher, pessimistically argues that Trocchi's later project sigma was 'unclear to all except a few devotees, but it gave Trocchi an excuse to avoid getting on with a sequel to *Cain's Book*' (John Calder, 'Alexander Trocchi', *Edinburgh Review* 70 [1985]: 34). Irvine Welsh has also labelled Trocchi as the 'George Best of Scottish literature'. Quoted in Stewart

Trocchi's biographic and bibliographic experience, yet the resultant schizophrenic and cacophonous narratology is used to convey the narrator-protagonist's multiple identities. Joe Necchi is, variously: the son of a father who refuses to accept their shared unemployment and (in the father's view) their economic uselessness; a failed husband; a lonely scowman; a frustrated writer; and a junkie oscillating between pre-fix desperation and post-fix enlightenment.

Although *Cain's Book* is not expressly an autobiography, its autobiographical element is most apparent in the narrator's polemics about society's hypocritical and ill-informed treatment of heroin users. Moreover, the novel is something of a literary autobiography, full of allusions and mimicries that signpost Trocchi's own reading and publishing. The chapter epigraphs quote Sade, Cocteau, and Unamuno. Beckett reappears throughout: his characters stalk Joe, who remembers 'an old man called Molloy or Malone'<sup>49</sup>, and eventually decides that, 'the most I can do is die like Malone with a last dot of lead pinched between forefinger and thumb'<sup>50</sup>. Other *Merlin* figures haunt the story, such as Genet, whose presence is felt in the uncharacteristically effusive language with which Joe recounts his nocturnal sexual encounters with exotic men in shadowy backstreets: 'I had simply to be and feel the workings of the nameless passion in me, to grant, permissively to meet with, sensation unobstructed, rocked gently out of nightmare at him'<sup>51</sup>. Another influential novel in Trocchi's literary education is namedropped, *Histoire d'O*, which Trocchi admiringly called 'one of the most obscene and obstinately seditious pieces of writing since the Marquis de Sade'<sup>52</sup>.

*Cain's Book* adds to its Continental inflections an American influence, the result of Trocchi's travels in New York and San Francisco. Michael Gardiner notes that *Cain's Book* is 'extraordinary, like Trocchi's journal *Merlin*, in its ability to soak up foreign literary cultures; in this case, despite frequent Scottish clues, the prose and the themes are close to the William S. Burroughs of *Naked Lunch*'<sup>53</sup>. Trocchi would befriend Burroughs in 1962, though clear parallels exist between the two, especially in relation to their autofictional accounts of heroin use and their affiliation with the Olympia Press. Both *Junkie* (1953) and *Young Adam* (1954) recount events in a relatively

---

Home, 'Introduction', in Alexander Trocchi, *Young Adam* (London: One World Classics 2008), 7.

<sup>49</sup> Trocchi, *Cain's Book*, 232.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 53

<sup>52</sup> Scott, Alexander Trocchi, 54.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Gardiner, *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory since 1960* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2006), 90.

straightforward paratactic manner, like diaries; yet by the time of *Naked Lunch* (1959) and *Cain's Book* (1960), temporal continuity and narratorial authority have both been subsumed by the addict's fractured sense of reality, and both narrations take on a more collage-like quality.

The formal and thematic switches that constantly interrupt *Cain's Book* are anything but seamless. They are jarring and unexpected, as demonstrated by a brief moment in *Cain's Book* when Joe's usually lethargic narration suddenly adopts an altogether different tone:

The Way of the Black One is crooked and full of a curse! Ayeeh! Ayeeh! Og, escaped from the Bitter Waters, and come through Thunder and Lightening to Sheridan Square, took shelter under a Traffic Light, under lancing Blue Rain which washed away the left leg of his Abominable Trousers, leaving him exposed.<sup>54</sup>

New York explodes into life as a crazed heterotopia where language and primal sounds spew forth uncontrollably. I read this passage as homage to the doyen of Beat literature, Allen Ginsberg. As in *Howl* (1956), Trocchi conjures a paranoid mysticism from the detritus of urban life—he later throws into the scene a prayer wheel as if to drive home the allusion. The New York that Trocchi inhabits is Ginsberg's New York, just as he had previously occupied Sartre's Paris.

*Cain's Book* consists only of interruptions. There is no master narrative as in *Young Adam*; *Cain's Book* is entirely composite. There is only discontinuity, polyphony, and non-sequiturs. Joe writes, his is a 'little voyage in the art of digression'<sup>55</sup>. *Cain's Book* resembles Fredric Jameson's characterisation of the postmodern aesthetic in which 'the very possibility of any linguistic norm in terms of which one could ridicule private languages and idiosyncratic styles [has] vanish[ed], and we [have] nothing but stylistic diversity and heterogeneity'<sup>56</sup>. The stylistic mimicry of *Cain's Book* is pastiche, described by Jameson as 'a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal'<sup>57</sup>. To go further: where the narration of *Cain's Book* is without a normative strand against which the interruptions become interruptions, its philosophical outlook is equally as schizophrenic, reminiscent of

---

<sup>54</sup> Trocchi, *Cain's Book*, 225.

<sup>55</sup> Trocchi, *Cain's Book*, 232.

<sup>56</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern* (London: Verso 1998), 5.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

Lyotard's famous definition of postmodernism as the collapse of grand narratives.<sup>58</sup> Whether or not *Cain's Book* is lumbered with the problematic label of postmodern, these characteristics certainly corroborate my argument that Trocchi exists on the boundary between historical avant-gardes and something less stable, less affirmatively identitarian.

More can be said of Trocchi's composite text by pursuing the observation that the author displays nothing of the anxiety of influence that Bloom describes. Trocchi's relationship with his literary forefathers was not oedipal. Trocchi's lack of ego-function, his willingness to display his literary influences without stamping his own name all over his text, is closer to the pathology of 'legendary psychasthenia' described by Roger Caillois. In the Surrealist journal *Minotaure* in 1935, Caillois rebuked the assumption that animals and insects who mimic other forms, such as butterflies who can disguise themselves against flowers, do so purely out of self-defence. Instead, Caillois proposed, there exists a psychological drive, which extends to humans, to imitate the terrain in which one exists. Caillois compared this psychasthenia to the response of schizophrenics to the question, 'where are you?' The typical response, 'I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I'm at the spot where I find myself', indicated for Caillois the 'depersonalization by assimilation to space' that automatically occurs in this pathological drive to adopt the forms around oneself.<sup>59</sup> This phenomenon is observable in Trocchi's subjective dissolution from *Cain's Book*, whose narration mimics the cultural terrain from which it emerges, and as a result something of Trocchi's subjective investment is sublimated.

### **Place(lessness)**

Either label, postmodern or psychasthenic, must be qualified; after all, Trocchi-as-author remains present, if only in constellating the text's influences and allusions. In the narrative of *Cain's Book* there exists another text called *Cain's Book* that Joe Necchi is attempting to write—which is perhaps Trocchi's assertion of his behind-the-scenes authorial control. Yet Trocchi's incorporation of other literary cultures into his own text indicates also what I shall tentatively call a *self de-nationalisation*. Trocchi attempts to unlearn, deny, or exhume whatever 'Scottish' tendencies he might have internalised. I am here arguing against the various attempts to locate Trocchi in a tradition of

<sup>58</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (1979).

<sup>59</sup> Roger Caillois, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia', trans. John Shepley, *October* 31 (1984): 30.

Scottish literature, as demonstrated by Edwin Morgan's claim in the *Edinburgh Review* that,

although Trocchi learned from Sartre and more obviously from Camus' *L'Étranger*, we also cannot help noticing links back to Hogg's *Justified Sinner* and forward to Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*: the dislocation of time, the problem of the hero's self-identification, the tension between natural guilt and its abnormal absence, the story within a story, the prominence of father-son relationships, the presence of serious crime<sup>60</sup>

This type of nationalist interpretation stands at odds with Trocchi's internationalism and his lifelong evasion of categorisation, both literary and national. Trocchi was ambivalent about his Scottish background: its memory was never completely expurgated from *Cain's Book*.

Scottish literature at the time, in Trocchi's reckoning at least, was dominated by Hugh MacDiarmid and the Scottish Renaissance, which sought to promote Scots language, dialects, and national culture in modernism. Its integrationist agenda clearly did not hold over Trocchi the subversive appeal of Existential or Beat literature. His discomfort with his Scottish origins came to the fore in 1962 at the International Writers' Conference at the Edinburgh Festival, attended by luminaries such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Bertrand Russell, Henry Miller, and Norman Mailer. There, Trocchi and MacDiarmid clashed directly over the issue of literature and Scottish identity. MacDiarmid argued that Trocchi's prose was 'not committed to the betterment of mankind in political terms'<sup>61</sup> and allegedly decried Trocchi and his soon-to-be friend and fellow heroin user William Burroughs as 'cosmopolitan scum'<sup>62</sup>. Trocchi argued for internationalism and against the hysterical treatment of addicts. In this disagreement we can recognise vestiges of the confrontation between the ideologues of Socialist Realism and Breton: on the one hand, a nationalism that presents itself as emancipatory, yet is ultimately conservative and artistically repressive; on the other, an aesthetic internationalism that asserts its political value, yet to the establishment appears indulgent and reckless.

Trocchi was a Scot with an Italian heritage whose literary sensibilities were formed in Paris. He wrote what is often regarded as the principle novel of British Beat literature, whose protagonist is mostly adrift in a boat off New York. Trocchi himself,

---

<sup>60</sup> Edwin Morgan, 'Alexander Trocchi: A Survey', *Edinburgh Review* 70 (1985): 56.

<sup>61</sup> Scott, *Alexander Trocchi*, 107.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

like the Joes of *Young Adam* and *Cain's Book*, lived as a drifter. Where Trocchi is to be found between literary cultures, he is also between the cities from which they emerged. His friends in the Lettrist International had theorised their own life praxes, their restless drifting around Paris, into the complementary notions of *dérive*<sup>63</sup> and psychogeography<sup>64</sup>. Though many of Trocchi's international departures were prompted by the demands of his heroin addiction, his drifting informed his literary and political sensibilities. Trocchi's *dérive* extended from his actual travels to the narratorial drift of *Cain's Book*, between the various literary movements of the late 1950s and early 1960s, psychogeographically drawn to some localities and repelled by others. *Cain's Book* is a Beat novel only in so far as it is an Existentialist novel in so far as it is a Situationist novel in so far as it is a De Quincey-esque drug novel and so on.<sup>65</sup> Its radically heterogeneous form was made possible only through Trocchi's refusal to ascribe to an individual national or cultural literary tradition.

Trocchi's placelessness reveals a further affinity with the fledgling SI. *Cain's Book* declares that,

Before I ever went there I heard that Paris was dead, and later I heard that Greenwich Village was dead [...] but I never found any place dead where a number of men and women for whatever reason tried to strike permanently against uncreative work. In those places I found dissent, sedition, personal risk. And there I learned to explore and modify my great contempt.<sup>66</sup>

One of the themes to which Trocchi returned was the rejection of 'uncreative work'. This theme pervaded the SI's work, and received its most evocative articulation by way of Vaneigem's question, 'Who wants a world in which the guarantee that we shall not die of starvation entails the risk of dying of boredom?'<sup>67</sup> Like many of his literary precursors, including Rimbaud, Henry Miller, and Burroughs, the refusal of bourgeois norms—steady employment, career progression, pride in work—is replicated in

---

<sup>63</sup> 'A mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of passing through varied ambiances.' Situationist International, 'Definitions,' in SIA, 52.

<sup>64</sup> 'The study of the specific effects of the geographical environment (whether consciously organised or not) on the emotions and behaviour of individuals.' Ibid. For more on the Lettrists' drifting lifestyle, see Jean-Michel Mension, *The Tribe*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Verso 2002).

<sup>65</sup> The parallels between de Quincey and Trocchi extend beyond their shared taste in opiates. De Quincey is often cited as a proto-psychogeographer. In an interview with Greil Marcus, Trocchi recounted that Guy Debord would regularly quote de Quincey. Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*, 388.

<sup>66</sup> Trocchi, *Cain's Book*, 220.

<sup>67</sup> Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Rebel Press 2006), 18.

Trocchi's creative productions as in his life praxis. *Cain's Book* is loaded with denunciations of wage-labour. Joe Necchi's estrangement from his father is based largely on their differing attitudes to their shared unemployability, which shames the father but instils pride in the son. Joe teases his father,

Now why don't you just admit it? You haven't worked for a quarter of a century. Now I'm not working either, so I'm following in your footsteps. You ought to be proud of me.<sup>68</sup>

Elsewhere, Joe explains the attraction of being a scowman as there being 'no other gig that paid so well for so little work'<sup>69</sup>. The laziness that his profession affords him—on his scow smoking, drinking, and writing—is conducive to both his literary pursuits and his heroin addiction, but it also attracts animosity from those whose jobs demand more intensive labour. Joe concedes that the anger, which is not necessarily jealousy, directed at the inactive scowman from the hard-working men who load the scows,

makes the job unpleasant from time to time, finding oneself having suddenly to deal with the animosity of a man who makes a virtue of his work. It is difficult to explain to the underprivileged that play is more serious than work<sup>70</sup>.

The Joe of *Young Adam* also differentiates himself from those who take pride in their wage-labour: 'As a representative of the industrious working classes he [Goon] was in a sense my enemy. I dislike people who make a virtue of work'<sup>71</sup>. Even Trocchi's less 'serious' dirty books repeat these sentiments. The titular narrator of *Helen and Desire*, for example, between recounting her numerous sexual adventures, digresses to comment on the differences between the nature of work in the West and in the exotic Middle East of the novel:

In the west everybody is busy because his neighbour is. Mountains of industry, seas of commerce come into being, and, once in being, exert their damning influence on the sons and grandsons of those who created them. Art, the aesthetic of the flesh, the cultivation of leisure, are despised, tolerated, perhaps, but basically thought of as not quite respectable.<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>71</sup> Trocchi, *Young Adam*, 96.

<sup>72</sup> Alexander Trocchi, *Helen and Desire* (Edinburgh: Rebel Inc. 1997), 117.





Fig. 4: Debord's graffiti<sup>73</sup>

The revolutionary potential of play, as a corrective not only to wage-labour but also to what Trocchi would later call 'the problem of "leisure"'<sup>74</sup>, was a theme inherited from the historical avant-garde by way of the SI. In *Cain's Book*, Trocchi makes reference to 'Homo Ludens'<sup>75</sup>. From this term we can map out an avant-garde genealogy that precedes Trocchi: *Homo Ludens* was the title of a 1938 text by Johan Huizinga, which had been studied by the Independent Group at the ICA, which had been founded by ex-English Surrealists; via the Independent Group, Ralph Rumney had learnt of the text and subsequently introduced it to Debord, from where it would greatly influence the SI.<sup>76</sup> Trocchi and the SI both sought to negate uncreative work. The SI's assault on wage-labour was captioned by Debord's famous graffiti on the Left Bank, which Trocchi would likely have seen: 'Ne travaillez jamais' (Fig. 4).

Among its myriad allusions, *Cain's Book* privileges Trocchi's Situationist association. The narrator of *Cain's Book* quotes what Trocchi presumably imagined was the central mantra of the SI in its original French: 'Il vous faut construire les situations'<sup>77</sup>. A more oblique reference is made to Trocchi's Situationist acquaintances, which simultaneously blurs the distinction between the fictional protagonist Joe Necchi and

<sup>73</sup> *Internationale Situationniste* 8 (Janvier 1963): 42.

<sup>74</sup> Alexander Trocchi, 'Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds', in Scott (ed.), *Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds*, 180.

<sup>75</sup> Trocchi, *Cain's Book*, 245.

<sup>76</sup> See Hussey, *The Game of War*, 73.

<sup>77</sup> Trocchi, *Cain's Book*, 236.

Trocchi's biography: 'My friends will know what I mean when I say that I deplore our contemporary industrial writers'<sup>78</sup>. One member of the SI, the Algerian Mohammed Dahou even makes a cameo appearance as the character Midhou (Dahou's nickname). In correspondence from the late 1950s, while he was in America, Trocchi used Debord in France as a proxy for sending friendly greetings to Midhou in Algeria.<sup>79</sup> Debord (notoriously fickle in choosing his acquaintances) would write to Trocchi to declare that he 'would be very pleased' to see him again, and hopes that 'the last remnants of freedom will linger in France' until Trocchi's return.<sup>80</sup>

What, however, was afforded by the radical heterogeneity of *Cain's Book*? In my reading, what I have called Trocchi's placelessness—which is a geographical and literary placelessness—afforded him a perspective similar to the totalising historical one that Debord described at the beginning of this chapter: an ability to survey cultural movements to see their common purpose beyond the idiosyncrasies of their 'isms'. *Cain's Book* was, therefore, an attempt to ally these multifarious influences, to channel their cumulative force; to produce a big hit against bourgeois literature.

Its radical heterogeneity and sublation of Trocchi's authorial position mean that *Cain's Book* becomes something of an inventory as described in *Young Adam*, an inventory of transgressive literary tactics. Towards the end of *Cain's Book*, its narrator comes to a revelation about his own literary pursuits:

And it's not the first time I've felt like making an inventory. (A little Lucifer constantly discovering himself after his eviction). I have tried more than once. Everything I have written is a kind of inventorizing. I don't expect ever to be able to do much more, and the inventories will always be unfinished.<sup>81</sup>

Trocchi's inventorying serves also as a gesture of solidarity with other writers of transgression, all Lucifers united in their exile from respectable literary traditions. I shall demonstrate later how Trocchi's sigma project attempted to inventorise beyond the text, to structure an alternative cultural industry.

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>79</sup> The Trocchi-Debord-Midhou connection is made in Debord's letters of 23<sup>rd</sup> August and 19<sup>th</sup> September 1957 (to Dahou), 21<sup>st</sup> September 1957 and 12<sup>th</sup> July 1958 (to Trocchi). See Guy Debord, *Correspondence: The Foundation of the Situationist International (June 1957 – August 1960)*, trans. Stuart Kendall and John McHale (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2009), 44–45, 50–51, 141–142.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>81</sup> Trocchi, *Cain's Book*, 232–233.

## The Limits of Literature

I have attempted to locate Trocchi in a diachronic historical constellation, in which he occupies an uncharted space between the luminaries of mid-century avant-gardist literature. Yet his efforts to erase the distinction between how he lived and how he wrote remain highly problematic. As *Cain's Book* winds to a close, but not a conclusion, its narrator begins to question whether those old antitheses could ever be sublated. He realises that his literary pursuits serve to maintain literature as a category separate from the praxis of life:

I told her that the great urgency for literature was that it should for once and for all accomplish its dying, that it wasn't that writing shouldn't be written, but that a man should annihilate prescriptions of all past form in his soul, refuse to consider what he wrote in terms of literature, judge it solely in terms of his living.<sup>82</sup>

*Cain's Book*, we realise, is too saturated by other writers' voices, too rooted in traditions of avant-gardism that are traditions unto themselves and disconnected from Trocchi's experience. The narrator realises that all the while he has simply been producing literature, which is exactly the thing that he wants to transcend. Joe Necchi eventually admits,

The trouble with me, I reflect, is that I look pruriently over my own shoulder as I write and I'm all the time aware that it's reality and not literature I'm engaged in.<sup>83</sup>

Literature, Joe Necchi knows, is recuperable. He has already made the Situationist observation that even 'anti-literature is rendered innocuous by granting it place in conventional histories of literature'<sup>84</sup>.

*Cain's Book* was Trocchi's final fully-formed novel, though certainly not the end of either his writing career or his celebrity. The progression that I have charted, from *Young Adam* to *Cain's Book*, demonstrates a dissolution of avant-garde impulses, whereby the pronouncements of discrete avant-gardes become tributaries to broader currents of oppositional and transgressive discourse. A similar morphology occurs in Bürger's account of the transition from historical to neo avant-garde. Bürger argues, 'The historical avant-garde movements were unable to destroy art as an institution, but they did destroy the possibility that a given school can present itself with the claim to

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 59-60.

universal validity'<sup>85</sup>. Trocchi seems to have reached a similar conclusion, to which he responded not by jettisoning the historical avant-garde project but by disregarding its factionalism and channelling instead its cumulative influence. Nonetheless, Trocchi found himself unable to move beyond the valorisation of literature as such, and therefore as something that occluded the Rimbaudian effort to *change life*. Prefiguring Debord's assertion that the true revolutionary '*can no longer combat alienation by means of alienated forms*'<sup>86</sup>, Trocchi's response was to reject literature and continue his pursuits through alternative forms of cultural practice.

---

<sup>85</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 87.

<sup>86</sup> SoS, thesis 122.

## **2.2 Alexander Trocchi's Invisible Insurrection**

*'to act within culture while being against the entire present organisation of this culture and even against all culture as a separate sphere.'*

Situationist International, 'The Counter-Situationist Campaign in Various Countries' (1963)<sup>1</sup>

The proposition that I made in the previous half of this chapter can be summarised as follows. As a novelist, Trocchi sought a place which was between rather than within literary traditions: to draw from, but evade identification with, a variety of literary movements. Though *Cain's Book* went some way towards this categorical disidentification, it was frustrated by its inability to affirm something other than its own and its progenitors' literary value. I proposed that Trocchi decided that only in moving beyond literature as such could he realise anything of the emancipatory programme indicated in his novels. He thus began to formulate project sigma, his expansive and more expressly political project of forging a network of cultural practitioners that did not rely on capitalist means of production and distribution. project sigma occupied Trocchi from the early 1960s through to 1967. Though he did not retire from writing fiction during this period, his sigma pursuits and his social presence in the London counterculture came to eclipse his status as a novelist.

The rest of this chapter is concerned with Trocchi's transition from novelist to cultural organiser (or, in his terminology, sigmatist). sigma represents Trocchi's attempts to respond to the Situationist problem he had articulated in *Cain's Book*—the problem of recuperation and the radical aesthetic object. Unfortunately, sigma has received even less critical attention than Trocchi's novels, not least because elusiveness and immateriality were central to its formulation. My attention must, therefore, shift from the cultural product to the cultural project; that is to say, I must chart Trocchi's movement from the aesthetic to the anti-aesthetic. I shall ask the same questions that I asked of Trocchi as a novelist, but I now ask them in a different context. Where Trocchi's novels pulled together disparate voices in single texts, project sigma attempted to pull cultural producers together in real life. How productive is it to think of Trocchi himself as a node between different forms of aesthetic or theoretical production?

---

<sup>1</sup> Situationist International, 'The Counter-Situationist Campaign in Various Countries', in SIA, 146.

First published in 1962 in the *New Saltire Review* and republished in 1963 in the SI's journal, *Internationale Situationniste*, Trocchi's essay 'A Revolutionary Proposal: Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds' introduces his conception of a cultural revolt that would bypass orthodox political formations (such as political parties and cellular avant-garde groups).<sup>2</sup> This invisible insurrection would unite sympathetic and progressive individuals in a loosely-affiliated vanguard which would attempt to 'seize the grids of expression and the powerhouses of the mind'<sup>3</sup>. Trocchi contrasts the 'coup-du-monde' of the invisible insurrection with 'the coup-d'état of Trotsky and Lenin', the former a 'transition of necessity more complex, more diffuse than the other, and so more gradual, less spectacular'<sup>4</sup>. Though Trocchi states that 'what is to be changed is "ourselves"', sigma was ultimately an organisational project, the construction of a social network outside of the existing industry of cultural production.<sup>5</sup> Much of the essay has aged poorly, overladen with hippie platitudes, but its enduring appeal lies in its programme to re-conceive creative sociability and unite the million minds who, Trocchi assures us, were already working towards similar goals.

A second article, 'Project Sigma: A Tactical Blueprint' (1962) elaborates some of the practical implications and ambitions of the newly-named project, though this article was not reprinted in *Internationale Situationniste*.<sup>6</sup> The name sigma was chosen 'to designate all, the sum, the whole', while being 'free from bothersome semantic accretions'<sup>8</sup>. Trocchi proposes that project sigma could incorporate a 'spontaneous university', to produce an international index (or, perhaps, an inventory) of participants, and even to offer cultural promotion services and consultancy to artists, writers, and thinkers. The Invisible Insurrection and Project Sigma articles both utilise a proto-Deleuzian rhetoric of revolutionary 'becoming'<sup>9</sup> and nomadic, borderless organisation. These visions are accompanied by expansive and bizarre business proposals that ranged

---

<sup>2</sup> The essay was retitled 'Technique du coup du monde', in *Internationale Situationniste* 8 (January 1963): 48-56. It was also published in 1962 in the London periodical *Anarchy*, and in 1963 in New York's *Evergreen Review* and the *Los Angeles Free Press*.

<sup>3</sup> Trocchi, 'Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds', in Scott (ed.), *Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds*, 178.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>6</sup> First published in the *New Saltire Review* (1962), and subsequently in the *Evergreen Review* (1963) and *City Lights Journal* (1964).

<sup>7</sup> Trocchi, 'Sigma: A Tactical Blueprint', in Scott (ed.), *Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds*, 193.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>9</sup> Trocchi, 'Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds', 178.

from a 'limited liability company (International Cultural Enterprises Ltd.)'<sup>10</sup> to the acquisition of 'a vacant country house (mill, abbey, church or castle), not too far from the City of London [in which to hold a] cultural jam session'<sup>11</sup>. Trocchi pulls together discourses of critical theory, radical psychoanalysis, and countercultural community initiatives. Though the emphasis was on universal participation, Trocchi's role is essentially facilitator and fundraiser.

Trocchi's early theorisations of sigma, like his fiction, gesture towards the primacy of praxis over product, of lived experience over the creation of an aesthetic object. With sigma, Trocchi was trying to produce a workable project from the ambitions signalled in his *Merlin* editorial that asked for a 'suspension of all categories [in order to arrive at the] immediacy of experience'<sup>12</sup>. Reality not art; life not literature. The *Invisible Insurrection* essay states that 'we have already rejected any idea of a frontal attack'<sup>13</sup>—an unacknowledged allusion to Joe Necchi's statement in *Cain's Book* that 'it's a dead cert the frontal attack is obsolete'<sup>14</sup>. Instead, the sigmatic revolt 'must be in the broad sense cultural'<sup>15</sup>: to operate obliquely, beneath the radar, via new social forms that would be radically incommensurable with the spectacle.

### **The Situationist Basis of sigma**

The intervention into life praxis via art, while simultaneously sublating the two was, of course, the central dialectic of the historical avant-garde. Like the SI, Trocchi was conscious of the pervasive and placatory processes of recuperation and commodification. The promise of sigma was to carry cultural revolt beyond the veneration of the aesthetic object to truly place lived experience before artistic production. Trocchi's abandonment of his novelistic career was a tactical necessity, and has analogous moments in the trajectory of the Lettrist-Situationist Internationals. The scission that led to the formation of the Lettrist International was due to its iconoclasts no longer wishing to be associated with the artists of Isidore Isou's Lettrisme Movement. After the Lettrist International became the Situationist International, it too experienced a moment of self-purging when it expelled in 1962 a faction of Situationists deemed more concerned with art than with revolution; it thus

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>12</sup> Trocchi, 'Editorial', 56.

<sup>13</sup> Trocchi, 'Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds', 179.

<sup>14</sup> Trocchi, *Cain's Book*, 232.

<sup>15</sup> Trocchi, 'Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds', 177.

attempted to distance itself from the artistic avant-garde traditions from which it had emerged.

At the fourth conference of the SI in London, 24<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> September 1960, a division had emerged between the Parisian core of the SI and the German section (the artists of Gruppe Spur) over the question ‘To what extent is the SI a political organisation?’ The Germans argued that the SI held too much faith in a revolutionary proletariat, and should instead align itself with avant-garde artists. Debord dismissed these proposals and Asger Jorn maintained that it was instead necessary ‘for the world to become artistic in the sense defined by the SI’<sup>16</sup>. The debate was not resolved by the SI’s fifth conference, in Gothenburg, 28<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> August 1961. Raoul Vaneigem’s opening address pushed a hard anti-art line, to argue that, ‘The point is not to elaborate the spectacle of refusal, but to refuse the spectacle’. Attila Kotányi mediated this position by saying that Situationists could still produce art, but it should be recognised as ‘antisituationist art’, produced in the knowledge that it will inevitably ‘be coopted by society and used against us’.<sup>17</sup>

The result was the expulsion of the German artists in February 1962, and in March the expulsion of the Scandinavian artists centred on Jørgen Nash. The latter were derogatorily labelled Nashists, which became a Situationist byword for those who were accused of using their SI connection to further their own artistic careers.<sup>18</sup> The SI described its political position at the time—in a statement which encapsulates the dialectic of cultural revolt—as an ‘ambiguous and risky policy of consenting to act within culture while being against the entire present organisation of this culture and even against all culture as a separate sphere’<sup>19</sup>. Trocchi’s sigma occupied a similar position *within and against* culture.

sigma did not entirely renounce artistic production as the SI claimed to have done, but sought to reorganise the production and distribution of art in society. Unlike the Situationists who spoke of the decomposition of aesthetic innovation in spectacular society, Trocchi did not see art itself as the problem, but the role it has been assigned in modern society. He writes,

---

<sup>16</sup> Situationist International, ‘The Fourth SI Conference in London’ (1960), in SIA, 81–84.

<sup>17</sup> Situationist International, ‘The Fifth SI Conference in Göteborg’, 114–117.

<sup>18</sup> Situationist International, ‘The Counter-Situationist Campaign in Various Countries’ (1963), in SIA, 145–149.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.



Art can have no existential significance for a civilisation which draws a line between art and life and collects artifacts like ancestral bones for reverence. Art must inform the living; we envision a situation in which life is continually renewed by art, a situation imaginatively and passionately constructed to inspire each individual to respond creatively, to bring to whatever act a creative comportment.<sup>20</sup>

‘A line between art and life’; recuperated ancestral bones; the situation, ‘passionately constructed’: Trocchi’s vocabulary and rhetoric reveal his increasing interest in Situationist theory and its tributary historical avant-gardist discourses. *sigma* extended Trocchi’s project of cumulating different avant-gardist impulses, yet its form, I want to argue, was principally determined by his interpretation of Situationist thought. Lettrist and Situationist theory offered Trocchi not an aesthetic framework as Existentialist and Beat literature had informed his novels, but a paradigm for rethinking how cultural production relates to political processes. Michael Gardiner suggests that Trocchi turned to the SI to find answers to the increasingly eschatological visions of his *Merlin* editorials: ‘Faced with nuclear destruction and totalitarianism, a non-binaristic, non-“political” way of thinking politics had become necessary’<sup>21</sup>.

Trocchi had already been trying to develop a non-political way of thinking politics, evident in *Young Adam*’s early formulation of the spectacle and *Cain’s Book*’s valorisation of play as resistance. The *Invisible Insurrection* essay argues that as a result of the infiltration of free time by logics of production and consumption, ‘Man has forgotten how to play’<sup>22</sup>. However, Trocchi’s critique of wage-labour and of reified consciousness (though he used neither of these terms) did not recognise its discursive origins beyond the SI. He repeatedly denounced Marxism, for instance. His introduction to the *Writers in Revolt* anthology associates Marxism with religion, as false consciousness:

one must ask what is the principle force to which our own culture is dedicated, the mainspring source from which we attempt to draw our own ethics and our sense of values? Certainly it is not Marxism, any more than it is Christianity<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Trocchi, ‘Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds’, 181.

<sup>21</sup> Gardiner, *From Trocchi to Trainspotting*, 79.

<sup>22</sup> Trocchi, ‘Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds’, 180.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Seaver, Terry Southern and Alexander Trocchi (eds), *Writers in Revolt: An Anthology* (New York: Frederick Fell Inc. 1963), xiii.

Tom McGrath describes the political ambitions of project sigma as ‘total change, but Trocchi had no patience for Marxism or any other political approaches, which he regarded as outmoded’<sup>24</sup>. Nonetheless, Trocchi’s *Invisible Insurrection* essay unwittingly espouses a Marxist critique of cultural production. Trocchi commends a quotation from Raymond Williams, though he declares himself to be ‘unfortunately ignorant’<sup>25</sup> of Williams’s work. Trocchi writes that project sigma accords with Williams’s ideal that ‘artists will have control of their own means of expression’<sup>26</sup>. Trocchi was seemingly unaware of his political debt to Williams and the New Left; a debt made evident when sigma is articulated in those Marxian terms. Trocchi’s Marxism, though underdeveloped and even self-denying, and certainly more concerned with culture than economics, was likely absorbed osmotically from Sartre, the more politicised aspects of the hippie and beatnik milieus, the British New Left, and the SI.

### **sigma as Situation**

From the SI, Trocchi acquired a vocabulary and a set of concepts that formed the basis of his (non-)political thinking. The most important of these concepts, quoted in *Cain’s Book*, was the Situationists’ command, ‘Il vous faut construire les situations’<sup>27</sup>. The imperative to create situations was the SI’s founding principle when it emerged from the Lettrist International, though the SI would soon extend its critique beyond the framework of the constructed situation. As the surrealists had the surreal, and the Lettrists the letter, the Situationists had the situation. The constructed situation is discussed in Debord’s essay, ‘Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organization and Action’, which he presented to members of the Lettrist International, the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, and the London Psychogeography Committee in June 1957, prior to the founding of the SI that July. That Trocchi had read this essay is certain: he quotes it in ‘*Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds*’ when justifying sigma’s attention to the urban environment (*l’art integral ne pouvait se realiser qu’an niveau de l’urbanisme*)<sup>28</sup>; and the references in *Cain’s Book* to play and leisure were likely

---

<sup>24</sup> McGrath, ‘Remembering Alex Trocchi’, 37.

<sup>25</sup> Trocchi, ‘*Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds*’, 185.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Trocchi, *Cain’s Book*, 236.

<sup>28</sup> Trocchi, ‘*Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds*’, 186.

sourced from this text, which calls for ‘the invention of games of an essentially new type’ in response to the ‘battle of leisure’<sup>29</sup>.

Debord writes,

Our central idea is the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality. We must develop a systemic intervention based on the complex factors of two components in perpetual interaction: the material environment of life and the behaviours which that environment gives rise to and which radically transform it.<sup>30</sup>

Situations were to be constructed through materialist, urban practices, which took the umbrella term ‘unitary urbanism’. In turn, unitary urbanism demonstrated the principles of ‘integral art’: a form of life praxis rather than artistic production; the total project of creating an atmosphere conducive to experimental behaviour; ‘the use of all arts and techniques as means contributing to the composition of a unified milieu’. Integral art ‘can no longer correspond to any of the traditional aesthetic categories’<sup>31</sup>. The situations, milieus, and ambiances to be constructed were intended, however momentarily, to shatter the reified appearances of the spectacle. Such was the SI’s original negotiation of the avant-gardist life-art dialectic: a rejection of artistic permanence; ‘Our situations will be ephemeral, without a future. Passageways. Our only concern is real life; we care nothing about the permanence of art or of anything else’<sup>32</sup>. Though Debord’s early theorisation of the situation is concerned with physical places and interventions therein, he concedes that ‘Situationist techniques have yet to be invented’<sup>33</sup>. It was to this challenge that Trocchi’s project sigma responded. ‘The situation’ was to be a particular mode of interpersonal communication; sigma was to be a social network that operated according to the interventionist logic of the situation.

In its introductory articles at least, sigma emerged from a Situationist critique even if it lacked the theoretical rigour of later SI projects. Trocchi’s correspondence with the SI is most obvious in the first essay, ‘Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds’. The invisible insurrection, he writes,

---

<sup>29</sup> Guy Debord, ‘Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organization and Action’ (1957), in SIA, 38.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

will come on the mass of men, if it comes at all, not as something they have voted for, struck for, fought for, but like the changing seasons; they will find themselves in and stimulated by the situation consciously at last to recreate it within and without as their own.<sup>34</sup>

The essay's publication in *Internationale Situationniste* (January 1963) predates the publication of Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967 in France), but the term 'spectacle' had already entered Situationist parlance, albeit constrained to a more cinematic meaning than the relational, non-visual, attributes that Debord later allowed the term ('The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images'<sup>35</sup>). Trocchi uses the term, and quotes the SI in French, to describe how in modern society, 'art anaesthetises the living'<sup>36</sup>:

The zombies remain; the spectacle grows more spectacular. To adapt an epigram of a friend of mine: *Si nous ne voulons pas assister au spectacle de la fin du monde, il nous faut travailler à la fin du monde du spectacle.*<sup>37</sup>

To counter the spectacle, sigma promoted participation and communication across specialisms and disciplinary boundaries. It sought to reconnect individuals atomised by the spectacle in a network that the spectacle had neither pre-established nor recuperated. Trocchi envisions an underground network of radical cultural producers, a dissolute and meta-avant-garde which would not require 'anyone to sink his identity in anything noxiously metaphysical'<sup>38</sup>. Like the polyvocality of *Cain's Book*, sigma was an attempt to facilitate collaboration between any number of distinct avant-gardes without reproducing an identity politics of its own. Trocchi writes that the groups which sigma will pull together,

are already called X and Y and Z and whose members may be somewhat reluctant to subsume their public identities under any other name. If these groups could be persuaded of the significance of linking themselves "adjectivally" to sigma, it would for the present be enough.<sup>39</sup>

He wanted X, Y, and Z to come together in a unified but not necessarily synthetic movement whose cumulative weight was to be greater than the sum of its parts. In

<sup>34</sup> Trocchi, 'Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds', 179.

<sup>35</sup> SoS, thesis 4.

<sup>36</sup> Trocchi, 'Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds', 181.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 182. 'If we don't wish to assist in the spectacle of the end of the world, we must work towards the end of the world of the spectacle.' My translation.

<sup>38</sup> Trocchi, 'Sigma: A Tactical Blueprint', 193

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

one of the few articles that mentions project sigma, Howard Slater clarifies Trocchi's intentions: 'Sigma was to have been active in the relocation of creativity as multi-disciplinary and non-privileged [,] removing the mystification of genius that is the denial of imaginative potential in all people'<sup>40</sup>.

Trocchi's insurrectionary project corresponds with the anti-spectacular, situationist, culture described by the SI in a manifesto that it presented at London's ICA in September 1960. The SI states,

Against unilateral art, situationist culture will be an art of dialogue, an art of interaction. Today artists—with all culture visible—have been completely separated from society, just as they are separated from each other by competition. But faced with this impasse of capitalism, art has remained essentially unilateral in response. This enclosed era of primitivism must be superseded by complete communication<sup>41</sup>.

The Invisible Insurrection and Project Sigma essays address these calls for dialogue, interaction, and 'total participation'<sup>42</sup> with a much more literal understanding of 'complete communication' than the SI had perhaps envisaged.

### **The Sigma Folio**

Trocchi presented sigma as, first and foremost, a social network, but it was a social network that was to generate new aesthetic forms. Perhaps unsurprisingly, sigma's obscure theorisation led to equally as obscure manifestations of what Trocchi had hoped would be a sigmatic culture. Trocchi seems to have spent as much time theorising sigma as attempting to actualise sigmatic principles. As well as 'Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds' and 'Project Sigma: A Tactical Blueprint', an introduction to project sigma was included in an early issue of *International Times*, which briefly labelled itself as 'a sigmatic newspaper'<sup>43</sup>. Trocchi never managed to create the numerous sigma centres that the early essays had envisaged, and the project's inherently ephemeral and immaterial nature leave us with a difficult task in measuring its successes, failures, or even its presence. What I consider to be its most interesting manifestation was the Sigma Folio.

---

<sup>40</sup> Howard Slater, 'Alexander Trocchi and Project Sigma', *Variant 7* (1989): 36.

<sup>41</sup> Situationist International, 'Manifeste', 36–38.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>43</sup> *International Times* 4 (Nov 28<sup>th</sup>–Dec 11<sup>th</sup> 1966), 2.

SIGMA PORTFOLIO : SIGMA PORTFOLIO : SIGMA PORTFOLIO : SIGMA PORTFOLIO : s.p. No.12

The sigma portfolio is an entirely new dimension in publishing, through which the writer reaches his public immediately, outflanking the traditional trap of publishing-house policy, and by means of which the reader gets it, so to speak, "hot" from the writer's pen, from the photographer's lens, etc. In a sense you might be said to be subscribing to an encyclopaedia in the making: in another sense you will be participating in a tactical historigem, to coin a word. In subscribing to the sigma portfolio, you are stimulating the growth of an interpersonal log constructing itself to alert, sustain, inform, inspire, and make vividly conscious of itself all intelligence from now on. You will receive various future informations and tactical objects and can judge for yourself at what points you can participate. Again, the portfolio is what we call a "futique" (what will be prized as an antique tomorrow); you will possess a first edition in this new dimension of publishing, the expanding file of our activities. It should be understood there is no minimum and no maximum subscription fee, that if the whole venture is to retain its existential posture, we who originate it can enter into no legal contract to do any specific thing which tomorrow may have to be "transcended". Subscriptions, in short, are to sigma unlimited, and a reasonable sum seems to us to be two guineas (42/-), or six dollars (\$6.00). We are most anxious that the sigma experiment should develop quickly so that the tendency on the part of the general public to associate it with particular names will be corrected. When the inspired mechanisms that are sigma are really "happening", one well-known individual more or less, here or there, will be of little significance. Come the day.

I wish to receive the sigma portfolio for one year.

I enclose.....

Name and address: .....

.....

Fig. 5: 'Notice to Contributors', sigma portfolio 12

The Sigma Folio remains the primary piece of material evidence of the existence of the sigma project. The Sigma Folio was a collection of documents (essays, fiction, critiques) submitted by sigma participants which were then distributed to the network of other participants. That the project required Trocchi to act as middle-man in receiving, reproducing, and forwarding these documents, suggests that for all of its rhetorical grandeur, project sigma was essentially Trocchi in an office. Nonetheless, each document was sent out on mimeographed coloured sugar paper to all the participants, who paid a subscription fee. In a 'Notice to Contributors', Trocchi

emphasises that there was no maximum or minimum fee, and certainly no legal contracts involved. Trocchi writes that, 'In a sense, you might be said to be subscribing to an encyclopaedia in the making: in another sense you will be participating in a tactical historigem, to coin a word'<sup>44</sup> (Fig. 5). The Folio reflects Trocchi's impulse to inventorise, to produce an index of progressive writings and sympathetic individuals.

The first Sigma Folio paper was a poster originally intended to be displayed in Underground stations. It was called 'Moving Times' and took the form of a large newsletter that combined information about sigma with excerpts of creative writing from Trocchi, Burroughs, and Kenneth White. It was never displayed in public. The second Sigma Folio paper was a reprint of 'Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds'; the third of 'Project Sigma: A Tactical Blueprint'. Sigma #17 was a 'list of people interested', which included Anthony Burgess, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg, Phillip Green, R.D. Laing, Joan Littlewood, Timothy Leary, Ann Quin, and Felix Topolski. Trocchi was certainly well-connected socially. On the 11<sup>th</sup> June 1965, Trocchi had organised and compèred the International Poetry Incarnation held at the Royal Albert Hall, which featured poets like Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Adrian Mitchell and Simon Vinkenoog, and was documented by Peter Whitehead in the film *Wholly Communion* (1965). The range of poets reading at the event not only demonstrated Trocchi's extensive social network, but placed Trocchi at a point of transition between cultural movements: Stewart Home locates the event as 'the last and greatest hurrah of the London beatnik scene, its fabulous death rattle' and 'the birth cry of psychedelia'<sup>45</sup>.

Sigma #4 was an essay by Trocchi that introduces the Sigma Folio. The essay is titled 'Potlatch', a term borrowed from the Lettrist International's newsletter, which had already been borrowed from Marcel Mauss and Georges Bataille's studies of gift-giving in Native American cultures, *The Gift* (1923) and *The Accursed Share* (1949) respectively. The Lettrists' Potlatch was clearly a model for Trocchi's Sigma Folio, especially in terms of their respective forms of circulation. Debord described the Lettrists' Potlatch in similar terms to those used by Trocchi about Sigma Folio:

---

<sup>44</sup> Alexander Trocchi, 'Notice to Contributors', in Iwona Blazwick (ed.), *An Endless Banquet, An Endless Passion, An Endless Adventure: A Situationist Scrapbook* (London: ICA 1989), 58.

<sup>45</sup> Stewart Home, 'Walk on Gilded Splinters: In Memorandum to Memory 13 April 1969, Alex Trocchi's State of Revolt at the Arts Lab in London', in Iain Sinclair (ed.), *London: City of Disappearances* (London: Hamish Hamilton 2006): 398.

Potlatch was sent for free to addresses chosen by the editor, and to some people who asked to receive it. It was never sold [...]  
The strategic intention of Potlatch was to create links to form a new movement, which should be an immediate reunification of avant-garde cultural creation and a revolutionary critique of society.<sup>46</sup>

The means of distributing both Potlatch and the Sigma Folio were attempts to function outside of capitalist distribution networks and beyond the logic of the commodity. Both were comparable to gift-giving or samizdat activity. Trocchi emphasises the importance of the means of distribution (as opposed to production) as early as the Invisible Insurrection essay: 'Clearly, there is no problem of production in the modern world. The urgent problem of the future is that of distribution which is presently (dis)organised in terms of the economic system prevailing in this or that area'<sup>47</sup>. Nonetheless, Trocchi recognises the inevitability of compromise, 'the fact that in a capitalist society any successful organisation must be able to sustain itself in capitalist terms'<sup>48</sup>. sigma's compromises are evident in the 'Notice to Contributors's marketing of the Folio as 'what we call a "futique" (what will be prized as an antique tomorrow)<sup>49</sup>, whereby sigma engineers its own commodification.

The last instalment of the Sigma Folio which bears on my investigation is Sigma #18, a 'sigma edition' of the aforementioned Situationist manifesto. The original Situationist text had been published in the fourth *Internationale Situationniste* (June 1960) and read by Maurice Wyckaert in an address to the ICA after the SI's fourth conference, its only proper visit to London, 24<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> September 1960 (at which Trocchi's imprisonment on drugs charges in the United States was discussed [Fig. 6]<sup>50</sup>). The SI's text states certain facts held to be true in the Situationist camp,

<sup>46</sup> Guy Debord, 'Introduction', in Guy Debord présente Potlatch 1954-1957 (Paris: Éditions Gallimard 1996), 8. My translation.

