

Society of the Counter-Spectacle: Debord and the Theatre of the Situationists

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*This article examines the work of the Situationists and their leading member, Guy Debord, as it relates to theatre history and the history of the manifesto. The Situationists privileged the writing of manifestos over the production of art works in order to avoid the fate of the historical avant-garde, whose provocative art had been co-opted by the cultural establishment. Despite this pro-manifesto and anti-art stance, the Situationists drew on the theatre, envisioning the construction of theatrical 'situations' influenced by the emerging New York happening as well as modern theatre artists such as Brecht and Artaud. This theatrical inheritance prompted a recent theatrical representation of their activities based on Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces*. What this theatrical rendering demonstrated, however, is that the theatricality of the 'situation' is different from that produced on a stage, reminding us that the strategies of the neo-avant-garde cannot be easily transferred to a traditional theatrical form.*

For some time now, attitudes towards the various avant-gardes have resembled the structure of the Freudian denial: the avant-garde is dead; the avant-garde has been pointlessly reanimated; and the avant-garde never really came to life in the first place. Whether backed-up by a history of capitalism (Jameson), a rudimentary Hegelian dialectics (Bürger), or a defence of high modernism, the avant-garde's simultaneous non-existence, empty revival and original still-birth inform the historiography of its detractors and even of its friends.¹ In this climate, Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces* (1989) still stands out in its singular desire to do justice to the avant-garde. Written by a former contributor to the music magazine *Rolling Stone*, *Lipstick Traces* has itself acquired a kind of rock-star fame and become a fixture on the counter-cultural bookshelf. Refusing to tell a single history of the avant-garde, the kind of history that would conjure the master-plots of decline, repetition, and failure, Marcus writes what he calls a 'secret history'. The avant-garde is featured as a subterranean force that erupts at different times in different places, whether they be the First World War Zürich, 1968 Paris, or 1970s Britain and the US.² These eruptions disturb the official history without ever becoming part of it; they appear, disappear and reappear, leaving traces here and there, without forming a lineage that could be told in a single story line.

The ephemeral nature of these disturbances betrays Marcus's inclination towards the performing arts, and indeed the three main exhibits of his secret history are the Dadaist Cabaret Voltaire, the punk rock performance of the Sex Pistols, and the Situationist

counter-spectacle. These three types of performance shape Marcus's view of an ephemeral avant-garde that relies on direct shock, rough provocation, performative assault, and shrill gestures. It is an avant-garde that is undeniably grounded in performance and theatre.

It must have been this emphasis on performance that tempted a small theatre company based in Austin, Texas, to turn *Lipstick Traces* into a theatrical show, which ultimately travelled to the Ohio Theater on Wooster Street in New York City where I saw it.³ For Marcus, at least, the old joke that you should never give away the movie rights to your monographs, took on off-Broadway reality. The result was intriguing. Who would have thought that re-creating an evening of Cabaret Voltaire, a performance of 'Anarchy in the U.K.', and a lecture/film of Guy Debord would, as they say, 'work' on the stage? For work they did; the material, undeniably, made for great characters and scenes. The actors were good; the set was evocative; the dramaturgy, even though it was based on some sort of academic study, surprisingly varied. And yet, you walked out of this show with the lingering feeling that you had witnessed neither an actual avant-garde performance nor its secret history. Up on stage, *Lipstick Traces* was no longer an archeology of the fleeting and ephemeral, but its re-staging; not a secret history, but its disclosure, commented on and framed by the explanatory discourse of an omnipresent narrator. How can one measure the differences among an avant-garde performance, its secret history and its re-staging?

