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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the influence of recuperation on the theories, concepts, and practices of the Situationist International. From 1957 to 1972, the Situationist International emerged as an ultra-leftist radical organization dually influenced by the European avant-garde and Western Marxism. In contrast to the majority of Situationist theories and concepts, recuperation receives much less attention. Consequently, this study takes recuperation as its central focus. This thesis argues that the awareness of recuperation and resistance to it provides a unifying theme in the intellectual history of the Situationist International.

The Situationists employed the concept of recuperation to describe the process by which subversive elements in opposition to modern capitalism are contained and effectively emasculated. Instead of direct eradication or suppression, recuperation neutralized critical dissent by assimilating it into the spectacle of consumer capitalism. Commodification transformed revolution into a product to be consumed, a circumstance in which the representation of subversion is encountered in a passive and contemplative manner which inhibited the active pursuit of revolution. The Situationists regarded recuperation as the greatest threat to their critical merit as a revolutionary organization.

This study examines three broad themes of the Situationist international – the spectacle, the refusal of work, and their aesthetic practices – within this context of recuperation. The first chapter asserts that recuperation functions as the process of fortifying the structure of the spectacle. The second chapter reveals the refusal of work as a philosophical core which emphasizes avoiding recuperation by positioning oneself beyond the framework of the commodity-relation and the spectacle. The third chapter demonstrates the integration of cultural and political practices as a means to counter and overturn the effects of recuperation.
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INTRODUCTION

“Never have we once been involved in anything either politicians of the most extreme left-wing variety or the most progressive-minded intellectuals get up to in the way of business, rivalries and the company they keep. Now that we can moreover pride ourselves on having achieved the most revolting fame among this rabble, we fully intend to become even more inaccessible, even more clandestine. The more famous our theses become, the more shadowy our presence will be.”

The events which erupted in May 1968 in Paris proved that the sentiments expressed by Guy Debord and the Situationist International concerning the nature of capitalist society had resonated strongly among those involved in the student insurrections and the largest general strike in the history of France. In the aftermath of these events, the popularity of the Situationist International surged to an unprecedented degree. At the height of its fame and renown, however, Debord dissolved the Situationist International in 1972. What is striking in the passage above is Debord’s expression of poise and self-assurance in the certainty of Situationist theory juxtaposed by the avowal to disappear and to become inaccessible. In contrast to contemporary society where the acquisition of celebrity represents success, the rising popularity of the Situationists in the late 1960s and early 1970s was regarded as a considerable threat. As a maximalist, ultra-leftist group unequivocally opposed to capitalism and the society it had created, Debord and the Situationists were aware that they were susceptible to the most ingenious tactic by which capitalism neutralized its opponents, a tactic known as recuperation. This tactic was based on the premise that the most effective way to neutralize revolutionary ambitions and desires was not through oppression or censorship but through an act of commodification. Ultimately, Debord dissolved the Situationist International in 1972 because he feared that the

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organization, its theories, and its practices would become “the prestige commodity of revolution itself.”

The Situationist International emerged during a period of great transition in Europe and in France specifically. After the Second World War, growing economic prosperity led to an increase in consumable goods, increased leisure time, and rapid urbanization. Politically, the collapse of the Fourth Republic had ushered in an age of technocracy and management intensifying with Charles de Gaulle’s Fifth Republic. In the context of the Cold War, this era also witnessed the decline of the French empire losing the colonial possessions of Indochina in 1954 and Algeria in 1962. Moreover, the death of Joseph Stalin and the declining legitimacy of Soviet Communism inaugurated a period in which French leftist intellectuals made pioneering advances in revolutionary theory. In contrast to Germany and Russia, the belated introduction of Marx into France arrived in the form of Western Marxism, a tradition which rejected the dogmatic economic determinism of orthodox Marxism, focusing on the themes of alienation and culture. Journals such as Arguments, Socialisme ou Barbarie, and Les Temps Modernes helped to loosen the monopoly held by the French Communist Party, and opened a space for the creation of new and more dynamic perspectives on revolutionary theory.

When the Situationist International formed in 1957, they emerged in an age in which capitalism had become the dominant and hegemonic force, its reach extending throughout the globe and exerting its influence into the lives of people everywhere. Since the late nineteenth century, Karl Marx and generations of his followers had espoused the belief that contradictory tendencies within capitalism itself would produce the very conditions for its collapse. For Debord and the Situationists, this systemic breakdown never materialized. From their

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3 Debord and Sanguinetti, The Real Split, 53.
perspective, modern capitalism seemed stronger and more stable than ever. While orthodox Marxists and the parties of the official Left continued to wait for this imminent breakdown, others sought an explanation for the continued existence of capitalism. Regarding the nature of their social and political criticism, the Situationists were closely aligned to the tradition of Western Marxism which “considered the essential problem of modern capitalism to lie within its ability to contain, rather than produce, class conflict and economic crisis.”5 Rather than search for these answers in the sphere of economics, this broad spectrum of intellectuals proceeded by examining the effects of capitalism within the framework of culture.

The Situationist International located this means of containment in their theory of the spectacle. In a single word, the spectacle encapsulates the entire body of their criticism against modern capitalism and the consumer society which flourished in the 1950s and 1960s. The spectacle refers to the extension of capitalist relations beyond the sphere of production into consumption. In a restricted sense, this concept applies to the realm of culture: media, entertainment, art, and leisure activities. More generally, it refers to the entire system of capitalism, the hegemony of commodity-production, and its penetration into everyday life. The Situationists condemned the spectacle for conditioning individuals into passive subjects who contemplated the experience of their own lives determined for them by the producers of commodities. The Situationists most strongly condemned the spectacle as a means of ideological propaganda for the purpose of maintaining the structure of modern capitalism.

Against threats to capitalism, the spectacle possessed a formidable instrument or self-correcting mechanism known as recuperation. From the perspective of the Situationists, the possibility of recuperation presented itself as a ubiquitous danger which threatened to undermine

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the trenchancy of their revolutionary positions and practices. By means of commodification, recuperation assimilates social and cultural opposition to capitalism into the spectacle. Ken Knabb, editor of the *Situationist International Anthology* provides a more thorough definition:

*Recuperation*: used in the sense of the system’s recovering something that was lost to it, bringing back into the fold a potential revolt against it. The term ‘cooption’ is similar but more limited. Thus, a reformist demand is co-opted (and recuperated) by being taken over and implemented by the state. But a more radical act or idea can be recuperated by being pigeonholed within the dominant categories, integrated into the spectacle as a confusionist or extremist foil which thus serves to complement and reinforce the system, while not necessarily obtaining the approval or implementation implied by cooption.6

Accordingly, the recuperation of dissent works by integrating subversion into the general context of capitalism, a circumstance which inhibits the emergence of a comprehensive analysis of modern society. Once commodified into the structure of capitalist society, the content of a “radical act or idea” remains entirely intact but no longer retains its former potency. As a commodity, the sale of revolution satisfied the needs of a specialized market niche, assuaging discontent through passive consumption and obviating the desire for actual revolt.

The Situationist concern with recuperation presents itself as a rather sophisticated philosophical issue. The main criticism against the spectacle was its compulsion of a life of passive contemplation in contrast to one of active engagement. Debord became a revolutionary due to “an overarching desire for a rich full life of passion, not of passive contemplation, and embod[ied] a will to destroy whatever at present makes such a life impossible.”7 The Situationists condemned the spectacle for propagating a tyranny of that which exists over the unimagined and creative possibilities of that which could be. Ideas, literature, art, and all products of human ingenuity were subject to a general trend in which their dynamic social origins become no longer evident, transformed into ideologies which demanded adherence

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7 Jappe, *Guy Debord*, 3.
instead of promoting one’s critical and active engagement in the world. For the Situationists, recuperation functioned as the process which ossified the fluid nature of human existence into the sacred domain of ideology and tradition.

In this thesis, I advance the argument that the theories and practices of the Situationist International were guided predominately by their concern over the possibility of recuperation. This research will demonstrate how recuperation provides the organizing principle which unites their socio-political critique of modern capitalism, the refusal of work, and their critical practices derived from their artistic background and connection with the European avant-garde. By looking at the concept of the spectacle in detail, we will discover and illuminate how recuperation functions to assimilate and weaken critical opposition to capitalism. In their refusal of work, we will see how the Situationists attempted to avoid recuperation as the commodity of labor-power and how this represents a larger effort on their part to circumvent the totality of spectacular relations. And, finally, in their aesthetic practices, we will see what the Situationists envisioned as the alternative to spectacular life, their active methods of contestation, and how they relate to recuperation.

I have been fascinated with the basic concept of recuperation for several years. Until fairly recently, however, I was completely unaware that it had a particular name or that it had ever been discussed as a historical issue. As an undergraduate student, I often noticed students around campus wearing t-shirts emblazoned with the image of Che Guevara or even the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata. With some historical knowledge of revolutionary movements in Latin American nations, the use of these images to make money seemed rather incongruous from what these figures stood for. For reasons I did not understand, the circulation of these images seemed to convey only a trivial vestige of what they signified. The question that
haunted me though was why exactly did commodification lead to the emasculation of revolutionary ideas rather than inspiring revolutionary action?

Toward resolving this dilemma, it is in the work of the Situationist International where I encountered this issue in the form of recuperation. Although it is mentioned throughout the body of their work, the documents produced by the Situationists do not provide a systematic analysis into the process of recuperation nor is it addressed adequately in the secondary histories on the Situationist International. In order to provide a systematic analysis of recuperation, this research proceeds as an intellectual history, examining the key ideas, concept, and theories offered by Guy Debord and the Situationist International.

As a result, this thesis primarily engages the documents produced by the members of the Situationist International. The most abundant sources come from the group’s self-titled journal Internationale Situationniste which published twelve issues between 1957 and 1972 during which Guy Debord served as its main editor. A great number of these articles were written collectively while others were the contributions of distinct authors. Anthologies of their work are abundant and often emphasize different aspects of Situationist theory, some focusing on their political ideas and others their aesthetic ones. The two anthologies used in this study are the Situationist International Anthology edited by Ken Knabb and Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents edited by Tom McDonough.⁸

The remaining primary sources consist of two Situationist books published in 1967: Guy Debord’s The Society of the Spectacle and Raoul Vaneigem’s The Revolution of Everyday Life. By far the most informative source, Debord’s work provides the most definitive explanation of the spectacle. Aphoristic and abstruse, this short volume encompasses the entire range of

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Situationist theory. In contrast, Vaneigem’s book is significantly less theoretical in substance. Originally published as *Traité de savoir-faire à l'usage des jeunes générations*, Vaneigem’s appeal communicates the more poetic and exuberant desire for revolutionary action.

The secondary material related to the Situationist International is abundant, and yet, possess a number of limitations. One major shortcoming in the literature encountered is a tendency to revere Debord and the Situationists rather than to treat them critically as a historical subject. Another issue confronted in this historiography concerns the inclination to emphasize the artistic ideas of the Situationists without regard to their political ideas. What distinguishes the more incisive sources is their ability to integrate both the artistic and political aspects of Situationist theories. However, even the works of these authors fail to address the issue of recuperation in an adequate and direct manner. The majority of this scholarship certainly does address the Situationist concern over recuperation but it is often mentioned as a peripheral issue. In contrast, my research positions recuperation as the focal point around which situationist theory and practices revolve.

The most insightful and invaluable source on the intellectual history of the Situationist International resides in Anselm Jappe’s *Guy Debord*. Published in 1999, Jappe’s work provided a significant framework for the development of this research. The author’s main objective is to determine “the relevance to the present time of the ‘spectacle’ . . . and its utility in the construction of a critical theory of contemporary society.” In doing so, Jappe explores the conceptual development of Debord’s theory of the spectacle by examining its precursors in the work of Karl Marx and Georg Lukács. The author illuminates how Debord adapted and refined their ideas on the commodity-form, commodity-fetishism, and reification in order to develop his

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own unique criticism of modern capitalism. In contrast to a majority of the works on the Situationist International, Jappe provides a balanced and integrated approach to the Situationist International by examining their political ideas in relation to their aesthetic foundation in the European avant-garde.

In his article “Sic Gloria Transit Artis: The ‘End of Art’ for Theodor Adorno and Guy Debord,” Jappe illuminates the relationship between modern art and exchange-value. An enduring theme which courses throughout Debord’s work is the supersession of art: the idea that art cannot be treated as a practice removed from the experience of everyday life. In contrast to Adorno who regarded art as a positive critical practice, Debord considered the practice of art as an indulgence without revolutionary merit. Another theme addressed by Jappe concerns the ambiguous role of the European avant-garde. Conventionally, Dada and Surrealism are regarded as artistic movements which sought to negate and explore alternatives to the existing cultural values of European society. Jappe argues that these movements had the opposite, unintended consequence of opening new avenues for the penetration of capitalism.

Of all the histories on the Situationist International, Sadie Plant’s book *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*, provides the most direct discussion of recuperation and its influence in the work of the Situationist International. The author is most preoccupied with establishing a sense of continuity between the work of the Situationist International and postmodernist intellectuals claiming that “all theoreatisations of postmodernity are underwritten by situationist theory and the social and cultural agitations in which it is

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pieced." Plant’s main contribution to this research has been to illuminate a number of theoretical problems which emerge when considering the issue of recuperation. Namely, the ambiguous distinction between recuperation and subversion as well as the theoretical and practical difficulties encountered by the Situationists in negotiating this tension.

In *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry*, published in 2006, Vincent Kaufmann provides a balanced approach between biography and intellectual history. Kaufmann’s basic thesis maintains that Guy Debord’s “life and work . . . [are] one and the same thing.” Although this research does not dwell at length on biographic details, Kaufmann’s book succeeds in describing how the spectacle and recuperation operate as the antithesis of life experienced directly. Debord’s desire to live authentically on his own terms is one which cannot be reproduced or represented in any way. Kaufmann describes the life of Debord as one which embraces the “ephemeral” over the eternal, “clandestinity” over the celebrity of the spectacle, and “the fervent intention to escape all forms of identification” as a means of protecting his individual sovereignty. Kaufmann reveals that it is representation which makes individuals and cultural works vulnerable to recuperation.

Jonathon Crary’s article, “Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory,” stands out as the most direct effort to examine the historical and material origins of Debord’s theory of the spectacle. Most analyses of the spectacle, including Debord’s own, are exceedingly abstract and present the spectacle as a collection of nuanced definitions and descriptions concerning the effects of

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13 Plant, 5.
15 Ibid., xiii.
16 Ibid., ix.
17 Ibid., xvii
18 Ibid.
capitalist power. Crary’s work, on the other hand, provides a grounded perspective of the spectacle by identifying its technological and political contexts from which it emerged.

