

The Sex of the Situationist International*

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*Today the fight for life, the fight for Eros,
is the political fight.*

—Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*

In June 1958, Guy Debord, Gil Wolman, Michèle Bernstein, and other founding members of the Situationist International (SI) published the first issue of *internationale situationniste* (*IS*). There, interspersed among essays on police brutality, functionalist architecture, and industrialization—essays all invested with a clear sense of import and urgency—are found photographs of sexy, flirtatious women. One stands underneath a shower, smiling as water trickles down her neck, while another wears nothing but a man’s trench coat, an erotic accouterment through which she exposes a thigh and a tantalizing glimpse of *décolletage*. What are sexually charged images such as these doing in a periodical whose twelve issues published some of the most incisive critiques of alienation, capitalism, and spectacle—along with astute analyses of current events like the Franco-Algerian War and the Watts Riots—to appear after World War II?

Readymade photographs of nude and semi-nude women are one of the leitmotifs of Situationist visual production. They embellish everything, from its collages and artist books to its films and publications. Nevertheless, these images have received only cursory attention from historians, and in the opinion of those who have addressed them, they constitute little more than a gratuitous sidebar to the group’s more lofty, less compromised pursuits. Susan Suleiman’s view, expressed in a footnote to her 1990 book *Subversive Intent*, typifies the scholarly response to date. “The Situationists appear to have been more of a ‘men’s club’ than the Surrealists,” Suleiman writes. When they weren’t ignoring women, they were treating them as “sex objects in the most banal

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Found photograph reproduced in internationale situationniste 1 (June 1958).

appearances to the contrary, these images were not scattered randomly throughout

sense.”¹ The Situationists most certainly reproduced the gender biases of their time, biases that plagued other radical artistic and political movements of the 1960s. Yet, there is a great deal more to their fascination with erotic imagery than has been acknowledged in the existing literature. Far from a frivolous addendum to or a curious departure from an otherwise progressive political and philosophical agenda, images of women were in fact one of the many platforms from which the Situationists launched their rebuke to capitalism and spectacle.

My interpretation follows from two observations. First, the soft-core images that have served as the locus of scholarly debate to date are actually part of a larger group of images of women, including female celebrities, that garnish the pages of *IS*. Together, these fantasies of femininity comprise two different yet overlapping categories: images of women as objects and images of women as images.² Second, despite

1. Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 214, n. 44. Suleiman does not mention the images of women in *IS* directly, but she is likely referring to these as well as other equally explicit instances of Situationist sexism. See also Peter Wollen, “The Situationist International,” *New Left Review* 174 (March/April 1989), pp. 94–95, n. 68. Martin Jay and Thomas Levin echo the sentiments of Wollen and Suleiman. See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 231; and Thomas Y. Levin, “Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord,” in *On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International, 1957–1972*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), p. 74. Myriam Maayan is the only scholar thus far to have attempted a more sophisticated (albeit still very abbreviated) analysis of the images of women that so captured the political imagination of the SI, and, as such, I am indebted to her earlier research. Maayan, too, makes room for the possibility that these images were intended in the spirit of critique, but she and I differ on that critique’s exact content. See her article “The ‘Feminine’ in Contemporary French Critical Discourse on the Consumer Society and Utilitarianism,” *Contemporary French Civilization* 16 (Summer–Fall 1992).

2. My article does not provide an exhaustive inventory of these images.

the pages of *IS*. The essays in which they are reproduced, as well as the captions with which they are paired, might address a broad range of subjects, but they ultimately coalesce around a single issue: alienation. As I will argue here, the images of women appropriated and recontextualized by the SI targeted one type of alienation in particular: the alienation of desire.

Desire occupied a place of prominence in Situationist theory and praxis. First and foremost, it was the basis on which the group formulated a working definition of revolution: for the SI, revolution simultaneously required and instantiated “a radical transformation of the structure and character of desire.”³ Debord put it this way: “We must support . . . the necessity of considering a consistent ideological action for fighting, on the level of the passions, the influence of the propaganda methods of late capitalism: to concretely contrast, at every opportunity, other desirable ways of life with the reflections of the capitalist way of life; [and] to destroy, by all hyperpolitical means, the bourgeois idea of happiness.”⁴ With regard to desire, therefore, the Situationists adopted a position that was simultaneously polemical and constructive. They not only mounted a sustained attack on the stunted desires proffered by capitalist society and the mechanisms by which it impaired the expression of authentic desires, they also strove to develop a radically new species of desire. In a 1996 essay, Thomas Levin describes their interventions in urban and architectural space in precisely these terms. If the Situationists predicated revolution on “a revolution in desire,” he asserts, they simultaneously predicated the “revolution in desire” on the organization of “new quotidian spaces.”⁵ Architecture and urbanism were by no means the only arenas in which the conflict between desire and its alienation was waged, however. Just as often as the Situationists projected this conflict onto space, so too did they project it onto the female body.

L'Angleterre leur avait complètement caché entre temps, et pensent être à la pointe du scandale en se proclamant républicains. « On continue de jouer des pièces, écrit Kenneth Tynan, qui sont fondées sur la ridicule idée que les gens craignent et respectent encore la Couronne, l'Empire, l'Eglise, l'Université et la Bonne Société ». Ce mot (« on continue de jouer des pièces... ») est révé-



Found photograph reproduced in internationale situationniste 1.

3. Thomas Y. Levin, “Geopolitics of Hibernation: The Drift of Situationist Urbanism,” in *Situationists: Art, Politics, Urbanism*, eds. Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 1996), p. 112.

4. Guy Debord, “Report on the Construction of Situations and on the Terms of Organization and Action of the International Situationist Tendency,” in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Thomas McDonough (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press), pp. 49–50.

5. Levin, “Geopolitics of Hibernation,” p. 113.

● **PROBLEMES PRELIMINAIRES A LA CONSTRUCTION D'UNE SITUATION.**

« La construction de situations commence au-delà de l'éroulement moderne de la notion de spectacle. Il est facile de voir à quel point est attaché à l'aliénation du vieux monde le principe même du spectacle: le non-intervention. On voit, à l'inverse, comme les plus valables des recherches révolutionnaires dans la culture ont cherché à briser l'identification psychologique du spectateur au héros, pour entraîner ce spectateur à l'activité. La situation est ainsi faite pour être vécue par ses constructeurs. Le rôle du « public », sinon passif du moins seulement figurant, doit y diminuer toujours, tandis qu'augmentera la part de ceux qui ne peuvent être appelés des acteurs mais, dans un sens nouveau de ce terme, des « viveurs ».

Rapport sur la construction des situations.