The avant-garde performances described by Marcus belong to what Hans-Thies Lehmann calls postdramatic theatre: they do not rely on a dramatic text as a structuring device. The theatrical rendering of *Lipstick Traces*, by contrast, relies heavily on just such a structuring device, not in the form of a dramatic text, but in the form of Marcus's own study.⁴ Characters, dialogue, scenes and even history – they all derive from this one text. In order to further characterize the dichotomy between the performances staged and the mode of staging, one could use Erika Fischer-Lichte's notion of re-theatricalization, which describes the new emphasis on spectacular stage effects, stage design and lighting in the early twentieth century. In the case of *Lipstick Traces*, however, re-theatricalization acquires a different function, namely that of framing an avant-garde performance by means of a relatively traditional use of theatre.⁵ Avant-garde performances, which do not use a theatrical matrix (characters, props and dramaturgy), are returned to an older model of theatre that relies on character, development and crisis. Whether described in the terms used by Lehmann or Fischer-Lichte, *Lipstick Traces* deploys theatre in a manner that utterly changes avant-garde performances even as it seeks to repeat them. In gauging the difference between the show and its source material, the middle part of Marcus's secret history, Guy Debord and his group called the Situationists, make for a particularly promising case study, since they themselves were centrally concerned with the dangers of the appropriation, canonization, museum-ization, and re-theatricalization of the avant-garde. One might say that the Situationists anticipated the problem of relying on the theatre to stage avant-garde performance.

The Situationists emerged from the neo-avant-gardes of the 1950s, in particular *CoBrA* (Denmark, Belgium, Holland), the *Lettriste Internaionale* (France), and *The Imaginiste Bauhaus* (Italy). In existence from the 50s to the early 70s, the Situationists

came into their own during the May 1968 revolt in Paris by advocating and participating in the occupation of universities and factories. But the Situationists also left their marks on resistance movements elsewhere in Europe and the United States, including the Provos, the Black Panthers, and Up Against the Wall/Motherfucker.⁶ May 1968 was their moment of fame, but it was also their downfall. Attempting to marry a new avant-garde practice to a new theory of the revolution, they did not survive the triumph and failures of the student revolt and dissolved in the early 1970s.

All twentieth-century avant-gardes had been political in some sense, and they all had been driven by some conception of a social revolution, whether it was a socialist revolution, as in the case of Berlin Dada, Surrealism, and Russian Futurism, or a fascist one, as in the case of Italian Futurism and British Vorticism. These various avant-gardes operated within what Perry Anderson describes as the revolutionary horizon of modernism, a modernism marked everywhere by its relation to social, artistic, intellectual and scientific revolutions.⁷ However, with the possible exception of André Breton's brand of Surrealism, few of these revolutionary avant-gardes had taken it upon themselves to advance significantly the theory of the revolution and to reconsider their own practice in light of such a theory. This is precisely what the Situationists did, setting out to revive a failing avant-garde by means of a proper theory of the revolution. Inspired by the Marxist philosopher of the everyday, Henri Lefebvre, the Situationists produced a revolutionary theory applied to the sphere of everyday life. In particular, they tried to ground a cultural revolution in a critique of capitalism in its newest, mediatized form. For this form, they famously chose the term 'spectacle', which found its most sustained and influential theoretical treatment in Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967).⁸ Together with Marcus's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), *Society of the Spectacle* became a foundational theoretical text for the May 1968 revolt in France and elsewhere – *L'Espresso* called it the 'manifesto' of a new generation.⁹ The term 'spectacle' does not simply denote the mediatization of post-war Western capitalism, but its entire ideology: television; advertising; commodity fetish; super-structure; the whole deceptive appearance of advanced capitalism – what Althusser would soon call the Ideological State Apparatus.¹⁰

The Situationists' critique of the historical avant-garde was a direct result of their critique of the spectacle: far from interrupting the spectacle, avant-garde art had become part of the spectacle through art auctions, museums, academies; the spectacle had even managed to incorporate many avant-garde techniques for purposes of advertising and marketing.¹¹ Recognizing the failure and 'ideological confusion' of the avant-garde,¹² the Situationists drew a radical conclusion: to renounce the making of art entirely.¹³ Anti-art had of course long been an avant-garde keyword, first created during the First World War by Dadaism, but the Situationists tried to put this programme on a new basis, namely a theory of the spectacle: only a theory of the spectacle could keep even the most rigorous anti-art from being co-opted by the cunning of the spectacle.¹⁴

