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**“REQUIEM POUR UN CON”
Subversive Pop and the Society of the Spectacle**

So this is Situationism? A sort of sub-psychiatry?
— Mark E Smith, *The Hacienda Must Be Built*.

Pop comes from the outside.
— Andy Warhol, *Popism*.

It is one of the less visible paradoxes of contemporary discourse that, in recent years, the term “Situationism” has entered the lexicon of cultural studies. This paradox is compounded by the fact that, although notorious in France for their ferocious and ubiquitous presence in Paris during the events of May 1968, the radical group known as the Situationist International were barely known in the English-speaking world until the early 1970s when their followers were confined to small circles at the universities of London, Sussex and Cambridge. However, since the early 1970s, like its hated but undeniable ancestor Surrealism, the theory of Situationism, even if it has not been entirely understood, has irrevocably entered the English language. Even more ironic, and the starting-point of this article, is the fact that it has primarily been used as a description of subversive activity in pop music, a style and form which those who first called themselves “Situationists” actively despised.

Indeed the word “Situationist” was first used in 1957 by a group of Paris-based radical artists and intellectuals who called themselves the *Internationale situationniste* (The Situationist International, or SI) and who vowed themselves to wage war on what they called “the civilisation of the image”. They declared that art was dead and in the name of “revolutionary anti-modernism” sought to make the “new art of the future, the creation of situations”.¹ Following this logic, the group were at pains to point out that there could be no such word as “Situationism”, indeed to use the static description

1. Guy Debord, “Rapport sur la construction des situations (1957)”, reprinted in *Documents relatifs à la fondation de l'internationale situationniste 1948-1957*, ed. Gérard Bérreby (Paris: Éditions Allia, 1989): 607-619.

of their philosophy as “Situationism” was to betray the fundamental belief in practice as the origin of theory. There could only be, the group insisted, “Situationists”, that is to say artists whose primary objective was to blur and overcome the false distinction between art and everyday life, the contradiction which, as they saw it, most clearly defined modern conditions of alienation. “There is no such thing as Situationism,” the Situationists pronounced, “this would mean a doctrine of existing facts. The notion of Situationism is obviously devised by anti-Situationists.”²

Appositely enough, the British public first came across the term “Situationism” in connection with the Angry Brigade, a floating group of hippy radicals turned “pro-Situationist” terrorists whose main targets were “spectacles”, whether the Miss World show or the fashion boutique Biba’s on London’s Kings Road.³ In his best-selling account of the Angry Brigade trials, Gordon Carr made much of the use of this term “spectacles” in Angry Brigade communiqués,⁴ tracing the word back to its original coinage and definition in the 1967 book *The Society of the Spectacle*, the key work of Situationist theory written by the editor of the *Situationist International* journal, Guy Debord.⁵ Even more damagingly to the reputation of the SI, Carr devoted the long opening chapter of his book to an account of Situationist ideas, describing the group as proto-urban guerrillas.

Notwithstanding this misuse of Situationist theory, the word was first used in connection with pop and rock music in Britain in the late 1970s at the height of the punk revolution. Most noticeably, the clothes, slogans and style of the Sex Pistols were all clearly recognised by French and English commentators as being firmly in the Situationist tradition of “existential obnoxiousness”.⁶ Since the 1970s, few bands who call themselves radical have been unable to resist the glamour associated with the term “Situationist”. The trend was started by The Clash, whose socialist politics were clearly at some remove from the anarchy espoused by the Sex Pistols, but whose early cover art features them wearing paint-spattered clothes in imitation of the Letterist International, a proto-Situationist group of the early 1950s.⁷ The Situationist

2. “Definitions”, *International Situationist Anthology*, edited and translated by Ken Knabb (Bureau of Public Secrets Berkeley, CA, 1995): 45.

3. The term “pro-Situationist” is generally used by members of the Situationist International to denigrate misguided would-be followers of Situationist ideas. The “pro-Situ” phenomenon is acutely analysed in Guy Debord, *The Veritable Split in the International* (London: Chronos, 1985): 67-68.