La conception que nous avons d'une « situation construite » ne se borne pas à un emploi unitaire de moyens artistiques concourant à une ambiance, si grandes que puissent être l'extension spatio-temporelle et la force de cette ambiance. La situation est en même temps une unité de comportement dans le temps. Elle est faite de gestes contenus dans le décor d'un moment. Ces gestes sont le produit du décor et d'eux-mêmes. Ils produisent d'autres formes de décor et d'autres gestes. Comment peut-on orienter ces forces? On ne va pas se contenter d'essais empiriques d'environnements dont on attendrait des surprises, par provocation mécanique. La direction réellement expérimentale de l'activité situationniste est l'établissement, à partir de désirs plus ou moins nettement reconnus, d'un champ d'activité temporaire favorable à ces désirs. Son établissement peut seul entraîner l'éclaircissement des désirs primitifs, et l'apparition confuse de nouveaux désirs dont la racine matérielle sera précisément la *nouvelle réalité* constituée par les constructions situationnistes.

Il faut donc envisager une sorte de psychanalyse à des fins situationnistes, chacun de ceux qui participent à cette aventure devant trouver des désirs précis d'ambiances *pour les réaliser*, à l'encontre des buts poursuivis par les courants issus du freudisme. Chacun doit chercher ce qu'il aime, ce qui l'attire (et là



encore, au contraire de certaines tentatives d'écriture moderne — Leiris par exemple —, ce qui nous importe n'est pas la structure individuelle de notre esprit, ni l'explication de sa formation, c'est son application possible dans les situations construites). On peut recenser par cette méthode des éléments constitutifs des situations à édifier; des *projets pour le mouvement de ces éléments*.

Une telle recherche n'a de sens que pour des individus travaillant pratiquement dans la direction d'une construction de situations. Ils sont alors tous, soit spontanément soit d'une manière cons-

Found photograph reproduced in internationale situationniste 1.

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The inaugural issue of *IS* contains five sexually-charged images. All depict women in different stages of undress, and all employ a number of devices to enhance their erotic appeal, as in the two described at the beginning of this essay. As such, they cater to what Laura Mulvey has called the “scopophilic gaze,” a highly gendered visual dynamic in which women are “simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to striptease . . . she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire.”⁶

It remains to be discovered what publication (or publications) originally presented these images. The photograph of a woman in a trench coat was likely appropriated from some variety of low-brow, soft-core erotica whose audience was comprised primarily of men. This image conforms more closely than the other four to the conventions of erotic photography. The contrived theatricality as well as the protracted game of temptation, frustration, and anticipation enacted here is less prominent (but certainly not absent) in the other photographs. If not from a girlie magazine, these images of women in bikinis (one of them topless) might have originated in a fashion, health, or lifestyle magazine, in which case they would have staged a different type of seduction than the pin-up—a seduction aimed at promoting, for instance, a resort in Saint Tropez to pliable, receptive consumers (male as well as female). The fact that it is difficult to identify the original use-value of these images is no accident. All of the Situationists’ design decisions, from their removal of extraneous content to their suppression of context, serve to generalize what were once temptations calculated to specific effect. Every image now conveys an identical erotic charge and traffics in the same mediocre pleasures.

Upon first glance, the SI would seem to have reproduced the images of women without modifying them, but this is not the case. The images may not have been altered physically, beyond having been removed from another publication, but they most certainly have been “detourned.” The technique of *détournement* informs the vast majority of Situationist visual practice.⁷ A variation on Dadaist and Surrealist montage, *détournement* involves the reclamation, negation, and reinscription of found materials, particularly cinematic and photographic images.⁸

6. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 18.

7. Although typically translated as “diversion,” *détournement* also means “embezzlement” or “misappropriation” (of funds) or “abduction” or “seduction” (of a minor).

8. Despite their deep-seated suspicion of images, the Situationists were active, if not prolific, producers of visual art. Even Debord, the author of *The Society of the Spectacle*, created several collages, assembled two artist books with Asger Jorn, and wrote and directed six films between 1952 and 1978. As long as we continue to take this fact for granted, we will fully understand neither the nature of Situationist visual practice nor its rationale. The SI was convinced that the most effective way of dismantling the spectacle

According to the SI, *détournement* derives its efficacy from “the double meaning, from the enrichment of most of the terms by the co-existence within them of their old senses and their new immediate senses *Détournement* is thus first of all a negation of the value of the previous organization of expression But at the same time, the attempts to reuse the ‘*détournable bloc*’ as material for other ensembles express the search for a vaster construction.”⁹ Diverting an image from its original context thus entails fundamentally altering its original meaning, not by displacing it, but by attenuating it. In this way, *détournement* generates a productive friction between past and present.

Giorgio Agamben provides additional insight into the mechanics of *détournement* (which he refers to as “montage”) in an essay on Debord’s films. According to Agamben, montage, as practiced by Debord, consists of two distinct yet related critical procedures: repetition and stoppage. While repetition (as in the repetition of something already made) restores possibility to the past, transforming a fact into a potentiality before which the viewer is no longer powerless, stoppage generates a temporary “noncoincidence” or “prolonged hesitation” between an image and its meaning. This is not a chronological pause, Agamben argues. Rather, in Debord’s hands, stoppage operates spatially and semiotically, excerpting the image and pulling it “away from the narrative power to exhibit it as such.”¹⁰ Following Agamben, we might say that from the Situationist perspective, the found image is “something that can be repeated and yet is also unique.”¹¹

If this is true, then in *IS* the images of women *cannot but* represent more than just the ravenous male gaze, since this was what they represented in their original incarnations. Having been subjected to *détournement*, these images now possess many additional layers of signification. In order to identify the operative value with which Situationists charged them, it is necessary to return to their site of reinscription: the essays in *IS*. Four of the essays critique “reactionary” elements in capitalist society (functionalism and industrial design; the use of

was not to dispense with images, but rather to instrumentalize them—more specifically, to instrumentalize existing images. *Détournement* was ideally suited to this task. It allowed the SI to capture, negate, and recirculate images without also contributing to the “common stream of images” that Debord designated as spectacle. Via *détournement*, in other words, the Situationists were able to fulfill several imperatives at once, the most important being to identify the visual practice most appropriate to—in greatest synchronicity with—their theoretical and political program. As an anonymous Situationist put it in 1959, *détournement* is “the signature of the [SI], the sign of its presence and contestation in contemporary cultural reality.” Anon., “*Détournement* as Negation and Prelude” (1959), in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), pp. 55–56. For an especially eloquent and incisive discussion of Debord’s relationship to the regime of representation, see T. J. Clark’s preface to Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), ix–x.

9. Anon., “*Détournement* as Negation and Prelude,” p. 55.

10. Giorgio Agamben, “Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord’s Films” (1995), in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, p. 317.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 318.

scientific research by the police and advertisers to more effectively administer human behavior; the “innocuousness” of the youth revolt in Europe and the United States as well as the “apathy” of the intellectual life of the current generation; and, finally, the automation of industrial production) and then compare them to a more progressive Situationist alternative. (The “constructed situation,” for instance, is posited as the radical, playful antithesis of functionalism and industrial design.)¹² The fifth essay, by Michèle Bernstein, addresses internal dissent and attempts to justify the excommunication of certain Situationists in the interests of maintaining a “disciplined organization.”¹³

With the exception of the youth revolt, the contemporary intellectual, and the delinquent Situationist, the reactionary elements denounced in each essay also function as tools of physical and psychological repression either by enforcing docility or suppressing creativity. Why illustrate such essays with images of women, though? Would not a photograph of a prison, an assembly line, or one of Le Corbusier’s buildings have been more appropriate? The confusion persists only so long as we consider the images as illustrations in the traditional sense of the word. If the proposition is reversed, and the essays are instead taken to elucidate (or “load”) the images, an intriguing possibility arises: the Situationists considered images of women the analogues of phenomena like functionalism and the abuse of police authority—that is, as the visual expressions of (erotic) alienation.