However, declaring the end of the avant-garde and the failure of art as such is not that easy. Some other practice has to take its place, and the search for such an alternative practice determined the work and also the fate of the Situationists. The requirements for this practice were high: not only would it have to be resistant to the spectacle's most cunning seductions, it also had to gesture towards some future transformation of

everyday life. Because of their commitment to a social revolution, the Situationists defined their present condition as a pre-revolutionary one, and this revolutionary horizon also meant that the total transformation of everyday life, the end of alienation or what they preferred to call 'separation', was only possible after a social revolution. Nevertheless, they hoped that it would be possible to create pockets of non-alienation or non-separation as an anticipation of and preparation for the total transformation achieved by the revolution. The term for this provisional non-alienated totality was what gave the group its name: the situation. It was the situation that would be the alternative to the art work: 'The situation is conceived as the opposite of the art work'.¹⁵

Theatre

Even though the creation of situations was supposed to be the 'opposite' of the art work, the Situationists could not help but use various types of media and art forms as models for creating situations, preferably those art forms that themselves aspired to some kind of all-encompassing totality: theatre and cinema. In the 'Report on the Construction of Situations', presented by Debord at the foundational conference of the situationists in 1957, the creation of a situation is described in an unabashedly theatrical manner as a 'collective' endeavour that nevertheless requires a 'director' as well as a 'metteur en scène', who 'co-ordinates' the arrangement of elements that are described as 'decoration' (p. 12). The situation here presents itself as a kind of expanded and experimental theatre.

At the same time, however, the Situationists considered the theatre to be dangerously complicit with the spectacle – *spectacle*, after all, means 'theatre' in French. This complicity was visible in those theatres that mimic the spectacle by obscuring the manner in which theatrical representation is actually created. A prime example of such a deceptive, theatrical spectacle was Richard Wagner's total work of art, which created the appearance of an organic, theatrical unity while hiding the mechanisms required for its production. In an early text, Debord explicitly denounces Wagner for attempting a grandiose but 'futile' and even dangerous 'aesthetic synthesis'.¹⁶ It was precisely this 'synthetic' tendency of the Wagnerian theatre, and the exclusively 'aesthetic' nature of this synthesis, that was unacceptable to Debord.

The Situationists' critique of theatrical and aesthetic totality, Wagnerian or otherwise, encoded in their term spectacle, was part of a long tradition of Marxist thought that used the theatre or theatricality to describe the representational practices and effects of capitalism. This tradition begins with Marx's own theatrical analysis of the revolution and also of the commodity fetish, and continues with Benjamin's and Lukacs's notion of 'phantasmagoria', which Theodor Adorno would bring full circle, namely back to Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*.¹⁷ From this vantage point, Debord's theatre-inspired notion of the spectacle is one more way of identifying and denouncing the deceptive theatrics of capitalism.

Torn between relying on the theatre to describe the situation and attacking the theatre for its affinity to the spectacle, the Situationists viewed the theatre with profound

ambivalence. At times, they wanted actively to destroy the theatre and replace it with something new, a situation: 'the construction of situations will replace the theatre' (p. 12). But for imagining such a post-theatrical situation, they borrowed from all kinds of modernist theatre visionaries and practitioners who themselves had critiqued the theatre in more-or-less fundamental ways. The theatre kept reappearing in the pages of *Internationale Situationiste* (*IS*), but not as an art form that is to be practised, but as a concept that can be both used and attacked.

In the fifth issue of *IS* (1960), the group's main journal, we find a text, signed by one André Frankin, that diagnoses the demise of theatre as we know it. Beginning with the sentence 'The theatre is dead' (p. 173), the text grounds its dismissal of the theatre in a critique of repetition that is borrowed from Artaud. The theatre is denounced as a machine for generating self-same performances night after night by creating a representational space populated by actors impersonating characters: 'An efficacious, theatrical, character is thus a character that has been repeated' (p. 174).¹⁸ The new theatre this text envisions must do without such reliance on dramatic texts, plots, and sequences, it 'is thus not at all dramatic. . . it is dialectical'. Dialectical theatre, however, is not something associated with Artaud, but with Bertolt Brecht, who is indeed Frankin's second point of reference. Like Brecht, Frankin demands that the participant in the situation should be 'as distant from his or her own emotions as from those of the spectator' (p. 174). Frankin thus picks and chooses between various modernist or avant-garde theatres in order to envision a theatre that would be protected from its tendency towards the spectacle, a tendency most overtly exemplified by Wagner but present in almost all existing forms of theatre.