4. Gordon Carr, *The Angry Brigade* (London: Gollancz, 1975).

5. An authoritative account of links between British “pro-Situationists” and The Angry Brigade is given in Jon Savage, *England’s Dreaming, Sex Pistols and Punk Rock* (London: Faber, 1992): 29-34.

6. *Ibid.* 31.

style also shaped the ethics and politics and ethics of key post-punk bands such as the Gang of Four or the Raincoats. Factory Records, which was set up during the post-punk era in Manchester by Anthony H. Wilson who had been a Situationist fan at Cambridge in the 1960s, borrowed slogans, images and ideas wholesale from the Situationists International. Inspired by New Order manager Rob Gretton's fascination with the SI, Wilson named his Manchester nightclub the Haçienda after a Situationist text.⁸ At the entrance of the Haçienda a small plaque with the SI's slogan "The Haçienda Must Be Built" welcomed clubgoers to the dance floor for the duration of the e-fuelled late 1980s and early 1990s.

During the same period, the KLF, the Manic Street Preachers and an even more recent generation of hardcore DJs were described or described themselves in the British music press as Situationist (one of the more ludicrous manifestations of this phenomenon was the bucolic soft-rocker David Gray describing one of his recent gigs in Ireland as Situationist in a recent edition of *Q*). Clearly the term "Situationist" has come to stand for an artistic subversion of style or technique rather than, as the Situationists originally intended it to be, the subversive use of art.

The first aim of this article is therefore to examine the relationship between British pop music and the ideas of the Situationist International with specific reference to Situationist writings on pop music, pop art and popular culture. The Situationists oscillated between overt hostility or contemptuous indifference to pop phenomena and to pop music in particular. The second aim of this paper is however not simply to trace the Situationist critique of pop modernism, but rather to place Situationist texts alongside or in dialogue with pop phenomena and to consider what emerges. More precisely, I will consider how Situationist writings on pop phenomena are informed by a theory which actively seeks the displacement or annihilation of the possibility of those phenomena in the public cultural sphere.

The third aim of this paper is to ask what currency the term "Situationist" carries in the divergent and splintered pop culture of 2001? Situa-

7. The *internationale lettriste*, or Letterist International in English, was founded by Guy Debord in 1952 as an offshoot of the Lettriste movement which had been founded by the Romanian poet Isidore Isou in 1947. For histories of the Letterist International see Jean-Michel Mension, *La Tribu* (Paris: Éditions Allia, 1998): 100-104. See also Andrew Hussey, *The Game of War. The Life and Death of Guy Debord* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001): 104-108. The links between the Letterist International and early punk rock fashion are examined in Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989): 275-280.

8. See Mark E. Smith, Jon King, Stewart Home, Anthony H. Wilson, "Situationist Fall-Out: New Wave, Punk Rock and the End of the World", in *The Haçienda Must Be Built: On The Legacy of Situationist Revolt*, Gavin Bowd and Andrew Hussey, eds., (Manchester: Aura, 1996), unpaginated.

nist theory, as it was refined and developed through the 1960s, as observed above, was also in part defined by its overt hostility to all forms of pop culture. I am interested therefore in the multiple questions that this implies about the present or future pop music. More simply, does the use of the word "Situationism" as an emblem of pop radicalism, in a move made out of a neat postmodern twists, also signal the end of its real meaning?

"The Attack, the Adventure!"

The group which called itself The Situationist International (the SI) was founded on July 28, 1957 in the obscure hamlet of Cosio d'Arroschia high in the Ligurian Alps. This meeting brought together three disparate groups: The International Movement for an Imaginary Bauhaus (IMIB), led by the Danish artist Asger Jorn, The London Psychogeographical Society represented by British artist Ralph Rumney, and—the most powerful and influential group—the Letterist International, a group of hooligan intellectuals from Paris led by the twenty-six-year-old Guy Debord.⁹

Debord was a witty, charismatic and daring troublemaker who was given to hard drinking and the development of impossibly intransigent theoretical positions. Inspired in roughly equal measure by the poetry of Baudelaire and Lautréamont, the critical writings of Marx and Hegel and the practice of the Dadaists and Surrealists, Debord saw himself and the Situationist International as leading the final revolutionary vanguard of the century, an "obscure conspiracy" which would leave the "old world" behind for "the new art of the future: the creation of situations".

