Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*

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In 1967, Guy Debord, the French Marxist theorist, radical filmmaker (see Debord, 2003a), and leader of the Paris-based artistic and political avant-garde group known as the Situationist International (see Knabb, 1981; Plant, 1992), published his now classic theoretical work *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967/1994). During the past four decades, as Kellner (2003) explained in the book *Media Spectacle*, Debord’s concept of the spectacle “has had a major impact on a variety of contemporary theories of society and culture,” adding that “Debord’s conception, first developed in the 1960s, continues to circulate through the Internet and other academic and subcultural sites today” (p. 2). For example, Debord’s ideas have been taken up in academic disciplines such as art (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2004; Kauffman, 1979), film studies (Levin, 1989), communication arts (Erickson, 1998), geography (Bassett, 2004; Pinder, 2005), architecture (Swyngedouw, 2002), theater (Puchner, 2004), and anthropology (Smith, 2005). Debord’s ideas have also been foundational in the work of a few academics in the field of education who have written about the necessity of engaging students in developing critical media literacy skills, such as Kellner (2003, 2005) and Giroux (2006).

In this column, I would like to turn the 40th anniversary of the publication of *The Society of the Spectacle* into an opportunity to focus the spotlight on Debord and the Situationist International (hereafter also referred to as the SI or the situationists). I will juxtapose a few brief historical snapshots with definitions of key terms and paraphrase some important ideas and events. I will also refer to selected texts and Internet sources by and about Debord and the situationists. Readers who subsequently engage with these texts and Internet sources should be able to discover the relevance of Debord and the SI to current discourses of critical media literacy.

The formation of the Situationist International

In “Bitter Victory: The Art and Politics of the Situationist International,” Wollen (1989) explained that the post–World War II breakup of the international surrealist movement “led to a proliferation of new splinter groups and an accompanying surge of new experimentation and position taking” (p. 20). In 1957, eight members from two European avant-garde groups—the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus and the Lettrist International—came together at a conference in the town of Cosio d’Arroscia in northern Italy to form the Situationist International. Guy Debord (a French founding member from the Lettrist
International—and the member who, within a few years, would become the Situationist International’s principal theorist and singular leader) contributed a position statement titled *Report on the Construction of Situations and on the Terms of Organization and Action of the International Situationist Tendency* (Debord, 1956/1981). The report began with the bold (albeit typically avant-garde) declaration: “First, we believe that the world must be changed. We desire the most liberatory possible change of the society and life in which we find ourselves confined. We know that such change is possible by means of pertinent actions” (p. 29). Debord went on to articulate the specific form of action that the SI would take—the one that gave rise to the organization’s name: “We must try to construct situations, i.e., collective environments, ensembles of impressions determining the quality of the moment.” The purpose of constructing situations was “to multiply poetic objects and subjects” and “to organize games of these poetic subjects among these poetic objects” (p. 47).

The situations that the members of the SI constructed took a variety of forms: from the spontaneous disruption of social spaces known as the derive, which means “the drift” (see Debord, 1956/1981; Marcus, 1989; McDonough, 2002; Vaneigem, 1967/2001), to the creation of new architectural environments (see *The Situationist City* [Sadler, 1998]), to detournements of texts produced by mass media. Of these situationist methods, detournement is the one for which the SI would eventually become most known. Before explaining what detournement is, however, it is necessary to explain what it was designed to combat—the spectacle.

**What is the spectacle?**

Although Debord’s most developed analysis of the spectacle (i.e., capitalist society) would occur in his book *The Society of the Spectacle*, he had already essentially developed his critique of it by the time the SI was founded in 1957. Jappe (1999) captured the essence of Debord’s analysis of the spectacle in the following paraphrase. (*The Society of the Spectacle* is made up of 221 numbered “theses,” as Debord called them, and what appears in brackets in this quotation are the numbers of the theses being quoted.)

