

# The Big and Small Theatres of Guy Debord

Jean-Marie Apostolides

translated by Marie Pecorari

*The more I think about it, the more I find that everything performed in the theatre is not brought closer to you but taken away.*

— Guy Debord ([1960] 1999:358)

According to all appearances, bringing up the question of theatre in the life and works of Guy-Ernest Debord is pointless. This art form seems to have elicited no interest from him whatsoever. He barely mentioned it as a separate art, bourgeois and decadent, the same way he described the “nouveau roman” [new novel] and Godard’s or Alain Resnais’s films.

Yet the genre of theatre never ceased to intrigue him. But, as is often the case with this author, to understand the deeper reasons behind his ambivalent attitude, one needs to take a closer look, to delve into his personal history, a territory he secretly guarded his whole life, even from his closest friends.

In the first stage of this study, I take stock of the criticism Debord leveled at theatre, as well as at the playwrights he knew. When he attacked a living artist, implicitly advising readers to shun him, chances are that other, more complex reasons for his attitude can be uncovered. My second and equally necessary step consists in researching Debord’s dramatic interests: What kind of works did he like? What kind of texts did he subject to *détournement*?<sup>1</sup> What sort of theatre did he imagine for the future? How, in the wake of significant encounters, did his conception of drama evolve? Finally, I raise the central question of the place of theatre in his conception of philosophy. Situationist theory cannot be understood without reference to the theatre.

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1. [I chose not to translate the words referring to situationist terminology (*détournement*, *dérive*, *mise en sourdine*, *mise en spectacle*, *viveur*), when possible offering a literal translation in parentheses on the first occurrence only. — Trans.]

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## Guy Debord's Theatrical Culture

Guy Debord's interest in the art of theatre can be perceived in the oldest documents available on his intellectual and sensorial education, the letters he sent as a young man to his friend Hervé Falcou between December 1949 and October 1951. Their correspondence contains several allusions to the theatre, which suggests that the young Debord was not indifferent to it. He can be seen parodying the classical style, writing in alexandrines (2004:42) or subjecting school curriculum staple authors like Pierre Corneille to *détournement*. He also quotes contemporary playwrights he discovered and liked, in particular Albert Camus. Before lending Camus's *Lettres à un ami allemand* (Letters to a German Friend) to Hervé Falcou, Debord covered the inside flap of the book's dust jacket with *détourné* phrases. Among them is a quote from *Caligula*: "Men die and they are not happy" (2004:52). Camus was an author who intrigued him, as he read *Les Justes* (The Just Assassins) soon after (58).<sup>2</sup> Another playwright he was interested in was Jean Anouilh. On 29 November 1950, Debord let his friend know, "I saw Anouilh's *Eurydice* the other day and liked it" (72). Anouilh, Camus, Cocteau, maybe Jean-Paul Sartre: from a theatrical point of view, before turning 20, Debord was familiar with the dominant sensibility of his time.

Guy Debord was also indebted to his academic education for a solid knowledge of the French classical authors of the 17th century, Racine above all, whom he preferred to Corneille. In issue number 26 of *Potlatch* journal, he published a quote from the preface of *Bérénice* that he was to use again on several occasions to characterize his research, which he meant to bring back passion into life: "The action only needs to be noble, the actors heroic, the passions aroused, and everything only needs to be pervaded by the majestic sadness which in itself renders tragedy so pleasurable" (Debord 1996:126).

To give a thorough account here, one would need to list all the instances of *détournement* applied to playwrights to be found in *Potlatch* or in Debord's *Memoirs* published in 1957.

A survey of the latter book, with help from the key provided by Boris Donné (2004), shows the dominant presence of Shakespeare. Hamlet, whom he feels deeply connected to and identifies with, occupies a special place in his personal universe. But other plays are *détourné* as well, like *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, which holds a place almost equally important as *Hamlet* in the *Memoirs*. Though Debord could not speak English, his admiration for Shakespeare never diminished. For him, the Bard was the very epitome of the absolute playwright, one whose works reflected with utmost lucidity the problems of his time (Debord 2006:1235–54).<sup>3</sup>

Finally, this overview would not be complete if I failed to mention how Debord introduced himself to others, in a profoundly theatrical way. At 20, he dressed in black to stress his identification with the character of Hamlet (Straram 2006a:70).<sup>4</sup> He was the leading actor in his first films, and had a clear voice and sharp diction, which he relied on to read radio or film texts. Although he never took drama lessons, his acting drew on performers he identified with and

2. During that period, Debord expressed an ambivalent relationship with the writings of Camus, a relationship whose negative dimension would prevail. This line is from a poem addressed to Hervé Falcou, "Limites": "But I have had enough of Camus who persists in vain" (2004:38).

3. Debord's persistent fascination with Shakespeare is more particularly apparent in the film *La société du spectacle*, shot in 1973. In it there is a *détournement* of both Richard III's first monologue and Henry V's speech before the battle of Agincourt.

4. In his novel *Bottles Go to Sleep* (*Les bouteilles se couchent*), written in 1953, Patrick Straram describes Guy Debord's entrance into Café Moineau as that of a performer aware of playing a character: "Guy came in, like a Sabre Dance in slow motion. Clad in black from head to toe, and in corduroy at that! A remarkable detail, his scarf. Black as well, and so ripped the two ends threatening to run loose had to be knotted together. A very beautiful scarf. Like a Sabre Dance, as I said. Arm flourishes of a rare precision, without haste. *The true adventure novel, it's Céline*. Here I totally agree with you, Guy" (2006a:70).

would be discovered in the film excerpts he was to *détour* later in life. These performers represent a magnified double of his persona; they are Marcel Herrand when Debord was in his 30s, Jules Berry a bit later, and Orson Welles in the last years of his life. All three performers instilled their personalities in their on-screen roles. With them, persona and character became one.<sup>5</sup> The same can be said of Debord in the public space. Elegant, secret, bearing the black sun of melancholia like a coat of arms, he exercised control over his character to make him more mysterious. He lived like a *social actor* in numerous circumstances of his public life. Would the street be the theatre for his exploits? Or could it be the screen? He does not seem to have made a decision.

Thus, when he graduated from secondary school in Cannes in July 1951, Guy Debord was showing a definite interest in theatre, but his knowledge of it was limited. He had not seen many productions and the plays he was interested in, apart from the classical theatre, were close to the existentialist sensibility that was dominant in post-World War II France. He did not seem to develop an interest for avantgarde theatre, the way he did for avantgarde film. Let us add that in April 1951, Isidore Isou had come to Cannes to present his film *Traité de bave et d'éternité* (A Treatise on Drool and Eternity), which was to leave a profound mark on Debord's cinematic thought. No theatrical encounter of equal significance occurred until he settled down in Paris.

When Debord arrived in the capital in the fall of 1951, he found a rich and diverse theatrical life. Beyond *boulevard* theatre (Marcel Achard, André Roussin), each year numerous productions were performed, whose genres tended to overlap. However humdrum the Comédie-Française might have been, it allowed the public to become familiar with classical theatre or authors who were thought likely to become classic. The great man in the 1950s was Henry de Montherlant. Other than that, a new wind was blowing at the Théâtre National Populaire, headed by Jean Vilar, in the big house at the Palais de Chaillot. His repertory was based on rejuvenated interpretations of masterpieces of Western theatre. Finally, the movement Martin Esslin dubbed the Theatre of the Absurd was reaching its peak, with Tardieu, Ionesco, Beckett, and Adamov as its star authors.