Edward Ball’s article, “The Great Sideshow of the Situationist International,” in *Yale French Studies* concentrates on the concept of reification, revealing it as an essential aspect of recuperation. For recuperation to occur through rationalization or commodification what is needed is a moment in which human activity or experience can essentially be captured and reproduced. Ball reveals that the Situationist technique of détournement was a technique meant to reverse the ideological connotations of existing artistic or literary works acquired within the context of the spectacle and to modify it for propagandistic ends.

Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen’s articles “Counterrevolution, the Spectacle, and the Situationist Avant-Garde” and “The Situationist International, Surrealism, and the Difficult Fusion of Art and Politics,” illuminate the Situationists’ artistic background in relation to their political theories. One major theme in the history of the Situationist International is the continuation of the European avant-garde’s project to integrate art and life. The failures of the avant-garde to realize this endeavor significantly influenced the Situationist perspective on art and revolutionary practice. For Debord, the production of representative art had to be abandoned completely in favor of revolutionary practices, albeit revolutionary practices informed by their background in the avant-garde.

Furthermore, this investigation led me to explore a number of additional historical themes which informed the course of this paper but were not used directly. One of the challenges I encountered was the Situationists’ totalizing perspective in which economic, cultural, political,

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social, aesthetic, and philosophical issues are fundamentally interconnected. Consequently, modernity, art history, the Enlightenment, the Frankfurt School of Marxist criticism, Max Weber, and a number of sociological analyses of consumerism and consumption. While essential for the development of this paper, these peripheral avenues of research were often more unproductive than expected. The secondary material related to these topics either went beyond the scope of this research, was only loosely discussed by the Situationists, or handled in a manner which diverged too considerably from the positions taken by the Situationists.

This investigation into the process of recuperation has led to a number of directly and indirectly to a number of related historical questions. How does the effort to avoid recuperation reflect the revolutionary ambitions of the Situationists? Why do the Situationists continue the tradition project of the European avant-garde who attempted to unify politics and culture? What are the socio-cultural implications of universalized commodity-production? What are the qualitative effects on the commodification of human ingenuity, creativity, and imagination? How is human life affected in a world predominately determined by value? Additionally, this thesis seeks to investigate the claim made by Sadie Plant who asserts “what has really written the Situationists out of intellectual history is their own determination to avoid recuperation within existing channels of dissent and critical theory.”

Finally I pose two related and fundamental questions which may be the most difficult to answer: what are the limits of commodification and what is irrecoverable?

Throughout the course of researching and writing of this thesis, I encountered a number of challenges which were largely theoretical in nature. First of all, the process of recuperation lacks a human agent. If such a concept were presented to the most unyielding proponents of capitalism it remains doubtful that he or she would acknowledge recuperation as a programmatic

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22 Plant, 4.
feature of the system. Rather, commodification appears as a legitimate entrepreneurial endeavor which bears no ideological or moral constraints from the perspective of making a profit. Recuperation does not present itself as an explicit ideological component of modern capitalism or consumer society. Those who recuperate are not aware that they function in the role as agents of recuperation. The abstract and reified nature of recuperation, however, does not detract from the legitimacy of the issue from the perspective of Debord and the Situationists.

A second problematic aspect of this topic hinges upon the issue of bourgeois ideology. In analyzing the texts of the Situationists, one gets the sense that all opposition to capitalism, without proper safeguards, is susceptible to becoming recuperated into the overall discourse of capitalism. Historians such as Arthur Marwick refute the notion that there exists a historical meta-narrative of bourgeois ideology which determines the nature and course of historical events in the modern world. What he calls the “Great Marxisant Fallacy” consists of

the belief in that the society we inhabit is the bad bourgeois society, but that, fortunately, this society is in a state of crisis, so that the good society which lies just around the corner can be easily attained if only we work systematically to destroy the language, the values, the culture, the ideology of bourgeois society.\(^{23}\)

From this perspective, the arguments of the Situationists emanate from fundamentally fallacious premises. While I agree with Marwick’s assertion that “[m]odern society is highly complex with respect to the distribution of power, authority, and influence,”\(^{24}\) this sophisticated analysis of historical development emerges from the perspective of a historian, not necessarily that of a historical actor. Without question, the ideas proffered by the Situationists emerged in opposition to capitalism. While there may exist no programmatic bourgeois or Marxist ideology guiding the course of history, the organization of capitalist economics, the production of commodities, and


\(^{24}\) Ibid.
the search for profit certainly have a presence with tangible consequences on the events of the world.

Yet another theme this thesis explores is the idea that the European avant-garde, with the Situationists included, in the process of fostering a critique of bourgeois culture and values, were actually responsible for dismantling all the previous constraints on capitalism and allowing it greater possibilities for extending commodification further into the cultural sphere of human endeavor. As Jappe claims, “what these oppositions challenged were imperfect phases of capitalism in which large sectors of the population were excluded from the access channels of capitalist socialization.”

Another problematic feature which I have confronted in this thesis concerns the intersection of culture and politics. When examining the history of the Situationists and their ideas, discussions of the Situationists and their ideas lend themselves to a considerable amount of ambiguity and vagueness. Part of this is due to the emphasis they placed on the necessity for active and direct participation. A significant portion of their work reads as a manual for practice, records of these practices, and suggestions for further development. This also due to the Debord’s desire to fuse aesthetic concerns with political demands. The Situationist concept of the spectacle resides largely within the sphere of culture, yet the situationist concept of the spectacle possesses a political and ideological function. When approaching the history of the Situationists from their foundation in the European avant-garde, their aesthetic ideas. With the expulsion of the artists in 1962, the boundaries between culture and politics becomes increasingly indistinct.

The first chapter examines the conceptual relationship between the spectacle and recuperation. An investigation into the origins and theoretical development of the spectacle will

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25 Jappe, Guy Debord, 147.
illuminate recuperation as an integrated process of commodification and rationalization. The second chapter will explore recuperation as it relates to the Situationist refusal of work. Representing the pivot between their socio-political criticism and their aesthetic practices, the refusal of work functions as the most adamant refusal to participate in the economy of the spectacle as well as an attempt to circumvent the cultural values propagated by the spectacle. The third chapter examines the aesthetic practices of the Situationist International looking more closely at their background in the European avant-garde, the preoccupation of the avant-garde with the intersection of art and politics, and how the Situationists sought to resolve this long-standing impasse through the creation of a set of a critical aesthetic practices of engagement which reflects their concern of recuperation. The conclusion of this research summarizes and synthesizes the arguments discussed in the previous chapters and finishes with a look at the implications of recuperation in relation to broader historical themes.
THE SPECTACLE AND THE MECHANISMS OF RECUPERATION

From 1957 to 1972, the Situationist International advocated the absolute destruction of capitalism and its socio-cultural extension, the spectacle. With the defeat of fascism and the declining legitimacy of Soviet Communism, it appeared that the forces of capitalism in Western Europe had prevailed. Rapid economic recovery, the proliferation of material goods, an increase in leisure time, and the promise of continual progress seemed to confirm the viability of capitalism as a sustainable mode of economic organization. The Situationist International regarded this state of affairs as concealing a more iniquitous reality. According to Guy Debord, “the problem is not that people live more or less poorly; but that they live in a way that is always beyond their control.”26 No longer bound to the exigencies of survival, technological advancements and increased economic productivity should have ushered in an unprecedented historical era in which people determined the course of their lives. Instead, the 1950s and 1960s witnessed the emergence of a new form of control and domination, more subtle, imperceptible, and effective than any which had come before: the spectacle of modern capitalism.

This chapter examines the Situationists’ concept of the spectacle in order to develop a systematic analysis of recuperation. Although the Situationists did not provide a definitive and explicit study of recuperation, Debord’s conceptual development of the spectacle provides the necessary elements to adequately elaborate this process. Accordingly, this chapter investigates the work of Debord’s main theoretical predecessors, Karl Marx and Georg Lukács, and examines their ideas concerning the commodity-form, commodity-fetishism, and reification. This will be followed by examining Debord’s elaboration of these ideas in the spectacle and how they function in the process of recuperation. In the process, this study identifies the process of

recuperation in full to gain an understanding of why the Situationists were concerned with the possibility of recuperation, and to gain a greater understanding of the idea which provides the cohesion to their criticisms, theories, practices, and their general revolutionary perspective.

From the perspective of the Situationists, the most notable historical examples of recuperation were the avant-garde movements of Dada and Surrealism. Having emerged in response to the brutality and devastation of the First World War, Dadaists and Surrealists blamed the outbreak of this conflict on the cultural values of the European bourgeoisie and proceeded to challenge them by employing innovative artistic forms as a means of political engagement. Despite their initially provocative character, the novelty of these movements gradually subsided and descended into familiar routines which became predictable, banal, and passé. By merit of its dissolution in 1924, Dada largely escaped the derisive critiques of the Situationists. The Surrealist movement and its adherents were less fortunate, becoming the object of frequent disdain for their continued survival into the late 1960s as an aesthetic movement which had lost its revolutionary vitality. When the Situationist International emerged in the late 1950s, Dada and Surrealism had become assimilated into the institution of art and had devolved into “sterile fragments with no connection [to] their original revolutionary premises.”27 These movements which had emerged so adamantly opposed to the existing bourgeois order had transformed into a mere source of artistic inspiration. Their recuperation served as a constant reminder that the same fate could befall the Situationist International.

Debord and the Situationists operated with a constant anxiety that their organization, theories, and practices were vulnerable to recuperation. Debord directly acknowledged this possibility in his seminal work The Society of the Spectacle:

Without a doubt, the critical concept of the *spectacle* is susceptible to being turned into just another empty formula of sociologico-political rhetoric designed to explain and denounce everything in the abstract—so serving to buttress the spectacular system itself. For obviously no idea could transcend the spectacle that exists—it could only transcend ideas that exist about the spectacle.\(^2^8\)

In addition to the theory of the spectacle, the anxiety over recuperation extended to the organization of the Situationist International, where the frequent expulsions of its members were carried out to prevent its transformation into a bureaucratic party and its ideas reduced to ideology. This logic came to its extreme conclusion when Guy Debord dissolved the Situationist International in 1972. While he asserted that this action transpired because the insurrections of May 1968 had proved the efficacy of Situationist ideas, it is quite clear that Debord regarded the popularization and the flood of new members into the Situationist International as more detrimental to revolutionary practice than beneficial.

As a result of the Situationists’ origins within the artistic avant-garde, the analysis of recuperation pertains most appropriately to the realm of culture. Defined broadly as the expression of human intercourse in literature and the arts, culture represented a sphere of human endeavor ostensibly removed from immediate political and economic considerations. Although, the Situationists criticized the “freedom concealed in the cultural sphere . . . as a cover for the alienation that reigned in every other realm of activity, . . . culture was nevertheless the only area where the question of the use of the means at society’s disposal could be posed in its entirety.”\(^2^9\) Moreover, this approach reflected a general disillusionment with the parties of the official Left which had been compromised by their degeneration into bureaucracy, their acquiescence to reformist solutions, and the constant deferral of revolution. Their failure demanded the

emergence of “new forms of rebellion, new ideologies, new criticism.” Consequently, the cultural approach to political engagement allowed for the possibility of a more comprehensive analysis of existing society serving as an intellectual space to develop new forms of contestation and the creative freedom to imagine alternatives to capitalism. The combined failures of the traditional left and the artistic avant-garde accentuated their limitations as isolated perspectives and emphasized the need for a more integrated approach in order to challenge capitalism. Accordingly, the Situationists attempted to balance their cultural approach by integrating “a social critique of Marxist inspiration.”

Due to his connection to the avant-garde, Debord cannot be defined strictly as a Marxist theoretician, yet his theory of the spectacle emerges most clearly when examined within the context of Western Marxism. In contrast to the economic determinism of orthodox Marxism, theorists of this particular tendency developed a more sophisticated approach to the relationship between economics and culture. Accordingly, Debord’s concept of the spectacle incorporates and expands many of the salient themes associated with Western Marxism. A conceptual summary of the spectacle describes it as the “subjugation of the world to the economy, the fetishism of goods, reification, alienation, ideology, and specifically, how images, representations, entertainment prevent authentic life from coming into being.”

An abstract concept described in abstract terms, defining the spectacle in a precise manner is an elusive task. The concept of the spectacle defies precise definition because the Situationists employed it as an inclusive term to convey different aspects of modern capitalism. In the most limited sense, the spectacle refers to the realm of culture, or everything which exists outside of the production process: “In all its specific manifestations – news or propaganda,

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31 Jappe, Guy Debord, 49.
32 Kaufmann, Guy Debord, 160.
advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment – the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life.”  

At the same time, however, the spectacle is applied in a broad, sweeping manner which “refers first of all to Western capitalism, then by extension to all existing society, and finally even covers societies of the past.”  

For Debord and the Situationists, the spectacle represented the subtle, intangible, and imperceptible influence of capital into every sphere of human life. As such, the concept of the spectacle functions as a theoretical model to describe how “power functions noncoercively” not from a single authority but from a number of seemingly unrelated, unprejudiced sources to achieve “a homogenous effect of power.”  

In Comments on the Society of the Spectacle published in 1988, Debord provides a rare yet specific indication that the spectacle’s emergence occurred in the late 1920s. From this evidence, Jonathan Crary isolates three critical historical developments which occurred during this period. The most significant innovation concerned the “technological perfection of television” which allowed images to be transmitted with an unprecedented degree of “speed, ubiquity, and simultaneity.”  

Intensifying the effects of the first innovation, the second involves the synchronization of sound and image. This amalgamation forever changed “the nature of subjective experience” by changing “the nature of attention that was demanded of a viewer.”  

