

## The Situationist International and Literature: Introduction

Alastair Hemmens  
(Cardiff University)

Gabriel Zacarias  
(Universidade Estadual de Campinas)

THE theme of this issue, the “Situationist International and Literature”, may well raise some eyebrows among those readers who are already well acquainted with the Situationists. The Situationist International (SI), after all, rejected cultural production, at least under present conditions, as a spectacular dead-end and consigned all such works to the dustbin of history. One might therefore reasonably ask what point there is in even thinking of the SI in relationship to literature. On the other hand, those less familiar with the history of the Situationists but well versed in literary theory might come to the subject with a set of expectations that must, for these same reasons, be quickly frustrated. The Situationist relationship with “literature” is, by design, difficult, negative, and even hostile, while also being rich, complex, and, arguably, expressing a deep love of what makes literature, in so far as it touches life, so important. It is, on the surface at least, something of a paradox that perhaps only Guy Debord himself, the key figure of the SI, ever fully managed to resolve. It should be noted, however, that he did so in a fashion that by no means precluded the creation of texts. Indeed, as some of the articles in this issue of *New Readings* demonstrate, reading and writing were central to what made the SI tick. That these ostensibly “literary” activities sought to break with the limits of “literature” is precisely what makes the study of this relationship so interesting. At the same time, as other articles in this issue show us, it is clear that the Situationists have had an important, if largely unrecognized, impact on literature, particularly French literature, since May ’68—a fact that is mirrored in the now more widely acknowledged influence the group had on punk rock in the late 1970s and early 1980s (see, e.g., Hussey and Self; Marcus). What concerns us here is how the producers of cultural products, who were otherwise enamoured with or at least echoed Situationist themes and rhetoric, could respond to or be understood in relation to a group that had already declared the death of art. The Situationist International, it cannot be denied, poses a problem for literature as both a practice and an object of study.

The Situationist relationship to literature should be considered first and foremost as a consequence of a broader commitment to the *dépassement*, or super-

session, of art through radical social change. The group was initially composed of painters, architects, moviemakers, and collagists who, in stark opposition to previous avant-gardes, did not call for a formal renewal of the arts, but instead wanted to put them to a new use: the “construction of situations”, that is, moments of lived experience consciously organized around some qualitative goal. The “constructed situation”, in this sense, stood as a conceptual and practical standpoint from which to criticize, what Debord would later come to define as the “society of the spectacle”, in which the immense creative powers of human beings have been subordinated to a passive, qualitatively empty, life organized around the purely quantitative remit of commodity production. “Art”, as such, was not capable of understanding or addressing the spectacle because it remained, by definition, a qualitatively rich but restricted, marginal, specialized social practice and one that, even then, both relied upon and was increasingly in thrall to commodification. The Situationists felt that the destruction and renewal of art had already played out enough times for the avant-garde to move onto something far more radical: a revolutionary movement that, through a social uprising against commodity production, would transform life itself into a permanent, consciously organized, and collective work of art. The Situationists therefore rejected art in the name of saving it from artists who wanted to keep it boxed away as just one aspect of life and to commodify it by making a living. As Raoul Vaneigem stated at the 5th conference of the SI in Gothenburg in 1961, “Il n’y a pas [...] d’oeuvre d’art situationniste”<sup>1</sup> and, as Attila Kotanyi follows, any artwork that lays claim to such a status would be, by definition, “anti-situationniste” [“anti-Situationist”] (*Internationale* 266–67). This is also, at least in part, why the Situationists rejected the term “Situationism” and why it is inaccurate to use it when speaking of the SI (academic discourse included): there is no formal set of procedures nor concomitant works to which it can be meaningfully applied. As a result, just as there is no Situationist work of art, there is no Situationist literature, at least not in a formal sense.

The Situationists, nevertheless, did produce texts and many of them have exceptional formal qualities. What are we therefore to make of these materials in the face of such an apparently categorical rejection? Is it simply hypocrisy or a nonsense? Certainly, many critics and casual observers have thought so. It should be noted, however, that the categorical rejection of art, and, by extension, literature, that was expressed at the Gothenburg conference was quickly followed with a precision from one of its main proponents, Attila Kotanyi: “Je ne veux pas dire que quelqu’un doit cesser de peindre, écrire, etc. Je ne veux pas dire que cela n’a pas de valeur. Je ne veux pas dire que nous pourrions continuer d’exister sans faire cela” (*Internationale* 267).<sup>2</sup> The point that Kotanyi is trying to make is that, while writing and the creation of images may serve a useful purpose, neither formal innovation nor the production of texts and images are the goal

---

<sup>1</sup> Transl.: “There is no such thing as [...] a Situationist work of art.”