Debord could have shown a passionate interest in this Parisian diversity and lost himself in its tasteful eclecticism. Not so. Instinctively, he cut to the chase, weeding out what did not suit him. In order to reconcile his theatrical conceptions with his newfound views on film, he absolutely rejected what was being performed on official stages, however small they were, to explore other venues. The way was first paved by Isou, but it is mostly after his split with Isou, in November 1952, that Debord started showing a more substantial interest in the theatre.

## A Trio of Like-Minded Friends

Debord founded Internationale lettriste in opposition to Isou in April 1952. He relied both on former members of the group who followed him in his rebellious move, and on new allies, recruited from outside the circle of *lettristes*, in particular Patrick Straram and Ivan Chtcheglov. Debord teamed up with Straram, whom he had gotten to know for a few months at Café Moineau, rue du Four, in the beginning of 1953. The two young men had much in common: a command of culture impressive for their age, a serious tendency to drink, a rejection of society as it was, and an intellectual curiosity nothing could satisfy. Shortly afterwards, through Straram, Debord met Chtcheglov and Michèle Bernstein.

Ever since his first experiences with an amateur theatre group, Straram had dreamed of becoming an actor. He knew well the theatrical circles in the French capital as his father, Enrich

5. The characters that made an impression on Guy Debord were Lacenaire, played by Marcel Herrand in *Les enfants du paradis* (Children of Paradise; 1945); the devil, played by Jules Berry in *Les Visiteurs du soir* (The Devil's Envoys; 1942); and Gregory Arkadin, played by Orson Welles in *Mister Arkadin* (1955).

Straram, was a shareholder in the three theatres of the Champs-Élysées located in the same building on Avenue Montaigne (the concert hall Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, the Comédie des Champs-Élysées, and the Studio des Champs-Élysées). He was also a friend of Jacques Seiler, himself connected to the theatrical avantgarde, and of Jacques Blot, who later had a career as an administrator for the Théâtre National Populaire. He was thus close to a number of figures who were to leave their mark on French cultural life in the second half of the century: Pierre Brasseur and Maria Casarès among the older generation; Michel Auclair, Daniel Gélin, Brigitte Auber, and Edith Scob among the younger generation. Straram also saw several writers regularly, Blaise Cendrars in particular, then Samuel Beckett, to whom he sent out a cry for help when he was interned at the Ville-Evrard psychiatric hospital in October 1953 (Straram 2006b:80–81). Because of its privileged position, the Straram family received weekly invitations to performances in the capital, and Patrick frequently used the tickets and generously shared them with his friends. Directly or not, thanks to Straram, Debord kept abreast of theatrical life during the period the two young men saw each other regularly in Paris, from January 1953 to April 1954.<sup>6</sup>

Ivan Chtcheglov was also a theatre amateur. He was friends with Arlette Reinerg, the director of Théâtre de Lutèce in Paris, where a number of avantgarde productions would open in the 1950s and 1960s (Apostolidès and Donné 2006:83). Not only did Chtcheglov keep in touch with contemporary productions, but he also had a particular interest in Antonin Artaud, with whom he identified closely (50–53).<sup>7</sup> Chtcheglov would later become a theatre director and playwright, during his stay at the Chailles psychiatric clinic (95). Chtcheglov entered Debord's life in June 1953. The two young men immediately struck up a friendship and launched various projects. In a manifesto/letter he sent to Chtcheglov in the summer of 1953, Debord takes stock of his months-long discovery of the cultural world. He paints a negative portrait of Breton, who had ceased to impress him. He insists on the shortcomings of the cultural world and offers to his correspondent an overview of what he himself contemplated doing in the near future with the newly founded Internationale lettriste. The theatre is part of the project:

I realize that typically, Breton *does not think anything*, know anything, want to say anything about the novel, the theatre, music (and thinks, knows and wants to say quite little about film). From these disciplines, he knows neither Joyce nor Pirandello, to say nothing of Eric Satie—whose *life* should nonetheless touch him. Anyway, he has never been able to participate in these arts other than by passing moral judgment on the personalities of the authors. (Debord 2004:140)

A little later, in a letter apparently written in the spring of 1954, Debord recommended that Chtcheglov read Camus's plays. He insisted on one particular play: "I reread with interest 'The Misunderstanding,' quite a curious key text, really. And it is curious to notice how everyone's obsessions are *clearly* recorded in there" (156).

The trio's friendship extended into a common activity, the practice of *métagraphies*, which followed up on research originally initiated by Isou. It was a "propaganda" device aimed at uniting images and texts on the same sheet of paper, the writing serving as a counterpoint to the graphics, with the purpose of influencing people's behavior. Hence the name *métagraphies influentielles*. The images could be either original or (more frequently) borrowed from various sources, in particular newspapers and magazines. Debord, Chtcheglov, and Straram multiplied their attempts at metagraphic research and exchanged their works. They believed they had discovered a bounty as rich as the automatic writing of the early days of surrealism and dreamed

6. After moving to British Columbia, Patrick Straram sent out a few short stories that Debord published in the second issue of *Potlatch*.

7. Before Chtcheglov, Debord frequently saw Serge Berna, a fellow *lettriste*. In June 1953 the latter published manuscripts from Artaud, which he had found in 1952 in an attic on rue Visconti in Paris.

of a new genre that would substitute for more traditional advertisement posters. Metagraphy represented for them a grip on immediate reality, since it served as an illustration of contemporary events. An exhibition announced under the title “Before the War,” presented in June 1954 at Galerie du Passage, comprised a series of 66 métagraphies influentielles made by the main members of Internationale lettriste.<sup>8</sup>

It is within this framework that the group’s project for a new theatre has to be situated. It was born within the trio and presents itself as the natural extension of the metagraphic experiments, in a different genre. How far was the project taken? How far did Debord wish to get involved in this research? It is impossible to know exactly from the documents discovered. One can nonetheless get an idea by looking at Straram’s private correspondence at the end of the summer of 1954. Straram had just parted ways with Debord, and did not wish the project to remain in the hands of the lettristes. To carry out the work, he thus entrusted the one he believed to be the most likely to break through into the theatre world, his friend Jacques Blot. In order not to leave Chtcheglov behind, Straram asked Blot to contact him immediately—so that they might complete together what had already been developed. Was it an effort to revive the trio without Debord? The question remains: Why was the trio never revived; and why didn’t the metagraphic theatre ever come to fruition? The idea, nevertheless, deserves to be remembered.

### The Metagraphic Project

From Canada, where he had just moved, Patrick Straram reached out to his friend Jacques Blot: “You are expecting a constructive theatre? Then go see how the renovations are going at 12, rue de Civry. We have never thought about anything but construction” (Straram 1954a).<sup>9</sup> A little while later, Straram summed up the project, mentioning he had shared its principles with other friends with whom Blot had stayed in touch, in particular Jacques Seiler. The text is incomplete and elliptical, but remains the main account calling for metagraphy to be understood as a global technique potentially applicable to other artistic fields.

Straram started out by summing up what he deemed essential in metagraphy—the connection between a word and an image: “That is to say, adding to the absolute dimension of a *painted* motif a story that explains it, strengthens it, or locates it, etc.... And, adding to the story—the words—an image that sheds light on the idea, strengthens its expression” (1954b). He went on to say that even though the practice of metagraphy was not yet over among the members of the Internationale lettriste, it no longer brought any surprises either.