Artaud and Brecht remained the two major axes along which the Situationists' struggle with and against the theatre occurred. Anticipating the argument of Frankin's text, an earlier contribution to *IS* (1958) in fact grounds its version of the theatre's demise explicitly in Brecht: 'one can see in . . . Brecht the destruction of the theatrical spectacle [spectacle théâtral]' (*IS*, p. 12). And much later texts echo Brecht as well: 'the most valuable revolutionary research in the sphere of culture tried to break the psychological identification of the spectator with the hero, to inspire the spectators to become active to provoke them to turn their lives upside down' (*IS*, p. 699).¹⁹ The fact that the Situationists would keep coming back to Brecht is one of the best indications that they, like Brecht, found themselves engaged in a struggle against the falsity of the total work of art, that their search for situations was one of many endeavours towards an anti-*Gesamtkunstwerk* that has held much of modern theatre in thrall.²⁰

At the same time, quotations from Artaud circulate everywhere in *IS* as epithets and allusions.²¹ It is this second, Artaudian, heritage that also points beyond theatre as representation and towards some notion of life: 'the situation is made to be lived by its creators' (*IS*, p. 699). The notion of life takes over so that actor and spectator end up being nothing but 'viveurs'. In conceiving of situations as a form of participatory theatre that becomes life, the Situationists attack the representational quality of theatre as such. One of their models for an alternative was the emerging New York happening, which they admired greatly: '[the happening] is a kind of spectacle in the state of extreme dissolution' (*IS*, p. 316). Like the happenings of Kaprow, Cage and others, the situation

was supposed to be a type of performance art that somehow avoided the techniques and deceptions of theatrical representation; the Situationists imagined what Michael Kirby called 'non-matrixed performance', a situation-happening that is folded into life.²² Life was a resonant term for the Situationists, but they usually prefaced it with a second term alien to Artaud: 'everyday life'. From the beginning, the situation was a name for a reformed and re-vitalized everyday life, which the Situationists, with Lefebvre, understood as the undoing of the division of labour and alienation: 'Everyday life is what remains once all specialization has been removed' (*IS*, p. 219). The situation is a glimpse, however preliminary, of such an undivided, non-separated life; it is a constructed version of a coming theatre of everyday life.

Here we begin to see why, despite all their critiques, the Situationists would nevertheless continue to be drawn to the theatre and more particularly to the total theatre: the situation, the undivided life, non-alienation – all of these terms point towards an all-encompassing totality and unity. Even as Frankin is opposing the false total theatre, for example, he demands 'total representation [représentation totale]' (p. 174) and 'scenic unity', phrases that sound dangerously close to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, especially since it is also reminiscent of another Wagnerian, namely Marinetti, whose *sintesi* – short compressed pieces of theatre that erase narrative and chronology – Frankin clearly admires when he says, 'its [his theatre's] ambition tends towards a total representation of all moments of a represented action, against or despite their chronological order' (p. 174). A tendency towards totality is visible on a theoretical level as well. Critics have pointed out that Debord's own notion of the spectacle, designed to capture the entirety of capitalism under one single term, threatens to become as totalizing as the spectacle itself.²³ There is then a triple gesture at work here: identifying the kinship between theatre and spectacle; attacking the theatre; but replacing it with a concept of situation and of everyday life that is as unifying and totalizing as the most ambitious of total theatres.

The only way out of these conflicting imperatives was by way of creating a radical anti-theatre: 'While it is no longer possible to make theatre, it is possible to use it for partisan propaganda purposes' (p. 9). The paradox of making theatre against the theatre marks most of the Situationists' practices and it points to their central dialectical technique: *détournement*. Since we cannot hope to carve out spaces untouched by the spectacle, to attack it from the outside, we must turn it against itself – *détourn* it – taking its elements, breaking them out of the simulated unity and totality on which the spectacle depends, and turning them against that unity. The Situationist anti-theatre is one component of this attempt towards detourning the spectacle, towards creating the counter-spectacle. The creation of an truly non-spectacular situation, however, had to remain a thing of the future: 'Finally, when we have got to the stage of constructing situations, the ultimate goal of all our activities, it will be open to everyone to detourn situations by deliberately changing this or that determinant condition of them' (p. 14). Yes, the Situationists undertook all kinds of practices, working with the world they found and turning it against itself. But the actual construction of a true and ultimate situation, a theatre of everyday life, had to remain the 'ultimate goal' of their activities.