<sup>2</sup> Transl.: “I am not saying that anyone should stop painting, writing, etc. I am not saying that these things have no value. I am not saying that we could even continue to exist without them.”

of the Situationist avant-garde. Rather, its *raison d'être* is the communication of “certaines vérités” [“certain truths”] that have “les pouvoirs brisants de l’explosif, du moment que des gens sont prêts à lutter pour elles” (*Internationale* 267).<sup>3</sup> Evidently, the propagation of these “truths”—that is, the critique of the spectacle and the possibilities for the supersession of art beyond it—will involve the writing of texts and the production of images, it will even involve formal innovation and certain formal choices to be successful, but such formal innovation and production is not *the* goal, nor even a primary concern. The texts produced are not “literature”, even if they have formal “literary” qualities, because the formal innovation, where it exists, is not the point and they do not exist for aesthetic consumption. In this respect, they set themselves apart from the post-war French literary scene. They did not, like the writers of the *nouveau roman*, for example, experiment with impersonal writing; nor did they play literary games, like the members of the Oulipo group, who developed obsessive rules for producing texts. The SI was not, in this sense, a “literary” avant-garde, any more than they were an “artistic” one, as they did not seek any kind of formal renewal of writing methods.

This “anti-literature” stance of the SI was not incompatible with both a deep connection to past literary works and to formal aesthetic considerations. Literature is indisputably a constant presence in Situationist materials and a touchstone for individual Situationists. Raoul Vaneigem, for example, author of that other great tome of Situationist critique, *Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations* [*The Revolution of Everyday Life*] (1967), seems to have flirted in his youth with becoming a poet and a Lautréamont scholar. He also taught literature in a Belgian high school for several years even while also being a member of the SI. His writing, like that of Debord, is awash with past literary references of every kind. Although less avant-garde at a formal level than the work of Debord, his rhetorical style draws on a rich literary culture and was praised even among mainstream critics in the 1960s. Of course, Debord, as Gabriel Zacarias demonstrates in his article included in this issue of *New Readings*, established an equally profound relationship with past literary works and adopted innovative formal methods. In recent years, he has even been recognized for his mastery of classical French written style. Nevertheless, to focus on these facts in isolation would be to miss the point of the SI and the materials it produced. Literature is there but predominantly as a reference point for ideas and projects, evoked through quotations and motifs, illuminating the path of Situationist experimental practices and revolutionary thought. Literature, that is to say, is primarily a source of inspiration; a starting point from which to move beyond literature itself. We might therefore say that the Situationists related to literature in a fashion that is primarily *indirect*.

It should be noted that, although elements of the subject have been addressed in such seminal works as Vincent Kaufmann’s *Guy Debord: La révolution au service de la poésie* (2001, translated into English in 2010 as *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry*), the relationship between the Situationists and literature may not

---

<sup>3</sup> Transl.: “an explosive power from the moment that people are ready to struggle for them”.

seem all that obvious to a wider public of scholars and readers. This is because the relevance of literature to the development of Situationist ideas and practices was not always clearly understood. The SI was founded in 1957, but it was only in the period leading up to and after 1968 that the group acquired wide recognition (in large part due to the influence of its ideas on the student movement and the May uprisings in Paris).<sup>4</sup> To the May '68 generation, the Situationist International was a revolutionary group that was indebted first and foremost to Marx and Hegel. Its connection to art history and the historical avant-gardes passed frequently unnoticed. It is quite possible, for example, that a young leftist reader of Debord's *La Société du spectacle* [*The Society of the Spectacle*] (1967) in the late 1960s and early 1970s may, when trying to understand the "subtilités métaphysiques" ["metaphysical subtleties"] of "notre vieille ennemie [. . .], la marchandise" ["our old enemy [. . .], the commodity"] (Debord 776), have been somewhat confused when confronted with a quotation from Lautréamont, followed with the claim that *détournement* is "le style de négation" ["the style of negation"] (Debord 853). What possible connection could such an assertion have with the critique of modern society in its "spectacular form"? Debord's reference to Lautréamont in *The Society of the Spectacle* is, however, far from merely anecdotal. It evoked a subversive relationship with language without which any revolution would remain incomplete. The "séparation achevée" ["perfected separation"] (Debord 766) which he described in his book was not only that of the "means of production", already extensively described by traditional Marxism, but that of lived experience (*le vécu*) and representation, which became the touchstone of a society based on spectacular mediation. The fight against spectacle would of course mean a concrete, material struggle, but it would also require a symbolic struggle, a struggle over language, in order to free words from captivity. What, other than literature, could provide a template, a perfect example, for the free use of language? Lautréamont, a marginal and, for much of literary history, obscure author, gave the model for a subversive textual practice, plagiarising and inverting meanings. Debord had referred to him frequently from his youth and, as noted above, Vaneigem had, since at least his master's thesis, developed an interest in his life and work.