Crary suggests that modes of sensory perception stimulated in isolation are less effective in commanding an individual’s attention than the stimulation of multiple senses at once. Together, these innovations encouraged passivity: “That kind of redundancy of representation, with its accompanying inhibition and impoverishment of memory, was what Benjamin saw as the

33 Debord, Society of the Spectacle, 13.
34 Jappe, Guy Debord, 146.
35 Crary, “Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory,” 96.
36 Ibid., 100-101.
37 Ibid., 101-102.
standardization of perception, or what we might call an effect of spectacle.”38 The third development connected the emergence of the spectacle to the rise of fascism. The use of television and film by the Nazi regime generated strong connotations of the spectacle as a means of propaganda. From this historical perspective, the association of images with propaganda extended beyond fascism and regarded as an instrument of capitalism.39

The intellectual most commonly associated with the tradition of Western Marxism resides in the figure of Georg Lukács. Regarded as “Communism’s most critical apostle and its most obedient apostate,” Lukács negotiated the difficult terrain of advancing new and original ideas while conforming to the official line of orthodox Stalinism.40 For his deviationism, he often faced censure and became the object of constant attack by the demagogues of the Communist Party. In 1923, Lukács published his most influential work History and Class

History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics. In this book, Lukács deviated from the orthodoxy of economic determinism by extending his analysis to investigate the cultural implications of capitalist alienation. In the following year, Lukács was summarily denounced by the chairman of the Communist International and forced to retract the opinions elaborated in his work.41 His book remained suppressed until the 1950s when “the official demise of Stalinism stimulated the search for a different kind of Marxism.”42

Lukács initiated this search in History and Class Consciousness by asking “How far is commodity exchange together with its structural consequences able to influence the total outer

38 Ibid., 103.
39 Ibid., 105.
42 Jappe, Guy Debord, 20.
and inner life of society?” In response to this inquiry, Lukács developed his most enduring idea: the concept of reification. Reification refers to the “process by which people come to believe that humanly created social structures are natural, universal, and absolute ‘things’ and, as a result, that those social structures do acquire those characteristics.” Lukács began his investigation by examining Karl Marx’s analysis of commodities.

Marx introduces Capital by elucidating two theoretical aspects of commodities: the commodity-structure and commodity-fetishism. According to Marx, the commodity functions as the most basic element residing at the core of the capitalist system, the form of which contains the kernel for the evolution of capital. In essence, a commodity is anything produced for the simultaneous realization of use-value and exchange-value; or more plainly, anything produced to satisfy the needs of a consumer while realizing a profit. For the capitalist, the use-value of a commodity functioned as a mere vessel for the transmission of exchange-value, a property of the commodity which possessed no physical form but existed as the measure of abstract labor-time. When Marx discussed the commodity-form in Capital, this form of economic organization was still in its incipient stages.

From the perspective of Debord, the embryonic form of commodity production which Marx described in the 1860s had reached its perfection and had become hegemonic within the next century. The spectacle emerged as the logical conclusion of a world dominated and molded by “a process of quantitative development.” Debord and the Situationists militated against the development of capitalism into an autonomous and hegemonic entity since value not only

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46 Debord, Society of the Spectacle, 27.
dominated economic production but had further implications in the social, cultural, and political context as the primary mode of perceiving interpreting the world.⁴⁷ Everything which arises from within the spectacle is reducible to a quantifiable or numerical degree, a circumstance in which the material property, or use-value, of a commodity becomes secondary. “Value, as Marx shows in the opening pages of Capital, forcibly imposes equivalence upon things that are not equivalent.”⁴⁸ In the era of modern capitalism, commodification had the possibility of reducing everything in terms of exchange-value, quantity, and equivalence.

The second idea critical for understanding the nature of the spectacle is known as commodity-fetishism. Before discussing this idea directly, Marx analyzed the emergence of money as the result of the possibility of reducing all commodities to equivalent measures of abstract labor-time. The commodity of money, which arose as the medium of exchange, functions as a mediator of economic relationships replacing traditional forms of dependence and obligation which were more easily discernible.⁴⁹ The theory of commodity-fetishism contends quite generally that relationships between people appear as relationships between things. A commodity materializes as a distinctive entity, sovereign and self-contained. What remains unseen is the nature of economic organization and the network of a social relationships which underlie the production of commodities. Instead of permitting a transparent understanding of capitalism as a historically determined process with social origins, capitalism appears as an economic process which seems disinterested, universal, and naturally occurring.⁵⁰ Jappe writes,

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⁴⁷ Ibid., 31.
⁴⁸ Ibid., 140.
⁴⁹ Marx, 138-163.
⁵⁰ Ibid., 163-177.
“in a society ruled by value, things are in effect ‘masters of social life’ – but only because the autonomous social relations that govern social life have become objectified in them.”\textsuperscript{51}

Lukács’s concept of reification represented a significant intensification of Marx’s ideas on commodification. As the commodity-form became progressively universal, the reification of capitalism meant that its origins became increasingly imperceptible and effectively unassailable. Lukács argued that “man’s own activity” had acquired an autonomous and self-perpetuating existence produced their own laws and “invisible forces” to which human beings are no longer capable of modifying but are increasingly forced to submit.\textsuperscript{52}

Debord echoed these sentiments when describing the autonomous nature of the spectacle. “The spectacle is by definition immune from human activity, inaccessible to any projected review or correction. It is the opposite of dialogue.”\textsuperscript{53} As such, the economy of capitalist production exists as a dispersed totalitarian system which had imposed institutional and economic constraints over which people have no influence over the “conditions of existence.”\textsuperscript{54} Moreover, the spectacle conveys that the conditions of modern existence appear as natural and objectively appropriate. The autonomy of capitalism and its subsequent domination over the conditions of human existence constituted the essence of alienation “as an antagonism between humanity and forces that humanity has itself created but that have now entered into opposition to it in the guise of independent beings.”\textsuperscript{55}

The full implications of reification becomes apparent when viewed as a synthesis of commodity-fetishism and rationalization. In contrast to the historical era preceding the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, the methods of rational inquiry and their

\textsuperscript{51} Jappe, \textit{Guy Debord}, 138.
\textsuperscript{52} Lukács, 84-87.
\textsuperscript{53} Debord, \textit{Society of the Spectacle}, 17.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{55} Jappe, “Sic Transit Gloria Artis,” 103.
application represented a considerable achievement. Rationalization became especially effective when applied toward increasing the productivity of labor. According to Gotham and Krier, “Lukács argued that the tenacity and resiliency of capitalism lies in its ability to adapt the bureaucratic mechanisms of efficiency, control, calculability, and predictability to all aspects of human action and social organization.” Subject to calculability and specialization, “the human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker appear increasingly as mere sources of error when contrasted with these abstract special laws functioning according to rational predictions.” The individual worker progressively resembles a replaceable component who is passive, submissive, and vulnerable to disinterested forces beyond his or her control. Consequently, the life of such an individual becomes a life of contemplation rather than one of participation. Reified into the commodity of labor power, the human qualities of the worker became secondary in the context of production and engendered a significant qualitative change in the subjective nature of human experience.

The effects of the commodity-structure extended beyond the sphere of economic production and permeated the totality of social life. According to Lukács, the commodity relation extended the process of reification into “the whole consciousness of man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can ‘own’ or ‘dispose of’ like the various objects of the external world.” Thus, all aspects of human experience are alienable and open to the possibility of commodification. Reification enabled commodification by providing “human activity, which in reality is process and fluidity,” with a

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56 Gotham and Krier, 163.
57 Lukács, 89.
58 Ibid., 90.
59 Ibid., 100.
static and representational form. Whether visual, linguistic, or material, the circulation of representational forms were not equivalent to the actual experience of life.

According to the Situationists, the main basis of spectacular power resided in the form of images. In the twenty-fourth thesis of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord asserted that “[t]he spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image.” The reasoning behind this statement argues that “the achievement of a purely economic abundance” made possible by the increase in productivity, progress in technology, and the advances in automation threatened to abolish the entire structure of capitalist production of value. Maintaining the structure of capitalism demanded the opening of new sources of investment and profit-making. In relation to advertisement, the circulation of images functioned as the most accessible and effective means of inculcating the desire to participate in the spectacular economy. For Debord, the evolution of a society based on commodity-production produced a significant qualitative change in the experience of human life which led first to the “downgrading of being into having,” and secondly, “from having to appearing.” This qualitative transformation resulted in the ascendancy of the image as the primary mediator of social relationships.

According to the Situationists, the proliferation of images in the spectacle inhibited a more direct and participatory experience of life. Instead, the saturation of images cultivated an attitude in the human consciousness disposed toward passivity and contemplation. Debord wrote, “The spectator’s alienation from and submission to the contemplated object works like this: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in

62 Ibid., 31-33.
63 Ibid., 16
64 Ibid., 12.
the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires.”

The representative and symbolic component aspect of images corresponds to another subject of Situationist concern: language. As the primary means of communication, language functions as mediator of social life which transmits human experience. The volatility and arbitrary nature of language demands strict curtailment of what language can communicate and what it cannot. The control of words is the most effective means of ensuring the maintenance of the spectacle. Spectacular language communicates a representation of experience as defined by the spectacle, “Under power’s supervision, language always designates something other than authentic lived experience.”

According to the Situationists, the spectacle presents the meanings attached to words as fixed and static, endlessly circulated through dictionaries, newspapers, literature, and other means of cultural transmission. In the spectacle, “language is not dialectical” but presents the meanings of words as invariable. Words operate in the service of the spectacle by limiting the possibility of communication “to a series of clear-cut, inflexible expressions.”

In combination, images and language constituted the primary means of ideological conditioning within the spectacle.

In his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” the German critical theorist Walter Benjamin provides some illuminating thoughts on the ideological use of images and words. He describes art in the era preceding mechanical production as possessing an “aura,” acquired due to its singularly unique existence. In the age of mechanical reproduction, or

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66 Debord, Society of the Spectacle, 23.
69 Ibid., 177.
mass production, art loses its sacred quality “owing to its accessibility to the non-privileged and its dissemination throughout society.”\(^\text{70}\) No longer tied to tradition or ritual, art acquires a function which is political. Using photography and film as his primary examples, Benjamin illuminates the political function of art as a consequence of the ability to present perspectives of human experience which are fragmented and isolated from their broader contexts.\(^\text{71}\) The process which mechanical reproduction began, Dada emerged to complete. In their protests against bourgeois culture, Dada initiated a process in which form could be forever dissociated from its content.\(^\text{72}\) The ability to remove any image or word from its original context and to assign it a new signification represented an extraordinary step in their use as a means of ideological conditioning.

From the perspective of the Situationists, the ideological employment of images and language resulted from their representational character. Representation necessarily implied a separation between content and form, signified and signifier, actual human activity and its symbolic manifestation. The distance of human experience from its original historical context and its abstraction through representation provided the discursive space for the manipulation of its original meaning. Images and language functioned ideologically within the spectacle by providing an abstract representation of human experience and by presenting isolated and restricted perspectives which misrepresented the dynamism of ceaseless social process.\(^\text{73}\)

Paradoxically, the fluid and adaptable nature of the spectacle constituted one of its greatest strengths. According to Debord, “[t]he self-movement of the spectacle consists in this: it

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 237-238.
\(^{73}\) Plant, 79-80.
arrogates to itself everything that in human activity exists in a fluid state so as to possess it in a congealed form.” Congealed into a representational form, the circulation of images and words exerted an ideological authority through their repetitive impression on the attention of spectators. Consequently, the spectacle of commodities represented a flexible, adaptable, and fluid form of ideology. While the Situationists faulted the spectacle for reproducing static representations of human experience, the spectacle itself did not remain stagnant but incessantly evolved through the constant process of recuperating the products of human creativity.

The Situationists often denied that their theories constituted an ideology, or a representation of revolutionary theory. In a letter written in 1957 to Piero Simondo, Debord wrote, “The main point to emphasize is that situationism, as a body of doctrine, does not exist and must not exist. What exists is a Situationist experimental attitude, defined organizationally.” Throughout the entire corpus of their writings, there are many references to the absence of a stable or fixed Situationist ideology. In part, this reflects their adamant demand for active participation, that they could not claim any possession to a singular truth about anything. As Vaneigem mentions at one point, submission to any particular doctrine or ideology translates into a refutation of one’s individual sovereignty. The Situationists could provide a definitive critique of existing society and they could provide the cultural weapons to combat it, but it was up to the willing radical subject and councils to implement them concretely.

In part, this perspective emerged from a fundamental mistrust of revolutionary ideologies. The dogmatization of revolutionary theory established a class of experts who specialized in the conduct and process of revolution, creating a hierarchy which lends itself to

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74 Debord, Society of the Spectacle, 26.
authoritarianism and the suppression of critical voices. According to Jappe, Debord maintained that “[t]he authoritarianism that both Marx and Bakunin displayed within the First International was a symptom of the degeneration of revolutionary theory into an ideology, and it arose from an unfortunate assimilation of their project with the methods of the bourgeois revolution.” The tendency to view the world in terms of universal, teleological, and eschatological conceptions of the historical process served only to restrict human beings who conformed to the roles, attitudes, and practices permitted by reified and institutionalized ideologies. Accordingly, Debord did not espouse any existing revolutionary ideology, “Leninist, Trotskyist, Maoist or Third-World position . . . [or] anarchism.”

The hardening of theory into ideology demanded a reactionary and doctrinal adherence at the expense of permitting the exploration of creative solutions for evolving historical circumstances.

The refusal to acknowledge situationism as an ideology functioned in part as a political tactic. At a Situationist conference in Göteborg, Sweden in August 1961, Attila Kotányi proposed that the artistic works created by Situationists artists be described as “anti-situationist.” This suggestion arose from the growing divide between the artistic and revolutionary factions in Situationist International and the increasing use of the term “Situationist” by artists in Europe who had only a superficial awareness of the revolutionary ideas of the Situationist International. While Kotányi’s motion reflected an attempt to repel those allegedly “situationist” artists, it also reflects a refusal to be neatly classified or categorized. The rejection of Situationism as an ideology expresses their determination to avoid recuperation: “[W]e refuse

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76 Jappe, Guy Debord, 88.
the term ‘situationism,’ which would be the only pigeonhole enabling us to be introduced into
the reigning spectacle, incorporated in the form of a doctrine petrified against us.”

As indicated by Kotányi, the most subtle and effective step recuperation involves
“pigeonholing,” or the process of assigning and categorizing something into an ordered
conceptual system. The act of labeling associates ideas, acts, or persons with relatively fixed
meanings, connotations, and identities. The Situationists criticized this process because it
delimited critical perspectives and inhibited the free play of ideas they considered to be fluid and
porous. Through definition, classification, and categorization, that which remained formerly
amorphous, unstructured, and flexible becomes discernible, logical, and intelligible according to
a established conceptual system. Even that which directly opposes rationalization – the art of
Dada, for example – may be categorized as irrational, regarded as an aberration, and
subsequently dismissed. By refusing the label of Situationism, the Situationists sought to
prevent the manipulation of their ideas and to retain flexibility in their theories for future
adaptations.