What Debord meant by this call to arms was for concentrated political and artistic activity which resisted the controlling powers of what he termed the "spectacle"—the notion that all human relations are mediated by images from TV, film, advertising, newspapers and magazines. The "spectacle" is the enemy of impassioned human existence: "The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has now become mere representation", Debord wrote in the first thesis of "Separation Perfected", the opening section of *The Society of the Spectacle*. The "spectacle" is, however, not merely false images refracted through media. It is also and most crucially in Situationist theory a nexus of images and signs which, when extended across all social relations, leads to the wholesale "colonization of daily life".

9. An authoritative account of the foundation of the SI is given in Ralph Rumney, *Le Consul* (Paris: Éditions Allia, 1999): 54-57.

Debord and the Situationists had been led to this position by their opinion that it was the failure of previous avant-garde movements to transcend the relation between art and revolution and blur the distinctions between art and everyday life which had led to the individual's increasingly alienated position in the modern world. This was not new: Debord's tutor in the 1950s, the leading post-war Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre had already tackled these problems in *Introduction à la critique de la vie quotidienne* in 1947, and had been marginalised by the French Communist Party who considered his ideas, rooted in the Hegel taught by Alexandre Kojève at the University of Paris in the 1930s and the "young" Marx of *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (which Lefebvre had translated in the 1920s) to be "romantic". Most importantly, Debord shared Lefebvre's reading of the insufficiency of the revolutionary demands made on daily life. Recognition of the spectacular society as it really is the first step towards a revolutionary moment. The second step is "the abolition or overcoming of art" and the deliberate construction of "Situations", moments of poetic intensity which disrupt the "spectacle" by making the passive spectator into an active participant in his or her own life.

It followed from this that the Situationists held a relentless and implacable hostility to all forms of pop culture, which was the site of this separation between spectator and spectacle. This hostility was however matched by their conviction that it was disaffected youth, the very who consumed the cheap gifts of the spectacular society in the form of records, clothes, drugs, who would spearhead the revolutionary movement. This much had been announced as far back as the late 1940s by the Letterist figurehead Isidore Isou in *Traité d'économie nucléaire: le soulèvement de la jeunesse*. In this text Isou, who was a crucial influence on the early Situationist group,¹⁰ declared that youth was excluded from the economy because it had no exchange value: without employment, family, capital, youths were not people but "luxury items" or "utensils". Isidore Isou's call for a Letterist revolution had been based on the Letterist principles of negation which demanded that all cultural activity be reduced to its most essential elements. In the same way that the Letterist programme, beginning in a critique of art, had called for films without images, stories without words, poetry without meaning, Isou's call for an insurrection was for a negation of all political activity.

Every politician defends the interests of one or other specifically defined "mass", while subjugating it to the surging force which is our youth—and those who manipulate the masses deny the suffering of youth as such. Their argument is this: "While the proletariat or the bourgeois"—the eco-

10. See Andrew Hussey, "La Divinité d'Isou", *Forum For Modern Language Studies* xxxvi,2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 132-143.

conomic agent—”remains definitively within his condition and finds himself obliged to defend his interests, youth is only a passing, fluctuating state. One is only young for x number of years”.

This assertion is false. Neither the proletarian nor the bourgeois remains definitively within this condition. Both die. They leave their place for another: death. Any reform must begin with millions of ‘pre-agents’ who collectively comprise the “sickness of society”.¹¹