The Situationist interest in Lautréamont did not come out of nowhere. It was Surrealism—more specifically, its founder, André Breton—that first recovered Lautréamont from oblivion. It could even be said, as André Gide himself once did, that the Surrealists "invented" Lautréamont. Such an assertion would have to be tempered somewhat nowadays, but it was very likely accurate for the reception of Lautréamont in post-war France, that is, at the time the Situationists discovered him through their own early engagement with Surrealist literature in their youth. This is why it is impossible not to address how the SI related to the legacy of Surrealism when thinking about the group's relationship with literature. It is well known at this point that the Situationists had a complex relationship with

---

<sup>4</sup> For a general overview of the historical reception of the Situationist International, see our Introduction to *The Situationist International: A Critical Handbook*.

Surrealism. On the one hand, the Situationists took up many Surrealist themes and aspirations, such as a concern with the “everyday” and the desire to, in some sense, “realize” art in life. On the other hand, the SI was overtly critical of many aspects of the legacy of Surrealism—not least, the emphasis that it placed on irrationality, its continued belief in artistic practice, and the way capitalist culture had finally embraced it—and, more than once, antagonized the existing Surrealist groups in post-war Paris. It would be hard therefore to summarize the relationship between the two groups, but, if we were to attempt to do so, it might be best to say that Surrealism always remained a kind of ethical-poetical source of inspiration for the Situationists. It provided a model of literature and literary practice as a point of departure for a liberated existence.

Literature, in the hands of the Surrealists, descended into the streets. It triggered encounters and meaningful experiences. The Situationist practice of the *dérive*, or drift, is probably the most obvious evidence of the way in which Surrealism survived within the group. This technique of urban wandering, systematized into a repeatable mode of critical urban research and a model of liberated experience, was a key concern for Debord and others from the earliest days, from the Letterist International to the Situationist International proper. The *dérive*, as Arielle Marshall, argues in her article, “Walking for Revolution: From Surrealism to the Situationist International”, included in this issue of *New Readings*, took its inspiration from Surrealist urban wandering, as explored in works such as Louis Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926) and Breton’s *Nadja* (1928).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, in contrast to Surrealism, the Situationists emphatically rejected automatism and any position that held the unconscious to be preeminent. A fact that placed them bluntly into opposition with a touchstone of Surrealism. These marked differences should not be dismissed as a simple “distinction strategy” in the Bourdieusian sense. Rather, they relate to how the Situationists understood post-war French society and, more broadly, their belief that capitalism had already effectively colonized the unconscious mind through incorporating a kind of automatism into its procedures. If the Situationists were to overcome the irrationality of the society of the spectacle, the irrationality of Surrealism, literary or otherwise, could have no place.

We begin this special issue of *New Readings* then with two texts that directly address the relationship between the Situationists and Surrealism in so far as they concern the question of literal as a source of thematic and formal inspiration. Gabriel Zacarias, in “The Budding Forest: Guy Debord’s Reading Notes on Literature”, examines the relationship that Debord had with literature through an analysis of his recently published collection of reading notes under the title “Poésie, etc.”. Zacarias demonstrates how Debord engages in a process of self-narration through the appropriation and *détournement* of quotations drawn from a vast body of past literary works that Debord read and reread over the course

---

<sup>5</sup> Of course, it is also worth pointing out that Surrealism had its own “anti-art” pretensions and that, in the preface to the reedition, Breton described *Nadja* as a work of “anti-literature”, using a decidedly “unliterary”, matter-of-fact and quasi-medical, psychoanalytical, tone and replacing physical description as much as possible with photographs.

of his whole life. Debord, we are shown, approached literature through a process that seems to amount to a kind of conscious systematization of the procedures Lautréamont adopted in the construction of his work *Poésies* (1870): plagiarizing and manipulating past literary works for new, sometimes anti-literary, ends. Here *détournement* serves as a formal method for the expression of a recognition and critique of the language of the past, as well as a means for developing a new language that can counteract the way in which, according to Debord, the Spectacle empties language of meaning. The text, originally published as a postface to the publication of a collection of Debord's reading notes by the Bibliothèque nationale de France, is reproduced here in translation for the first time.

Arielle Marshall, in "Walking for Revolution: From Surrealism to the Situationist International", provides a focused comparative analysis of how the two groups approached the city of Paris that underscores the debt the Situationist practice of *dérive* owes to Surrealist *déambulation*. Marshall traces the development of Surrealist engagement with urban life and space through organized walks, events, and everyday practices. Although these activities resulted in ground-breaking literary works, it is also clear that the strict barrier between literature on the one hand and life on the other are broken down thanks to the way Breton and many others actually lived the city. It is consequently no surprise that the Situationists' engagement with the city should have so clearly been initiated through a reading of Surrealist literature. In this sense, Marshall is keen to distinguish Surrealist and Situationist city wandering from a straightforward identification with the literary and bourgeois *flâneur*, even if, via Baudelaire, it serves as an important historical forerunner to later avant-garde practices. Yet, the differences between Surrealism and the Situationists remain stark. For Surrealism, the city was a site of "mysteries and erotic encounters", whereas, for the Situationists, although the *dérive* carried with it an "experimental" mode of living, it was also clearly the bearer of a critical negative aspect that seems largely absent in the earlier movement.