<sup>47</sup> Trocchi, 'Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds', 179.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>49</sup> Trocchi, 'Notice to Contributors', 58

<sup>50</sup> In the following *Internationale Situationniste*, the SI published a defence of Trocchi, which asserted that his arrest was based on a 'police provocation' and that, anyway, 'drug taking is without importance' (Fig. 6). Soonafter, Debord, Asger Jorn and Jacqueline de Jong published another appeal, titled 'Hands off Alexander Trocchi!' that denounced the 'menacing lack of culture on the part of the American police' and affirmed that Trocchi was 'an artist of the first order', moreover, 'a new type of artist; pioneer of a new culture and a new comportment (the question of drugs being in his own eyes minor and negligible)'. (The appeal's title was a self-conscious echo of the French Surrealists' 1927 defence of Charlie Chaplin, 'Hands Off Love'). 'Resolution of the Fourth Conference of the Situationist International Concerning the Imprisonment of Alexander Trocchi', *Internationale Situationniste* 5 (December 1960): 14, and Guy Debord, Jacqueline de Jong and Asger Jorn, 'Hands off Alexander Trocchi' (October 1960), in Debord, *Œuvres*, 535.



especially the need for new forms of cultural action: new games, new art, as well as new forms of economic production and distribution. The 'Manifeste' clearly influenced Trocchi: it discusses a structural and anti-hierarchical reorganisation of culture, so 'Everyone will be a situationist so to speak, with a multidimensional inflation of tendencies, experiences, or radically different "schools"'<sup>51</sup>.

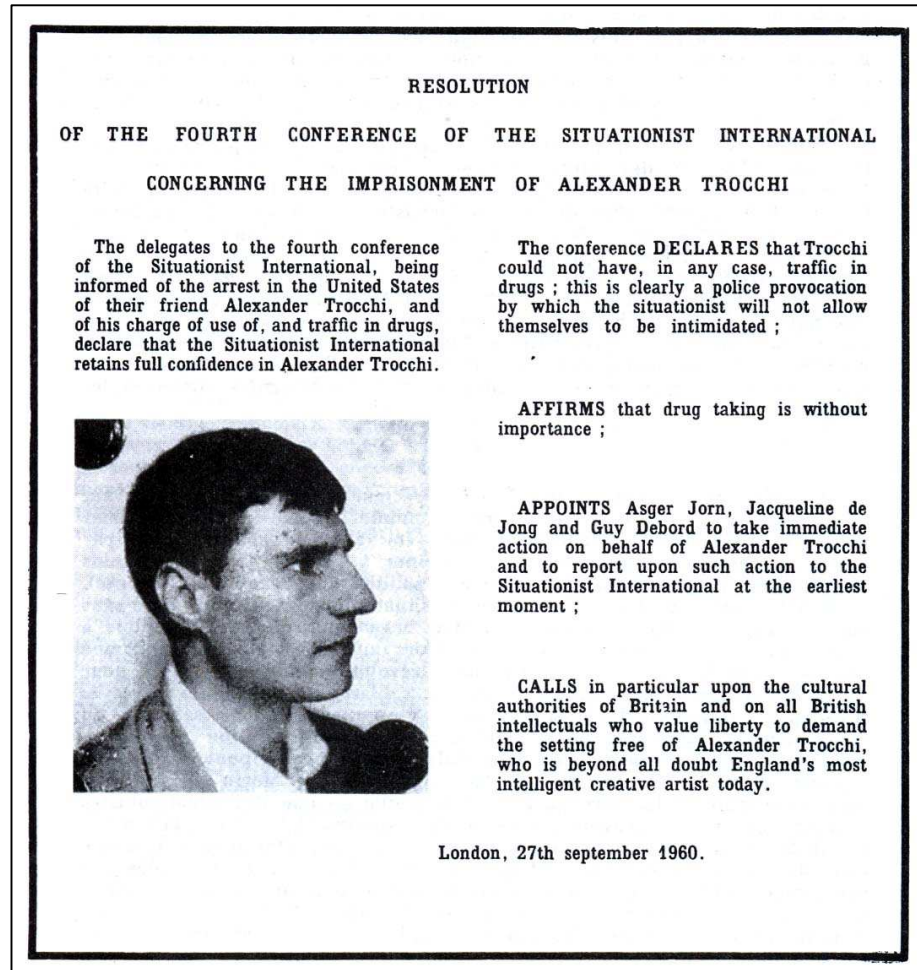


Fig. 6: 'Resolution of the Fourth Conference of the Situationist International Concerning the Imprisonment of Alexander Trocchi'<sup>52</sup>

The sigma version of the manifesto begins with a quotation from 'Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds', followed by an editorial note explaining that what follows is not the original Situationist text, but a version edited by Trocchi and Philip Green. Trocchi and Green state their relationship to the original text, 'For many years now we have been to some extent involved in the theoretical evolution of that

<sup>52</sup> *Internationale Situationniste* 5 (December 1960); 14.

dialectic which goes under the name *situationiste*<sup>53</sup>. They justify their adaptations by noting, 'all situationist documents have been at all times provisional in the sense that they are to be understood as tactical manoeuvres or "happenings"'<sup>54</sup>. Trocchi and Green even mobilise the SI's original text in support of their own project: 'the fact that we are able to do this without perverting the original, bears out our contention that the invisible insurrection is happening in many places simultaneously... NOW'<sup>55</sup>.

The sigma edition reproduces the majority of the original text, with elaborations on some theses and some minor digressions. The additions mostly serve to ground the abstractions of the original text within an Anglo-American context, with allusions to Burroughs, to the essay 'Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds', to poetry readings in New York, and to the seizure of *Cain's Book* as an obscene work in England. A comparison of passages from the SI's original and the Anglicised variant will reveal precisely how Trocchi and Green adapted the Situationist text to sigma's aims. The original manifesto asks,

Qu'est-ce, en effet, que la situation? C'est la réalisation d'un jeu supérieur, plus exactement la provocation à ce jeu qu'est la présence humaine. Les joueurs révolutionnaires de tous les pays peuvent s'unir dans l'I.S. pour commencer à sortir de la préhistoire de la vie quotidienne.<sup>56</sup>

Trocchi and Green's corresponding passage reads thus:

What do we mean by the word 'situation'? Within an experimentally constructed context, due attention paid to what we call 'psycho-geographic' factors, the situation is the gradual and spontaneous realisation (articulation: happening) of a superior game in which each participating individual is vitally involved. Revolutionary players of all countries must evolve the technique of acting together to raise the whole tenor of daily living beyond the level of stock response: we must break out of the stifling conventional doldrums which future historians will undoubtedly regard as evidence that present-day man is sunk in what they (the future historians) will regard as a kind of 'pre-history', a period of human history during which man is still without techniques to control his own destiny.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Alexander Trocchi and Philip Green, 'Manifesto Situationiste, 1960, sigma edition', in Campbell and Niel (eds.), *A Life in Pieces*, 190.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Situationist International, 'Manifeste', 36.

<sup>57</sup> Trocchi and Green, 'Manifesto Situationiste, 1960, sigma edition', 191-192.

Aside from its verbosity, the sigma edition makes a number of important changes. It adds more Situationist terminology ('psycho-geographic') to its definition of 'situation', and roots the notion of the situation in another tradition, the countercultural 'happening'. This analogy was never made by the SI. Importantly, the Situationists' manifesto stresses the importance of the SI ('I.S.') in providing an identity for the 'revolutionary players' and acting as the vanguard to begin the movement out of everyday life. The sigma edition dismisses the necessity of a unified vanguard group: it is enough to be involved in and conscious of the struggle.

Trocchi's hijacking of the Situationist text pays a twofold homage to the SI. Not only does he borrow its theses, he also practices its tactic of *détournement*.<sup>58</sup> *Détournement* was the SI's theorisation of the historical avant-garde's logic of plagiarism, which had its roots in Lautréamont's declaration that,

Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. It closely grasps an author's sentence, uses his expressions, deletes a false idea, replaces it with the right one.<sup>59</sup>

The *détourné* manifesto is a synecdoche of the broader function of the Sigma Folio. An original text was produced and circulated amongst affiliated individuals. In this process of circulation, the original text is rewritten and adapted to different cultural milieus. The authority of the original text is undermined through this process of reproduction; individual authorship is replaced by collective anonymity; and hierarchical channels of communication are replaced by informal gift-giving.

*Détournement* is the paradigm of Trocchi's engagement with the SI, yet his *détournement* of the SI also forestalled that relationship. His efforts to unite people and to overlook programmatic disagreements in favour of broader similarities and sympathies conflicted with the SI's efforts to model itself on the vanguard parties of the Communist and Marxist traditions. Trocchi's formal expulsion from the SI was published in the tenth *Internationale Situationniste* (1966):

---

<sup>58</sup> 'Détournement. Short for "détournement of pre-existing aesthetic elements." The integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu. In this sense there can be no situationist painting or music, but only a situationist use of those means. In a more elementary sense, *détournement* within the old cultural spheres is a method of propaganda, a method which reveals the wearing out and loss of importance of those spheres.' 'Definitions' (1958), in *SIA*, 52.

<sup>59</sup> Lautréamont, 'Poésies', 240.

UPON THE APPEARANCE in London in fall 1964 of the first publications by Alexander Trocchi's 'Project Sigma,' it was mutually agreed that the SI could not involve itself in such a loose cultural venture, in spite of the interest we have in dialogue with certain of the individuals who may be drawn to it, notably in the United States and England. It is therefore no longer as a member of the SI that our friend Alexander Trocchi has since developed this activity, several aspects of which meet our complete approval.<sup>60</sup>

The expulsion was atypically cordial, and even credited Trocchi, a 'friend', with having developed a project that was, at least, interesting. The SI was clearly resistant to sigma's lack of organisational discipline: 'loose cultural venture' is used by the SI as a derogatory epithet, even though it echoes the language with which Trocchi had proudly announced sigma. Trocchi's expulsion, I suspect, was a tactical decision on the part of the SI. Trocchi was too willing to allow sigma to develop beyond the confines of the SI, beyond Debord's authority. The Sigma Folio's push for collective authorship and gift-giving, for example, reveals a certain contradiction between theory and practice in the SI, whose journal maintained fetishised production values that inflated its price and adapted it for collectors.

### **The Invisible Avant-Garde**

After Trocchi's expulsion from the SI, project sigma attracted less and less attention and eventually petered out. Why did sigma disappear into its own obscurity without managing to utilise that obscurity tactically as it intended? sigma's disappearance has meant that it has since attracted minimal critical attention despite its embeddedness in a very fertile period of countercultural activity and its proleptic position in relation to a number of post-situationist groups who have since proposed similar forms of invisible activity.<sup>61</sup>

The significance of sigma's willed obscurity, and particularly of the invisibility of Trocchi's insurrection, relates to the SI's discussion of spectacle. Debord declares, as the first thesis of *Society of the Spectacle*, that, 'In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*.'

---

<sup>60</sup> 'Sur les Publications de L'I.S.,' *Internationale Situationniste* 10 (Mars 1966): 83. Also available at the 'Situationist International Archive', Centre for Digital Discourse and Culture at Virginia Tech, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/publications.html> [accessed 10/05/2012].

<sup>61</sup> *The Coming Insurrection* (2007), authored by the anonymous Invisible Committee, espouses a similar tactics of subterranean, formless organisation as a means of operating under the radar of the hegemonic order. The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2009).

Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation.’<sup>62</sup> The spectacle, he adds, is not itself the proliferation of images in everyday life, but it is the ‘social relation between people that is mediated by images.’<sup>63</sup> sigma, therefore, was Trocchi’s attempt to evade that realm of spectacular representation. Early in his *Invisible Insurrection* essay, Trocchi voices his wariness of revolt which ‘As soon as it is defined it has provoked the means for its containment. The prudent man will avoid this definition which is in effect his death-sentence’<sup>64</sup>. sigma was an attempt to refuse identification, to refuse social presence as determined by the spectacle, and to represent a logic of communication that operated counter to the hegemonic logic of the spectacle.

Trocchi’s sigmatic ambitions are illuminated by a summary offered by Rancière of avant-garde formalism and its limits (in which, perhaps provocatively, Rancière adopts some Situationist terminology):

The dream of a suitable political work of art is in fact the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle. It is the dream of an art that would transmit meanings in the form of a rupture with the very logic of meaningful situations. As a matter of fact, political art cannot work in the simple form of a meaningful spectacle that would lead to an ‘awareness’ of the state of the world.<sup>65</sup>

Rancière reformulates the relationship between aesthetics and politics with a much less damning account of representation than was the SI’s. Politics, he contends, is the process of becoming visible in and to society; it is when subjects who had previously been denied representation achieve political agency. Rancière thus neither damns nor valorises the visible in relation to projects of emancipation. He describes a redistribution of the sensible (as in, sense matter): when the newly-visible subjects arrive, or force their way to, the plane of the visible, then the whole social organisation is readjusted to allow for their presence. Art’s relation to this process of becoming-visible is to prefigure that redistribution of the sensible, to demonstrate, aesthetically, what can and can’t be recognised and understood in a given political

---

<sup>62</sup> SoS, thesis 1.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., thesis 4.

<sup>64</sup> Trocchi, ‘Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds’, 177.

<sup>65</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum 2008), 63.

order. Art cannot illuminate something otherwise unimaginable or unrepresentable; it can only illuminate what already exists but is obscured.

sigma, to apply Rancière's observations to Trocchi's project, promised something completely external to the spectacle and in doing so refused to comply with the spectacle's regime of visibility and distribution of the sensible. As such, sigma's externality left it unrepresented and unintelligible. sigma was fundamentally incompatible with the spectacular logic of comprehensibility-through-visibility. Rancière writes,

The arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parcelling out of the visible and the invisible. Furthermore, the autonomy they can enjoy or the subversion they can claim credit for rest on the same foundation.<sup>66</sup>

Precisely in being invisible, sigma was incomprehensible. sigma excluded itself from the logic of the spectacle, and condemned itself to obscurity. In contrast, the SI's own dogged insistence on producing an image of itself as a disciplined revolutionary organisation, and its continued engagement with the visual despite having acknowledged the dangers and compromises therein, seem validated by Trocchi's forays into anti-aesthetic organisation. The SI sought to remain dialectically suspended *within and against* spectacular culture: 'to act within culture while being against the entire present organisation of this culture'. The dissolution of the avant-garde as engineered by Trocchi meant a forfeiting of whatever stake the avant-garde once had in the political order.

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 19.

### **3.1 Charles Radcliffe and the English Section of the Situationist International**

*'Once there had just been Trocchi drawing on the group's ideas [...] Now they were seeping into the consciousness of people within a milieu which, rejecting straight left politics, was searching for a route out of a hippy enclave at a time when the political temperature was rising [...] It promised involvement, rationalised non-organization, it dramatized outcast status, and offered the possibility of action, and, as the next decade opened, provided it for a few.'* Nigel Fountain, *Underground: The London Alternative Press 1966-74* (1988).<sup>1</sup>

The first efforts towards an English Situationist practice that recognised itself as such, as opposed to Trocchi's project sigma, began with a small journal titled *Heatwave* and culminated in a fierce anarchist group that called itself King Mob. Between these two manifestations there briefly existed the English Section of the Situationist International. The period during which these groupings appeared and just as rapidly disappeared, the latter half of the 1960s, serves as the fulcrum of my study, when the paths of English and Continental Situationists ran closest, but it also marks the most definitive split between the nascent English Situationist tradition and the SI. This split occurred in part consciously, as English Situationists formed their unique identity, and in part unconsciously, through a critical misreading of the SI's programme.

As English activists and artists became conscious of the SI, the challenge they faced was, to paraphrase my earlier articulation, not to produce Situationism in England, but English Situationism. The difficulty of this task relates largely to the adjectival use of 'English' to connote something beyond the movement's geographical origin and something more like the specific character that arises from its cultural context. As the English Section morphed into King Mob, a hooliganistic and caricatured image of English culture was glorified in defiance of what King Mob saw as the haughty Frenchness of the SI. Situationist practice was anglicised through a cultural translation which was not objective but largely determined by political and tactical decisions made by the emergent English Situationists, oftentimes in contravention of the SI's authority.

While much of the earliest work of the first generation of English Situationists consisted of reiterating the SI's pronouncements, the distinction between those reiterations and the English Situationists' additions is muddled because of the curious liberties they took in their translations. The resulting idiosyncrasies and peculiarities

---

<sup>1</sup> Nigel Fountain, *Underground: The London Alternative Press 1966-74* (London: Comedia 1988), 58-59.

of anglicised Situationist theory cannot be accounted for solely in contrast with the SI's version. Just as Trocchi was never a pure Situationist, nor purely a Situationist, the English Situationists married the SI's theory with other discourses, including discourses with which the SI had refused or had failed to engage—most notably, American anarchist traditions and aggressively vernacular English working-class movements. I shall attempt to recreate a constellation of the English Situationists' influences.

The emergence of English Situationist practice from Continental Situationist theory was contingent on biographical details, the availability of texts, and the stage of development of Continental Situationist theory itself. As I have emphasised, the SI went through a number of mutations, so the SI of 1962 was very different to the SI of 1966. As I shall demonstrate, English Situationist practice had its own infancy to pass through. Like the previous chapters, this one is divided into two halves. The first half follows the English version as it adhered to the original Continental pronouncements, in a sort of Situationist apprenticeship. The result was, again, complication and rupture. Previously, the complication was Trocchi's loss of faith in aesthetic representation, and the rupture his abandonment of the novel; now, the complication will relate to Situationist orthodoxy and dissent, and the rupture will be the expulsion of the English Section and the formation of King Mob.

### ***Rebel Worker and Heatwave***

The particular current with which this chapter is concerned has its source in the anarchist tendency of the UK's anti-nuclear movement of the 1960s, and in one figure in particular. Charles Radcliffe was a young activist and writer who had undertaken direct action alongside Bertrand Russell's Committee of 100. He had also written about anarchism, jazz, and blues for a number of specialist and underground periodicals, but was unexposed to either Surrealist or Situationist thought. Towards the end of summer 1965, Radcliffe wrote to a small group of young people based in Chicago, who shared his interests in anarchism and Black American music and who were publishing a magazine called *Rebel Worker*. This magazine ran articles on jazz, poetry, and the various manifestations of Black and teenage countercultures, all appraised through a strain of libertarian anarchism drawn from Marx, Surrealism, and the group's attempts to resurrect the union Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). A correspondence developed between Radcliffe and *Rebel Worker*, and the American anarchists had soon introduced the English activist to the work of those figures who



formed the touchstones of Surrealism and who feature prominently in the SI's constellation: Sade, Fourier, Lautréamont, and the young Marx.<sup>2</sup>

At the centre of the *Rebel Worker* group were Penelope and Franklin Rosemont, who came to London to visit Radcliffe in April 1966. Earlier in the same trip, the Rosemonts had been to Paris to meet André Breton and their Surrealist heroes, where they had also met Guy Debord. The latter meeting, however, was not remembered fondly by the Rosemonts. Although they would describe him as 'comradely in the best sense'<sup>3</sup>, the Rosemonts found Debord unwaveringly critical of all Surrealism after the movement's dalliance with Soviet Russia in the 1930s. Nonetheless, the Rosemonts left Paris with 300 copies of the SI's pamphlet 'Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy'<sup>4</sup>. This text remains a high-water mark in the history of the SI, the most comprehensive application of its theoretical work to an empirical event. The text declares that the 1965 uprisings in the Watts district of Los Angeles were not race riots as the media portrayed them, nor were they class riots as might be the conclusion of an orthodox Marxist perspective, but they were a 'rebellion against the commodity'<sup>5</sup>. That the Situationists had widened their analysis to events outside of France was no doubt important to the popularity of this text in Britain and America.

Thus began the dissemination of Situationist texts in the United States, spearheaded by the Rosemonts, their magazine *Rebel Worker*, and their bookshop, Solidarity. In London, the Rosemonts produced with Radcliffe a London edition, the sixth, of *Rebel Worker*. Its collection of texts reflects Radcliffe and the Rosemonts' shared orientation at that time: writings from Marx sit alongside those from the jazz musician Archie Shepp and the Surrealist Pierre Mabille; an article on the IWW accompanies a treatise on black humour; and a rather naive article by Radcliffe, under the pseudonym Ben Covington, declares the revolutionary potential of The Who, who 'could turn on a whole regiment of the dispossessed'<sup>6</sup>. An article by Franklin Rosemont introduces the aforementioned Surrealist precursors as 'Souvenirs of the Future: Precursors of the

---

<sup>2</sup>Charles Radcliffe, 'Two Fiery Flying Rolls: The Heatwave Story, 1966-1970', in Franklin Rosemont and Charles Radcliffe (eds), *Dancin' in the Streets: Anarchists, IWWs, Surrealists, Situationists & Provos in the 1960s as recorded in the pages of The Rebel Worker and Heatwave* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr 2005), 327-381.

<sup>3</sup> Franklin Rosemont, 'To Be Revolutionary in Everything: The Rebel Worker Story, 1964-68', in Rosemont and Radcliffe (eds), *Dancin' in the Streets*, 60.

<sup>4</sup> Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, who would later become a member of the English Section of the SI.

<sup>5</sup> Situationist International, 'The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy' (1966), in SIA, 197.

<sup>6</sup> Ben Covington, 'Crimes against the Bourgeoisie', *Rebel Worker* 6 (May 1966), in KME, 14.

Theory & Practice of Total Liberation'. The importance of revisiting Lautréamont, Fourier, and Sade, Rosemont argues, is that, 'The most relevant voices of the past are not the ones sanctified in the bourgeois mausoleum of heroes'; instead, 'The revolutionary movement, presently rebuilding itself from scratch, will have to re-envision its history from scratch as well.'<sup>7</sup>

When the Rosemonts returned to Chicago, Radcliffe began his own magazine, *Heatwave*, the first issue of which was published in July 1966 and the second (and final) issue in October of the same year (Fig. 7). Between the two publications, Radcliffe had befriended Christopher Gray, who introduced him to the work of the SI. Gray had recently translated Raoul Vaneigem's article 'Banalités de Base' into the widely-read pamphlet 'The Totality for Kids'. Radcliffe's first *Heatwave* had continued the project of *Rebel Worker*; with Gray on board, the second *Heatwave* adopted a much more 'Situationist' tone.

### **The Seeds of Social Destruction**

Across the three proto-Situationist magazines that Radcliffe and friends produced—*Rebel Worker* 6, *Heatwave* 1 and 2—much attention is paid to what they call the youth revolt. Radcliffe introduced this agenda in an article in *Rebel Worker* 6 titled 'A Very Nice Very Respectable Very Useless Campaign', in which he voices his dissatisfaction with the British anti-nuclear movement with which he had previously been involved. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Radcliffe argues, had come to replicate the authoritarian structures of power that it had once opposed. Just as Debord would soon state that a new revolutionary organisation must level its critique at 'all aspects of alienated social life'<sup>8</sup>, Radcliffe argues,

It is time for a young movement which addresses the contemporary reality, a movement which will challenge every tiny aspect of our war-sustained society, even unto the last public utility, which will militarise the dissatisfaction of almost every young person in this country.<sup>9</sup>

The movement that Radcliffe envisions would not only address the disenfranchisement of modern youth, but also harness their frustrated energies, the 'emotional eruptions'

---

<sup>7</sup> Franklin Rosemont, 'Souvenirs of the Future: Precursors of the Theory & Practice of Total Liberation', *Rebel Worker* 6 (May 1966), in KME, 8.

<sup>8</sup> SoS, thesis 121.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Radcliffe, 'A Very Nice Very Respectable Very Useless Campaign', *Rebel Worker* 6 (May 1966), in KME, 7.

and 'outrages'<sup>10</sup>. Radcliffe places his faith in the youth as the subjects of an 'obscene and blasphemous' movement which 'is symbolised by the bomb-thrower, the deserter, the delinquent, the hitch-hiker, the mad lover, the school drop-out, the wildcat striker, the rioter and the saboteur'<sup>11</sup>.

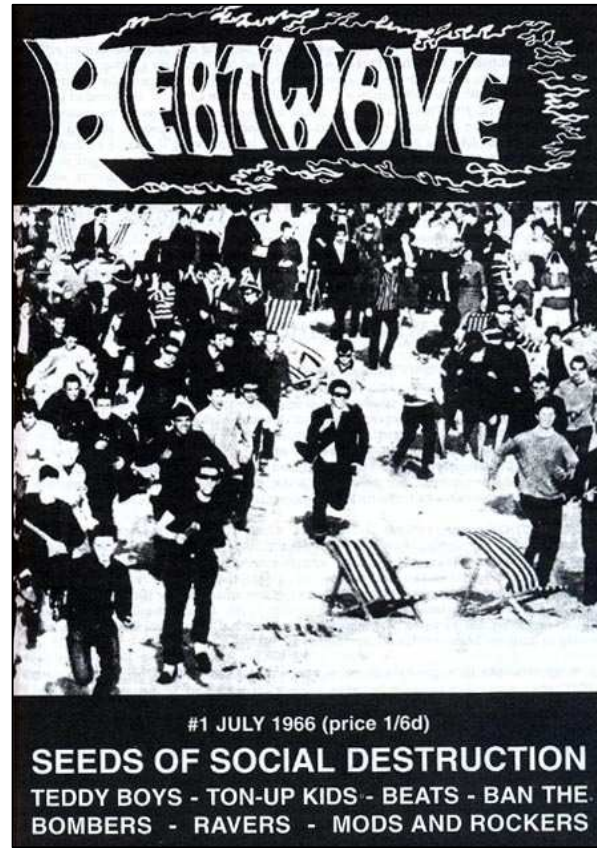


Fig. 7: Cover of Heatwave 1 (1966)

The first *Heatwave* sought evidence of revolutionary stirrings in youth culture, for which Radcliffe looked towards the Provos movement in Holland. In 1966, Provos were causing quite a stir, particularly in Amsterdam, through their stunts which used non-violent interventions into city life to provoke a violent response from the authorities in order to reveal the coercion that underlies capitalist society.<sup>12</sup> As an early manifestation of hippie culture, Provos also identified itself with disaffected youth. An article by Provos, reprinted in *Heatwave*, contains a list of youth subcultures similar to the symbolic figures conjured by Radcliffe: 'What is the Provotariat? Provos, beatniks, pleiners, nozems, teddy-boys, rockers, blousons noir, hooligans, mangupi, students,

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> See Richard Kempton, *Provo: Amsterdam's Anarchist Revolt* (New York: Autonomedia 2007).

artists, misfits, anarchists, ban-the-bombers [...] Those who don't want a career and who lead irregular lives.'<sup>13</sup>

Such lists are common tropes in the type of pamphleteering that constitutes much proto-English Situationist writing. What might be their function? In the first instance, they suggest heterogeneity; specifically, a heterogeneity of identities unfamiliar to mainstream society, an affirmation of the variety of countercultural identity. These identities are assembled into a community of individuals whose individuality is determined by its negative relation to mainstream society. However, the overflowing superabundance of countercultural identity, the sense that these lists could go on and on, cannot disguise the fact that these identities are roles to be played: each individual remains a type. Nonetheless, such celebrations of identitarian diversity abound in the 1960s London counterculture from which Radcliffe wrote. The proliferation of murals and the collage aesthetic, demonstrated by the countercultural class photo on the sleeve of The Beatles' 1967 record 'Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band', and the establishment of the Notting Hill Carnival in 1964 (Notting Hill being the counterculture's West London home territory), reflect the counterculture's self-identification as a diversity of types. The countercultural role-calls offered by Radcliffe and the Provos, more specifically, adopt the language and hierarchical subdivisions of the military: there are 'bomb-throwers' and 'deserters'; there is the division of tasks from the 'students' as the intelligence officers, to the 'saboteurs' as the spies, to the 'wildcat striker' as the frontline artillery, etc. The effect is of ordered disorder. The counterculture, in Radcliffe's imagination, is not a drop-out community but a hostile community, a community at war.

Radcliffe attempted to locate expressions of youthful discontent in England. In the longest article in the first *Heatwave*, titled 'The Seeds of Social Destruction', Radcliffe restates his interest in 'the emergence, one after the other, of groupings of disaffected youth' which 'exist wherever modern, highly bureaucratised consumer societies exist; in the USSR (stilyagi), France (blousons noir), Britain (mods and rockers), in Holland (provos)'<sup>14</sup>. Radcliffe asserts that such groupings 'have little immediately in common but their implicit rejection of the positions allocated to them in society'<sup>15</sup>, then catalogues the defining characteristics of six post-war English youth

<sup>13</sup> 'Provo: What is the Provotariat?' *Heatwave* 1 (July 1966), in *KME*, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Radcliffe, 'The Seeds of Social Destruction', *Heatwave* 1 (July 1966), in *KME*, 27.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

movements: the Teddy-Boys, Ton-Up Kids, Beats, Ban the Bombers, Ravers, Mods and Rockers. Although he alludes to their class backgrounds and maps a basic genealogy of such movements, of primary interest to Radcliffe are the different groups' fashions and idiosyncrasies, such as the Ton-Up Kids' identification with motorbikes, their name taken from their hobby of doing the ton (100mph).

Radcliffe's tone oscillates between mock tabloid and sincere revolutionary, with the result that each of these groups comes to represent roughly the same strain of existential angst. The Teddy Boys, for example,

were socially unacceptable precisely because [...] they were unable to accept the living death to which they had been so casually consigned or the non-sequiturs of a society which demanded of its citizens an uncomprehending acceptance of dumb non-violence towards internal authority and ferocity towards officially-designated external enemies.<sup>16</sup>

Radcliffe obscures the origin of these damning verdicts on society—are they his views or is he focalising the Ton-Up Kids?—so that the youth revolt's angst and society's oppressive nature are accepted as commonplace. Unbeknown to Radcliffe at this moment, the SI had maintained a longstanding interest in youth revolt and juvenile delinquency. However, whereas Radcliffe focuses on specific manifestations of youth revolt in all their identitarian minutiae, the SI's treatment of youth revolt was more figurative. For example, Vaneigem's 'Banalités de Base'—by 1966, one of the few texts from *Internationale Situationniste* that had been circulated in England, thanks to Gray's translation—speculates on youth's role as the proletariat of spectacular society, subjects and objects of its eventual overthrow. Vaneigem's magnum opus, *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations* was published the following year as an address to 'the young generations' that advised them on their structural role in anticapitalist struggle.<sup>17</sup>

Vaneigem's writing, concerned with passion, subjectivity, and insurrection, is typically distinguished from Debord's colder Hegelian logic when mapping the SI's internal dynamics, though Vaneigem's prose style seems to have been preferred by the English Situationists, who certainly translated more of his texts than Debord's. Nonetheless, Debord offers the most succinct account of the SI's collective attitude

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>17</sup> The title's address to 'the young generations' is lost in its English title, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*.

towards the anti-spectacular potential of youth revolt. Thesis 115 of *Society of the Spectacle* is worth quoting in full:

New signs of negation are proliferating in the most economically advanced countries. Although these signs are misunderstood and falsified by the spectacle, they are sufficient proof that a new period has begun. We have already seen the failure of the first proletarian assault against capitalism; now we are witnessing the failure of capitalist abundance. On one hand, anti-union struggles of Western workers are being repressed first of all by the unions; on the other, rebellious youth are raising new protests, protests which are still vague and confused but which clearly imply a rejection of art, of everyday life, and of the old specialized politics. These are two sides of a new spontaneous struggle that is at first taking on a criminal appearance. They foreshadow a second proletarian assault against class society. As the lost children of this as yet immobile army reappear on this battleground — a battleground which has changed and yet remains the same — they are following a new “General Ludd” who, this time, urges them to attack the machinery of permitted consumption.<sup>18</sup>

Debord recognises in youth revolt a dialectic of negation and affirmation: the youth revolt will find its true identity through its rejection of the old forms of life, art, and politics. The disenfranchisement of orthodox Marxist and traditional industrial conceptions of class struggle (the first proletarian assault against capitalism) give weight to the type of protest emerging from the youth revolt (the ‘second proletarian assault’), which Debord values for having freed its objectives from ‘the old specialized politics’, and for its spontaneity, autonomy, and disregard for tradition. The youth revolt is understood to replace and abolish the traditionally-conceived proletariat, which has been recuperated by capitalism’s internal dynamics. (Debord’s mention of ‘a new “General Ludd”’, I shall later demonstrate, anticipates the English Situationists’ efforts to recognise resonances between historical and contemporary dissidents.)

In *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord is interested only in youth revolt’s position in the totality of social relations. He cares little for the specificities of individual examples of youth revolt. Radcliffe’s ‘Seeds of Social Destruction’, on the other hand, revels in youth-cultural modes of identification, and it enumerates at length the Teddy Boys’ choice in clothes, the Ravers’ choice in jazz, and the Mods and Rockers’ party programmes. The difference between Radcliffe and Debord’s attentions, in this respect, recalls the observation typically made in popular histories that France, the land of

---

<sup>18</sup> SoS, thesis 115.

revolutions, has never had a rock'n'roll revolution as was experienced in Britain and the United States in the 1960s. Conversely, Britain has yet to experience a mass revolutionary movement at the order of those experienced in France. Radcliffe would much later reflect that, 'By a nice irony Debord simply wasn't hip enough to colonise the Anglo-American left on his own terms.'<sup>19</sup>

Radcliffe's mode of investigation into youth revolt, however, unwittingly reproduces conditions described by Debord in *Society of the Spectacle*, whereby representations have replaced direct social relations. Debord writes that in spectacular society, 'the individual's gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him'<sup>20</sup>. Radcliffe's framework for understanding youth revolt is drawn directly from its spectacular representations. He treats the Ton-Up Kids, the most Americanised of the movements, as something straight out of a Hollywood film:

[These Coffee Bar] Cowboys are not interested in converting anyone to their way of life; they vary so much anyway that the only real points of contact between them lie in their leather clothes, their bikes and the attitudes forced on them by society's reaction to their enthusiasms.<sup>21</sup>

Is Radcliffe describing suburban English youth, or any number of Hollywood's rebels without causes? The Ton-Up Kids were certainly informed by the arrival of American commodities after the Second World War, yet Radcliffe fails to recognise that the terms of his engagement with them derive from a similar spectacle.

Radcliffe's untroubled adoption of the mythology of the coffee bar cowboys contrasts, for example, with Richard Hoggart's observations of a similar demographic in his study of English 'juke box boys' in *The Uses of Literacy* (1957). Hoggart's study, which gauges the changes brought about by post-war mass culture, became a foundational text for the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies which Hoggart founded in 1964. Of the juke box boys, Hoggart writes,

Compared even with the pub around the corner, this is all a peculiarly thin and pallid form of dissipation, a sort of spiritual dry-rot amid the odour of boiled milk. Many of the customers—their clothes, their hair-styles, their facial

---

<sup>19</sup> Radcliffe, 'Two Fiery Flying Rolls', 375.

<sup>20</sup> SoS, thesis 30.

<sup>21</sup> Radcliffe, 'The Seeds of Social Destruction', 28.

expressions all indicate—are living to a large extent in a myth-world compounded of a few simple elements which they take to be those of American life.<sup>22</sup>

Hoggart's languid and cynical tone scarcely conceals his nostalgia for what he presumably remembers as a more authentic—or, more authentically English—age before the superficiality of American mass culture began encroaching on good, honest Englishness. Hoggart refuses to engage with the Hollywood 'myth-world'; Radcliffe, on the other hand, reads the commodified signifiers of countercultural identity without reflecting on them as such, and thus mistakes the image of rebellion for rebellion itself. Both accounts fall victim to sentimentality and myth, Hoggart in his myopic valorisation of English working-class culture and Radcliffe in his adoption of the language of a B-movie's advertising pitch. Hoggart and Radcliffe repeat the failure of Mass-Observation in its attempt to produce an 'anthropology of ourselves' to comprehend and reflect on its own subject position. Nonetheless, Radcliffe's implicit observation that youth movements are constituted by the spectacle lays the foundation for what would become the English Situationist perspective that delinquents are both product and agent of negation of consumer culture, a homology of Marx's investment in the urban proletariat as product and (eventual) negation of capitalism.

In his comprehensive account of the milieus from which emerged British punk rock, the cultural historian Jon Savage writes, 'In "The Seeds of Social Destruction", Charles Radcliffe laid the foundations for the next 20 years of sub-cultural theory.'<sup>23</sup> Radcliffe's text certainly shares with Hoggart's Birmingham School of cultural studies an interest in the identities and commodities of mass culture, which were largely dismissed by the SI and the Frankfurt School of critical theory. Radcliffe, however, was later to renounce his article as 'pop-sociology' and speculate that a closer affiliation with the SI may have led to greater theoretical coherence on his part.<sup>24</sup> If Radcliffe really did lay the foundations for the following two decades of English 'sub-cultural theory', what might that body of work have lost due to Radcliffe's obliviousness, at that time, to developments in Situationist theory?

---

<sup>22</sup> Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Penguin 1960), 204.

<sup>23</sup> Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock* (London: Faber and Faber 1991), 32.

<sup>24</sup> Radcliffe, 'Two Fiery Flying Rolls', 360.



## New Leftisms

A crucial difference between British cultural studies and Situationist theory relates to their respective critiques of the mechanisms of social control. Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), for example, provides another reading of youth subculture, this time in relation to the concept of hegemony. For Hebdige, as for British cultural studies more generally, the mechanism of social control against which cultural revolt positions itself is that of hegemony, as the concept was theorised by Gramsci. Hebdige refuses the notion that hegemony is ever absolutely consolidated; it is always to be won. Hebdige uses Valentin Volosinov's claim that signification is inherently ideological, and that class struggle occurs even at the level of the sign, to argue that subcultures struggle through style<sup>25</sup>: 'the challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style'<sup>26</sup>. If class is something performed and signified, then the radical rearrangement of cultural signs performed by a youth subculture like punk is thus a form of class struggle.

This logic, however, is refuted by the Situationists, for whom the dominant mechanism of social control is not hegemony but recuperation. Unlike hegemony, recuperation does not construct a battlefield of competing sign systems but instead absorbs all signs and all cultural phenomena into one order: the spectacle. In a commodity economy, argued the SI, recuperation is an unavoidable and uncombatale process which nullifies all rebellion that operates solely on the level of culture or of the sign—hence the SI's efforts to distance itself from the artistic milieu from which it emerged. Debord and Vaneigem did not value youth subcultures for their style, as did Hebdige and even Radcliffe, but instead for their position in a socio-economic order: their structural freedom, their lack of investment in the economy, and their Dada-like nihilism regarding the maintenance of that order.

As I mentioned previously, when he wrote 'Seeds of Social Destruction', Radcliffe was becoming aware of the SI but was not particularly versed in Situationist theory. In fact, Radcliffe would never really consider himself a Situationist and would later reflect that, 'As a Sit, French or English, I'd always been out on my own un-

---

<sup>25</sup> See Valentin Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik (New York: Seminar 1973).

<sup>26</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1979), 28.

theoretical limb.’<sup>27</sup> If Radcliffe’s early readings of the youth revolt had been more vigorously Situationist—which is to say, more anxious of recuperation, more conscious of the role of the commodity and even of his own susceptibility to the commodity’s fetish character, and more insistent on the totality of social relations—British (sub-)cultural studies may have taken a very different direction.

I do not mean to suggest that Radcliffe’s attention to the cultural manifestations of youth revolt was doomed to being a recuperative or already-spectacular project. His investment in youth revolt is clearly political and tactical, rather than diagnostic or superficial. Bill Brown, writing thirty years later for the online post-situationist zine *Not Bored*, makes an excellent defence of Radcliffe’s attention to cultural struggle at the expense of political or workplace struggle.<sup>28</sup> Brown writes that,

The reasons for the inclusion of these articles into *Heatwave* are clear: pop culture, consumerism and subcultural ‘style’ are phenomena that modern workers have directly experienced, have questioned deeply, and have understood at a profound level. It isn’t at all relevant, important or even interesting that classical Marxism and its contemporary adherents disapprove of these phenomena as distracting, degenerate or ‘superficial’. What is truly relevant, important and interesting is the question, Toward what end will modern workers put their understanding of these phenomena?<sup>29</sup>

Brown recognises the quotidian emphasis of Radcliffe’s project, its immersion in the mass cultural forms that it reappraises, and its insistence that class consciousness will come about through the very stuff of mass culture. Brown recognises the immanence of Radcliffe’s project. In addition to Brown’s question, I ask, toward what end will English Situationists put their understanding of phenomena such as youth revolt?

Although Radcliffe was unaffiliated to any political group at this time, his efforts to relocate revolutionary agency correspond with a broader questioning of orthodox Marxism that occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The British New Left critiqued Stalinism, and British cultural studies took up the challenge of attempting to locate revolutionary agency in a political landscape where the

<sup>27</sup> Radcliffe, ‘Two Fiery Flying Rolls’, 371.

<sup>28</sup> The introduction to ‘The First Daffodils in the Pissaire’, in *Heatwave* 2 (October 1966) reflects, ‘We have omitted resistance on the industrial front, not because we are unaware of its importance but because it’s already covered elsewhere: “Solidarity”, etc.’ KME, 46.

<sup>29</sup> Bill Brown, ‘Heatwave, Thirty Years Later’ (1996), available at <http://www.notbored.org/heatwave.html> [accessed 10/05/2012].

proletariat had been dispersed, suppressed, or seemed to act against its own interests.<sup>30</sup> To draw out the political value of Radcliffe's attention to youth revolt, I want to locate his work in these debates, and specifically argue that his attentions prefigure Rancière's project of re-evaluating the political. I hope that by drawing these comparisons I am indicating the importance to English Situationist theory of traditions Anglo-and-Francophonic of which the SI were unwaveringly dismissive. At the very least, like Radcliffe, the New Left (in its British and French guises) rapidly engaged with the post-'68 paradigm of mass mobilisation, the exigencies thereof, and disenchantment with traditional forms of solidarity—all of which marked changes in political thinking that contributed to the SI's dissolution in 1972. The efforts of Radcliffe and later English Situationists to relocate revolutionary agency from an organised proletariat to more disparate forms such as youth revolt reflect the movement away from vanguardist organisations and towards what I have described as the dissolution of the avant-garde.

Rancière is particularly interesting to consider in relation to the SI because he too is concerned with the relationship between aesthetics and politics, but he dismisses the SI as representative of 'the transformations of avant-garde thinking into nostalgia'<sup>31</sup>. Rancière sabotages the terms 'political' and 'aesthetic' in ways not attempted by the SI. In *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (1999), Rancière contends that politics begins from 'a count of community "parts," which is always a false count'<sup>32</sup>. This arrangement of community parts is an example of Rancière's concept of a 'distribution of the sensible', an arrangement of parts which simultaneously makes those parts known and recognised. But such a count is always a false count and such a distribution is always exclusionary: there are always parts left uncounted. Those who are excluded from the distribution of common lots and communal shares—'the poor of ancient times, the third estate, the modern proletariat'<sup>33</sup>—become *parts with no part*. Politics happens when a part with no part insists that it should be included into a new distribution of the sensible, which it does by making itself seen and heard. When the

---

<sup>30</sup>For an account of the geopolitical events (the Hungarian revolution and the Suez Crisis of 1956) and the British socio-political forms (including student radicalism) from which the British New Left emerged, see Stuart Hall, 'Life and Times of the First New Left', *New Left Review* 61 (January-February 2010): 177-196.

<sup>31</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1999), 6.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

part with no part demands to be recognised as a political subject, the existing distribution of the sensible is exposed as fallacious and exclusionary.

Rancière explains,

Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise.<sup>34</sup>

For Rancière, politics only happens 'when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part'<sup>35</sup>, when the apportioning of common lots and the distribution of the sensible is challenged, and the existence of an uncounted part with no part is asserted. Rancière therefore offers the part with no part as the unique repository of emancipatory politics, in place of Marx's proletariat.

Is Rancière's project, in this respect, not an echo of Radcliffe's efforts before the '68 moment to identify a new revolutionary subject or, more precisely, a new revolutionary subjectivity? Radcliffe regarded the youth revolt and its juvenile delinquents as political subjects uncounted by and unaccountable to the dominant power, and he made efforts to interpret and make intelligible their unarticulated political rage. Radcliffe recognised that the subjectivity embodied by the youth revolt was still in its political infancy, still pre-political and unself-conscious, yet he insists,

What is important about the youth revolt at this stage is not what it is but that it is; that in some ways and however hesitantly, however unsurely, youth recognises its exploiters and is, if only temporarily, prepared to pay them off in a currency they can understand.<sup>36</sup>

The youth revolt would remain central to both the aesthetic and the political formations of English Situationist practice, but it is worth noting that Radcliffe has not yet identified himself with the youth revolt as would later English Situationists.

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>36</sup> Radcliffe, 'The Seeds of Social Destruction', 31. My italics.

Instead, Radcliffe simply advises that, ‘the revolutionary of all people must be able to sympathise with and encourage such revolt’<sup>37</sup>.

### Negative Identity

There is one more dimension of Radcliffe’s project that I need to clarify. Across the one *English Rebel Worker* and the two *Heatwaves*, Radcliffe and his friends conflate many disparate instances of youth revolt and juvenile delinquency, and assume therein the coherence of interest necessary to make pronouncements about revolutionary potential. Mods and rockers, for example, are placed alongside each other—literally, in the aforementioned lists—despite their infamous rivalry. I have already acknowledged Radcliffe’s admission that the manifestations of youth revolt ‘have little immediately in common but their implicit rejection of the positions allocated to them in society’ (which now seems to corroborate the notion that youth revolt is the refusal of remaining as a part with no part); what they share is a negative identity. Radcliffe’s youth revolt has a capacity for pure and spontaneous negation: ‘it is this disquiet-factor that all rebel youth has in common, that threatens the carefully moulded suburban fantasies whose function is a contraceptive against reality, sexual, social and cultural’<sup>38</sup>. In this sense of negative identity as the potential to expose the disunity of bourgeois society, Radcliffe prefigures another aspect of post-’68 political philosophy as exemplified by Chantal Mouffe and, particularly, Ernesto Laclau.