Manifesto

But how could the Situationists guarantee that their notion of the situation, no matter how provisional, anti-theatrical, and detourned, would not fall pray to the spectacle the way avant-garde anti-art and performance had done? The solution can be found in their particular use of critical theory. The Situationists could be seen as the most extreme case of what some have described as the ‘theory death of the avant-garde’.²⁴ Not only were the Situationists dedicated to the tasks of theorizing, they also wanted to let this theorizing interfere with their art. What is often not recognized by the ‘theory death’ argument, however, is that for the Situationists, theory was not something opposed to and devoid of practice, something that occurs in a reified abstract sphere, like the cloud inhabited by the philosophers in *Gulliver’s Travels*. Rather, it was itself first and foremost a practice. This practice of theory did not lead to the avant-garde’s ‘theory death’. On the contrary, after diagnosing the death of avant-garde a, the Situationists tried to revive it in a different form by means of theory, what should be called the theory rebirth of the avant-garde.²⁵

The avant-garde form in which this rebirth of the avant-garde took place was that of the manifesto. In response to the precarious position of art, including the creation of situations, the Situationists shifted more and more of their activities to the writing of theoretical and polemical texts and manifestos that were published in *Internationale Situationniste*. One might say that instead of creating works of art, the Situationists decided to write in the vein of the manifesto. What advantages and dangers did this reliance on the manifesto bring with it, and what are its consequences for the theatre/situation?

As in the case of their anti-art stance, the Situationists’ use of the manifesto demonstrates how deeply they were rooted in the concerns and practices of the avant-garde. Of all the inventions of the avant-garde, including the collages and sound poetry, the manifesto is perhaps the most consequential one, for it accelerated the avant-garde’s oppositional stance, revolutionary rhetoric, and the internal differentiations among the different isms.²⁶ In addition, it encouraged the shrill tone, confrontational attitude towards the audience, and hypertrophic language of much avant-garde art.²⁷ The Situationists were directly influenced by the traditions of the avant-garde manifesto, from the militant Futurist manifestos and the parodic Dada manifestos to the ruminating and theoretical Surrealist manifestos. Drawing on these avant-garde movements, the Situationists outdid them not only in the number of manifestos they produced, but also in the time they spent on perfecting this genre and its distribution as flyer, graffiti and as published text.

However, just as the Situationists had critiqued avant-garde art, they critiqued the avant-garde manifesto. They did so by reconnecting the avant-garde manifesto to the tradition of the socialist manifesto from which it had broken off in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Not that the avant-garde manifesto had been completely unhinged from the socialist manifesto. But even though some avant-garde movements, such as Berlin Dada and Surrealism, had associated themselves with the Communist Party, their writings had never stood directly in the tradition of Marxist theory. It

was only with the Situationists that a concerted attempt was made to bring those two traditions of the manifesto together again. The critical writings of the Situationists were dedicated to the task of finding a new language and form of revolutionary writing in the form of the manifesto.

Even more central than the changes within the genre of the manifesto was the manner in which the manifesto influenced the residual practice of art. In order to keep their anti-art practice from becoming part of the spectacle, the Situationists infused it with their practice of the manifesto. Here too, however, they did not so much interrupt the avant-garde as push its inherent contradictions to an extreme, for a significant portion of avant-garde art had in fact been heavily manifesto-infused. This was true in particular for the theatre. The Futurist *serate* and Dadaists *soirées* had featured the recitation of manifestos and, more importantly, both movements had produced manifestos imagining a yet-to-be-realized theatrical practice. The most well-known such manifesto theatre, a theatre that existed primarily in the form of the manifesto, was Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. While most of Artaud's attempts at realizing such a theatre failed, his manifestos can be said to have succeeded: they became the documents that instigated much performance art since the 1950s.²⁸ A similar logic drove the manifesto-situations of the Situationists. While the realization of situations became less central, the writing of manifestos for these situations became the form in which these situations received their provisional and ephemeral realization.