The point was to discover other fields by letting the lettristes—namely, Guy Debord—be in charge of conquered territories:

Well, metagraphy is now a done thing. Not that we are done. Almost everything remains to be discovered, worked out. But we have started and everything is taking care of itself. [...W]hat interests me now are the uses of metagraphy in other fields. [...] And metagraphy in the theatre (as well as in literature, music, or architecture, etc....) seems to me less of a utopian, future vista and more of a new and fucking interesting device, to be perfected from now on. (Straram 1954b)

How could a metagraphic theatre be developed practically? To give an idea to his correspondent, Straram reminds him of a production presented in Paris a few months prior:

Before leaving Paris, a theatre—I don’t remember the name of its director—gave performances with mute characters onstage, behind which a kind of *mouthpiece* would place

8. Some of Chtcheglov’s works are reproduced in his apocryphal collection *Ecrits retrouvés* (2006).

9. Ivan Chtcheglov lived on rue de Civry, in the 16th arrondissement of Paris, at the time.

slates on which the cues were written. There is an idea worth studying further. This is not yet it, but the element deserves to be retained. (1954b)<sup>10</sup>

Through this reference, one understands once again how, for the young explorers, it came down to breaking the natural bond between image and word, in order to highlight their arbitrary relationship.

There was nothing prescriptive in this project. It was more about breaking away from realistic theatre by separating out the different elements that made up a performance. Once rendered autonomous, these elements could be recombined in different ways, appealing to the imagination of the director. Thus, and due to its artificial quality, the apparently “forced” dimension of the metagraphic performance returned to the roots of ritual. Beyond the artifice, a new manifestation of life found an expression onstage:

I am convinced that with the help of metagraphy, we are bound to obtain a much more explicit, *living* theatre. Images added to the text and to the purely scenic action. Immobile characters with images and texts unfolding behind to give a psychogeographical frame. Action *a* on this image, action *b* on that image, but a uniform text, etc. Everything has to be used. Symbolism, an incantatory style, science, mathematics (the *mathematics of situations*), the powers of images and words. Searching for more thorough, as well as more strictly delimited, material and modes of functioning. “It’s more because they believed in the power of words and images that the Indians in Mexico used cutup paper.” Take this phrase and apply it to the theatre. (1954b)

The project as it is presented in this letter breaks away from avantgarde practices, which focus on the destruction of language and aim at retrieving the meaning of religious ritual. The allusion to indigenous Mexicans indeed reveals the influence of Artaud on the members of the trio. Here, the very meaning of performance is inverted in regard to *bourgeois* theatre. The latter is declared dead, or at the very least artificial. To retrieve the sources of life, the elements that are part of the performance have to be recombined differently, and the products of civilization have to be destroyed in order to be rebuilt on new foundations. No form is preferable to any other. It is the director’s task to reconstruct the performance each time as if it were a new moment that cannot be reproduced. The theatre then rediscovers its essence, in other words, that it takes place in the present, and does so in the spectator’s presence (Gouhier 1943:38).

The metagraphic project was developed collaboratively by the Debord-Chtcheglov-Straram trio. The split among the three friends hindered its further evolution. Yet this failure did not mean Guy Debord was abandoning theatre, but that other ideas needed to be found to conquer the theatre world. Debord did not want to give the impression he was lagging behind his former friends. Obliterating them from his emotional horizon meant the projects they were associated with would collapse. This is why no mention of metagraphic theatre would ever be made again; it was to fall into oblivion [*oubli*], the dominant passion of the lettristes. However, metagraphic theatre was directly in keeping with the collective research of the lettristes.

## Street Theatre and Everyday Theatre

After he split with Straram and Chtcheglov, Debord sought to move further in the direction of theatrical innovation. He wanted to be bolder, more extreme than his former collaborators. In order to do that, he had no choice but to adopt a no-holds-barred approach. He then initiated different projects without bothering to wonder whether they could materialize practically. What mattered to him most was propounding radical ideas in which superseding the art of the theatre was tantamount to destroying it. Where Straram and Chtcheglov had failed, Debord hoped to succeed in including theatre in his plan to put all the arts back into perspective, a plan he was

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10. The spectacle Straram refers to may be the production of a play by Jean Tardieu, directed by Jacques Polieri.

now conducting with Gil Wolman. The two projects I analyze below are both attempts at moving beyond the metagraphic theatrical project in a radical way.

In 1957, Debord delineated two projects in a hasty note. Here is the first one, announcing what was later to be called “street theatre,” detailed in a letter from 24 July 1960:

A future (connected to *dérive* [drifting]) that would put actors in the streets (as theatre in its dislocation phase had already begun to sneak actors into the house sometimes). These actors would not have roles. At most, a *theme*, a motif, much thinner than in the old *commedia dell'arte*, in order to intervene in urban life, also taking into account the urban areas and *settings traveled through*. These actors could specialize in frightening or surprising roles; or represent sad or happy possibilities in life. They would put on a new spectacle without a location (breaking away from the playful space), without order, that nobody will have to understand, but in which all involved could find opportunities to live. This new spectacle would thus set itself apart, by its very existence, from the sphere of the spectacle. (Debord [1960] 1999:358)

This ought to be read as an application of lettristes techniques, in particular of *dérive*. Yet more than that, what Debord breaks away from is theatrical specialization, by abolishing the distinction between actor, character, and spectator. The actor no longer has to play a character in relation to a precise play. As in jazz, the actor is given a theme on which to improvise, attempting to come to a more or less pleasant harmony with the other performers involved in the project. Debord glimpses a break with theatrical tradition, similar to that accomplished by jazz in relation to the tradition of orchestral music. In jazz, the musician is freed from the score written by someone else. He takes responsibility for his production, by improvising with and against the others. The result is unexpected and cannot be repeated identically. In that sense, each concert is unique.<sup>11</sup>

In the project of theatrical *dérive* presented here, the character is no longer in search of an author; he has severed his ties to the author. He invents his own score. Even better, he does not have to follow a particular role, as his performance can be a series of improvisations and metamorphoses. An infinite number of roles open up before him. This richness and freedom is liable to cause alarm in the spectators, all the more as they do not know they are in the presence of a spectacle. They believe they are in the social space, characterized at the time by a dwindling availability of public spaces (see Sennett 1974). They become actors against their will in a space *theatricalized* again without their knowing it. Debord thus aimed at recreating the social space, at returning to a time where the wanderer was also a social actor. Debord did so in a playful way, reintroducing the *play* dimension, without the public even knowing it. He presented a draft for *street theatre*, but much more complex than the work done at the end of the 20th century, insofar as the separation between actor and spectator was entirely abolished, forcing the spectator to enter the performance against his will.<sup>12</sup>

It is tempting to compare this project to the way Debord and his fellow lettristes envisioned their role in society at the time. In both cases, they refused defined roles, be it in the form of a theatrical text or a social imperative. They both wanted to take part in the performance and refused to do so. The spectators had no idea these passersby were actors meaning to disorient and provoke them. The performers without a role could put on any kind of mask, becoming

11. Debord also understood his project in reference to *commedia dell'arte*.

12. Let us remember that in his first manifesto on *Soulèvement de la Jeunesse* (The Uprising of Youth), dating back to 1950, Isou pitted the Proletariat—a passive force, as it was locked up inside factories—against Youth, the standard-bearer of the revolutionary utopia, whose place was in the street: “The ‘established,’ proletarians or capitalists, are passive because they do not want to compromise their position by taking out to the streets. They have property or children to defend! Youth, who has nothing to lose, represents Attack, Adventure itself!” (Isou 2004:59).

elusive. Being both in the limelight and hidden, they took advantage of an ambiguous situation to satisfy their immediate desires during the course of a game of which only they knew the rules.