When Radcliffe and subsequent English Situationists speak of youth revolt, I propose, they use the term as an empty signifier. Laclau explains that an empty signifier is that which signifies a lack or an absence in spite of its own significance. What, after all, is signified by ‘youth revolt’? The term connotes much but is indexically linked to no specific signified. Laclau explains that empty signifiers exist through an awareness of their own structural impossibility: they signify an absence, but they signify nonetheless. The signification of an absence requires the acknowledgement of a limit between that absence and something which is not absent, but if a limit is signified then it is therefore within the sign regime and no longer a limit. Empty signifiers thus operate on a contradictory logic of positive and negative identity. The relevance of this to politics, Laclau says, can be demonstrated through Rosa Luxemburg’s notion of the working-class as constituted through many disparate mobilisations and struggles which are both positive in their particularity (their issuing

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

of demands) but negative in what brings them together (their opposition to a repressive regime):

Luxemburg's argument is that a revolutionary mass identity is established through the overdetermination, over a whole historical period, of a plurality of separate struggles. These traditions fused, at the revolutionary moment, in a ruptural point.<sup>39</sup>

A collective identity of this type functions as an empty signifier because it makes a claim that simultaneously asserts and abolishes the particularity of its constituent elements. The positive community that the revolutionary mass identity promises to inaugurate is based on its united resistance to the anti-community which currently exists. This promised community therefore requires an empty signifier. Radcliffe's use of 'youth revolt' performs the same task: youth revolt as the anti-community; the heterogeneous collection of anti-identities predicated on their negativity (deserters, drop-outs, delinquents), whose agency lies in their disruption of the ossified landscape of bourgeois society.

### **The English Section of the Situationist International**

In October 1966, soon after the second *Heatwave*, Radcliffe, Gray, and Radcliffe's partner Diana Shelley set off to Holland to observe first-hand the Provos events, before continuing to Brussels to meet Vaneigem, and then to Paris to meet Debord. They stayed at Debord's flat where, Radcliffe recalls, Debord would give audiences to attendant Situationists.<sup>40</sup> Andrew Hussey, in his biography of Debord, reports that Debord was keen to extend the SI's 'theatre of operations into the English-speaking world' and particularly into America, home of the Watts uprising.<sup>41</sup> Yet Debord did not speak fluent English and had expelled the SI's earliest British members, Rumney and Trocchi. After many hours spent drinking, smoking, and walking, and with Debord having approved of *Heatwave* and of Gray's translation of the pamphlet 'The Totality for Kids', Radcliffe and Gray were admitted into the SI. Another Englishman, Donald Nicholson-Smith was already a member and living in Paris; soon after, Timothy (T.J.) Clark also became an official Situationist. Although Radcliffe, Gray, Nicholson-Smith, and Clark are now recognised as having constituted the English

---

<sup>39</sup> Ernesto Laclau, 'Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?' in *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso 1996), 41.

<sup>40</sup> Radcliffe, 'Two Fiery Flying Rolls', 362-363.

<sup>41</sup> Hussey, *Game of War*, 210.

Section of the Situationist International, Radcliffe, Nicholson-Smith, and Hussey all agree that there was not at the time an official 'English Section' as such, and they all simply belonged to the Parisian group.<sup>42</sup>

That the English Section—the central object and the fulcrum of this study—might never have existed should come as no surprise. Absences have already figured prominently in the tradition that I am documenting, from the spectral presence of the English Surrealist group to the dissolution of the authorial self in Trocchi's projects. One explanation of this tendency towards absence would be to repeat the accusation that there remains some quintessentially English inability to deal with the modes of thought and of organisation proposed by Breton and the Surrealists and Debord and the Situationists. It is certainly true that there remains a tension between Anglophonic and Francophonic modernisms which is replicated in the stunted developments of English Surrealism and Situationism, but I am more interested in accounting for this tendency towards absence as a response to the enduring problem of recuperation. Sadie Plant, in her account of the SI's influence on postmodern Continental philosophy, *The Most Radical Gesture*, addresses the SI's eventual dissolution in terms of a tactics of absence, refusal, and non-participation that also necessitated the end of Dada, the disbanding of Provos, and even the dissolution of Italian autonomism. Plant writes, 'Absences—of meaning, participation, reality and identity—can constitute useful tactics in the struggle to unmask the social and economic relations of contemporary capitalist society.'<sup>43</sup> It is in this tactical sense, and bearing in mind the motif from my first chapter of *the group that is not a group*, that I shall, gradually, conceptualise the English Situationist tendency towards absence.

---

<sup>42</sup> Hussey, *Game of War*, 386; Radcliffe, 'Two Fiery Flying Rolls', 364. Perhaps the 'English Section' was one of the many flourishes that Gray added in his early (1974) retrospective of the SI, in which he included a list of SI members and the sections to which they belonged. Gray (ed.), *Leaving the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, 132–133.

<sup>43</sup> Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture*, 181.

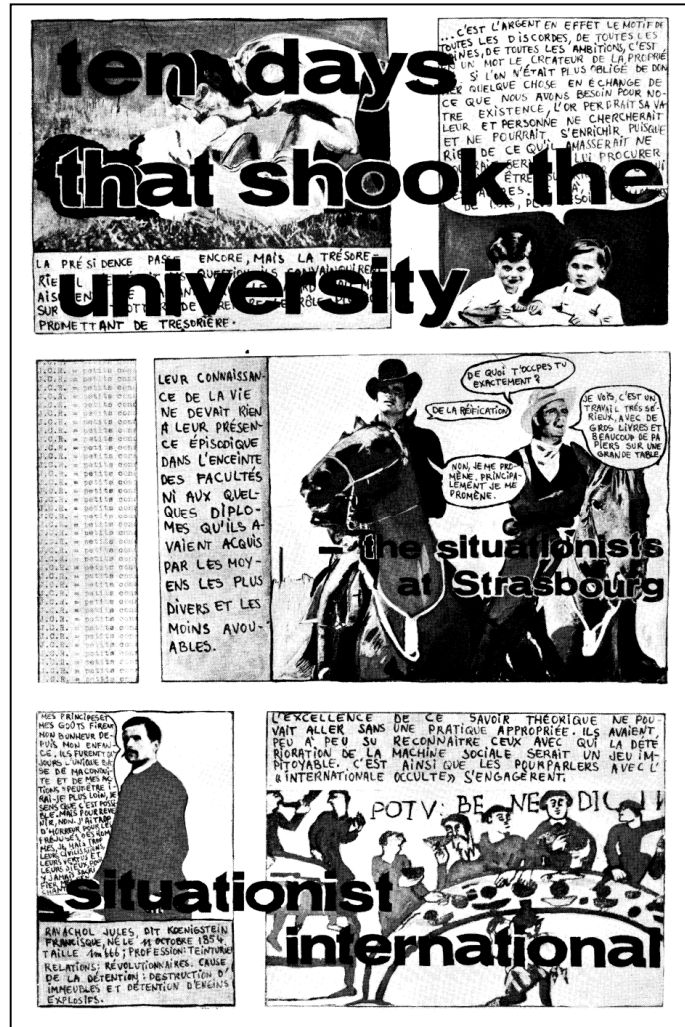


Fig. 8: Cover of Ten Days That Shook the University pamphlet<sup>44</sup>

For the moment, however, whether the English Section existed as an official section of the SI or whether 'English Section' is simply a label added posthumously is less important than the fact that Radcliffe, Gray, Nicholson-Smith, and Clark collectively issued two texts from which can be traced the contours of a specifically English Situationist practice. The first of these texts was a postscript subtitled, 'If you want to make a social revolution, do it for fun', added to a translation of the infamous 1966 pamphlet, 'De la misère en milieu étudiant' (retitled 'Ten Days that Shook the University', Fig. 8), that had sparked scandal at Strasbourg University.<sup>45</sup> In 1967, the English Section (I shall stick with this nomenclature, official or otherwise) issued an original pamphlet, 'The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution'. This text was produced in anticipation of an English Situationist journal, but the

<sup>44</sup> The détourned cartoon background was taken from André Bertrand's *Le Retour de la colonne durutti* (1967).

<sup>45</sup> For the SI's account, see René Viénet, *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May '68* (New York: Autonomedia 1992).



group's rapid exclusion from the SI meant that although the text circulated unofficially in underground milieus, it remained unpublished until 1994.<sup>46</sup>

'Ten Days that Shook the University', originally written by 'members of the Internationale Situationniste and students of Strasbourg', denounces student life as an initiation into the passivity of spectacular society.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, the text maintains that youth revolt, however recuperated it might be in the present, contains the revolutionary thrust of a future mass movement. The violence of young delinquents, specifically of the *blousons noirs*, is read as a rejection of everyday life that has been made boring under the spectacle, though the young delinquents remain unable to conceive that 'this society can be superseded'<sup>48</sup>. The text looks also to the Provos, Berkeley student protestors, America's Resurgence Youth Movement, Japan's Zengakuren, and the British Committee of 100. All of these movements are discounted as having failed to accompany their practice with a theory of total revolution. The pamphlet's conclusion is that the disparate revolutionary movements must culminate in the form of autogestion and the workers' council. The pamphlet's tone becomes increasingly messianic when heralding the latter:

The task of the Workers' Councils will not be the autogestion of the world which exists, but its continual qualitative transformation. The commodity and its laws (that vast detour in the history of man's production of himself) will be superseded by a new social form [...] The democracy of Workers' Councils is the resolution of all previous contradictions. It makes 'everything which exists apart from individuals impossible'.<sup>49</sup>

Council communism was, by 1967, the SI's stated political position, drawn mostly from Cornelius Castoriadis's *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group (of which Debord was a

---

<sup>46</sup> It was eventually published in pamphlet form as *The English Section of the Situationist International, The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution* (London: Chronos Publications 1994), though I shall henceforth refer to Tom Vague's publication of the English Section's text in *King Mob Echo: English Section of the Situationist International*.

<sup>47</sup> 'Ten Days that Shook the University' has since been republished as a pamphlet with the English Situationists' translation but with the original French title rather than the English Situationists' alternative. See *Members of the Situationist International and Students of Strasbourg, On the Poverty of Student Life: considered in its economic, political, psychological, sexual and particularly intellectual aspects, and a modest proposal for its remedy* (London: Active Distribution, Dark Star and Public Reading Rooms 2008).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

sometime member) and Antonie Pannekoek.<sup>50</sup> The fourth chapter, 'The Proletariat as Subject and Representation', of Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* argues that the failures of twentieth century revolutionary movements was the failure of the proletariat to become the subject of history, its agency always co-opted by Party representation and the ensuing development, in Soviet Russia, of a new ruling class of bureaucrats.<sup>51</sup> Workers' councils, for the SI, were the promise of direct social and industrial participation, the refusal of hierarchy, and the refusal of the spectacle. The workers' council, Debord writes, is,

the terrain where the objective preconditions of historical consciousness are brought together—the terrain where *active* direct communication is realized, marking the end of specialization, hierarchy and separation, and the transformation of existing conditions into "conditions of unity".<sup>52</sup>

The workers' council itself, however, remains in the SI's rhetoric a shibboleth of authenticity. The SI never elaborated precisely what it understood by the term, or how a workers' council would actually function in practice—it, too, is characterised by an absence, by its anti-identity. The concept implies discipline, procedure, and compromise, all of which are undermined by the SI's simultaneous valorisation of the spontaneity and individualism of youth revolt. The SI uses the workers' council in tandem with equally vague terminology such as the 'real experience' and 'life directly lived' which have been lost in the society of the spectacle: all empty signifiers which, following Laclau, matter politically; but which also reveal the SI's sublimated conception of authenticity. I suggest—though I will develop this argument later—that the SI's use of these empty signifiers, especially when they purportedly indicate a pragmatic political programme, demonstrates the essential *literariness* of much of the Situationist critique. The empty signifier serves in that critique as a gesture toward forms of anti-spectacular truth that does not circumscribe or prescribe those forms, which would be to orchestrate their recuperation.

---

<sup>50</sup> *Socialisme ou Barbarie* had an English sister organisation, Solidarity, which published its own and translations of Castoriadis' texts. Solidarity was one of the few English organisations to be praised by the SI. (See 'Instructions for an Insurrection' [1961], in SIA, 84–86.) Solidarity also leant Radcliffe the equipment to print *Heatwave*, in which he commended Solidarity for its actions on the industrial front. The English Section, however, was less willing to court such alliances, and in 'The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution', it accuses Solidarity of having failed to address the revolution of everyday life.

<sup>51</sup> SoS, theses 73–124.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, thesis 116.

The English Section, in its postscript to the Strasbourg pamphlet, neither adopts nor challenges the councilist conclusions of the original text. The discourse of workers' councils was, perhaps, too much associated with the British ultra-left group Solidarity—the English Section certainly preferred political novelty to political allegiance. The English Section instead considers what of the text's critique of recuperated student revolt remains relevant to the 'very different'<sup>53</sup> situation in England. The French text commends the British Spies for Peace, a radical offshoot of the Committee of 100 that, in spring 1963, caused media outrage by publishing secret government plans which anticipated nuclear war. The English Section argues that the Strasbourg pamphlet, published using Student Union funds, had created an equivalent situation, in which 'society was forced to finance, publicise and broadcast a revolutionary critique of itself, and furthermore to confirm this critique through its reactions to it'<sup>54</sup>. Situationist thought, the English Section argues, had reached its critical moment in France, yet France's relative lack of economic development means that Situationist thought had also developed beyond its French context. The English Section reflects that,

Strasbourg marks the beginning of a new period of situationist activity. The social position of situationist thought has been determined up to now by the following contradiction: the most highly developed critique of modern life has been made in one of the least highly developed modern countries—in a country which has not yet reached the point where the complete disintegration of all values becomes patently obvious and engenders the corresponding forces of radical rejection. In the French context, situationist theory has anticipated the social forces by which it will be realised.<sup>55</sup>

England, on the other hand, is 'the temporary capital of the spectacular world'<sup>56</sup>, but only so long as it can conceal the (lack of) truth beneath its spectacular appearances. The English Section's efforts to replicate the SI's critique frequently lapses back to the type of existential angst of Radcliffe's early writings: the English Section write that 'every thing is phoney'; 'Fashion accelerates because revolution is treating on its tail'; 'Fake culture, fake politics.'<sup>57</sup> It reserves its utmost spite, though, for the British labour

---

<sup>53</sup> From the English Situationists' foreword to *Ten Days that Shook the University*, excluded from the republished *On the Poverty of Student Life* pamphlet.

<sup>54</sup> 'Postscript: if you want to make a social revolution, do it for fun', *On the Poverty of Student Life*, 21.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

movement, with its 'bone-hard hierarchies and [...] school-teacher notions of technology and social justice'<sup>58</sup>. The 'official Left', according to the English Section, had only maintained 'the spectacular antagonisms (Tory/Labour, East/ West, High Culture/Low Culture)', which had served to obfuscate the genuinely militant proletariat and the new spheres of social struggle in 'everyday life, in the supermarket and the beatclub as well as on the shopfloor'<sup>59</sup>. The English Section's self-appointed task, therefore, was to apply the Situationist critique to England, to expose the false binaries which sequester revolutionary energies, and to provide 'a quasi-terroristic denunciation of the official world [which] is the only possible planned action on the part of a revolutionary group'<sup>60</sup>. The 'Postscript' concludes, 'The enemy is entrism, cultural or political. Art and the Labour Movement are dead! Long live the Situationist International!'<sup>61</sup>

### **The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution**

Despite the forthrightness of the postscript's rhetoric, the English Section's 'The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution' is an altogether more ambitious text in the development of a specifically English Situationist critique. The text reflects a widening division between the English Section's interpretation of Situationist theory and what was happening on the Continent. Indeed, as Bill Brown again usefully indicates, the only quotation from the SI that the English Section uses in this text is from the first issue of *Internationale Situationniste*, published in 1958. The quotation begins with the SI stating its most fundamental objectives: 'The goal of the Situationists is immediate participation in a varied and passionate life, through moments which are both transient and consciously controlled'; to which the SI adds its definition of cultural activity as 'a method of experimental construction of everyday life' in response to 'the problem [which] is how to produce ourselves, and not the things which enslave us'<sup>62</sup>. The English Section's text was written in 1967, so it was looking back to a period in which the SI had been much more concerned with the role of art and hopeful about 'cultural activity' than was the SI of 1967.<sup>63</sup> The time-lag, Brown suggests, was not due to the unavailability of translations of Situationist

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>62</sup> English Section of the Situationist International, 'The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution', in *KME*, 63.

<sup>63</sup> See section, 'The Situationist Basis of sigma', above.

texts, or to ‘the relative “immaturity” of the English Situationists’ theoretical development’; instead, the English Section produced ‘an intentional distancing’ between itself and the SI as it then existed, ‘because they weren’t ever really committed to being members of any type of official organization’<sup>64</sup>.

The English Section was not engaged in a project of presenting the SI to an English audience that had few points of access to that Francophone tradition. The English Section sought to represent the SI not as its ambassador but as its mentor; to apply to an Anglophonic context a Situationist *mode of thought* rather than specific pronouncements. ‘The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution’ moves through four stages. It begins with an introduction to the central tenets of Situationist theory as it was at its inception roughly a decade previously—themes of play and of rewriting urban space. ‘Life’, the English Section writes, ‘is revealed as a war between the commodity and the ludic’<sup>65</sup>. The proceeding three stages reiterate themes common to each of the texts that Radcliffe and Gray had previously issued: firstly, a denunciation of the contemporary left, particularly of the British New Left for having failed to recognise that a critique of capitalism must incorporate a willingness to invent new ways of living; secondly, a consideration of what must be at stake for a new revolutionary movement, namely a focus on the everyday; and, thirdly, a gesture towards youth revolt as symbol of this new project.

The English Section conflates the historical avant-garde’s project with Radcliffe’s proposal that the youth revolt represents a new, post-proletariat, political subjectivity. It writes,

The juvenile delinquents—not the pop artists—are the true inheritors of Dada. Instinctively grasping their exclusion from the whole of social life, they have denounced its products, ridiculed, degraded and destroyed them [...] Delinquent violence is a spontaneous overthrow of the abstract and contemplative role imposed on everyone, but the delinquents’ inability to grasp any possibility of really changing things once and for all forces them, like the Dadaists, to remain purely nihilistic.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Bill Brown, ‘Comments on an article by the English Situationists’, available at <http://www.notbored.org/english-comments.html> [accessed 10/05/2012]

<sup>65</sup> English Section, ‘The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution’, 68.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Many of the ideas contained in ‘The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution’, aside from the explicit connection between Dada and juvenile delinquency, would have been familiar to the *Internationale Situationniste*’s readership, though this was very small in England. However, the section of the text titled, ‘The Real Avant-Garde: The Game-Revolt of Delinquency, Petty Crime and the New Lumpen’ marks the English Section’s most unique contribution to the nascent English Situationist discourse, by way of its identification of the apparently growing masses of juvenile delinquents as ‘the new lumpen’<sup>67</sup>. The English Section’s terminology reflects back on other lines of inquiry which I have previously mentioned: ‘new’, as the English Section’s disidentification from the existing scene of the political in favour of vocalising a part with no part; ‘lumpen’, as the English Section’s challenge to orthodox Marxism and its conception of the proletariat, as well as the English Section’s increasing glorification of the anti-social. About ‘the new lumpen’, the English Section writes,

The formation of the new lumpen prefigures several features of an all-encompassing subversion. On the one hand, the lumpen is the sphere of complete social breakdown [,] of apathy, negativism and nihilism—but, at the same time, in so far as it defines itself by its refusal to work and its attempts to use its clandestine leisure in the invention of new types of free activity, it is fumbling, however clumsily, with the quick of the revolutionary supersession now possible.<sup>68</sup>

It is worth sketching a quick history of the role of the lumpenproletariat in Marxist discourse prior to the SI, in order to understand what is at stake when the English Section adopts such loaded terminology. Marx and Engels introduced the term in *The German Ideology* (1845), though Marx elaborated its historical role in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). For Marx, the lumpenproletariat represented the refuse of class society, beneath the labouring classes. The lumpenproletariat’s absolute dispossession from social life meant that this sub-stratum could never achieve class consciousness. In fact, the lumpenproletariat was susceptible to reactionary ideology and could be mobilised against the interests of the true revolutionary agent, the proletariat. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx recounts Louis Bonaparte’s efforts to corral his own mass movement of the lumpenproletariat. Though Marx certainly does not celebrate this sub-class, his characterisation of the lumpenproletariat clearly prefigures

---

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

the lists that Provos and *Heatwave* offered of the social types that constitute the youth revolt. Marx writes,

On the pretext of founding a benevolent society, the lumpenproletariat of Paris had been organized into secret sections, each section led by Bonapartist agents, with a Bonapartist general at the head of the whole. Alongside decayed *roués* with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin, alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaux*, brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars—in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French call *la bohème*<sup>69</sup>.

Marx's attitude towards the lumpenproletariat became orthodoxy, and Trotsky would maintain a similar distrust. Anarchists had long had seen potential in the lumpenproletariat, as evidenced by Lucy Parson's 'To Tramps' address (1884), but the next major development in Marxist discourse came by way of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). For Fanon, in relation to colonisation, the lumpenproletariat was the rural poor who constituted a revolutionary class in their resistance to the regime of the colonisers. Yet he recognises that the interests of the rural poor are not the same as those of the urban proletariat; the former tend towards conservatism, nationalism, and traditionalism. Nonetheless, in their spontaneity, autonomy, and resistance, the rural poor remain revolutionary, particularly because 'they won't become reformed characters to please colonial society'<sup>70</sup>. As Marx's urban proletariat are the vessel of communism, Fanon's lumpenproletariat are the subject-objects of a different teleology, that of the colonised world's decolonisation.

Another version of the lumpenproletariat was offered at a moment roughly contemporary with the SI by Huey P. Newton and the Black Panther Party. Newton developed tangentially from a Maoist perspective to argue that automation would render increasing numbers of the proletariat unemployed and unemployable. As such, their class status would shift downwards. Eventually, this new lumpenproletariat would become a popular majority and its anger at its dispossession would instil it with

---

<sup>69</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in *Selected Works* (London: Lawrence & Wishart 1991), 131–132.

<sup>70</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* trans. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin 1967), 103.

revolutionary energy.<sup>71</sup> The key incompatibility of this theorisation of the lumpen with the SI's perspective is that the latter were, for the most part, optimistic about automation and its potential to free people from the drudgery of work. Vaneigem foresaw a lumpen similarly constituted to Newton's, but Vaneigem imagined instead 'a transitional period during which full automation and the will of the new proletariat leave work solely to the specialists, reducing managers and bureaucrats to the rank of temporary slaves'<sup>72</sup>.

The quotation above—Vaneigem at his most Nietzschean—is taken from the text that Gray had translated, and it is entirely conceivable that its mention of a 'new proletariat' directly informed the English Section's theorisation of a 'new lumpen'. I noted previously that Radcliffe, at the time of *Heatwave*, did not identify himself with the youth revolt; by now, the English Section (which still included Radcliffe) was expressly keen to infiltrate and harness the energies of the new lumpen: 'We must enter it as a power against it and precipitate its crisis'<sup>73</sup>.

As the English Section consolidated its own identity distinct from that of the SI, its project became increasingly literary, by which I mean it utilised more and more tropes typically associated with fictional writing to articulate its political critique. Its treatment of the youth revolt, for example, became less of an empty signification of bourgeois society's immanent Other and more of a textual, heteroglossic, performance of a more visceral type of Otherness. Just as Marx in *Capital* intersperses his language of political economy with more fantastical registers in order, for example, to depict the capitalist as a vampire, which dramatises the dehumanising process of wage-labour, the English Section constructed an image of the lumpenprole through literary allusions and rhetorical devices. The English Section even began to purposefully confuse its self-image with the image of the lumpenprole that it simultaneously constructed; it began to actively identify with the new lumpen, to play-act as this caricature. The English Section, unlike Radcliffe, no longer spoke of or even for the youth revolt, but as the youth revolt, as the new lumpen. I shall label this process 'lumpenproletarianisation'.

The English Section's lumpenproletarianisation became much more apparent once it was (involuntarily) distanced from the SI. Radcliffe reports that after their

---

<sup>71</sup> See Toni Morrison (ed.), *To Die for The People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton* (San Francisco: City Lights Books 2009).

<sup>72</sup> Raoul Vaneigem, 'Basic Banalities (2)' (1963), in *SIA*, 164.

<sup>73</sup> English Section, 'The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution', 69.



expulsion, when some members but not himself formed the group King Mob, the English Situationists

embraced a hooligan ethos (based, it has to be said, on a generally uncritical approach to the nature of “youth cultural” violence and anti-social behaviour) and tried to bring the Situationists’ revolutionary consciousness into the streets and into the hands of street people.<sup>74</sup>

Even prior to King Mob, the English Section performed the lumpenproletarianisation of English Situationist discourse by way of its textual style. The English Section developed an aggressive and hooliganistic language at odds with Radcliffe’s previously earnest and journalistic tone. ‘The Modern Art of Revolution and the Revolution of Modern Art’, for example, issues the threat, ‘The *poésie faite par tous* has known to be somewhat trigger-happy in the past’<sup>75</sup>. The English Section enacts a clash of worlds here: a political intervention made in the language of literature; and the language of nineteenth-century proto-Surrealism (Lautréamont) forced alongside the language of the Western.

Rancière offers another applicable observation, that political intervention is always rooted in the literary:

Politics’ penchant for dialogue has much more to do with literary heterology, with their utterances stolen and tossed back at their authors and its play on the first and third persons, than with the allegedly ideal situation of a dialogue between a first and second person. Political invention operates in acts that are at once argumentative and poetic, shows of strength that open again and again, as often as necessary, worlds in which such acts of community are acts of community.<sup>76</sup>

What is particular about the English Section’s conflation of different discursive registers is where it drew those from: Anglophone low culture with Francophone avant-garde rhetoric. I propose that the English Section’s recourse to expressly literary techniques in what presents itself as a sociological critique of social alienation, is a response to the Situationist demand that it simultaneously articulates for ‘man’s free and experimental creation of his own world and his own creation’<sup>77</sup>. The English Section’s textual performances are the struggle for an element of rhetorical freedom in

<sup>74</sup> Radcliffe, ‘Two Fiery Flying Rolls’, 375.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 59.

<sup>77</sup> English Section, ‘The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution’, 70.

a world which the English Section, taking the SI at its word, saw as nothing more than the spectacular reproduction of alienation.

### **The Negation of Style and the Style of Negation**

Before King Mob took the Situationist revolutionary consciousness into the streets, as Radcliffe claims, the English Section began a lumpenproletarianisation of its discursive style. Vincent Kaufmann makes a similar claim of Debord's writing—that it develops a poetics of revolution based on 'the appropriation of language'<sup>78</sup> from its administration by spectacular power. For Kaufmann, Situationist poetry 'is the revolution in absentia, its shadow; it evokes its absence while repeating its promise'<sup>79</sup>. I wish now to offer my own account of the role of style in Debord's critical method, which stands metonymically for that of the SI, and which English Situationists would adopt and adapt.

Thesis 204 of *Society of the Spectacle* contains Debord's most important articulation of his critical method:

Critical theory must communicate itself in its own language—the language of contradiction, which must be dialectical in both form and content. It must be an all-inclusive critique, and it must be grounded in history. It is not a "zero degree of writing", but its reversal. It is not a negation of style, but the style of negation.<sup>80</sup>

Debord's mention of 'style' indicates three different features which together consolidate his critical method. In the first instance, style indicates the SI's overarching political project. Its 'style of negation' was, of course, the inverse of affirmation. The SI was not concerned with valorising particular and concrete images because in its logic of recuperation any such image, no matter how antagonistic to power, will be appropriated and nullified by power; hence the importance of empty signifiers such as 'life directly lived' to stand in as anti-spectacular forms. To evade the recuperation of her texts and to write in a manner as incommensurable as possible with the spectacle, Debord sees the task of the critical theorist as an antithetical one of portraying the negative images of the false-positives of the spectacle (which is itself the 'affirmation

---

<sup>78</sup> Vincent Kaufmann, *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2006), 175.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>80</sup> SoS, thesis 204.

of appearance' and the 'negation of life'<sup>81</sup>: Debord desires a negation of that negation). The task is not to affirm a particular mode of being but to negate the dominant one, with the Benjaminian faith that a more authentic *something else* will be illuminated in the process.

The second implication of 'style' relates to the aesthetic representation of that political project. Debord calls this aesthetic representation a 'mode of exposition', which 'reveals the negative spirit' of dialectical critique.<sup>82</sup> A mode of exposition, for Debord, must *demonstrate*, and not simply speak of, the thinking behind it: dialectical criticism must '*communicate itself*'; it must be 'dialectical in both form and content'. The practice of *détournement*, Debord asserts, is one such mode of exposition. The SI had previously described *détournement* as the appropriation and rearrangement of existing expressions to change their meanings and to subvert untruths.<sup>83</sup> *Détournement*, as a textual practice, attempts the Situationist negation of spectacular language. Debord describes *détournement* as, variously, 'the opposite of quotation'<sup>84</sup>, 'the flexible language of anti-ideology'<sup>85</sup>, and as the reradicalisation 'of previous critical conclusions that have been petrified into respectable truths'<sup>86</sup>. His description of the style of negation as a 'scandal and abomination to the rules of the dominant language' is itself a *détournement* of Marx's description of *Capital*'s dialectical method as 'a scandal and an abomination to the bourgeoisie'<sup>87</sup>.

Style thus denotes the abstract political project *and* its aesthetic representation. The third implication of Debord's discussion of style focuses even closer on the very language used in critical texts. His final sentence in thesis 204, above, demonstrates a trope that enacts the previous two elements of style: the chiasmus, whose ABBA structure rearranges the elements of its first half in its second, consistent with the SI's description of *détournement* as 'the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble.'<sup>88</sup> Chiasmus is a particularly visual demonstration—we can see, *actually see*, the parts being rearranged—of the process of *détournement* that is the basis of Debord's style of negation. The English Section enthusiastically incorporated chiasma

---

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., thesis 10.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., thesis 206.

<sup>83</sup> See Situationist International, 'Definitions'.

<sup>84</sup> SoS, thesis 208.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>87</sup> Karl Marx, 'Postface to the Second Edition', in *Capital* Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin 1990), 103.

<sup>88</sup> Situationist International, 'Détournement as Negation and Prelude' (1959), in SIA, 67.

into its own style. In its chiasmatically-titled ‘The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution’, the English Section employs the following examples:

What does Utopia mean today? To create the real time and space within which all our desires can be realised and all of our reality desired.<sup>89</sup>

It is not enough for art to seek its realisation in practice, practice must also seek its art<sup>90</sup>

[the Neo-Dadaists’] culture of the absurd reveals only the absurdity of their culture<sup>91</sup>

The nihilism of modern art is merely an introduction to the modern art of nihilism<sup>92</sup>

The Situationist, English and French, use of chiasmus presents a curious paradox. Is it not contradictory that the Situationist critique of spectacular inauthenticity should be articulated by way of a trope that is so visual, so reliant on formal exposition? The truth-claim made by the Situationist chiasmus is made simultaneously with the revelation of its own textual artifice. Similarly, does the chiasmus not serve as a quick-fix impression of a closed totality, which simplifies the relationship between its constitutive elements? Chiasmus is a visual trick, a mirror; it can have a stupefying effect. Richard Lanham writes that, ‘The ABBA form seems to exhaust the possibilities of argument, as when Samuel Johnson destroyed an aspiring author with, “Your manuscript is both good and original, but the part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good.”’<sup>93</sup> Chiasmus does not allow for exigent factors, *only* repetition and reversal. Though Debord implies that dialectical criticism is inherently chiasmatic, the chiasmus is a structure that can only solve its own problem; it is not dynamic but pre-scripted.

These logical objections to chiasmus, I suspect, reveal something of the SI’s investment in the literary. The Situationists valued the chiasmus, I suggest, for its uncanny poetic truthfulness, its aphoristic self-assuredness. Both Debord and the English Section regarded rhetorical freedom as one of the few freedoms as yet uncolonised by the spectacle. As such, to simply occupy and celebrate that territory is a

---

<sup>89</sup> English Section, ‘The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution’, 64.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Richard A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press 1991), 33.

politically antagonistic gesture in itself—perhaps it is even to act in a revolutionary manner in the absence of a revolution, as Kaufmann argues. Debord opines that *détournement* (though we might instead read ‘chiasmus’ or any other figure of his negative-dialectical style) ‘has grounded its cause on nothing but its own truth as present critique.’<sup>94</sup>

Paul de Man’s account of chiasmus as the structuring feature of Rilke’s poetry, in ‘Allegories of Reading’ (1979), attests to another function of the trope. De Man writes that chiasma ‘can only come into being as the result of a void, of a lack that allows for the rotating motion of the polarities’<sup>95</sup>. In chiasmatic formulations, elements are shown in a before-and-after diptych, though the moment of their rearrangement is absent. To borrow Rancière’s terms, Situationist chiasma display a distribution of the sensible and a redistribution of the sensible, but not the moment of re-distribution itself. This absence is one of those tactical absences that Sadie Plant mentioned, above; one that, in relation to Situationist chiasmus, frees the speech act from its context in order to give prominence to the *process* that it represents, over its particular product. Situationist chiasmus is, first and foremost, a tactic to be adopted and replicated, an introduction to an anti-spectacular *mode* of thought. In the Situationist critique, the chiasmus figures a *jouissance* in language that the spectacle has not yet fully recuperated. The chiasmus, as a word game, performs a minor revolutionary act that confirms the enduring pleasure of subversion, play, and iconoclasm.<sup>96</sup>

### Historical Repetition and Reversal

In the structure of my study, chiasmus serves another, wholly different, function: it figures a particular historical relationship. Debord uses a chiasmus to establish the basis of the SI’s project when he writes that, ‘Dadaism sought to abolish art without realising it; Surrealism sought to realise art without abolishing it’<sup>97</sup>. The SI, Debord claims, was to learn from the avant-garde’s mistakes, and supersede art. The English Section later repeats one of Marx’s chiasma from *The Holy Family* (1844) to reflect on the nature of inheritance: “‘If man is formed by circumstances, then these

---

<sup>94</sup> SoS, thesis 208.

<sup>95</sup> Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1979), 49.

<sup>96</sup> Another example of Situationist word-play is the palindromic title of Debord’s film, in *girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (roughly: ‘we move in circles in the night and are consumed by fire’).

<sup>97</sup> SoS, thesis 191.

circumstances must be formed by man.” (Marx.)<sup>98</sup>. In an essay on Marx’s frequent employment of chiasmus in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, John Paul Riquelme proposes that the chiasmus demonstrates the historical process of repetition and reversal about which Marx is writing, so that ‘History [...] is revealed to be a tissue of repetitions that are also reversals, of causes that merge inextricably with their effects rather than being wholly displaced by them’<sup>99</sup>.

Marx’s text, Riquelme notes, begins its discussion of historical repetition by repeating Hegel’s pronouncement that history repeats itself, with Marx’s addendum that this happens, ‘the first time as tragedy, the second as farce’<sup>100</sup>. Debord’s ruminations in *Society of the Spectacle* on the nature of dialectical style, and particularly its negative potential as figured by the chiasmus, pass a different judgement on historical repetition and reversal. Debord writes,

This theoretical consciousness of a movement whose traces must remain visible within it is manifested by the *reversal* of established relationships between concepts and by the *détournement* of all the achievements of earlier critical efforts. Hegel’s practice of reversing the genitive was an expression of historical revolutions, though that expression was confined to the form of thought. The young Marx, inspired by Feuerbach’s systematic reversal of subject and predicate, achieved the most effective use of this *insurrectional* style, which answers “the philosophy of poverty” with “the poverty of philosophy.” *Détournement* reradicalizes previous critical conclusions that have been petrified into respectable truths and thus transformed into lies.<sup>101</sup>

For Debord, historical recurrences, in traditions of dialectical thought at least, are not necessarily farcical repetitions but *détournements* of precursory moments; historical repetitions can stand precursors on their heads to correct their perspective. Debord’s attempt to politicise this process of historical *détournement* is clearly informed by Lautréamont’s famous assertion, ‘Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. It holds tight an author’s phrase, uses his expressions, eliminates a false idea, and replaces it with just the right idea.’<sup>102</sup> Debord argues that to adapt or even chiasmatically reverse a

---

<sup>98</sup> English Section, ‘The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution’, 63.

<sup>99</sup> John Paul Riquelme, ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Karl Marx as Symbolic Action’, *History and Theory* 19:1 (February 1980): 61.

<sup>100</sup> Marx and Engels, ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’, 93.

<sup>101</sup> SoS, thesis 206.

<sup>102</sup> Lautréamont, ‘Poésies’, 240.

historical precursor might be to *détourn*, reclaim, and ‘reradicalise’ that which history has recuperated or obscured.

The development of the English Situationist practice, from *Heatwave* through to the English Section, assumed a similar relationship with the SI. This relationship is figured by the chiasmus and characterised by *détournement*. The English Section repeated and reversed the SI; it used the SI’s terms and analysis but rearranged them to reveal different aesthetic-political formulations. The English Section did not directly transfer Situationist theses from France to England: its translation was cultural, not literal. The English Section *détourned* the SI. These early English Situationists were plagiarists; they took what was incorrect in Situationist theory once it has been transplanted into an English context and replaced its false ideas with right ideas.

### **Expulsion**

The activities of the English Section were soon disrupted, though not entirely thwarted, when it was expelled from the SI on the 21<sup>st</sup> December 1967, after just over a year of membership. Radcliffe, always the most wary of the SI, had already resigned in November for personal reasons. He has since claimed, ‘I was thoroughly disillusioned with the SI, although I probably never had many illusions’<sup>103</sup>. The expulsion of the remaining English Section remains a contentious issue to this day. The SI gave its version in an unusually lengthy account in the twelfth *Internationale Situationniste* (September 1969). It recounts how Vaneigem had visited New York in November 1967 as the SI’s delegate to meet with the individuals who would thereafter form an American Section. The SI does not give names, but this section was centred on Robert Chasse, Bruce Elwell, Jonathan Horelick, and Tony Verlaan. An anarchist named Ben Morea, who was behind a group and journal called *Black Mask* requested a meeting with Vaneigem, but was refused. The SI claimed that Morea was in conflict with the soon-to-be American Section ‘on virtually every question concerning revolutionary action’<sup>104</sup>. Vaneigem also fell out with Morea’s friend, ‘a certain Hoffman’<sup>105</sup>, who dared offer Vaneigem ‘a mystical interpretation of his text “Basic Banalities”’<sup>106</sup>. Morea and his cohorts were already in contact with the English Section, and after a series of accusatory letters between Morea, the English Section, and Paris,

<sup>103</sup> Radcliffe, ‘Two Fiery Flying Rolls’, 371.

<sup>104</sup> Situationist International, ‘The Latest Exclusions’ (1969), in *SIA*, 375.

<sup>105</sup> This was Abbie Hoffman, who would soon after found *Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker* with Morea, and later achieve notoriety as founder of the Yippies.

<sup>106</sup> Situationist International, ‘The Latest Exclusions’, 375.

the SI asked the English Section to renounce Morea and Hoffman. Though the English Section initially agreed, no denunciation appeared and so the English Section was deemed to have sided with Morea rather than with Vaneigem. Such an act of treason ensured its expulsion, and the SI spitefully concluded that, 'the English never denied that Morea was teamed up with a mystical idiot.'<sup>107</sup>

The rest of the SI's article alleges that the English Section had felt excluded and unappreciated by the SI. The SI is characteristically vitriolic towards its ex-members: 'They hadn't dared to say so, but they were pained by the Continentals' lack of interest in what they were going to do. They were left isolated in their country—all surrounded by water'. The SI also accuse the English Section of a sort of revolutionary hubris: 'England being (according to them) much closer to a revolutionary crisis than Continental Europe, we "Continental" theorists were supposedly moved by spite at seeing that "our" theories would be realized somewhere else.' The events of May '68, the SI held, were sufficient rebuttal of that prediction. Although the SI acknowledges the integrity of Donald Nicholson-Smith, at least before he left Paris to return to London, it pours scorn on Gray, who 'now publishes a rag called *King Mob* which passes, quite wrongly, for being slightly pro-situationist, and in which one can read eulogies to the eternal Morea.'<sup>108</sup>

A later account of the expulsion, by the American Section, notes that Gray was originally to have accompanied Vaneigem as a European delegate to New York, though Gray actually arrived a day after his expulsion. The American Section also claims that Verlaan had visited London soon after, spoken with the ex-English Section, and contested its expulsion with the SI. This suggests that relations between America and England were actually much friendlier than the impression given by the SI's fiery rhetoric, though the American Section criticises Gray and *King Mob*'s association with Morea and Black Mask.<sup>109</sup>

Despite these very personal attacks, Gray himself would lament that the expulsion foreclosed avenues of development that may eventually have proved very productive. Gray's anthology, *Leaving the Twentieth Century: The Incomplete Work of the Situationist International*, was the first collection of Situationist texts translated into

---

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 376

<sup>109</sup> Robert Chasse and Bruce Elwell, 'Field Study in the Dwindling Force of Cognition Where it is Least Expected: A Critique of the SI as a Revolutionary Organisation' (1970), quoted in Vague, *King Mob Echo: From Gordon Riots to Situationists & Sex Pistols*, 40–41.



English. The facts in Gray's introductions are often questionable, his translations were always highly idiosyncratic (see 'Banalités de Base' retitled 'The Totality for Kids'), but his reflections are interesting in relation to the moment in which they were written, two years after the SI was dissolved and during a lull in Situationist activity either French or English. In his essay, "'Those who make half a revolution only dig their own graves': The Situationists since 1969", Gray writes,

The presence of the SI never made itself properly felt in either England or America. The English and what could well have become the American sections of the SI were excluded just before Christmas 1967. Both groups felt that the perfection and publicising of theoretical critique was not sufficient: they wanted political subversion and individual "therapy" to converge in an uninterrupted everyday activity. Some of this they saw, though on a very limited and local scale, the following year: the Americans as *The Motherfuckers* and the English as *King Mob*. Neither group survived that apocalyptic summer of 1968 [...] Henceforward the dissemination of situationist ideas in both countries was dissociated from the real organisation that alone could have dynamised them.<sup>110</sup>

A rather more objective account of the English Section's expulsion is offered by George Robertson in his 1988 survey of post-Situationist activity in Britain. Robertson claims that, 'Because they [the English Section] had developed their positions without the SI and had not taken part in ongoing theoretical and tactical debates, they soon came into conflict with the "official" SI "line"'<sup>111</sup>. Robertson recognises that the English Section did not simply develop in parallel to the SI; it threw other influences into the mix, but its association with Morea, whom the SI regarded as an enemy, was too great a challenge to the SI's authority.

The SI characterised the English Section as Oedipal and ostracised, and made much of an Anglo-Continental antagonism. It is true that the English Section never fully ascribed to the SI's party line, but it is also true that by 1967 the SI had made all their major theoretical contributions. After the events of May and June '68, the SI went into terminal decline and such expulsions became increasingly common. Its influence and its legacy were escaping its control, as it had predicted they would, and all that was left was to dissolve the organisation. The English Section may have escaped

---

<sup>110</sup> Gray, "'Those who make half a revolution only dig their own graves': The Situationists since 1969", 135.

<sup>111</sup> George Robertson, 'The Situationist International: Its Penetration into British Culture', in Stewart Home (ed.), *What is Situationism? A Reader* (London: AK Press 1996), 121.

just in time, before the SI's reputation (in France at least) shifted from being an obscure yet incendiary unknown to a discredited *groupuscule* among many others.

Against Gray's pessimism, I want to demonstrate through the rest of this study that Situationist theory in England did not simply wither and die after it had been severed from the SI. Instead, it developed in a multitude of new directions, supplementing the master narrative provided by the SI with a host of new roots and offshoots. The first of these new developments came about by way of King Mob, which attempted to maintain the momentum of the English Section. It did so by veering ever further from the SI, towards an exaggeratedly English working-class interpretation of Situationist activity, and as such accelerated the project that I have called lumpenproletarianisation.

### **3.2 King Mob**

'Browned off with the English so-called revolutionary scene? Read about the Mother\_\_\_\_, Black Mask and other American gangs in King Mob – 2/- in stamps post free from: BCM/King Mob, London WC1'  
Advert in International Times 58 (13-25<sup>th</sup> June 1969)

It is worth pausing at this moment in the historical narrative of English Situationist practice to reflect on what was at stake for the emergent tradition when its manifestation (the English Section) that maintained the closest relationship with its principle source (the SI) was excommunicated. The trajectory of English Situationist practice, by 1967, was towards forms of textual performance and aesthetic representation; the SI, at the same moment, had made its political turn, expelled most of its artists, and focussed on theoretical critique and negation. The English tradition had begun to aestheticise Situationist theory at the same moment that Debord, whom I still use as metonym of the SI more generally, was voicing his suspicion of aesthetic representation in *Society of the Spectacle*. The SI's discourse of anti-aestheticism, articulated by way of empty signifiers and utopic chimera, sought a mode of being freed from the spectacle's debasement of aesthetic representation. That anti-spectacular ontology, however, could not be affirmed or represented, as this would prescribe, delimit, and offer it up for recuperation.<sup>1</sup> Instead, the SI needed to negate the spectacle's negation of life. The affirmative moment, the glimpse of the *authentic experience* or *directly-lived life* which the spectacle has undermined, would be a flash of illumination catalysed by the specific determinate negation enacted by the SI's critique.

The SI's iconophobic rejection of aesthetic representation, its desire for the anti-aesthetic, was prompted by what I shall call its recuperation anxiety. At the SI's 1961 conference in Gothenburg, Attila Kotányi articulated the paradox of representation that had arisen from the SI's paranoiac hypersensitivity to the recuperation of visual motifs:

---

<sup>1</sup> Vincent Kauffman explains the SI's investment in notions of invisibility and the anti-aesthetic in the following terms: 'From the situationist perspective, everything visible is false, impure. I see, or worse, I present for viewing, I self-present for viewing, thus I am blind to the illness of my own life. The source of infection is the image'. 'Angels of Purity', in McDonough (ed.), *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, 288.

