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Beneath the Idol, the Bureaucrat

By Sam Williams

A recently published volume of Guy Debord's early letters provides insights into a singular personality, and the fractious relationships that spawned the Situationist International. But, asks Sam Williams, how does this disenchanting account alter its spectacular legacy?

'The SI just refuses to go away', writes McKenzie Wark in his introduction to Guy Debord's *Correspondence*. Semiotext(e)'s publication of this book affirms the position. Translated from the French, and subtitled 'The Foundation of the Situationist International', it is the first of seven volumes of Guy Debord's correspondence.

[IMAGE]

Image: Graffiti outside the Royal Exchange, London, May 2009

So, why do we need this volume? These letters were available in English online for a year and a half prior to its publication. And there is hardly a dearth of Situationist material. The Situationists, as individuals and as a movement, were prolific. As well as the twelve volumes of the Situationist International, there are Debord's own clutch of framework texts and films, along with countless scrapbooks, chapbooks, prophetic pronouncements and epigrams. Together with the pseudo-Situationist material that has followed, Situationist artifacts have bedded deep into cultural apocrypha, morphing into authorless fragments such as this piece of graffiti, chalked outside the Royal Exchange in London at the G20 protests: 'Enjoy your spectacle!'

The question is connected to a deeper one which underlies Wark's opener: why is it that we keep going back to the Situationists? Together with Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium is the Message*, Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* forms a brace of founding texts in media theory. Both were published in 1967. Revolutionary, artistic brio from one side of the Atlantic; cold, clean academic critique on the other. Media theory, attempting to understand its own rapid ascendancy by referring to its origins, pays dues to its elders. But the theory of the spectacle also offers a set of coordinates from which to map the terrain of the present and, as such, an opportunity to drop anchor outside our own mediasphere, in order to better navigate the surface.

In the idea of the 'spectacle', 'a world vision become objectified'¹ Debord drew heavily on Marx to capture the alienating experience of 'social relations among people, mediated by images'.² Thus, '[t]he spectacle is capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image.'³ So persuasive was the model that two decades later, in *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Debord could include this citation from French newspaper, *Le Monde*: 'That modern Society is a society of the spectacle goes without saying.'⁴ In the age of mass media, the spectacle had become 'integrated', gone global. It was now, Debord suggested, inescapable. The citation notes a curious effect. The idea

of the 'spectacle' itself had joined the ranks of 'society', 'capitalism', and other sliding signifiers. It had become, in a word, 'spectacular'.

In the 1972 film, *Society of the Spectacle*, media clips of pornography, fashion shots, news reels, and John Ford and Orson Welles features are montaged into a critique. Debord's words, underpinning the images, offer the commentary of a rebel guide leading us through the emergent city of the spectacle. The film today, despite the overuse of Situationist terminology, nevertheless retains a certain power. It prompts the question of what form a comparable contemporary critique might take. A Twittered *Society of (Mis)communication* isn't an enticing prospect, but there may be other possibilities.

The letters of this volume end seven years prior to the publication of *Society of the Spectacle*. Edited by Debord's second wife, Alice Becker-Ho, it poses the formative years of the Situationist International itself as a trawl through the contents of Debord's out-tray. In these years, an emphasis on practical change would emerge as the central tenet of the situation, a unit of space and time, alive to all possibilities and interventions. Against predicted behavioural codes and conditioning through previous experience, the situation posed the experimental possibilities implied by action in the moment. The situation was, for Debord, fundamentally something constructed. As he would later suggest, 'in a world that is really topsy-turvy, the true is a moment of the false.'⁵. We can get an idea of how situations were constructed in practice from an anecdote revealed by the book. Debord, as we learn from a footnote, 'taken with boredom and drink, found it advisable to flirt with [Bea] Dassin's twelve year-old daughter and cover the walls with inscriptions like "Long Live Free Algeria" and "Liberate Krim Belkacem".'

But this attempt to rile the bourgeoisie, at a social to condemn apartheid in South Africa, was soon retracted in his subsequent letter of apology:

Madame,

I am the author of the inscriptions appended to your walls during Saturday's party. The theme of the reunion and the ambiance of the space had seemed to call for such corrections. Having learned who you are, I would like to assure you that I now consider them utterly superfluous.
(p.249)

The force of Debord's personal charm and charisma seems to have made such displays perfectly excusable. 'Thanks to this letter', the editors add, '[Debord] was helped out of difficulty and the matter duly closed with a bouquet of orchids and a dinner at Haynes.' We are not told who provided the orchids, and who the dinner. Debord was a pragmatist when it came to making connections, and even apologies, where necessary. Building relationships, linking and coordinating projects, and carrying out plans, Debord pursues revolutionary activity with the tireless dexterity of an ambitious businessman. In chasing down texts and haranguing contributors, the spread of Situationist influence is rigorously plotted.