Since Artaud and the Situationists, manifesto theatre has developed into other forms, for example the work of Richard Foreman, now an avant-garde institution of the off-off-Broadway theatre in New York. There can be no doubt that the prominence of manifestos for the theatre has somewhat subsided since the 1970s, but it has not gone away. In 1993, Michael Kirby, guardian of avant-garde performance in the US and editor of *The Drama Review*, conceived of an anniversary issue entitled 'Dreams, Proposals, Manifestos' as if to revive manifesto theatre, and groups such as the Electronic Disturbance Theatre have infused their conception of theatre with a practice of the manifesto.²⁹ These manifesto theatres are a particular form of postdramatic theatre as defined by Lehmann, but with a particular twist: the dramatic text as organizing principle is done away with, but what takes its place is a different kind of text, namely the text of the manifesto. A study of Situationist theatre may thus be used to complement and redress the anti-text bias of some studies of postdramatic theatre by pointing to the centrality of alternative, performative, forms of textuality, such as manifestos. These texts belie the dominant belief that contemporary performance art somehow had to shatter its old textual chains to gain some glorious text-free future. Textuality returns, but in the form of a practice of theatre that interrupts and everywhere interferes with theatre.

Cinema

The most elaborate juxtaposition of art and manifesto occurred in the Situationists' use of the art form that constituted the second meaning of *spectacle* and that even more than the theatre (or urbanism) seemed to come close to embody the spectacle itself: cinema.

Debord's most important definition of the spectacle reads: 'The spectacle is capital is such a degree of accumulation that it becomes image' (*Society of the Spectacle*, p. 32). It is true that the spectacle cannot be identified with any single art form. Even the visual media of mass communication, cinema and television, are only the external and 'superficial manifestations' (p. 26) of the spectacle, which Debord associates at times with ideology, false consciousness, and more generally with everything that dissimulates the reality of capitalist production, everything that thrives on the separation and at the same times hides this separation under some pretense of false totality: 'The spectacle reunites what is separated, but it reunites it only to the extent that it is separated' (p. 30). Yet, there can be no doubt that cinema and television are at least figures for the spectacle as well as its most frequent forms of manifestation. Due to the association of the cinematic image with the spectacle, the cinema is seen as the false double of – or 'substitute' for – the situation: 'the cinema presents itself as the passive substitute of the unitary, artistic activity which is possible now. It brings new powers to the reactionary power used by the spectacle without participation' (*IS*, p. 9). Film and the film camera frequently feature as the tools of the spectacle. One of the last issues of *IS*, for example, captions an advertisement for a camera thus: 'The domination of the spectacle over life' (*IS*, p. 553). To the extent that the camera becomes the agent of the spectacle's domination over life, the cinema represents everything that has to be opposed and destroyed.

Given the immense danger exerted by the cinema, it must come as a surprise that Debord created a number of films, or anti-films, culminating in an effort to turn his longest and most demanding theoretical text, *Society of the Spectacle*, into a film. Debord here demonstrates that he was willing to take the notion of detournment to an extreme, to attack the spectacle where indeed it is strongest. The first technique he used for this attack was to turn the cinema against itself. The visual material of the film version of *Society of the Spectacle* is taken from a variety of sources: live footage of policemen clubbing down demonstrators; newsreels showing politicians, including Giscard d'Estaing and Fidel Castro; images from Vietnam and the stock market; documentary footage showing the processes of production inside factories and construction sites; clips from film history, especially Hollywood films, depicting everything from war to love. Debord juxtaposes different elements of the spectacle precisely to suggest their interdependence: democratic party politics and police violence; Hollywood film and political reality; consumer products and the process of production. The spheres that are carefully kept separate by the spectacle are thus brought together in a collage that reveals precisely the contiguities and causalities obscured by the spectacle.

Debord uses a second technique to break the rule of the spectacle: at crucial moments, he interrupts the sequence of images and presents the viewer with a blank screen across which appear text passages taken from *Society of the Spectacle*. The first and most dramatic interruption features the following text: 'One could still recognize some cinematographic value in this film if this rhythm were continued; and it will not be continued'.³⁰ Worried that despite the critical collage, the spectacular image might still exert its dissimulating power, Debord does not know what to do except to pull the plug on it. What takes the place of the image is the text of Debord's longest and most ambitious manifesto.