Since the beginning of the movement there has been a problem as to what to call artistic works by members of the SI. It was understood that none of them was a situationist production, but what to call them? I propose a very simple rule: to call them 'antisituationist.' We are against the dominant conditions of artistic inauthenticity. I don't mean that anyone should stop painting, writing, etc. I don't mean that has no value. I don't mean that we could continue to exist without doing that. But at the same time we know that such works will be coopted by society and used against us.<sup>2</sup>

Kotányi saw no possibility for the SI in its search for anti-spectacular forms other than engaging with the spectacle's deleterious regime of representation. Aesthetic objects were necessary, yet necessarily antisituationist. The SI proclaimed its horizon to be the end, or the supersession, of art: art as an institution, qua Bürger; but also art as aesthetic representation, as the creation of a world other than the one we immediately and directly experience. The Situationist revolution would make impossible any separation of representation and experience. However, Kotányi's proposals demonstrate how the SI's hyperbolism served to conflate aesthetic sensibility with spectacular misrepresentation, so that the SI remained blind to the afterlives of cultural objects, refused the possibility that the spectacle itself could be made a site of contestation, and thus succumbed to a recuperation anxiety.

The English Section's lumpenproletarianisation was, similarly, an attempt to counteract the forms of (mis-)representation through which the spectacle operates, though the English Section placed less emphasis on negation than did the SI. The English Section's practice was an affirmative one that took little heed of the SI's paralysing recuperation anxiety. King Mob, I shall demonstrate, accelerated the English Section's project. Whereas Debord wrote that, 'Revolution is not "showing" life to people, but bringing them to life'<sup>3</sup>, King Mob did want to show life to people, to remind them of its highs and its lows, its limits and its possibilities under a spectacular regime. King Mob's lumpenproletarianisation remained consistent with Situationist theory in general, in that the former operated through a textual practice, that played with language and literary allusions.<sup>4</sup> But what image of life did King Mob choose to show? Was King Mob's aestheticisation of Situationist theory the result of a failure to comprehend the SI's 'style of negation', or was it the result of a tactical Anglicisation

<sup>2</sup> Situationist International, 'The Fifth SI Conference in Göteborg', 115.

<sup>3</sup> Guy Debord, 'For a Revolutionary Judgement of Art' (1961), in SIA, 396.

<sup>4</sup> As well as Kauffman, Tom McDonough has written about Situationist language in an extended investigation into Debord's statement that *détournement* is the first step towards a literary communism. See 'The Beautiful Language of My Century'.

of that method to adapt it to different cultural and historical conditions? This aestheticism has since come to characterise English Situationist practice in its many diverse and denatured forms, so it seems unlikely that such aestheticism and, more specifically, such literariness has condemned the English Situationist project to absolute recuperation, though it certainly did contravene the oftentimes po-faced austerity and intransigent rhetoric of Situationist orthodoxy. I hope to demonstrate, by way of King Mob, what were the limitations but also the possibilities for English Situationist practice after it had jettisoned the method of negation central to the SI's critique.

### **His Majesty King Mob**

The origins of the King Mob group are shrouded in myths and rumour, most of which the group propagated about itself.<sup>5</sup> After his expulsion with the rest of the English Section from the SI, Christopher Gray formed the group, which was named after graffiti found on the walls of Newgate Prison in London after the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots of June 1780 (Fig. 9). The juxtaposition of these two conflicting identities, 'King' and 'Mob', has the effect of declaring the wild and uncontrollable mob to be sovereign. At the same time, the name lent the group a singular persona to create as it wished. The English Section treated the lumpenprole as an empty signifier, as a figure identified only abstractly as a disruptive or negative capacity; the King Mob group assigned to the figure of the lumpenprole the King Mob identity, which is never embodied physically but is an identity constructed in the group's texts. King Mob becomes a modern manifestation of Captain Swing or General Ludd, the collective identities used by the English Swing rioters of 1830 and the Luddites respectively.<sup>6</sup> Debord had already prophesied that the new phase of proletarian assault on capital was 'following a new "General Ludd" who, this time, urges them to attack the machinery

---

<sup>5</sup> My account of the foundation of King Mob is drawn from the following texts: Hussey, *Game of War*, 207–214; Savage, *England's Dreaming*, 23–36; Vague, *King Mob Echo: From Gordon Riots to Situationists & Sex Pistols*, 39–53; David and Stuart Wise, 'End of Music (Punk, Reggae: A Critique)' (1978), in Home (ed.), *What is Situationism?* 63–102; and David Wise, 'Jumbled Notes: A Critical Hidden History of King Mob' (1999–2003), available at <http://www.revoltagainstplenty.com/index.php/archive/34-archivelocal/93-a-hidden-history-of-king-mob> [accessed 10/05/2012].

<sup>6</sup> King Mob even incorporated one of the Luddites' letters, signed 'General Ludd', into one of its posters. David and Stuart Wise note that King Mob came across the letter in E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). See David and Stuart Wise, 'A Hidden History of King Mob (Posters/ Cartoons)', available at <http://www.revoltagainstplenty.com/index.php/recent/34-archivelocal/128-a-hidden-history-of-king-mob-posterscartoons> [accessed 10/05/2012].

of permitted consumption.<sup>7</sup> The name of King Mob's journal, *King Mob Echo*, and the title of Norman O. Brown's poem, 'Return of the Repressed', included as the first text in the first issue (April 1968), both suggest the group's efforts to summon an enduring spirit of anti-authoritarian resistance. More than that, King Mob attempted to become the spectral revenant of those historical groups that have acted on their hostility to capitalist accumulation: King Mob as the 1968 echo of the Gordon rioters, the Swing rioters, the Luddites. Jon Savage reads the King Mob nomenclature in a similar manner:

In applauding this hidden moment of British history, the group were attempting to reemphasize a disordered, anarchic Britain that had previously been swept under the carpet. It was an attempt to give a specifically British context to the rumblings of discontent that, even before the events [of May '68], were growing louder.<sup>8</sup>

As King Mob attempted to speak as a new lumpen, it performed linguistically the intervention of this sub-class into the scene of political comprehensibility; it performed by way of language the new lumpen's disruption of bourgeois convention. Biographical accounts of the group emphasise its desire to become the lumpenproletariat. Tom Vague offers one of the few histories of the group by way of his 'speed history', *King Mob Echo: From Gordon Riots to Situationists and Sex Pistols* (2000), which provides a sprawling and hyperactive narrative interspersed with anecdotes and rumours. In one, King Mob associate Fred Vermorel describes the group as 'a band of hooligan pedants based in the Notting Hill area of London'<sup>9</sup>. King Mob members David and Stuart Wise elsewhere describe the group as 'a loose affiliation (hardly a group) of disparate though confused revolutionary individuals'<sup>10</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> SoS, thesis 115.

<sup>8</sup> Savage, *England's Dreaming*, 33.

<sup>9</sup> Vague, *King Mob Echo: From Gordon Riots to Situationists & Sex Pistols*, 43.

<sup>10</sup> David and Stuart Wise, 'End of Music (Punk, Reggae: A Critique)', 67.

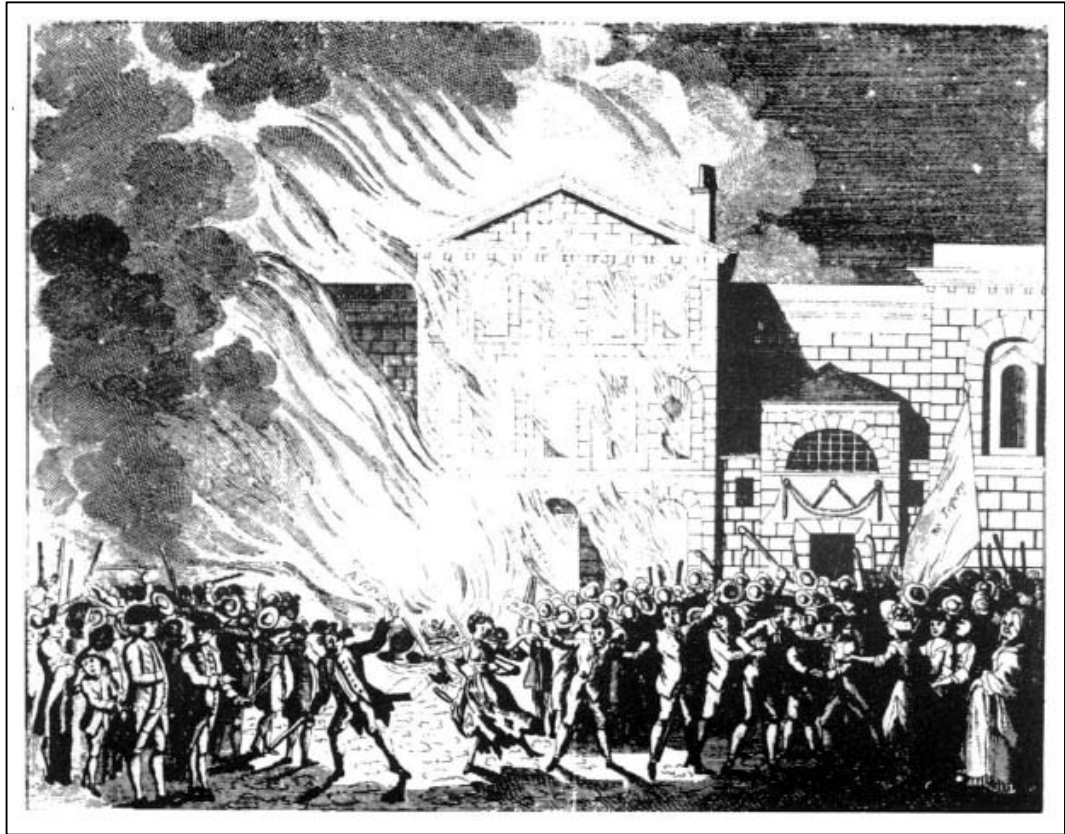


Fig. 9: 'The Burning & Plundering of Newgate & Setting the Felons at Liberty by the Mob' (1780)

The Surrealist Group in England, in my reading, never attained the same social presence as Breton's French group, but acquired instead an unembodied notoriety, an indistinct and ghostly anti-presence in the cultural landscape. King Mob occupied a similar role. King Mob's auto-mythologisation is evident in Jonathon Green's popular history of the London counterculture, *Days in the Life: Voices from the English Underground 1961-1971* (1988), which anthologises a mass of fragments of conversations between the author and countercultural figures. In one conversation, Dick Pountain, another King Mob member, remembers,

We terrorised the early IT [*International Times*]. When they were still at the Indica bookshop one of the earliest King Mob/Situationist actions was going and breaking in there and scaring the wits out of them. Nothing violent, just language and posture.<sup>11</sup>

'Language and posture': Pountain anticipates my reading of King Mob's activity. Pountain also tells the story of a sit-in at the University of London Union with which King Mob involved itself. Pountain reproduces the sectarianism typical of the 1960s

<sup>11</sup> Jonathon Green, *Days in the Life: Voices from the English Underground 1961-1971* (London: Heinemann 1988), 126.

counterculture, a sectarianism exaggerated in Situationist circles, when he remembers, 'The New Left crowd tried to run it. We gave Robin Blackburn a really bad time, howled him down, told him he was a wanker.'<sup>12</sup> Pountain's delight in confrontation and profanity characterises King Mob's involvement in the leftist milieu of their time.

Also in Green's history, Alan Marcuson explains his admiration of King Mob in terms of their radical difference from most other groups of the period: 'They were much more fun [...] their pamphlets were more interesting than the boring fucking Trots, who really were the most tiresome bunch of people I have ever come across.'<sup>13</sup> Vague's 'speed history' and David Wise's online memoirs, 'Jumbled Notes: A Critical Hidden History of King Mob' (1999-2003), both contain many more King Mob legends. While myth and self-aggrandisement were central to King Mob's social presence, I shall curtail my own predilection for Situationist gossip and remain focussed on the material through which King Mob's identity was created. The first impression that I want to convey of that identity is garnered from the descriptions above: King Mob as a cartoonish bully-boy, a tabloid villain, a politicised hooligan.

### ***King Mob Echo***

The King Mob group's archive consists of six issues of its journal, and numerous pamphlets, posters, and documented graffiti. The group's work is inherently marginal. Its interventions typically reiterated and disseminated other work; it conjured old and not-so-old ghosts. The spread from the first *King Mob Echo* reproduced below (Fig. 11) illustrates this marginality, as well as the group's idiosyncratic interests: the main text is appropriated from Vaneigem, one image is Man Ray's *Gift* (1921), which accompanies a passage from Richard Huelsenbeck's *En Avant Dada* (1920), and the other image of some peasants, which accompanies a passage from Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957)<sup>14</sup>, which is also accompanied by an uncited quotation from Freud. The group constellates these diverse materials into something violent and foreboding.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>14</sup> Norman Cohn, 'The Prehistory of the Id', *King Mob Echo* 1 (April 1968), in KME, 80. Cohn's text, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (1957) had also been mentioned in Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* and Vaneigem's *Revolution of Everyday Life*.



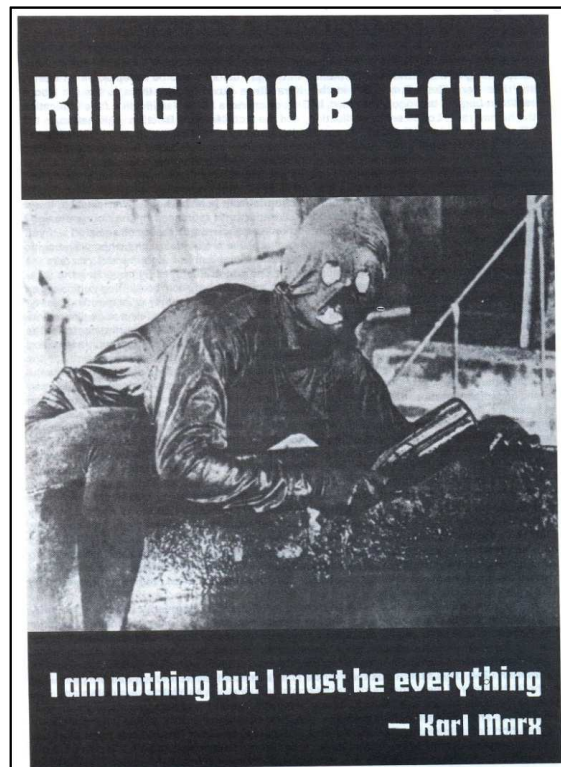


Fig. 10: Cover of King Mob Echo 1 (April 1968)

The issue also includes an excerpt from the SI's pamphlet, 'The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy', cuttings from newspaper stories relating to everyday refusal and spontaneous violence, an image of Rosa Luxemburg's corpse, and one of Jack the Ripper's letters. The King Mob project was heralded, indirectly, by an article titled 'Desolation Row', 'freely translated'<sup>15</sup> from the chapter 'Spurious Opposition' of Raoul Vaneigem's *Revolution of Everyday Life* (1967).

The title that King Mob gave to its 'free translation' of Vaneigem's article is borrowed from a Bob Dylan song in which fairytale characters, literary figures, and film stars contemplate their ineffectuality in a world presented as facile, farcical, and absurd.<sup>16</sup> The article in *King Mob Echo* begins from a similar contemplation of the relationship between symbolic fictions and the dejected reality of the present. The article claims that, in bourgeois society, ideology has taken the place of myth as that which excuses and reinforces social repression. Nihilism, in contrast, is presented as anathematic to bourgeois ideology and as something that cannot be recuperated by the spectacle. Ideology, writes Vaneigem/King Mob, 'can never integrate the total negation

<sup>15</sup> Raoul Vaneigem, 'Desolation Row', *King Mob Echo* 1 (April 1968), in KME, 81.

<sup>16</sup> Bob Dylan, 'Desolation Row', on *Highway 61 Revisited* (Columbia Records 1965).

of the nihilist'<sup>17</sup>. Yet the article argues that nihilists have yet to act on a world historical scale, while others who have done so 'have lacked a sense of the total decomposition of social forms which nihilism announces'<sup>18</sup>. So, for example, Vaneigem/King Mob criticises Marx for having failed to analyse 'Romanticism and the artistic phenomenon in general'<sup>19</sup>, and Dada for having contained 'the seeds by which nihilism could have been surpassed; but it just left them to rot'<sup>20</sup>.

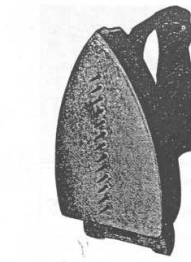
point of the turning world, the place where all perspectives are interchangeable, the exact point where movement, dialectic and time no longer exist? Noon and eternity of the great refusal. Before it, the pogroms, beyond it, the new innocences. The blood of Jews or the blood of cops.

The active nihilist does not intend simply to watch things fall apart. He intends to speed up the process. Sabotage is a natural response to the chaos ruling the world. Active nihilism is pre-revolutionary; passive nihilism is counter-revolutionary. And most people oscillate between the two. Like the red soldier described by some Soviet author — Victor Chlovsky perhaps — who never charged without shouting 'Long Live the Tsar!' But circumstances inevitably end by drawing a line, and people suddenly find themselves, once and for all, on one side or the other of the barricades.

You always learn to dance for yourself on the off-beat of the official world. And you must follow your demands to their logical conclusion, not accept a compromise at the first setback. Consumer society's frantic need to manufacture new needs actually clings in on the way-out, the bizarre and the shocking. Black humour and real agony turn up on Madison Avenue. Flirtation with non-conformism is an integral part of prevailing values. Awareness of the decay of values has its role to play in sales strategy. There's money in decomposition. More and more pure rubbish is marketed. The figurine suit-collar of Kennedy, complete with "bullet-holes" through which to pour the salt, for sale in the supermarket, should be enough to convince anybody, if there is anybody who still needs convincing, how easily a joke which once would have delighted Ravauchol or Teter the Painter now merely helps to keep the market going.

Consciousness of decay reached its most explosive expression in Dada. Dada really did contain the seeds by which nihilism could have been surpassed; but it just left them to rot, along with all the rest. The whole ambiguity of Surrealism, on the other hand, lies in the fact that it was an accurate critique made at the wrong moment. While its critique of the transcendence aborted by Dada was perfectly justified, when it in its turn tried to surpass Dada it did so without beginning again with Dada's initial nihilism, without basing itself on Dada-anti-Dada, without seeing Dada historically. History was the nightmare from which the Surrealists never awoke: they were defenceless before the Communist Party, they were out of their depth with the Spanish Civil War. For all their yapping they sunk after the official left like faithful dogs.

Certain features of Romanticism had already proved, without awakening the slightest interest on the part of either Marx or Engels, that art — the pulse of culture and society — is the first index of the decay and disintegration of values. A century later, while Lenin thought that the whole issue was beside the point, the Dadaist could see the artistic abscence as a symptom of a cancer whose poison was spread throughout society as a whole. Trepanning is only expresses the regression of pleasure demanded by the State. It is this the 1916 Dadaists proved so cogently. To go beyond this analysis could mean only one thing: to take up arms. The neo-Dadaist larvae



MAN RAY: GIFT (1921)

It is ridiculous and a sign of idiosyncrasy exceeding the legal limits to say that Dada (whose actual achievements and immense success cannot be denied) is "only of negative value". Today you can hardly find long-earners with the old saw about positive and negative. The gentlemen who demand the "constructive" are among the most suspicious types of a caste that has long been bankrupt. It has become sufficiently apparent to our time that law, order and the constructive, the "understanding for an organic development", are only symbols, corsets and pretences for fat bellies and treachery. If the Dadaist movement is nihilism, then nihilism is a part of life.

RICHARD HULLENBROCK: "IN ANTI DADA" 1930.

pullulating in the shithouse of present-day consumption seem to have found more profitable employment.

The Dadaists, working to cure themselves and their civilisation of its discontents — working, in the last analysis, far more coherently than Freud himself — built the first laboratory to revitalise everyday life. Their activity was far more radical than their theory. Groux: "The point was to work completely in the dark. We didn't know where we were going". The Dada group was a funnel sucking in all the trivia and pure rubbish cluttering up the world. Disappearing at the other end, everything was transformed. Through people and things stayed the same they took on totally new meanings. The beginning of Dada was the re-discovery of lived experience and its possible delights — its end was the reversal of all perspectives, the invention of a new universe. Subversion, the tactics of radical change, overthrew the rigid structure of the old world. Amidst this upheaval the poetry made by everyone revealed its concrete sense — something very different from the literary mentality to which the Surrealists surrendered.

The initial weakness of Dada lay in its extraordinary humility. Every morning Tzara, clown with the gravity of a Pope, is said to have repeated Diderot's statement: "I'm not even interested in knowing whether anyone ever existed before I did." Yet this same Tzara was to end up a Stalinist, meeting at non like Ravauchol, Bonnot and Mahkno's peasant army.

If Dada broke up because it could not transcend itself, then the blame lies on the Dadaists themselves for having failed to search for the real historic occasions when such transcendence becomes possible: the moments when the masses arise and seize their destiny in their own hands.

The first compromise is always terrible in its effects. Through Surrealism to neo-Dada, its repercussions gradually infect and finally poison Surrealism's initial vigour. Consider the Surrealists' ambivalent attitude towards the past. While they were right to recognise the subversive genius of a Sade, a Proust or a Lautréamont, all they could subsequently do was to write so much — and so well — about them as to



#### THE PREHISTORY OF THE ID

##### REVOLUTIONARY PEASANTS OF THE EARLY 16TH CENTURY

Sade... describes how on a bright Sunday, as he was sitting lost in meditation, an incorporeal image appeared to his split. Sade addresses the image: "Whence have you come?" The image answers: "I come from nowhere" — "Tell me, what are you?" — "I am one." — "What do you wish?" — "I do not wish." — "This is a miracle! Tell me, what is your name?" — "I am called Nameless Wilderness" — "Where does your insight lead us?" — "To uncontrolled freedom." — "Tell me, what do you call uncontrolled freedom?" — "When a man lives according to all his caprices without distinguishing between God and himself, and without looking before or after."

—HOMERUS COHEN, "THE PURSUIT OF THE MILLENIUM"

Mysticism is the confused imitation of that realm, lying beyond the ego, where the id reigns.

—FREUD, 1918

win for their heroes the honour of a few timid footnotes in progressive school textbooks. A literary celebrity much like the celebrity the neo-Dadaists win for their forebears in the spectacle of our present decomposition.

The only modern phenomena which can be compared with Dada are the most savage outbursts of juvenile delinquency. The same contempt for art and bourgeois values, the same refusal of ideology, the same will to live. The same ignorance of history, the same barbaric revolt, the same lack of tactics.

The nihilist makes one mistake. He does not realise that other people are also nihilists, nor that their number is rapidly growing. Nihilism is, in fact, about to become a mass philosophy. The nihilist does not realise that life as a whole could be completely and utterly transformed. He is quite unaware of what was really attempted during the highpoints of past revolutionary activity. Yet contemporary society is nothing more than the product of a series of past revolutionary defeats. Inhumanity is reaching its paroxysm today, and it is in this paroxysm that our only hope lies.

Awareness of just how nightmarish life has become is on the point of fusing with a rediscovery of the real revolutionary movement in the past. We must reappropriate the most radical aspects of all past revolts and insurrections at the point where they were prematurely arrested, and do so with all the violence bottled up inside us. A chain explosion of subterranean creativity could not fail to overthrow the world of hierarchical power.

In the last analysis, the nihilists are our only allies. They cannot possibly go on living as they are. Their lives are like an open wound. A revolutionary perspective could put all the latent energy generated by years of repression at the service of their will to live. They need only to realise that life today could be utterly transformed, and that total revolution can have no other meaning. Nihilists — as Sade would have said — one more effort if you want to be revolutionaries!

—freely translated from Raoul Vaneigem's *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations*, 1967.

Fig. 11: King Mob Echo 1 (1968): 8-9.

The articles offers youth revolt as an example of nihilism, but which shares the faults of Dada. Both hold 'The same contempt for art and bourgeois values, the same refusal of ideology, the same will to live', but both also display 'the same ignorance of history, the same barbaric revolt, the same lack of tactics'<sup>21</sup>. Vaneigem/King Mob thus distinguishes active and passive nihilism:

The active nihilist does not intend simply to watch things fall apart. He intends to speed up the process. Sabotage is a natural

<sup>17</sup> Raoul Vaneigem, 'Desolation Row', 77.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 81.

response to the chaos ruling the world. Active nihilism is pre-revolutionary; passive nihilism is counter-revolutionary.<sup>22</sup>

Passive nihilism is the nihilism of the spectacle and its recuperated 'Joe Soap intellectuals', 'crypto-fascists', 'pop artists', and 'psychedelic impresarios'.<sup>23</sup> It is the nihilism of those who do not believe in what they do but do it anyway. It is 'an overture to conformism'<sup>24</sup>. In contrast, Vaneigem/King Mob argues that 'What we need now is the conjunction of nihilism and historical consciousness'<sup>25</sup>; that is, modern nihilists need to become aware of and harness the energies of their predecessors. The article is littered with references to the triumvirate of proto-Situationists (Sade, Fourier, Lautréamont), and illuminates other figures in the same historical constellation whom, it argues, must be reappraised. Those figures include militant anarchists such as 'Ravachol, Bonnot and Mahkno'<sup>26</sup> (who have haunted my discussions of delinquency and the lumpenproletariat) and two other historical coordinates that would greatly influence King Mob's identity—the English Romantics and Jack the Ripper.

Vaneigem/King Mob's insistence that a new revolutionary subjectivity—a Situationist subjectivity—must reenergise the project of historical revolutionaries otherwise forgotten or obscured corresponds with the efforts of the English Section to disaffiliate itself from its milieu. To step outside of the scene of the political, to *Other* oneself, can be understood in this context as an assertion of belonging to different, anterior, historical and political traditions. Radcliffe, of course, distanced himself from England's anti-nuclear movement which he saw as recuperated, and the English Section denounced the 'false intelligentsia' which ran from 'the CIA subsidised torpor of the latest New Left to the sanctimonious little tits of *International Times*', all of whom constituted a 'New Establishment'.<sup>27</sup> The King Mob group's act of disaffiliation is most evident in *King Mob Echo 2* (1968), which published an exchange of letters between Gray and the Dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck. Both parties denounce contemporary student movements, though Gray is particularly dismissive of the 'free' or 'anti' university projects associated with Alexander Trocchi. Gray accuses Trocchi of having limited his concept of revolution to the plane of culture, and thus having lacked a

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>27</sup> English Section, 'The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution', 69.

sense of totality.<sup>28</sup> What is at stake in Gray's attack on Trocchi is the claim to be the correct interpretation of Situationist theory and the first truly English Situationist praxis.

The SI, as I have demonstrated, was tactically venomous in its denunciations of its rivals and its ex-members. The King Mob group gladly mimicked this practice, and its disaffiliations set the tone for decades of internecine disagreements in English Situationist currents. Such disagreements, in part, exemplify Freud's theory of a narcissism of small differences. Yet I suggest that these disagreements, petty as they may seem, demonstrate again how English Situationist currents anticipate developments made in post-Marxist, post-'68, theory. Laclau and Mouffe, for example, write,

The rejection of privileged points of rupture and the confluence of struggles into a unified political space, and the acceptance, on the contrary, of the plurality and indeterminacy of the social, seems to us the two fundamental bases from which a new political imaginary can be constructed, radically libertarian and infinitely more ambitious in its objectives than that of the classic left.<sup>29</sup>

Against a conception of the political as the stand-off between 'two opposing systems of equivalences'<sup>30</sup>, as in the orthodox Marxist conception of class struggle, Laclau and Mouffe propose that the political should be thought in terms of hegemony and antagonism, whereby socio-political struggle occurs between inherently relational forces which cannot be ossified into representative or symbolic identities. When the English Section and King Mob seek to relocate revolutionary agency away from a classically-conceived proletariat, when they advance (somewhat perversely) all possible internecine quarrels, and when they stubbornly denounce all those whom they regard as the recuperated false friends of the revolutionary movement, then they enact a disruption of the political imaginary in a way that allowed for the subsequent paradigm-shifting work of figures like Laclau, Mouffe, and Rancière. Situationist disagreement, I propose, is the endless re-staging of conflict, even the insistence on conflict, and the performance of antagonism, even internal antagonism, in order to contend the concomitant Situationist fear that the spectacle has sublimated all the

---

<sup>28</sup> 'King Mob: Two Letters on Student Power' (November 1968), in KME, 85-90.

<sup>29</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso 1985), 152.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

necessary tensions of political life. As the spectacle is understood to subsume all tensions, the Situationists' task is to exacerbate tension, at all costs. King Mob undertook this task with the maximum of flamboyancy and belligerence.

### **Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker**



Fig. 12: Cover of King Mob Echo 3 (1969)

The third King Mob Echo (1969, Fig.12) marks the group's most radical departure from the SI's programme, and tells the story of the New York anarchist groups Black Mask and Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker (or the Motherfuckers).<sup>31</sup> It was for their association with these groups that the English Section had been expelled from the SI. King Mob Echo 3 reprints a few texts by Black Mask and the Motherfuckers, but the issue is primarily one long essay in which Gray introduces Black Mask as a 'real' interpretation of Dada and Futurism—a modernisation and lumpenproletarianisation of the historical avant-garde. Gray's sensationalist characterisation of the Futurism inherited by Black Mask (and thus King Mob) revels in its destructive impulse.

<sup>31</sup> Other histories of these groups include: Osha Neumann, *Up Against the Wall Motherfucker: A Memoir of the 60s, with Notes for the Next Time* (New York: Seven Stories Press 2008); Black Mask and Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker: *The Incomplete Works of Ron Hahne, Ben Morea and the Black Mask Group* (London: Unpopular Books and Sabotage Editions 1993); and *Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker: An Anthology of Rants, Posters and More* (Melbourne, Australia: Homebrew Press 2007).

Futurism is 'science, elegance and violence'<sup>32</sup>. Gray eulogises Marinetti for his 'post-artistic way of life':

Marinetti beating up Wyndham Lewis in an allnight urinal and hanging him up on some adjacent spiked railings by his coat collar... Marinetti imprisoning a bevy of wealthy culture-vultures in a belltent and driving his motorbike over it full throttle time after time... Marinetti, even at the end, at one of Mussolini's galas, kicking over a banquet table on top of Hitler, just to show that he really couldn't give a fuck.<sup>33</sup>

The King Mob group aspired to a similar infamy, which it saw Black Mask in the process of achieving. Gray reports how Black Mask's Provo-style happenings targeted modern art institutions which it saw as agents of recuperation. Gray recounts the story of a 'panel of experts on Futurism, Dada and Surrealism' who attempted to hold a discussion on 'the true revolutionary meaning of modern art'. The event was intended as a trap for the local troublemakers Black Mask, who would surely show up and in turn be shown up by the experts. Black Mask, however, heard about the trap, printed off thousands of false invitations to a party promising free food and drink at the venue, and distributed the invitations to all the 'hardest bastards' and 'down-and-outs' that they could find. The event was duly thrown into chaos by the arrival of such unwanted guests who demanded from the organisers what Black Mask had promised them.<sup>34</sup> The King Mob group was inspired by such actions, and restaged in London another prank previously carried out in New York by Black Mask at Macy's department store. An account of the event was included in *International Times* 51:

at Christmas [...] they went into Selfridge's in Oxford Street, one of them dressed as Santa Claus, took toys from the counters and handed them to children. Natural Result: in no time the fuzz arrive and everyone is treated to the spectacle of the fuzz taking toys away from the kids, and finally carrying out a defiant Santa Claus.<sup>35</sup>

Back in *King Mob Echo* 3, Gray argues that Black Mask and the 'French Situationists' were the only contemporary White groups to understand the Watts Riots, and as such were able to ally themselves with the 'post-Watts Blacks'.<sup>36</sup> Gray

---

<sup>32</sup> *King Mob Echo* 3 (1969) in KME, 104.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> 'Report from France', *International Times* 51 (Feb 28<sup>th</sup>-March 13<sup>th</sup> 1969): 5. Sadie Plant notes that this stunt has since been copied in Poland by Orange Alternative. See *The Most Radical Gesture*, 148.

<sup>36</sup> *King Mob Echo* 3 (1969), 105.

notes with delight that Black Mask's founders, Ben Morea and Ron Hahne, 'were kids off the street, not middleclass dropouts'<sup>37</sup>, who preached 'revolutionary violence'<sup>38</sup>. Gray's impression of the American anarchists is clearly informed by his caricatured impression of English hooliganism: he describes the 'theoretical dimension' of Black Mask as, 'fuck off, you cunt'<sup>39</sup>.

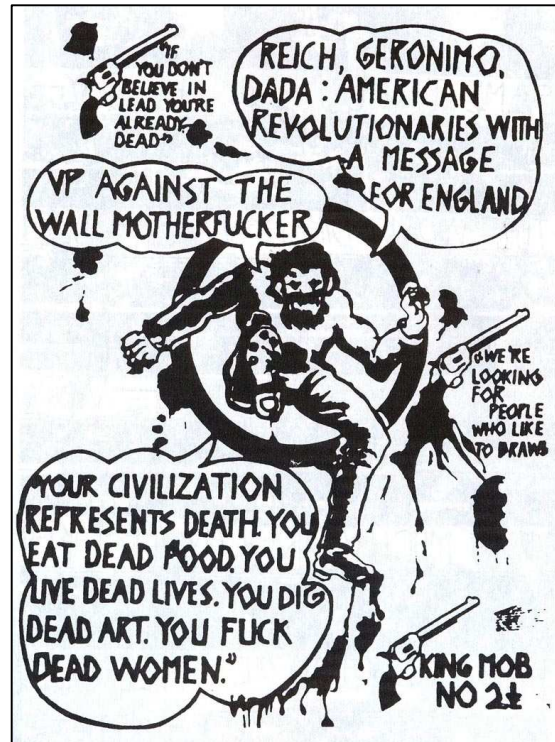


Fig. 13: King Mob poster that appropriates text and images from the Motherfuckers<sup>40</sup>

Black Mask had appeared in New York in 1966. By late 1968, it had morphed into Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker, which was originally formed as the Students for a Democratic Society's Lower East Side chapter. The Motherfuckers continued the project of Black Mask but with an even more militant programme. They presented themselves as a 'street gang with an analysis'<sup>41</sup>; their pamphlets preached 'armed love' and quoted Huey P. Newton's 'If you don't believe in lead, you're already dead'.<sup>42</sup> The Motherfuckers' actions included shooting the poet Kenneth Koch with blanks as he gave a reading at a church (actually the Poetry Project at St Mark's Church-in-the-

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>40</sup> KME, 91.

<sup>41</sup> 'Affinity Group = A Street Gang with an Analysis', King Mob Echo 3 (1969), 118.

<sup>42</sup> See Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker: An Anthology of Rants, Posters and More.



Bowery, though King Mob's telling of the tale omits this important context<sup>43</sup>). Like the Black Panther Party, the Motherfuckers complemented their direct actions with a social programme, and involved themselves in tenant struggles, rent strikes, and the (illegal) provision of food and medical supplies to disadvantaged inner-city neighbourhoods.<sup>44</sup> 'But perhaps the most radical aspect of all they did during the summer of '68', Gray writes,

can be seen as their faltering but persistent attempt to create a new form of self-expression beyond art and politics: a new revolutionary *language*. In the first place, they started to write in the language of the streets. What, a few months before, had been 'The poverty against which man has been constantly struggling is not merely the poverty of material goods; in fact, in industrially advanced countries the disappearance of material poverty has revealed the poverty of existence itself' became 'Your community represents death. You eat dead food. You live dead lives. You fuck dead women. Everything about you is dead... The struggle is for real life...' From the Situationist SALON down to Skid Row.<sup>45</sup>

Gray's terms—the supersession of art, the poverty of existence—are clearly indebted to his reading of the SI, but at the same time he signals a certain distrust of Situationist rhetoric. As he recoils from what he perceives as the haughtiness or inaccessible difficulty of the French 'Situationist SALON', Gray is attracted to Black Mask and the Motherfuckers for their bluntness, their immediacy, their lack of sophistication—all of which are qualities that Gray associates with 'the streets' and the new lumpen that he and his English Situationist associates had been trying to infiltrate. Gray also demonstrates the English Situationists' thirst for the new, and their rejection of that which is already politically recognisable and legitimised. Bourgeois society may represent death, Gray infers, but the language with which the SI levels its critique of bourgeois society is not one of vigour and vitality. The SI is instead secluded away in the salon, an image heavy with historical and class associations. On the other hand, Black Mask and the Motherfuckers represent 'a new revolutionary language'.

---

<sup>43</sup> For a full account, see Daniel Kane, *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2003), 172–173. Kane records that the 'gunman' was the poet Allen Van Newkirk, and that Koch and attendees originally thought the action was in solidarity with the jailed poet Amiri Baraka. It was from Baraka's poem 'Black People!' (1969) that Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker took its name. For King Mob's version, see *King Mob Echo* 3 (1969), 111.

<sup>44</sup> It is worth remembering the social projects that such groups established, which reactionary histories typically ignore. The same has happened to the English urban guerrilla group the Angry Brigade, whose members had previously established Claimants' Unions. See Gordon Carr, *The Angry Brigade: The Cause and the Case* (London: Gollancz 1975).

<sup>45</sup> *King Mob Echo* 3 (1969), 113.



## We're Looking for People Who Like to Draw

King Mob's exposure to Black Mask and the Motherfuckers prompted a shift in the English group's practice away from the radical sociology inherited from *Heatwave* and the English Section, and towards a more aesthetic practice in keeping with the Americans' street-gang posturing. In the pamphlets and posters that accompanied their actions, the Motherfuckers' utilised an overblown, aggressive, and cartoonishly violent aesthetic (Fig. 14). Their iconographic repertoire consists of fiercely masculine Native and Latin American revolutionaries, skulls, skeletons, and occultist images, and only the occasional, and then highly sexualised, representation of femininity.<sup>46</sup>

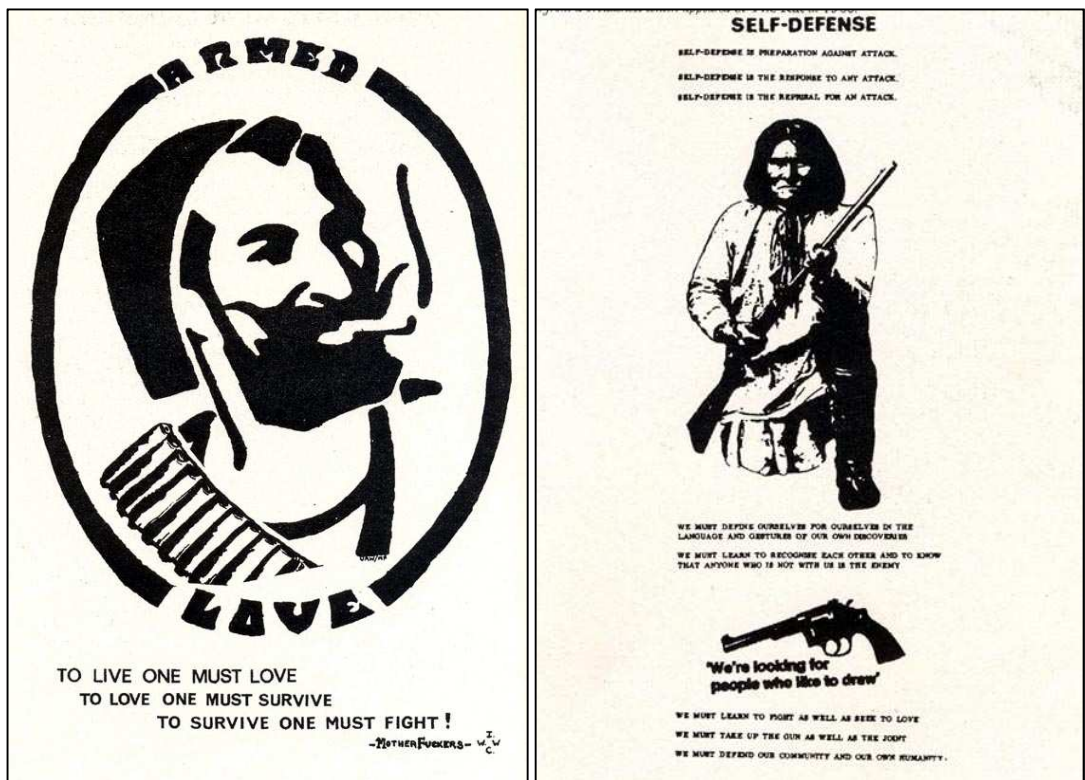


Fig. 14: Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker imagery<sup>47</sup>

The dichotomy that Gray establishes between the Situationist salon and the brutal honesty of the Motherfuckers is not entirely accurate. *Internationale Situationniste* plays with confrontational and explicit imagery, and includes much visual material chosen to offend bourgeois sensibilities, though it is used in a different manner to the Motherfuckers'. The SI's imagery was typically détourned; that is, found images were

<sup>46</sup> For a reading of the sexism and homophobia of the Black Mask, Motherfucker and King Mob aesthetics, see my article, 'Sex and the Situs', *World Picture* 4 (Spring 2010), available at [http://english.okstate.edu/worldpicture/WP\\_4/Cooper.html](http://english.okstate.edu/worldpicture/WP_4/Cooper.html) [accessed 10/05/2012].

<sup>47</sup> *Up Against the Wall Motherfucker: An Anthology of Rants, Posters and More*, 30, 54.

placed into a new context, or given a caption that expressed a sentiment designed to expose the spectacular ideology latent in the original image. Most of the Motherfuckers' imagery does not convey this same criticality. It addresses its viewer directly and performs a type of interpellation comparable to the famous 'Uncle Sam Needs You' propaganda. Where the SI negates, the Motherfuckers affirm: the Motherfuckers trade in role-models, objects of desire, and figures of identification.

The Motherfuckers' imagery, frequently recycled by King Mob, does not seek to make its viewer question her own relationship to the image (or, at least, this function is not prioritised). The SI used *détournement* to affect precisely this type of reflexivity. As demonstrated in Fig. 15, the SI used text to interrupt a familiar visual mode (cartoons, pornography, reportage, etc.). The text is of a different register to that of the image, and the juxtaposition of the two forces new readings from the ensemble. The *détourned* image is the antistrophe to the original image; the *détourned* image is the negative, or even the undoing, of the original image. Something new is revealed about the original. The image of the topless woman who is made to say that, 'the emancipation of the workers will be their own work', not only makes explicitly political an ostensibly apolitical image, but also locates pornography in the same spectacular regime of representation that simultaneously promises and refuses anything beyond itself.

Yet something else also happens: the accusation is levelled not only at the original image, but also at the viewer. The political intrudes into the passive, and one is forced to recognise one's own immergence in—or, more precisely, the impossibility of an alterior position to—the spectacle's reproduction of ideology through the visual. The SI removes any privileged or autonomous position from which one could engage with the image. For example, the photograph of the Black man being burned in front of a crowd of onlooking White men is clearly deeply unsettling, yet the SI's addition of the comment, 'The roles reserved for Negros in the spectacle', refuses to identify the position from which the viewer can express her repulsion. The image is made doubly unsettling as it is hijacked by this deeply sardonic comment: certainly, the viewer should feel outraged at the scene; but because the comment doesn't confirm that outrage, the viewer is forced to reflect on how the particular visual register (reportage photography and documentary) positions its viewers and prescribes their responses.



Fig. 15: Images from Internationale Situationniste<sup>48</sup>

Situationist visual *détournement* attempts not only to defamiliarise certain types of image, but also defamiliarise and complicate the way that we engage with those images. In contrast, and to their detriment, the Motherfuckers gladly utilise a range of spectacular tropes to produce images that encourage straightforward modes of identification. Although both approaches target the living death of bourgeois society, both also propagate other forms of repression. The Motherfuckers' imagery addresses itself exclusively to the gaze of the White heterosexual male. The SI fails to address those forms of repression which are so obviously entrenched in many of the images it chose to *détourner* yet which fall beyond the remit of Situationist discourse, such as heteronormativity and sexism: in the photo above, the SI says nothing of the woman, only of the worker.<sup>49</sup>

King Mob was ideologically closer to the SI than to the hippie mysticism of Morea's groups, though it was aesthetically closer to the Motherfuckers. King Mob's Anglicisation of the Motherfuckers' American(a) aesthetic replaces its alpha male excesses with a less erotic black humour, which is drawn more from Andy Capp than Geronimo and replaces the erect phallus with toiler-door scribbles of cock-and-balls (Fig. 16 and 17).<sup>50</sup> King Mob's aesthetic counteracts the Motherfuckers' earnestness, lack of irony, and lack of reflexivity with a provocative celebration of the crude and

<sup>48</sup> *Internationale Situationniste* 9 (August 1964): 9, 36.

<sup>49</sup> For a discussion of the SI's sexism, see Kelly Baum, 'The Sex of the Situationist International', *October* 126 (Fall 2008): 23-43.