For Debord and the Situationists, recuperation functioned as an instrument which ensured
the survival of modern capitalism. In essence, recuperation refers to the general process by
which capitalism recovers that which opposes it and assimilates it into the spectacle.
Recuperation neutralized or emasculated the efficacy of radical dissent not by eradicating
opposition but rather by through its commodification and circulation in the spectacle of modern
capitalism. The process of commodification placed the expression of dissent in any
representative form – film, art, literature, photography – into circulation for the purpose of

exchange, purchase, and consumption, becoming absorbed into the very socio-economic structure which it sought to challenge.

Recuperation, then, is the means which liquidates challenges to capitalism not by changing its content or eliminating it altogether, but rather changing its original and historical meaning by bringing within the context of consumer capitalism. Now a commodity to be passively consumed, revolution becomes safe and no longer dangerous. For the Situationists, the spectacle of revolt militated against the actual pursuit of revolution. Recuperation “is capable of moving all experience and expression into a representation of itself. Critical discourse is subject to the same qualities of fragmentation, stasis, equivalence, and vacuity which mark every commodified aspect of consumer society: turned into spectacle, criticism becomes an object of contemplation itself.”

This chapter has explored the theoretical aspects of the spectacle in an effort to analyze recuperation systematically. By examining the Situationists’ interpretations, modification, and adaptation of the concepts Marx and Lukács, recuperation emerges as a collective process of commodification, reification, and rationalization. Commodification serves as the most direct path toward recuperation by bringing expressions of dissent into circulation as a commodity. Through circulation and mass reproduction, the significance of critical ideas became lost through the removal of a contextual and historical perspective, reifying them into static and fixed ones. In turn, the process of reification enabled the commodification of human experience by ossifying the fluid and dynamic nature of human activity into a conceptual, linguistic, visual, or material representation. The ensuing rationalization of all reified things entailed “[t]he divorce between theory and practice provides the central basis of recuperation, of the hardening of revolutionary theory into ideology that transforms real practical demands into systems of ideas and demands of

80 Plant, 76-77.
reason.”81 For the Situationists, recuperation diluted the transient and fluid experience of human activity by reproducing it is a mediation or representation of life. Subsequently, the most effective and reliable safeguard against recuperation would be through conscious and active revolutionary engagement with the spectacle on the existing level of everyday life.

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RECUPERATION AND THE SITUATIONIST REFUSAL OF WORK

In 1953, Guy Debord painted the words “Ne Travaillez Jamais!” on a wall in Paris near the Rue de Seine. Ten years later, he received a request to pay a fine for stealing the work of Monsieur Buffion who had photographed, reproduced, and circulated Debord’s graffiti as a postcard accompanied with the inscription “Superfluous Advice.” In his reply, Debord did not seek compensation for the piracy of his work but requested that the postcard be no longer circulated because of its “fallaciously humorous interpretation.”

For him, the incitement to “Never Work!” was more than a frivolous dismissal of work, but rather comprised a very serious concern in the philosophy of the Situationist International.

Debord’s unambiguous pronouncement neatly summarizes the Situationist position on work. One of the main criticisms leveled against the Situationists has been their utopian perspective which has failed to consider the logistical and mundane realities of economic production. Debord and the Situationists may have “never produced detailed analyses of the work world [.yet] . . . they clearly showed how the logic of work extended to all social life and especially to the consumption of leisure time.”

Accordingly, the Situationists addressed their position on work indirectly through a number of associated ideas. In addition to the consumption of leisure time, the ideas implicitly associated with their criticism of work encompass the ideology of productivity, the reversal of perspective, radical subjectivity, everyday life, and council communism. In examining these ideas, the Situationist refusal to be recuperated as the commodity of labor-power represents their effort to overturn the values and conditions of modern life imposed by the demands of capitalism.

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83 Jappe, Guy Debord, 99.
The Situationist refusal of work represents an effort to obviate the entire structure of capitalist production, and by extension, the whole of capitalist society. This extremist position appears as a visceral response to the possibility of being physically integrated into and managed by the whims of capitalist economics. Psychologically, the refusal of work reflects the Situationist desire to circumvent the alienating effects of being objectified as human labor. By rejecting their role as human labor, Debord and the Situationists sought to exist apart from a society determined by quantification and dominated by value. Additionally, this afforded them a position external to capitalist society, a position which they could use to oppose the spectacle in its entirety.

In his most openly autobiographic work *Panegyric*, Debord revealed that his family had been financially ruined during the Great Depression. Instead of misery and self-pity, this event nurtured for him a desire for adventure without regard to considerations of the future. Debord remarked, “poverty has principally given me a great deal of leisure.” This statement reflects the high esteem Debord embraced for his individual sovereignty, a belief which permeates Situationist theory as radical subjectivity. Commenting on the conclusion of his youth, Debord wrote, “I now had no further obligation than to pursue all my tastes without restraint.” And the promises offered by the spectacle he rejected absolutely. The pursuit of monetary riches or social prestige in any form seemed a petty and frivolous endeavor. Above all, Debord “had wanted a life of adventure, and, rather than exploring grottoes or dabbling in high finance, he chose an attack on existing society as the most seductive.”

The Situationist ambition for the total abolition of work distinguished them from traditional left opposition groups. While critics on the left condemned capitalism for its...
exploitative, alienating, and dehumanizing tendencies, the belief in work itself remained a sacred ideal beyond reproach. Jappe writes that “[t]he whole of the Left, including the anarchists” regarded work as an intrinsically liberating activity, if only it could organized in a just manner.\textsuperscript{86} From their position on the extreme left, Debord and the Situationists disagreed with this perspective completely. They condemned the left’s focus on reforming and improving the conditions of work as a narrow and limiting perspective. The aspiration for the utopian societies envisioned by anarchists, socialists, and communists would be constantly deferred into the future “without at all having called in question the experience of this production or the necessity of this kind of life.”\textsuperscript{87} The maximalist orientation of the Situationist International demanded comprehensive, active, and immediate revolutionary change.

For the Situationists, work and the ideology of productivity persisted as antiquated beliefs made unnecessary as a result of capitalist development. Throughout the course of history until the 1950s, the organization of human societies was based on struggling over resources and producing to secure the needs of human survival. At an accelerating pace, however, capitalism had produced the means to overcome these deficiencies. The technological and industrial capacity of Western societies had enabled the dawning of a new historical era in which economic scarcity could be vanquished.\textsuperscript{88} The rise of the bourgeoisie and the imposition of the capitalist mode of production had been a historical force necessary to “bring about the material preconditions of total emancipation.”\textsuperscript{89} Although less complete in degree, the bourgeois revolution had the additional consequence of weakening long-standing social and cultural fetters

\textsuperscript{86} Jappe, \textit{Guy Debord}, 98.
\textsuperscript{89} Vaneigem, \textit{Revolution of Everyday Life}, 207.
such as “blood, lineage and race.” In general, capitalism had emerged to play a revolutionary and historical role which destroyed the mythical foundation of old societies while providing the material basis for the establishment of a more ideal society.

When the Situationists formed in 1957, they perceived the technological and productive conditions of society as sufficiently developed to commence a new historical era. According to Sadie Plant, “The [S]ituationists’ entire theory was based on the assumption that both the objective and subjective ingredients of a new society were already present within the spectacle, so that all that is needed is a reversal of perspective in which spectacular society is lived.” The perspective which needed to be overturned concerned the general acquiescence of people to capitalism simply because it existed. The Situationists, however, thought it could be even better. Certainly an idealistic notion, the reversal of perspective implied that a utopian society existed just beyond the horizon and that capitalism would wither away naturally, a possibility limited only by the perception of human beings. Social organization and economic production would shift away from considerations of profit and toward the collective pursuit of cultivating imaginative and creative possibilities for the enhancement of everyday life. The ideological conditioning of the spectacle, however, severely mitigated the cultivation of new and imaginative possibilities for the reorganization of society.

The new society which the Situationists envision would not be organized on the basis of work but organized on the basis of creativity. According to the Situationist interpretation, a society founded upon creativity embodied the ideal which motivated Marx’s demand for communism. Instead of a world in which the conditions of existence were determined by the forces of natural and social alienation, people would preside from a position of dominance over

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90 Ibid., 69.
91 Plant, 31.
92 Ibid., 55.
society and nature to enhance their quality of living. According to Debord, “the whole world must be torn down then rebuilt not under the sign of the economy but instead under that of a generalized creativity.”  

Work and creativity had not always existed exclusively from one another but had become detached through the introduction of Taylorism and the rationalization of the realm of work. According to the Situationists, capitalism existed as non-creative force but only a as recuperative one. In the context of the labor process, recuperation takes the products of human creativity and ingenuity, alienated from the worker, objectified as a value, and reduced to equivalence. In the world of the spectacle, creativity does not serve as a means toward self-realization but only for the realization of profit and “forcibly channeled into the global construction of the spectacle.”

The extension of leisure time, the portion of the day not dedicated to working, served as the most tangible outcome of increased economic productivity. Long fought for by the proponents of the left, the extension of leisure time was the realm of human activity ostensibly free from the constraints and the drudgery of work. The alienated conditions of modern labor gradually generated a transition from which “the point of reference whence individuals derived their identity, was in the process of shifting from work to so-called leisure activities.” Free time became the space for creativity and self-realization. However, what seemed like a positive derivative of increased productivity concealed a more iniquitous reality. The realm of leisure was not a wholly autonomous sphere where people could exist free from the influence of capital

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93 Jappe, Guy Debord, 47.
94 Vaneigem, Revolution of Everyday Life, 53-54.
95 Debord, Society of the Spectacle, 21-22.
96 Jappe, Guy Debord, 99.
and the relations of work. Rather, this became exactly that realm colonized by the spectacle and the abundance of commodities.

According to the Situationists, leisure time was precisely that aspect of human existence which became inhabited by the spectacle. What had seemed like a strict division between the world of work and the world of non-work was merely superficial distinction as the “remaining realm of free and unalienated experience is increasingly eroded by the encroachment of capitalist relations.” For the Situationists, the increase of a population of consumers was in part, the result of a general historical transformation toward greater freedom and an increase in the standard of living, could be more cynically regarded as the result that the search for profit demanded new sectors of investment. During his time, Debord observed a historical transformation of the worker

Whereas at the primitive stage of capitalist accumulation “political economy treats the proletarian as a mere worker” who must receive only the minimum necessary to guarantee his labor-power, . . . these ideas of the ruling class are revised just as soon as so great an abundance of commodities begins to be produced that a surplus ‘collaboration’ is required of the workers. All of a sudden the workers in question . . . find that every day, once work is over, they are treated like grown-ups, with a great show of solicitude and politeness, in their new role as consumers. The humanity of the commodity finally attends to the workers’ “leisure and humanity” for the simple reason that political economy as such can – and must – bring these spheres under its sway.

In addition to new sources of profit, the argument implies that without the pacifying influence of the spectacle, people would endanger and interrupt the continuity of the capitalist system.

“Crisis had always been averted, not least because the extension of the market necessary to the solution of crises of over-production was largely achieved by the extension of commodity relations into discourse, culture, and everyday life.” What had formerly belonged strictly to the

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97 Plant, 11.
98 Debord, Society of the Spectacle, 30.
99 Plant, 14.
domain of labor, now extended into every aspect of social life. Human life became molded by considerations of production, consumption, exchange-value, and quantification.

The hegemonic sway of the economy led to the commodification of every sphere of life, reducing all human experience to means-ends rationality: “we have seen the attraction of the unknown turned into mass tourism, adventure turned into scientific expeditions, the great game of war turned into operational strategy, and the taste for change turned into mere changes in taste.”¹⁰⁰ Capitalism and play were fundamentally irreconcilable demanding that play be turned into a commodity. Both creative and destructive, unrestrained play had the potential to undermine the reified authority of capital and the socio-cultural means which it used to control people.¹⁰¹

In order to stifle play, creativity, and those desires which could threaten the entire mode of economic organization, the spectacle circulated an abundance of commodities based on the production of false needs and the reduction of life to survival. The spectacular economy excels in manufacturing the desire for products which have are essentially useless and ridiculous:

Waves of enthusiasm for particular products, fueled and boosted by the communications media, are propagated with lightning speed. A film sparks a fashion craze, or a magazine launches a chain of clubs that in turn spins off a line of products. The sheer fad item perfectly expresses the fact that, as the mass of commodities become more and more absurd, absurdity becomes a commodity in its own right.”¹⁰²

The only real value in the purchase of spectacular commodities would be to secure one’s own place and identity within the established organization of society.

Consumption promises to restore the unity and wholeness of life which has been fragmented and to offer a sense of self-realization in a society in which alienating tendencies

¹⁰⁰ Vaneigem, Revolution of Everyday Life, 257.
¹⁰¹ Ibid.
¹⁰² Debord, Society of the Spectacle, 44.
predominate. Debord writes, “Each and every new product is supposed to offer a dramatic shortcut to the long-awaited promised land of total consumption. As such it is ceremoniously presented as the unique and ultimate product.” The satisfaction provided by the purchase of such a commodity fades quickly because each commodity materializes from a system based on the mass production of equivalent values. The allure of the commodity inevitably declines following its purchase. With no other means of satisfaction, the consumer knows only those pseudo-needs which confront him in the spectacle and the cycle of consumption continues. Together, alienation and spectacular commodities perpetuate a cycle which maintains the structure of the capitalist system. “The satisfaction of basic needs remains the best safeguard of alienation; it is best dissimulated by being justified on the grounds of undeniable necessities. Alienation multiplies needs because it can satisfy none of them.”

Despite the material abundance, the Situationists described the world they inhabited as one reduced to survival and poverty. In contrast to exploring the possibilities opened up by advanced technology and increased productivity, “[s]urvival is life reduced to economic imperatives. In the present period, therefore, survival is life reduced to what can be consumed.” Jappe asserts that the Situationists use of the term survival has more profound implications “as meaning the subordination of the content of life to apparent external necessities.” The economic system of capitalism and consumer society promotes a high degree of dependence which undermines the ability of individuals to perceive or critique the

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103 Jappe, Guy Debord, 6.
104 Debord, Society of the Spectacle, 45.
105 Ibid.
106 Plant, 25.
society in which they live while inhibiting their ability for the creative and deliberate construction of their own lives.

The Situationists condemned the spectacle and the extension of capitalist relations into every aspect of life because it offered a distorted sense of freedom. Within the spectacle there is the freedom of choice but there is not the freedom to choose beyond what the spectacle does not offer. Choices within the spectacle are fundamentally prearranged. “The modern spectacle, by contrast, depicts what society can deliver, but within this depiction what is permitted is rigidly distinguished from what is possible.”¹¹⁰ The individual enters a situation in which he or she is inundated by the influence of external things and images. The life of the individual is one in which the representations and roles of life are must be accepted from what is offered by the spectacle. The spectacle enforces its rule over people by forcing them to accept a position as passive and contemplative experience of life rather than to choose one of their own making.¹¹¹ Despite the limitless abundance of commodities, what is really offered is the semblance of freedom, a freedom that negates true autonomy: “The consumer is in reality, morally and psychologically consumed by the market.”¹¹² One did not have the freedom of choice to reject the spectacle.