In subsequent issues of *IS*, images of women are not merely aligned with alienation, they are charged with actually *instantiating* it. Take the caption attached to a photograph of Marilyn Monroe in the January 1963 issue, for example. “Marilyn Monroe, August 5, 1962: the specialization of the mass spectacle constitutes, in the society of the spectacle, the

ques psycho-sociologues pour huiler un peu leurs micro-groupes. Les méthodes de la sociométrie et du psychodrame ne mèneront personne très avant dans la construction des situations.

A mesure que la participation devient plus impossible, les ingénieurs de seconde classe de l’art moderniste exigent comme leur dû la participa-

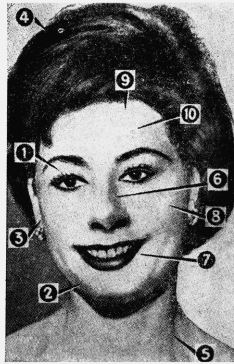


Marilyn Monroe, 5 août 1962 : la spécialisation du spectacle de masse constitue, dans la société du spectacle, l'épicentre de la séparation et de la non-communication.

Found photograph of Marilyn Monroe reproduced in internationale situationniste 8 (January 1963).

12. See Anon., “Preliminary Problems in Constructing a Situation” (1958), reproduced in *Situationist International Anthology*.

13. Michèle Bernstein, “No Useless Leniency,” in *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 47. For the remaining two essays, see Anon., “The Sound and the Fury,” in *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 42; and Anon., “La Lutte pour le contrôle des nouvelles techniques de conditionnement,” *IS* 1 (June 1958), p. 6.



Beauté de la sociologie.

Ceci est le portrait-robot de la « femme idéale », établi dans *France-soir* du 31 août 1962, à partir de dix détails considérés comme les plus beaux du monde, pris sur dix femmes célèbres. Cette vedette de synthèse fournit un exemple éloquent de ce que peut donner la dictature totalitaire du fragment, opposée ici au jeu dialectique du visage. Ce visage de rêve cybernétique est modelé par les techniques de l'information moderne, qui sont réellement efficaces en tant que répression, contrôle, classification et maintien de l'ordre (le portrait-robot a fait ses preuves dans la recherche policière). C'est évidemment à l'opposé des moyens et des buts de cette information qu'existent la connaissance, la poésie, notre appropriation possible du monde. La sociologie de la beauté vaut la sociologie industrielle ou la sociologie de la vie urbaine, pour les mêmes raisons : c'est un relevé mystifié et mystificateur du partiel, qui cache les ensembles et leur mouvement. Mais aussi l'exact moralisme scientifique de la sociologie, inséré sans même vouloir y penser dans la société du spectacle, indique à chacun, en même temps que la beauté, son usage. Sa nouvelle traduction du *Hic Rhodus, hic salta* peut se lire : « Ici est la beauté, ici, tu consommes ! »

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pris de combattre toutes les « red dances » de la liberté pour *transmettre simplement des ordres*. Les penseurs de l'automatisation visent explicitement une pensée théorique autoritaire, par fixation et élimination de variables dans la vie comme dans le langage. Ils n'ont pas fini de trouver des os dans leur fromage ! Les chinos à traduire, par exemple, commencent à assurer l'uniformisation planétaire de l'information, même temps que la révision informationniste de l'ancienne culture, soumises à leurs programmes pilotés, auxquels doit échapper toute acception nouvelle d'un mot, au bien que ses ambivalences dialectiques passées. Ainsi, en même temps que la vie du langage — qui se relie chaque avancée de la compréhension théorique : « Les idées s'améliorent. Le sens des mots y participe » — trouve expulsée du champ machin de l'information officielle, mais à la pensée libre peut s'organiser une vue d'une clandestinité qui s'incontrôle par les techniques police informationniste. La recherche de signaux indiscutables et de clarification binaire instantanée va clairement dans le sens du pouvoir existant, qu'elle relèvera de la microcritique. Jusque dans leurs formations défrayées, les penseurs informationnistes se comportent en lo précurseurs à brevets des lendemains qu'ils ont choisis, et qui sont justement ceux que modelent les formations dominantes de la société actuelle : le renforcement de l'Etat cybernétique. Ils sont les hommes liges tous les suzerains de la féodalité technique qui s'affermirait actuellement. Il n'y a pas d'innocence dans la bouffonnerie, ils sont les fous du

L'alternative entre l'informationnisme et la poésie ne concerne plus la poésie du passé ; de même qu'aucune variante de ce qu'est devenu le mouvement révolutionnaire classique ne peut plus, nulle part, être comprise dans une alternative réelle face à l'organisation dominante de la société. C'est d'un même jugement que nous tirons la dénonciation d'une déshumanisation totale de la poésie dans les anciennes formes où elle a pu être produite et consommée, et l'annonce de son retour sous des formes inédites et opérantes. Notre époque peut à l'écrire des consignes poétiques mais à les exécuter.

Found photograph of a "portrait-robot" reproduced in internationale situationniste 8 (January 1963).

epicenter of separation and non-communication.”¹⁴ Here the Situationists trade on an existing cultural configuration, one that correlates celebrity and femininity with spectacle, masquerade, and performance.¹⁵ In the economy of the gaze, moreover, movie stars and women function as objects rather than subjects—they are always already about another’s desire. This is doubly true for female celebrities, like Monroe, who exaggerate the condition of all celebrities. The Situationists’ decision to insert the precise date of her suicide into the caption adds another layer of nuance, as does their choice of this particular photograph, which depicts a surprisingly pensive, introspective Monroe. Both date and image inject an element of tragedy that complements the ominous tone of the caption.¹⁶ The Situationists were exploiting the full extent of Monroe’s social and cultural currency to craft a succinct allegory of the pernicious effects of the spectacle on human subjectivity.

Neither a pin-up nor a celebrity, an altogether uncanny female form appears in the January 1963 issue of *IS*.¹⁷ The caption describes her as a “portrait-robot” whose features have been cobbled together from the faces of ten famous women. The portrait-robot was originally intended to represent that ultimate object of masculine desire—the “ideal woman”—but for the SI, she signifies the exact opposite. Indeed, from the Situationists’ point of view, this modern mechanomorph is nothing less than a harbinger of the becoming-artificial of individuality. She dramatizes the threat that both sociology and technology pose to the integrity and organicity of the human body as well as the extent to which “techniques of modern information” have penetrated into everyday life. The same developments that made possible the portrait-robot’s “cybernetic dream-face,” the SI claims, likewise allow the police to track, monitor, and supervise the public more closely than ever.