<sup>50</sup> See Cooper, 'Sex and the Situs'.

the bagatelle.<sup>51</sup> King Mob's fixation on sexual organs is reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin's exposition, via Rabelais, of the politically subversive meanings of the carnival and the grotesque.<sup>52</sup> King Mob shares with Rabelais a delight in the 'bodily lower stratum' and the unbridled pleasures associated with the lower classes. Just as the Rabelaisian carnival was an inversion of the church's hegemony, and Bakhtin's invocation of the pleasures of social disorder an implicit challenge to Stalinism, so was King Mob's glorification of base pleasures a condemnation of the SI's refusal to represent joy and frivolity.<sup>53</sup>

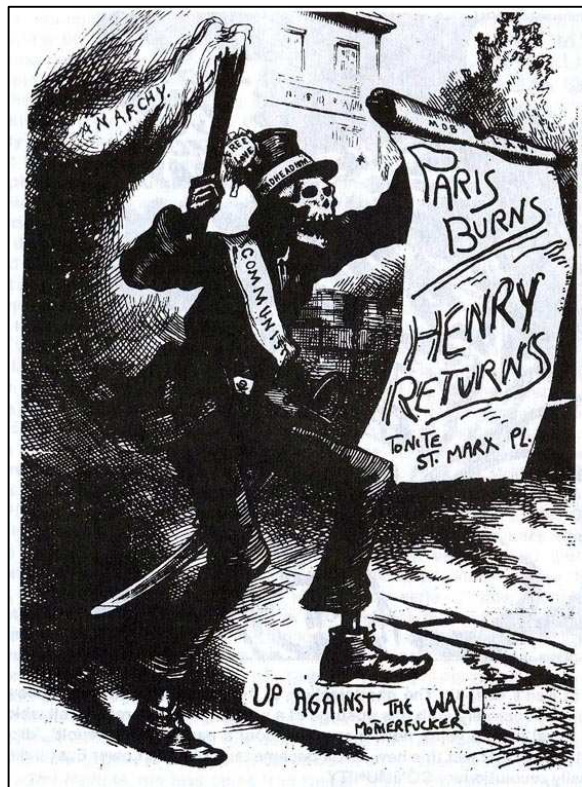


Fig. 16: Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker image reproduced by King Mob<sup>54</sup>

King Mob's aesthetic is lumpenproletarianised, an attempt to project the under-class position that it wanted to embody. King Mob's iconography followed but took leave from the Motherfuckers, to draw on archetypes, caricatures, and myth-

<sup>51</sup> *Rebel Worker* and *Heatwave* had delighted in the black humour of the Surrealists evident in Breton's *Anthology of Black Humour* (1939). Penelope Rosemont writes, 'Unlike other forms of humour, black humour is totally unacceptable to present society [...] Black humour releases all of the power of unconscious desire'. 'Humour or Not or Less or Else', *Rebel Worker* 6 (May 1966), KME, 12.

<sup>52</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press 1984).

<sup>53</sup> That is not to say that the SI refused the possibility of joy and frivolity. Biographical accounts suggest that many Situationists were indeed practising libertines despite the oftentimes prudish nature of their work. See my article, 'Sex and the Situs.'

<sup>54</sup> KME, 109.



figures of an English lumpenproletariat. The repeated appearances of Jack Ripper in King Mob's journals signal its interest in antihero nastiness, but also the inherently literary nature of King Mob's project: the new lumpen whom King Mob represents as the true English Situationist subjects are stereotyped villains from comic books, tabloid newspapers, and horror stories. It is, of course, actually very patronising to associate the (sub-)working-classes with swearing, obscenity, and violence; ideologically, that association is typically made by the ruling classes. Yet King Mob's delight in ugliness and provocation is pantomimic. King Mob's revulsion towards English bourgeois values manifests itself as a desire to be revolting in return. King Mob was more interested in theatrically upsetting the bourgeoisie by conjuring and exaggerating its worst nightmares than actually organising or sympathetically representing the repressed classes.

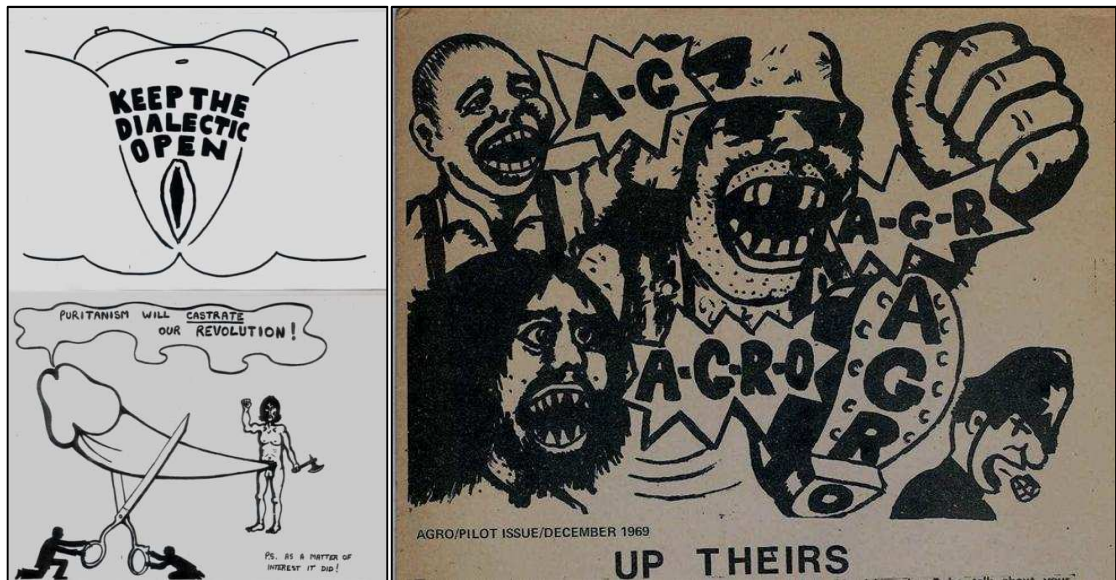


Fig. 17: King Mob posters attributed to Richard 'Irish' Bell<sup>55</sup>

King Mob's calculated brutishness contributes towards its critique of both English bourgeois society and the SI's moral haughtiness and visual austerity. In (dis)respect to the former, King Mob continued the project that Cyril Connolly recognised in English Surrealism, to 'generally tweak the tale of that old circus lion the British Bourgeoisie'<sup>56</sup> (in France, of course, this is the tradition of *épater la bourgeoisie*); in (dis)respect to the latter, King Mob protested that the SI's aesthetic reserve neither challenged the conservatism of the spectacle nor addressed itself to those most in need

<sup>55</sup> 'A Hidden History of King Mob (Posters/Cartoons)'.

<sup>56</sup> Connolly, 'It's got here at last!'

of Situationist theory. King Mob's tactic of separatist violence is explained (and retrospectively renounced) by David and Stuart Wise in their reflections on their King Mob days, their 1978 article 'End of Music (Punk, Reggae: A Critique)':

King Mob's hysterical overemphasis (without adequate explanation) of violence, whether Futurist, or contemporary hooligan outbursts, played into the hands of a charismatic romanticism of deeds which mistakenly equated genuine theoretical development with the dead hand of academia. Without such a distinction the way was open for the return of English philistinism and the renewed acceptance of the university salon.<sup>57</sup>

Violence, they suggest, is legitimate but only when distinguished as Situationist rather than mindless (a qualification that King Mob was not always able to convey). The violence of the SI's texts and images, on the other hand, is at the level of form, the negation of spectacular forms. The violence of King Mob's aesthetic, however, is enacted primarily at the level of content: the crudity of its language, and the moral repulsiveness of its imagery. The cartoon penises, the glorification of murderers, the shameless sexism: all seem to ask, how far can we go within received forms? Can we make something so ugly that even the spectacle rejects it, or whose obscenity is actually illegal?

In his sprawling and vitriolic account of his days with King Mob, 'Jumbled Notes', David Wise comments on Tom Vague's collection of King Mob documents, *King Mob Echo: English Section of the Situationist International* (2000), which remains the only one of its kind. Wise notes that the crudest cartoons are not included. He considers this a success for King Mob:

we were out to upset and we really didn't care that much just how we did it. If that meant public lavatory walls as our sources of inspiration too—well so be it! Cocks and Cunts and Shitting—well I never! [... these cartoons] meant that King Mob could never really be mentioned again in respectable PC circles<sup>58</sup>.

Wise perhaps overstates the likelihood that King Mob would ever have been discussed in 'PC circles', and his attack on Vague is certainly more of the aforementioned pro-situ sectarianism, but his implicit critique of the squeamishness and self-censorship of left-libertarian factions, including the SI, seems accurate.

<sup>57</sup> David and Stuart Wise, 'End of Music (Punk, Reggae: A Critique)', 69.

<sup>58</sup> Wise, 'Jumbled Notes'.

King Mob's disaffiliation from the scene of the political included a great effort to distinguish itself from the counterculture's prevalent hippie ideology (though of course King Mob now appears very much a part of the hippie movement, albeit not in its peace-and-love guise). To do so, King Mob performed the role of the lumpenprole in its most bastardised and brutish form. David and Stuart Wise offer a characteristically bilious reflection on King Mob's self-image:

The most deranged manifestations of hate against the present organisation of society were greeted with fascination. Jack the Ripper, John Christie (Christie lives slogan [graffitied] opposite former Rillington Place mews) and child killer Mary Bell. [...] Look at the monstrosities produced by bourgeois society—isn't that sufficient to condemn the golden afternoon of hippy ideology? [...] Better to be horrible than a pleasant altruistic hippy, as a kind of undialectical overreaction to hippy.<sup>59</sup>

The aesthetic form that most clearly corresponds with King Mob's desire for an absolute anti-sociality is (or, after Banksy and co., was) graffiti (Fig. 18). Alongside the Hammersmith & City tube line at Westbourne Park, where affluent commuters arrived into London from the suburbs, King Mob painted:

SAME THING DAY AFTER DAY — TUBE — WORK — DINER [sic] — WORK —  
TUBE — ARMCHAIR — TV — SLEEP — TUBE — WORK — HOW MUCH MORE  
CAN YOU TAKE? ONE IN TEN GO MAD — ONE IN FIVE CRACKS UP<sup>60</sup>

More King Mob graffiti appeared around the areas of West London which had become the focus of the city's counterculture. Much of this graffiti détourned popular hippie expressions into violent proclamations that echoed the Futurists:

ALL YOU NEED IS DYNAMITE (The Beatles' 'All you need is love')  
HASHISH IS THE OPIUM OF THE PEOPLE (Marx's 'Religion is the opium of the people')  
I DON'T BELIEVE IN NOTHING — I JUST FEEL LIKE THEY OUGHT TO BURN  
DOWN THE WORLD — JUST LET IT BURN DOWN BABY (taken from a  
Newsweek article, but a reference to the expression 'burn baby burn' which  
had been popularised during the Watts uprising)<sup>61</sup>

Graffiti is typical of King Mob's practice: antisocial, ephemeral, essentially immaterial, and anonymously spectral. Like the graffiti that appeared all over Paris'

<sup>59</sup> David and Stuart Wise, 'End of Music (Punk, Reggae: A Critique)', 67. The article also mentions Gray's idea for an unpleasant pop group, which is frequently cited as the inspiration for Malcolm McLaren's forming of the Sex Pistols.

<sup>60</sup> KME, 92.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 100.

Latin Quarter during May and June 1968, King Mob's literal street-writing was an attempt to enact the twin sentiments of *la philosophie est dans la rue* and *les murs ont la parole*—to bring poetry to life.



Fig. 18: King Mob graffiti around West London<sup>62</sup>

There are two aspects to King Mob's project on which I now want to focus, both of which are exemplified by its graffiti. Firstly, in the following section ('The Negation of Language and the Language of Negation') I shall theorise the differences between the speech acts of King Mob and of the SI, in terms of what they both attempted to do with and to language. In the subsequent section ('King Mob's Peculiar Romanticism') I shall apply that theorisation to a study of how King Mob responded to Vaneigem's call for revolutionaries to be conscious of their historical predecessors, which included, for King Mob, English Romantic poets. Both of these sections are concerned with King Mob's surprising utilisation of the literary as a mode of critique.

### **The Negation of Language and the Language of Negation**

I noted, above, Rancière's claim that political intervention originates as speech acts that are 'argumentative and poetic'. In a more recent article, 'The Aesthetic Dimension: Aesthetics, Politics, Knowledge' (2009), Rancière clarifies how the

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 92; Ibid., 98.



speaking political subject comes into being. He writes that ‘the part with no part’—the agent of his conception of politics, whose recognition as a speaking subject disrupts the status quo and catalyses its more democratic rearrangement—is not a figure determined by class or any other empirical social category, but is instead a role, the idealised figure of democratic engagement, that can be played by anyone. The part with no part, Rancière argues, ‘does not mean the underdogs but means anyone. The power of the demos is the power of whoever’<sup>63</sup>. Political intervention is thus something that is performed, staged, theatricalised; the political subject acts ‘in the mode of the as if’<sup>64</sup>. Rancière describes this ‘as if’ as ‘the aesthetic dimension of politics: the staging of a dissensus—of a conflict of sensory worlds—by subjects who act as if they were the people’<sup>65</sup>.

I am not attempting to conflate the projects of King Mob and of Rancière. The latter’s paradigm is of social democracy and civil engagement, whereas King Mob wanted to upset society as it exists rather than be assimilated into it; King Mob’s disruption was more open-ended, less programmatic. Yet Rancière’s observations regarding the aesthetic dimension of political intervention illuminate King Mob’s tactics, most obviously by way of the latter’s performative lumpenproletarianisation, its Anglicisation and aestheticisation of Situationist theory. King Mob acted *as if* it was a nightmarish villain, *as if* it was a band of ultra-left football hooligans, *as if* it was the spirit of the bomb-throwing insurrectionist. Most of its activity, though, seems to have been *writing about itself*.<sup>66</sup> Many years after his involvement in the English Section, T.J. Clark made a similar observation about the disconcerting literariness of Debord’s political career. Clark asks,

how are we to understand the obvious (but scandalous) fact that in Debord’s case politics was largely *writing* – that it turned on the building of an inimitable polemical and expository style,

---

<sup>63</sup> Jacques Rancière, ‘The Aesthetic Dimension: Aesthetics, Politics, Knowledge’, *Critical Inquiry* 36:1 (Autumn 2009): 10.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> In fact, King Mob’s most immediate political intervention was much more socially democratic and communitarian than its rhetoric would suggest. In June 1968, King Mob members, dressed as pantomime horses and gorillas, convinced local families to occupy the closed-off Powis Square Gardens, West London. King Mob tore down the square’s gates, and the council subsequently opened the gardens to the public with a children’s play area.

assembled over decades, born from a series of engagements with, on, and against the French language?<sup>67</sup>

To borrow Rancière's formulation, the problem that Clark highlights is that the aesthetic dimension of Debord's politics threatens to overshadow their material engagement with the world. Clark signals a typical reservation regarding what is perceived to be the subsumption of actual (yet unspecified) political activity into mere writing. King Mob's oeuvre is also a scandalously literary one—in the double sense of there being a lot of writing, but also a type of writing that uses rhetoric and allusions that are uncannily literary—though its literariness operates in a different way to Debord's. Before I measure the difference between these two types of literariness, I want to establish what is scandalous in the revelation that Situationist critique, in its French or English forms, might be fundamentally literary.

The problem is this: if the literary is privileged as a mode of critique, this would seem to contradict the avant-gardist dictum to which the SI subscribed that art and life—and by extension, writing and politics—must be sublated out of separation. A literary mode of critique would seem to preserve the separation and specialisation of different categories of critical practice rather than sublate such categories into a new, total, practice as the SI desired. As Kotányi recognised at the 1961 conference, the SI needed to resist the development of a Situationist aesthetic, including an identifiably Situationist literary style, because this, like the instauration of a dogmatic philosophy of 'Situationism' (the existence of which the SI repeatedly denied<sup>68</sup>), would have been the first step towards the recuperation of the group's critique. Debord, for example, insisted that his legacy would not be as a writer but as someone who exposed and acted directly on the conditions of his world-historical moment.<sup>69</sup> Across his many efforts towards producing his own panegyric, Debord claimed to have acted against disciplinary specialism. The scandal that Clark recognises is that despite his protestations, Debord fits the mould of the *littérateur* disconcertingly well.

---

<sup>67</sup> T.J. Clark, 'Foreword', in Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press 1999), vii.

<sup>68</sup> See Situationist International, 'Definitions' (1958), in *SIA*, 51–52.

<sup>69</sup> Debord (over-)states his individual world historical significance throughout his autobiographical text *Panegyric* (1989) and film *in girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978). In the text that announced the SI's dissolution, he claims, 'If it is possible for the pervasive influence of the SI to be denounced everywhere, this is because the SI is itself merely the concentrated expression of an historical subversion which is everywhere.' Situationist International, *The Real Split in the International*, trans. John McHale (London: Pluto Press 2003), 7.

I proposed that the literariness of the English Section—which, stylistically, remained in mimicry of the SI—can be read as a certain *jouissance*, a freedom and delight in language that consoles the SI's recuperation anxiety and perhaps affirms the existence of some sort of anti-spectacular and non-recuperated ontology. Of the spectacle's treatment of language, Debord writes, 'The most extreme destruction of language can be officially welcomed [by the spectacle] as a positive development because it amounts to yet one more way of flaunting one's acceptance of a status quo where all communication has been smugly declared absent'; at the same time, the spectacle's function 'is to use culture to bury all historical memory.'<sup>70</sup> As a response to what he perceived as the degradation of language and the flattening of cultural experience and history, Debord's particular prose manner and its characteristics that Clark recognises can, therefore, be understood as the summoning of a 'literature irreconcilable with the [spectacle's] standard of truth and interpretation'<sup>71</sup>, to appropriate an expression from Keston Sutherland's analysis of the comparably literary style that Marx chose for *Capital* (1864). In short: certain discursive modes that can variously be described as literary might signal territory not yet entirely colonised by the spectacle. Through a discussion of Debord's literariness and that of King Mob, I hope to identify those modes and evaluate their anti-spectacular tactics.

King Mob's literariness was of a vastly different type to that of Debord and the SI, yet it maintained the belief in the potential of a certain usage of language to gesture towards something else. To grasp precisely this difference, I shall first recapitulate what I consider to be the character of Debord's literariness. Debord's writing, as he describes it, reflects his 'style of negation'. He attempts to portray the antithetical, negative, images of his objects of critique: the false positives of spectacular ideology. His prose is precise and elegant, though abstruse, in which are found confident and totalising assertions rather than dialectics-in-process or the working-through of logical contradictions. The resultant impression of hermeneutic conclusivity has caused some critics to take Debord to task for claiming that his is a dialectical method.<sup>72</sup> The

---

<sup>70</sup> SoS, thesis 192.

<sup>71</sup> Keston Sutherland, 'Marx in Jargon', *World Picture* 1 (Spring 2008), available at [http://english.okstate.edu/worldpicture/WP\\_1.1/KSutherland.pdf](http://english.okstate.edu/worldpicture/WP_1.1/KSutherland.pdf) [accessed 10/05/2012].

<sup>72</sup> 'One would have expected [Society of the Spectacle] to be a violent attack against its adversaries, but in fact this ostentatious discourse has no other aim than showing off. Admittedly it has a certain beauty. The style is flawless. Since any question that does not have an automatic response has been banished from the very first lines, one would search in vain for any fault.' Claude Lefort, quoted in Situationist International, 'How Not to Understand Situationist Books' (1969), in *SIA*, 336–348.

representative trope of Debord's prose style, I have suggested, is the chiasmus, whose structure mirrors the process of *détournement* that characterises Debord's specifically *negative* dialectic, yet which plays, in the first instance, on language.

King Mob's, on the other hand, is a more allusive and intertextual literariness, which invokes a pop-cultural memory diametrically opposed to Debord's more conceptual engagement. The visual is not experienced by way of form, as in Debord's chiasmus, but by way of content, as an overload of diegetic imagery. These images are drawn mostly from lurid and lowbrow cultural sources. The *dramatis personae* of King Mob texts, and the King Mob persona itself, are drawn from sensationalist representations of the lumpenproletariat. The diegetic visuality of King Mob texts is demonstrated in the passage quoted above in which Marinetti is presented as a rampant thug. King Mob encourages the reader to visualise the figure of Marinetti kicking over the table as one might picture a half-remembered scene from a movie. Debord's iconophobia is thus inverted in King Mob, which is phanopoetic in Ezra Pound's sense of using 'a word to throw a visual image on the reader's imagination'<sup>73</sup>. King Mob's trade in images extends beyond the content of its texts, which were usually illustrated by visual materials or experienced as visual interventions (such as graffiti).

These differences in literariness (roughly, Debord's formalism and King Mob's pop-cultural allusiveness) relate to where Debord and King Mob locate anti-spectacular authenticity. Debord is reluctant to prescribe the content of anti-spectacular forms; King Mob attempts to identify sites of contestation immanent to the spectacle and to exacerbate tensions therein. Marinetti, skid row, dynamite, millenarian peasants, historical rioters: King Mob's violent language abounds in symbols, icons, and images of that which the group stands for and authenticates, which is usually drawn from English lumpen vulgarity or American anarchist radicalism. Debord, on the other hand, refuses to offer any conception of authenticity other than the experience of his style of negation. Situationist authenticity—the anti-spectacular—is represented in Debord as form and in King Mob as transgressive content.

The shared principle of King Mob and Debord's literary modes is their performativity—the authors' beliefs that literature can intervene into life praxis to signal

---

<sup>73</sup> Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions 2010), 37. Debord is closer to Pound's category of 'logopoesis'.

a different mode of being. Debord's style is meant to be experienced as something frustrating, to be struggled with, that doesn't offer itself up easily, because the intellectual labour it demands acts as an antidote to the infantilising and passive conditions of the spectacle. King Mob, I suggest, misrecognises and discards this difficulty, identifying it as an exclusivist quality emerging from the so-called Situationist Salon. Debord's difficulty is replaced with something more quotidian, familiar, and accessible. King Mob's anglicised (by which I really mean ironic, self-deprecating, and gladly thuggish) aesthetic invites a more imaginative labour of visualising the world according to King Mob's hyperbolically nihilistic and violent portrayal. Although King Mob maintains the Situationist *jouissance* in language and rhetoric, it is now channelled towards specific and recognisable categories of experience, whereas Debord attempts to produce something alien, something unfamiliar (albeit, qua *détournement*, from the negation of something familiar).

The irony of what I am describing is that Debord sees the spectacle as infantilising and so makes something difficult, and then King Mob sees Debord as difficult and so makes something infantilising. King Mob's critical method reproduces a populist yet cynical philistinism unfortunately prevalent in the English left, it reproduces stereotypes of the haughty French and the thuggish English, and its formal familiarity relinquishes the difficulty that, for the SI, guards against recuperation. At the end of this chapter I shall offer a balance-sheet of that which is gained and that which is lost in King Mob's treatment of Situationist theory, but at the moment I want only to repeat the verdict to which I alluded in the previous chapter that King Mob *détourned* the SI. King Mob's lack of critical nuance was, paradoxically, a continuation of Debord's scandalously literary mode of critique, though a continuation on different terms. King Mob negated the SI's style of negation to produce a style of affirmation. Where Debord and the SI are anti-spectacular, King Mob is hyper-spectacular. The literary styles of King Mob and the SI are dialectically opposed and connected, much like the two clauses of a chiasmus.

### **King Mob's Peculiar Romanticism**

I want now examine a little more closely what I am describing as the affirmative and aesthetic nature of the English Situationist critique as demonstrated by King Mob's scandalous (in every sense) literariness. I want also to elaborate some of my hypotheses above and question further the implications of producing a critique that is so rooted in Situationist theory yet which also abandons key elements of the

SI's programme, such as the latter's refusal to acknowledge itself as a direct continuation of already existing traditions. Does the development of an identifiably English Situationist aesthetic condemn the critique to recuperation, as the SI predicted, or does such a development signal a move away from the self-imposed discursive isolation of the SI?

I have offered one understanding of King Mob's literariness as the affirmation that there exists something which remains productively incommensurable with the spectacle—whereby 'literariness', following Clark, relates to an *a priori* engagement with language rather than more immediately material social conditions. At the same time, King Mob took heed from Vaneigem's advice to revolutionaries that they must become conscious of historical revolutionary movements and rescue those from recuperation or obscurity. To that end, King Mob summoned and reanimated a number of figures whom it considered to be a part of its dissident genealogy. I have already mentioned the Swing rioters, the Luddites, and the Gordon rioters, as well as King Mob's American contemporaries Black Mask and the Motherfuckers. However, King Mob's literariness, its historical consciousness, and its irreducible Englishness all come together in its relationship with early English Romantic poetry.

I have already included, though not yet highlighted, two instances of the English Situationists' engagement with Romanticism. Firstly, the English Section, in 'The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution', declared that 'delinquent violence is the spontaneous overthrow of the abstract and contemplative role imposed on everyone'. The statement *détourns* Wordsworth's famous verdict in his 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*, that 'poetry is the overflow of powerful feelings'<sup>74</sup>. The English Section's conflation of violence and poetry harks back to a long avant-gardist tradition of violent provocation as (anti-)art gesture, epitomised by Breton's verdict that 'The simplest surrealist act consists of dashing down the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd'<sup>75</sup>, and replicated in Gray's aforementioned characterisation of Marinetti as a thuggish aggressor. Secondly, King Mob's article 'Desolation Row' had included Vaneigem's criticism of Marx for overlooking the fact that, 'Certain features of Romanticism had already proved [...]

---

<sup>74</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Preface' (1800), in William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, ed. E.L. Brett & A.R. Jones (London and New York: Routledge 1991), 246.

<sup>75</sup> Breton, 'Second Manifesto of Surrealism', 125.

that art—the pulse of culture and society—is the first index of the decay and disintegration of values<sup>76</sup>.

King Mob appropriated lines from Blake and Coleridge and used them as graffiti around countercultural West London (Fig. 19). From Coleridge's 'Dejection: An Ode' (1802), King Mob took, and misspelled, the lines, 'A grief without a pang, void, dark, drear, a stifled drowsy grief'<sup>77</sup> (21-22); from Blake's 'Marriage of Heaven and Hell', it took both, 'The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom'<sup>78</sup> and 'The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction.'<sup>79</sup> The former of Blake's aphorisms had already been appropriated by the SI in the essay, 'Now, the SI'<sup>80</sup>. When the English Section translated the SI's pamphlet 'On the poverty of student life', it added the aphorism to the text's conclusion. King Mob's reproduction of these lines of Romantic poetry as graffiti performs the 'decay and disintegration of values' in a particularly visceral manner, and literally inscribes King Mob's everyday environment with the spectral utterances of Blake and Coleridge. A radical temporal breach is affected as the Romantics are made to speak through the same channels as the antisocial delinquents with whom the English Situationists allied themselves.

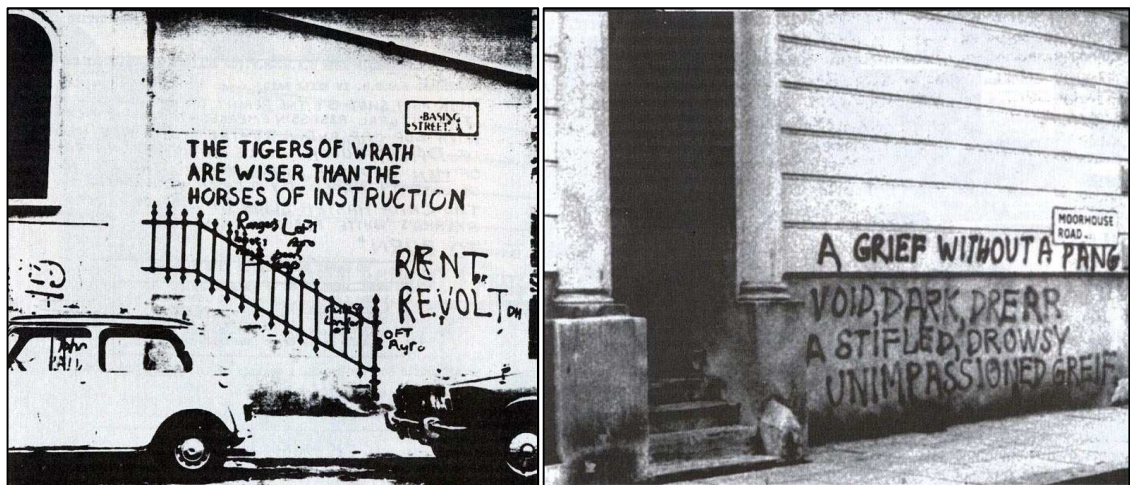


Fig. 19: King Mob graffiti<sup>81</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Vaneigem, 'Desolation Row', 80.

<sup>77</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, ed. William Keach (London: Penguin 1997), 308. King Mob's graffiti has 'greif' for 'grief'.

<sup>78</sup> William Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' (1790-1793), in *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press 1966), 150.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>80</sup> Situationist International, 'Now, the SI' (1964), in *SIA*, 174-178.

<sup>81</sup> *KME*, 96, 94.

English Romantic poetry may seem a far cry from both the SI's haughty iconoclasm and the delinquency channelled by English Situationists, particularly if one thinks only of the version of English Romantic poetry that has been canonised and, in Situationist terminology, recuperated throughout the history of its popular and academic reception. A visit to the Lake District today will starkly demonstrate how far the movement's commodification has eclipsed its radical origins; yet Wordsworth and Blake in particular, and Coleridge to a lesser extent, feature as important figures in King Mob's historical constellation.

In relation to the methodology of my study—my attempt to account for the diachronic and synchronic resonances across movements from different cultural and historical contexts—these early English Romantic poets represent another complex bond between England and France by way of their reactions to the French revolution beginning in 1789. Romanticism, in its early English manifestations, offers another perspective regarding the aesthetic formations that have risen from that Anglo-Franco axis, with the additional opportunity to consider the resonances of the 1790s in the 1960s. Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* and Blake's 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' (begun 1790), were composed in light of the revolutionary situation in France. At one moment, Wordsworth and Blake were hopeful for the prospects of the French Revolution. Both men were actively engaged in the political debates of the period, which arose from traditions of Dissent and radical humanism.<sup>82</sup> Their optimism faded, however, as the Revolution became the Terror, and Wordsworth and Blake would react differently as revolutionary fervour and hope became despondency and disillusionment. The English Situationists too were influenced by events in France—those which culminated in the mass strikes and occupations of May and June 1968—though their aesthetic response drew also on a native Romantic inheritance. These influences deserve unpacking, and this process touches on various issues: the aesthetic theory of the English Situationists; the paradoxes of Situationist theory, which become apparent once it is removed from its French political and philosophical context; the latent radicalism of early English Romantic poetry; and the Romantic presence in the 1960s counterculture.

---

<sup>82</sup> Those traditions are chronicled in E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon 1964). The response of English Romanticism in general to revolutionary France is elaborated in Aidan Day, *Romanticism* (London: Routledge 1996); the response of Blake in particular in Saree Makdisi, *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2003).



To investigate King Mob in this manner—to subject it to a literary critical analysis, to treat its work first and foremost as literature—is undoubtedly Situationist heresy; but I do so to emphasise the aesthetic dimension of King Mob’s project and the political implications thereof. What does it mean that King Mob, so aggressively critical of civilised society and the bourgeois canons of *EngLit*, should turn not only to literature as its mode of expressing itself, but to a movement as thoroughly canonised as that of English Romantic poetry? Its return to Romanticism indicates the productive contradictions of King Mob’s identity: its disdain for high-culture and its recourse to canonical voices of English literature; its pure anti-sociality in the present and its assertion of its historical community; its desire for a new revolutionary language and its ventriloquism of poets nearly two centuries old.

Critical attention to King Mob is scant, and there are no studies of its Romantic inheritance, but in his 1988 survey, ‘The Situationist International: Its Penetration into British Culture’, George Robertson notes the ‘peculiarly English Romanticism’ of King Mob. He explains,

For various reasons—a traditional British suspicion of intellectualism, the historical presence of a Romantic element in the British left avant-garde, etc.—it seems that in Britain there was an attraction to the superficial, subjective and spectacular aspects of the SI.<sup>83</sup>

Here Romanticism appears self-evidently as a conservativising influence; Robertson misses that King Mob was actively involved in a radicalised re-reading of Romanticism. Certainly, King Mob took up the challenge of developing a radical politics in and through a spectacular aesthetic—a programme in contravention of SI diktats—which was a result of its American anarchist connection. King Mob’s invocation of Romanticism indicates a historical consciousness quite at odds with Robertson’s accusations. King Mob’s historical consciousness, its desire to distance and differentiate itself from other elements of the London counterculture, and its reinvigoration of a radical Romanticism are all demonstrated in the recollections of King Mob members David and Stuart Wise. In ‘The End of Music’, they write,

Ideas were mooted in ’68 which were sufficiently tasteless to horrify the prevalent hippy ideology and its older, more conservative forms—romantic English pantheism. For instance, the dynamiting of a waterfall in the English lake district was

---

<sup>83</sup> Robertson, ‘The Situationist International: Its Penetration into British Culture’, 123.

suggested, with a message sprayed on a rock: 'Peace in Vietnam'—not because there was a deep going interest in the war like there was in the United States but because the comment was an absurdist response to ruralism and the revolution had to be aggressively urban. There was a suggestion to blow up Wordsworth's house in Ambleside, alongside the delphic comment *Coleridge lives*.<sup>84</sup>

The Wises' conception of the relationship between King Mob and the English Romantics is, in this instance, purely iconoclastic. These proposed but unrealised King Mob actions all abuse a specific image of Romanticism in order to aggravate King Mob's nemeses, those whom it perceived as the hippies who recognised in Romanticism a precursor to the ruralist, pacifist, and spiritualist counterculture that they envisioned. King Mob wanted something more visceral and violent, in rhetoric at least, and made Romanticism the medium and archive through which a revolutionary praxis was articulated (however seriously or mock-seriously). In his autobiographical account, 'Jumbled Notes', David Wise admits that King Mob did inherit something from the Romantic tradition and he describes English Romanticism as the most radical movement of its kind, far superior to 'anaemic' English Surrealism.<sup>85</sup> King Mob, Wise writes, attempted a 'revival through appreciative critique' of English Romanticism.<sup>86</sup> This 'appreciative critique' began with the English Section's engagement with Wordsworth.

#### *The Wordsworthian Authentic*

The source of the English Section's *détournement* of Wordsworth, his 1800 'Preface,' is the closest thing to a manifesto of English Romanticism, at least of the poetic movement's early phases. Wordsworth writes that his contributions to *Lyrical Ballads* were intended to evoke 'the principal laws of our nature' through 'the incidents of common life'. 'Low and rustic life', Wordsworth continues,

was generally chosen because in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are under less restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that situation our elementary feelings exist in a state of greater simplicity and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and from the

<sup>84</sup> David and Stuart Wise, 'End of Music (Punk, Reggae: A Critique)', 68.

<sup>85</sup> Wise, 'Jumbled Notes'.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

necessary character of rural occupations are more readily comprehended; and are more durable; and lastly, because in that situation the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.<sup>87</sup>

The passage abounds in botanical metaphors of the organic growth of authenticity: the better soil, the germination, the incorporation into nature. Nature, Wordsworth makes clear, is the source of authenticity, and rustic lives allow a closer attachment to that authentic natural world. He also associates with this rustic life a rustic aesthetic, which allows for the representation of authenticity with as little mediation as possible. Through his appraisal of the 'essential' and the 'elementary', Wordsworth introduces this aesthetic as a return rather than an innovation—the rustic aesthetic is something uncovered or recovered rather than discovered.

Wordsworth thus establishes a dichotomy between a rustic life that is experienced in all its richness and a more sophisticated life that has lost its immediate connection with nature. This dichotomy is echoed by the distinction made by Debord in the first thesis of *Society of the Spectacle*, the distinction that forms the basis of Situationist theory: 'In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation.'<sup>88</sup> I am aware that these connections seem overdetermined and historiographically somewhat abrupt, but I am trying to identify the Romanticism latent to Situationist theory, which King Mob exacerbated. Like Wordsworth, Debord associates authenticity with that which is experienced directly, without mediation. The society of the spectacle, for Debord, is characterised by representation divorced from experience, from the proliferation of the mass-media to the forms of political representation that accompany such alienated social relations.

What might be obscured to a contemporary reader, however, is how both Wordsworth and Debord's abstract and aesthetic formulations (both of which rely on idyllic, even prelapsarian states of authenticity, on which I shall comment below<sup>89</sup>) were issued as responses to socio-economic changes in late eighteenth century England and in post-war France respectively. More specifically, Wordsworth and Debord both

---

<sup>87</sup> Wordsworth, 'Preface', 244-245.

<sup>88</sup> SoS, thesis 7.

<sup>89</sup> This idealisation of lost authenticity is similar to the 'unrooted nostalgia' that Alastair Bonnett identifies in the Situationist critique. He argues that the SI's melancholic depiction of universal social alienation leads to 'romantic extremism' and the 'general assertion of dissatisfaction [... as] the only authentic political and personal path'. 'The Nostalgias of Situationist Subversion', *Theory, Culture & Society* 23 (2006): 33.

contended that authentic experience, or at least its possibility, was being obscured and sequestered by the phases of capitalist accumulation through which they were living.

Wordsworth composed *Lyrical Ballads* against the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution, when mass urbanisation threatened to eradicate the rustic life that Wordsworth eulogises (and, as before, idealises). Marx describes this period as a phase of primitive accumulation and the instauration of industrial capitalist production, when workers, while ‘freed’ from the bonds of feudalism, were violently expropriated from their land and, therefore, from their means of production.<sup>90</sup> Thus was established a class of people who were forced into cities through the enclosure of common land, who were left with only their labour-power to sell, and who were forced into lives of wage-labour: ‘the history of their expropriation’, Marx writes, ‘is written in the annals of mankind in blood and fire.’<sup>91</sup> Marx catalogues the means, coercive and legislative, that forcibly created the industrial working-class, and his insistence that ‘the methods of primitive accumulation are anything but idyllic’<sup>92</sup> indicates how Wordsworth’s retreat to images of rural idyll was a gesture of resistance. Wordsworth’s early radicalism was a literal radicalism, a return to *radix*, to the roots.

The socio-economic changes to which Debord’s text responds can also be understood as a phase of primitive accumulation. This argument is made by the Retort collective in its text, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (2005).<sup>93</sup> The critical concept of spectacle, Retort writes,

[was] a first stab at characterizing a new form of, or stage in, the accumulation of capital. What it named primarily was the submission of more and more facets of human sociability – areas of everyday life, forms of recreation, patterns of speech, idioms of local solidarity, kinds of ethical or aesthetic insubordination, the endless capacities of human beings to evade or refuse the orders brought down on them from on high – to the deadly solicitations (the lifeless bright sameness) of the market.<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> Marx, *Capital* Vol. 1, 873–904.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 875.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Retort includes ex-English Section member, T.J. Clark.

<sup>94</sup> Retort, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (London: Verso 2005), 19.

The spectacle represented capital's colonisation not of common land but of everyday life, the expansion of capitalist relations beyond economic production.<sup>95</sup> Debord passed the verdict that 'everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation' and, as an important clarification regarding the concept's materiality, adds that the spectacle 'is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.'<sup>96</sup> Debord, plagued with recuperation anxiety, was unwilling to explicitly identify a source of authenticity as had Wordsworth, though where the latter valorises the natural world, one can surmise that the former is in agreement with Marx's declaration that, 'man is not merely a natural being: he is a human natural being. [...] Therefore he is a *species being*'<sup>97</sup>. Both Wordsworth and Debord recognise that the processes of division inherent to capitalist accumulation—the division of labour in industrial production, and the division of experience and representation enacted by the spectacle—force the separation of man from (her/his) nature and thus from authentic experience.

There are growing bodies of work that examine the Romantic legacy in the modernist and avant-garde traditions from which emerged the SI<sup>98</sup>, and in the 1960s counterculture in which King Mob existed<sup>99</sup>, so while the specific Romantic-Situationist correspondence should come as no surprise, it remains curiously idiosyncratic. Rancière has recently observed that the logic of the SI and its critique of the spectacle are based in 'the Romantic vision of truth as non-separation'<sup>100</sup>, which I would historicise by insisting that the similarities between the prognoses of Wordsworth and Debord on authenticity and representation cannot be attributed to a priori aesthetic preferences, but to shared feelings of fear, anxiety, and anger at new phases of capitalist accumulation. However, though Wordsworth and Debord maintain similar conceptions of what constitutes and what obscures authenticity, thereafter their paths diverge: Wordsworth believed that there are poetic subjects that allow for

---

<sup>95</sup> The phrase 'The colonization of everyday life' was popularised by Henri Lefebvre, but he took the expression from Debord. See Michael Trebitsch, 'Preface: The Moment of Radical Critique', in Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life Vol. 2*, trans. John Moore (London: Verso 2002), xxii.

<sup>96</sup> SoS, thesis 4.

<sup>97</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: Prometheus Books 1988), 155.

<sup>98</sup> See, for example, Gabriel Josipovici, *Whatever Happened to Modernism?* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2010).

<sup>99</sup> Blake was particularly important figure for the counterculture. See, for example, Jeffrey J. Kripal, 'Reality Against Society: William Blake, Antinomianism, and the American Counterculture', *Common Knowledge* 13.1 (2007): 98–112.

<sup>100</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso 2009), 6.

the articulation of authenticity; Debord believed that any affirmative art would ultimately collude with the spectacle. I shall now trace this divergence, before plotting King Mob's precarious trajectory between the two.

Authenticity, according to Wordsworth, transfers itself through the 'passions of the heart', the 'passions of men', and 'elementary feelings'. Wordsworth makes concrete these abstractions. His contributions to *Lyrical Ballads* take as their subject matter a host of individualised but allegorical figures living in the English countryside, on whom he hangs his vision of authenticity. Take, for example, his poem 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' (1798). In response to changes in the Poor Laws which Wordsworth understood as an attack on mendicancy and almsgiving, Wordsworth's poem directly addresses the 'Statesmen' who had denounced the beggar's lack of economic productivity. Wordsworth advises those Statesmen to 'deem not this man useless' (67)<sup>101</sup>, and he launches a multi-tiered defence of the beggar.

Wordsworth begins with a Blakean affirmation of the interconnectedness of the spiritual and the material, to remind law-makers that all men should be equal: "Tis Nature's law [...] / A life and soul to every mode of being / Inseparably link'd" (73, 78-79). This argument is complemented by a more pragmatic, even utilitarian, argument whereby the beggar, as he passes through the village collecting alms, acquires a symbolic importance as manifestation of the community's charity: he is 'A silent monitor' (115) whose presence pushes the soul towards good and virtue. Finally, Wordsworth makes the Christian argument that the beggar facilitates the charity of even the poorest members of the community, who might be able to offer him only 'a blessing on his head' (155), but which allows for the demonstration of their selflessness. The beggar is, in the poem's telling, a solitary figure, but he performs a social function valuable in terms that are economic, humanistic, and theological.

In addition, as the beggar has become physically as much a part of the landscape as the birds and trees, he has achieved the incorporation into nature that Wordsworth valorises. Wordsworth concludes the poem by imploring the addressees to allow the beggar to live freely in the countryside, so that 'As in the eye of Nature he has liv'd, / So in the eye of Nature let him die' (188-189). That this final couplet should summon the 'eye of Nature' illuminates two of Wordsworth's assertions

---

<sup>101</sup> All references are to William Wordsworth, 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', in Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, hereafter cited in text by line number.

regarding the aesthetic representation of authenticity. In the first instance, Wordsworth is confident that there is a language suitable for the articulation of authenticity, evident not only in his rejection of high-poetic language in favour of the 'low and rustic' language and homespun wisdom of this maxim, but also in the uncluttered formal and thematic mirroring in the couplet with which he concludes the poem. His poetic faith is allied with a more philosophical proposition, that authenticity is something to be witnessed, to be seen. Wordsworth attests to the primacy of vision in the quest for authentic experience. Indeed, the Wordsworthian authentic, which we might conflate with the Wordsworthian sublime, arises from an engagement with nature that is an act, in situ, of looking, accompanied by solitary contemplation in a private place.<sup>102</sup> From a hypothetical case-study of the human impact of socio-economic changes, the beggar has become an archetype and image of authenticity.

Debord and the SI refused to identify so positively an equivalent image of authenticity because, for them, the primacy of vision in spectacular capitalism was repressive and the cause of their recuperation anxiety. The SI veers away from the Romantic project of Wordsworth at the moment of transition from imagination—the production of mental images—to representation. Kotányi's evasive phrase 'certain truths [*certaines vérités*]' and Debord's 'everything that was directly lived [*Tout ce qui était directement vécu*]', indicate the SI's response to this problem of the authentic image. The SI took recourse to what I shall call a Situationist sublime, a vague and tentative gesture towards an authentic something else which cannot be given an aesthetic form for fear of its spoliation by the spectacle.<sup>103</sup>

The SI diverges, tactically, from Wordsworth due to the formers' distrust of the image, including the textual image; in this way, the SI repeats that denigration of vision that Martin Jay identifies as a common theme of twentieth century French philosophy.<sup>104</sup> The English Situationists, however, remain in closer affinity with

---

<sup>102</sup> Poetry 'takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.' Wordsworth, 'Preface', 266.

<sup>103</sup> Benjamin Noys identifies something similar to my Situationist sublime when he discusses the SI's vitalism, its 'retention of a ground of reality as positivity', at odds with its professedly negational critique. Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2010), 98.

<sup>104</sup> See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1994).

Wordsworth than with the SI in regard to their willingness to provide images of authenticity. Here, the Anglicisation of the Continental avant-garde tradition performed by King Mob in particular is a process that transplants the (anti-)aesthetic programme of the SI away from an identifiably French philosophical discourse and into a distinctly English literary tradition, another example of the ‘strong misreading’ or ‘poetic misprision’ which for Harold Bloom is how influence is transferred.<sup>105</sup> Is King Mob’s professed desire to abandon the ‘Situationist Salon’ and attain a ‘language of the streets’ not the equivalent, though exaggerated and urbanised, of Wordsworth’s declaration that he has foregone ‘poetic diction’ in favour of the ‘language of men’<sup>106</sup>? For Wordsworth and for King Mob, the first return to authenticity is a linguistic one.

The point of access to that language as yet unspoiled by what Retort call the ‘lifeless bright sameness’ of capital was for Wordsworth a pre-capitalist, and for King Mob a sub-capitalist, class of people. In the ‘Description’ that opens ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’, Wordsworth warns, ‘The class of Beggars to which the old man here described belongs, will probably soon be extinct.’<sup>107</sup> The threatened disappearance of this class of mendicants, as is the case for many of the protagonists of Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads*, is the result of capitalist accumulation and the legal structure that legitimised it. ‘The Female Vagrant’, ‘Michael’, ‘The Mad Mother’: these are victims of socio-economic processes whose monolithic advance is belied by the poems’ quaintness, provincialism, and acquiescence to fate. Wordsworth’s political tactic was not to express the problems—which extend from enclosures to imperialism, militarism, and patriarchy—but to illustrate what was being lost. Just as Wordsworth chose to illuminate the plight of an economically liminal class of people, the English Situationists directed their attention to the underclass that they labelled the new lumpen and held up as a repository of revolutionary potential and capitalist society’s immanent critique. In both cases, those outsider figures were meant to reveal the repressive and homogenising drive of capitalism and their continued existence the assertion that another mode of being remained possible.