The proliferation of false needs and life reduced to survival appear in stark contrast to the Situationist vision of a life based on the cultivation of desires. What authentic desires consist of the Situationists left purposefully vague and undefined. Perhaps the Situationists do not define desires since the prevailing conditions in society have concealed needs as desires, they have not been determined by the consumer but have been imposed upon them. Accordingly, desires

¹¹⁰ Debord, Society of the Spectacle, 20.
¹¹¹ Plant, 24.
cannot be realized through consumption. Based on the premise that society contained the means of satisfying the basic needs of human subsistence, the pursuit for the cultivation of desires could begin. Only then could people “refuse all forms of behavior dictated by others and continually reinvent their own fulfillments . . . [and] that they aspire to the unlimited enrichment of their acts.”

Toward this endeavor, the Situationists embraced radical subjectivity as a philosophical starting point for the wholesale rejection of the spectacle and capitalist society. Influenced by the philosophical existentialism of the 1950s, the idea of radical subjectivity elevates the individual as a unique and sovereign being. The radical subject recognizes only oneself as an exclusive authority to control and determine the situation of one’s own life. Such an individual summarily dismisses the authority, permanency, and inviolability of existing social institutions. With echoes of Max Stirner, Vaneigem writes, “Nothing is valuable that it need not be started afresh, nothing is too rich to need constant enrichment.”

It is from the position of radical subjectivity which grants individuals the perspective to reassert human dominance over reified institutions. “The concepts and abstractions which rule us have to be returned to their source, to lived experience, not in order to validate them, but on the contrary to correct them, to turn them on their heads, to restore them to that sphere whence they derive and which they should never have left.”

The radical subject initiated this perspective first by rejecting any sort of identification with the social roles offered within the context of the spectacle. The Situationist condemned social roles for nurturing conformity to acceptable patterns of behavior. “No matter how much or how little limelight a given role attains in the public eye, however, its prime function is always

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113 Canjuers and Debord, “Preliminaries,” 392.
114 Vaneigem, Revolution of Everyday Life, 23.
115 Ibid., 196
that of social adaptation, of integrating people into the well-policed universe of things.”

For the Situationists, the acceptance of a role was equivalent to surrendering one’s individual sovereignty to the influence of society, power, and the spectacle. The social roles circulated in the spectacle demarcated, regulated, and restricted acceptable modes of behavior as defined by the spectacle. According to Plant, “Even the refusal of a pre-established set of commodified patterns leads us into the roles, equally pre-ordained and unthreatening, of the individualist, the eccentric, the disaffected, or the revolutionary.”

Roles of a subversive nature merely retained a vestige of the desire to effect revolutionary change, encouraging the innocuous repetition of gestures instead of direct engagement in revolutionary activity: “The communist and the rebel may be consumed as readily as every other role, with their spectacular appearance precluding the possibility of their real experience.” Only by refusing all identification with social roles, even those most antagonistic to existing society, could the radical subject operate most freely in opposition to capitalist society. The radical subject desired control over the conditions of existence from an individualistic perspective, the council served as the collective manifestation of this desire.

The most appropriate form of revolutionary organization for the radical subject emerged in the Situationist espousal of workers’ councils or council communism. In this regard, Debord was largely influenced by his brief participation between 1960 and 1961 with a group of intellectuals known by their eponymously named journal Socialisme ou Barbarie. This group emerged in 1948 and coalesced around the figures of Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort

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116 Ibid., 134.
117 Plant, 65.
118 Plant, 69.
who dissented against the prevailing interpretations of the Soviet Union held by the Trotskyist Parti Communiste Internationaliste. Leon Trotsky’s analysis maintained that the Soviet Union had become a “degenerate workers’ state” due to the influence of Stalin, a position which vindicated and reinforced the functionality and legitimacy of Leninism. *Socialisme ou Barbarie* pioneered new territory by developing a more sophisticated critique which regarded the bureaucracy of the Soviet Union as an exploitative ruling class describing the Soviet Union in terms of a new category of political economy in the form of “State Capitalism.” They argued that the bureaucracy of the Soviet Union had emerged directly from the Leninist theory of organization. From Lenin’s perspective, workers were incapable of developing a revolutionary consciousness on their own and required a party with the proper grasp of history to cultivate this awareness. Accordingly, this analysis established a hierarchy in which conscious party members were superior to the collective body of ostensibly uninformed workers, and historically led to the creation of an authoritarian bureaucracy. *Socialisme ou Barbarie* argued that the Soviet Union had failed to become an actual socialist state because “workers were objectified and seen as passive social elements.”

The Debord’s personal critique of the Soviet Union followed a close parallel to the positions of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. According to Debord, the division of the world into two opposing factions – the capitalist west and the communist east – persisted as a false dichotomy. Debord identified two types of the spectacle: the “diffused “spectacle of Western, capitalist nations, and the “concentrated” spectacle of Eastern, communist nations. The formal opposition between the ideologies of Communism and Capitalism concealed the reality that both forms of

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121 Gombin, 78.
122 Poster, 203.
social organization were founded on the accumulation of capital and economic production. In Debord’s estimation, Lenin’s formulation of the vanguard party resulted in the creation of a class of “professional revolutionaries” in which “the specialty of the profession in question became that of total social management.”123 The Soviet Union based the legitimacy of its power on the need to represent and defend the interests of the working class. However, the contingencies of the revolution, civil war, and economic collapse transformed the Bolshevik party into a bureaucratic state, a ruling class based on the principle of collective ownership. The primary objective of the bureaucratic form of organization existed solely for its perpetuation rather than effect real change on the behalf of the proletariat. Consequently, Debord writes that “an image of the working class arose in radical opposition to the working class itself.”124 Like the intellectuals of Socialisme ou Barbarie, the Situationists saw the need for workers to engage as active participants in the construction of new society, a conclusion which led them to adopt workers’ councils as the ideal form of revolutionary organization.

Workers’ councils emerged in their most distinctive form during the revolutionary upheavals in Europe between 1917 and 1923. Examples of councilism during this period are numerous and cover a broad spectrum of economic, political and social interests. Some of the most notable examples often cited by the Situationists include the St. Petersburg Soviet, the council of Turin, Italy in 1920, and the workers’ and soldiers’ councils in Germany between 1918 and 1921.125 While diverse in their orientation and methods, councils provided the primary benefit of serving as an alternative to traditional forms of working class representation: “A new medium of working class activity, councils differed from both socialist parties, which acted

123 Debord, Society of the Spectacle, 68.
124 Ibid., 69.
through parliamentary and state institutions, and unions, which worked on the capitalist economy’s given assumptions via the wage relation.”¹²⁶ While socialist parties and unions have performed an undeniably positive historical role in the mobilization of workers, they operated within an established framework largely defined by the political economy of capitalism, a circumstance which limited their overall efficacy. Activism through parliamentary means certainly had the possibility of effecting change but any such transformation occurred gradually, and confronted the obstacles of resistant and powerful competing interests. By limiting their focus to wages and the conditions of work, unions failed to challenge the systemic nature of capitalism and the institutions which guaranteed its survival. Furthermore, socialist parties and unions functioned as “separately organized, centralized, nationally focused political and economic movements.”¹²⁷

In contrast, workers’ councils collapsed this division by situating labor activism directly within the site of production. Instead of waiting for change through institutionalized means, workers took matters into their own hands directly by forming strike committees and occupying factories. Through the direct control over the means of production, workers’ councils promoted democratic participation to directly manage and determine the nature of economic production for themselves. As a result, workers’ councils integrated economic and political concerns by “joining direct industrial action to the political project of a workers’ government.”¹²⁸ Accordingly, the foundation of councilism lies in its advocacy of direct democratic participation.

For the Situationists, the democratic nature of councils obviated the possibility of their recuperation into the form of a bureaucracy. In a direct democracy, authority was not conceded

¹²⁷ Ibid.
¹²⁸ Ibid.
to a centralized leadership or representative but dispersed within a “free association” of individuals with equal opportunity for participation.\textsuperscript{129} Through active participation in councils, workers would develop revolutionary consciousness through dialogue rather than having it imposed from above. Appropriately, the Situationists abstained from elaborating a precise and detailed theory of councilism, insisting that councils had to develop organically as the result of direct practice. They militated against the formulation of a “pure councilism,” arguing that the transformation of councilism into an ideology restricted its efficacy in actual practice by becoming the domain of specialists who could approve or disapprove what actions constituted proper and correct methods of councilism.\textsuperscript{130} As such, political and revolutionary ideologies directly contradicted the democratic ideal of councilism. Where ideology demands acceptance and adherence, councils operated on the basis of participation. By disavowing ideology, the Situationists renounced the possibility that any individual or group of individuals held any monopoly on revolutionary theory. Idealistically, the development of revolutionary consciousness through direct democratic participation inhibited the degeneration of councilist organizations into hierarchical, authoritarian, and centralized bureaucratic structures.

The problem of the vanguard party and bureaucratization has a number of parallel implications when considering the role of the Situationist International as a revolutionary organization. In a couple of respects, the Situationists did resemble a vanguard party. One salient example is reflected in their prolific use of exclusions. The extensive use of exclusions ensured that the size of the Situationist International remained a small and exclusive organization: “Only 70 individuals ever became members during the fifteen years of its

\textsuperscript{130} Riesel, “Preliminaries on Councils,” 352-353.
existence, and never more than ten or twenty belonged to the group at any one time.” As its only constant member, Debord is sometimes compared to Stalin when considering the personal influence he exerted on the direction of the Situationist International. Following suit, expulsions changed the general orientation of the Situationist International in which their concerns evolved from an emphasis on art and aesthetics toward one of a more overtly political and revolutionary orientation. The expulsion of the artistic tendency within the group occurred because Debord feared that the Situationist International would delegate too much squandered effort toward the production of representations and participation in the world of art. Certainly, the most noble interpretation justified the use of exclusions as a means to maintain theoretical cohesion in the development of Situationist theories.

Although the Situationists projected themselves as specialists of revolutionary consciousness and regarded their theories as correct interpretations of the historical situation, they did not consider them to be fixed and universal. In contrast to Lenin’s idea of a party which imparted revolutionary consciousness, the diffusion of Situationist ideas would occur based on the recognition of their cogency and the subsequent popular acceptance which would follow. Furthermore, the Situationist International was not a revolutionary organization which operated toward the effort of becoming an institutionalized political entity. The highest and sole purpose of such an organization would be to promote and foster the emergence of councils. Once workers’ councils had become the dominant and universal form of association, the Situationists argued that such a revolutionary organization “must explicitly aim to dissolve itself as a separate organization at its moment of victory.” Through self-dissolution and by devolving further

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revolutionary action to the participation of the proletariat, the Situationist International refused to represent itself as the exclusive possessor of specialized revolutionary theory.

The Situationists believed in the coherence of their own ideas and assumed that workers’ councils would naturally be in general agreement. In their opinion, the proletariat was indeed conscious of its revolutionary potential. The Situationists asserted that workers’ were no longer demanding higher wages or improved working conditions but rather sought to destroy modern capitalism and the spectacle in its entirety. They asserted that “councilist power” would necessarily “bring about the fundamental transformation of what is produced and how it is produced, reorienting people’s needs and abolishing the whole commodity production system.”

In some respects, the Situationists’ advocacy of the proletariat as the most important revolutionary actor appears as an inconsistency with their own refusal to work. Despite rejecting the productivist orientation of unions and parties of the left, the Situationists maintained an enduring faith in the revolutionary role of the proletariat. Between 1957 and 1972, the supremacy of the proletariat as the sole revolutionary actor was challenged by the advocates of student organizations and anti-colonial movements. However, the Situationists’ definition of the proletariat was more expansive and extended beyond an inflexible and acute focus on workers. The Situationists enlarged the scope of the working class by including all those individuals who were “not the master of one’s own activity, of one’s own life, in the slightest degree.”

Debord assumed that that the actions of African-Americans during the riots in Watts,

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134 Shipway, 160-161.
Los Angeles in August 1965 were based on a fundamental rejection of the spectacle. The comprehensive and open-ended definition of the proletariat could include students, anticolonialists, minorities, and any group or individual generally opposed to capitalism and the spectacle.

At its most fundamental, the refusal of work represents the desire to avoid recuperation as the commodity of labor-power. From the perspective of the Situationists, the colonization of commodity-relations into the realm of leisure by the spectacle signified the need for a wholesale rejection of existing capitalist society. The rejection of work was facilitated by the belief that capitalism had achieved its revolutionary goal to establish the means for the establishment of a new type of society. Subsistence no longer an immediate issue, this society would be primarily oriented toward the nurture of creativity and play as fundamental human values. The radical subject rejects all identification with the spectacle and everything perceived to be a part of it.

By extension, the refusal to participate in the capitalist mode of production represented an attempt by the Situationists to circumvent participation in the spectacle and place themselves in a position completely external to capitalism. In the context of refusing to participate in the spectacle, Debord and the Situationists practiced their theory by isolating themselves culturally by scorning “the worlds of academia, publishing, journalism, politics and media . . . the whole cultural establishment . . . [and the] worldliness and snobbish frivolity that flirts with revolutionary extremism.” The uncompromising demand for personal sovereignty is reflected in the extreme individualism of the radical subject. Thus, the radical subject is an individual who cannot be represented by spectacle, isolated or defined by his or her social role but one who acts authentically from a historical perspective, a step which took the Situationists beyond the parties

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136 Ibid., 194-203.
and organizations of the traditional left. Consequently, the collective expression of the radical subject discovered its ideal expression in the form of councilism which operated on the basis of direct democratic participation rather than rely on the representative format of institutionalized working class parties. The democratic and participatory nature of councilism fundamentally excludes the possibility of hierarchy, specialized authority, or ideologies as incompatible and inimical to democratic participation. Instead of degenerating into a bureaucratic organization, the efficacy of councils relied on constant and ongoing democratic participation by individuals to be in control over the organization of society rather than be manipulated by it.
SITUATIONIST PRACTICE

In the two preceding chapters, we examined the concept of recuperation in relation to Situationists’ theory of the spectacle and to the resistance of work, respectively. The focus of this chapter concentrates on the issue of recuperation in the context of Situationist praxis. Guy Debord and the Situationists developed a number of practices that brought together their opposition to the spectacle, their advocacy of revolution, and, fundamentally, their concern over recuperation. If the essential outcome of recuperation is the assimilation of subversive culture into the spectacle, then how does one oppose the spectacle without becoming integrated into the spectacle? This dilemma resides at the core of Situationist practices, shaping them and defining their character.

