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Truth or Fiction: Memory and Storytelling

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**“Sous les Pavés, la Plage”:**

**The Situationist International and the Reclamation of Spectacular Memory**

For many, human memorial faculties remain highly individualized; in other words, it seems likely from a general cultural impression that few perceive memory as coming from any system other than the mind of the person remembering. However, what if all of our memories were filtered through some other apparatus? What if the capitalist society we live under actually had a hold over our memorial processes? The Situationist International, a French radical group, attempted to answer these questions.

During the 1950s and 1960s, a number of students, spearheaded in some ways by the writings of Guy Debord, broke off from a pre-existing revolutionary group (the Lettrist International) to form the Situationist International, an organization founded on a non-hierarchical model committed to a total critique of modern society that extended into Marxism, urbanism, philosophy, media theory, and art historical criticism, among other domains. Because of the nature of its development as a supposedly “total” and rationally based critique, it can be difficult to pin down exactly what it would have meant to be a “Situationist.” While certain terms will be defined and ideas clarified, it remains essential that the reader understand one of the SI’s fundamental critiques of modern life: that it creates boredom and slowly kills its participants, and that the only way to avoid such death is to go beyond an evolutionary way of thinking and destroy the conditions that lead us to this state, while actively inventing entirely new conditions, situations and feelings.

From this idea, a question arises: in a movement so concerned with rationality, in terms of the careful remembrance and examination of failed revolutionary movements and structures, and yet simultaneously so infatuated with the creation of something entirely new, where does memory fit in? In other words, how much should we retain? Situationist theory appears steeped in insurmountable contradictions regarding how prominent a role memory should play in the actions of its participants and the members of the Situationist International. However, through selective remembrance and a practical reclamation of the memories and histories put forth by the capitalist system, the theorists, writers, artists and revolutionaries of the SI have redefined memory as something to be employed and actively used, not merely something to file away in the back of our minds.

The chief object of the situationist critique was a concept they termed “the spectacle.” Like many of their ideas, its exact definition remains hard to compartmentalize, and to call it a “concept” perhaps does not even do the term justice. However, the idea of the spectacle is predicated on the theory, put forth in Guy Debord’s work *Society of the Spectacle*, that “in societies where modern conditions of production prevail...everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation” (Thesis 1). The spectacle, then, can be most simply understood as beginning with an accumulation of representations that keep us (the citizens of modern society) producing for the capitalist economy. However, Debord also points out that “the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by image” (Thesis 4). In other words, the representations that keep us producing now extend so far into modern life that they infiltrate every human interaction. Instead of interacting with people, objects, or environments, citizens interact with the spectacle. According to Debord, this pseudo-interaction appears under the guise of unification, but “the unification [the spectacle] achieves is nothing but an official language of generalized separation” (Thesis 3). At this point, perhaps the

television can be seen as the ultimate tool of the spectacle: it achieves pseudo-unification and pseudo-interaction through an ostensibly shared experience, but physically isolates and separates us from the rest of the world. We often find ourselves filtering our human interactions through the television, and the images it gives us encourage the status quo of capitalist production. In the same way that Debord describes the spectacle as “both the result and the project of the existing mode of production” (Thesis 6), television both exists in the world and encourages its own existence. However, to believe that television *is* the spectacle utterly misses the situationists’ most crucial point: the spectacle cannot be reduced to a single acting body. It permeates all of modern capitalist society, necessitating the total critique of modern life the situationists tried to foster.

The SI’s assessment of modern society as spectacle relied on two primary critical “weapons” (as the SI’s members perhaps would have called them): the *dérive* and the *détournement*, strategies that have specific applications but that also can serve as metaphors for the situationist critique as a whole. Pop culture historian Greil Marcus defined the *dérive* as “a drift down city streets in search of signs of attraction or repulsion,” and *détournement* as “the theft of aesthetic artifacts from their contexts and their diversions into contexts of one’s own devise” (168). Marcus proves apt at getting at the heart of the specific actions entailed in both concepts, but their greater significance remains to be seen. Debord sees taking part in a *dérive* as “studying psychogeography and situationist psychology” (46). In other words, the *dérive* is meant to, as Libero Andreotti put it, “[explore] forms of life radically beyond the capitalist work ethic” (215), and to encourage its participants to see space as having been constructed to encourage production (or, if you like, as an arm of the spectacle). The playful “drifting” that constitutes the *dérive* then enacts a complete reclamation of urban geography from the production oriented purposes of the spectacle and encourages experiencing it on a psychological,

use-based level in terms of what specific emotion locations foster. In the situationist critique, as articulated by the architect Constant and quoted by Andreotti, "urbanism [was] intended to bring pleasure" (233), and should offer infinite opportunities for new forms of play. The *dérive* was the first step in seeing urban structures in such a way. Because the *dérive* (and, for that matter, most situationist theory) can be somewhat difficult to grasp in its greater societal scope, perhaps it would be beneficial to boil this geographic reclamation down to a very basic situation.