Yet these images of anti-capitalist authenticity—Wordsworth’s rustic classes and the English Situationists’ new lumpen—were fictionalised and idealised as much as they were the record of a struggling underclass. Paul de Man, in ‘Intentional

<sup>105</sup> Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, xxiii.

<sup>106</sup> Wordsworth, ‘Preface’, 251.

<sup>107</sup> Wordsworth, ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’, 205.



Structure of the Romantic Image', claims that the blurring of documentary and fictionalisation is characteristic of Romantic literature, whose images are always produced through a dialectic of perception and imagination.<sup>108</sup> The poetics of Romanticism are, for de Man, founded precisely on an ambiguity between the themes of nature and of imagination. Similarly, John Barrell observes that the depiction of the rural poor in the eighteenth century not only became increasingly common but also increasingly idealised: Arcadian pastoral scenes were anglicised, but only as a half-revelation that occluded the miseries of poverty.<sup>109</sup> Thus, in Wordsworth's attention to soon-to-be eradicated pre-capitalist ways of life, and in the English Situationists' performative alliance with the sub-capitalist dispossessed, we see not so much an objective, humanitarian, or even documentarian impulse, but the operation of a shared tactics of resistance.

The English Situationists, however, retained enough of the SI's project to mark their difference from other neo-Romantic elements of the 1960s counterculture, whose neo-Romanticism was usually much more ruralist or mystical. In the 'Preface', Wordsworth describes the poet as someone possessed of 'more than usual organic sensibility'<sup>110</sup>. King Mob, in contrast, was expressly anti-individualistic (the clue is in the name). Wordsworth also emphasises the didactic purpose of poetry, whereby the reader of good poetry 'if he be in a healthy state of association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, his taste exalted, and his affections ameliorated'<sup>111</sup>. This too is a far cry from the Ur-text of Situationist theory, Lautréamont's 'Poesies', which declares that 'Poetry must be made by all. Not by one.'<sup>112</sup> Finally, although Wordsworth states that poetry is 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', he also writes that good poetry must have been thought over 'long and deeply' and it relies on the reader's enjoyment of its rhyme and meter. The artwork, for Wordsworth, can facilitate—can heighten the reader's sensitivity to—authentic experience. King Mob may have discarded what I have called the Situationist sublime in favour of a more affirmative and representational aesthetic, but it ultimately retained the SI's wariness regarding the veneration of aesthetic objects. King Mob produced much ephemera but no manifesto or masterpiece. Its ephemeral and

<sup>108</sup> Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press 1984), 1-17.

<sup>109</sup> See John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840* (London: Cambridge University Press 1980).

<sup>110</sup> Wordsworth, 'Preface', 246.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>112</sup> Lautréamont, 'Poesies', 244.

marginal form of productivity, exemplified by its graffiti, reflects its Situationist scepticism of proper artistic production.

#### *Blake's Infernal Method*

King Mob learned from Wordsworth's poetic subjects, but his understanding of the aesthetic object as a channel to authentic experience conflicted with its Situationist understanding of the aesthetic object as an obstacle to authentic experience. What King Mob learned from Blake, on the other hand, relates to poetic method. It is easy to imagine the affinity King Mob must have felt towards Blake. They both worked in and on London yet neither identified with the prevailing radical movements. Blake was only ever peripheral to the groups from which Romanticism sprang, such as the publisher Joseph Johnson's circle which involved many important writers, social theorists, and Dissenters, and which fostered debate around the political issues of the day. Blake remained ideologically distinct from Wordsworth as well as from other Johnson circle figures such as William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Anna Laetitia Barbauld, largely due to Blake's idiosyncratic interpretation of Christianity. Like many subsequent generations of English radical and avant-garde practitioners, and even like much of the 1960s counterculture, King Mob was attracted to Blake's outsider status, his English mysticism, and his efforts towards the *gesamkunstwerk* via his integration of text, image, and method. Blake can be seen as a forerunner to the avant-gardist rejection of the distinction between artistic and life praxes. Had Breton not been such an Anglophobe, it is easy to imagine that his 'Manifesto of Surrealism' could have included 'Blake is Surrealist in his infernal method' among its retroactive claims for Sade, Chateaubriand, and Hugo. Blake's 'Proverbs from Hell', in the poem on which I shall focus, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', are loaded with proto-Surrealist (and thus proto-Situationist) lessons, ranging from their language of desire versus restraint, to their reversal of conventional wisdom ('Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires'<sup>113</sup>), to their insistence on profane joy. Blake's 'Exuberance is beauty'<sup>114</sup> is particularly reminiscent of Breton's 'Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or will not be at all'<sup>115</sup>.

King Mob's engagement with Blake is most obvious in the former's plagiarism of some of these 'Proverbs from Hell'. I want to suggest that the philosophy Blake

---

<sup>113</sup> Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', 152.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin 1999), 160.

expounds in the poem is secularised in *King Mob*, which translates Blake's sense of the interrelatedness of all living processes into an effort towards a total critique as expounded by the SI. My argument here is indebted to a materialist reading of Blake's poem provided by G.R. Sabri-Tabrizi in *The 'Heaven' and 'Hell' of William Blake* (1973), a text that emerged from the resurgence of interest in Blake in the British left of the 1960s and early 1970s. Sabri-Tabrizi reads 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' as Blake's riposte to the theology of Emanuel Swedenborg, whereby Blake's poem is a heterodox collection of literary and theological modes of address which parody and refute Swedenborg's philosophy of predestination which, Sabri-Tabrizi argues, can be understood in terms of class. Swedenborg conceived of Heaven as the divine principles of love, affection, and attraction, which are passive pursuits; Hell was that which is active and disliked. As manual labour was an obstacle to Heavenly pleasures, Swedenborg condemned the working person to a life divorced from divine pursuits. Sabri-Tabrizi contextualises Swedenborg's disdain of active labour by noting his privileged background, born into a family wealthy through mining. Blake, a working man, refutes Swedenborg's metaphysics and argues instead that divine principles must have a material basis. Blake thus reverses Swedenborg's use of the terms 'Heaven' and 'Hell'. For Blake, knowledge derives from experience and man can only develop through the combination of active experience and passive spiritual pursuits: the marriage of Heaven and Hell.<sup>116</sup>

Blake's poem is composed principally in free verse, arranged into series of vignettes titled 'A Memorable Fancy', proverbs titled 'Proverbs from Hell', and sermons including 'The Argument', 'The Voice of the Devil', and the closing 'Chorus'. In the opening section, 'The Argument', Blake encapsulates the lesson of the poem:

Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion,  
Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human  
existence.<sup>117</sup>

Blake expounds a form of dialectics that embraces contraries and conflict, and this was heard by *King Mob*. Blake wanted to provoke and to give voice to that which is elsewhere condemned as Hellish or repulsive; *King Mob* play-acted as the bourgeoisie's bogeymen. In the poem, Blake claims to speak in 'The voice of the devil', and argues

---

<sup>116</sup> G.R. Sabri-Tabrizi, *The 'Heaven' and 'Hell' of William Blake* (London: Lawrence and Wishart 1973), 76-99.

<sup>117</sup> Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', 149.

with angels and prophets. Blake and King Mob were both adept at playing Devil's Advocate.

It was two of Blake's 'Proverbs from Hell' that King Mob appropriated as graffiti: 'The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom'<sup>118</sup> and 'The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction'<sup>119</sup>. Blake's self-professed 'infernal method'<sup>120</sup> anticipates the negative dialectical character of Debord's method (*Society of the Spectacle* as the infernal reading of consumer capitalism) and King Mob's Anglicisation of that method, which involved glorifying stereotypically English forms of anti-sociality. King Mob chose 'the road of excess' and acted as the 'tygers of wrath'. As such, King Mob continued the project that Walter Benjamin identified the Surrealists as having inherited from Lautréamont and Rimbaud, in whom, 'One finds the cult of evil as a political device, however romantic—a device that can be used to disinfect and isolate against all moralizing dilettantism.'<sup>121</sup>

King Mob's investment in the aesthetic, specifically its willingness to provide images of that which it considered authentic, was a movement away from Debord and the SI and towards an English Romantic tradition. The importance of those images is even more pronounced when King Mob is read alongside Blake, where the images are not just textual images but actual pictures accompanying the text. Blake produced his poems for printed plates that were illustrated and hand-painted. His aesthetic objects represent a union of disciplines—painting, poetry, engraving, printing—which serves as a proto-Situationist renunciation of the specialisms imposed by capitalism's division of labour. Though King Mob's pamphlets could have been produced cheaply and quickly as plain-text mimeographs, as was then standard, they bear instead a formal similarity to Blake illuminated manuscripts: the text occupies the centre of the page, and illustrations adorn the borders (Fig. 20).

---

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 150. Sabri-Tabrizi notes that 'excess' may refer to Blake's early impressions of the French Revolution. Sabri-Tabrizi, *The 'Heaven' and 'Hell' of William Blake*, 129.

<sup>119</sup> Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', 152.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>121</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' (1929), in *Selected Writings: Volume 2 1927-1934* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1999), 214.

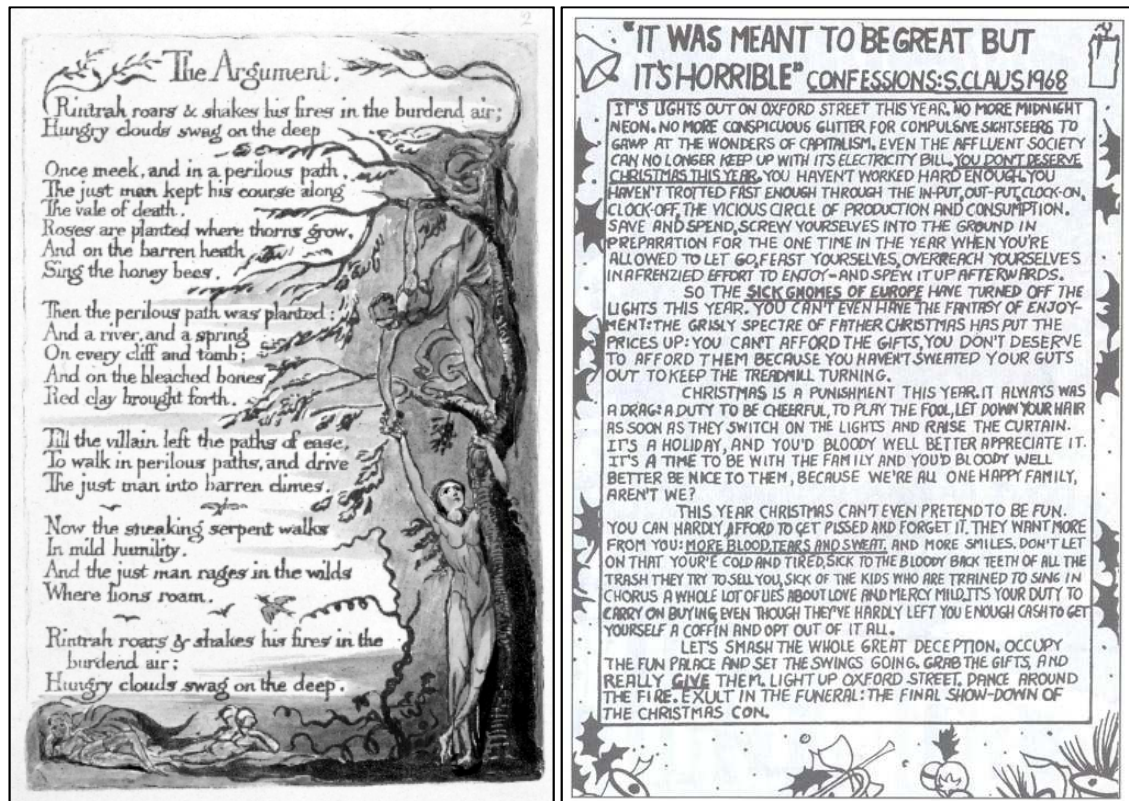


Fig. 20: Plate 2 of Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and King Mob pamphlet distributed at Selfridges intervention<sup>122</sup>

The value of comparing Blake and King Mob, however, extends beyond the recognition of aesthetic homologies. I have indicated already the problem of the aesthetic object in Situationist theory—the SI's too-rapid conflation of aesthetic representation with spectacle—a problem for which Wordsworth's account of the genesis of poetry in *Lyrical Ballads* offers little resolution. Blake's project in 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', on the other hand, emphasises praxis over product, the process of production over the aesthetic object thereby produced. For example, one of the 'Memorable Fancies' in Blake's poem begins with Blake recalling, 'I was in a Printing house in Hell and saw the method in which knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation'<sup>123</sup>. Printing was integral to Blake's project because he wished to demonstrate how knowledge progresses rather than to didactically impart knowledge itself. Blake argues that knowledge progresses through contraries, which feature in this poem as Heaven and Hell. In a more materialist sense, the poem

<sup>122</sup> William Blake, *The Illuminated Blake*, annotated David V. Erdman (London: Oxford University Press 1975), 99; KME, 99.

<sup>123</sup> Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', 154. See also Joseph Viscomi, 'In the Caves of Heaven and Hell: Swedenborg and Printmaking in Blake's *Marriage*', in Steve Clark and David Worrall (eds), *Blake in the Nineties* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd. 1999), 27–61.

circulates through its having been printed, which Blake emphasises is not a neutral process. He writes,

the notion that Man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged; this I shall do by printing in the infernal method by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid.<sup>124</sup>

King Mob's was a similarly infernal method. It too wrote from Hell, it valued the process over the object, and it wished to corrode decorum and decency to reveal something obscured but authentic.<sup>125</sup> When King Mob transplanted Blake's aphorisms from the pages of books to city walls, its acts were consistent with Blake's valorisation of active, physical, engagement with the word and the world. In that process, King Mob also re-radicalised Blake, who was made to speak again, as a contrarian and provocateur.

### **The End of Art**

King Mob's English Situationist aesthetic practice is exemplified by a flyer that the group produced to celebrate Valerie Solanas's shooting of Andy Warhol (Fig. 21). It offers a further hit-list that includes Mick Jagger, Richard Hamilton, and Miles from *International Times*. The flyer's violent anti-art rhetoric demonstrates King Mob's engagement with the more provocative and black humoured aspects of the historical avant-garde, as well as its Blakean Devil's advocacy.<sup>126</sup> Similarly, the flyer's hit-list, celebrities of the counterculture, reveals King Mob's very localised iconoclasm—King Mob ironically apologises for the 'inferior quality of the English cop-outs' included on the hit-list. At the same time, the images of guns and the play on 'Wanted: Dead or Alive' posters place this gesture in the tradition of outlaw machismo inherited from Black Mask and the Motherfuckers.

The flyer's heading reads: 'The death of art spells the murder of artists. The real anti-artist appears.' Wordsworth offers a rather different interpretation of the end of art. In the 'Preface', he writes that, 'The end of poetry is to produce excitement in

---

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Jack the Ripper, repeatedly referenced in *King Mob Echo*, sent a letter to his pursuers on which he wrote his address as 'From Hell'.

<sup>126</sup> The barely concealed homophobia of this flyer remains ambiguous in light of King Mob's calculated brutishness. Is this unbridled provocation, in all its willed ugliness, or is King Mob uncritically reproducing the heteronormativity that pervades much Situationist rhetoric?

coexistence with an overbalance of pleasure'<sup>127</sup>. Clearly, Wordsworth's 'end of poetry' relates to its didactic purpose. While King Mob's 'death of art' is in the first instance provocation, it also engages with the notion of the end of art as received from the SI, from the historical avant-garde, and from Hegel. King Mob's rephrasing of the grand historical project of sublating art and life as 'the death of art' demonstrates the group's performative lumpenproletarianisation of Situationist theory. King Mob sardonically suggests that the sublation will be achieved through shooting celebrity artists, especially the *récupérateurs* of the counterculture, whereby the shooter will come to embody the new artist, the agent of negation.

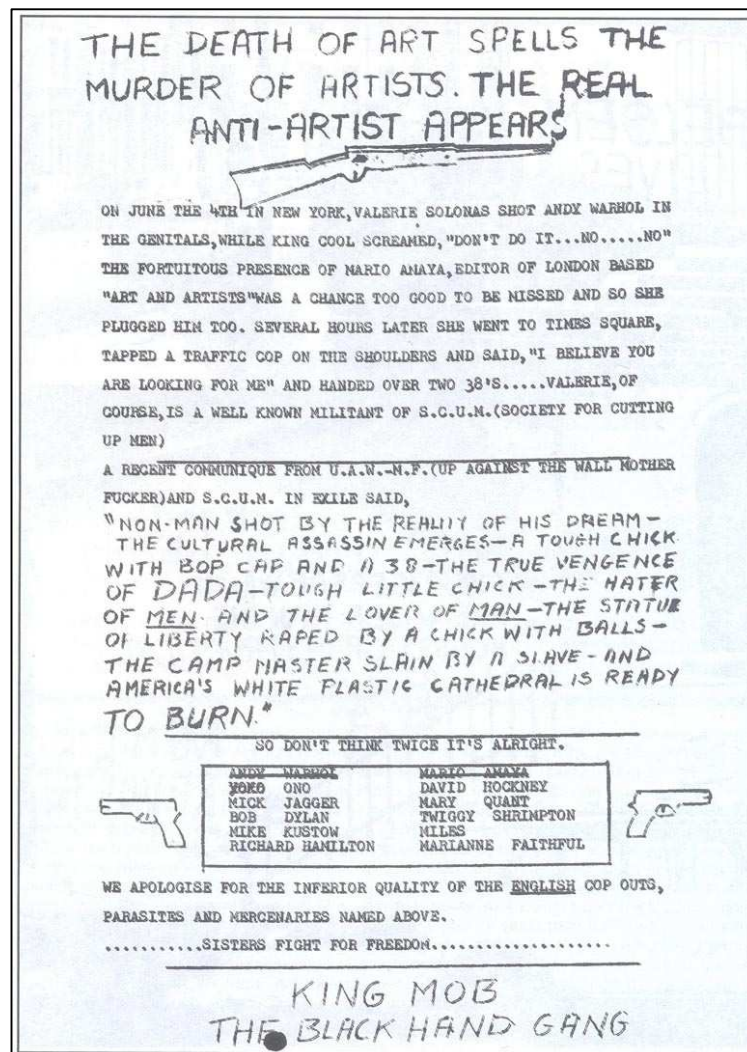


Fig. 21: King Mob pamphlet in defence of Valerie Solanas<sup>128</sup>

King Mob's provocation doesn't demand to be read seriously. It is hyper-spectacular. Nonetheless, in the tense relationship between King Mob's literalised

<sup>127</sup> Wordsworth, 'Preface', 263-264.

<sup>128</sup> KME, 95.



'death of art' and Wordsworth's didactic 'end of poetry', and in the contradiction inherent to King Mob's aesthetic object that antagonistically proclaims the redundancy of aesthetic objects, the central paradoxes of Situationist aesthetic theory are brought into relief: the demand that art must represent its own supersession; that artistic representation is inherently inauthentic (at least in an age of spectacle) yet art nonetheless has the duty and privilege to entertain questions of authenticity; that the imagination is powerful but the image is not. These are the same paradoxes to which Kotányi responded with the rather weak notion of antisituationist art. King Mob's response was to develop an English Situationist aesthetic that exacerbated paradox and proudly flaunted its own contradictions. Iconoclasm and tradition, anti-literary and literary, anti-aesthetic and aesthetic: a critique of the spectacle made by way of spectacular forms.

King Mob brazenly defied the SI's line that, 'there is no such thing as [...] a spectacular situationist'<sup>129</sup>, in order to adapt Situationist practice to English culture. The SI refused spectacular, alienated, forms; King Mob adopted but hyperbolised them, and in the process established an identifiable English Situationist aesthetic. It will be the task of my next chapter to trace the subsequent development of this aesthetic beyond King Mob, but first (and finally, for this chapter) I want to state the dilemmas of this English Situationist aesthetic.

On the one hand, we might briefly inhabit the SI's absolutist sense of group discipline and accuse King Mob of contravening its various declarations that there should be no such thing as a Situationist aesthetic, whose appearance would signal the ossification of Situationist theory into dogma and collapse its defences against recuperation.<sup>130</sup> As I argued above, King Mob might be seen to have misrecognised the difficulty of Debord's texts as a difficulty stemming from their Frenchness rather than as a difficulty that was inherent and productive. King Mob's caricatured image of lumpen Englishness was, in this sense, a philistine collusion with the stereotype of English culture as insular, xenophobic, and fearful of Continental abstraction; a stereotype whose influence is evident in a March 1968 review of two SI texts in the *Times Literary Supplement*, which patronises the Situationists, 'who poke fun at everyone

<sup>129</sup> Situationist International, 'The Fifth SI Conference in Göteborg', 115.

<sup>130</sup> Debord retrospectively justified the hyperbole of the SI's pronouncements and its oftentimes overzealous policy on expulsions as efforts against recuperation: 'The calm assertion of the most sweeping extremism, like the numerous expulsions of ineffectual or forbearing situationists were the SI's weapons for this particular combat, and not in order to become an authority or power.' Situationist International, *The Real Split in the International*, 29.



else, [but] take themselves very seriously indeed', and maintain an 'austere philosophy'.<sup>131</sup>

Certainly, King Mob launched an attack 'with, on and against' (to borrow Clark's phrasing) the English language, yet this assault jettisoned the necessarily irruptive difficulty of Debord's prose style. Despite its calculatedly jarring content, King Mob essentially produced a grotesque, a satire. Formally, King Mob's style was recognisable, easily comprehensible, and, in Situationist terms, recuperable. The result was a vulgar translation and a farcical repetition that could not breach the intervention into life-praxis attempted by Debord.

On the other hand, we might take the SI's absolutism and hyperbole with a pinch of salt and suggest that perhaps recuperation isn't as pervasive and paralysing a concept as the SI feared.<sup>132</sup> We might also reject the SI's autocratic proprietorship over its legacy and associate King Mob with traditions other than that of the SI. Situationist theory was certainly King Mob's launching pad, but how productive is it to rigidly judge King Mob according to the SI's diktats when the group was the result of an expulsion from that organisation? The SI dismissed King Mob as the English misinterpretation—or, worse, as the *recupérateurs*—of pure Situationist theory. But perhaps King Mob's Anglicisation of Situationist theory was not so much a compromise of the pure theory but a corrective to the pure theory after it had been embedded in a specific context.

The SI's puritanical dismissal of English Situationism has an analogy in the opinion, popular and critical, that English culture and the European avant-garde are simply incommensurable. For example, the critic Martin Puchner proposes a model of historical recurrence in avant-garde practices in which British practitioners, beginning with Wyndham Lewis, have typically 'reacted to and against the various avant-gardes'. This reaction 'to and against' is consistent with my reading of King Mob and the SI, yet Puchner characterises this relation as the 'rear-guardism of British modernism', which

---

<sup>131</sup> Peter Fryer, 'Spectacles', *Times Literary Supplement* (21<sup>st</sup> March 1968): 286.

<sup>132</sup> In later years, Debord would temper that which I have described as his recuperation anxiety. He writes that recuperation is 'an effect of the crisis of society, of the weakness of the ideas held by power. [...] I have often combated, among certain comrades, a slightly purist-moralist tendency to only see a disastrous loss of critical truth when a new theme is reprised and falsified in the current social spectacle, without seeing that this is *also* the necessary road for what can succeed in shaking a society.' Guy Debord, letter to Guy Leccia (7<sup>th</sup> December 1976), available at <http://www.notbored.org/debord-7December1976.html> [accessed 10/05/2012].

'is a defensive formation that places itself within the field of advancement but is sceptical of its most extreme practitioners; it seeks to correct and contain the avant-garde's excesses without falling behind and losing touch with it entirely.'<sup>133</sup> King Mob may correct but it did not contain the SI; it is not so easily allied with the conservative impulse Puchner describes. King Mob attempted to apply Situationist theory not only to a new cultural context but also to other traditions, in order to disseminate it as well as revitalise, reanimate, and reradicalise those other traditions in a move that cannot be called rear-guardist. To engage with historical traditions is not to consign oneself to history, but to use the past to reshape the present as much as the present then reshapes the past: such was the lesson of Breton and Eliot.<sup>134</sup> Debord, in fact, said something similar of *détournement*: it 'reradicalises previous critical conclusions that have been petrified into respectable truths and thus transformed into lies.'<sup>135</sup>

---

<sup>133</sup> Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*, 107-108.

<sup>134</sup> See Breton, 'Manifesto of Surrealism', and T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent [1919]', *Perspecta* 19 (1982): 36-42.

<sup>135</sup> SoS, thesis 206.

#### **4.1 English Situationist Poetics**

‘There is always, in such movements, a moment when the original tension of the secret society must either explode in a matter-of-fact, profane struggle for power and domination, or decay as a public demonstration and be transformed.’

Walter Benjamin, ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’ (1929)<sup>1</sup>

In 1972, Guy Debord dissolved the Situationist International. He announced its end in a text co-written with Gianfranco Sanguinetti, *The Real Split in the International: Theses on the Situationist International and Its Time*. The text explains the necessity of dissolving the SI before its legacy was besmirched too greatly by the post-’68 expansion and dilution of Situationist activity, though the text maintains, with Debord’s characteristic self-assuredness, that history will prove correct the SI’s theses and actions, which had come to determine the character of anti-capitalist struggle in the West. The occupations movement of 1968 had represented the moment when, internationally, ‘a generation began to be situationist’<sup>2</sup>, and the SI had become ‘merely the concentrated expression of an historical subversion which is everywhere’<sup>3</sup>. The time had come, however, for the SI itself to disappear—as it had always willed—so that its vanguardist role would not obstruct the development of a wider-reaching Situationist consciousness.

The presence of an organised (that is, with a programme, but also with organs, embodied) avant-garde group has, throughout the historical narrative that I have offered, proven problematic for English practitioners attempting to anglicise a Continental avant-garde practice. The first English Surrealists found it difficult to maintain productive relations with Breton’s group (just as Breton’s group was regarded with suspicion by the Third International), and the efforts of Trocchi and the subsequent first wave of English Situationists were denounced by the SI. After the dissolution of the SI, without that authoritarian presence to appease and impress, the specific character of English Situationist practice was free to develop beyond its source. At the same time, the representative body of the anglicised practice required the productively dissonant relationship with the Continental authority—to constitute itself as such, the English Section required the SI. At this point in my study, I shall be

---

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’, 208.

<sup>2</sup> Situationist International, *The Real Split in the International*, 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

breaking from the narrative that I have been constructing and consider instead the impact of this long history of anglicised Situationist practice on contemporary cultural activity not anchored to avant-garde groups that recognise themselves as such, or at least which do not proclaim themselves of an ‘-ism’. In the catalogue to the 1989 exhibition on the SI held in Paris, Boston, and London, the collection of pamphlets, artworks, and articles by and about English post-Situationist groups of the 1970s and 1980s was labelled as the ‘fallout’ of the SI. Though I shall soon explain why this ‘pro-situ’ activity represents the least interesting legacy of the SI in England, the notion of a fallout is prescient, as a pun on the aforementioned tendency towards internecine squabbling, and for its impression of dispersed and toxic activity continuing well beyond the event that produced it.

I want first to gather together, briefly, the main characteristics that I have attributed to the practice of English Situationists and their precursors:

Firstly, the Continental avant-gardes that I have considered (Dada, Surrealism, the SI) have been approached by ‘the English’ as something foreign, even alien, something from which England is disconnected. ‘The Channel’, explains Charles Radcliffe, ‘is much wider than its width.’<sup>4</sup> Consequently, a populist hostility has frequently operated against what has been regarded as a quintessentially French taste for the esoteric, the obscure, and the abstract. Mass Observation and King Mob both deemed it necessary to tone down, to colloquialise, and even to (lumpen)proletarianise their French sources.

Secondly, English practitioners have not sought to further the tradition of the Continental avant-garde itself, but to incorporate that avant-garde into native traditions. Most obviously, English Situationists heard the resonances of English Romanticism in Situationist theory, and thus replaced allusions to French revolutionary history with English revolutionary moments, particularly those related to English Romanticism’s resistance to industrial capitalism. The native gaze of the English Situationists extended from history and tradition to places as they now exist: as the SI focussed on Paris, and the Romantics on the rural landscape, the English Situationists focussed on the urban landscape of

---

<sup>4</sup> Charles Radcliffe, e-mail to author, 2/12/2010.

London, particularly its liminal and forgotten spaces (this will become more apparent later in this chapter).

Thirdly, the cultural translation of Situationist practice was accompanied by a methodological one, so that the SI's style of negation was transformed into something affirmative, and the SI's abstractions transformed into an aestheticised and phanopoetic English Situationist style.

To understand these transformations of the Situationist project, and in opposition both to Puchner's derogatory account of English rear-guardism and to the various accounts of repetitious and depoliticised neo-avant-guards, I have offered a model of Franco-Anglo avant-garde transition more akin to Harold Bloom's antithetical method, whereby poetic influence advances through misreading; repetition not as farce but chiasmus. These characteristics of English Situationist practice, I now want to propose, operate in contemporary cultural production by way of a particular cultural method which manifests itself by way of a particular poetics. I shall now sketch out these English Situationist poetics, before rendering the image more fully with examples as this final chapter continues.

### **The Poetics of English Situationist Practice**

The English Situationist practice takes leave from the SI's early interest in psychogeography.<sup>5</sup> It is characterised by its performance of a poetic intervention into a real place (usually, though not exclusively, London; and I include existing texts as places, sites for intervention). These places are re-imagined and re-represented as they might have been had history moved in a different direction. The documentary fiction, as a distant relative of the plagiarised and détourned text, is the archetypal form of English Situationist practice. Alastair Bonnet's description of the 'radical re-enchantments'<sup>6</sup> of place, to which I shall return, is of particular importance in terms of method, and the spectre is the accompanying motif, as that which haunts the present but can't yet come into being.<sup>7</sup> (Of course, different desires for spectrality have haunted each of my previous chapters).

---

<sup>5</sup> See section, 'The Psychogeography of English Situationist Poetics', below.

<sup>6</sup> Alastair Bonnett, 'The Dilemmas of Radical Nostalgia in British Psychogeography', *Theory, Culture & Society* 26:1 (2009): 59.

<sup>7</sup> When Marx and Engels wrote that, 'A spectre is haunting Europe', they recognised that Europe then contained within itself another version of itself, a communist one, and it is this

English Situationist texts are fraught with an *anxiety of form*: the texts recognise that the alternatives they imagine could never come into being except via a major overhaul of social relations—a revolution—the unlikelihood of which they already know; the texts are plagued with the fear that their status as aesthetic objects, recuperable into the commodity form, compromises and perhaps even obstructs whatever possibility does exist for any such revolutionary change. The English Situationist text still carries the weight of what I have called the central paradox of Situationist aesthetics: *the demand that art must represent its own supersession*. Yet I shall defend the politics of English Situationist practice on these terms: that the recognition of this paradox and the performance of the anxiety of form are precisely what make English Situationist poetics forceful and dynamic; their instability is what makes them incendiary. I shall identify a body of work, and make this defence, by first identifying the other traditions which emerge from the same sources but which jettison the necessary paradoxes, anxieties and instabilities of English Situationist poetics.

### **The Paths Not Taken**

The most commonly known—though perhaps also the most tenuously associated—Situationist-influenced phenomenon in England is punk. The influence is most obvious in the lyrics, iconography, and fashions (the SI had precious little to say about music) associated with the Sex Pistols and other first-wave (c.1977) bands, and then with post-punk bands in the early 1980s, particularly those affiliated with Tony Wilson's Factory Records. Punk's Situationist influence has been debated widely, with commentators usually defending or dismissing punk's superficial allusions to Situationist themes.<sup>8</sup>

The connection originates with Malcolm McLaren, who founded and managed the Sex Pistols and was previously a peripheral member of King Mob. One rumour suggests that the original inspiration for the Sex Pistols was the proposal of King Mob's Christopher Gray for 'a totally unpleasant pop group'; more certainly, Gray's *Leaving the Twentieth Century: The Incomplete Work of the Situationist International* (1974), the first collection of SI texts in English (*freely translated*, of course), became an important

---

type of spectrality that is conjured by English Situationist poetics. *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin 1985), 78.

<sup>8</sup> The Situationist-Punk connection has been explored in: Stewart Home, *Cranked Up Really High: Genre Theory and Punk Rock* (Hove: Codex 1995); Home, *The Assault on Culture*; Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*; Savage, *England's Dreaming*; Vague, *King Mob Echo: From Gordon Riots to Situationists & Sex Pistols*; Dave and Stuart Wise, 'The End of Music'.

<sup>9</sup> Dave and Stuart Wise, 'The End of Music,' 67.

source-book for punk aesthetics, particularly Jamie Reid's imagery. Later, Wilson and Factory Records also mined the SI for, essentially, marketing gimmicks. For example, the debut Durutti Column album, *Return of the Durutti Column* (1980), was named after a 1967 SI cartoon of the same name; the original LPs had sandpaper sleeves like the cover of Debord's *Mémoires* (1959); and Debord and Reid were thanked in the notes for 'the marketing concept'.<sup>10</sup> This quip, together with McLaren's mantra of 'Cash from Chaos', reveals why I do not include these phenomena in my category of English Situationist poetics.<sup>11</sup> Punk, at least '77 British punk, adopted (or, in the relevant parlance, recuperated) Situationist aesthetics but jettisoned Situationist politics, along with the dialectical relationship between the two and the resulting anxiety of form. Johnny Rotten puts it more bluntly: 'All the talk about the French Situationists being associated with punk is bollocks. It's nonsense!'<sup>12</sup> 'They were too structured for my liking, word games and no work. Plus they were French, so fuck them.'<sup>13</sup>

The other phenomenon, earlier in the 1970s, frequently understood as an English manifestation of something associated with the SI was the Angry Brigade, the guerrilla group responsible for a string of bombings of banks, embassies, and properties associated with the Conservative Party. Its Situationist connection relates mostly to the inclusion of 'spectacles' on the group's first communiqué in a list of the group's targets, alongside 'High Pigs', 'Judges', and 'Property'.<sup>14</sup> The police operation to identify and prosecute the Angry Brigade involved a so-called 'Situationist Cop'<sup>15</sup> who familiarised himself with Debord's work and tracked 'the Angries' via the small number of radical bookshops in London where SI pamphlets were available.<sup>16</sup> Politically, however, the Angry Brigade remained closer to autonomist theory, Spanish anarchism, and Italian workerism than to French Situationist currents. The Angry Brigade has since been largely overshadowed by more violent ultra-left groups such as Germany's Red Army Faction, Italy's Red Brigades, and France's Action Directe, though former Angry Brigade members have made important contributions to gay rights

<sup>10</sup> The record label Fast Product demonstrates a familiarity with Situationist theory that is perhaps less cynical than McLaren and Wilson's entrepreneurship. Members of its bands Gang of Four and The Mekons were likely taught by T.J. Clark when he held a position at Leeds University in the 1970s.

<sup>11</sup> See *The Great Rock'n'Roll Swindle*, DVD, directed by Julien Temple (1980; London: Sony BMG 2005).

<sup>12</sup> John Lydon, *Rotten: No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1994), 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>14</sup> Angry Brigade, 'Communiqué 1', in *The Angry Brigade 1967-1984: Documents and Chronology* (London: Elephant Editions 1985), 21.

<sup>15</sup> Vague, *King Mob Echo: From Gordon Riots to Situationists and Sex Pistols*, 56.

<sup>16</sup> See Carr, *The Angry Brigade*.

(Angela Mason), experimental poetry (Anna Mendelssohn), and British anarchism (Stuart Christie).

The Angry Brigade's constellation of influences matches the make-up of another strand of activist group, which became prevalent in Britain during the late 1980s and 1990s. These groups, which emerged from the Reclaim the Streets movement, were not as extremist as the Angry Brigade but favoured spectacular political protest that drew on street theatre and performance.<sup>17</sup> A similar tradition, though not oriented towards protest as such, was that of the psychogeographical associations of the 1990s.<sup>18</sup> These began when Fabian Thompson and Stewart Home re-convened the London Psychogeographical Association, the organisation that Ralph Rumney had represented at the founding of the SI in 1957, though he was then its only member. Both of these spheres of activity—protest groups and psychogeographical associations—inform the practice of the cultural producers who, I shall argue, have inherited English Situationist poetics, though I do not include the two spheres in this category. I am more concerned with the problem of English Situationist aesthetics as they manifest themselves in texts. Protest and activist groups tend, necessarily, to lack the anxiety and the reflexivity which maintain the dynamism of English Situationist practice; they may adopt Situationist ideas and tactics but they lack the Situationist effort towards a total critique.

The final sphere of activity that I want to bypass but acknowledge is that which I shall label 'pro-situ sectarianism'. In *The Real Split in the International*, Debord observes,

Enthusiastic spectators of the SI have existed since 1960, but in the early years there were only a handful of them. The last five years have seen the handful become a multitude. This process started in France where they were served with the nickname of 'pro-situs', although this new 'French disease' has now spread to many other countries. Their sheer number does nothing, however, to enhance their vacuity: all of them make it known that they fully approve of the SI, and prove clueless when it comes to doing anything else. By growing in numbers, they remain the same: anybody who has read or seen one has read or seen them all.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Gavin Grindon offers an account of these activist milieus in 'Second Wave Situationism?' *Fifth Estate* 350 (2009): 11, 50–51.

<sup>18</sup> Bonnett's 'The Dilemmas of Radical Nostalgia in British Psychogeography' addresses these groups.

<sup>19</sup> Situationist International, *The Real Split in the International*, 32



Debord identifies that alongside its creation of active Situationists the SI had also generated within itself a number of merely 'contemplative' members, and outside of itself a swarm of pro-situationists, or 'pro-situs'. Vaneigem's resignation in 1970 had been followed by an SI communiqué that accused him of having become one such contemplative, 'regularly setting their seal of approval on everything [produced by the SI] and never displaying anything other than the strongest determination to do absolutely nothing'<sup>20</sup>. The first English Situationists, too, were succeeded by a multitude of pro-situ groups.<sup>21</sup> These groups, I suspect, are the target of the recriminations of the anonymous English ex-member of the SI with whose venomous reflections my study began. My principle observation about English pro-situ groups, and my reason for their exclusion from the lineage that I am tracing, is that they essentially repeat, albeit sometimes with greater clarity, the programmes of the English Section and King Mob.<sup>22</sup> They rarely advance (or critically misread) this programme. A couple of examples, below, will suffice to demonstrate pro-situ mimicry and its limitations.

Included in the 1989 exhibition on the SI and its legacy was a 'Mini phrase-book for foreigners (those foreign to this world)' produced by a group called Spontaneous Combustion. This leaflet offers a series of 'translations' of terms to reveal their true meanings: 'wages' are described as 'damages awarded as poor compensation for boredom, humiliation and frustration'; 'equal pay' as 'equal emptiness; equal impotence'; and 'trade union official' as 'pimp; negotiator of the rate of exploitation'.<sup>23</sup> A playful gesture, certainly; but the leaflet is also (though it doesn't state this) a response to a proposal by Mustafa Khayati in *Internationale Situationniste* 10 ('Captive Words: Preface to a Situationist Dictionary', 1966) which had already prompted a response in the run-up to May '68 in France.<sup>24</sup> Of course, plagiarism and

---

<sup>20</sup> 'Communiqué from the SI concerning Vaneigem' (1970), in Situationist International, *The Real Split in the International*, 146.

<sup>21</sup> These groups are catalogued in George Robertson, 'The Situationist International: Its Penetration into British Culture', in Home (ed.), *What is Situationism?*, and Simon Ford, *The Realization and Suppression of the Situationist International: An Annotated Bibliography 1972-1992* (Edinburgh: AK Press 1995).

<sup>22</sup> There were, however, a selection of zines in the Eighties and Nineties that kept English translations of SI texts available and introduced the SI to new circles. Particular mention goes to Tom Vague's *Vague*, Stewart Home's *SMILE*, Larry Law's *Spectacular Times*, and Kill Your Pet Puppy.

<sup>23</sup> 'Dialectical Adventures into the Unknown', in Blazwick (ed.), *An Endless Adventure, An Endless Passion, An Endless Banquet*, 85.

<sup>24</sup> 'Untitled Tract Published in Bordeaux in April, 1968', in Viénet, *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May '68*, 127-128.

détournement are central to the Situationist programme, but pro-situ repetition of this nature reveals nothing particular to English Situationist practice.

Another example illuminates the dogmatic nature of much pro-situ discourse. In *Reification, or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism*, Timothy Bewes revisits a small pamphlet titled 'Life and its Replacement with a Dull Reflection of Itself' (1984), issued by The Pleasure Tendency from Leeds. The pamphlet, though Bewes does not identify it as such, is typical of 1980s pro-situ writing, inflected with influences from contemporary green and anarchist movements. A couple of its theses demonstrate its Situationist inheritance, as filtered through the English interpretation of the SI that I have been elaborating:

2.1 We must look forward to the time when merely taking a walk outside tickles the pleasure centre. When the deluge of falsified experience recedes, when the few books which are still read are those which stimulate debate, enhance learning and inspire action. When the parasite Art is no more.

3.0 What will this future be like? That is what cannot be said, for this is how falsification starts.<sup>25</sup>

Thesis 2.1 corroborates that English Situationist theory is propelled by a peculiar Romanticism: the notion that 'falsified experience' has served to obstruct a more authentic relationship between people and nature. Thesis 3.0 demonstrates precisely what I have proposed to be the SI's hyperbolic recuperation anxiety. The two theses together demonstrate something of the anxiety of form I am allocating to English Situationist poetics: in 2.1, it is an artwork that must condemn 'parasite Art'; in 3.0, only through speaking can the recognition be made that falsification begins with speaking. Bewes is sceptical of the pamphlet. He regards it as profoundly conservative, the articulation of bourgeois anxieties in a countercultural register, the presentation of existential angst disguised as materialist politics. The Pleasure Tendency, according to Bewes, does not engage in ultra-left discourse, but only quotes it.<sup>26</sup>

A final pair of examples indicates the dead-end of English pro-situ discourse, or the limits of English Situationist discourse that merely regurgitates its sources. Included in the ICA catalogue is a broadside titled *Wall* produced in 1969 'with the assistance of King Mob' by the Oxford Motherfuckers (even their name is

<sup>25</sup> The Pleasure Tendency, *Life and its Replacement with a Dull Reflection of Itself* (Leeds: The Pleasure Tendency 1984), 1.

<sup>26</sup> Timothy Bewes, *Reification, or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso 2002), 186-189.

straightforward mimicry). The Oxford Motherfuckers speculate on the growing fashion for 'Situationism', deeming it to be 'a bit of a drag that this will certainly be the last year of active Situationism in Great Britain, since Situationism no more than Flower Power can hope to survive its own trendiness'.<sup>27</sup> The text refutes 'Situationism' without acknowledging its own Situationist character. For pro-situ, the truest signifier of Situationist authenticity is to denounce Situationist thought! This paradox was pastiched by the group Art & Language in an article titled 'Ralph the Situationist' (1987). Art & Language describes the fictional Ralph (presumably a nod towards Ralph Rumney), a caricatured pro-situ: a young man, barefoot and messily dressed, who spouts on about psychogeography, and whose conversations are 'intricate unaccultured messes, empty but teleologically replete'<sup>28</sup>. Talking to Ralph, Art & Language jokes, is like reading Guy Debord. By 1987, it seems, the English pro-situ had become a stereotype. English Situationist activity, I propose, has been at its most dynamic when it hasn't identified itself as such.

### **The Psychogeography of English Situationist Poetics**

The activity that I want to characterise as English Situationist is closely aligned with the SI's concept of psychogeography.<sup>29</sup> However, psychogeography has become an overdetermined term, and there is now a veritable psychogeographic industry. Merlin Coverley's *Psychogeography* (2006) identifies the various literary traditions that have claimed or have been retroactively lumbered with the label. He accounts for two lineages: on one side of the Channel, the London tradition of visionary writing, which begins with Defoe and moves through Blake, De Quincey, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Arthur Machen; on the other side, the Parisian tradition of flâneurie, which begins, confusingly, with Poe's 'Man of the Crowd' (1840, set in London) and moves through Baudelaire, Benjamin, Céline, and the Surrealists (while also claiming for itself figures like Xavier de Maistre and Rimbaud).<sup>30</sup> Coverley refutes the SI's claims for the originality of the idea, but recognises that psychogeography today—represented by J.G.

<sup>27</sup> The Oxford Motherfuckers, 'Wall' (1969), in Blazwick (ed.), *An Endless Adventure, An Endless Passion, An Endless Banquet*, 71.

<sup>28</sup> Art & Language, 'Ralph the Situationist' *Artscribe International* (Nov-Dec 1987), in Blazwick (ed.), *An Endless Adventure, An Endless Passion, An Endless Banquet*, 93.

<sup>29</sup> This return to psychogeography, as a concept developed early in the SI's existence, marks a neat full-circling because the English member of the SI most associated with psychogeography is Ralph Rumney, the first English exclusion from the SI. Rumney was expelled for not handing in his 'Psychogeographic Report on Venice' on time; the influence of psychogeography on his post-SI art career is discussed in Ralph Rumney and Alan Woods, *The Map is not the Territory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2001).

<sup>30</sup> Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials 2006).

Ballard, Iain Sinclair, Peter Ackroyd, Stewart Home, and Patrick Keiller—mediates the traditions of London and Paris by way of the SI's formal instauration of psychogeography as a method, which has subsequently been commodified as a genre.<sup>31</sup>

In 1958, the SI defined psychogeography as 'The study of the specific effects of the geographical environment (whether consciously organised or not) on the emotions and behaviour of individuals.'<sup>32</sup> Psychogeography was practiced by way of the *dérive*, which Debord describes in terms of a walk without a destination, preferably undertaken in a group, when the walkers move between different areas of a city allowing 'themselves to be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there'<sup>33</sup>. Debord describes the political value of the *dérive* in the same terms that the notion of 'the situation' is discussed in early SI texts: as an intervention into the status-quo of the spectacle (of which the modern city is an exemplary manifestation) in order to reveal the extent of social alienation and to become aware of the possibility of alternative arrangements of social space. Psychogeography and the *dérive* were, however, dropped from the SI's programme by the end of its first few years—when it attempted to switch focus from artistic to theoretical intervention—because they were seen to have become artistic practices geared towards the production of spectacular material rather than its negation.