Having witnessed the ineptitude, dogmatization, and distortion of traditional revolutionary politics, the practices devised by the Situationists coalesced within the forum of culture. In 1960, Canjuers and Debord wrote,

> capitalism grants art a perpetual privileged concession: that of pure creative activity – an isolated creativity which serves as an alibi for the alienation of all other activities” and thus, the only activity “in which the question of what we do with life and the question of communication are posed fully and practically.\(^{138}\)

Accordingly, Situationist practices are grounded in the realm of the aesthetic, derived from the work of the European avant-garde. From its 19th century precursors to the movements of Dada, Surrealism, and Lettrism, the common theme which resounds throughout the history of the avant-garde regards the end of art as a separate human institution removed from political concerns. Consequently, the political implications of art stems from its capacity to critique the way things are and to offer a vision of the way things could be. However, Debord and the Situationists considered the avant-garde as having failed to realize this endeavor as a result of

\(^{138}\) Canjuers and Debord, “Preliminaries,” 391.
their recuperation: a result of their commodification and canonization into the cultural realm of bourgeois capitalism. The dilemma as well as the solution to the problem of recuperation arises from the perceived division between art and politics. Consequently, this failure of the avant-garde had a significant impact on the aesthetic ideals and methods of the Situationist International.

This chapter examines the aesthetic ideas and methods proposed by the Situationists which sought to abolish capitalism while preventing their potential recuperation. Toward the realization of this endeavor, the Situationist International evolved into an organization which eschewed the production of traditional, representational forms of art. Rather, the Situationists regarded the activity of revolution and the elimination of the spectacle as the necessary path toward the realization of art in the practice of everyday life. As such, the aesthetic ideas of the Situationists can be roughly divided between the idealistic and the pragmatic. The idealistic side of situationist ideas were those never fully realized or implemented: the construction of situations, unitary urbanism, and psychogeography. Those methods which could be implemented practically included the dérive and détournement. Whether ideal or realized, the entire range of the practices of the Situationist International – the construction of situations, unitary urbanism, psychogeography, the dérive, and détournement – represented practices designed to oppose the spectacle and obviate the possibility of recuperation.

The main theoretical connection between the Situationist International and the historical European avant-garde centered on the common desire to abolish the institution of art. According to Peter Bürger, the autonomization of art, or “the emancipation of the aesthetic from the praxis of life,” began during the Renaissance and completed by the end of the 18th century. The

result culminated in a philosophical approach to aesthetics epitomized by the phrase “art for art’s sake.” This situation emanates from the work of the German philosopher Emmanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*, published in 1790. Kant argued that aesthetic judgment necessarily be disinterested from moral and practical considerations, an argument which distanced art “as a sphere that does not fall under the principle of the maximization of profit.”

Removed from the “means-end rationality of bourgeois existence,” artistic expression functioned as the sole forum for an unfettered criticism of society. Additionally, art functioned as the realm of human activity which expressed and fulfilled “[all] those needs that cannot be satisfied in everyday life” in a world dominated by “the principle of competition.” The same autonomy, however, rendered the critical and political ability of art impotent.

In their desire to destroy the institution of art, the European avant-garde sought to unite art with the practice of life. The Situationists sought the end of art because art had become a spectacle. They sought the end of art because they wanted life to be infused with art or they had “a desire to shift poetics toward life, in an attempt to reinvent it.” Together, the European avant-garde and the Situationists conceived of an existence not dominated by principles of rationalization, productivity, and competition; rather, they had a notion of human life based on creativity, self-realization, and adventure. Although not a comprehensive list, the lives and works of several notable artists provided the guiding examples of a life lived poetically which inspired Debord and the Situationists among them Arthur Rimbaud, Arthur Cravan, and Lautréamont.

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140 Ibid., 42.
141 Ibid., 10.
142 Ibid., 50.
143 Kaufmann, *Guy Debord*, 92.
For the Situationists, the two most influential avant-garde movements consisted of Dada and Surrealism. Together, Dada and the Surrealist movement provided “the weapons of a political armory with which not only the values, but the entire network of social relations could be challenged.” More popularly known for their original art, the work of Dada and Surrealism provided the foundation for comprehensive and critical perspective founded upon destabilizing the seemingly impervious assumptions of bourgeois culture, western civilization, and modernity.

A relatively brief movement lasting from 1916 to 1923, Dada emerged as a response to the chaos and brutality of the First World War. From its beginning Dada was a global movement comprised of artists and intellectuals of diverse nationalities, based originally in Zurich and later spread most notably to New York, Berlin, Cologne, and Paris.

The members of Dada engaged in and produced art in ways that diverged in radically from the established traditions of western art. Perceived as irrational, absurd, and dissonant, Dada rejected the traditional artistic pursuit of the sublime but rather sought to mimic the chaos and madness of the war being waged around them. From the setting of the cabaret, the Dadaists performed bruitist music, simultaneous poems, and sound poems. Dada’s visual art included collages, photomontages, sculptures, and most famously, the ready-mades, which were produced through the assemblage or simple manipulation of pre-existing materials. The cacophonous nature of Dadaist art, in its aural and the visual sense, was meant to disrupt established notions of human perception, bourgeois culture, and the institution.

In the context of art history, Dada fits into the sweeping category of modernism. Broadly, modernism is “a debate about the nature and origins of culture in the broadest sense in

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144 Plant, 40.
the context of advanced (and aggressive) capitalism.”¹⁴⁶ This debate is a general cultural response to the even greater phenomenon of modernity: an epoch of history induced by the ideals of the Enlightenment and driven forward by the economic force of industrial capitalism, a combination replete with vast social, political, and cultural ramifications. Modernity, itself, is a very general concept open to nuanced interpretations and understandings. Richard Sheppard identifies modernity as

(1) the increasing separating out, institutionalization, and/or rationalization of scientific knowledge, justice, morality, and aesthetic taste; (2) the increasing bureaucratization and rationalization of all aspects of life by the state and its agencies; (3) the secularization, desacralization, or disenchantment of the world; and (4) the constitution of the autonomous human subject in terms of his legislative reason – i.e. his ability to create rational order out of natural or institutionalized disorder. This whole process, it is then argued, was legitimized by the idea of progress – a secularized version of the grand narrative involved in the Judeo-Christian vision of history and, more immediately, of eighteenth-century providentialist theology.¹⁴⁷

Consequently, the broad cultural phenomenon of modernism emerged due to a growing awareness of the positive and negative effects of the combined faculties of reason and capitalism. The character of responses to modernity were numerous and varied, a subject which could and has filled volumes. For many artists and intellectuals, the eruption of the First World War functioned as the critical turning point which confirmed their skepticism toward the progressive ideals of the Enlightenment and the bourgeois society which served as their bearer. What was formerly an unquestioning faith in the ambitions and promises of progress inaugurated by the Enlightenment and bourgeois revolutions eventually yielded to a sense of disillusionment, cynicism, and abandon.¹⁴⁸

Perceiving bourgeois culture as the responsible agent, Dada emerged as a movement largely characterized by its “negational” tendencies. The destruction of bourgeois cultural values

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 10.
¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 71.
and the destruction of the institution of art were the movement’s main goals. First of all, Dada sought to dismantle the detrimental components of modernity and to offer a balance against the inexorable drive of Enlightenment progress. Dada represented the middle point along the trajectory of responses to modernity, balanced between those who rejected modernity altogether and those who embraced it absolutely.\textsuperscript{149} For Dada, the only way to correct the ills of human society attributable to the Enlightenment was through the displacement of the central role given to reason and its replacement with “a more eccentric, dynamic model of human nature in which reason is engaged in a perpetual dialectic with the fluctuating impressions it receives from without and the surging drives to which it is exposed from within.”\textsuperscript{150} For this reason, Dada regarded the integration of art into life as the necessary corrective to the inexorable faith in logic and rationalization which had proved to be so destructive.

Accordingly, the institution of art, as an autonomous sphere of human activity, proved to be the main obstacle. The Dadaists argued that the institution of art promoted in its audience a sense of detachment and passive contemplation of an art removed from the political and social circumstances of the world around them.\textsuperscript{151} Although seemingly chaotic and irrational, the political function of Dadaist art stemmed from its desire to elicit a “subjective response” in which “the reader, beholder, or listener” becomes an active participant through interpretation and action.\textsuperscript{152}

Thus, their desire to integrate art and politics emerged as a methodology based on negation and critical engagement. The most significant consequence of Dada artistic engagement, then, is that it revealed that the artifacts of human culture were not static and

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 86.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 181.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 200.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 204.
transcendent but existed as rather arbitrary constructions, determined by social and historical circumstances. As a result, the trenchancy of Dadaist negation derives from the idea that there exist no fixed, universal, or sacred qualities of human culture, impervious and unassailable, but rather that all cultural products of human society – ideas, language, culture, and institutions – are arbitrary, dynamic, and manipulable. For the Situationists, Dadaist negation became an invaluable tool in the service of revolution. Negation allowed for an unceasing critical assessment of established notions of cultural, political, and economic institutions; to subject them to evaluation and constant reevaluation; and to discard, alter, or preserve them as necessary in a given period of human history. Furthermore, the methodology of negation permitted absolute intellectual freedom. This freedom allowed for the employment of all intellectual products of human history in order to develop and advance ideas which overcome orthodoxies and stagnant traditions which by habit alone fostered acquiescence to a set of conventions or beliefs which inhibited rather than nurtured an individual’s active, critical participation in the world. Dada’s unreserved willingness to manipulate and alter cultural works of the past later served as an essential foundation to the Situationist practice of détournement.

By the mid-1920s, the European avant-garde witnessed the decline of Dada and the rise of a new movement: Surrealism. Amidst the ruins of war, the nihilistic and negational character of Dada resonated flatly among a number of individuals who emerged to form a distinctly new tendency from within the nucleus of Paris Dada. Under the leadership of André Breton, Surrealism coalesced into a distinct movement by 1924 with new ambitions and unique methods.

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Where Dada emerged as a *destructive* artistic movement concerned with the negation of existing cultural meanings, the Surrealists may be regarded as a *constructive* one with the positive desire to cultivate and imbue life with a sense of enchantment and the marvelous. In its early days, the artists of the Surrealist movement endeavored to systematize the possibilities of psychoanalysis, inspired by the work of Sigmund Freud. Through dreams, free association, automatic writing, and psychic automatism – the exploration of the subconscious became a means to liberate the human mind from the subjugation of reason and propel it towards creativity and greater consciousness.\(^{155}\)

Soon after their formation, the Surrealists became politicized, inserting themselves into the activities of present-day revolutionary politics. Having expressed an equivocal commitment for a Marxist revolution, the Surrealists sought to participate politically by collaborating with the French Communist Party. Despite the repeated attempts by the Surrealists throughout the 1920s and 1930s, considerable ideological differences prevented any rapprochement between the two parties to develop a working relationship.\(^{156}\) The result translated into a split within the Surrealists between those who joined the ranks of the PCF and those led by Breton who wanted to maintain the groups’ autonomy. Breton and his faction regarded the PCF as treasonous to the ideals of revolution and contributed to the isolation of Surrealism as a political force from the official Left through the end of the Second World War and beyond.\(^{157}\)

In response to the PCF’s rejection, Breton attempted to synthesize the theories of Surrealism and Marxism. Toward this effort, the Surrealists became responsible for “the first efforts to appropriate Freud’s seminal twentieth-century exploration of the irrational for Marxist

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\(^{156}\) Lewis, 32-33.

thought.”¹⁵⁸ For Breton, psychoanalysis became the means in his efforts to revitalize a Marxism which had become overly simplistic, mechanical, and rigidly doctrinaire.¹⁵⁹ The legacy of the Enlightenment inherited by the French Communist Party privileged a strict materialism which condemned any consideration of “surrealism’s ‘ideal’ dwelling in the land of aesthetics, subjectivity, desire, dream.”¹⁶⁰ Without a revolution in mentality or spirit, a revolution based solely on materialist determinism would remain incomplete.¹⁶¹ For the literary critic Walter Benjamin, the bourgeois parties of the left had made revolution into a dispassionate affair mired in the bureaucratic, doctrinaire, and mechanical nature of orthodox Marxism. Without such vitality and passion, the conditions necessary for revolution would never be realized and would remain forever in an unattainable and distant future.¹⁶² Thus, Surrealism became the means to revitalize revolutionary ideas by conceiving them as open, dynamic social processes, and to overturn the inertia of tradition by infusing revolution with a sense of immediacy and enchantment.¹⁶³

From the perspective of Debord and the Situationists in the 1950s, however, the continued advance of capitalism and consumer society proved that Dada and Surrealism had failed. By 1930, Dada and Surrealism had become defunct as movements able to engage in social and political issues in a critical manner. In The Society of the Spectacle, Debord wrote, “dadaism sought to abolish art without realizing it, and surrealism sought to realize art without

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 120-121.
¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 124.
¹⁶³ Benjamin, 182; Cohen, 130.
Dada had succeeded in destroying the inviolability of art, meaning, and culture. This component of negation later became essential to the practices of the Situationist International. In their desire to make life more poetic, the Surrealists rejected reality, devolving into the realm of mysticism, irrationality, and the subconscious.

The recuperation of both movements occurred due to the failures of revolutionary movements, their eventual popular acceptance, and institutionalization as an artistic tradition. In a curious reversal, the revolutionary aspects of Dada and Surrealism became the means which further reinforced the institution of art. Their groundbreaking creativity provided the means “to create a new ‘ism’, to re-infuse an age-old institution with new vitality, to allow a new beginning – but with much the same ground rules.” Furthermore, the popularization of their art led to the employment of their techniques and methods beyond their original intention become “nothing more than a banal redeployment of the forms of the past.”

What became essential for the Situationists, then was the “single transcendence of art” through the simultaneous “abolition and realization of art.” Above all, it was the quality of representation which made art and all cultural expression vulnerable to the possibility of recuperation. Preceding the formation of the Situationist International, Debord had been involved in a group known as the Lettrist International from 1952 to 1957. Unlike previous avant-garde movements, the Lettrist International represented the culminating step toward the destruction of art simply by refusing to create works of art, and they refused to acknowledge themselves as writers and artists. Debord himself “wrote no books and made no films” during

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165 Lewis, 41.
167 Ibid., 202.
The Lettrists produced a journal called *Potlatch* but its circulation remained limited, its distribution mostly confined among the members of the group and their immediate associates. The Lettrists were not concerned with the transmission of their ideas but with the transcendence of art in the immediacy of daily life. In refusing to produce works of art, the members of the Lettrist International “chose idleness [and] oblivion rather than co-optation.”