The second project Debord considered in May 1957 seemed to complement the first one. It was a means for him to move beyond his personal difficulties by theatricalizing them in his own way. It looked as if the status of performer without a role was not as satisfying as he had foreseen. Debord summed up the project:

In the present, in the present conditions, a negation of theatre by an *excess of realism*. Some people meeting in a regular room. In the manner of Sacha Guitry (he liked to perform *among his actual furniture*), lacking a plot and devoid of any wit. A regular conversation, in other words, neither too smart nor too stupid. A *permanent*, empty spectacle, like life—with no beginning and no end on that day—(the “three unities” *under a microscope*), with brief glimpses of what could be. (This is pre-situationist in that the actors here reproached one another with being actors—in the sense that they said, “Our life should be constructed better...”) Project for an antitheatre directed against Ionesco-Beckett ([1960] 1999:358–59)

Here, the idea was to break away from the theatre of the absurd, to go further than the official proponents of the avantgarde, in particular Tardieu, Ionesco, and Beckett. What Debord wanted was to bring down the barrier between theatre and everyday life by infusing one with the other; by adding autobiographical elements if need be. What he viewed as the performance space was no longer the street, but, in a much more radical way, “a regular room,” that is to say a private space like an office or a room in a living space. The actors did not set themselves apart from the spectators other than by being conscious of their alienation: they could occasionally glimpse *what could be*. None of the spectators’ expectations were met, starting with an expected story or particular meaning.

Whereas in the first project Debord aimed at denying any role, be it in the theatre or in social life, here on the contrary the character cannot escape his/her roles. She/he is trapped in his own mediocrity. The only way she/he can *get by* is to exaggerate the inadequacy of the role she/he has been given by deriding it. It is no longer the actor but the spectator who is responsible for the sense of boredom, confronted with the spectacle of his/her alienation and implicitly in charge of remedying it. If, in the first project, Debord offered a blueprint for what was to become a few years later street theatre, in the second one, he envisaged, once again in a radical way, *théâtre du quotidien* [everyday theatre], to be developed in France by Jean-Paul Wenzel and in Quebec by Michel Tremblay. In the first case, in the public space, the performer escaped social constraints by giving flexibility to the roles imposed upon them. They became a force impossible to hold back because, in the street, everyone is free to go wherever they please, to do whatever they feel like doing, whether the leader agrees or not. In the second case, the performer reinforced social constraints by making them more cumbersome. They became heavier, petrified, as the role started to thin out. In street theatre the spectator was confronted with his own freedom, his capacity to create new roles, the possibility to escape behavior patterns; in everyday theatre, at home, in the private sphere, he faced his alienation, confronted with the impossibility to escape the inadequacy of the roles he was assigned.

Neither the street theatre nor the everyday theatre projects were completed. Did the autobiographical dimension prevent Debord from devoting himself to them entirely? For him, everyday theatre involved a confrontation with his private life, which he may not have been ready to undertake in 1957. When, three years later, he went over the notes taken at the time Internationale situationniste (IS) was founded, he added the following comment intended for André Frankin:

At the time, I had a precise story in mind, also a kind of anti-story that had just ended around that time. And I could pretty well picture such a piece as an exact reconstitution

of the relationship, this or that day for three or four hours (the piece called for at least that sort of length so as to have its own, particular brand of “realism”) between myself and two other people. A relationship sufficiently fake and failed to suit this moment in the life of the theatre; yet odd enough so as not to recall in any way *bourgeois* comedies or melodrama. ([1960] 1999:359)<sup>13</sup>

At any rate, Debord was moving away from the metagraphic project developed along with Straram and Chtcheglov, while breaking away from the productions presented on Parisian stages.

### The Place of Theatre in the *Internationale Situationniste* Journal

Apparently, the transformation of Internationale lettriste into Internationale situationniste changed nothing essential in regard to the question of theatre. Except for one member, none of the recruits joining the new group had a particular interest in the theatre in general. Though theatre remained marginal if one considers the place devoted to urban issues or reflections on painting, it was nonetheless present. The theatre column in the *Internationale Situationniste* journal was sloppily and irregularly maintained. Adamov, Beckett, and Marguerite Duras were picked on in passing, with the kind of irreverence appropriate for a seemingly closed chapter. When Antonin Artaud was quoted in an epigraph, it was in an article by Alexander Trocchi ([1963] 1997). In issue number 9 (August 1964), Debord clarified his position towards Samuel Beckett, whose star kept rising. In 1963, *Happy Days*, directed by Roger Blin and starring Madeleine Renaud as Winnie, met with great success at the Odeon Theatre. When, the following year, Beckett presented *Comedy*, which went a step further in his conquest of silence, it proved too much for Debord. Without ever quoting his archival, Debord wrote an article entitled “L’absence et ses habilleurs” (Absence and Its Dressers), in which he once again denounced the appropriation of past avantgarde techniques by the “dominant culture.” In terms of silence, he was not going to let anyone teach him a lesson, as he had ended his first film in 1952 with a 24-minute-long silence.<sup>14</sup>

As the evolution of art has moved towards the reduction to nothing, to silence, the products of this decomposition have to be used more and more extensively, shown off and “communicated” everywhere. That is because this evolution expressed—and fought against—the noncommunication that has indeed taken root everywhere in society. The emptiness of life must now be filled by the emptiness of culture. One strives to do it using all the existing selling techniques that, almost everywhere else as well, are destined to peddle half-emptiness. To this end, it is necessary to hide the real dialectic of modern art by reducing everything to a positivity satisfied with nothingness, which justifies itself tautologically by the sole fact that it is; in other words, that it is recognized in the spectacle. This art of proclaimed novelty thus happens to be rude, to its very details, the art of open plagiarism. The fundamental difference between innovative modern art and the current generation is that what used to be anti-spectacular now repeats itself as part of the spectacle, and is accepted. The preference thus given to repetition demands that any historical evaluation be canceled out: as neo-dadaism is becoming the official art of the United States, one goes as far as reproaching the Dadaist Schwitters with being reminiscent of *his own time*. Even the critical writings of *détournement* will be subjected to some attempts at

13. Debord’s autobiographical project would not materialize in the theatre but in his two beautiful films, *Sur le passage de quelques personnes* (1959) and *Critique de la séparation* (1961).

14. Maurice Nadeau’s article, “Samuel Beckett ou le droit au silence” (Samuel Beckett or the Right to Remain Silent) in *Les Temps modernes* (1952), probably made Debord aware of the affinities between them.

literary vulgarization yet with “references at the end of the book.” But today the volume of cultural vacuity ensures the end will be vastly different. ([1958] 1964:374)

Authors were not the only victims of Debord’s diatribes; avantgarde directors were also criticized for their lack of radicalism, or coming too late to a world too old. Roger Planchon was thus ridiculed for producing “tasteful entertainment” by putting together “the bits and pieces of a complete theatrical tradition” (1963:14).

From that viewpoint, nothing had changed since the dissolution of Internationale lettriste; Debord always passed judgment in a regal way, without seeking to justify himself; his target of choice remained avantgarde artists, who, around the same time, were under attack by right-wing pundits such as Jean-Jacques Gautier, the solemn critic of the *Figaro* newspaper. Be they authors like Adamov, Ionesco, or Beckett, or directors like Vilar or Planchon, Debord’s preferred targets were those who were closer to his own sensibility, in order to set himself apart from them.<sup>15</sup> His enemies were not so much those who held a position opposite to his own as those for whom he feared he could be mistaken: the avantgarde artists who benefitted from a more or less established official recognition. The only contemporary whom he held in high esteem remained Brecht, whose work he had seen at the Théâtre des Nations. The Berliner Ensemble had indeed presented their *Mother Courage* in 1954, as well as Kleist’s *The Broken Jug*. They had come back the following year with *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. They returned to Paris after Brecht’s death with *Life of Galileo* in 1957, then again in 1960 with *Mother Courage*, *The Mother*, *Galileo*, and *Arturo Ui*.<sup>16</sup> Debord wrote about it in *Rapport sur la construction des situations* (A Report on the Construction of Situations): “In the workers’ States, only the experiment led by Brecht in Berlin comes close, in its challenging of the classic notion of spectacle, to the constructions which matter to us today. Only Brecht managed to resist the stupidity of the socialist-realism in power” ([1957] 2000:28). In that respect, and despite his desire to set himself apart from the official left, Debord was far from being original in regard to the tendencies of the time.