While the image of the portrait-robot indicts technology, an advertisement for the German home-movie camera Eumig, published in the October 1967 issue of *IS*, targets the spectacle.¹⁸ According to the caption composed by the SI, this advertisement exemplifies a temporal and existential dilemma specific to spectacular society. Thanks to the development of image-making technologies such as the home movie camera, which simultaneously relegate the present to the past and resuscitate the past as the present, the distinction between these two historical conditions has been all but effaced. As Levin has written of this found image, film

14. Anon., “L’Avant-Garde de la presence,” *IS* 8 (January 1963), p. 19.

15. On masquerade and femininity, see Joan Riviere, “Womanliness as Masquerade,” in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin (London: Methuen, 1986); Amelia Jones, “Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman,” in *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997); and Laurie J. Monahan, “Radical Transformations: Claude Cahun and the Masquerade of Womanliness,” in *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th-Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996).

16. Just months following her suicide, photographs of Monroe appeared in both a poster advertising the Sixth Congress of the Situationist International and a collage published in the second issue of *The Situationist Times*.

17. Anon., “All the King’s Men,” *IS* 8 (January 1963), p. 33.

18. Anon., “La Pratique de la théorie,” *IS* 11 (October 1967), p. 57.

j'aime ma caméra

parce que

**j'aime
vivre**

j'enregistre les
meilleurs moments
de l'existence

je les ressuscite
à ma volonté
dans tout leur éclat



LA DOMINATION DU SPECTACLE SUR LA VIE

Cette publicité de la caméra Eumig (été 1967) évoque très justement la glaciation de la vie individuelle qui s'est renversée dans la perspective spectaculaire : le présent se donne à vivre immédiatement **comme souvenir**. Par cette spatialisation du temps, qui se trouve soumis à l'ordre illusoire d'un présent accessible en permanence, le temps et la vie ont été perdus ensemble.

*Found advertisement
reproduced in interna-
tionale situationniste
11 (October 1967).*

“functions as an ... ‘evocation’ or figure ... for a sociopolitical and epistemological shift that has taken place under late capitalism. An attitude toward the production of spectacle (home movies) is taken as a symptom of a ‘spectacular economy’ (the temporality of an alienated social condition).”¹⁹

However, Levin’s otherwise cogent analysis does not address the woman in the advertisement, who is featured just as prominently as the camera. Nor does it account for the advertisement’s erotic subtext, which, along with its more direct, denoted message, was likely what made it such an appealing target for *détournement*. Here woman and camera are presented as if in the midst of a romantic encounter. With slightly parted lips and bare shoulders, the woman gazes in rapt fascination at the camera cradled in her right hand. Its proximity to her mouth (one end of the camera disappears just behind her lips) suggests the act of fellatio. The text to the left of the woman further sexualizes her relationship to the camera: “I love my camera because I love to live: I record the best moments of life and revive them at will in all their richness.” When the Situationists speak in the caption about the “Domination of Life by the Spectacle,” they are likely referring as much to film as they are to the staging of this sexually-charged union between camera and woman. Beyond the “spatialization of time,” therefore, the advertisement may have exemplified for the SI

19. Levin, “Dismantling the Spectacle,” p. 75.



LE POINT CULMINANT DE L'OFFENSIVE DU SPECTACLE

Cette image fut assez remarquée quand elle passa, en octobre 1967, sur la chaîne protestante de la télévision hollandaise. Son directeur, qui se trouve être un ancien prédicateur, déclara alors : «Nous voulions montrer que des femmes nues peuvent être très belles». On peut admettre que là, l'inversion spectaculaire de la vie réelle avait atteint un indépassable sommet. Dans leur assurance grandissante, les experts des **mass media** se proposent de révéler au bétail qui les contemple une vérité dont on semble croire qu'elle lui aurait autrement à jamais échappé ; et ils se flattent de cette contribution au progrès culturel des foules qu'ils sont persuadés d'avoir réduites à une passivité définitive et absolue. Et, bien sûr, on leur livre cette réalité, après les autres, précisément sous la forme où elle échappe à tout usage concret, à toute communication réelle, derrière la vitrine du spectacle inaccessible qui s'en charge la totalité de l'existence humaine. Comme pour confirmer la pensée dialectique de Clausewitz, le spectacle, au moment où il a poussé si loin son invasion de la vie sociale, va connaître le début du **renversement** du rapport de forces. Dans les mois suivants, l'histoire et la vie réelle sont revenues à l'assaut du ciel spectaculaire. Et cette contre-offensive ne s'arrêtera pas avant la fin du monde de la séparation.

Found photograph of a television screen reproduced in internationale situationniste 12 (September 1969).

not only the love affair between images and individuals in spectacular society, but quite possibly the becoming-spectacle of love affairs between human beings as well.

A photograph reproduced in the last issue of *IS* epitomizes the libidinous dilemma described above.²⁰ Snapped from a television screen, it depicts an attractive woman, nude from the waist up, sitting in a chair and making direct eye contact with the viewer. This is simultaneously an image of an object as well as an image of an image, one whose referent (the woman specifically, but sexuality in general) has been removed several times over from reality. The caption reads: "This image was noteworthy when it appeared, in October 1967, on a Protestant chain of Dutch television. Its director . . . declared, 'We wanted to show that nude women can be very beautiful.'" This claim seems innocuous enough, but for the Situationists it instead signaled "[t]he culminating point of the spectacle's offensive." There as elsewhere, they write, the mass media delivers reality to the public, but only insofar as that reality "escapes from all concrete usage, from all real communication, behind the shop-window of the inaccessible spectacle." Together, caption and photograph attest to what constituted for the SI the defining characteristic of modern life: the mutual imbrication of commodity

20. "Comment on ne comprend pas des livres situationnistes," *IS* 12 (September 1969), p. 50.

and image, capital and spectacle, as well as the concomitant debilitation of agency and free will. Why reproduce this image, though? The Situationists could have made the same point with almost any photograph, but they chose to publish an erotic photograph specifically. Clearly, another argument is being advanced, a second-order message is being introduced via the first, and its subject, I would argue, is desire. To the extent that the images discussed thus far represent nude models, female celebrities, and various other fantasies of femininity, they also represent desire.²¹ However, they do not represent the sorts of polymorphous pleasures embraced by the Situationists. Those pleasures were impetuous, unmediated, and calculated to disarm conventional morality. The pin-ups sampled in *IS*, on the other hand, would seem to represent desire at its most anemic and impoverished, precisely because they are pin-ups, precisely because they confine desire to the four corners of an image. As such, this type of soft-core erotica might be said to epitomize the becoming-image of desire under capitalism and spectacle. In the photographs, captions, and essays discussed above, the Situationists address the virtualization of desire indirectly, through allusion and inference, but in other articles, they do so explicitly and with mounting alarm.²²