This is the argument extended in the Letterist pamphlet, *Front de la jeunesse* (The Youth Front), edited by Maurice Lemaitre but written by Isou, which called for young people, defined as outsiders by the economy, to refuse to take their allotted future economic position in society. Revolution would be made, argued Isou, by all those who realised that youth was an economic construct and had nothing to do with age. This made youth, or at least the economic definition of “youth”, the new proletariat, the new revolutionary class. All those who, through age, boredom, drunkenness, alienation, found themselves excluded from the economic life of society were, in fact, harbingers of freedom from family, work, money. As soon as the new class realised this and unleashed their revolutionary potential, the constructs of state, government and finance would melt away. “We will call young any individual, no matter what his age, who does not yet coincide with his function”, wrote Isou, “who struggles to attain the realm of activity he truly desires, who fights to achieve a career in terms of a situation and a form of work other than that which was planned for him...Those who know and love their places, whether proletarians or capitalists, are passive, because they don’t want to compromise themselves by appearing in the streets. They have goods and children to protect. The young, who have nothing to lose, are the attack. They are the adventure!”¹²

It followed from this logic that one of the key targets for the Situationists in the mid-1960s was the concept of leisure, the humiliating reduction of pleasure to utilitarian function. It was moreover precisely the notion of leisure as the power to consume which was being sold back to youth as the fake freedom of consumer choice; this process, argued Debord, both mimicked and parodied the exigencies of real life, which lay at some considerable remove from what he termed “the society of the spectacle”. The emblem of this distance is the media star who does not reflect reality but who refracts and distorts it:

11. Isidore Isou, *Traité d'économie nucléaire: le soulèvement de la jeunesse*, reprinted and translated in Marcus 167.

12. *Ibid.* 168.

Media stars are spectacular representations of living human beings, distilling the essence of the spectacle's banality into images of possible roles. Stardom is a diversification in the semblance of life—the object of an identification with mere appearance which is intended to compensate for the crumbling of directly experienced diversifications of productive activity. Celebrities figure various styles of life and various views of society which anyone is supposedly free to embrace and pursue in a *global* manner. Themselves incarnations of the inaccessible results of social labour, they mimic by-products of that labour, and project these above labour so that they appear as its goal. The by-products in question are power and leisure—the power to decide and the leisure to consume which are the alpha and omega of a process that is never questioned. In the former case, government power assumes the personified form of the pseudo-star: in the second, stars of consumption canvas for votes as pseudo-power over life lived. But, just as none of these celestial activities are truly *global*, neither do they offer any real choice.¹³

This statement, most importantly, as a re-reading and re-ordering of Marxist speculation on economic theory opens up the possibility of analysing the beginning of the movement from reality to illusion which, posits Debord, is the defining characteristic of the spectacular age. Most importantly, for Debord, a-historical time and its relation to the present is defined by its circularity: it is this movement, most importantly, which reduces the subject to an alienated state in which real vision is replaced by a passive stare.

"The Simple Things You See Are All Complicated"

Pop is by any definition "spectacular". In the first instance, this applies to pop music in the generally understood sense of theatrical or performative art which demands immediate response from an audience. For the Situationists, however, pop music, pop style, pop art were all part of the "spectacular" nexus of work, leisure, culture which made up the "spectacle" and which had to be resisted and destroyed. How was it then that "Situationist" subversion can be found in the detailed nuances of pop music, which is apparently not only the soundtrack to also a controlling force within the society of the spectacle?

At least part of answer may be found in Greil Marcus' book *Lipstick Traces* which on its publication 1989 was immediately hailed on both sides of the Atlantic as a masterpiece of cultural criticism. One of the main reasons for this was that the explicit aim of the book was to investigate the complex relation between the permanence of historical narrative and its negative reflection in the impermanent, unstable language of pop. This was the territory which had been mapped out over fifteen years earlier in Marcus' first ground-

13. Guy Debord, *The Society of The Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1994): 38-39.

breaking book *Mystery Train*, in which he made the case that not just Dylan, but also Elvis, Johnny Ray or The Shangri-Las were, in this sense, poets who had a visceral, if unconscious, sense of the different levels of complexity which made up a culture's position in history. In this text Marcus revealed himself as a shrewd, perceptive and subtle writer who saw rock and pop music as offering a way into understanding the secret springs of a nation or a culture's psyche. Most importantly, Marcus' key theme was that history did not only exist in the past but was an integral part of the fabric of everyday life.