Since the foundation of Internationale situationniste, the activities of its leader had multiplied. Debord was the editor of the journal, single-handedly wrote many of its articles, organized international conferences, directed two short films, traveled continuously, maintained an ample correspondence; in short, he was fighting on all fronts. Between 1957 and 1972, his attempts at establishing an original theatre were put on hold indefinitely as he grew more attracted to film—to the point where he listed *cinéaste* as his only acceptable profession. This did not prevent him from following attentively any attempt at creating a real situationist theatre—such as André Frankin’s.

## The Scenic Unit

André Frankin made his appearance in Guy Debord’s life at the end of the lettriste period, at the time when Gil Wolman and Jacques Fillon were excluded (Debord [1957] 1996). He brought a knowledge of Marxism few in the group possessed, as well as a knowledge of theatre, which stimulated Debord’s own interest. Less meddlesome than Straram, Wolman, or Chtcheglov, and living in Belgium, Frankin did not seem to threaten the leader’s supremacy. He had several projects in mind, among them a formally innovative play, *Personne et les autres* (Nobody and the Others), which was ready by the beginning of July 1960. He added to it a

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15. Debord’s aggressiveness towards Beckett may also involve a personal dimension. Ten years before, in November 1953, Beckett and Jérôme Lindon had intervened to get Straram out of the Ville-Evrard asylum, while Debord, who had nonetheless visited his friend during his confinement, had only been heavily ironic about Straram’s police and hospital-related misadventures (2004:148).

16. Carl Weber, who was Brecht’s assistant in the last years of his life, provided me with this information in July 2005. It is also possible Debord discovered Brecht reading François Erval’s article, “Bert Brecht and his theory of epic theatre” (1952).

preface entitled “Le théâtre en question” (The Theatre in Question) in which he explained his intentions, perhaps even to himself. Before sending a copy of the play to Debord, Frankin gave him the preface. Debord was enthusiastic about the programmatic presentation, which he shared with several of his friends.<sup>17</sup> He wrote to Asger Jorn<sup>18</sup> on 16 July 1960:

The same Frankin just wrote a play, and I have only read the preface, but it seems absolutely impressive and experimental. At any rate, it is an excellent thing for our presence to progressively expand to all existing artistic fields. Through this progression, we will be able to reach theatre people, urge them to present a play like the one Frankin announces, introducing the situationist scandal to a whole new field. We ought to think about that. (Debord 1999:353–54)

So it appears that, among the territories Debord hoped to conquer, theatre held a position of choice, on the same level as the novel or film. Around the same time, the Buchet-Chastel publishing house was on the verge of releasing Michèle Bernstein’s debut novel, *Tous les chevaux du roi* (All the King’s Horses), for which Debord had written two blurbs, the first one praising the work, the second one undermining it (Bernstein [1960] 2004).<sup>19</sup> Around the same time, Debord had also completed *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps* (On Some People Passing through a Rather Short Time Unit), which was his first film with images. The utopia of the lettriste period was succeeded by the realism of the situationist period.

When Debord wrote to Frankin on 24 July 1960, he asked how the play was faring, as it had been submitted to a publisher. He offered to publish the preface in issue number 5 of the *Internationale Situationniste* journal, and asked about a potential production, which would create a scandal at a time when the theatrical avantgarde (Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov, and lower-grade disciples such as Georges Michel) was now accepted by the more progressive bourgeoisie.

I believe we will have to do our best to have the play produced by whatever “avantgarde actors” there are. If we are able to have an impact upon some in the theatre milieu, it will be for the best. This could be a decisive shock in the prehistory of the antispectacle. ([1960] 1999:358)

The idea was to go further in debasing authors on their way to becoming part of the canon. Debord sensed Frankin was better equipped than he was to provoke a scandal; he encouraged Frankin to view his preface as a manifesto for a renewed theatre: “I absolutely approve the terms of the preface as constituting a general program for a new theatre, and we ought to make this preface public as a program as soon as possible” (358).

Debord and Michèle Bernstein received Frankin’s play from the hands of Pierre Debauche—a young director who contemplated directing it—at the end of the summer of 1960. He read it immediately. The two were enthusiastic about the theatrical work of their friend and let him know in a telegram sent from Liège. A few days later, on 31 October 1960, Debord wrote a long letter to the author to clarify his thoughts on the play.

In *Personne et les autres*, Frankin’s main idea consisted in finding a way out of the dichotomy in which avantgarde playwrights had become trapped, that of theatre and anti-theatre. To this

17. On 31 October 1960, Debord wrote to Straram, with whom he had just renewed his ties: “Please find enclosed the script for *Sur le passage* [...] and a preface by André Frankin—to be published in *I.S.5*—to his play *Personne et les autres*. You see, we have not withdrawn from expressing ourselves within and against current frameworks” (Debord 2001:39). A copy of Frankin’s original text can be found in the Patrick Straram archive at the Bibliothèque Nationale du Québec in Montréal. The original differs slightly from the text published in the situationist journal.

18. [Asger Jorn (1914–1973), Danish painter, cofounder of the group and collaborator on the journal—Trans.]

19. The first edition was printed on 30 August 1960. The blurb perfectly illustrates what Debord had written to Straram: “within and against current frameworks.”

end, the author offered a new form he named the *unité scénique* (scenic unit): “After Brecht, and Dadaism, and the Beckett trend, it would be inappropriate to discover the anti-play or more than well-known techniques” (1960a:173).<sup>20</sup> A scenic unit is akin to a novel, insofar as the spectator has direct access not only to what the characters say, but also to their private lives, their secret plans, all that is generally left unsaid in everyday relationships and can be perceived indirectly in the traditional theatre:

The scenic unit is first and foremost a novel. Not adapted, of course. Anything but that! A performed novel. In other words, the onstage projection of this strange mix of a lifestyle, nowhere near achieved or barely touched upon, and the asymmetry of our actions, the discrepancy between the two brought on by situations. (1960a:173)

Insofar as the characters did not control the situations they were in, and were not the *producers* of these situations, they were caught between the lifestyle they wished to lead and the banality of their daily lives. In that, they closely resembled the members of Internationale situationniste. They were alienated because of the very discrepancy— asymmetry between their profound aspirations and their practical achievements. This is the source of the *miser*y in their everyday lives. The performance of the scenic unit aimed at reinforcing the discrepancy between the two: “On the one hand, the lifestyle conducts a dialogue in front of us, and on the other, the gestures, decisions, encounters, and departures cannot positively be expressed in the dialogue: this is what the scenic unit is, once the interpretative biases or glitches in the performance are taken into account” (173).

In order to underline this gap, Frankin introduced a certain number of departures from traditional theatre, including some common to plot-based theatre. The characters were not bound up in a coherent story, which would make sense both for them and the spectators: “The scenic unit is thus in no way dramatic (if by plot one intends the progression of the characters towards a ‘destiny’); it is dialectic because its ambition leans towards the total performance of every instant of any action performed, against or despite their chronological order” (173).