Suppose a person entered a room for a meeting, seeing many people sitting at a large table. He or she sees a seat open on the opposite side of the table and moves to fill it. Instead of walking around the table, this person walks on top of it. Walking around the table would be playing into the table's spectacular value: it is a flat surface upon which one could write. The spectacle teaches us not to tread on it, but there is no concrete reason a person could not do such a thing. Walking over the table removes it from its spectacular context and gives it a new, practical use value. On a larger scale, this remains the fundamental goal of the *dérive*.

The *détournement*, perhaps easier to grasp in the context of modern day clip-art comic strips such as *Get Your War On* and *Red Meat*, existed in its most basic form as preexisting images (comics panels, photographic stills, etc.) whose characters were given new words. For instance, one might hypothetically see Dick Tracy philosophizing about the workers' struggle or the futility of the democratic process. In an essay, Debord writes that "creation is not the arrangement of objects and forms, but the invention of new laws for such an arrangement" (43), and, in essence, the *détournement* remains the physical manifestation of such a concept. To write a comic strip is to operate within the existing rules of a structure, which cannot be separated from the spectacular commodity economy. To recontextualize existing images in order to critique modern society is to assign them a new value separate from the reach of that

economy. To sum up, *dérive* and *détournement* were the situationists' primary attempts at creating forms that would be truly "new" and separate from the spectacle.

Since the spectacle, according to situationist theory, permeated all aspects of modern capitalist life, it makes sense to extrapolate that it extended into the domain of memory. In this case, spectacular memory remains tied to the idea of infinite endurance that the situationists critiqued through their desire for infinite invention and play. In an essay entitled "The Totality for Kids," Raoul Vaneigem asserts that "survival becomes the ultimate stage of life organized as the mechanical reproduction of memory" (58). Essentially, "survival" in this context is the negation of living; it is the life the spectacle allows you. Such a state occurs because our lives (or what remains of them) center on producing. The production of "memory" can then be seen as an acceptance and affirmation of the spectacle. The use of the phrase "mechanical reproduction" brings to mind industrial, capitalist terminology, indicating that through the production of commodities, the spectacle also produces a certain kind of memory: essentially, the memory of the spectacle's endurance. If, through life, we produce memory, then that memory will be of an eternal and enduring state of production. In other words, because our lives are production, our memories will then be of that production, contributing to a memorial cycle trapped in commodities, whose accumulation amounts to the spectacle. However, all of the spectacle's claims at endurance are false, for, as Debord writes in *Society of the Spectacle*, "what the spectacle offers as eternal is based on change and must change with its base...Nothing stops for the spectacle; this condition is natural to it, yet completely opposed to its inclination" (Thesis 71). Essentially, the spectacle indoctrinates us with false memories of an enduring system of production, though, by its nature as production and its existence within the natural changing world, it continuously moves and changes. With this assertion, the situationists have painted

memory as something that the spectacle actively falsifies and reproduces, setting the stage for their further critique and appropriation of spectacular memory.

Perhaps the most concrete manifestation of spectacular memory comes through the language of “official” memory, or history, seeing as the very idea of having a history suggests an enduring concept, such as the spectacle. Situationist thought asserts that one must critique the history fostered by the spectacle and filter that history through the same lens of practicality that permeates the SI’s ideas. Debord asserts in *Society of the Spectacle* that “history has always existed, but not always in a historical form” (Thesis 125), implying that a difference exists between natural events and the way humans order them into a system. Through capitalism, we have produced an abundance of commodities, objects, and representations that amount to the spectacle. Since the spectacle creates the historical form, by necessity that form must encourage and be the result of capitalist production, and the spectacle assigns value to events and cultural items based on their relation to production. For example, mainstream society’s astounding unfamiliarity with the SI’s involvement in the Paris uprisings of May 1968 affirm that any event that fundamentally questions modern life as it is will fall by the wayside. In addition, since it remains upheld by the spectacle, “this history has no object distinct from what takes place within it” (Debord Thesis 74). In other words, history only reproduces itself to enforce the artificial endurance discussed earlier, and “by being thrown into history...men find themselves obliged to view their relations in a clear manner” (Debord Thesis 74): in relation to the production of historical forms that uphold the validity and verity of production itself. To overcome this, Debord suggests that “the thought of history can be saved only by becoming practical thought; and the practice of the proletariat as a revolutionary class cannot be less than historical consciousness operating on the totality of its world” (Thesis 78). By this logic, one must remove historical events from their known context in relation to the spectacle and reinterpret them, using

them to dissect the operations of the spectacle and eventually destroy it. In this sense, history (“the memory of states” as Henry Kissinger once put it; perhaps here, it is more apt to call it “the memory of spectacle”) must be taken away from the spectacle, divorced from its status as upholding the endurance of production, and instead become a weapon of the revolutionary. In the case of history, the situationists turn memory into something present and practical to be employed, not merely to rely on as a storage facility.