Nowhere was this issue more clearly articulated, Marcus argued, than in post-war pop culture, which always defined itself just ahead of or in opposition to its time. It was the unique cultural role of pop music that although by definition unconscious of its role, even in its very denial of history, it offered insight, even revelation, into what might lie beneath the textual surface of a given historical moment. The book *Lipstick Traces* was itself a demonstration of this process at work: written in the years immediately preceding the fall of the Berlin Wall, read in the wake of the events of 1989 its central theme (that the world seemed to be changing) seemed to take on the force of prophecy.

More specifically, Marcus had set out in *Lipstick Traces* to understand what it was that made him hear in the Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the UK" the noise of a culture in crisis. According to Marcus this was, at least in the first instance, the result of a collision between given historical circumstances and a voice which articulated a sheer and unbreakable contempt for those circumstances. This was, wrote Marcus, political pop in action in its purest form: "For a time, as if by magic—the pop magic in which the connection of certain social facts with certain sounds creates irresistible symbols of the transformation of social reality—that voice worked as a new kind of free speech." This was "a voice that denied all social facts, and in that denial affirmed that everything was possible."¹⁴ But what did this voice contain, Marcus asked, which made it so singular and so powerful?

Marcus was not able to find a complete and satisfying answer, but he did trace in his book a "secret history of the twentieth century" by marking and delineating the work of all those artists and movements in the century who had sought an art of negation, who had said no to the world as it was and turned away from the century's false promises. He therefore read Dadaists, Surrealists, Letterists and Situationists, each time focusing upon the writer, filmmaker and leader of the Situationist International Guy Debord who as a revolutionary, artist and strategist had the "instant route to total change, the reversible connecting factor".¹⁵

14. Marcus 2.

15. *Ibid.* 446.

What Marcus meant by this was the capacity of pop music to touch and transform reality, making history, as well as reflecting it. At the height of the Sex Pistols' career, Malcolm McLaren and designer Jamie Reid had frequently and loudly voiced their enthusiasm for this aspect of Situationist ideas and theses. Indeed the essential excitement of the punk rock moment was encapsulated not only in the music but also in activities which culminated in the Pistols' occupation of the number one spot at the height of the Queen's Jubilee celebrations. The media blackout of this event only hammered the point home: here was an agenda at work which in a perfect series of negative reversals had replaced politics with art, made the audience artists, and abolished the prevailing cultural consensus all in one single move. It was, as Marcus had it, pure pop Situationism: the spectacle disrupted and faced with its own negative reflection.¹⁶

The Spectacle of Politics and the Death of Pop

Since the late 1970s pop has mutated into plural and disassociated forms. The process of volcanic change anticipated by punk actually slowly dissolved into looser, more organic structures: post-punk evolved away towards dance which, driven by drug culture and aiming at oblivion, was indifferent to the possibility of politics. Only ten years after the release of "Anarchy in the UK", the punk revolution did not only seem an anachronism but also an impossibility which could never happen again. Art and time were now permanently out of joint.

Since then the separation between pop music and its context has become an abyss. Present day pop, more than ever, is obsessed with the "perpetual present", which Debord also calls "pseudo-cyclical time" in "the society of the spectacle", which has obliterated both history and meaning forever. The process is not only at work in British pop (endless recycling of black American soul songs by interchangeable boy or girl bands who may quite literally not know what they are singing about), but also within the framework of indie rock, which taking its original ideals from the punk and post-punk era has similarly been forced back into endless recycling of images and icons from that period whose totemic significance also confirms their impotence (a key example of this form of refraction—it is primarily a visual phenomenon—can be seen at work in the style and art of Primal Scream, or indeed any of their labelmates at the now defunct Creation Records who embraced its anachronistic status by declaring itself "Guardian of Twentieth-Century Rock 'n' Roll"). It seems that pop has finally lost the original function it played in post-

16. Guy Debord, "Rapport sur la construction des situations" 609.

war culture of moving just ahead of its time and become just one of many leisure options and lifestyle choices. It no longer functions as a totality but as an accessory.