Then comes the cyclical function of the characters, a technique aiming at separating the actor from the character, and the latter from what he embodies onstage, that is to say, social roles. In other words, while remaining constantly onstage, a character loses his specific status; freed from the role(s) he must play, he becomes a free spirit, intervening in the progression of the spectacle unexpectedly:

It is a role marveling at no longer being a role, and emphasizing the distortion, present in reality, in everyday life. Between what we say and what we do, we feel very well there is never identity or even identification—but the theatre, until now, had never aimed at having us believe the opposite. The scenic unit is nothing but a denial—and of the most absolute kind there is: that of everyday life using the means of everyday life (for nobody escapes everyday life). (1960a:173)

Frankin’s third innovative point consists in entrapping the characters and what they say in the insignificance of everyday life, outside of any plot, or at least any perceptible project: “These actions are apparently established randomly, so the characters are not prepared for them” (173). In the scenic unit, the characters thus appear devoid of meaning, except on the occasion of particular exchanges during which their truth manages to manifest itself against their will: “These are characters who do not express anything by themselves, only through others, just as we do not express anything by ourselves, but through what concerns us least. They belong to a terrible, alienated, undeniably fake life that any one of us might lead from morning till night” (173).

20. It is interesting to compare this final version, revised and corrected by Debord, to Frankin’s original manuscript, which reads: “After Brecht and Beckett, it would be inappropriate to discover the anti-play or more than well-known techniques” (1960b).

Consequently, most of the dialogue conveys “the value and absence of value of communication” (173). Against the grain of their actions, the characters’ dialogue betrays hopes, wishes, all the more poignant as they are inaccessible under their present circumstances: “Dialogue, the only foundation of the scenic unit, would be, if pushed to its limit, a direct yet unbearable reflection of the deepest affectivity, constantly opposed to the cyclical repetition of these acts or episodes” (173).

Debord was all the more enthusiastic about Frankin’s project as the latter was retrieving some of Debord’s own intuitions dating back to May 1957. Frankin found an elegant way to synthesize the two theatrical proposals discussed above, street theatre and everyday theatre. Additionally, in the scenic unit can also be found the same gap between what is said and what is shown, as in Isou’s film, *Traité de bave et d’éternité*, which Debord wrote about to his correspondent:

It is a story, untold yet lived by idiots full of sound and fury, signifying nothing—to *détour* Shakespeare precisely—and these very people combine this dull, bored (boring) delirium, which is the average way of being, in the sense of Mayakovski’s final poem, *the love boat smashed up on the dreary routine*, with certain fragments of a privileged communication, but not treated as such; some “information” among the most lucid and exact that a spectacle could convey today, through the very contestation of itself. (2001:43)

In order to highlight the discrepancy between the insignificant words and the glimpsed truths regarding the sources of contemporary alienation, Debord gave Frankin an important piece of advice. The actors have to say in a realistic tone, with the utmost conviction, all that is banal or conventional, in order to show how passions are exhausted as they come into contact with insignificance. As for essential words, they should be said in a neutral or insignificant, even barely audible, tone, in order to warn the spectators of their importance through this *mise en sourdine* (muffling) technique:

Directing the scenic unit is, I believe, a relatively easy task as far as directing the actors’ movements is concerned (their gestures at least having to seem natural and realistic) and it will necessarily raise a problem of central importance: that of *diction*. Very roughly, it seems to me that the various, vulgar aspects of the dialogue, or its lyrical, love advice column-worthy outbreaks should be emphasized by actors making the most of their “craft,” whereas important interchanges should be, if not exactly mumbled, at least often smuggled, should fall flat, etc., all this in order to follow the statistic truth of everyday life, and the structure of the scenic unit. (2001:44)

In the months following this exchange, Debord tried to find the financial support to produce the spectacle *Personne et les autres*, to no avail. On 4 February 1961, he wrote to Frankin: “I think IS will have the opportunity to produce your play shortly. We will talk again about it later” (2001:69). But the relationship between the two men deteriorated rapidly and, on 8 September 1961, Debord sent to his correspondent one of those chillingly polite letters tantamount to a definitive severing of ties. Frankin took the hint and resigned at once from IS, bringing to a close in his wake the most elaborate theatrical project ever undertaken under the situationist aegis. His name was mentioned once more for the last time in issue number 7 of the journal in April 1962. It was a short, ironic, and deprecating article, whose aim was to take the split to a point of no return:

André Frankin, over serious divergences on the political course to follow after the great strike in Belgium, had separated from our IS comrades in Belgium—and so from the other situationists—in March 1961, and he let us know in a letter dated 13 September of the same year that he considered all the IS ideas nonsense handled by fishy individuals, yet with the exception of some, plainly plagiarized from his own writings (published in this very journal, issues number 3, 4, and 5). So the least we can acknowledge is, just as he no longer endorses us, we can no longer endorse him. (1961:9)

As in the case of Straram and Chtcheglov, the separation from Debord meant that the individual projects Frankin was attached to were discredited.

## The Intimate Dramatic Experience

André Frankin's resignation put an end to Guy Debord's willingness to transform the theatrical practice of his contemporaries. We now have enough information to attempt a first appraisal of Debord's theatrical interests. Without theatre ever being at the center of *lettriste* or *situationist* concerns, this art form remained a field ripe for intervention.

Several projects were encouraged by Debord: metagraphic theatre during the *Internationale lettriste* period, the scenic unit during the *Internationale situationniste* period. Each time, the same scenario played. At first, Debord encouraged these innovations; then, personal quarrels grew more frequent, eventually forcing the dissenters to leave the group. Their departure caused Debord, if not to lose interest in the art of the theatre, at least to focus more exclusively on projects all the more radical as they were either undoable or would have required, to be implemented, an investment in time and energy he was not ready to commit to.

Yet Debord's interest in the theatre was undeniable, even if he refused most of its contemporary manifestations, with the exception of Brecht. By various means, Debord tried to escape the building itself, the outdated dimension of the ritual. He wanted theatre to venture out into the street, or expand into places not intended to house performances. He strove to separate the actor from his character and the character from his roles. He abhorred dramatic plots insofar as they were buttressed by a mistaken notion of human action. They gave people characterized by their passivity the illusion that they were making an impact on the world when they were following its rules. Even though he aimed at rekindling the passion in human relationships, Debord knew he would not succeed if he deluded himself with *stories*. In short, he liked the theatre but without its conventional theatricality. And though he agreed with a number of principles at the root of the absurd, he reproached absurdist playwrights for their lack of radicalism and for limiting themselves to the autonomized sphere of aesthetics—in other words, once again, their passivity.

What about becoming a best-selling author himself or an *avantgarde* director like Roger Planchon, whom he physically resembled? He could have, and he had the potential. But he preferred to deny his contemporaries the talents life had bestowed on him.

One of the reasons behind Debord's ambivalence towards the theatre may have had to do with his desire to initiate "noble and tragic stories" in life rather than onstage. "When art has become independent and portrays its world in shining colors, a moment in life has aged, and shining colors will not make it look younger" (Debord [1967] 2006: par. 188). Therefore, the idea was not to confine older passions to a fixed image, however beautiful, but to live new ones, in order not to age. Wallowing in a representation is a first step towards accepting death.

The passionate life at which Debord so often hinted should not be reduced to amorous passions, as is sometimes believed. What is to be understood is various, violent passions in everyday, interpersonal relationships. Debord did not know how to remain emotionally neutral. As in the tragedies of Racine, his heart, if "denied the ecstasy of love, must hate in rage" (Racine 2000:368). In other words, Debord preferred to see drama in life rather than onstage.