According to situationist theory, the spectacle’s insistence upon endurance allows degradation to seep into other areas of life, necessitating active invention and asserting the prominence of the temporary. In his “Totality” essay, Vaneigem writes that “until now the specific use of technology...while quantitatively reducing the number of occasions of pain and death, has allowed death itself to eat like a cancer into the heart of each person’s life” (39). In some ways, the drive to prolong our lives can serve as a metaphor for the spectacle’s desire for endurance. However, that endurance produces the boredom, strife, and condition of “surviving” rather than “living” that situationists feel the need to fight against. Their method of struggle becomes clear in an essay by Debord entitled “The Great Sleep and Its Clients,” in which he writes that “all worthwhile works of this generation and its predecessors lead us to think that the next revolution in sensibility can no longer be conceived of as a novel expression of known facts, but rather as the conscious construction of new emotional states” (22). It makes sense that complete innovation would serve as the counteraction to a false endurance, since a “novel expression of known facts” only contributes to that false endurance by affirming its elements. The creation of that which is completely new remains the only way to truly live outside of the spectacle. The idea of the temporary enters into this resistance as well, for if endurance produces boredom and degradation, then, as Debord writes in “Report on the Construction of Situations,” “we must try to construct situations, i.e., collective environments, ensembles of impressions

determining the quality of a moment” (46-47). The emphasis on the “moment” reevaluates life in terms of the evanescent. Since it is the enduring and supposedly unchangeable aspect of spectacular commodity production that traps the producers (e.g. workers) into the slow death of modern life, the embrace of the temporary and that which will not persist infinitely can liberate those producers from such a death. Here again the situationists demonstrate their appropriation of memory as an active tool, as they exhibit a conscious and practical thought process allowing one to choose what gets kept and what gets discarded based on a system of infinite invention. Such an idea seems contradictory, since memory as we know it remains rooted in the spectacle; however, what makes memory so dangerous is that the spectacle paints it as unchanging and infinitely enduring. As long as the temporary dominates, hope remains that we can reclaim memory from the spectacle.

However, no matter how one chooses to look at this process, an infinitely inventive life necessitates the loss of certain memories and structures. The infinite invention, however, is an end result, and until we get to that point, memory must be reclaimed from the spectacle and employed to achieve the total critique of modern life the situationists desired. In other words, it does not represent the complete destruction of memory that a lack of endurance initially implies. In a pamphlet published by the student union of the University of Strasbourg, students assert that “everything is said about our society except what it is, and the nature of its two basic principles: the commodity and the spectacle. The fetishism of facts masks the essential category, and the details consign themselves to oblivion” (10). One can extrapolate from here that the over-retention of facts has blinded us to the true function of memory: to dissect practically and rationally what elements of our past and current society can be used, and what can be thrown away. In that same pamphlet, produced in conjunction with members of the SI, the students claim that “a radical critique of the modern world must have the totality as its object and

objective. Its searchlight must reveal the world's real past, its present existence and the prospects for its transformation as an indivisible whole" (18). To "reveal the world's real past," one must employ one's practical faculties to subvert the version of memory created by the spectacle and grasp at the truth of modern life. Not only do the situationists actively employ memory in a practical sense, but forgetting as well. The false notions of memory put forth by the spectacle must be actively done away with in order to bring about its demise. Memorial processes, in the case of situationist thought, cannot merely exist as systems of passive retention and deletion. Instead, these faculties must be employed to assess the totality of the modern life presented to us by the spectacle, in order to bring about its destruction.

If both remembering and forgetting actively assert themselves as weapons in the revolutionary arsenal according to situationist thought, specific questions arise: what, precisely, should we retain, and what should we do away with? Essentially, what we remember of the old world remains tied to the idea of the *détournement*. Preexisting structures must be assigned a new use value based in practicality and rationality in order to persist and be accepted into the memory of the new society. For example, in his essay "Report on the Construction of Situations," Debord dissects the role of film in the enactment of a society based around the creation of situations. He asserts that since "the systematic construction of situations [have] to generate previously nonexistent feelings, the cinema will discover its greatest pedagogical role in the diffusion of these new passions" (48). Previously, cinema was used by the spectacle in order to uphold the ideals of commodity production and a false sense of infinite endurance. In the SI's view of the new world, film will be retained and remembered as a form from the old order, but will take on an entirely new function that will serve infinite invention. Earlier on in the essay, Debord says that "we must not reject modern culture, but seize it in order to repudiate it. An intellectual cannot be revolutionary if he does not acknowledge the cultural revolution before us"