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According to the SI, the epidemic of commodity fetishism that accompanied the consolidation of capitalism after World War II, along with the advent of the spectacle, precipitated an acute crisis of desire. Stripped of its cognitive, psychological, and emotional core, desire was becoming a commercial transaction whose currency was images as well as things. Passion was now mediated by movies, magazines, and television, while happiness was identified largely with objects. The changes wrought to the character of desire had grave consequences for individual

21. Over the course of the nineteenth century, Abigail Solomon-Godeau writes, “femininity progressively became the primary signifier for the sexual and erotic It is, therefore, the female body’s monopoly of the role of image of desire that is characteristically modern.” Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “The Other Side of Venus: The Visual Economy of Feminine Display,” in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, ed. Victoria de Grazia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 116. Solomon-Godeau has developed one of the most sophisticated critiques of the relationship between femininity, spectacle, and commodity fetishism in the nineteenth century. Indeed, her work lends great insight into the historical roots and psychoanalytical underpinnings of this cultural configuration, which revolved around the rise of the mass media, the birth of consumer culture, and the invention of photography. See the chapter “Reconsidering Erotic Photography: Notes for a Project of Historical Salvage,” in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

22. The historical avant-garde, too, decried the commercialization of erotic relations in capitalist society. See Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993); Dorteia Dietrich, *The Collages of Kurt Schwitters: Tradition and Innovation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Maud Lavin, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); and Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

subjects as well. Insofar as they were consuming desire, not exercising it, insofar as they were relinquishing responsibility for their desire to capitalist society, they were quickly losing purchase on their agency. As Debord wrote in *The Society of the Spectacle*, the “spectator’s alienation from and submission to the contemplated object (the result of his unthinking activity) works like this: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires.”²³

Despite the proliferation of bankrupt pleasures, the SI insisted that authentic desire was still possible. In order for a desire to qualify as authentic, though, it had to be self-identical with the individual giving expression to it. Authentic desires were essentially internal desires externalized by thinking subjects. Furthermore, it was only by establishing synchronicity with their desires and realizing these desires in the world that individuals could attain the status of affective subjects.²⁴ As theorized by the Situationists, then, subjectivity was constitutive of desire to the extent that desire was constitutive of subjectivity. Debord went even farther than this, asserting that the actualization of desire and subjectivity exists in dialectical relationship with the revolutionary transformation of the material conditions of everyday life. “Consciousness of desire and the desire for consciousness together and indissolubly constitute that project which in its negative form has as its goal the abolition of classes and the direct possession by the workers of every aspect of their activity. The opposite of this project is the society of the spectacle.”²⁵

Debord’s position on desire (and by extension that of the SI) seems to owe a

23. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), p. 23.

24. This raises another important issue: the Situationist definition of “subject” or “subjectivity.” Debord posits the subject as an agent—that is, as one who is master of his own sovereign will (or his own sovereign desires, as the case may be). Debord devoted an entire chapter to this topic in “The Proletariat as Subject and Representation” in *The Society of the Spectacle*. Here he contrasts the worker as he is represented to himself by others (whether the union or the government) with the worker as he assumes the status of subject. In allowing others to speak on his behalf, Debord argues, the worker forfeits his autonomy and authority, thereby perpetuating his alienation. The worker as subject, on the other hand, exists in a dialectical relationship with his social, political, and economic liberation. According to Debord, the worker-subject secures his liberation, while liberation produces the worker-subject (pp. 34, 59–60). It is in the context of this discussion that Debord provides as clear a definition of the subject as he was inclined to give: “As for the *subject* of history, it can only be the self-production of the living: the living becoming master and possessor of its world—that is, of history—and coming to exist as *consciousness of its own activity*” (p. 48). This might suggest that Debord, like Karl Marx before him, as Paul Smith has argued, presumes a quasi-mythical, post-revolutionary “subject” (or “concrete individual,” in Marx’s case) who is immune to both ideology and alienation. See Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 7–8. However, Debord and his Situationist comrades recognized that post-revolutionary subjects do not appear *ex nihilo*, but must be coaxed into being and, later, provided with the infrastructure to reproduce themselves as subjects. (These were some of the tasks with which Situationist art, architecture, and theory were entrusted.) The SI might have conceived of post-revolutionary society as one from which alienation had been eradicated, in other words, but it never dismissed the determining force of social, cultural, political, and economic circumstance on subjectivity.

25. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 34.

great deal to a tradition of French Hegelianism that began with Alexandre Kojève in the 1930s and continued into the 1940s and beyond with Jean Hyppolite. This tradition is the subject of Judith Butler's 1987 book *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*. According to Butler, Hegel, Kojève, and Hyppolite each posited the mutual imbrication of desire and subjectivity. In addition, they understood desire as the "principle of self-consciousness"—more specifically, as that which "signifies the *reflexivity* of consciousness."²⁶ Taking her cue from her three interlocutors, Butler describes desire as a project with two goals, one intentional, the other reflexive. Insofar as desire dramatizes the subject's effort to recognize, understand, and attenuate itself in relationship to the sensuous world, the object of desire is always the self as well as "something other than the self."²⁷

If we recognize some of Debord in Butler's summary of Hegelian desire, we detect even more of him in her description of Kojève's project specifically. Much like Debord, Kojève distinguishes between contemplation (what he calls "animal consciousness"), in which the subject "learns nothing about itself," and desire, which represents "the experience of self-constitution and self-knowledge."²⁸ What is more, for Kojève, as it seems to have been for Debord, "the proper aim of desire is the transformation [negation] of natural givens into reflections of human consciousness," because it is only in this way that "desire can manifest itself as the transformative [negative] power that it is."²⁹ We know Debord assiduously studied Hegel; he was probably familiar with the work of Kojève as well.³⁰ Even more importantly, he periodically attended Hyppolite's courses at the Collège de France in 1967.³¹ Given this, along with the striking similarities between their respective positions, it is entirely possible that Debord and his colleagues developed a theory of desire in concert with those of Hegel, Kojève, and Hyppolite.