The period of the Lettrist International was not completely inactive, however, but served as a period of gestation.

The formation of the Situationist International in 1957 initiated a period in which the formerly inchoate ideas of the Lettrist International coalesced into a systematic body of theoretical practices. Although these practices emanated from the innovative work of the previous European avant-garde, the Situationist International adopted and refined their techniques in order to succeed where the projects of Dada and Surrealism had failed. Grounded in the realm of the aesthetic – the construction of situations, unitary urbanism, psychogeography, the *dérive*, and *détournement* – these methods had political implications. Rather than be subject to the impulses of capitalism, Debord and the Situationist International sought “[t]he political demand to be in control of one’s own life and environment, participating in the world with a frank immediacy free of all separation, hierarchy, and bureaucracy, [which] is also the poetic and sensual desire to be really in the world, feeling its most intimate reality.”

Thus, the art of the Situationists became an art of life infused with revolutionary demands and experienced directly.

The basis for this ephemeral and politically-minded aesthetics was originally conceptualized by the Situationist International as the construction of situations. The concept of the situation emerged from the philosophical climate of existentialism prominent in France.

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169 Kaufmann, 94.
170 Kaufmann, 95.
171 Plant, 39.
during the 1950s. In his *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, “there is freedom only in a situation, and there is a *situation* only through freedom.”¹⁷² In the existential sense of freedom, the “situation” refers to the historical and paradigmatic set of circumstances wherein an individual is positioned with the capacity to engage in the world accordingly. This idea has its roots in Hegel’s “dialectical conception of the world, [in which] the separation and antagonism between consciousness and the world, the subject and the object, is necessary to human development: it is out of this difference or friction that full self-consciousness emerges.”¹⁷³ For Debord and his associates, modern capitalism and the spectacle of consumer society functioned as a conditioning society, one anathema to the objective of creative and active participation in the world.¹⁷⁴

The construction of situations emerged as the utopian and hypothetical opposite of the spectacle. In contrast to the haphazard, contingent nature of the spectacle, the ideal situation would be a creation of deliberate and intentional planning. Like the spectacle, the constructed situation was a totalizing concept meant to emphasize its holistic, all-embracing nature. In Debord’s article, “Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organization and Action,” the constructed situation incorporates a number of related practices: unitary urbanism, psychogeography, the *dérive*, and *détournement*.¹⁷⁵ The constructed situation serves as the abstract, utopian goal; unitary urbanism and psychogeography as the domain of research; the *dérive* and *détournement* as the most pragmatic and realistically implemented practices of the Situationist International.

¹⁷³ Plant, 21.
¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 57.
The project of conflating art, politics, and life – the construction of situations was a project never realized by the Situationists. Debord provides the following definition of the situation:

the concrete construction of momentary ambiences of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality. We must develop a systematic intervention based on the complex factors of two components in perpetual interaction: the material environment of life and the behaviors which that environment gives rise to and which radically transform it.\textsuperscript{176}

Thus, the situation emerges more clearly as “ambiennes of life” can be interpreted as an ephemeral aesthetic experience which could not be reproduced or captured through its representation, the Situationist transcendence of art.\textsuperscript{177} Toward this end, questions on the relationship between environment and behavior became fundamental. Furthermore, the purpose of the constructed situation was meant to contrast the allure and fascination exuded by the spectacle, but rather sought the “clarification of these simple basic desires, and to the confused emergence of new desires whose material roots will be precisely the \textit{new reality} engendered by situationist constructions.”\textsuperscript{178} By merit of its transitory quality of experience, the constructed situation obviates the possibility of recuperation: “In a constructed situation there are no spectators, it reduces them to action, failing which, it becomes experimental, and from the experimental it becomes art, the domain of the individual, that is separate, activity.”\textsuperscript{179} Thus, the ideal of the constructed situation represents the absolute realization of the supersession of art.

Concepts associated with the constructed situation – unitary urbanism, psychogeography, and the \textit{dérive} – must be understood as a reaction to and a critique of the modern city. Following the devastation of the Second World War, European cities, specifically Paris were reconstructed

\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., 38.
\textsuperscript{177} Kaufmann, 158.
\textsuperscript{179} Kaufmann, 157.
and “reconfigured according to the needs of the automobile, and emptied of their inhabitants, who were forced to make room for stores and offices; they became places of separation and solitude.” The city became an environment in which “[e]verything is functionalized, identified, monitored.”

For the Situationists, the city had lost its enchantment and existed as the primary domain of the spectacle, its inhabitants subject to the “capitalist domestication of space” with the purpose of “individual integration into its bureaucratic production of conditioning.”

The Situationists offered an alternative vision on urban development embraced by the theory of unitary urbanism. Unitary urbanism is defined as a “theory of the combined use of arts and techniques as means contributing to the construction of a unified milieu in dynamic relation with experiments in behavior.” Unlike the desultory urbanism which had shaped Paris during the 1950s which existed as an isolated field of study, unitary urbanism was conceived as a totalizing theory of urban environments which incorporated all aspects of human life within its perspective. In contrast to cities adapted to serve the demands of capital, the situationist city would serve and cultivate the desires of people. The city as dreamt by the Situationists would be “cities bringing together – in addition to the facilities necessary for basic comfort and security – buildings charged with evocative power, symbolic edifices representing desires, forces and events, past, present and to come.” In this respect, the ideal city functioned as the space for the construction of situations.

The proposals of unitary urbanism were grounded in the research of psychogeography.

180 Kaufmann, 114.
183 Kaufmann, 140.
Uniting the disciplines of psychology and geography, psychogeography presented itself as a methodology for “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.”

For the Situationists, cities were more than passive and neutral environments simply inhabited by people. Rather, cities were “turbulent” places, “always in process, with its own rhythms and life cycle” which exerted a considerable influence on its inhabitants.

Psychogeography, then, served as a way “to cultivate an awareness of the ways in which everyday life is presently conditioned and controlled, the ways in which this manipulation can be exposed and subverted, and the possibilities for chosen forms of constructed situations in the post-spectacular world.” In essence, psychogeography examined the relationship of the urban environment and its influence on human behavior.

The Situationists researched psychogeography through their practice of the dérive. Literally translated as “drifting,” at its essence the dérive is a manner of walking. The purpose of the dérive “was to notice the way in which certain areas, streets, or buildings resonate with states of mind, inclinations, and desires, and to seek reasons for movement other than those for which an environment was designed.” More than simply walking, the dérive was a practice which opposed the conditioning forces of the spectacular city:

The dérive cuts across the division of the space of the city into work, rest and leisure zones. By wandering about in the space of the city according to their own sense of time, those undertaking a dérive find other uses for space besides the functional. The time of the dérive is no longer divided between productive time and leisure time. It is a time that plays in between the useful and gratuitous.

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188 Plant, 58.
189 Kaufmann, 108.
190 Plant, 59.
191 Wark, 25.
The dérive existed as a subjective practice intended to subvert the functional rationalism of an urban space previously appropriated by the needs of capitalism. Altogether – the construction of situations, unitary urbanism, psychogeography – were conceived as practices founded upon the desire to transcend art and life. The successful realization of this program would have entailed the end of the spectacle and negated the possibility of recuperation. The persistent nature of the spectacle, however, demanded a practice of ongoing, active contestation.

The method of contestation most extensively developed by the Situationist International was known as détournement. Détournement emerged as the practice embraced by the Situationists as “the principal technique of total opposition to the spectacle,” In its first issue, the Internationale Situationniste presented one of their most formalized definitions of the term:

*Détournement*: Short for “détournement of preexisting aesthetic elements.” The integration of present or past artistic production into a superior construction of a milieu. In this sense there can be no Situationist painting or music, but only a situationist use these means. In a more primitive sense, détournement within the old cultural spheres is a method of propaganda, a method which testifies to the wearing out and loss of importance of those spheres.

Translated roughly as “diversion,” détournement is a creative practice in which an author freely incorporates, modifies, or alters the literary and artistic works of the past to invest them with a revolutionary meaning. Examining the technique of détournement closely bears several significant implications in its relation to culture, ideology, and language which together demonstrate the Situationist concern over recuperation.

The Situationists were open to employing any form of existing culture as a potential détournement. Literature, art, film, photography as well as the more pedestrian sphere of comic

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192 Kaufmann, 114.
193 Kaufmann, 161.

The Situationists wrote extensively on the procedure and theoretical operation of \textit{détournement}. In a \textit{détournement}, an artistic or literary work undergoes a process of negation and positive valuation: a negation of its accumulated connotations, interpretations, and spectacular meanings followed by a positive movement which “restores all their subversive qualities to past critical judgments that have congealed into respectable truths.”\footnote{Debord, \textit{Society of the Spectacle}, 145.} Emptied of its original content, a cultural work becomes the medium for establishing a dialogue between the ideas and the meanings of the past within the context of the present. This process becomes a dialogue in which “mutual interference of two worlds of feeling, or the juxtaposition of two independent expressions, supersedes the original elements and produces a synthetic organization of greater efficacy.”\footnote{Debord and Wolman, “User’s Guide,” 15.} Thus, \textit{détournement} emerges as a critical method which appropriates, alters and manipulates the cultural work of the past to restore their potential as ideological propaganda against the spectacle.

A closer analysis reveals a number of closely related principles on \textit{détournement} which recur throughout the writings of the Situationist International. Preceding the formation of the
Situationist International, in 1956 Debord and Wolman offered the following comments on the use of *détournement*:

> It is in fact necessary to eliminate all remnants of the notion of personal property in this area [literary and artistic heritage of humanity]. The appearance of new necessities outmodes previous ‘inspired works. They become obstacles, dangerous habits. The point is not whether we like them or not. We have to go beyond them.”

Within this passage contains the denial of private property, the rejection of human culture as an inviolable tradition, and the argument for the free use and modification of culture for contemporary purposes.

The first premise argues for the end of private property in the sphere of culture. For Debord, culture was necessarily the collective property of human society. The possession of exclusive rights to an intellectual and cultural work by an individual seemed unthinkable considering that the influences of the intellectual or artist are dependent on accumulated social, cultural, and historical circumstances. Accordingly, artistic and literary works possessed no intrinsic value or inviolable sanctity which made them inaccessible for innovative uses. The Situationists recognized that the specific relevance of art and literature acquired differing interpretations and connotations of meaning over time. Similar to their psychogeographical concerns, the Situationists regarded culture as having an oppressive and inhibitive power but also an embryonic, creative one as well. Furthermore, reified cultural works had become “obstacles, dangerous habits” by promoting adherence to a venerated past of cultural achievements, largely confined to the domain of academic study and passive contemplation. Rather, the Situationists conceived of culture as a living and dynamic sphere of human activity, malleable and open to constant renewal.

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200 Ibid.
While the methods of détournement and recuperation share the common method of cultural appropriation, the essential distinction lies in their respective ideological functions. Through détournement, the Situationists manipulated previous works, quotes, phrases, and images, revising their meaning, to serve the purpose of fomenting revolutionary desires for the overthrow of capitalism and the spectacle. On the other hand, the cultural work which has been recuperated exerts a passive ideological influence on behalf of capitalism through its integration into the vast world of commodities, the gradual distancing between the work and knowledge of its original context, and its inevitable assimilation into the archives of bourgeois culture. Despite their opposing functions, the intersection between recuperation and détournement remains highly fluid and subtle. What has been recuperated may be détourned and what has been détourned may again become recuperated. For the Situationists, détournement became a necessity since they regarded previous cultural forms as having already been appropriated and integrated into the spectacle.\textsuperscript{202} On the other hand, commodified forms of dissent cannot be entirely disassociated from its original context, and through mass production, enables the potential spread of radical ideas antithetical to capitalism. Détournement and recuperation emerge as complementary strategies in which culture functioned as the primary field of ideological contestation.

The strategic and ideological nature of détournement is most clearly evident in the sphere of language. The Situationists argued that power exerted an imperceptible and subtle influence through language which “conceals and protects [the spectacle], without laying bare its true nature” as a means “to guard the oppressive order.”\textsuperscript{203} Within the context of the spectacle, language expresses “the discourse of power . . . as the sole possible frame of reference, as the

\textsuperscript{202} Kaufmann, 163.
\textsuperscript{203} Khayati, “Captive Words,” 222.
universal mediation...the discourse of power establishes itself at the heart of all communication.”

Although the control over language and meaning may be the most effective means for maintaining the spectacle, it is also the most susceptible means for its subversion. At the same time, “[u]nder the control of power, language always designates something other than authentic experience. It is precisely for this reason that a total contestation is possible.”

As a technique, détournement employs the volatile and arbitrary nature of language to expose the discourse of power by revealing the incongruity between an individual’s experience of everyday life and in the context of the spectacle. The Situationists scorned the use of quotations and gave to words new variations in meaning which dissolve the ideological boundary between spectacular language and the language of revolution. The subsequent ambiguity and uncertainty of meaning permitted the space in which situationist propaganda thrives in the openness and need for active, ongoing contextualization of language.

Inspired by the vision of an everyday life infused with the vitality of art, the Situationist International articulated a number of practices which were closely bound to revolutionary and utopian ambitions. Guided by the example of Dada and Surrealism, the Situationists sought to avoid the fate of their predecessors. Accordingly, the members of the Situationist International wanted to obviate the potential for their own critique to be used to support the commodity-structure. The desire to realize the synthesis of art and life through revolution and the awareness of recuperation is reflected in the fluid, ephemeral, and elusive quality of Situationist practices.

The ideal of the constructed situation places its greatest emphasis on an individual’s fleeting subjective experience as it occurs. The situation could not be captured, represented, or reproduced, but rather could only be felt and experienced. Unitary urbanism and

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204 Ibid., 223.
205 Situationist International, “All The King’s Men,” 150.
psychogeography serve as the theoretical foundation for developing the knowledge base deemed essential for constructing situations. In its simplicity and ease, the *dérive* stands out as the Situationists’ most direct practice in resisting the conditioning effects of the urban environment under advanced capitalism. Finally, *détournement* emerges as the most sophisticated and subtle technique of the Situationists which embraced the constant mutability of meaning as well as the openness to critique, revision, adaptation, and refinement of the works produced by the human intellect, qualities unfavorable to recuperation.
CONCLUSION

This investigation has focused on the theories, ideas, and practices of the Situationist International in relation to the concept of recuperation. Compared to the more fully developed concepts of the Situationists, recuperation has received much less attention in the elaboration of a detailed analysis and is often presented as a peripheral issue. This investigation, however, places recuperation as the central issue and unifying theme in the intellectual history of the Situationist International. The anxiety over recuperation permeates throughout their texts and its influence had a significant effect on the development of their ideas. This research has explored recuperation as the centralizing theme in regard to spectacle, the refusal of work, and their aesthetically-based critical practices.