Debord’s analysis is based on the everyday experience of the impoverishment of life, its fragmentation into more and more widely separated spheres, and the disappearance of any unitary aspect from society. The spectacle consists in the reunification of separate aspects at the level of the image. Everything life lacks is to be found within the spectacle, conceived of as an ensemble of independent representations. “Separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle” [25], and individuals, separated from one another, can rediscover unity only within the spectacle, where “images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream” [2]. Individuals are reunited solely “in [their] separateness” [29], for the spectacle monopolizes all communication to its own advantage and makes it one way only. The spectacle speaks, “social atoms” listen. And the message is One: an incessant justification of the existing society, which is to say the spectacle itself, or the mode of production that has given rise to it. For this purpose the spectacle has no need of sophisticated arguments; all it needs is to be the only voice, and sure of no response whatsoever. Its first prerequisite, therefore, and at the same time its chief product, is the passivity of a contemplative attitude. Only an individual “isolated” amidst the “atomized masses” [221] could feel any need for the spectacle, and consequently the spectacle must bend every effort to reinforce the individual’s isolation. (pp. 6–7)

For those who have seen the film *The Matrix*, rereading Jappe’s passage by substituting “the matrix” for “the spectacle” should reveal the great resonance between Debord’s concept of the spectacle and the cinematic science fiction representation of a world of near total separation and passivity—“the Desert of the Real,” as the character Morpheus called it.
Detournement as a subversive tactic

Debord’s theorization of the spectacle appears to leave no room for escape or for the expression of any individual or group agency. But Debord (1972/2003b) also explained that despite “the alienation of everyday life, the opportunities for passion and playfulness to find expression are still very real” (p. 138). And the “critical art” that Debord (1963/1989) and the situationists developed to critique and challenge the alienating, separating, pacifying, spectator-inducing, socially controlling forces of the spectacle was called detournement. Sussman’s (1989) discussion of detournement provides an initial, broad definition:

Detournement ("diversion") was [a] key means of re-structuring culture and experience....Detournement proposes a violent excision of elements—painting, architecture, literature, film, urban sites, sounds, gestures, words, signs—from their original contexts, and a consequent restabilization and recontextualization through rupture and realignment. (p. 8)

Debord and Wolman (1956/1981) explained that detournement entailed “the reuse of preexisting artistic [and mass-produced] elements in a new ensemble” (p. 9) for the purpose of critique, which was the ultimate purpose of art in situationist theory:

Any elements, no matter where they are taken from, can serve in making new combinations.... When two objects are brought together, no matter how far apart their original contexts may be, a relationship is always formed.... The mutual interference of two worlds of feeling, or the bringing together of two independent expressions, supersedes the original elements and produces a synthetic organization of greater efficacy. Anything can be used. (p. 9)

Many detournements made by the situationists derived from relatively insignificant sources. For example, in the issues of the SI’s journal Internationale Situationiste, comic strips with rewritten speech bubbles, along with advertisements with new captions, often appeared. Some excellent examples of these kinds of detournements can be found in Vienet’s “Enrages and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May ’68” (in Gray, 1998), as well as in Ford’s (2005) The Situationist International: A User’s Guide. Other examples—though ones produced by other groups besides the SI, groups Debord (1972/2003b) disparagingly dubbed “pro situs” (meaning “sympathetic to situationist ideas”)—can be found at the Bureau of Public Secrets webpage (www.bopsecrets.org), particularly on the Comics page, which features examples of detourned Dagwood and Lulu comic strips.

The SI’s role in May 1968

During its 15-year existence, the SI produced 12 issues of its journal Internationale Situationiste, as well as many art and political works, including paintings, books, posters, architectural models, and films. It held eight conferences, typically attracting around a dozen or so attendees, in various European cities (e.g., Paris, Munich, London, Antwerp). The small number of attendees reflected the SI’s declaration that “The SI does not want disciples” (see Knabb, 1981, p. 134). According to Marcus (2002), “Rather than expanding their group, the situationists worked to make it smaller, expelling careerist, backsliding, or art-as-politics (as opposed to politics-as-art) members almost from the day the group was formed” (p. 17).