For the Situationists, desire was also a fact of the body, of its needs, drives, and impulses, and the expression of embodied desire constituted a revolutionary act in itself.³² Indeed, like the historical avant-garde before them, the SI voiced its opposi-

26. Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 7.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

30. Jappe, *Guy Debord*, p. 128.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 128, n. 9.

32. In this, the SI was following the lead of both the Surrealists and the Marquis de Sade, whose defense of sexual and political freedom served as an important source of inspiration for the group. The Situationists' valorization of De Sade coincided with his postwar rediscovery by censors and intellectuals alike. In 1956, just one year before Debord and others launched the SI, the publisher J. J. Pauvert was tried on indecency charges and eventually fined for publishing De Sade's complete works. At the trial, Georges Bataille and André Breton, among others, testified on Pauvert's behalf. For a transcript of the trial, see *L'Affaire Sade* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert Editeur, 1957). On the importance of De Sade after World War II, see Simone de Beauvoir, "Must We Burn Sade?" in *The Marquis de Sade: An Essay by Simone de Beauvoir with Selections from His Writings Chosen by Paul Dinnage* (New York: Grove Press, 1953); and Susan Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969).

tion to the dominant social order by asserting its independence from established moral codes. As an anonymous Situationist wrote in 1964, “it goes without saying that we unconditionally support all forms of liberated mores, everything . . . the bourgeois or bureaucratic scum call debauchery. It is obviously out of the question that we should pave the way for the revolution of everyday life with asceticism.”³³ The Situationists typically practiced what they preached, and debauchery was no exception: members of the group pursued all manner of erotic liaisons, satisfying, we might imagine, desires both physical and political in nature.³⁴

The Situationists had reason to attach supreme political, philosophical, and symbolic importance to desire, the foundation on which they built a sophisticated theory of subjectivity and emancipation. It was likely that this led them, beginning in 1957, to assiduously chronicle the incursion of spectacle and capitalism into the field of human pleasure, happiness, and sexuality. The essays in which they did so constitute an incisive polemic on desire in modern life.

This polemic was played out on two fronts. On the one hand, the Situationists bemoaned the manipulation of desire by advertisers seeking to stimulate the consumption of goods and services. In December 1960, an anonymous Situationist wrote, within “the current framework of consumerist propaganda, the fundamental mystification of advertising is to associate ideas of fulfillment with objects (television, or garden furniture, or automobile, etc.) . . . This imposed image of fulfillment also constitutes the explicitly terrorist nature of advertising.”³⁵ Put another way, while specific advertisements associate the products they promote with happiness, advertising in general trains the consumer to predicate happiness on consumption alone. The latter achieves its desired effect by treating objects as if they “embod[y] passion in a passionate way But . . . when advertising busies itself with a real passion, this means only the advertising of the spectacle.”³⁶ To assert that advertisements present objects as if they manifest “passion in a passionate way” is another way of saying that upon leaving the factory, commodities not only become animated, they become sexualized as well.³⁷ This astute *détournement*

33. Anon., “Questionnaire” (1964), in *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 141.

34. Former Lettrist Jean-Michel Mension reports that these encounters were not exclusively heterosexual, despite the insistent heterosexuality of Situationist visual culture. According to Mension, a few openly homosexual and bisexual men participated in the SI, and even those men who defined themselves as heterosexual engaged in homosexual liaisons. See *The Tribe*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2001), p. 111. The same held true for female members. Situationist Michèle Bernstein fictionalized a series of homosexual encounters between women (one of whom serves as her own alter ego) in the novels *Tous les chevaux du Roi* and *La Nuit*, published in 1960 and 1961, respectively. See Odile Passot, “Portrait of Guy Debord as a Young Libertine,” *SubStance* 28, no. 3 (1999), pp. 74–76, 78–79, 83–84.

35. Anon., “The Situationist Frontier” (1960), in *Theory of the Dérive*, pp. 106–7.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Concern over the sexualization of commodities (and the concomitant desexualization of individuals) was not unique to the European Situationists. Members of the American wing of the SI also expressed frustration with the degree to which advertising imparted to commodities an erotic allure. “Marketing draws on the sexual energy of the individual . . . The objects are not only shown by men and women who look and act horny, the objects are in themselves appealing, attractive, desirable,

of a singular principle of Marxist philosophy—commodity fetishism—would be followed by many others as the SI elaborated their critique of desire under the postwar visual and economic regime.

In a 1960 essay, Debord and Pierre Canjuers also decried the commercialization of desire—more specifically, the substitution that capitalism effects between debased desires, on the one hand, and authentic desires, on the other. “Capitalist consumption imposes a general reduction of desires by its regular satisfaction of artificial needs,” they write, “which remain needs without ever having been desires—authentic desires being constrained to remain unfulfilled (or compensated in the form of spectacles).”³⁸ The authors provide the example of tourism, whose “pure, rapid, superficial spectacles” simultaneously satisfy and pervert the very real desire “to live in [unfamiliar] human and geographical milieus.”³⁹ Debord and Canjuers also cite the (unillustrated) phenomenon of striptease, which, as “the most obvious form of the degradation of eroticism into spectacle,” imperfectly gratifies a genuine desire through bogus means.⁴⁰

As a corollary to this complaint, the Situationists also expressed consternation over the degree to which individuals had begun to experience desire, independent of consumption, as if it were a commercial exchange. Lettrist Gilles Ivain developed a variant of this critique as early as 1953 in an essay later reprinted in the first issue of *IS*. Here Ivain condemns capitalism for having replaced romance with consumption. “Everyone is hypnotized by production and conveniences—sewage system, elevator, bathroom, washing machine,” he writes. “This state of affairs, arising out of a struggle against poverty, has overshot its ultimate goal . . . Presented with the alternative of love or a garbage disposal unit, young people of all countries have chosen the garbage disposal unit.”⁴¹ To put it bluntly, the pleasure, solace, and comfort that individuals used to seek in lovers, they now find in commodities. Situationist Raoul Vaneigem would pursue Ivain’s observation to its logical conclusion. “Consumer society is extending falsification further and further into the reaches of the night, where the simplest gestures of love are contaminated by its logic.”⁴² Because of the near

necessary for one’s fulfillment, exactly as a sexual object is.” Anon., “The Recuperation of Language,” *Situationist International (Review of the American Section of the SI)* 1 (June 1969), p. 17.

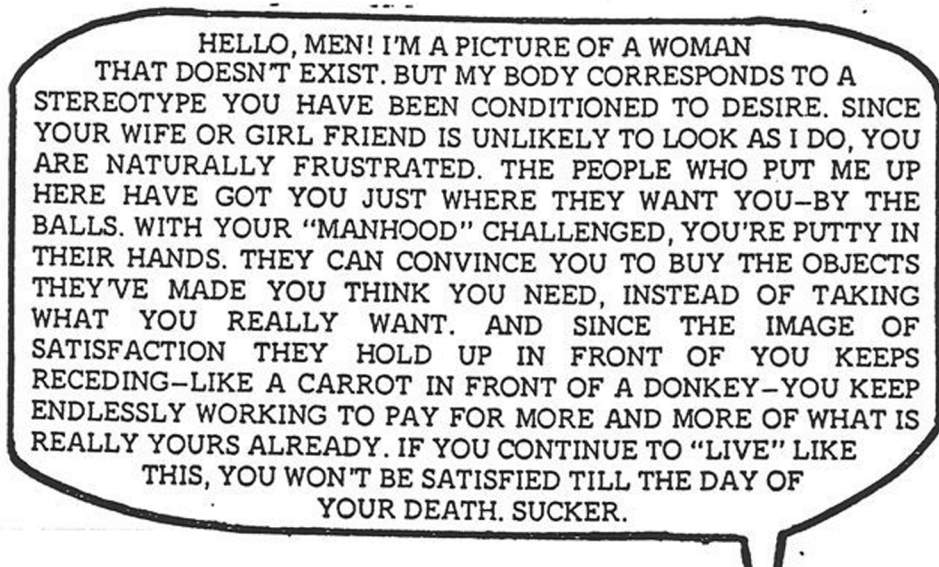
38. Pierre Canjuers and Guy Debord, “Preliminaries Toward Defining a Revolutionary Program” (1960), in *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 307.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 308.