Although much less emphasized, the anxiety of recuperation serves as an enduring influence on the nature of Situationist theories and practices. The Situationists saw recuperation or the potential of the spectacularization of their work as the greatest threat to the cogency and trenchancy of their revolutionary theories. If their theories and practices were recuperated, they were essentially harmless and ineffective in accomplishing revolutionary change. They would mean nothing, they would have no spark or influence once recuperated. The fundamental motivation and concern was that recuperation inhibited the actual experience of life by becoming ossified into a representation of itself and encouraged a life of passive contemplation. The Situationists assumed that all forms of representation were irreversibly corrupted as a result of their commodification and reification.

The first chapter “The Spectacle and the Mechanisms of Recuperation,” examined the Situationists concept of the spectacle in order to systematize the process of recuperation. The difference between the spectacle and recuperation is a subtle one. The spectacle is the
established form or structure of an existing form of noncoercive capitalist power. In contrast, recuperation functions as the active process of incorporating new elements in to the structure of the spectacle. By going back to the work of Karl Marx and examining his investigation of the commodity-structure and commodity-fetishism, the most simple and straightforward path to recuperation reveals itself to be commodification. Through commodification, anything capable of having a representative form is reduced to exchange-value and equivalency. Through the development of commodity-fetishism and its extended form, reification, anything that does not already possess a representative form may acquire one by giving it a name and an identity. Furthermore, the proliferation of identifications and categorizations lend themselves to a certain dogmatization, ensnaring what was formerly a social process into one that has become fixed acquiring the characteristics of a reified entity. While this may suggest the existence of an enduring human ideal, a reified ideal is susceptible to being defined by power and in relation to the spectacle, reducing the versatility and limitation of concepts as dynamic instruments. Consequently, the most subversive ideas may be pigeonholed and manipulated through their rationalization.

In addition, commodification recuperates by bringing everything within its grasp into the context of the universalized commodity-form into order to be exploited as a new sources of investment. Utterly reduced to considerations of exchange-value, the work of photography, poetry, literature, or film becomes far removed from the original context in which it was produced. The de-contextualization of critical dissent from it historical situation, results in the distortion of meaning once placed into the context of commodity-production. Mass production and mass circulation intensify this process by making endless reproductions of cultural products and reducing them to banalities. Following the Situationist analysis, the willing, or disgruntled
consumer who purchases a commodity of a subversive nature by supports the commodity-structure as a whole. Having digested the commodity of revolution, the consumer finds that nothing has changed, and the consumer perceiving no other alternative, becomes dissatisfied and repeats the cycle of consumption. Thus, the consumer is never permitted the chance to cultivate the totalizing perspective necessary to effect enduring revolutionary change.

Recuperation, however, is an active process in containing dissent, a process which is never complete. The Situationists believed that recuperation emasculated critical theories by bringing them within the sphere of commodity-production. However, the argument could also be made that commodification permits wider circulation and greater accessibility of critical ideas to an interested audience. From the position of consumers, individuals and groups received such ideas from a passive and contemplative perspective. At the same time, however, the cultural transmission of dissent through literature, films, television, plays, and a myriad of other forms, always retains a trace of its original trenchancy. Assuming that commodification did weaken the trenchancy of subversive messages, the Situationists constantly sought to reclaim, revitalize, and renew revolutionary theory. The Dadaist movement, despite its own recuperation, had an indelible influence on Guy Debord and the various members of the Situationist International. While this may have been due to the relative cultural, geographical, and historical proximity between these two groups, the Situationists sought to revive the effective critical weapons Dada had created and use them for their own purposes. The project of recuperation, the assimilation of dissent and opposition into the spectacle was never final. As long as they existed, cultural works retained the power to influence someone to restore the critical force of ideas by reinterpreting, revising, and updating them for the revolutionary demands of the current historical situation.
The second chapter explores recuperation in relation to the Situationists’ adamant refusal of work. By refusing to engage in wage labor, the Situationists obviated their recuperation as the commodity of labor power, and by extension, rejected the whole of capitalist society and its cultural values. They called into question the basic ideology of productivity, a belief or principle held in common by the ideologies of the left and capitalism. The Situationists demonstrated how commodity-production extended beyond the domain of the workplace. Capitalism infiltrated every aspect of life beyond the sphere of production in the form of the spectacle. Leisure time had been, or should have been, a portion of the day free and unrestrained by the influence of work but it had become populated by an array of commodities. In the 1950s and 1960s, consumers were inundated with a seemingly endless abundance of choices, an obvious improvement in comparison to wartime scarcity. For the Situationists, however, the endless wealth of commodities concealed a reality in which the consumer had become subservient to spectacle.

In contrast to the consumer, the radical subject sought to control the conditions of existence rather than being determined for them by the whims of the spectacular economy. By refusing all representation and established social roles, the radical subject possessed a limitless freedom for creative action. By rejecting identification with social roles, the radical subject refused to be pigeon-holed and forced to conform to established patterns of behavior. The council emerged as the organizational expression of the radical subject’s desire for the direct control over the conditions of existence. In contrast to working class parties and unions, councils avoided recuperation through the perpetual dialogue and constant participation of individuals with a common pursuit.
In the final chapter, “Situationist Practices,” the most prominent theme concerns the integration of politics and culture. The European avant-garde and the Situationist International held a common perspective that crises engendered by capitalism were the product of rationalization gone to extremes, a circumstance which need to be balanced by a humanizing perspective. Dada confronted modernity not with the intention to destroy the world but simply to rectify the uncontrolled form of rationalization which relentlessly moved forward as an impersonal force which placed ordinary human beings at its mercy. In contrast to the Futurists who embraced technology as the harbinger of a new society, Dada embraced technology but with the intent of restraining and controlling it. By embracing irrationalism and the subconscious, the Surrealists sought to infuse everyday life with a sense of poetic enchantment lost by the advent of capitalism. However, the Surrealists recognized that the complete realization of this endeavor needed to be made permanent through revolutionary action. The Surrealists attempted to involve themselves with the French Communist Party but the primacy they placed on individualism made the Surrealists less than ideal candidates to join a dogmatic and entrenched political organization such as the Communist Party.

When the Situationists emerged in the late 1950s, they exhibited this desire for balance by merging political theory with subversive cultural practices. Accordingly, the Situationists wanted to destroy the ideological function of the spectacle, but sought to re-appropriate the cultural technology and means of the spectacle for the purpose of enriching the experience of human life. They felt that all the means of society could be reorganized for the construction of situations, a form of lived art that emphasized the ephemeral experience of the subjective individual which could not be reproduced or commodified. What is curious is that the construction of situations served to cultivate desires, desires being something that the
Situationists neglected to define since they must be determined by the subject. However, there is always the possibility that someone could cultivate the desire to dominate over others. The Situationists assumed that once the productive capacity of society was oriented for the satisfaction of basic human needs, then everyone would naturally coexist and no such desire as the one to dominate over others would ever arise. Of course, the construction of situations was an idea which was never realized, the remainder of Situationist aesthetic activities are oriented in the direction of active and practical contestation.

The purpose of the dérive and détournement concentrated on subverting the conditioning effects of urban environments and institutionalized cultural products. More than a simple mode of transportation, the dérive was a mode of walking with the intent of researching the psychogeography of a city in order to discover the way urban environments influenced and conditioned its population. Based on the theory of unitary urbanism, the Situationists sought to discover how to transform urban environments for the purpose of enriching life through the creation of situations.

Détournement emerged as the Situationists most uncomplicated and accessible cultural practice as a means of political engagement. By manipulating existing forms of spectacular culture, the technique of détournement was used to alter the current meaning of cultural forms and replace them with a new, subversive meaning. By placing images and language into a new context and modifying them, the Situationists used the products of the spectacle to directly combat it. Accordingly, détournement and recuperation are theoretical opposites: they share the common purpose of manipulating meaning. The Situationists used détournement to cultivate and foment the revolutionary desire for the destruction of the spectacle. Recuperation, on the other hand, manipulated the meaning of cultural dissent in order to maintain the spectacle. In addition,
détournement functioned to revive and restore the cogent aspects from cultural works of the past and to improve upon them for contemporary needs.

In examining the ideas of the Situationist International in the context of recuperation, the most prominent and enduring theme emphasizes the qualities of dynamism, transience, and fluidity. The Situationists opposed the spectacle because it ossified all human activity through commodification, reification, and rationalization. Ironically, the spectacle itself constantly evolved by the constant recuperation of human ingenuity and creativity. For the Situationists, the active contestation of capitalism and the spectacle became the ideal means of superseding art through participatory revolutionary action: “The contingency of this position was indicative of the Situationists’ distrust of all foundations, essences, and absolutes. The spectacle and its negation were seen to be engaged in perpetual articulation; the radical subject invoked by the Situationists . . . is drawn on no rigorous conception of human nature and has no universal foundation.”206

The Situationists were adamantly opposed to recuperation because it functioned to solidify human activity into a form of ideological conditioning. From their perspective, the spectacle inundates the consumer with so many representations and images that the spectator loses the intellectual capacity to operate free of their influence. The historical accumulation of cultural works and their proliferation as spectacular commodities encouraged passive contemplation while discouraging creative engagement. In addition, the entire body of past cultural works exerted an authority acquired by tradition and the passage of time which made them effectively unassailable. Subsequent cultural productions then are necessarily judged according to the exemplary or poorest models of literature and art, the standards of a particular aesthetic school, or any form of existing representation. In the spectacle, culture functions

206 Plant, 62.
ideologically because it presents established, defined, and correct forms of interpreting the world.

All forms of representation were potentially ideological because they presented isolated perspectives of human experience. According to the Situationists, ideologies restricted human participation by demanding adherence and conformity. By definition, representations possessed a material or conceptual form which becomes fixed and changeless through reification. Like representations, ideologies were non-adaptive and did not evolve according to changing historical circumstances but consistently offered old solutions to new historical problems. Deferral to ideology in any form was equivalent to self-abnegation, the abandonment of one’s subjective autonomy. By rejecting all forms of ideology and representation, the Situationist International emphasized revolutionary practice as a constant and ongoing activity to be incorporated into the experience of everyday life.

One of the more curious results of examining the concept of recuperation, concerns the efficacy of the theories of the Situationist International. In other words, how successful were the theories and practices of the Situationists in actually contesting the spectacle. One argument has been made that the Situationists’ continuation of the avant-garde project to integrate art and life was fundamentally misguided: “the misrecognition on the part of the Situationists International of the role of the avant-garde in advanced capitalist society; rather than being the latter’s absolute contestation . . . it was this society’s necessary adjunct.”

In many ways the role of the European avant-garde had conducted the pioneering work necessary to provide capitalism new opportunities to extend its encroachment into every sphere of life. Dada exposed the possibility of negating the significance of representational forms and the potential to impart new meanings.

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Theoretically, Dada provided the spectacle a means of constant renewal through the constant recycling and recirculation of works of the past. In their exploration of dreams and the subconscious, the Surrealists opened up new realms of human experience which could be exploited and commodified. Furthermore, their high regard for individualism fitted suitably with the spectacle which could offer a vast number of consumable products tailored to fit specific social roles, the consumption of which confirmed the identity of the consumer. Since the formation and dissolution of the Situationist International, the critical practice of détournement has been employed a general technique to recycle old commodities into new ones.

Guy Debord and the Situationist International offered their critique of modern capitalism and spectacular society during a rather idyllic period of European history when consumerism was in its embryonic stage. In this regard, the Situationists were quite prescient in their concern over the relentless force of commodification. In the 1950s and 1960s, the extent of commodification seems fairly tame. In the early twenty-first century, the possibilities of commodifying any form of human experience seems limitless. Contemporary technologies permit the abstraction of human experience into representational forms disguised as a participatory activities. Human creativity and ingenuity is nurtured with the direct intent of producing an object, an idea, or work of art exclusively for the purpose of a making a profit.

In response to the question posed at the beginning of this investigation, “what is irrecuperable?” the answer seems to be that nothing is immune from the possibility of recuperation. The only definitive means of obviating recuperation consisted in the absolute denial of representation. In this respect, the Lettrist International provides the most extreme example which largely abstained from production of art other than the minimal circulation of
their journal *Potlatch*. Accordingly, the Lettrists remained irrecoverable because they did not produce representations of work which could reproduced and recuperated.

With the need for the transmission of their ideals, the Situationists made themselves vulnerable to recuperation by producing works of art and literature. The expulsion of the artistic tendency in 1962 was a direct manifestation of the anxiety over recuperation. Images, paintings, and other forms of art were easily susceptible to becoming detached from their original context and circulated until its former relevance had been completely lost. After 1962, the majority of the Situationist efforts went into the transmitting their theories and ideas in writing. In contrast to ideology, the Situationists asserted that their ideas and theories were malleable and open-ended. Their texts serve as a living record of the Situationists’ attempts to theorize the nature of modern capitalism and reflected their attempt to discover a means of engaging the spectacle effectively.

The Situationist perceived the effects of recuperation in a simplistic and monolithic manner. In their opinion, recuperation corrupted in a totalizing and unilateral way: once recuperated, the individual or cultural work lost its relevance as a subversive threat to modern capitalism and the spectacle. The Situationists’ anxiety over the possibility of recuperation seems exaggerated when considering their faith in the reversal of perspective and the necessity of perpetual articulation. Concurrently, Debord’s book, *The Society of the Spectacle*, exists today as a result of its commodification and circulation within the context of modern capitalism. However, the negative connotations of recuperation may be reversed and attributed a positive significance by regarding recuperation as a means to preserve and circulate critical dissent and cultural opposition to capitalism.

The topic of recuperation provides a number of avenues for further historical research.
One possibility would examine recuperation in the context of present day consumer society and consider its relevancy as a viable and useful perspective. Another project would be to examine the Situationists awareness and responses to recuperation relates to the broad historical theme of modernity and responses to it. One could also examine the similarities and contrasts between the work of the Situationists and the intellectuals of the Frankfurt School. A contemporary direction for further research would be a focus on the subject of intellectual property rights.
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