In this early phase, thoughts and theories are being worked out piecemeal, tentatively, through exchanges characterised by gestures of compromise and expressions of doubt. At this stage, it is the situation as a practice, rather than a central theoretical discourse, which is at the heart of the project. Debord writes:

The main point to emphasize is that *situationism* as a body of doctrine does not exist and must not exist. What exists is a *Situationist* experimental attitude, defined organizationally (precisely in the form of an international Association.). In my *Report*, I used the word 'situationism' once - in quotes - to denounce it in advance as one of the stupidities that our adversaries will naturally use in opposition to us. (p.42)

But there is a doctrine of a kind that emerges in spite of Debord's protestations. It's difficult to make out its precise contours, though certain patterns do begin to emerge. Debord's theoretical inclinations harden, and certain tactical manoeuvres and compromises come together to form a Situationist centre. Theoretical though many of Debord's engagements are (most notably with Henri Lefebvre's theory of 'moments' in *La Somme et La Reste*) they remain powerfully inflected by the desire to promote the movement. Thus, to the artist and SI bankroller, Asger Jorn: 'if you could come to agree with [Lucien] Goldmann's conceptions, this would be very positive, at least for our relationships with the Parisian intelligentsia' (p.264).

There is something troubling about this volume though. It is as if there is something missing, or perhaps something there that shouldn't be. As it draws to a close, a certain narrative logic begins to emerge. Debord captures it in a letter to the SI collaborator and writer, Patrick Straram. The problem is boredom:

The undeniable backsliding in everyday life [...], the transition from what was purely play to 'work' [...]. [W]e have accepted defining ourselves 'sociologically' - officially since the Munich conference - as producers of contemporary modern culture [...]. Thus I am making short feature films right now - highly experimental it's true (like L. Portugais, I am a filmmaker and a Capricorn): It is unfortunate to specialize, and even more, a danger. But to refuse is to accept specializing in the repetition of teenage conveniences as a means of postponing confrontation with the real problem of culture and of life: general practical subversion or nothing. We are now engaged in the organization of a long struggle: 'A life that is a critique must be conceived and created.' (p.395)

Perpetual critique and perpetual play prove difficult to organise. Clearly, bureaucratic pressures became wearisome for Debord, the practically-minded entrepreneur. Taken together, the letters are a litany of (often irritable) demands for the submission or translation of texts, transmission of images, negotiations as to the line to be taken, and closeted disciplinary hearings. In this surfeit of work and the necessity of production, Debord quietly acknowledges an internal threat to the Situationist project,

that it might crumble under the weight of its own ambition. Even revolutionary 'work' becomes routine when relentless.

[IMAGE]

Image: Guy Debord, Michele Bernstein and Asger Jorn, Paris 1961

Some fun was had, at least, by Michele Bernstein, Debord's wife, who successfully smuggled one of Pinot Gallizio's controversial paintings through customs because, Debord recounts, she was 'put in a compartment of builders, where everyone drank a lot, such that the customs officials - greeted with jeers and singing - checked nothing' (p.47). Not insignificantly, it is such asides and detours from the daily business of the Situationist International that provide the most interest. The editors also add some colour in the footnotes, such as the Dassin anecdote mentioned above, as well as a note on the Situationist headquarters, suitably housed in a bar, Le Tonneau d'Or, where Jorn once waited an entire afternoon for an appointment that never came. Still, the overall effect is that the Situationists seem, on the whole, rather earnest. Perhaps even a bit too serious.

If there are some things here that shouldn't be, there are also things that aren't, and should be. Michele is one of these. Or rather, two of them. Michele Bernstein appears only on rare occasions, mainly when Debord signs off her regards dispatched with the letter. Those letters sent to his mistress, Michele Monchot-Brehat do not appear at all. Nor do those sent to Jacqueline de Jong, painter and member of the SI's Dutch section, nor those to Becker-Ho herself. Whatever the causes for this editorial decision, its effect is to all but erase the role of women from the formation of the SI, thus distorting the narrative of the volume into one that concerns men only. As regards Debord's women, there is a story to be told. Michele Bernstein's novel, *All the King's Horses*, published to make money for the Situationists, was released in English last year, also by Semiotext(e). A thinly fictionalised paean to Debord, it adds some weight to those views which hold the Situationists to be a Debordian personality cult. Becker-Ho, as collector of this volume, takes up where Bernstein left off, as custodian of the Debordian image. Whether this myth-making role is the only one occupied by the women of the Situationist International, it is difficult to say, but such is the effect of the presentation. And the absence of women has a further significance, muting the strain of love in the Situationist discourse. Lest this sound sentimental, the point, in Situationist terms, is significant. Wasn't the idea of the 'situation', as Debord writes to Jorn, to 'unify falsely separated categories (love, play, expression, creative thought)'? (p.264) To this list might also be added the category of 'work' which, as the letter to Straarum shows, had become a dominant concern.

The aspect of love is just one of the problems in this volume's presentation of relationships in general. Debord's missives are made to stand alone, unaccompanied by the letters that prompted and responded to them. The choice is understandable, given that Debord's correspondence alone stretches to seven volumes, but it produces odd effects. One is to make the letters extremely difficult to read, because they draw on threads to which the reader has no access. It is also deeply questionable in terms of the SI project itself, which was to make possible and realise authentic social relationships, impossible as they were within spectacular society. Letters rely on the discursive harmonies of call and response, but here the voices of other players remain unregistered, making Debord sound at times like an unhinged

despot shouting orders into a vacuum. Presumably unintended, the picture may be accurate. But in the attempt to polish Debord's persona for public presentation, the evidence has been painted over.