(42). Again, "acknowledgement" remains of vast importance. On a more basic level, this statement finally proves that situationism is not a movement based upon destruction. However, the theory also represents a reevaluation of the very concept of destruction. Turning a car on its side in the middle of a city street would most likely be seen by most of mainstream society as a destructive act. However, seen through a situationist lens, the act becomes creation in its truest sense: the actor does not incinerate the car, but uses it for its practical, situational value (as a barricade) rather than its spectacular value. In other words, we can retain the items and objects of modern society if we reevaluate their use value. This reevaluation represents the direct manifestation of an active idea of memory and retention. In order to use and retain an object, one must question its current value and discover its most practical, situational function. Such a process could never be passive.

Forgetting and discarding in the situationist sense could also never be passive. Instead, it involves an avoidance of and conscious unwillingness to replicate the structures that contribute to the spectacular separation discussed earlier. For instance, in discussing a previous workers' movement in *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord writes that "it was the workers' party organized according to the bourgeois model of separation which furnished the hierarchical-statist cadre for this supplementary edition of a ruling class" (Thesis 104). Essentially, in order to subvert the alienation of modern life, we should actively reject a hierarchical structure that orders people into categories of owner and owned, of ruler and subordinate. These are the structures that keep people producing for the spectacle, so to replicate them within a "revolutionary" movement would be fallacy (hence the SI's various anti-voting slogans). Related to the dismantling of hierarchy is the abandonment of exchange value. Debord writes that "the process of exchange became identified with all possible use and reduced use to the mercy of exchange" (Thesis 46). Exchange value limits what an object could be, and hence must be discarded in favor of the use

value discussed earlier. The afore-mentioned car, confined by its exchange value, can only ever be a vehicle for human transportation worth a certain amount of money. By removing its exchange value in favor of practicality, it can then be so much more. In a greater sense, this abandonment elucidates the active part of forgetting in a situationist society, and relates to the idea of discovering practicality. According to situationist thought, nothing will be discarded without discovering a replacement. Exchange value contributes to the boredom and death of modern life, and hence we must do away with it; however, practical dissections of use value will take its place. Activity, and discarding certain structures remain creative, in that there will always be something new, thus illustrating the active capacity of forgetting.

With all of this discussion of practicality and rationality, it seems apparent that we must decide in what ways we can practically and rationally *use* memory. Memory, as seen by the situationists, proves a successful method of establishing and dissecting the falsities and shortcomings of previous revolutionary, worker, and student movements in order to devise and create new revolutionary activity. Debord writes in "One More Try If You Want to Be Situationists" that "becoming aware of our real possibilities requires both the recognition of the presituationist – in the strict sense of the word – nature of whatever we can attempt, and the rupture, without looking back, with *the division of labor in the arts*" (52, emphasis Debord's). Remembering what Debord terms "presituationist" thought allows for progression, for it remains the only way to rationally develop a critique: through the amassing of evidence and the drawing of conclusions. Debord, in "Report on the Construction of Situations," also contends that the "only valid experimental approach is one based on the uncompromising critique of existing conditions and their conscious supersession" (43). The author implicitly contains within this statement an affirmation of our memorial capacities, since it is not the revolutionary's job to destroy existing conditions, but to supercede them. This requires a certain amount of retention,

thus illuminating the true use of memory as an ability. As in all other cases, the situationists portray memory as an active capacity, and affirm its necessity to the central issues of their critique of modern life.

Reading situationist texts, all originally composed in the 1950s and 1960s, in 2004 brings about an inevitable question: since no revolution has displaced capitalist society, and modern life as the situationists described it retains its hold, should we view situationism as another failed revolutionary project? If so, using their own suggestions and principles, what can we as activists today retain from their theory and struggle? One answer lies implicitly in the asking of such a question: we can always use our memorial capacity to reevaluate the movements that have come before in order to further critique modern society. Another seemingly valuable quality was their idealistic and innovative approach to creation. Postmodernism in many ways relied (and, in some sense, continues to rely) on a resignation to the idea that true innovation was not possible; thus, the movement sometimes resorted to cultural recombination. For all its attractive qualities, how can innovation ever take place if one remains closed off to the very idea of innovation? Our attitudes, in many ways, shape our ability to act, and if we continue to know that creation can occur and seek new ways of enacting such creation, even if it does not exactly fit the situationist model of *dérive* and *détournement* (which, the SI would say, it should certainly not), perhaps we can eventually overcome the atrocities of modern life that continue to confine and plague us.

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