The final three articles in this special issue of *New Readings* explore the relationship of the wider world of literary production to the Situationists. Anthony Hayes, in "Science Fiction and the Situationist International", explores the relationship between the Situationists and one of the key literary genres of the post-war culture industry. One of the things that characterized all twelve issues of the group's main organ, *Internationale situationniste*, was the *détournement* of comic strips and pulp fiction covers. These *détournement* served as a means of parodying and otherwise engaging critically with the materials of cultural commodity production. As Hayes demonstrates, the Situationists were interested in sci-fi as a genre that expressed the capitalist imaginary of the future and also as a genre that anticipated the space race of the cold war. Sci-fi was important therefore both as a cultural reference point and as a metaphor. The SI even described its utopian project for a "unitary urbanism", in opposition to the broken, alienating, urbanism of capitalism, as the "sci-fi of urbanism". Hayes is equally concerned with how many sci-fi authors of the period seemed to explore similar themes and topics to those found in Situationist texts. While it is not clear how many of these writers

had direct familiarity with the SI, there are clear echoes and even the occasional hint in this direction. Perhaps more importantly, however, Hayes proposes that Debord's theory of "cultural decomposition" can be used to help elucidate formal developments that took place within the sci-fi literary genre between the 1950s and 1970s.

Solophie Dolto's essay, "Il faudrait cesser d'écrire des romans': The Paradoxical Influence of the Situationist International on Jean-Patrick Manchette", also addresses the question of genre fiction. Manchette was a prominent and celebrated *roman noir* author of the same generation as the Situationists. Dolto demonstrates how Manchette, while never engaging directly with its members, was deeply influenced by Situationist ideas. Manchette explicitly refers to the Situationists and sought to incorporate Situationist concerns in his approach to the themes of the post-'68 epoch (terrorism, dissatisfaction among middle managers, false opposition, and escape). At the same time, as Marshall deftly shows us, Manchette experienced a deep ambiguity, even guilt, in response to his failure to live up to the high demands of Situationist radical critique. As a "professional writer", Manchette, thanks to his engagement with Situationist materials, understood that he was engaging, however regretfully, in the "recuperation" of Situationist ideas and also contributing to the further commodification of culture. It was a contradiction that he knew he could only resolve if he were to "stop writing novels". Manchette exists therefore as one example of a self-conscious literary artist who continues to make art when he knows or, at the very least, agrees with the SI that art is dead.

Angelos Triantafyllou provides us with one other example in the form of the French poet, Alain Jouffroy, another contemporary of the '68 generation, in his article, "Debord et Jouffroy, alliés en instance de poésie". Triantafyllou offers a comprehensive analysis of the way in which Jouffroy engaged with the life and work of Guy Debord and the Situationists throughout his literary career. His poetry, like the works of the SI, addresses the nature of everyday life and expresses critiques of capitalist existence. Jouffroy also seems to have developed something of a strange affinity (obsession?) with Guy Debord after his death in 1994. Although he apparently never met the man, Jouffroy develops a "virtual dialogue", as the author phrases it, with Guy Debord and the SI. Jouffroy, through his poetry, imagines a kind of spiritual and intellectual affinity with Debord who he considers a fellow poet though he made no poems of his own. Along with the two previous contributions in this special issue of *New Readings*, the article provides us insight into how literature after the SI responded to, echoed, or was otherwise marked by Situationist ideas, such as the supersession of art, the critique of spectacle, and the revolution of everyday life. The result is a critical contribution to a story about which there is still no doubt much to be revealed.

### Works Cited

- Debord, Guy. *Œuvres*. Gallimard, 2006.
- Hemmens, Alastair, and Gabriel Zacarias, editors. *The Situationist International: A Critical Handbook*. Pluto Press, 2020, doi:[10.2307/j.ctvzsmdwo](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvzsmdwo).
- Hussey, Andrew, and Will Self. *Guy Debord: La société du spectacle et son héritage punk*. Globe, 2014.
- Internationale situationniste*. Edited by Patrick Mosconi, expanded ed., Fayard, 1997.
- Kaufmann, Vincent. *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry*. Translated by Robert Bononno, U of Minnesota P, 2010.
- Marcus, Greil. *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*. Faber and Faber, 2011.