Now that some features of his personality have been clarified with the publication of his private correspondence, one can guess how the induction of like-minded friends into *Internationale lettriste* or *Internationale situationniste* must have been emotionally charged, if not even based on shared fantasies. For that reason, the rifts proved traumatic for the members of these groups. Debord inflicted upon those who used to be close to him wounds that would never heal. It was his way of maintaining the bond eternally *set*, as if the intimate clock of those who had resigned or been excluded had to stop at the fateful time of the rift. Drama, and sometimes tragedy, were thus at the center of his life, much more violent than a weakened *représentation* (re-presentation/representation/performance) on a stage or screen. This is the reason why

these intimate dramas could not be turned into artworks. They were impossible to voice, except in an allusive way. Be it by means of a film, play, novel, or confession to a friend or psychoanalyst, the objectivized representation of a trauma helps to overcome it. The wounded individual can start mourning the missing object. Debord denied himself and those close to him the passage of time, which makes it possible to forget. Distancing the hurtful wounds in a representation was out of the question. But our analysis must move beyond biographical anecdotes and take theory into account.

## Theatre and Situation

Beginning in his youth, under the influence of classical moralists, Debord devised a theatrical conception of life he was to keep to the end. He spoke of society in terms of set, *mise-en-scène*, or wings. Those in power were the actors, whether good or bad, of a *spectacle* in which he refused to participate. Before even defining a revolutionary course of action, he confronted the great stage of the world, in which roles escaped the control of individuals, with practices like *dérive* and *détournement*, whose end was to break away from the dominant form of representation. So that there exists a direct connection between the notion of situation, as it had been elaborated since 1954 in *Internationale lettriste*, and the notion of spectacle, that Debord would develop in the early 1960s. These terms are at odds with each other.

Promoting the construction of situations is a way to resist the spectacle of the world. The two notions are to be viewed in connection with the experiments Debord carried out over the course of his various theatrical ventures.

*Dérive*, as it was invented by the lettristes in the 1950s, comes across as both a game and a spectacle, paving a way out of the dead end on which bourgeois theatre was based. This practice would engender the notion of situation, which is its natural extension. Whereas in *dérive* the urban set is left untouched, and one lets oneself get carried along, the situation calls for the construction of a new set favoring new behaviors and passions as intense as they are ephemeral. Debord was clearly aware that his program was radically new; he asked the whole lettriste group to cosign a declaration on the future organization of leisure:

Only one enterprise seems to us worthy of consideration: setting up an integral kind of entertainment. [...] The construction of situations will be the continuous achievement of a great game deliberately chosen; the passage from one to the other of these sets and conflicts whose characters in a tragedy used to die in 24 hours. But time will no longer run out. / To this synthesis will have to contribute a critique of behavior, an influential strand of urbanism, a technique based on atmospheres and relationships, whose first principles we already know. ([1954] 1996:29)

If Debord's criticism leveled at 20th-century theatre could be reduced to a single point, it would be the division between actors and spectators. The former perform, aim at action, while the latter sit passively gazing at the spectacle. This separation was as unbearable to him in the theatre as in other fields. This is the reason why his projects claim to offer a critique of separation. The text enabling us to pinpoint his intentions is "Rapport sur la construction des situations" [A Report on the Construction of Situations], presented at the Cosio d'Arrosia conference in July 1957. This essay aimed at being a "platform for the situationist movement towards a new organization" ([1957] 2000). The situation as he viewed it then implied both the destruction of the arts and their recuperation in a *unitary* kind of urbanism that would involve architecture, painting, music, dance, theatre, in short, a *total* spectacle, more grandiose than it had been dreamed by 1930s directors, and in which the separation between actors and spectators would be abolished:

The construction of situations starts beyond the modern collapse of the notion of spectacle. It is easy to see how much the very principle of the spectacle is tied to the alienation of the Old World: nonintervention. We see, on the contrary, how the most valid revo-

lutionary research on culture has sought to break the psychological identification of the spectator to the hero, to lead the spectator to become active, by arousing his abilities to transform his own life. The situation is thus designed to be lived by those who construct it. The role of the “public,” if not passive, figures then at least no more than extras, must always be reduced, whereas the input from those who cannot be called actors but, in a new sense of the term, *livers* [*viveurs*], will be greater. ([1957] 2000:39)

The end of a constructed situation is not only pleasure but also the discovery of humankind. Debord assumed the most archaic element in human beings could help gauge their unknown, unexploited part: “The really experimental direction of situationist activity consists in establishing, from more or less clearly acknowledged desires, a field of temporary activity favorable to these desires. Only its establishment is apt to lead to the clarification of primitive desires, and the confused apparition of new desires” ([1958] 2006:11). It was a truly new experiment, involving the forces of the unconscious. Hence Debord and Chtcheglov’s rather frequent use of a vocabulary borrowed from psychoanalysis: “So we have to imagine a sort of psychoanalysis tailored to situationist ends” (11).

The situation goes beyond the theatre. If the theatre is a performing art aimed at freezing past emotions, *dérive* strives to create new ones: “We will have to find or verify laws, like the one according to which the situationist emotion relies on an extreme concentration or an extreme dissemination of gestures (classical tragedy giving an approximate image of the first case, and *dérive* of the second one)” (40). In the situation, Debord did not break away either from the classical theatre or the more self-aware avantgarde (i.e., Brecht); he transcended them by moving experimentation from a specialized building (the theatre house) to a new environment—the city. It was to be his *théâtre d’opérations*:

The collective work we offer to undertake is the creation of a new, cultural, *theatre of operations* that we place at the assumed level of a possible general construction of *ambiances* by preparing, under some circumstances, the terms of a set-behavior dialectic. We base our work on the obvious premise that modern forms of art and writing are in decline. ([1957] 1996:143)

In its elementary form, which Debord thought easily achievable, the situation is a game led by a *directeur* acting as a double for the theatre director [*metteur en scène*]:

From a project for a situation—studied by a team of researchers—which would combine, for example, a few people in a *touching meeting* at an evening party, you would probably have to distinguish between a *directeur*—and a director: in charge of coordinating the preliminary elements of set construction, as well as anticipating certain *interventions* in the events (the latter process liable to be shared between several leaders more or less ignorant of the intervention plans of the others)—direct agents living the situation—having participated in the creation of the collective project, worked on the practical composition of the *ambiance*—and a few passive spectators—unacquainted with the construction process—who ought to be *compelled to action*. ([1958] 2006:12)

In the *situation*, spectators are given the role of mere candidates. They are initiated to situationist practices, tested by others, judged worthy or not to enter the game according to their ability to *react*. Regarding the actors, whom Debord called *livers* [*viveurs*], they live the situation all the better if they are not subjected to the director’s intentions: “Naturally, the relationship between the *directeur* and *livers* of the situation cannot become a relationship based on specialization. It is only a momentary subordination by a team of situationists to the leader of an isolated experiment” (12).

The situation thus amounts to a destruction and total fulfillment of the theatre. It opens directly onto life. The pleasure derived from the theatrical performance by the actor becomes

accessible to all participants. Life itself sheds its prosaic dimension to turn into a superior kind of life, in other words, poetry:

These perspectives, or their tentative vocabulary, should not lead you to believe they are an extension of theatre. Pirandello and Brecht showed the destruction of the theatrical spectacle, on top of a few assertions that went further. We can say the construction of situations will replace the theatre only in the sense that the real construction of life has always gradually replaced religion. Obviously, the main field we are going to replace and *accomplish* is poetry, which burned itself on the avantgarde of our time, and completely disappeared. (12)

At a time when Jean-Paul Sartre dreamed of founding a theatre of situations, the situationists offered situations meant to destroy and *fulfill* the theatre (see Sartre [1947] 1973:19–21). Far from being marginal, the notion of situation seems central to Debord's conception of an avantgarde movement between 1954 and 1962. Only Yves Klein would arrive on his own at equally radical conceptions (see Klein [1959] 2003).