The particular version of psychogeography that I want to associate with English Situationist poetics is principally a literary one but its motivating factor is political: a political intervention made by way of literature. I want to refute—or, more precisely, recalibrate—the SI's fear of the aesthetic object, and also dismiss the version of psychogeography that is just an activity, praxis without theory, urban rambling for radicals. The psychogeography of English Situationist poetics is first and foremost a method, one that privileges its creative process over its instrumental function to such an extent that a physical journey need not even have been undertaken. This psychogeography has precedents in de Maistre's *Voyage Around My Room* (1794) and Rimbaud's verb 'robinsonner' in 'Roman' (1870), which he uses to signify an imaginary voyage or mental journey.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, this expressly literary form of psychogeography has progenitors in both the London and Paris traditions that

<sup>31</sup> The role of psychogeography in the SI's programme has attracted much critical attention: a good starting-point is McDonough (ed.), *The Situationists and the City*.

<sup>32</sup> Situationist International, 'Definitions' (1958), in SIA, 52.

<sup>33</sup> Guy Debord, 'Theory of the *Dérive*' (1958), in SIA, 62.

<sup>34</sup> Rimbaud's verb alludes to Robinson Crusoe, as does the name of the protagonist of Patrick Keiller's films to which I shall turn later in this chapter.

Coverley identifies. In the London tradition, for example, Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) and De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821) both subordinate their documentary impulses to their visionary and creative ones. In Paris, the surrealist texts *Paris Peasant* (1926) by Louis Aragon and *Nadja* (1928) by Breton both attend to the subjective experience of place, particularly that which is uncanny or seemingly magical. This constellation of English and French texts holds the genesis of the psychogeographical novel; though as Coverley reminds us, Defoe's work demonstrates that 'psychogeographical themes are as old as the novel itself'<sup>35</sup>. The psychogeography of English Situationist poetics operates by way of free association, chance, and coincidence—the same factors that determine the course of a Situationist *dérive*. Lateral imaginative movements and documentary fictionalisation replace preordained structures and plot devices.

The political character of this English Situationist psychogeography arises from the dialectical confrontation that it stages between place and imagination. An effort towards parity between these two factors is essential. In the 'visionary tradition' of London writing described by Coverley, materialist politics are frequently subsumed into occultism, mysticism, and esotericism. Blake's heretical visions, Arthur Machen's supernaturalism, and Alfred Watkins's ley line theory have all, in the work of Iain Sinclair and Peter Ackroyd in particular, produced versions of psychogeography that jettison the SI's radically materialist focus and lend themselves to the endless mainstream paperback reiteration of gentle nostalgias and oftentimes conservative politics.

Elena Gorfinkel and John David Rhodes articulate the political necessity of remaining doggedly focussed on real places and their attendant histories when they write that 'the accretion of history in a given location provides the traction necessary for resonant and forceful political intervention'<sup>36</sup>. Gorfinkel and Rhodes go on to quote Kristin Ross's comment on the Communards' destruction of the Vendôme Column during the Paris Commune of 1841: 'An awareness of social space [...] always entails an encounter with history – or better, a choice of histories'<sup>37</sup>. This 'choice of histories' is precisely what King Mob struggled for when it conjured the Gordon,

---

<sup>35</sup> Coverley, *Psychogeography*, 35.

<sup>36</sup> Elena Gorfinkel and John David Rhodes, 'Introduction: The Matter of Places', in *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2011), xi.

<sup>37</sup> Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (London: Verso 2008), 8; quoted in Gorfinkel & Rhodes (ed.), *Taking Place*, xi.

Luddite, and Swing rioters, and I shall demonstrate how the gesture is repeated in the work of Patrick Keiller with greater focus on London as the repository but also, through Thatcherite conservatism and Blairite class struggle amnesia, suppressor of alternatives to the present. Bonnet—whose notion of ‘radical re-enchantment’ is, I hope, becoming clearer—describes the communitarian impulse in Sinclair’s attention to forgotten histories of place (though I remain unconvinced that Sinclair is much more than a sentimentalist, see above and below) as a ‘restitutive impulse [that] forges bonds of solidarity and empathy with earlier generations of radicals’<sup>38</sup>. Bonnet also recalls the geopolitical argument of the London Psychogeographical Association, that ‘the nature of power can be disclosed through an understanding of the way [that] concealed forces have been deployed and imposed upon the landscape’<sup>39</sup>. Neither of Bonnet’s case studies can be unproblematically assigned to the sphere that I am labelling English Situationist, though both of his observations pertain to the English Section and to King Mob, as well as to the individuals whom I shall now identify as the most recent torch-bearers of English Situationist poetics. These individuals each make explicit reference to the SI, and as well as engaging with the aesthetic-political problems that I have associated with the English Situationist tradition, they represent its application to a variety of media.

### **Stewart Home and the Self-Hating Commodity**

As historian, artist, and writer, Stewart Home has maintained a longstanding engagement with the SI. His text *The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrism to Class War* (1988) was one of the earliest extended accounts of the SI in English. He locates it in a current of cultural provocation succeeded by Fluxus, Punk, Mail Art, and other subterranean movements. Home has always contested the hegemony of the Debordian faction of the SI, in order reappraise the contributions of its artists, particularly those of the excluded Scandinavian section who usually receive short shrift in accounts of the SI. Home thus refuses to be paralysed by (what I have described as) the SI’s recuperation anxiety and its fear of the aesthetic object; instead, in his various artistic interventions, Home recognises and confronts the paradoxes that emerged from the SI and which were exacerbated in its Anglicisation.

---

<sup>38</sup> Bonnett, ‘The Dilemmas of Radical Nostalgia in British Psychogeography’, 57.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

Home is prolific: in documenting his own artistic interventions<sup>40</sup>; in issuing pamphlets and, more recently, in blogging; in researching lesser-known members of the 1960s counterculture and especially his mother's involvement therein; and in writing novels which, like his other activities, reflect his playful and provocative approach to questions of the avant-garde, the postmodern, pop-culture, and ultra-leftism. Edward S. Robinson's *Shift Linguals* (2011) includes the first sustained academic study of Home, and places him in a lineage of experimental writing that runs from William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, through Kathy Acker, to contemporary online art writers. Home's contribution to the development of 'cut-up narratives', Robinson argues, is to have combined Burroughsian cut-up methods with Situationist tactics of *détournement* and plagiarism, as well as with his own tactics of repetition, pastiche, and 'cultivated contradictions'<sup>41</sup>, to produce novels that revel in their own absurdities, fissures, and ironies. Robinson divides Home's novels into two periods: the early work, concerned with pulp fiction and punk/skinhead culture, which includes *Pure Mania* (1989), *Red London* (1994), and *Slow Death* (1996); and the later work, which moves away from pulp to more overtly experimental styles with great emphasis on literature reviews and bibliographic histories interspersed into Home's fictions. The later work includes *69 Things to Do with a Dead Princess* (2002), *Down and Out in Shoreditch and Hoxton* (2004), and *Tainted Love* (2005).<sup>42</sup> I shall use novels from both of these two periods to demonstrate how Home's writing perpetuates the English Situationist poetics that I have described. I do not mean to pigeon-hole Home's work which, certainly, evades absolute categorisation; instead, Home's project of identifying and responding to paradoxes of radical aesthetic practice is in part inherited from the long history of English Situationist practice.

*Red London* is set in Hackney, north-east London, and based around a housing co-op run by a cult called the Teutonic Order of Buddhist Monks. Some of the residents, including Wayne Kerr and Fellatio Jones, are members of the Skinhead Squad, an anarchist urban guerrilla group that performs gruesome murders of institutional bourgeois figures, and leaves at the site of each murder slogans from the

---

<sup>40</sup> See his collections, *Neoism, Plagiarism and Practice* (London: AK Press 1995) and *Confusion Incorporated: A Collection of Lies, Hoaxes & Hidden Truths* (Hove: Codex 1999).

<sup>41</sup> Edward S. Robinson, *Shift Linguals: Cut-Up Narratives from William S. Burroughs to the Present* (New York: Rodopi 2011), 203

<sup>42</sup> I would speculate that *Blood Rites of the Bourgeoisie* (2010) marks a new phase of Home's writing, one which engages with his blogging experiences and which erodes even further the role of a linear narrative.

underground tract, *Marx, Christ and Satan United in Struggle* by K.L. Callan.<sup>43</sup> After a series of murders, punctuated by graphic and extended, but farcically-described sex scenes, the novel culminates in a street battle in which the Skinhead Squad and other lumpenproletarian revolutionary factions run rampant through central London.

Home's novel continues the tradition of English Situationist practice most obviously by way of its conflation of high and low discourses: specifically, a type of ultra-left rhetoric drawn from the SI is combined with a sensationalist narrative drawn from pulp novels. Examples from two of the main themes of *Red London*—sex and violence—will demonstrate the continuation from *King Mob* to Home's early writing. At one moment, Fellatio Jones is showing off his library to Melody Thrush. Jones denounces 'middle-brow bollocks'<sup>44</sup> like B.S. Johnson and Alain Robbe-Grillet, and lauds the paperbacks he buys at Woolworths. Thrush notices a title that she's been hunting, and her enthusiasm for this book pushes her to an impromptu orgasm. The narrative then returns to an overwrought evolutionary metaphor that reappears at every sex scene, which themselves reappear every few pages. Each rendezvous includes some mention of 'liquid genetics' (semen), beating 'the primitive rhythm of the swamp' (sex) and the un/scrambling of DNA (orgasm). In this instance, that metaphor is awkwardly grafted onto a jargonistic analysis of commodification:

The DNA had seized control of the girl's body. Genetic codes were being scrambled and unscrambled in every nerve-ending she possessed. Under the dictatorship of the commodity, sex and consumerism are so closely connected that in certain borderline cases, the functions become confused. Thrush was wet with pleasure.<sup>45</sup>

A similar conflation of high and low occurs in the novel's set pieces of revanchist ultra-violence. In one instance, the Soho Prostitutes' Collective, allies of the Skinhead Squad, storm a Christian charity benefit gig by the reactionary pop-star Sebastian Fame. Like a routine from a kung-fu movie, the prostitutes storm through the hall, executing the assembled fascists, religious fundamentalists, and racists, until they crucify Fame on stage. A slogan from *Marx, Christ and Satan United in Struggle* is then scrawled, in Fame's blood, across the back wall:

---

<sup>43</sup> Robinson claims this was Home's birth name. *Shift Linguals*, 201.

<sup>44</sup> Stewart Home, *Red London* (Edinburgh: AK Press 1994), 94.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.



Panic and terror will play a major role in the struggle. They add a much needed aesthetic element to our fight, and assist the comrades in appreciating the terrible beauty of the class war.<sup>46</sup>

These ironic juxtapositions of high theory and low, lurid, culture are typical of Home's lumpenproletarianised style. Bonnet, in relation not to Home's novels but to the 'magico-marxism' of his London Psychogeographical Association pamphlets, argues that Home scurrilously satirises class politics<sup>47</sup>. I would add the qualification that Home satirises the dogma, jargon, and stylistic homogeneity of a certain type of post-Situationist politics, the type that Bewes dismissed as merely quoting, or uncritically repeating, its sources. Home's 'aesthetics of provocation'<sup>48</sup>, Bonnet continues, 'rely on a sense of nostalgia for "real" class politics but exhibit a brazen confidence that revolutionary rhetoric is today so hollow that it can be scripted as a kind of elaborate joke.'<sup>49</sup> But who, I ask, is the butt of the joke? Certainly, Home mocks the self-aggrandisement of pro-situ currents, but he perpetuates it too. He includes in *Red London* a policeman called Marcus O'Greil—a barely-veiled attack on Greil Marcus, whose text *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (1989) was, like Home's *Assault on Culture*, an early English account of the SI that made the link with punk. Home continues to cultivate such feuds, which are often based on denunciations of others' interpretations of the SI.

Home's vitriolic mockery does, however, extend beyond the small-difference narcissism of the pro-situ milieu. We do not condescend to laugh at the stereotyped ultra-leftists and their clichéd slogans in *Red London* because we know that Home is also mocking us as readers: we keep reading the same things, literally, as sex scenes are just rearrangements of a handful of rude words and ridiculous metaphors. The form of Home's novel is itself a joke. It plagiarises, and in its internal repetitions it plagiarises itself. It performs the vortex of inauthenticity that, Home implies, is the mire of postmodern experimental fiction. Home is, at times, direct in his condemnation of contemporary cultural production. At one moment, the narrative focalises Fellatio Jones to declare, 'The fiction market was dominated by middle-brow hacks. These bastards were wrecking the English language with their Booker Prize respectability.'<sup>50</sup> More importantly, Home's polemics are delivered through a textual form that is itself

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>47</sup> Bonnett, 'The Dilemmas of Radical Nostalgia in British Psychogeography', 60.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Home, *Red London*, 45.

an assault on the mundane aspirations and sequestered potential of commodified cultural production. The style of *Red London*, a pastiche of Richard Allen's skinhead novels of the 1970s, reflects Home's contention that the novel truest to the cultural conditions of late capitalism is the pulp novel, which is endlessly repeatable, superficial, ironic, cheap (in all senses), and titillating.<sup>51</sup> Home's détournement of that form, which it simultaneously pays homage to and mocks, produces a tainted commodity, even a self-hating commodity: thus returns the English Situationist anxiety of form, a response to the aforementioned demand that art represent its own supersession; the agonised text that is what it condemns.

69 *Things to Do with a Dead Princess* intensifies Home's assault on the publishing industry and includes extended digressions on trends in publishing, with fierce diatribes aimed, for example, at Chris Kraus and Sylvère Lotringer and their marketing of French poststructuralist theory to the Anglophonic world by way of the Semiotext(e) imprint. Home's novel revisits many of his hallmark themes, including: the reappearance of the fictional writer K.L. Callan; repetition of and in gratuitous and farcical sex scenes, which now involve a ventriloquist's dummy; and critiques of the SI, particularly of Debord, alongside lip-service to council communism. 69 *Things*, like many of Home's fictional and non-fictional writings, also comments on the biography and bibliography of Alexander Trocchi, whose association with Home's mother has led to Home suggesting that, 'I remain almost literally Alex Trocchi's illegitimate son'<sup>52</sup>. Whether or not Home's mother did know Trocchi—it is difficult to ascertain whether these allegations are part of Home's praxis of lying and fabulation—I certainly regard Home as Trocchi's literary son. They share an enthusiasm for combining pulp erotica with sloganistic politics, and they both employ the bricolage textual method that I previously described as Trocchi's composite text. Home has written that his 'revolt against authenticity' was learned from Trocchi<sup>53</sup>. He sees their correspondence as based on the assertion that in a world which is fundamentally untrue, to tell the truth one must lie—which resounds with Debord's claims, 'In a world that is really upside down,

---

<sup>51</sup> *All the Kings Horses* (1960) by the Situationist Michèle Bernstein, written as a détournement of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (Choderlos de Laclos, 1782) and as a means of generating income for the SI, anticipates Home's project in this respect.

<sup>52</sup> Home, 'Walk on Gilded Splinters: In Memoriam to Memory 13 April 1969. Alex Trocchi's State of Revolt at the Arts Lab in London', 409.

<sup>53</sup> Home's writing on Trocchi can be found in *Tainted Love* (2005), in Home's introduction to the One World Classics edition (2008) of Trocchi's *Young Adam*, and in many entries on his blog at <http://www.stewarthomesociety.org>.

the true is a moment of the false'<sup>54</sup>, and more pertinently, 'in the enemy's language the lie must reign.'<sup>55</sup> Like Home's adoption of the pulp novel form as an immanent means of exacerbating the contradictions of commodity culture, Home's endless lying is both consistent with and a fundamental violation of spectacular ideology (in the spectacle, the known lie should never acknowledge itself as such).

*69 Things* is narrated by its female protagonist, Anna Noon, who meets a man in a bar with whom she travels around the stone circles of Aberdeenshire following a route described in a story also called *69 Things to Do with a Dead Princess* (and also by K.L. Callan), whose author claims to have carried the corpse of Princess Diana around these sites. The narrator and her accomplice use a ventriloquist's dummy as a substitute for Diana's corpse and intersperse their travels with much sex and much discussion of the man's literary preferences. Meanwhile, Anna's unreliability as narrator becomes increasingly apparent. The dummy appears to come to life, and narrates one chapter as Anna sleeps, in which he declares that it is actually her male friend who is imaginary (the implication is that this chapter marks one of many dream episodes).

Home's pulp parodies have, by this time, moved towards a more recognisably modernist set of concerns. Home employs the Joycean tactic of abruptly shifting the narrative style through a range of different registers, resulting in a debased heteroglossia, a survey of exhausted, clichéd, and interchangeable styles, which acts as a microcosm of a mundane, repetitious and spectacularised literary culture. For example, Anna recounts one visit to the man's flat. She begins with a plain, observational style, which notes simply, 'There were no longer any books in the bedroom. Indeed, all the furniture had been removed and clothes he still possessed were heaped up in a corner.'<sup>56</sup> After a whisky, Anna starts to desire the man and her tone suddenly adopts an ornate, high-romantic style: 'His roseate limbs seemed floating in celestial light. I stretched up my arms and told my love how delightful it was to be with him now.'<sup>57</sup> As they begin to have sex, the narrative style changes again, into a crude, pornographic register: he 'rammed home his prick with desperate energy

---

<sup>54</sup> SoS, 9.

<sup>55</sup> Guy Debord, *Panegyric Volumes 1 & 2*, trans. James Brook and John McHale (London: Verso 2004), 9.

<sup>56</sup> Stewart Home, *69 Things to Do with a Dead Princess* (Edinburgh: Cannongate 2003), 114.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

and with a low moaning cry shot forth a torrent of boiling spunk. I felt my cunt filled to overflowing.’<sup>58</sup>

The difference between the stylistic oscillations of *Red London* and of *69 Things* is that the former retains some ground of certainty, some assured identity—above all else, it is a pastiche genre novel. *69 Things*, however, is only composite and there is no hierarchy of its literary modes.<sup>59</sup> It is also less spectacular and lumpenproletarianised than *Red London*, less akin to King Mob’s effort to critique the spectacle by way of spectacular forms. In its questioning of linear narrative, of authorial certainty, and of realism, *69 Things* seems to inhabit a more ‘respectable’ cultural place than does *Red London*: *69 Things* adopts a more complex and sophisticated narratology, and alludes to recognised modernist authors who have done the same; *Red London* (over-)states its own ‘cheapness’, with correspondingly ‘cheap’ allusions (so long as we agree that Samuel Beckett, for example, is regarded as being of greater literary value than Richard Allen). *69 Things* adopts—and lets its reader know that it is adopting—the prose styles of Ann Quin and Beckett (the former *détourned* in the opening, the latter pastiched in the conclusion). *69 Things* allies itself with such authors in an acknowledgement that their assaults on banal culture resonate with Home’s. He stylistically endorses their writing styles as he previously used Richard Allen’s skinhead novels as examples of compromised cultural production.<sup>60</sup> *69 Things* begins with the sentence, ‘A man who no longer called himself Callum came to Aberdeen intent on ending his own life.’<sup>61</sup> An endnote later in the first chapter reflects on the prose style of the opening and closing sections of the novel. The narrator writes that, ‘Avoiding Ernest Hemingway, I detour instead towards Ann Quin. Disliking Hemingway, I detour instead to Ann Quin.’ These sentences are then repeated with Hemingway replaced by Gertrude Stein.<sup>62</sup> The verb ‘detour’ suggests ‘*détourn*’ and, indeed, Quin’s *Berg* (1964) begins, ‘A man called Berg, who changed his name to Greb, came to a seaside town intending to kill his father’<sup>63</sup>,

---

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>59</sup> The transition from *Red London* to *69 Things*, therefore, matches Trocchi’s transition from *Young Adam* to *Cain’s Book*, in terms of a willed dissolution of the self. McKenzie Wark has recently described Trocchi’s *Helen and Desire* in similar terms, as the documentation of the efforts of Helen, protagonist and narrator, to entirely give herself over to the situation and thus eliminate the possibility of authorship: ‘Her diary ends when there is no longer a subject to be writing it’. McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International* (London: Verso 2011), 127.

<sup>60</sup> Quin and Beckett were both associates of Trocchi: Home hasn’t strayed too far from his comfort zone.

<sup>61</sup> Home, *69 Things*, 1.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>63</sup> Ann Quin, *Berg* (Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press 2001), xv.

and includes many of the plot devices that Home appropriates for *69 Things*, including the ventriloquist's dummy.

The final endnote of Home's novel offers an alternative, condensed, version of the story, told in an absurd, Beckettian, style of repetition, variation, and narratorial uncertainty. It begins,

A man no longer called Alan came to Aberdeen. He told me his name was Callum. Somewhere along the line he slipped out of my life. The life slipped out of Callum. If I could reach out and touch him. Reach out. Touch him. Slipped. Slipped out. Life slipped out. Along the line. He slipped out. My life. If I could slip out. If I could reach out. A man. A man called Callum. No longer.<sup>64</sup>

This delirious and schizophrenic conclusion represents the distilled essence of the preceding story. Home undermines certainties claimed by the novel as a form. His characters change names; dreamt and waking moments are blurred; the narrator reflects back on her (or him) self and queries her (or his) method; farcical plot elements sit alongside earnest accounts of local history; different versions of the story are offered. *69 Things* begins to crack under its own weight, its own overdetermination, its own impossibilities. Home describes a series of experimental novels of which he is the commissioning editor as 'where the novel has a nervous breakdown'<sup>65</sup>: this tag-line is an apt description of Home's own work too. *69 Things* demonstrates Home's assault on culture by way of culture, by intervening into recognised and legitimised—but also commodified and spectacularised—cultural forms to exacerbate their paradoxes and impossible claims. Home's is a style of negation as was Debord's, but Home's is a style of negation made through the false affirmations of the spectacle, as was King Mob's—with all the ambivalence between endorsing or superseding spectacular aesthetics thereby entailed.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Home, *69 Things*, 181.

<sup>65</sup> These are the Semina texts, published by Book Works, London.

<sup>66</sup> Another writer whose work stages a similar intervention into existing texts in order to condemn both the state of British politics and the redundancy of aesthetic responses to that dire situation is the poet Sean Bonney. His poetic sequences *Baudelaire in English* (2011) and *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud* (2011) perform complex *détournements* of the two French poets to revitalise their antagonistic politics and make them speak to modern England. Bonney's poems—which frequently quote the SI—rework their sources and themselves; the poems keep updating themselves. However, they also recognise their limits: one 'After Rimbaud' variation (posted 2/5/2010) dejectedly notes its inability to further Rimbaud's efforts to synaesthetically reinscribe letters (as in 'Vowels' [1871]), because, 'The alphabet was,

### Patrick Keiller and the Peculiarly English

Home's project, as I have described it, begins with an intervention into existing texts. A corollary project, and one which I also identify with English Situationist poetics, is that of Patrick Keiller's Robinson films and their interventions into existing places. As Home queries the function of particular literary forms through projecting onto those forms détourned versions of themselves, Keiller's films are documentary fictions that overlay footage of real places with fictional narratives that contest received understandings of those places and their attendant histories. Keiller, to borrow Ross's phrase, brings to light 'a choice of histories' and the possibilities contained therein.

The trilogy of films, *London* (1994), *Robinson in Space* (1997), and *Robinson in Ruins* (2010), announce themselves as documentation of the fictive journeys of Robinson, a part-time lecturer who has taken it upon himself to explore the social space of modern England.<sup>67</sup> Robinson's project combines English and French psychogeographic traditions: one part travelogue in the manner of Defoe, references to whom recur in the films; and one part Situationist *dérive*, euphemistically renamed 'psychic landscaping, drifting and free association' in *London*. The first two films are narrated by his unnamed companion and sometime lover (voiced by Paul Scofield); the final film by the unnamed director of the recently-named Robinson Institute (voiced by Vanessa Redgrave), who claims to have been the sometime lover of Robinson's now deceased previous travelling companion. In all three films, (mostly) static cine camera shots of the landscape, of buildings, of plants, and of ephemera—shots that rarely include any human figures, and never Robinson or his companion—are voiced over with narratives that tell of Robinson's escapades and his researches, with many quotes from literary, historical, and academic texts.<sup>68</sup> The films (like Home's novels) experiment with layers of narration that serve to make ambiguous the authorial presence and make instable certain truth-claims inherent to the form, ostensibly a documentary, though the films' status as artworks is never fully consolidated.

---

ultimately, not ours.' See <http://abandonedbuildings.blogspot.com/2010/05/after-rimbaud.html> [accessed 10/05/2012].

<sup>67</sup> Quotes from these films are taken from the narrations of the DVDs: *London* and *Robinson in Space*, DVD, directed by Patrick Keiller (1994, 1997, London: bfi Video 2005); *Robinson in Ruins*, DVD, directed by Patrick Keiller (2010, London: bfi Video 2011). I have tried to reference the sources quoted by the films.

<sup>68</sup> As well as the narration, the films' soundtracks are composed of ambient sound and (mostly) extra-diegetic music.

In each film, Robinson researches a specific problem: in the first, it is the ‘problem of London’, which he considers to be ‘now a city of fragments [...] no longer organised around a centre’; in *Robinson in Space*, whose journeys move throughout England, the problem is of locating the import-export activity that sustains England’s economy yet which, despite its scale, has remarkably little social presence; *Robinson in Ruins* visits the rural landscape to question its present ownership and the history of its acquisition by private interests. The three films provide a portrait of modern England as corporate-owned, historically unselfconscious, and seemingly committed to its own social and ecological suicide. The films combat this desultory impression with tactics learned from English Romanticism’s quiet radicalism, French Surrealism’s transformative aspirations, and European Modernism’s most antagonistic impulses. Robinson is described, variously, as a Romantic, a Surrealist, and a Modernist—in other words, through the terms that name and repeat the constellation of English Situationist practice.

The second film of Keiller’s trilogy begins by quoting Vaneigem: ‘a bridge between reality and the imagination must be built’<sup>69</sup>. Robinson undertakes this task, and his methods of doing so reflect Keiller’s immersion in the *longue durée* of English Situationist practice. After their first walk together in London, the narrator announces Robinson’s idiosyncratic research method (with Scofield achieving a tone that perfectly balances incredulity and sincerity):

Robinson believed that if he looked at it hard enough, he could cause the surface of the city to reveal to him the molecular basis of historical events, and in this way he hoped to see into the future.

With this announcement, the shot jumps from a panorama of bridges across the Thames to a close-up of the water’s surface, where oil and bubbles swirl like a cosmos (Fig. 22). The second shot is reminiscent of the close-up on the surface of a cup of coffee that accompanies the narrator’s existential-semiotic monologue in Godard’s *Two of Three Things I Know About Her* (1967), and of Debord’s explanation of the thematic role of water ‘as a metaphor for the passing of time’<sup>70</sup> in his autobiographical film *in girum*

---

<sup>69</sup> In Donald Nicholson-Smith’s translation, the line is: ‘A bridge has to be built between the work of the imagination and the objective world.’ Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, 245–246.

<sup>70</sup> Guy Debord, *Complete Cinematic Works*, trans. Ken Knabb (Edinburgh: AK Press 2003), 223.

*imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978).<sup>71</sup> Like Keiller's films, Godard's is critical of city planners and their complicity in the narrator's more philosophical problem of being unable to find images in which he can recognise himself. In Debord's film, the also-unseen narrator says of the shots of Paris and from other films, 'This film disdains the image-scrap of which it is composed'<sup>72</sup>. Yet Keiller wants to go further than Godard and Debord's efforts to recognise and exacerbate the alienated status of their films' images: if the significance of filmic images is unstable, then Keiller wants to imbue those images with significance of his own choosing; specifically, he wants his landscape images to signify the histories that have produced those landscapes as they presently appear, as well as the other possibilities that have been suppressed in those historical processes.



Fig.22: The Thames

Robinson's research method is restated verbatim in *Robinson in Ruins*, whose narrator also mentions that Robinson was keen on repeating Benjamin's verdict that, 'the true creative overcoming of religious illumination certainly does not lie in narcotics, it resides in a profane illumination'<sup>73</sup>. The line is from his essay on Surrealism, in which Benjamin attributes the 'profane illumination' to Breton's *Nadja* and Aragon's *Paris Peasant*, two of Keiller's psychogeographical precursors. However, Keiller anglicises these lines of enquiry by allying French Surrealism with, in particular, English Romanticism, as if to make the former more palatable in films

<sup>71</sup> The SI frequently denounced Godard as a *récupérateur*, most notably in 'The role of Godard', *Internationale Situationniste* 10 (March 1966):58-59. An anonymous, détourned comic strip reproduced in Gray's anthology declares Godard to be 'just another bloody Beatle'. Gray (ed.), *Leaving the Twentieth Century*, 14.

<sup>72</sup> Debord, *Complete Cinematic Works*, 145-146.

<sup>73</sup> Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia', 209.



whose narrators' accents, whose arid senses of humour, and whose very 'proper' articulation of embitterment are 'English' almost to the level of parody.<sup>74</sup> (The layers of irony in the narration serve to conceal whose account of Englishness these films present: Keiller, the author? Schofield, the narrator? The implied narrator? Robinson, the character?) 'Twickenham', Robinson tells the narrator in *London*, 'is the site of the first attempts to transform the world by looking at the landscape'—a reference to Turner having lived there from 1807 to 1826. Turner is mentioned again in *Robinson in Ruins*, when Robinson declares that he has recognised a 'great malady' in England, which he shall 'dispel in the manner of Turner by making picturesque views on journeys to sites of scientific and historic interest'.<sup>75</sup>

In pursuit of those picturesque views, the films switch between panoramas of the landscape (urban and rural), incidental scenes of the types of liminal space that Marc Augé calls the 'non-place'<sup>76</sup>, and close-up shots that, like the cosmos on the water's surface, infer greater significance. In the interaction of these three types of shot, we assume, is to be found the profane-transformative illumination. However, there is a difference between the first two films and the final one in terms of their ambition: the first two function principally as an introduction to a mode of thinking, saturated as they are with quotations that act as signposts to relevant sources; the final film, emerging from what it perceives to be more politically and ecologically desperate times, attempts a more concrete and immediate intervention into its chosen landscape.

*London* and *Robinson in Space* project onto the English landscape a mode of thinking drawn, as Paul Dave notes, from the historical avant-gardes and particularly their notions of a 'carnivalization' or 'revolution of everyday life', which they combine with more pragmatic politics by way of Robinson's commitment to the 'municipal

---

<sup>74</sup> 'I had embarked on landscape film-making in 1981, early in the Thatcher era, after encountering a surrealist tradition in the UK and elsewhere, so that cinematography involved the pursuit of a transformation, radical or otherwise, of everyday reality.' Patrick Keiller quoted in Mark Fisher, 'English Pastoral', *Sight & Sound* (November 2010) available at <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/49663> [accessed 10/05/2012].

<sup>75</sup> Keiller's transformative psychogeography distinguishes him from Richard Long, in whose work I do not recognise the English Situationist poetics. Long's psychogeographical art (glimpsed on a bill board in *London*) is rooted in a long history of walking in landscapes as gesture of resistance of reclamation, but he is more concerned with subjective transformations than changes in the organisation of social space. See Dieter Roelstraete, *Richard Long: A Line Made By Walking* (London: AfterAll 2010).

<sup>76</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso 1995).

socialism' and 'cosmopolitanism' once represented by the GLC.<sup>77</sup> In the first two films, Keiller's engagement with the SI is relatively straightforward: Robinson is its Anglophonic cipher; he has an emotive engagement with the Continental traditions from which the SI emerged, but he is also conscious of the English resistance to such traditions, so he synthesises them with more 'grounded' Anglophonic ones. Robinson celebrates the utopianism of Rimbaud and the Routemaster bus, of Benjamin and the NHS, of Vaneigem and pre-fab council homes. As a result of its timing (shot during the 2008 financial collapse) and its funding (granted not as an artwork unto itself but only as part of a broader research project involving the geographer Doreen Massey and a PhD studentship<sup>78</sup>), *Robinson in Ruins* adopts a rather more complex position. Dave writes,

Whilst the earlier films take place within a context in which neoliberalism is so thoroughly naturalized that any revelation of the mechanisms of its ideological operations appears to offer a sustaining breakthrough for its opponents, the making of *Robinson in Ruins* accompanies a more extensive exposure of the frailty of that system in turmoil, and consequently it raises the possibility of genuine change emerging.<sup>79</sup>

In what follows, I shall offer an overview of how Keiller's first two films reflect the English Situationist poetics described above, but I shall also consider how *Robinson in Ruins* pushes at the limits of those poetics and, as such, might signal the direction in which the tradition that I am charting is now (2010-) beginning to move.

*London* and *Robinson in Space* both stage an intervention into the present—specifically, into the present landscape—by way of Robinson's fervent literary imagination. *London* revisits a number of places where French writers have lived in the city, particularly the sites that Rimbaud once knew. At Battersea Reach where 'trains that carry spent uranium cross the river at night', Robinson remarks, 'Sometimes I see the whole city as a monument to Rimbaud.' The narrator then reads Rimbaud's 'The Bridges' to a sequence of shots of bridges over the Thames. Later, the narrator reads from 'City', also in *Illuminations* (1886), which begins with a sentiment particularly apt for Robinson: 'I am an ephemeral and not too discontented citizen of a metropolis considered modern because all known taste has been evaded [...] in the layout of the

<sup>77</sup> Paul Dave, 'Robinson in Ruins: New Materialism and the Archaeological Imagination', *Radical Philosophy* 169 (September-October 2011): 20.

<sup>78</sup> The project is documented at <http://thefutureoflandscape.wordpress.com/> [accessed 10/05/2012].

<sup>79</sup> Dave, 'Robinson in Ruins', 20.

city.’<sup>80</sup> Robinson is ironically said to imagine Thatcher’s Canary Wharf development as a monument to Rimbaud’s erotic explorations of the docks that occupied the site before it became the very emblem of the city’s neoliberal turn.<sup>81</sup> The phallic BT Tower is, similarly, imagined as a monument to Rimbaud’s relationship with Verlaine (Fig. 23). Robinson’s affinity for Rimbaud is easily comprehended. The former would certainly empathise, as Georges Izambard did not, with Rimbaud’s declaration, ‘I want to be a poet, and I’m working to make myself a visionary [voyant] [...] To arrive at the unknown through the disordering of *all the senses*, that’s the point.’<sup>82</sup>



Fig. 23: ‘The house in which Rimbaud and Verlaine lived as lovers was demolished in 1938 to make way for a telephone exchange, where a monument to their tempestuous relationship has been erected.’

The narrator explains that Robinson has ‘imaginatively reconstructed’ areas of the city as monuments to writers associated but incongruous with those areas as they now exist. Robinson quotes Baudelaire to emphasise the specific literariness of this project. After the intertitle, ‘the ROMANTIC’, the shot is of a McDonalds at the side of a B-road. The frame is busy with roadwork rubble, passing traffic, a grey sky, and an inflatable Ronald McDonald flapping agitatedly and distractingly alongside a Union Jack, all of which contribute to a sense of industrial park ennui (Fig. 24). With a comment that functions as both ironic juxtaposition and antidote to this scene, the narrator recounts,

<sup>80</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, ‘City’, in *Illuminations*, trans. Louise Varèse (New York: New Directions 1957), 57.

<sup>81</sup> The SI held its fourth conference (1960) in nearby Limehouse. It explained its preference for the area ‘famous for its criminals’ in *Internationale Situationniste* 5 (December 1960): 19.

<sup>82</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, letter to George Izambard May 13, 1871, in *Illuminations*, xxvii.

“Romanticism”, wrote Baudelaire, “is precisely situated neither in choice of subjects nor in exact truth, but in a mode of feeling.” For Robinson, the essence of a Romantic life is in the ability to get outside oneself, to see oneself as if from outside, to see oneself, as it were, in a Romance.

Robinson’s imaginative reconstruction of social space turns on multivalent modes of reading. He reads places for the histories and narratives they contain, and also filters his own engagement with those places through a poetic sensibility, so that life is imagined as a fiction and himself as a character therein, as per Rimbaud’s ‘Je est un autre’<sup>83</sup>, a phrase that encapsulates the films’ attempts to make ambiguous their narration. This desire to *get outside oneself*, to refuse immediate presence and to live life as a fiction (rather than to write fictions) corresponds with what I have identified as, on the one hand, Trocchi’s desire for a dissolution of the authorial self into the lived situation, and, and on the other hand, the English Surrealist and Situationists’ desire for a spectrality that is in but not of the present historical moment. Debord’s later writings turn on a similar desire for subjective dissolution through literature. In the script of *in girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* and the autobiographical text *Panegyric* (1989), for example, both of which are heavy with diverse literary allusions, Debord recounts his own adventures in the manner of his literary heroes, filtering his experiences through fiction as he too overwrites reality with the imagination.



Fig. 24: ‘Romanticism is precisely situated [...] in a mode of feeling’

In *London* and *Robinson in Space*, the banality of the present is offset by Robinson’s poetic sensibility. At Brent Cross Shopping Centre in *London*, Robinson optimistically

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

supposes that if he were a poet, this is where he could come to write. Romanticism is privileged as a paradigm through which the imaginative reconstruction of social space might occur. As in his account of Turner, Robinson grants to Romanticism the transformative aspirations of Surrealism. His Romanticism is not Little England ruralism nor pre-industrial sentimentalism, but a political radicalism that opposes the administration of the landscape. Paradoxically, Robinson's version of Romanticism is de-Anglicised, in order to become antithetical to the English culture that Robinson finds in industrial parks, shopping centres, and roadside services. The films imply that the political worth of Romanticism in a project of reimagining English social space is at its greatest when Romanticism is regarded as an alien presence in the English landscape, alongside Surrealist and Situationist thought.

The overriding problem of Englishness, with which Robinson contends, is that it has become conflated with conservatism. Robinson, who maintains an outsider's status to English culture, frequently voices his despair at England's peculiar conservatism. (In *Robinson in Space*, even the economy is recognised as a 'peculiarly English form of capitalism'—note the expression's similarity to George Robertson's mention of the 'peculiarly English Romanticism' at work in *King Mob*). At the beginning of *London*, against an iconic English scene (Tower Bridge, overcast, light rain) the narrator offers a mock-serious survey of the cultural climate:

Dirty Old Blighty. Undereducated, economically backward, bizarre. A catalogue of modern miseries, with its fake traditions, its Irish war, its militarism and secrecy, its silly old judges, its hated of intellectuals, its ill-health and bad food, its sexual repression, its hypocrisy and racism and its indolence. It's so exotic, so home-made.

The root of these problems, Robinson proposes to the narrator in *London*, is that 'English culture had been irrevocably damaged by the English reaction to the French Revolution'. Robinson's interest in eighteenth century English writers and nineteenth century French ones is therefore 'an attempt to rebuild the city in which he found himself as if the [English] nineteenth century had never happened.' He declares that he wants to undertake 'a pilgrimage to the sources of English Romanticism', and so heads to Twickenham, home also to Horace Walpole. We realise that Robinson is looking for clues of other directions in which English culture could have—and maybe could yet—move.

Robinson's effort to uncover lost historical possibilities is signified also in the name that Keiller has chosen for him. Defoe, the patron saint of psychogeography, introduced Robinson Crusoe, the first protagonist of the first English novel.<sup>84</sup> Ian Watt, in agreement with Marx, sees Robinson Crusoe as the prototype of 'homo economicus', in whom the profit motive has come to supersede all other interests.<sup>85</sup> James Joyce, likewise, recognises Crusoe as 'the true prototype of the British colonist': 'All the Anglo-Saxon soul is in Crusoe: virile independence, unthinking cruelty, persistence, slow yet effective intelligence, sexual apathy, practical and well-balance religiosity, calculating dourness.'<sup>86</sup> Keiller's Robinson is Crusoe re-imagined. Robert Mayer proposes that Keiller's Robinson is an attempt to 'undo' Crusoe and his legacy:

The 'failure of London' [in Keiller's film] is attributed to 'the English fear of cities, a Protestant fear of popery and socialism, the fear of Europe that had disenfranchised Londoners and undermined their society.' The Robinson of the films, therefore, seems in important ways to be seeking to undo Defoe, identifying the Protestantism and individualism that we associate with Defoe's most famous protagonist as constitutive elements of a catastrophe that has rendered the Robinson of Keiller's films a victim of a 'shipwreck' in his own country.<sup>87</sup>

However, Keiller does not only attempt to undo a cultural inheritance, he also wants to reclaim another, Romanticism, which is made to play various roles in these films. It is allied with Surrealism and venerated as 'a mode of feeling', reading, and imagining that remains productively dissonant with English conservatism. In the process, Romanticism is taken to signal a radical English inheritance, and used to myth-bust the creeping impression of English culture's inherent conservatism. Keiller demonstrates that England has its own historical currents that can match the radicalism of Continental avant-guards; he just needs to re-radicalise, to détourn, those English currents from whatever ossified status they have assumed, as King Mob attempted three decades previously.

These versions of Romanticism, mostly in the first two films, remain on a cultural level, to engage with (and perhaps hypostatise) stereotypes, and to speculate on what it presently means and what it could mean to be English. *Robinson in Ruins*

---

<sup>84</sup> See Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Fielding, Richardson, Defoe* (London: Pimlico 2000).

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 64–65.

<sup>86</sup> James Joyce, 'Realism and Idealism in English Literature,' in *Occasional, Critical & Political Writing* (Oxford: OUP 2002), 174.

<sup>87</sup> Robert Mayer, 'Not Adaptation but Drifting: Patrick Keiller, Daniel Defoe, and the Relationship between Film and Literature', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 16:4 (July 2004): 820.

advances a Romanticism more historical materialist in character, one which attempts to address political and ecological problems. As I explored in my previous chapter, Marx demonstrated how the period of early English Romanticism, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, was the period of land enclosures and of the forced instauration of industrial capitalism and private property relations. *Robinson in Ruins* presents the most sustained investigation into the history and the politics—not just the culture—of this period to mark the vicious imposition of what has become the present.

As he wanders through the Oxfordshire countryside in that final film, Robinson notices an industrial chimney in the distance, which he takes as a sure sign of the presence of some ‘Romantic ruins’. He is in Otmoor, ‘the landscape of *Through the Looking Glass*’.<sup>88</sup> To a long-shot of a nondescript field being ploughed by a tractor, the narrator recounts how, once, this wetland common was used by the residents of neighbouring towns to graze cattle, sheep, and geese (Fig. 25). In 1830, the local gentry’s efforts to enclose the moor were met with a campaign of civil disobedience and direct action. Farmers attacked the levees that rerouted a nearby river away from the wetland. Locals walked the circumference of the moor and destroyed fences and hedges, ‘possessioning it, in accordance with a local custom’. Arrested protestors were freed from a convoy taking them to jail. At night, this vandalism was continued by armed locals in disguise. Troops initially failed to prevent the actions, but between 1832 and 1835, ‘a force of Metropolitan constables policed the moor at a cost of 13% of the county’s expenditure. There was anger that the public should protect a private property speculation.’ Eventually, the locals’ alliance weakened, and though the narrator states that the enclosure was largely a failure, the shot we watch of the tractor ploughing the field clearly indicates that this is no longer common land. The episode, like the film’s mentions of the Swing riots and the failed agrarian revolt led by Bartholomew Steere in 1596, represents for Robinson one of many historical defeats that produced the present conditions, also narrated in the film, whereby £500billion of public money is needed to bail out a failed, privatised, banking system.

Dave associates such instances in *Robinson in Ruins* with Benjamin’s *Angel of History*, as it is hurtled into the future with its eyes on the past, which it sees as ‘one

---

<sup>88</sup> The reference to Carroll is to a literary figure at once familiar, recognisably English, but also somehow Other—Carroll was, after all, claimed by Breton as a proto-Surrealist.

single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage'<sup>89</sup>. Dave explains, via Michael Löwy, that, 'The forces of barbarism are forever trying to shut the door on the defeated struggles of the oppressed, but the revolutionary cannot afford to allow these struggles of their transhistorical kin to be lost for all time.'<sup>90</sup> Keiller catalogues moments that reveal the barbarism of capitalist relations in the same manner that Marx sought to denaturalise the bourgeois history propounded by the ideologues Ricardo and Malthus.



Fig.25: Otmoor

*Robinson in Ruins* develops also an expressly ecological Romanticism. Where *London* is concerned with the experiential problem of a city, and *Robinson in Space* with the infrastructural problem of a national economy, one problem with which *Robinson in Ruins* contends is global and political-economic: the environmental degradation that accompanies capitalist growth. Much of the work of each of these films is not to provide answers but to elucidate problems. To identify the problem it faces, *Robinson in Ruins* returns to an oft-quoted (especially by Žižek) passage from Jameson, which Robinson is said to have photocopied:

It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>89</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, 249.

<sup>90</sup> Dave, 'Robinson in Ruins', 27.

<sup>91</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'The Antinomies of Postmodernity', in *The Cultural Turn*, 50.



*Robinson in Ruins* includes a number of lengthy close-ups of natural processes. In one, as a spider diligently weaves its web, the narrator recounts the government's response to the financial crisis. In another, to a shot of a foxglove swaying in the wind, the narrator explains,

As a surrealist, Robinson believed that designers of artifacts should seek to emulate the morphogenesis of life-forms and pursued this and similar questions in encounters with flowers. He inclined to biophilia—the love of life and living systems—having discovered Lynne Margulis's view that symbiotic relationships between organisms often of different phyla are a primary force in evolution.