40. *Ibid.* Striptease was of cultural, political, and philosophical interest to many commentators in the postwar period. See Roland Barthes, “Striptease,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1990); and Umberto Eco, “The Socratic Strip” (1960) in *Misreadings*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company and Jonathan Cape Limited, 1993). See also Jean-Luc Godard’s 1961 film *Une femme est une femme* and Marc Allégret’s 1956 film *En effeuillant la Marguerite* [Plucking the Daisy], starring Anna Karina and Brigitte Bardot, respectively.

41. Gilles Ivain, “Formulary for a New Urbanism,” in *Theory of the Dérive*, pp. 15–16.

42. Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life (Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations)*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Paris: Gallimard, 1967; repr., [n.p.]: Left Bank Books and Rebel Press, 1983), p. 248. See also Anon., “De l’Aliénation: examen de plusieurs aspects concrets,” *IS* 10 (March 1966), p. 36.



Ken Knabb.
Untitled. 1970.

total recuperation of desire by the market, Vaneigem fears that even the real women he encounters will behave like things. "We are so afraid of never escaping from meeting with objects . . . No love is possible in an unhappy world."⁴³

It is at this point, however, that Vaneigem's argument begins to stutter. Exactly what is he blaming for the alienation of desire: capitalism, women, or both? Slippage of a similar variety troubles a fascinating piece of ephemera by Ken Knabb, an American closely associated with the SI. Knabb's "comic balloon on stick-um paper" was designed to facilitate the most incisive and efficient of critical operations: users were instructed to paste it over "advertisements of the sort where a beautiful woman is juxtaposed with a masculine oriented product."⁴⁴ The text inside the balloon issues a harsh (yet humorous) rebuke: because they represent women who conform to an impossible ideal, these advertisements arouse but then just as quickly frustrate male desire. With his masculinity impaired, the viewer subsequently loses purchase on his agency, his

43. Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, p. 41. Vaneigem devotes a considerable section of *Revolution* to analyzing the rationalization and quantification of desire.

44. The form and purpose of the comic balloon is described in *Council for the Eruption of the Marvelous: "1044": Contradiction (1970-1972)*, ed. Ken Knabb, (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1975), n.p. Knabb belonged to "1044," a group inspired by the SI and based in Berkeley in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

affectivity, and his critical faculties, rendering him all the more vulnerable to commodity culture.⁴⁵

There is even more to Knabb's deceptively straightforward sticker than this, however. The text accommodates two subject positions, one for the aggressor (the image) and one for the victim (the man). As for the woman, her point of view is inextricably fused with that of the image. Unconsciously or not, therefore, the sticker collapses the images it attacks for having compromised masculine subjectivity and the women these images depict into a single entity, generating so much confusion between woman and image that it is impossible to determine exactly which of them is tormenting the man and, by extension, precisely which of them Knabb is indicting. A similar confusion haunts portions of Vaneigem's text.

In the process of elaborating his analysis of desire and alienation in capitalist society, Vaneigem makes a distinction between the erotic and the sexual. While the former represents an actual encounter, the latter represents merely the illusion or distorted reflection of one. This distinction grants Vaneigem important critical leverage. "Sexualized forms" (which he neither illustrates nor specifies) exist in inverse proportion, he claims, to erotic reality: the more erotic reality declines, the more "sexualized forms" proliferate.⁴⁶ Vaneigem thus reprises a statement made elsewhere by Debord and Canjuers: in order to prevent individuals from becoming conscious of their alienation, capitalist society substitutes anodyne pleasures for truly subversive hopes and dreams. Insofar as they are prefabricated, however, these pleasures are mere palliatives: they relieve without curing, soothe without healing.

Unlike Knabb, neither Debord nor Canjuers nor Vaneigem identify images of women as the specific source of the crisis that they otherwise diagnose in considerable detail in writing. It would be left to a close associate of the Situationists, Henri Lefebvre, to make explicit what the others merely imply.

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Between 1958 and 1962, Lefebvre and the Situationists, Debord in particular, took part in a spirited dialogue, but by the mid-1960s, their relationship had begun to sour, and in 1966 the SI publicly accused Lefebvre of plagiarism.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Lefebvre exerted a profound influence on the Situationists, and they on him.

45. Neither the real women they depict nor the real women who were also subject to their exhortations seem to have concerned Knabb. His uninterest in female subjectivity (or that of the Situationists) stands in contrast to *Collectif femmes en lutte*, whose members participated in the 26th Salon de la Jeune Peinture at the Musée d'art moderne in 1975. With the goal of mounting a "sociological inquiry" into the mediatisation of femininity, the group appropriated and recontextualized advertisements, specifically those featuring images of women. See *Face à l'histoire 1933-1996: l'artiste moderne devant l'événement historique* (Paris: Centre national d'art et de culture Georges Pompidou, 1996), p. 489. Unlike Knabb and the Situationists, *Collectif femmes en lutte* was concerned above all with the ramifications that images of women specifically and capitalist society in general had on the socio-political status of women. For more information, see "Femmes en lutte," in *26e Salon de la Jeune Peinture* (Paris: Jeune peinture, 1975).

46. Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, p. 138.

47. "L'historien Lefebvre," *IS 10* (March 1966), pp. 73-4.

Lefebvre was a figure of considerable intellectual stature in postwar France, especially after the publication of the first volume of his book *Critique of Everyday Life*, in 1947. While the first edition of *Critique* strove primarily to “confront looming alienations as a critic and an implacable enemy,” the second edition, released in 1958, attended more specifically to the alienation of desire, perhaps due to Lefebvre’s collaboration with Debord, who had founded the SI the previous year.⁴⁸

Of particular relevance is the introduction Lefebvre wrote for the 1958 edition, which chronicles the manner in which desire had gradually succumbed to alienation in the intervening decade. The author’s position is unequivocal: if desire no longer functions as the preserve of connection and attachment, interaction and reciprocity, the fault lies not only with capitalism, but with the use capitalism makes of sexually explicit images. Lefebvre writes: “Images with a (more or less) erotic meaning, or simply the display of a woman’s body, are violently attractive,” and even though they have become more conspicuous over the last several years, especially in advertisements, “the effect they have on us” has not yet been exhausted.⁴⁹ “On posters, in shop windows, on the covers of magazines, in films, everywhere,” he continues, “there are unclothed women.” It is not simply the ubiquity of such images that gives him pause, however. According to Lefebvre, these are the agents as well as the products of “modern eroticism,” a debased, disingenuous form of eroticism specific to the modern era. (We might think of “modern eroticism” as a phenomenon fueled by Vaneigem’s “sexualized forms.”) Lefebvre condemns modern eroticism not because it flaunts moral values (the flaunting of entrenched moral values was precisely what he and the SI were advocating), but because it lacks “genuine sensuality, a sensuality which implies beauty or charm, passion or modesty, power over the object of desire, and fulfillment.” Modern eroticism, he continues, “is weary and wearying, mechanical. There is nothing really sensual in this unbridled sensuality, and that is probably its most profound characteristic.”