Questions of presentation apart, relationships remain integral to the story, as the cheerfully traded insults ('Smalltime hoodlum!') that liven up the first half of the volume mutate into ugly suspicions and increasingly insoluble difficulties as the years progress. Notorious among the many casualties of the Debordist purges in 1960 was Giuseppe Pinot Gallizo - 'Carissimo Pinot' - the 'grande e nobile amico' of the earlier letters who was seemingly shunted aside in the event of a spat with the architect, Constant Nieuwenhuys. Pinot seems to have been given the axe in the hope of placating Constant. It didn't work, and Constant resigned the following day. In a climate of quite real political danger and in a project which sought to redraw behavioural codes, suspicions were bound to surface, but this does not exclude the possibility that Debord merely institutionalised a certain type of paranoia.

There is, nevertheless, an incredible closeness in the relationships presented here. Fierce accusations and challenges to honour are so frequently put forward and then retracted as to seem oddly essential to what Situationist relationships were. Even enmity is traded with exasperated affection. To Jorn, Debord reports a communiqué from Constant, replying to Debord's own accusations:

'If passion leads me astray, indecision loses you altogether.' Which is to say that [Constant] intends to call my decisions indecision when they are absolutely opposed to him. And he has still not responded to the only question that is still before him: the 200 copies of the monograph, which will also determine the degree and forms of hostility that he is going to draw from us [...]. I have already been careful to send him only one copy of IS4. He will not receive another one unless he candidly settles the practical questions that remain in abeyance. (p.369)

The bureaucratic pettiness is a little depressing, but perhaps to be expected. Where love, work and play are to be brought together into a false unity, the interweaving of personal motives is predicted in the terms of the project itself. According to the rules of the Situationist game, these manoeuvres are not only acceptable in play, but essential to it.

Putting Debord on a pedestal, turning the Situationists' daily activity into a subject for study, and omitting the images and artwork that went with the letters - all this seems to compromise the 'experimental attitude', and 'poetry in life' that was the Situationist mode of action. (p.177) Not that a book can be expected to perform that, but the problems run deeper. Given that Wark's introduction is the only newly published material here, its gloss on the Situationist project has an unusual significance. Wark writes:

It may seem quixotic to talk about Marx [...]. But perhaps there is something to be said for a theoretical Marxism, the memory of which one cannot abandon, just as one cannot abandon the memory of a certain lover, or of one's home town. But one lives on. In place of that memory of

Marxism, the memory of the Situationists [...]. (p.26)

Theoretical Marxism as the memory of a lover? The association is strange, and perhaps telling. Wark seems to be making an argument for theory here, and to explain the allure of the Situationists as ultimately traceable to theoretical Marxism. The point is worth considering, but not without risk of turning the Situationists into the 'ism' Debord so resolutely rejected. Debord was a man, after all, who proclaimed: 'Nothing has ever interested me beyond a certain practice of life. It is this which has prevented me from becoming an artist, and I hope, a theoretician of aesthetics!' (p.244)

[IMAGE]

Image: Conference of the Situationist International (Debord centre), Gothenberg, 1961

Raoul Vaneigem, speaking recently to Hans Ulrich Obrist, identifies a certain 'spectacular recuperation' of the Situationist project, in the ubiquity of Situationist terms and ideas.⁶ It seems that Wark is proposing an alternative recuperation, a theoretical one. The reason, the SI 'refuses to go away', Wark suggests, is as follows:

[I]t speaks for a hidden God whose promise is now in the past. Perhaps we would like to think that the dead are safe, that even in this era of disenchantment, we still have a line back to other possible worlds, even if it lies along a historical path not only not taken, but which had never even existed. (p.27)

But it is possible also that the Situationist mythos could benefit from the despectacularising scrub-down a little 'disenchantment' might offer. And voyages into imaginary worlds can be productive, even yielding materials and equipment usable in this one. In this respect, there are some notes in the correspondence that travel well. Interestingly, they are most often questions, such as, 'can we do something new?' (p.278) That may not be the only question, and there's hardly likely to be an easy response, but it seems at least to be a question worth asking.

Sam Williams ([samanthajaynewilliams AT gmail.com](mailto:samanthajaynewilliams@gmail.com)) is based in Berlin

Info

Guy Debord, *Correspondence: The Foundation of the Situationist International (June 1957-August 1960)*, Semiotext(e), 2008

Footnotes

1 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Rebel Press, 1992, Thesis 5.

2 Ibid, Thesis 4.

3 Ibid, Thesis 34.

4 Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Verso, 1998, III.

5 Ibid, III.

6 Hans Ulrich Obrist, 'In Conversation with Raoul Vaneigem', *e-flux*, May 2009, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/62>

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