Not the written manifesto, but the spoken manifesto is the third and most consequential weapon Debord uses against the spectacle. The entire critical collage of detoured images is accompanied by the calm murmur of Debord's voice-over reading passages from *Society of the Spectacle* throughout, approximately one-sixth of the entire text. Debord pits the practice of writing a totalizing, critical theory-manifesto against the diffuse surface of the spectacle. This most all-encompassing of his theoretical treatises, which can be seen as the summa of all manifestos produced by the Situationists, thus becomes a film in order to attack the film, so that Debord can confront the spectacle with the manifesto. This is something of a final showdown or rather two showdowns: the battle of the cinema against its detoured double, and the battle of the manifesto against the cinema.

When pondering this mixture of Situationist strategies, we can now specify what was wrong with the theatrical version of *Lipstick Traces*, namely its unquestioned, uninterrupted belief in the theatre, its commitment to re-theatricalizing avant-garde performances. When, if we side with Debord, it should have interrupted the theatre, detoured it, infused it with the manifesto's disruptive and critical energy. Even though we get some recited manifesto-like passages on stage, they are all framed by the explanations of the narrator, who assumes the posture of a researcher – 'according to my research' is her repeated phrase. This female narrator is a combination of a sexy talk-show host (part of this staging in fact takes the form of a talk show) and a teacher explaining an obscure historical phenomenon in an overly pedagogical tone to a class of students. Nothing could be further from Debord's witty theory, poignant phrases, and targeted quotations. And even though we see glimpses of Debord's iconoclastic film, the theatre that stages and frames this viewing has not learned from Debord's interruptions and proceeds without hesitation or doubt. We do not have to confront an empty screen because this play also shows Debord's own reactions and those of the audience onstage, an amusing scene, to be sure, but one that utterly undoes the film's negativity. While we watch the audience onstage, the actual audience is left in the dark and positioned merely to absorb a historical curiosity: no reaction is expected or invited.

Anticipating the problem of relying on the spectacle in order to bring about its destruction, Debord had always feared that the Situationists would become not the revolution of the spectacle, but the 'latest revolutionary spectacle'.³¹ *Lipstick Traces*, the theatrical version, proves this fear right. While Marcus had undertaken the delicate task of a secret history, an archeology of lipstick traces, the stage turned this secret history and its traces into a performance without audience, a show without remorse, a theatre without interruption: a spectacle of critique, not a critique of the spectacle.

NOTES

- 1 Hal Foster argues against the story of empty repetition, showing that it was only through the so-called neo-avant-garde that the original, historical avant-garde was retroactively created. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).
- 2 This theme of the secret history was taken up more recently by Peter Wollen in his *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), which speaks of a 'hidden' history of the twentieth century that culminates in the Situationists.

- 3 *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, conceived and directed by Shawn Sides, adapted by Kirk Lynn, created by Rude Mechs of Austin, Texas, presented by the Foundry Theater.
- 4 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater: Essay* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1999).
- 5 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Geschichte des Dramas: Epochen der Identität auf dem Theater von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, vol. 2, *Von der Romantik bis zur Gegenwart* (Tübingen: Francke, 1990); *The Show and the Gaze of Theatre: A European Perspective* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), p. 115.
- 6 Some of these international alliances and correspondences were documented in the early 1970s by Peter Stanstill and David Zane Mairowitz in *BAMN [By Any Means Necessary]: Outlaw Manifestos and Ephemera 1965–1970* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1999) (originally published in 1971 by Penguin).
- 7 Perry Anderson, 'Modernism and Revolution', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited and with an introduction by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
- 8 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books 1995); originally published as *la Societé du Spectacle* (Paris: Editions Buchet-Chastel, 1967).
- 9 *L'Espresso*, 15 December 1968, cited in *Situationist International Anthology*, edited and translated by Ken Knaab (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), p. 384.
- 10 Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)', in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 127–86. The history of the spectacle as Debord conceives of it remains debatable. T. J. Clark, in the introduction to *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), dates it as far back as the 1870s of the Impressionists, while Jonathan Crary locates it in the late 1920s with the introduction of synchronized sound and the first emergence of television; 'Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory', in *October*, 50 (Fall 1989), pp. 97–107.
- 11 These arguments sound familiar now, for they inform the Marxist theories of postmodernism developed by Jameson, Anderson, and others, but they found their first articulation in the Situationists.
- 12 *Internationale Situationiste*, augmented edition (Paris: Libraric Arthème Fayard, 1977), p. 36.
- 13 See Ursula Meyer, 'The Eruption of Anti-Art', in *Idea Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1993), pp. 116–34.
- 14 Hans Richter, *Dada: art and anti-art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).
- 15 *Internationale Situationiste*, p. 75.
- 16 Guy Debord, 'Architecture and Play' (*Potlatch 20*) in *Potlatch 1954–57*, presented by Guy Debord (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), pp. 155–8, 157. Simon Sadler has pointed out the relation between the situation and the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 106ff.
- 17 For an analysis of Marx's theatrical language, see Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994). Also see Martin Harries, *Scare Quotes from Shakespeare: Marx, Keynes, and the Language of Reenchantment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).
- 18 A similar critique of repetition, which leads to the formation of 'rôles' can be found in what is probably the second most important book-length Situationist text, Raoul Vaneigem's *Revolution of Everyday Life*, whose French title is *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967). Artaud's battle against repetition has been particularly highlighted by Jacques Derrida, in his 'Le Théâtre de la Cruauté et la Clôture de la Représentation', in *L'Écriture et la Différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), pp. 341–68.
- 19 As Martin Jay has suggested, one can see in the Situationists' notion of detournement another connection to Brecht, namely to his *Umfunktionierung*, which likewise indicates a process by which something is taken from the dominant culture, re-coded and thus turned against this culture. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 424.
- 20 For a more sustained argument about the long shadow of Wagner on modern drama and theatre see my *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