The situation is a practice both concrete and poetic that aims at transforming the relationship of the individual with the world. It is both social experiment and collective therapy.<sup>21</sup>

## Theatre and the Theory of the Spectacle

The concept that has to be opposed to the situation is that of spectacle. Debord developed it during this period, even though he did not theorize it until 1967. The spectacle is theatre invented by capitalism to solve its contradictions in the realm of illusion. As such, it epitomizes art in general. The situation, on the contrary, appeals to the notion of *jeu* (performance/game/play). It is not an illusion but *divertissement* (entertainment), in the sense the term had in 17th-century France. The spectacle is frozen insofar as the participants are passive, in other words remain spectators staring at star actors. Conversely, though there is indeed a *directeur* in the situation, his function can only be tentative. It is an experiment that allows you to access a superior stage of existence.

In 1960, aiming at fostering a closer relationship between Internationale situationniste and the far-left political movement Socialisme ou Barbarie, Guy Debord and Pierre Canjuers worked together on a platform they called “Preliminaries towards Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program” [“Préliminaires pour une définition de l'unité du programme révolutionnaire”].<sup>22</sup> It is in that text that the shift from theatre to political philosophy can be seen. The two authors start by asserting that the production of commodities in capitalism implies their exhibition, in order to make them look desirable. But gradually, this *mise en spectacle* (exhibition) encompasses all the realms of the real: “The consumers' world is actually that of the exhibition of everyone by everybody, in other words of division, uncanniness and non-participation between people” (Debord 2006:514). This feeling of uncanniness, which is also to be understood in its Freudian sense, is in part due to the fact that, behind this whole theatre lurks a director who aims at controlling the entire spectacle according to his economic and aesthetic imperatives. Note here that if the economic imperative is that of profit, the spectacle produced is strangely reminiscent of the theatre of the absurd, which triumphed at the same period on

21. Precisely because of its ambitious character, the notion of situation would remain nothing more than a promise.

The attempts carried out at the time of Internationale lettriste did not go beyond the various *dérives* experimented with by Wolman, Debord, or Chtcheglov. After 1962, the subject was, so to say, no longer brought up. After the eviction of the last artists from the situationist movement, Debord replaced the construction of the situations project by another one, equally unrealistic yet more traditional, that of *révolution*.

22. On the relationship between Debord and Cornélius Castoriadis's Socialisme ou Barbarie movement, see Stephen Hastings-King's article “*L'Internationale Situationniste, Socialisme ou Barbarie, and the Crisis of Marxist Imaginary*” (1999).

Parisian stages, in particular with Ionesco and Beckett: “The directorial realm is the strict metteur en scène of this spectacle, automatically and poorly made according to imperatives outside of society, signified in absurd values” (514).

At this point in the analysis, Debord developed his own theses on the spectacle and endowed them with a dimension allowing this concept to escape the field of theatre while retaining its primary roots:

The spectacle is the dominant mode of connection for human beings. It is only through the spectacle that human beings acquire a—falsified—knowledge of certain general aspects of social life, from scientific feats or techniques to reigning modes of conduct, to meetings with Great Men. The relationship between authors and spectators is but the transposition of the fundamental relationship between managers and workers. (515)

The theatrical metaphor can be understood in two different ways. The more obvious way is based on traditional theatre, in which actors and spectators belong to two autonomous spheres: the spectacle is directed by workers, who have sold out to capitalism; the director orders the whole to satisfy the spectators. The latter are given a “falsified” image of reality onstage, which remains worthy of interest since it is a global, totalizing image. This implies that any form of knowledge in capitalist society is alienated and derived from the sphere of illusion. To know therefore means to falsely know, because the spectacle happens elsewhere, and the most intelligent spectator always remains a passive spectator. But at a different level, the theatrical metaphor allows Debord to add complexity to his model. Between the spectacle and the spectator, there exists an intermediary category of people, the performers themselves. Their passivity is of a different kind from that of the spectators in the orchestra. It is true they believe they are active because they are onstage, whereas in reality the script is written by someone else; yet their position is more enviable than that of passive individuals: they participate, they move around onstage, in a world that may be fake but provides them with real emotions. The performers gain access to an alienated life, though, granted, it is a passionate life that gives the illusion of true action.

The actor, meaning the artist in general, is the individual who, in the world of the spectacle, enjoys this intermediary position. On the one hand, he has the freedom to create, on the other, his creation is insignificant because it takes place in a separate location (the theatre stage) and is received passively by the spectators. For Debord in 1960, art was thus the central place of his activity. On the one hand, it enables you to ask all the questions related to an alienated or passionate life; on the other, this freedom granted to art remains under surveillance since art belongs to the spectacular sphere:

At one end, it [art] is purely and simply appropriated by capitalism as a means of conditioning people. At the other end, it has benefitted from a perpetual, privileged concession granted by capitalism: that of being pure, creative activity, an alibi against the alienation of every other activity (which actually makes it the most expensive social ornament). But at the same time, the sphere devoted exclusively to free, creative activity is the only one in which the question of the profound use of life, and the question of communication, are given practical, thorough consideration. (Debord 2006:515–16)

According to this analysis, the role of art remains essential, for it is through art that all the questions about the value of life are asked. The realm of art was viewed by Debord in 1960 as a battlefield where the partisans of the status quo and those in favor of radical change took on one another. The idea was not for the latter to change the content of art or add to it minor modifications; the only attitude to adopt was twofold; on the one hand, to acknowledge the position held by the separate sphere of art as the center of all illusions (but also of all sources of knowledge) and on the other, to make all arrangements to destroy art. To destroy art in order to fulfill it, to fulfill the dream of knowledge and freedom it carries:

Here are founded, in art, the antagonisms between partisans and adversaries of officially dictated reasons to live. To established nonsense and separation corresponds the general crisis of traditional artistic means, a crisis related to experience or the demand to experiment with other uses of life. Revolutionary artists are those who call for intervention; and have themselves intervened in the spectacle to disturb and destroy it. (516)

## Conclusion

Far from being a marginal art in Guy Debord's life, theatre is the melting pot in which both his practical experiments and theoretical attempts come together. In other words, the two pillars of the situationist perspective—on the one hand, the notion of situation, and on the other, the theory of the spectacle—find their common origin in Debord's unceasing reflection on theatre. This art was for him a source of freedom and fulfillment (for it announced the creation of the situation) and at the same time, a source of falseness and illusion (for it led to the concept of spectacle).

Until 1962, Guy Debord gathered collaborators around him based on his understanding of theatre. This is how he sought to strike an alliance with Castoriadis's group; but he also tried, with the help of the text written with Canjuers, to bring back the main companions of his early years, Ivan Chtcheglov and Patrick Straram in particular. Debord sent to the latter a copy of his *Préliminaires*; Straram, who then lived in Montreal and dreamed of founding a Quebec annex of Internationale situationniste, answered Debord in a long letter in which he discussed the main elements of this artistic and political manifesto (Rannou 2006:40–44). He went as far as to request from Debord permission to reproduce it in Canada and cosign it in order to express his agreement, which Debord granted him freely (Straram 2006c:64–81).

Until 1962, the theatre remained a key element in Debord's perspective. Yet after 1962, he somewhat modified his strategy and turned Internationale Situationniste into a group geared more towards social and political theory. He put an end to his correspondence with Straram, once again left behind Chtcheglov, with whom he had renewed his ties, and above all, purged Internationale situationniste of all remaining artists. The notion of revolution then substituted that of situation; as for the spectacle, it became a global concept, an equivalent to what would be the notion of alienation in Marx or Lukacs, adapted to contemporary society. If, in the "Preliminaries towards Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program," the theatrical origin of such a concept could still be traced, in Debord's *magnum opus*, *The Society of the Spectacle*, it had become totally invisible—covered in philosophical ornaments. In order to better appear under his new mask, that of a revolutionary philosopher in the tradition of Marx or Bakunin, Debord erased the theatrical source of his reflection.

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