Sussman (1989) explained that though the SI remained from its inception intentionally underground, it “achieved cult status in Europe during the late 1960s and 1970s as a result of the part they played in the events of 1967 and 1968 in France” (p. 3). One of those events took place during 1966–1967 when a group of radical students at Strasbourg University got elected to the French Student Union and collaborated with the SI on the publication and distribution of the SI’s scathing critique and devastating attack on university life—a pamphlet titled On the Poverty of
Student Life (see Dark Star, 2001). The Strasbourg students had used university funds to produce 10,000 copies of the pamphlet, which were passed out at the university’s opening-day ceremonies. Student disruptions of university life and occupations of buildings followed. The university took the students to court, and for months “the Strasbourg scandal” was widely reported in the press. As Gray (1998) explained,

This was Europe’s first university occupation and for weeks the scandal echoed through all the student unions in France. The [SI] pamphlet...became a best-seller overnight and there can hardly have been a single left-wing student in France who didn’t hear of the SI. (p. 16)

Plant (1992) described this period of SI activity and influence:

The popularity of this pamphlet—quickly reproduced and translated into more than ten languages—encouraged the unprecedented discussion of situationist analyses and the avant-garde heritage which informed them, developments hastened by the 1967 publications of Vaneigem’s The Revolution of Everyday Life and Debord’s The Society of the Spectacle. The student agitations begun at Strasbourg continued throughout 1967: students at Lyon, Nantes, and Nanterre were involved in disruptions and occupations culminating in the situationist-inspired enragés in January 1968.... These developments culminated in the dramatic events of May and June 1968.... (p. 96)

Jappe (1999) described the dramatic events of May and June 1968 as “one of the crucial turning points of the century” (p. 101). He explained that more than 10 million workers in France stopped working and occupied their workplaces. Jappe went on to say that

the striking workers of May and June 1968 were not simply aping the students’ occupation of the Sorbonne. Nor did any economic crisis underlie the revolt, as the SI correctly pointed out.... [A]nd quite clearly specific demands for university reform or for higher wages were not the most fundamental motor in a situation that was completely unexpected and that bordered on civil war. For several weeks, though, every agency of authority abdicated its role, a feeling of “everything is possible” prevailed, the upside-down world was set back on its feet—in short, a historical event occurred, but it was one that affected individuals in their most intimate and everyday being. One, too, that showed beyond doubt that a very large number of people yearned inwardly for a completely different life and that this desire, once it found expression, could quickly bring a modern state to its knees: exactly what the SI had always said. Even though another May 1968 has not yet occurred, the fact remains that the conditions which occasioned the first have not disappeared, and should the day come when people’s desire to control their own lives drives them once again into the streets, not a few of the SI’s precepts will surely be recalled. (p. 101)

Although the role that the SI played in relation to May 1968 has been interpreted in various ways, Greil Marcus’s assessment is arguably right: “You can’t say the situationists started May ’68. You can’t say they governed May ’68. I think you can say this: Had there never been a Situationist International, there never would have been a May ’68” (from Bogdanov, 1989). In the years following the May 1968 events, according to Jappe (1999), “The SI’s theses enjoyed vast renown” (p. 102), and many new members were admitted.

Gradually, however, the SI entered what Jappe (1999) explained as “a terminal crisis, seemingly due to the shortcomings of a good many newcomers,” and “a series of expulsions and splits left only Debord and two others in the organization” (p. 102). The official, intentional dissolution of the SI was announced and explained in Debord’s (1972/2003b) book The Real Split in the International.

Last but not least

Throughout this column, I have referred to many works and resources about Debord and the situationists. However, one of the most valuable sources for anyone interested in exploring the work of Debord and the SI further is the UbuWeb website (www.ubu.com), particularly the Film & Video page, which provides alphabetically
arranged links to hundreds of films by dozens of avant-garde filmmakers that can be viewed in their entirety. I would recommend the excellent (and the only existing) documentary (Bogdanov, 1989) about the situationists titled On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International, 1956-1972. The film can be accessed via the link titled Situationist International (www.ubu.com/film/si.html). The documentary introduces all the main figures of the SI, discusses the history of the SI, provides examples of many detournements created by various SI members, and interprets the SI’s central role in the May 1968 revolt in France. Also available on the UbuWeb site are five of Debord’s six films, which can be found through the Guy Debord link on the Film & Video page. Each of the films is accompanied by a link to the dialogue of the films. The film to begin with is, of course, The Society of the Spectacle. This cinematic twin of Debord’s famous book is comprised of dozens of detourned images and scenes from various media texts. Accompanying these images is Debord reading many of the theses from his book of the same title. The film itself is both a critique of the society of the spectacle and an exemplary example of detournement. One more UbuWeb-available film to work into the mix here is Vienet’s exemplary SI film Can Dialectics Break Bricks? The film can be found under Rene Vienet’s name on the Film & Video page.

REFERENCES

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