The most important of these close-ups is of lichen growing on a roadsign. The lichen, the narrator explains, thrive despite the pollution through the collaborative symbiosis described by Margulis, which the narrator emphasises is profoundly opposed to the neoliberal ideology of competition that prevails in the human use of the same environment (Fig. 26). The lichen offers a concrete image of an alternative mode of organisation and of growth, and is Robinson's response to Jameson's denigration of the contemporary imagination. (Mark Fisher offers a more pessimistic reading: this image of life after catastrophe might involve only non-human life.<sup>92</sup>)



Fig. 26: Lichen

Fisher also notes that *Robinson in Ruins* differs from the earlier films by sidelining the 'Robinson framing narrative' to allow the narrator more space to state explicitly

---

<sup>92</sup> Fisher, 'English Pastoral'.

the film's 'radical Green perspective'<sup>93</sup>. Fisher suggests, 'Keiller has slightly tired of the Robinson fiction', and when the narrator does return to Robinson's story, 'it can be something of a jolt'.<sup>94</sup> While it is true that the film articulates its politics with less narrative mediation than the previous films, and that the ratio of documentary to fiction is weighted towards the former, I want to argue that Robinson's increasing absence from the final film is not a result of a tactic's exhaustion, but rather its culmination. Robinson is never entirely present in any of the films: we never see him, he is ventriloquised by the narrators, and details of his story are held back from us. 'I cannot tell you where Robinson finally found his Utopia', ends *Robinson in Space*. In *Robinson in Ruins*, however, the protagonist has disappeared entirely, bequeathing nineteen film cans to the institution of the new narrator. Paradoxically, it is when Robinson is furthest away in the film's fiction that we, as viewers, come closest to him, as the film purports to be footage shot by Robinson.

Robinson's diminishing presence in the films serves two functions. The second I shall explicate in the following chapter, which serves also as a conclusion, through reading Robinson's disappearances alongside an even more recently published text that continues the English Situationist theatricalisation of spectrality, Laura Oldfield Ford's *Savage Messiah* (2011). The first function of Robinson's disappearances, however, relates to what I have described as the Situationist anxiety of form, which emerges from the artist's fear that her work will be recuperated and put to work against itself, and that the artwork will invariably assume the commodity form whose inherent fetish character will obstruct whatever revolutionary impulse the artwork declares. Keiller's films, tactically, refuse to represent the results of Robinson's researches. They document and explicate his methodology, catalogue his sources, but never realise his project. Though they can evade neither the commodity form nor the operations of the spectacle, the films, and particularly the last film, complicate their own status as artworks. The films anticipate their spectacular recuperation and, as such, refuse to present themselves as present-and-correct artworks, as closed totalities that are microcosmically adapted to the spectacular regime in which they circulate. The contribution of Keiller's films, in and beyond the tradition of English Situationist practice, is not in whatever answers or images they produce, but in the *space they force open for critical reflection*; in that manner, the films attempt to remain faithful to Robinson's veneration of the imagination as a tool of resistance. In accordance with

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

what Vincent Kaufmann calls Debord's 'science of clandestinity'<sup>95</sup>, Keiller is conscious of the importance of holding something back.<sup>96</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup> Kaufmann, *Guy Debord*, xvi.

<sup>96</sup> See, for example, the SI's 'Hamburg Theses' of 1961, which were never written down and were purposefully kept secret. In 1989, Debord described these theses as the SI's most mysterious document and 'a striking innovation in the succession of artistic avant-gardes, which until then had given the impression of being avid to explain themselves.' Guy Debord, letter to Thomas Levin, November 1989, Not Bored, available at <http://www.notbored.org/debord-November1989.html> [accessed 10/05/2012].

## **4.2 The Spectre of English Situationism**

'The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.'  
Marx, 'Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' (1852)<sup>1</sup>

The 2011 publication by Verso of Laura Oldfield Ford's *Savage Messiah* zines reflects the acceptance of the English Situationist tradition by the (relatively) institutional British left.<sup>2</sup> It also reflects a certain recuperation of Situationist work, though as I have argued, a work's recuperation does not necessarily mean that such work should be dismissed; instead, the anxiety and internalised agonisms that result from anticipating (even hyperbolising) the inevitability of recuperation—and the concurrent recognition of a work's inevitable degree of complicity in spectacular forms—might produce a space in which critical practices can remain critical. Testing the limits of the concept of spectacle is perhaps a more engaged project than is evading the spectacle.

*Savage Messiah* ran as a cut-n-paste zine for eleven issues between 2005 and 2009. Each issue focuses on a particular area of London and combines photographs and Ford's photorealistic drawings of urban landscapes, faces, and détourned signage with fictional narratives of drinking sessions, love affairs, and hungover afternoons (not necessarily in that order). The protagonists are those whom the English Section called the new lumpen: the unemployed, ravers, hooligans, punks, squatters, and the last hangers-on in foreclosed council estates. The predominant discourse is of gentrification and its social and architectural effects, understood as a stage of spectacular (rather than primitive) accumulation. Ford laments the loss of spaces in the city that facilitate activity that isn't consumptive or productive, and gives representation to the subjects excluded from and inassimilable to the glossy urban-lifestyle PR that accompanies the city's ongoing neoliberalisation. Ford envisions

---

<sup>1</sup> Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', 93.

<sup>2</sup> English Situationists and the British New Left maintained hostile relations for a long period. The English Section denounced the New Left as a 'New Establishment' in 1967. The *New Left Review* published its first substantial article on the SI only in 1989, in advance of the ICA's retrospective. T.J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith published a fierce polemic against the article's author, Peter Wollen, in October in 1997 (subsequently included in McDonough's collection). Verso has since embraced the Situationists wholeheartedly. See: English Section, 'The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution', 69; Peter Wollen, 'The Situationist International', *New Left Review* 174 (March-April 1989): 67-95; and T.J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith, 'Why Art Can't Kill the Situationist International', in McDonough (ed.), *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, 467-488.

'redevelopment' sites as the future ruins of Ballardian dystopias (Fig. 27: 'Loft Living Victims of Future Crimes'). A typical page of *Savage Messiah* acts as a negative image of, for example, the billboards that adorn the perimeter exclusion fence of the London 2012 Olympics site, billboards that project the better world of corporatism, glass-and-steel 'yuppiedromes', and endless shopping malls. 'Estate Agents Up Against the South-Facing Wall' is a recurring slogan.

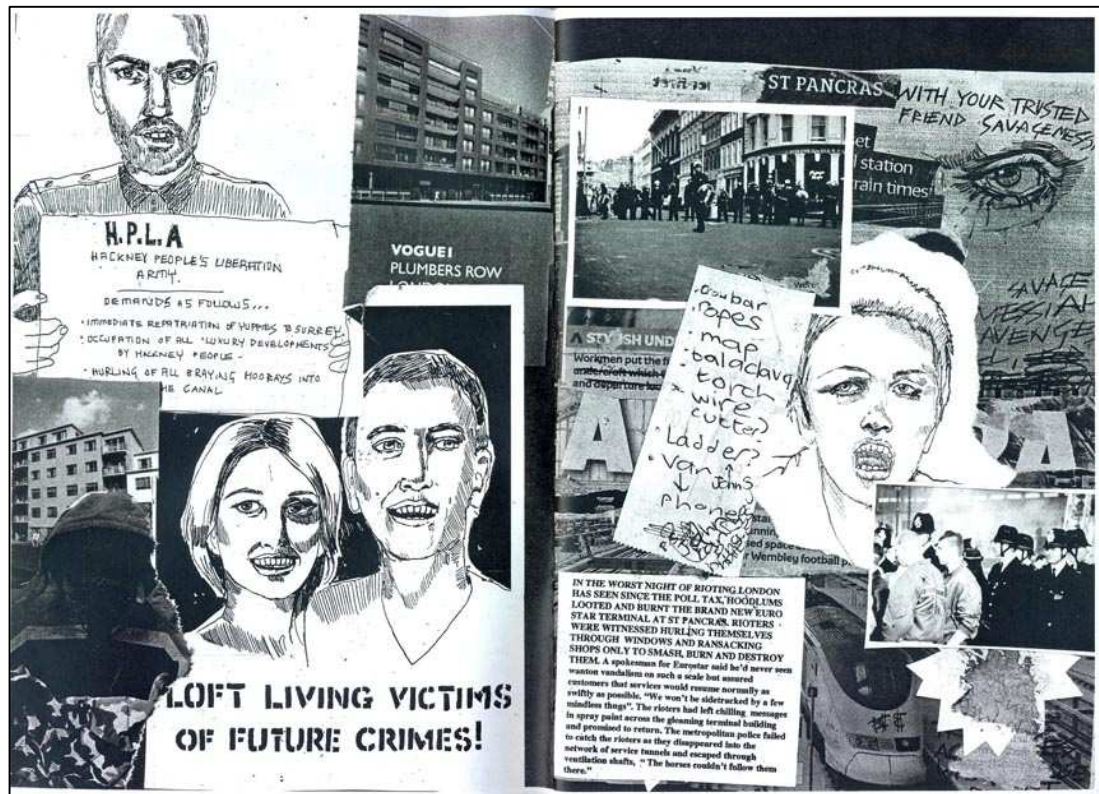


Fig. 27: From *Savage Messiah 8* (c.2008)

Thematically, *Savage Messiah* continues the English Situationist tradition by way of its effort to represent, or perhaps construct, a lumpen class as the agent of the negation of the spectacle, and by way of its concomitant attraction to liminal and unreconstructed areas of the city. Formally, *Savage Messiah* adopts a punk aesthetic indebted to the surrealistic montages found on Crass Records sleeves, and it privileges an ephemeral and 'low' cultural form, the zine, which itself represents a certain refusal of specialisation, a bedsit *gesamtkunstwerk*. Like Keiller's films, *Savage Messiah*'s most obvious debt to the SI comes by way of its psychogeographical method—more specifically, its English Situationist psychogeographical method, its effort to radically re-enchant real places (as opposed to the more subjective focus of 'regular'

psychogeography<sup>3</sup>). *Savage Messiah* performs a poetic intervention into a specific and material manifestation of the spectacle, which Ford calls the 'spectacle of redevelopment'. Ford's détournement of the marketing iconography of the 2012 Olympics insists on the presence of people, histories, and local cultures that gentrification tries its hardest to occlude.

In his introduction to Verso's collected edition, Mark Fisher describes the zines as 'a samizdat counter-history of the capital during the period of neoliberal domination'<sup>4</sup>, and quotes Ford:

The idea that I was moving through a spectral city was really strong, it was as if everything prosaic and dull about the New Labour version of the city was being resisted by these ghosts of brutalist architecture, of '90s convoy culture, rave scenes, '80s political movements and virulent black economy of scavengers, peddlars and shoplifters. I think the book could be seen in the context of the aftermath of an era, where residues and traces of euphoric moments haunt a melancholy landscape.<sup>5</sup>

Fisher suggests that the label of 'hauntology' might account more accurately for the particularity of Ford's project than does the label of psychogeography. Hauntology was a term coined by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx* (1994) though, as Fisher notes, it underwent a transformation in Anglophonic theory around the time when Ford started producing her zines. The object of the discourse of hauntology shifted from Derrida's philosophy of history (by 2005, the 'End of History' moment that had prompted Derrida's book seemed somewhat outdated) and towards the curious recurrence in cultural productions of the theme of haunting and its motif of the spectre.<sup>6</sup> Hauntology came less to diagnose a world-historical condition, and more to reflect a consciously-adopted cultural method (which, I hope to have demonstrated, is a recurrent pattern: the abstractions and the Hegelian inheritance of a Continental discourse are empiricised in the process of their Anglicisation). Fisher describes the hauntology of *Savage Messiah* as 'a staining of place with particularly intense moments of

---

<sup>3</sup> Ford: 'I think a lot of what is called psychogeography now is just middle-class men acting like colonial explorers, showing us their discoveries and guarding their plot.' Quoted in Mark Fisher, 'Introduction', in Laura Oldfield Ford, *Savage Messiah* (London: Verso 2011), xiv. Beyond the introduction, the text is unpaginated.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., v.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>6</sup> Around 2005, music critics started using the term hauntology, not dissimilarly to retrofuturism, in relation to music that used outdated recording styles and sounds in a way that was uncannily futuristic. The main theorists of sonic hauntology were the bloggers Mark Fisher (<http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/>) and Simon Reynolds (<http://blissout.blogspot.com/>).

time'<sup>7</sup>, and spectres as 'not so much ghosts from an actual past [...but as] the traces of futures that had never arrived but which once seemed inevitable'<sup>8</sup>.

Throughout the *longue durée* of the English Situationist tradition, spectrality has occupied privileged positions: the English Surrealist group chose a phantom to represent itself; Trocchi decided that an insurrection must be invisible, and must renounce bodily presence to be in but not of the present age; and King Mob chose to 'echo' the voices of historical revolutionaries, to produce itself as the revenant of all that the bourgeoisie hoped to have dispelled. Likewise, Rancière's account of the aesthetic dimension of politics, so important to my interpretation of the English Situationist attention to class and historical subalterns, hangs on the moment when something invisible is made visible in a similar formulation to that which Derrida uses when he describes the spectre as 'the furtive and ungraspable visibility of the invisible'<sup>9</sup>.

Derrida might seem a surprising choice of theoretical touchstone at this late point in my study—there are, of course, other theories of ghostliness. Yet his articulation of spectrality offers a particularly aesthetic conception of historical recurrence. It thus forces a return to the aesthetic question that has run throughout this study: whether the radical aesthetic object sustains the possibility of an immanent new possibility, or whether it offers compensatory satisfaction that occludes the same.<sup>10</sup> Might the spectre, in addition to being an important motif in English Situationist aesthetic practice, offer a means of conceptualising a philosophy of the tradition's history, which would be as a spectral presence sustained in the absence of a revolutionary moment and, more recently, in the absence of an organised group? Either way, the spectre is the motif that concludes my study—though, handily, spectrality is precisely the refusal of conclusivity.

### **Spectres and Savage Messiahs**

At the end of the previous half-chapter, I suggested that one function of Robinson's increasing absenteeism from Keiller's films, films of which he is ostensibly

---

<sup>7</sup> Fisher, 'Introduction', xv.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning & The New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge 1994), 7.

<sup>10</sup> One Marxist critique of Derrida's hauntology is that it lacks a consideration of class; this critique is more easily negotiated, as the English Situationist spectres are typically those of class war in contexts where discussion of class is suppressed.



the protagonist, is to refute the artworks' completion and to deny the artwork its totality. A space is left in which to reflect on the artwork's limitations. Another function of this absenteeism relates to the notion of a willed subjective dissolution that is an impulse in Situationist theory particularly exacerbated in its English forms. At the beginning of *Robinson in Ruins*, Robinson is released from an unexplained prison sentence and is said to be looking 'for somewhere to haunt'. He squats an abandoned property in Oxford and gradually retreats from the world that exists (cultural conservatism, financial collapse, ecological disaster), to eventually disappear even from the film's narration (the film becomes a more straightforward documentary). Though he still represents the fiction in documentary fiction and the poetic in poetic intervention, the space that Robinson occupies in the film's narratology is no longer filled by the character's idiosyncratic particularity, but by the historical figures whom he attempts to summon from the landscapes through which he travels.

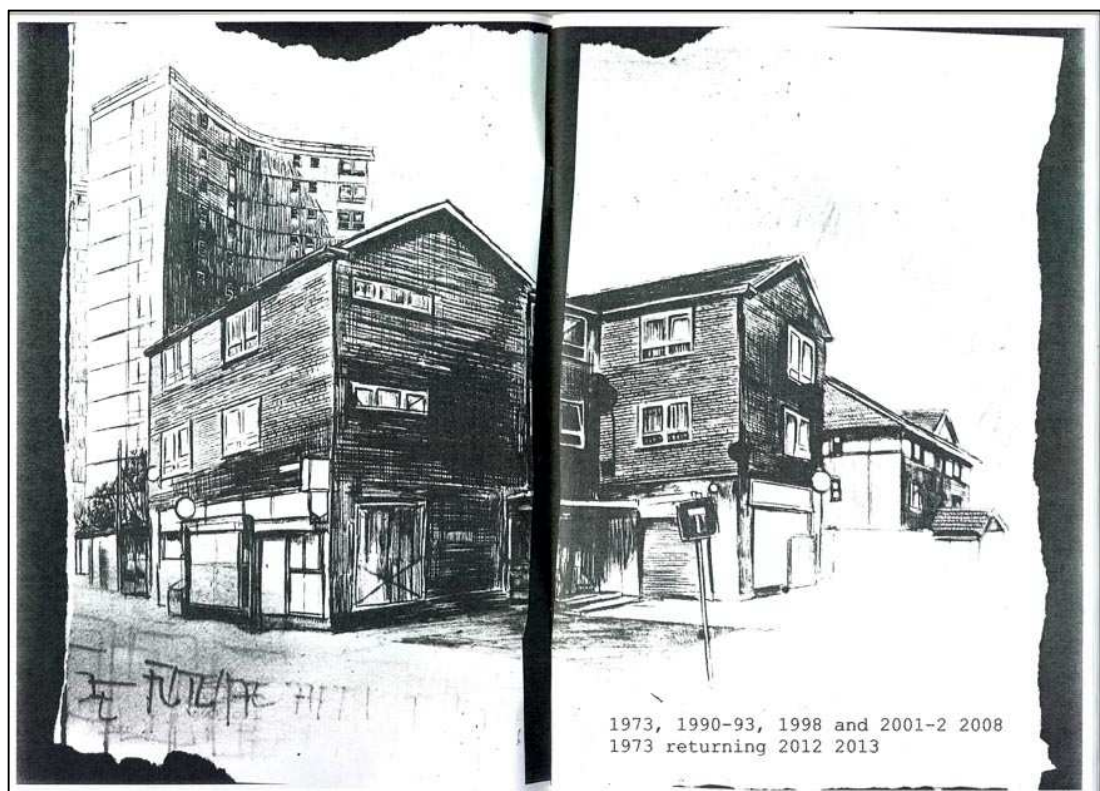


Fig. 28: *Savage Messiah* 10 (2008)

Ford does something similar in *Savage Messiah*. She redraws places, literally, to include that which other redrawings of the city (by city planners and marketing executives) attempt to exclude. Fisher notes Ford's sensitivity to a certain 'poetry of



dates'<sup>11</sup>: her narratives frequently refer to dates—sometimes with explanation, sometimes without, typically the dates are those of riots—meant to signify moments when the history which culminates in the present was contested and something else was envisioned (Fig. 28). *Savage Messiah* 11, for example, introduces itself as a 'special issue tracing the paths from east end to the new towns, from the riot cities of 1981 to the future insurrections of 2010-2013'.

Ford also draws herself into her zines; she constructs the figure 'Laura Oldfield Ford' (perhaps she is the eponymous *Savage Messiah*) as the representative of the collection of boozers and bruisers to whom the author extends her solidarity. Ford makes a spectre of herself; through layers of ambiguous narrating, she too wills a subjective dissolution so that her embodied presence signifies something other than herself. The intention is to create the Situationist situation: the disruption of the spectacular regime in order to glimpse another world, to free occluded possibilities, and to construct an anti-spectacular ontology.



Fig. 29: Laura Oldfield Ford as the *Savage Messiah*, *Savage Messiah* 10 (2008)

The Robinson in Keiller's films and the 'Laura Oldfield Ford' in *Savage Messiah*, and the counter-histories that they conjure, represent the anachrony between the

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., xv.

dejected present and a history that never arrived: Robinson as the revenant of peasant and pre-industrial revolt; Laura Oldfield Ford, the Savage Messiah, as class conflict's refusal to disappear. Both spectres represent an Other whose possibility remains embedded but mostly unrecognised in the history of the present. Both maintain the spectre's ambiguous presence, which Derrida describes as the paradoxical 'Thing that is not a thing'<sup>12</sup> (see Gascoyne's conceptualisation of English Surrealism as *the group that is not a group*). The spectre, for Keiller and Ford, acts as an interruption of the false chronology of bourgeois history which presents itself as natural, consolidated, and, in Debord's term, 'irreversible'<sup>13</sup>—a project analogous to Benjamin's desire to blast open 'the continuum of history'<sup>14</sup>.

In the 'Eighteenth Brumaire', from which Derrida derives much of his account of hauntology, Marx writes,

And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.<sup>15</sup>

English Situationist poetics, and their borrowings, are Janus-faced. They use a past to invoke a future, and in that invocation they assert the counter-tradition to which they belong, even though the period is not one of revolutionary crisis but lack-of-revolution crisis. The spectre is, in this case, the figure that maintains the (anti-) presence of historical antagonism.<sup>16</sup>

### **Revolution(ary) Anxiety**

But this hauntological project remains unconsolidated. It relies too heavily on an aesthetic motif, the spectre, to satisfy either the Situationist scepticism of the aesthetic or the demand that art must represent its own supersession. The English Situationist project is, in this sense, confined to the level of the symbolic. With full

---

<sup>12</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> SoS, thesis 147.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', 254.

<sup>15</sup> Marx, 'Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', 93.

<sup>16</sup> Iain Sinclair is also obsessed with ghosts, haunting and disappearances, yet I do not identify him with English Situationist poetics. Simply put, for him, spectres are plot devices and embellishments, typically used to add some metaphorical flourish to subjective accounts of local history and urban planning; his ghosts are not combative but conservative.

knowledge of the enormity of prior defeats and the negligibility of its gestures of historical solidarity, the English Situationist tradition remains dejected. In Keiller's *London*, after explaining Robinson's effort to forget the nineteenth century, the narrator confides, 'Of course, he is bound to fail'. In *Robinson in Space*, the narrator quotes Lefebvre: 'The space which contains the realized preconditions of another life is the same one as prohibits what those preconditions make possible.'<sup>17</sup> Keiller lets us know of the impossibility of his project, of its inability to escape from the history that has led to the present, to the spectacle. In such a society, can the films, as commodified aesthetic objects, be anything more than false placations?

At the same time, however, Keiller's recognition that his project is impossible in the midst of his project seems to corroborate Marx's observation, above, that historical borrowing is done 'anxiously'. Keiller's anxiety, an anxiety inherent to the aesthetic objects he produces, might represent how the aesthetic can combat its spectacularised self, how art might gesture towards (if not fully achieve) its own supersession. About Marx's mention of anxiety, Derrida writes, 'this anxiety in the face of the ghost is properly revolutionary.'<sup>18</sup> Such anxieties are necessary, they make nightmarish rather than friendly the spectres conjured by the Situationists. Mayer suggests that the 'dismay, anxiety, and ultimate derangement' of Keiller's *Robinson* might be the very things to 'destabilize the myth' of Englishness whose archetype is Robinson Crusoe.<sup>19</sup> In the continued absence of an exit from the capitalist present, the efforts of Keiller, of Ford, and of English Situationist poetics more generally are to sustain the spectre of revolutionary change that Marx once heralded, to sustain a certain antithetical presence in culture even when, due to particular historical conditions, that presence is more poetic than personified. Kaufmann offers a similar verdict about Debord's oeuvre. For Kaufmann, poetry is both substitute for *and* sustenance of revolution:

Between revolutionary periods when the masses accede to poetry through action, we might imagine that circles of poetic adventure remain the only place where the totality of the revolution lives on, as an unfulfilled but imminent potentiality, as the shadow of an absent individual.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell 2004), 189-190.

<sup>18</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 109.

<sup>19</sup> Mayer, 'Not Adaptation but Drifting', 821.

<sup>20</sup> Kaufmann, *Guy Debord*, 177.

Kaufmann's conflation of communism and poetry emphasises the importance of the poetic to the English Situationists. The Situationist project occupies the same position that Derrida attributes to Marxism: 'a ghost that goes on speaking'<sup>21</sup>. In the penultimate thesis of *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord writes that 'a critique seeking to go beyond the spectacle must know how to wait.'<sup>22</sup> To become a spectre is to wait, perhaps to be forced to wait. The anxiety of *Robinson in Ruins*, with its worsening economic and ecological crises, and of *Savage Messiah*, as it watches London disappear, is that we can only wait so long.

---

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 32.

<sup>22</sup> SoS, 119.

## **Bibliography**

- Adorno, Theodor. *Notes to Literature Vol. 1*. Translated by Shierry Weber Nicholson. New York: Colombia University Press, 1991.
- . *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by Dennis Redmond, 2001. Accessed 10 May 2012. <http://members.efn.org/~dredmond/ndtrans.html>.
- . *Minima Moralia*. Translated by E. F. N. Jephcott. London: Verso, 2002.
- Adorno, Theodor, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht and Georg Lukács. *Aesthetics and Politics*. London: Verso, 2007.
- Antonello, Pierpaolo, and Olga Vasile, eds. 'Special Issue: Guy Debord'. *SubStance* 90 (1999).
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Aragon, Louis. *Paris Peasant*. Translated by Simon Watson Taylor. Boston: Exact Change, 1994.
- Augé, Marc. *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Translated by John Howe. London: Verso, 1995.
- Ayer, A.J. 'Some Aspects of Existentialism'. *Merlin* 1:1 (1952): 45-52.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and his World*. Translated by Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Ball, Edward. 'The Great Sideshow of the Situationist International'. *Yale French Studies* 73 (1987): 21-37.
- Barrell, John. *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1980.
- Barthes, Roland. *Image, Music, Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana, 1977.
- Baum, Kelly. 'The Sex of the Situationist International'. *October* 126 (2008): 23-43.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zorn. London: Pimlico, 1999.
- . *Selected Writings: Volume 2 1927-1934*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- . *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Harvard: Belknap Press, 2002.
- Bernstein, Michèle. *All the Kings Horses*. Translated by John Kelsey. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008.
- Bertholf, Robert J., and Annette S. Levitt, eds. *William Blake and the Moderns*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1982.
- Bewes, Timothy. *Reification, or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso, 2002.
- Black Mask and Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker: The Incomplete Works of Ron Hahne, Ben Morea and the Black Mask Group*. London: Unpopular Books and Sabotage Editions, 1993.
- Blake, William. *The Complete Writings of William Blake*. Edited by Geoffrey Keynes. London: Oxford University Press, 1966.

- . *The Illuminated Blake*. Annotated by David V. Erdman. London: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- Blazwick, Iwona, ed. *An Endless Banquet, An Endless Passion, An Endless Adventure: A Situationist Scrapbook*. London: ICA, 1989.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Bonnett, Alastair, 'The Nostalgias of Situationist Subversion', *Theory, Culture & Society* 23:5 (2006): 23-48.
- . 'The Dilemmas of Radical Nostalgia in British Psychogeography'. *Theory, Culture & Society* 26:1 (2009): 45-70.
- Bonney, Sean. *Baudelaire in English*. London: Veer, 2011.
- . *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud*. London: Unkant, 2011.
- Breton, André. *Manifestos of Surrealism*. Translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1972.
- . *Nadja*. Translated by Richard Howard. London: Penguin, 1999.
- . *Anthology of Black Humour*. London: Telegram, 2009.
- Buchloh, Benjamin H.D. 'The Primary Colours for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde'. *October* 37 (1986): 41-52.
- . *Neo-Avant-Garde and Culture Industry*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000.
- Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Translated by Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Caillois, Roger. 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia'. Translated by John Shepley. *October* 31 (1984): 16-32.
- Calder, John. 'Alexander Trocchi'. *Edinburgh Review* 70 (1985): 32-35.
- Campbell, Allan, and Tim Niel, eds. *A Life in Pieces: Reflections on Alexander Trocchi*. Edinburgh: Rebel Inc., 1997.
- Camus, Albert. *The Outsider*. Translated by Joseph Laredo. London: Penguin Classics, 2000.
- Carr, Gordon. *The Angry Brigade: The Cause and the Case*. London: Gollancz, 1975.
- Clark, Steve, and Jason Whittaker, eds. *Blake, Modernity and Popular Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Clark, Steve, and David Worrall, eds. *Blake in the Nineties*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1999.
- Clark, T.J. *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999.
- . *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *The Complete Poems*. Edited by William Keach. London: Penguin, 1997.

- Comte de Lautréamont. *Maldoror and the Complete Works*. Translated by Alexis Lykiard. Cambridge: Exact Change, 1994.
- Connolly, Cyril. 'It's got here at last!' *New Statesman and Nation*. December 14<sup>th</sup> 1935.
- Cooper, Sam. 'Sex and the Situs'. *World Picture* 4 (2010). Accessed 10 May 2012.  
[http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP\\_4/PDFs/Cooper.pdf](http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_4/PDFs/Cooper.pdf).
- Coverley, Merlin. *Psychogeography*. Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2006.
- Daily Mirror*, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1972.
- Dave, Paul. 'Robinson in Ruins: New Materialism and the Archaeological Imagination'. *Radical Philosophy* 169 (2011): 19-35.
- Day, Aidan. *Romanticism*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979.
- . *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.
- de St. Jorre, John. *The Good Ship Venus: The Erotic Voyage of Maurice Girodias and the Olympia Press*. London: Faber & Faber, 2009.
- Debord, Guy. *Guy Debord présente Potlatch 1954-1957*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1996.
- . *Considerations on the Assassination of Gérard Lebovici*. Translated by Robert Greene. Los Angeles: TamTam, 2001.
- . *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Malcolm Imrie. London: Verso, 2002.
- . *Complete Cinematic Works*. Translated by Ken Knabb. Edinburgh: AK Press, 2003.
- . *Panegyric Volumes 1 & 2*. Translated by James Brook and John McHale. London: Verso, 2004.
- . *Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1995.
- . *Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Ken Knabb. London: Rebel Press, 2005.
- . *Œuvres*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2006.
- . *Correspondence: The Foundation of the Situationist International (June 1957 – August 1960)*. Translated by Stuart Kendall and John McHale. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009.
- DeKoven, Marianne. *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. London: Athlone Press, 1992.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning & The New International*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Derrida, Jacques, Terry Eagleton, Frederic Jameson, Antonio Negri, et al. *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx*. London: Verso, 1999.
- Diepeveen, Leonard. *The Difficulties of Modernism*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Easthope, Anthony. 'The Question of Literary Value'. *Textual Practice* 4:3 (1990): 376-389.
- . *Englishness and National Culture*. London: Routledge, 1999.

- Eliot, T.S. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. *Perspecta* 19 (1982): 36-42.
- English Section of the Situationist International, the. *The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution*. London: Chronos Publications, 1994.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington. London: Penguin, 1967.
- Fisher, Mark. 'English Pastoral'. *Sight & Sound* (November 2010). Accessed 10 May 2012. <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/49663>.
- Ford, Laura Oldfield. *Savage Messiah*. London: Verso, 2011.
- Ford, Simon. *The Realization and Suppression of the Situationist International: An Annotated Bibliography 1972-1992*. Edinburgh: AK Press, 1995.
- Foster, Hal. 'What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?' *October* 70 (1994): 5-32.
- . *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1996).
- Fountain, Nigel. *Underground: The London Alternative Press 1966-74*. London: Comedia, 1988.
- Fryer, Peter. 'Spectacles'. *Times Literary Supplement* (21<sup>st</sup> March 1968): 286.
- Gardiner, Michael. *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory since 1960*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.
- Gascoyne, David. 'Premier Manifeste Anglais du Surréalisme (fragment)'. *Cahiers d'art* 10 (1935): 106.
- . *Collected Journals: 1936-1942*. London: Skoob Books, 1991.
- . *A Short Survey of Surrealism*. London: Enitharmon Press, 2000.
- Gilman-Opalsky, Richard. *Spectacular Capitalism: Guy Debord & the Practice of Radical Philosophy*. London: Minor Compositions, 2011.
- Gorfinkel, Elena, and John David Rhodes, eds. *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
- Gorky, Maxim, Karl Radek, Nikolai Bukharin, Andrei Zhdanov, et al. *Soviet Writer's Congress 1934*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977.
- Gray, Christopher, ed. *Leaving the Twentieth Century: The Incomplete Work of the Situationist International*. London: Rebel Press, 1998.
- Green, Jonathon. *Days in the Life: Voices from the English Underground 1961-1971*. London: Heinemann, 1988.
- Grigson, Geoffrey. 'Letter from England'. *Poetry (Chicago)* 49 (1936): 101-103.
- Grindon, Gavin. 'Second Wave Situationism?' *Fifth Estate* 350 (2009): 11, 50-51.
- Hall, Stuart. 'Life and Times of the First New Left'. *New Left Review* 61 (2010): 177-196.
- Harrisson, Tom, Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge. 'Anthropology at Home'. *New Statesman and Nation*, January 30<sup>th</sup> 1937.
- Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1979.
- Helmling, Steven. 'Constellation and Critique: Adorno's Constellation, Benjamin's Dialectical Image'. *Postmodern Culture* 14:1 (2003). Accessed 10 May 2012. <http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.903/14.1helmling.txt>.
- Highmore, Ben. *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*. Oxford: Routledge, 2002.



- Hoggart, Richard. *The Uses of Literacy*. London: Penguin, 1960.
- Home, Stewart. *The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War*. Stirling: AK Press, 1991.
- . *Red London*. Edinburgh: AK Press, 1994.
- . *Cranked Up Really High: Genre Theory and Punk Rock*. Hove: Codex, 1995.
- . *Neoism, Plagiarism and Practice*. London: AK Press, 1995.
- . *Confusion Incorporated: A Collection of Lies, Hoaxes & Hidden Truths*. Hove: Codex, 1999.
- . *69 Things to Do with a Dead Princess*. Edinburgh: Cannongate, 2003.
- . *Tainted Love*. London: Virgin Books Ltd., 2005.
- . *Introduction to Young Adam*, by Alexander Trocchi. London: One World Classics, 2008.
- . *Blood Rites of the Bourgeoisie*. London: Book Works, 2010.
- Home, Stewart, ed. *What is Situationism? A Reader*. London: AK Press, 1996.
- Hubble, Nick. *Mass-Observation and Everyday Life: Culture, History, Theory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Hussey, Andrew. *The Game of War: The Life and Death of Guy Debord*. London: Pimlico, 2002.
- Hynes, Samuel. *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s*. London: Bodley Head, 1979.
- Invisible Committee, the. *The Coming Insurrection*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009.
- Jackaman, Rob. *The Course of English Surrealist Poetry Since the 1930s*. Lampeter: Mellen, 1989.
- Jameson, Frederic. *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998*. London: Verso, 1998.
- Jappe, Anselm. *Guy Debord*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Jeffrey, Tom. *Mass-Observation: A Short History*. Mass Observation Occasional Paper No. 10, University of Sussex Library, 1999.
- Jennings, Humphrey. *Pandæmonium 1660-1886: The Coming of the Machine as seen by Contemporary Observers*. London: André Deutsch, 1985.
- Jennings, Humphrey, and Charles Madge. *May the Twelfth: Mass-Observation Day-Surveys 1937 by over two hundred observers*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1937.
- Josipovici, Gabriel. *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.
- Joyce, James. *Occasional, Critical & Political Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Kane, Daniel. *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- Kaufmann, Vincent. *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry*. Translated by Robert Bononno. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.
- Kempton, Richard. *Provo: Amsterdam's Anarchist Revolt*. New York: Autonomedia, 2007.

- Knabb, Ken, ed. *Situationist International Anthology*. Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006.
- Kravitz, Peter, ed. 'The Trocchi Issue'. *Edinburgh Review* 70 (1985).
- Kripal, Jeffrey J. 'Reality Against Society: William Blake, Antinomianism, and the American Counterculture'. *Common Knowledge* 13.1 (2007): 98-112.
- Laclau, Ernesto. *Emancipation(s)*. London: Verso, 1996.
- Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso, 1985.
- Lanham, Richard A. *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *Critique of Everyday Life Vol. 2*. Translated by John Moore. London: Verso, 2002.
- . *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.
- Lewis, Helena. *Dada Turns Red: The Politics of Surrealism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990.
- Lord Hastings. 'The Surrealists'. *Left Review* 2:4 (January 1936): 186-187.
- Lydon, John. *Rotten: No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1994.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition*. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- MacClancy, Jeremy. 'Brief Encounter: The Meeting, in Mass-Observation, of British Surrealism and Popular Anthropology'. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropology Institute* 1:3 (1995): 495-512.
- Madge, Charles. 'Surrealism for the English'. *New Verse* 6 (1933): 14-18.
- . 'Anthropology at Home'. *New Statesman and Nation*, January 2<sup>nd</sup> 1937.
- Madge, Charles, and Tom Harrisson. *Mass-Observation*. London: Frederick Muller Ltd., 1937.
- Makdisi, Saree. *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Marcus, Greil. *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001.
- Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. Translated by Martin Milligan. New York: Prometheus Books, 1988.
- . *Capital Vol. 1*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin, 1990.
- Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. London: Penguin, 1985.
- . *Selected Works*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991.
- Mass-Observation. *First Year's Work 1937-1938*. Edited by Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson. London: Lindsay Drummond, 1938.
- Mayer, Robert. 'Not Adaptation but Drifting: Patrick Keiller, Daniel Defoe, and the Relationship between Film and Literature'. *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 16:4 (2004): 803-827.

- McDonough, Tom. 'The Beautiful Language of My Century': Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945-1968. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007.
- McDonough, Tom, ed. *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004.
- . *The Situationists and the City: A Reader*. London: Verso, 2010.
- Members of the Situationist International and Students of Strasbourg. *On the Poverty of Student Life: considered in its economic, political, psychological, sexual and particularly intellectual aspects, and a modest proposal for its remedy*. London: Active Distribution, Dark Star and Public Reading Rooms, 2008.
- Mension, Jean-Michel. *The Tribe*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. London: Verso, 2002.
- Morrison, Toni, ed. *To Die for The People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2009.
- Neumann, Osha. *Up Against the Wall Motherfucker: A Memoir of the 60s, with Notes for the Next Time*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008.
- Noys, Benjamin. *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.
- Nyiszli, Dr. Miklos. 'SS. Obersturmfuhrer Doktor Mengele (Conclusion)'. *Merlin* 2:1 (1953): 48-72.
- Plant, Sadie. *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Pleasure Tendency, the. *Life and its Replacement with a Dull Reflection of Itself*. Leeds: The Pleasure Tendency, 1984.
- Pound, Ezra. *ABC of Reading*. New York: New Directions, 2010.
- Puchner, Martin. *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Pyke, Geoffrey. 'King and Country'. *New Statesman and Nation*, December 12<sup>th</sup> 1936.
- Quin, Ann. Berg. Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001.
- Rancière, Jacques. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Translated by Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- . *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Translated by Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum, 2008.
- . 'The Aesthetic Dimension: Aesthetics, Politics, Knowledge'. *Critical Inquiry* 36:1 (2009): 1-19.
- . *The Emancipated Spectator*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. London: Verso, 2009.
- . *The Future of the Image*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. London: Verso, 2009.
- Rasmussen, Mikkel Bolt, and Jakob Jakobsen, eds. *Expect Anything Fear Nothing: The Situationist Movement in Scandinavia and Elsewhere*. New York: Autonomedia, 2011.
- Ray, P.C. *The Surrealist Movement in England*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971.
- Read, Herbert. 'Why the English have no taste'. *Minotaure* 7 (1935): 67-68.
- . 'Surrealism – the dialectic of art'. *Supplement to Left Review* 2:10 (July 1936): 2-3.

- . *Surrealism*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1936.
- Remy, Michel. *Surrealism in Britain*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999.
- Retort. *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*. London: Verso, 2005.
- Richter, Hans. *dada: art and anti-art*. Translated by David Britt. London: Thames and Hudson, 2007.
- Rimbaud, Arthur. *Illuminations*. Translated by Louise Varèse. New York: New Directions, 1957.
- Riquelme, John Paul. 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Karl Marx as Symbolic Action'. *History and Theory* 19:1 (1980): 58-72.
- Robinson, Edward S. *Shift Linguals: Cut-Up Narratives from William S. Burroughs to the Present*. New York: Rodopi, 2011.
- Roditi, Edouard. 'A New Reality'. *The Oxford Outlook* X:49 (Summer 1929): 295-300.
- Roelstraete, Dieter. *Richard Long: A Line Made By Walking*. London: AfterAll, 2010.
- Rosemont, Franklin, and Charles Radcliffe, eds. *Dancin' in the Streets: Anarchists, IWWs, Surrealists, Situationists & Provos in the 1960s as recorded in the pages of The Rebel Worker and Heatwave*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2005.
- Ross, Kristin. *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*. London: Verso, 2008.
- Roughton, Roger, ed. *Contemporary Poetry and Prose May 1936 – Autumn 1937: Ten Numbers in One Volume*. London: Frank Cass and Company Ltd., 1968.
- Rumney, Ralph. *The Consul*. Translated by Malcolm Imrie. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2002.
- Rumney, Ralph, and Alan Woods. *The Map is not the Territory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001.
- Sabri-Tabrizi, G.R. *The 'Heaven' and 'Hell' of William Blake*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1973.
- Savage, Jon. *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock*. London: Faber and Faber, 1991.
- Scorpio, Felix. 'Report from France'. *International Times* 51 (1969): 5.
- . 'Alex Trocchi Gives a Party'. *International Times* 55 (1969): 4.
- Scott, Andrew Murray. *Alexander Trocchi: The Making of the Monster*. Edinburgh: Polygon, 1991.
- Scott, Andrew Murray, ed. *Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds: A Trocchi Reader*. Edinburgh: Polygon, 1991.
- Seaver, Richard, Terry Southern and Alexander Trocchi, eds. *Writers in Revolt: An Anthology*. New York: Frederick Fell Inc., 1963.
- Sinclair, Iain. *Lights Out for the Territory*. London: Penguin, 2003.
- . *Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire*. London: Penguin, 2009.
- Sinclair, Iain, ed. *London: City of Disappearances*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2006.
- Situationist International. *Internationale Situationniste: Édition augmentée*. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1997.

- . *The Real Split in the International*. Translated by John McHale. London: Pluto Press, 2003.
- Slater, Howard. 'Alexander Trocchi and Project Sigma'. *Variant* 7 (1989): 30-38.
- Surrealist Group in England. *International Surrealist Bulletin* 4 (1936).
- Sutherland, Keston. 'Marx in Jargon'. *World Picture* 1 (2008). Accessed 10 May 2012. [http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP\\_1.1/KSutherland.pdf](http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_1.1/KSutherland.pdf).
- The Angry Brigade 1967-1984: Documents and Chronology*. London: Elephant Editions, 1985.
- Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. New York: Pantheon, 1964.
- Trocchi, Alexander. 'Editorial'. *Merlin* 1:2 (1952): 55-57.
- . 'Letter from Paris'. *NIMBUS* 2:1 (1953): 48-52.
- . *Cain's Book*. New York: Grove Press, 1961.
- . *Young Adam*. London: John Calder, 1983.
- . *Sappho of Lesbos*. London: Star, 1986.
- . *Thongs*. New York: Blast Books, 1994.
- . *White Thighs*. New York: Blast Books, 1994.
- . *Helen and Desire*. Edinburgh: Rebel Inc., 1997.
- Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker: An Anthology of Rants, Posters and More*. Melbourne, Australia: Homebrew Press, 2007.
- Vague, Tom. *King Mob Echo: From Gordon Riots to Situationists & Sex Pistols*. London: Dark Star, 2000.
- Vague, Tom, ed. *King Mob Echo: English Section of the Situationist International*. London: Dark Star, 2000.
- Vaneigem, Raoul. *A Cavalier History of Surrealism*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Edinburgh: AK Press, 1999.
- . *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. London: Rebel Press, 2006.
- Viénet, René. *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May '68*. New York: Autonomedia, 1992.
- Volosinov, Valentin. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Translated by Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik. New York: Seminar, 1973.
- Wark, McKenzie. *50 Years of Recuperation of the Situationist International*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008.
- . *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International*. London: Verso, 2011.
- Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Fielding, Richardson, Defoe*. London: Pimlico, 2000.
- Williams, Heathcote. 'The Illegible Split in the Situationist International'. *International Times* 4:1 (1978): 26.
- Wollen, Peter. 'The Situationist International'. *New Left Review* 174 (1989): 67-95.
- Wordsworth, William, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *Lyrical Ballads*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Edited by E.L. Brett and A.R. Jones. London and New York: Routledge, 1991.

### Archival Collections

King Mob. Archive Collections, Tate Britain.

Mass-Observation Archive. Special Collections, University of Sussex.

Trocchi, Alexander. Sigma Portfolio. British Library.

### Audiovisual Materials

Cain's Film and Marihuana Marihuana. DVD. Directed by Jamie Wadhawan, 1969, 1972. London: Chronos Films, 2003.

Can Dialectics Break Bricks? Video. Directed by René Viénet, 1973. Accessed 10 May 2012. [http://www.ubu.com/film/vienet\\_dialectics.html](http://www.ubu.com/film/vienet_dialectics.html).

Œuvres cinématographiques complètes. DVD. Directed by Guy Debord. Paris: Gaumont, 2005.

London and Robinson in Space. DVD. Directed by Patrick Keiller, 1994, 1997. London: bfi Video, 2005.

Robinson in Ruins. DVD. Directed by Patrick Keiller, 2010. London: bfi Video, 2011.

The Great Rock'n'Roll Swindle. DVD. Directed by Julien Temple, 1980. London: Sony BMG, 2005.

Wholly Communion. DVD. Directed by Peter Whitehead, 1965. London: bfi Video, 2007.

### Online Archives

Centre for Digital Discourse and Culture at Virginia Tech. Situationist International Archive. Accessed 10 May 2012. <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/publications.html>.

Home, Stewart. Stewart Home Society. Accessed 10 May 2012. <http://www.stewarthomesociety.org>.

International Times Archive. Accessed 10 May 2012. <http://www.internationaltimes.it/>.

Keiller, Patrick. *The Future of Landscape and the Moving Image*. Accessed 10 May 2012. <http://thefutureoflandscape.wordpress.com/>.

Knabb, Ken. Bureau of Public Secrets. Accessed 10 May 2012. <http://www.bopsecrets.org/>.

Law, Larry. *Spectacular Times*. Accessed 10 May 2012. [http://nntk.net/main.php?g2\\_itemId=251](http://nntk.net/main.php?g2_itemId=251).

Not Bored! Accessed 10 May 2012. <http://www.notbored.org/heatwave.html>.

Vague, Tom. *Vaguerants*. Accessed 10 May 2012. <http://www.vaguerants.org.uk/>.

Wise, David and Stuart Wise. *Dialectical Butterflies*. Accessed 10 May 2012. <http://www.dialecticalbutterflies.com/>.

-----, *Revolt Against Plenty*. Accessed 10 May 2012. <http://www.revoltagainstplenty.com>.