“Power over the object of desire”—this phrase is the pivot around which Lefebvre’s critique of modern eroticism revolves. A subject who lacks power over the object of his desire has not only lost ownership of that object, he has also lost ownership of his desire and, by extension, of himself. Instead of the subject of desire, he

48. Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life: Volume 1*, trans. John Moore (repr., London: Verso, 1991), p. 98. Lefebvre and the Situationists were by no means the only artists and intellectuals to comment on this phenomenon. Georges Perec, Boris Vian, Jean-Luc Godard, and others also issued sometimes indirect, sometimes more scathing indictments of the effects of materialism and consumerism on human desire. The militants of May 1968, echoing the Situationists, also criticized the manner in which capitalist society reduced the experience of desire to the ownership of goods and commodities. This position was given its most poetic and virulent expression by the anonymous graffiti artists who scrawled slogans such as “L’homme fait l’amour avec la chose” or “On achète ton bonheur: VOLE LE” on the interior and exterior of buildings during the weeks of civil unrest. See Walter Lewino, *L’imagination au pouvoir* (Paris: Eric Losfeld Éditeur, 1968). On a different element of the relationship between sexuality and politics after May 1968, see Michael Lucey, “Sexuality, Politicization, May 1968: Situating Christiane Rochefort’s *Printemps au parking*,” *Differences* 12, no. 3 (2001).

49. Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, p. 35. (Unless otherwise noted, all remaining quotes are from this page.)

finds himself subject to another's desire. "As a set of desires," Lefebvre writes in the main body of *Critique*, "the human being is not developed and cultivated for himself, but so that the demands of [the bourgeois political economy] may be satisfied."⁵⁰ What he identifies under the guise of modern eroticism, therefore, also constitutes a shift in the nature of desire and subjectivity under capitalism.

According to Lefebvre, the "displays of sexuality and nudity" to which modern eroticism has given rise might be understood to "correspond to something profound," but in fact they function solely as "a kind of escapism which from certain angles is more like a generalized neurosis."⁵¹ In the case of modern eroticism, "we step outside the everyday, without actually leaving it: it shocks, [but] this effect is superficial, pure appearance." Lefebvre goes on to identify modern eroticism and, by implication, images of sexualized women as manifestations of a much wider phenomenon he designates as the "domain of the illusory reverse image," a theoretical precursor, perhaps, to Debord's (more nuanced) "spectacle." Here, Lefebvre writes, "we find a false world: firstly because it is not a world, and because it presents itself as true, and because it mimics real life closely in order to replace the real by the opposite." Modern eroticism would seem to operate in a similar capacity. Insofar as it furnishes the illusion of pleasure, affection, and companionship via images with sexually explicit content, it simultaneously mitigates and conceals an all too real unhappiness: the estrangement of individuals from one another.

It was for precisely this reason, I would argue, that the Situationists pressed images of women into service in the first place, especially those that spoke to the sexual imaginary of the postwar era. By virtue of their symbiotic relationship with both modern eroticism and the domain of the illusory reverse image (to use Lefebvre's terms), images of women were at once symptomatic of and directly responsible for the alienation of desire. As such, they made ideal candidates for *détournement*. Indeed, once isolated from the "common stream" of images comprising the spectacle and rearticulated in the context of a Situationist periodical, these images served as a trenchant commentary on the virtualization of desire. That such an approach would generate an insoluble contradiction was inevitable—after all, the Situationists were fashioning a rebuke to the visibility of alienation out of images and generating a critique of the alienation of desire through material that trafficked in pedestrian, bankrupt desires. This contradiction was nonetheless a productive and illuminating one. It was also entirely in keeping with the Situationists' other experiments in *détournement*, whose primary source of dialectical energy was contradiction.

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So pressing an issue was desire that, even after the dissolution of the SI in 1972, Debord had still not exhausted it as a subject of inquiry. One year later, he released

50. Ibid., p. 161.

51. Ibid., p. 35.

his film *The Society of the Spectacle*, in which footage of female fashion models and celebrities mingles with photographs of nude bathers and erotic dancers. Although the images in the film tend to be more salacious than the ones in *IS*, the terminology Debord used to describe them is rather clinical—descriptive without being judgmental: “*Un long strip-tease*”; “*Strip-tease de plusieurs professionnelles*”; “*Une fille nue*”; “*Filles exotiques présentées dans des cages*”; or “*Série de cover-girls, nues ou peu vêtues.*”⁵² However, the images with which these striptease artists and cover girls are juxtaposed as well as the excerpts from *The Society of the Spectacle* with which they are paired advance a point of view that is anything but clinical—or subtle.⁵³ They also signal the expansion of the symbolic and strategic value attached to images of women. Whereas before 1972, the Situationists recruited images of women to critique the derealization of desire, in his film, Debord employs them to condemn with equal virulence the becoming-image as well as the becoming-commodity of desire. A single example will suffice. A quarter of the way through the film, a sequence of nine still photographs depicting women in various stages of undress is interrupted by footage from a newsreel about the Salon d’Automobile, a popular forum for the purveyance of that ultimate object of consumer lust: the car. Bodies and shiny chrome bumpers are caressed and stroked, inspected and parsed, to similar ends by the camera, while the entire sequence is accompanied by Debord’s 1967 riff on Marx:

The essential movement of the spectacle consists in absorbing all that existed in human activity in a fluid state, in order to possess it in a congealed stage Through this we recognize our old enemy, the commodity, which knows so well how to seem at first glance trivial and self-evident, while on the contrary it is so complex and full of metaphysical subtleties. This is the principle of commodity fetishism . . . which reaches its absolute fulfillment in the spectacle [The] movement [of the commodity] is identical to the growing estrangement of men among themselves and in relation to their growing product.⁵⁴

If the coincidence of image and text is here taken in the spirit of a reply—a reply, perhaps, to a question that would be posed decades later by Judith Butler: “What kind of journey is desire that its direction is so deceptive?”⁵⁵—we might imagine that Debord has responded thus: it is the journey of desire that does not know itself as such. It is the predicament of subjectivity in the age of capital and spectacle.

52. Guy Debord, *Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes 1952–1978* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), pp. 65, 72, 78, 92, and 94.

53. The images represent everything from police brutality and couples watching television to shopping malls and assembly lines. The excerpts consistently condemn alienation, spectacle, and commodity fetishism.

54. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle and Other Films* (London: Rebel Press, 1992), pp. 73, 76.

55. Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, xix.