- 21 One example is Alexander Trocchi's 'Technique du coup du monde' (*IS* (1963), p. 344).
- 22 With the notion of non-matrixed performance, Kirby describes the kind of avant-garde performance that does not rely on a representational matrix, i.e. a performance that is presentational rather than representation. Michael Kirby, *A Formalist Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987).
- 23 The influence of Debord on such theorists as Jean Baudrillard has been quoted as a proof that Debord's theory had been too totalizing and prone to a defeatist attitude: everything is simulacrum and there is nothing one can do about it. Without focusing on the genre of the manifesto, the Situationists practice of theory has been discussed insightfully by Anselm Jappe's *Guy Debord*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, with a foreword by T. J. Clark and a new afterword by the author (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 45ff. Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge, 1992), has written the most eloquent defence of Debord against the critique that sees in him the later Baudrillard. The only component I would add to this defence is the emphasis on the manifesto, which encapsulates the difference between Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum and Debord's critical practice.
- 24 Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-garde* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
- 25 An understanding of theory dissociated from its practice also informs some critical accounts of the Situationists themselves, for examples Thomas F. Mc Donough's 'Rereading Debord, Rereading the Situationists', in *October*, 79 (Winter 1997), pp. 3–14, which critiques Sadie Plant's emphasis on textuality and agitation (8). While I think Plant is right in her emphasis on theory, she herself has no systematic conception of the Situationists' practice of theory either and therefore reproduces herself the theory/art or theory/practice dichotomy. Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture*, p. 8.
- 26 It is only recently, through the work of a few editors and commentators that the manifesto as genre has begun to attract systematic critical and theoretical attention. Insightful studies have been devoted to this genre by Claude Abastado, who edited a special issue, *Littérature*, 39 (1980), on the manifesto and Janet Lyon, *Manifestos: Provocations of the Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999). Collections of manifestos have been presented by Wolfgang Asholt and Walter Fähnders, eds., *Manifeste und Proklamationen der europäischen Avantgarde (1909–1938)* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995). More recently still, Mary Ann Caws presented the first comprehensive collection of manifestos in English. Mary Ann Caws, ed., *Manifesto: A Century of Isms* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).
- 27 Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
- 28 See my 'Theatre = Manifesto', in *Theatre Journal*, 54 (Fall 2002), pp. 449–65.
- 29 *The Drama Review*, 27, 4 (Winter 1983). For a discussion of Kirby's role in American avant-garde theatre, see Arnold Aronson's *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History* (London: Routledge, 2000).
- 30 Guy Debord, *Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes: 1952–1978* (1978; Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 73.
- 31 *Situationist International Anthology* ed. and trans. by Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), p. 368.

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