In his review of *Lipstick Traces* for the *New York Times*, Terry Eagleton emphasises that for Marcus and the Situationists it is of paramount significance “[that] the metapolitical involves issues of desire, everyday life, the importance of microscopic gesture, which mainstream leftist politics has often enough breezily edited. But it carries with it by the same token an anti-sociality that is impatient with institutions as such. It is hard to dismantle particular institutions without dreaming for a euphoric moment of what it might be like to be free of institutions altogether”.¹⁷ But when Eagleton wrote this there was already nostalgia in his voice for a time when utopianism, dreams and desire, could connect and fuse with their moment. The moment had evidently passed. It was however this central, political fact, described elsewhere in *Lipstick Traces* as a negative corollary of utopianism, which allowed Marcus to claim that the singularity of Johnny Rotten’s voice in “Anarchy in the UK” was that it “denied all social facts”, and thus announced limitless possibilities.¹⁸

This voice, which is against history, can no longer be heard, or at least it no longer makes sense—history has been dissolved. This much too was anticipated by Guy Debord who, when he dissolved the Situationist International in 1972, claiming that “The Situationist International imposed itself at a moment of universal history as the thought of the collapse of the world; a collapse which has now begun before our eyes”.¹⁹ In *Comments on The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord extended this notion of collapse into all forms of social behaviour and discourse, positing therein the “unreality” of mediated social relations at the centre of an analysis which demonstrates the limits of social or political forms of organization. He emphasised, marking a significant shift in direction from the original notion of the “spectacle” as defined in 1967, that these limits have now become, in the absence of any living critique of society in the orthodox Marxist sense, the real and uncrossable frontiers of all human experience.

It is was somehow fitting, his indifference to rock and pop music notwithstanding, that Debord wrote this text in 1988, some ten years after the punk revolution had taken Situationist theses to the heart of the pop spectacle and apparently dissolved once and for all pop’s ability to serve the spectacle.

17. Terry Eagleton, “Rotten, Vicious and Surrealist”, reprinted in Simon Ford (ed.), *The Realization and Suppression of the Situationist International* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1995): 106.

18. Marcus 2.

19. Guy Debord, *The Veritable Split* 11.

Newer, mutated forms of capitalist logic which Debord called the “integrated spectacle” had since then superseded the “materially modernised and enhanced presentation” which had been defining feature of “spectacular” popular culture. “The integrated spectacle” was, moreover, a spectral form of social organization which defines limits therefore in negative terms. For Debord, these limits were everywhere and always defined by what is not or cannot be named within the prevailing hegemonic framework. This phenomenon of “falsification”, Debord further insists, although it originated in the coming together of state, media and capital in France and Italy (*pace* Bernard Tapie or Silvio Berlusconi), was also occurring everywhere, and signals the end of the true political history of the twentieth century.

It is, most importantly, this fundamental recognition of the living subject's distance from lived experience which means for Debord the word “politics” in present “spectacular” conditions has lost all meaning. In the same way, the possibility of reflecting and touching historical moments that pop had once presented in a parallel fashion to Situationist theses, had also disappeared. This does not mean, I think, that in 2001 it is no longer subversive to make pop noise: the recent output of Black Box Recorder, Momus or even Jarvis Cocker bear witness to this possibility. But what is also clear is that all of these artists, whether (as is the case with Black Box Recorder) they imitate the clean funk lines of a track by Billie or Britney Spears in order to reveal the darker sexual imagination which shapes those rhythms or (as is the case with Momus) seek pop inspiration outside the UK (Momus is most famous in Japan as a writer of hits for Japanese teen girl groups) are functioning by necessity outside the parameters of the British mainstream pop world which a short while ago would have been their natural home. It is one of the distinguishing heresies inherent in the works of Momus, Cocker and Luke Haines (the driving force behind Black Box Recorder) that they take as a model not the Beatles, the Stones or the Pistols, but rather Serge Gainsbourg, a ludic and subversive figure whose relationship to mainstream pop was at best ambiguous and who gives the lie to well-worn shibboleth that French pop has never had anything to impress the British.

It would be a further singular irony however if, by applying the logic which has formed the argument of this paper, we are able to conclude that what Guy Debord and the Situationists see as the victory of the spectacle and the end of history has also signalled the death of British pop.