

---

H-France Forum, Volume 3, Issue 1 (Winter 2008), No. 5

Tom McDonough, *“The Beautiful Language of My Century”: Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945-1968*. Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2007. 273 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$34.95 (hb). ISBN 0-262-13477-2.

Response by Tom McDonough, Binghamton University

The frequently solitary character of intellectual labor—or rather, the illusory solitude that academic work tends to foster—makes the attentive reading of colleagues all the more rewarding, and I cannot but begin this response to the reviews of Julian Bourg, Steven Ungar, Gisèle Sapiro, and Gerd-Rainer Horn without expressing my deep gratitude to them and to the editors of H-France Forum, in particular Sarah A. Curtis, who has carefully shepherded this to publication. It is truly a pleasure to have four such careful and insightful appraisals of *“The Beautiful Language of My Century”* and to have the opportunity to continue the dialogue in this reply. Because there is a fair degree of overlap in the issues raised by the reviewers, I have organized my response by subject matter, roughly corresponding to the chapters of the book, and concluded with preliminary answers to a few more general questions posed by my readers.

A first set of issues arises around the definition and political positioning of the practice of *détournement*—of, as Ungar rightly reminds us, the illicit *diversion* or deflection of text, image, or object toward subversive ends. (I have often translated *détournement* as “appropriation” in this volume in order to signal to its art-historical readers the ground it shares with later strategies of critical postmodernism that Craig Owens paradigmatically termed the “allegorical impulse.”[1]) Bourg cautions that such a program runs the risk of being little more than a formalist politics, much like the slightly later “political modernisms” of the 1960s and 1970s.[2] There seem to be two necessary responses to this claim. The first is a historical response, which would insist on the complex literary and political terrain on which *détournement* arose; this I must admit to having only partially mapped in the first chapter of *“The Beautiful Language of My Century,”* and Sapiro has helpfully indicated several of the gaps in my cartography. Above all, the Situationist practice of *détournement* cannot be understood outside the crushing presence of Jean-Paul Sartre and his theory of engaged literature (as well as of the related figure of Louis Aragon, avatar of socialist realism), which paraded its revolutionary ideals in what some (including the young Guy Debord) understood to be the superannuated literary form of the nineteenth-century novel. Already in the later 1940s, Isidore Isou and the poetic provocateurs of Lettrism—those crucial predecessors of the Situationists—were militating against this dominant canon of postwar French writing, and in many ways *détournement* was a direct product of their earlier experiments. By neglecting this history I have perhaps obscured the very real historical conditions of the literary-aesthetic field within which *détournement* appeared, conditions that made attention to “form”—and the reactivation of the doubly-forgotten legacies of the historical avant-garde (repressed first within the conservative aesthetics of Vichy and then again within the Zhdanovite doctrines of the postwar PCF)—appear an urgent political task.

Sapiro also insists on the importance of positioning *détournement* in relation to the development of the nouveau roman, whose ascendance in the later 1950s almost directly corresponds with the formation of the Situationist International. (Emile Henriot’s coining of the term in *Le Monde* in May 1957 came just two months before the SI’s founding conference.) Indeed, like *détournement*,

the nouveau roman needs to be seen as a reaction to the reign of engaged literature; both were attempts to move beyond traditional literary forms, but whereas Robbe-Grillet and his peers chose the path of “white writing” outlined by Roland Barthes, the Situationists sought to push beyond literary form itself. The SI had no interest in staking out a position in a merely *literary* avant-garde; in response to Robbe-Grillet’s articles in *France-Observateur* in 1957, Guy Debord wrote:

Actually, Robbe-Grillet is *up to date* for a certain social group, just as Michel de Saint-Pierre is up to date for a public made up of another class. Both are very much “of today” in relation to their audiences, and nothing more, to the extent to which they exploit, with different sensibilities, neighboring degrees of a traditional *mode of cultural action*. It is no big deal to be *up to date*: one is only more or less *part of the disintegration*. Originality now wholly depends on a leap to a higher level.[3]

A leap, we might say, from working within given aesthetic fields such as literature, to the free use of these disintegrating superstructures in the name of politico-aesthetic subversion. Nouveau roman and *détournement* may be said to share a point of origin in their mutual rejection of the terms of Sartrean engagement, but that rejection assumed fundamentally opposed forms: on one hand, an almost exclusively self-reflexive mode of writing that emptied itself of ethical and political concerns, and on the other hand, a mode of writing that sought to politicize form as well as content through a radicalization of the principles of montage. A closer examination of Debord’s films from 1959 and 1961, and of his partner Michèle Bernstein’s two novels from this same period, would undoubtedly allow us to more rigorously think through the SI’s relation to the nouveau roman and related forms in cinema.[4] (Similar questions could be asked of the following period in French literature and theory, dominated as it was by the journal *Tel Quel*, which the Situationists all but ignored, not least because *Tel Quel*’s convoluted *pas de deux* with the PCF and its later (fleeting) embrace of Maoism were indisputably anathema to the Situationists’ resolutely anti-Stalinist politics.[5])

But there is a second response which seems to me no less necessary, and which provides the basis of a reply to Bourg’s charge of “formalist politics.” At the heart of this charge, I think, are his related questions (echoed by Horn) regarding the actual audience for Situationist productions, and the “naturalism” subtending their practice. While I am not particularly interested in the sociology of literature or of art, I must confess that there is certainly important work to be done in reconstructing the milieu formed by the readership of the SI journal and related publications; in the absence of such a study, I can only say that the current belief that the Situationists were an entirely marginal group, almost unknown prior to 1967-68, is absolutely untenable. Their name regularly appeared within the pages of popular weeklies like *France-Observateur*, and the more specialized art press gave them at least passing attention, as did other far-left journals. So there were determinate, and I imagine heterogeneous, audiences for the SI that likely encompassed both a segment of the cultural elite (especially through the early 1960s) and a segment of the heterodox left (especially after); in both cases their ideas would prove influential, if largely in altered forms. I cannot pretend that this is a satisfactory answer, but it begins to specify what has largely remained inchoate up to now.

More problematic perhaps is the issue of naturalism, and what Bourg calls the group’s “groundless revolutionism” [sic]. There can be little doubt that, particularly early on in the group’s history, “revolution” and “the proletariat” were largely abstract, almost mythical categories, but this ceases to be true by the mid-1960s. Debord’s work with the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* early in the decade concretized these terms both historically and sociologically, a revision of his thought that would culminate in the 1967 publication of *Society of the Spectacle*, with its extended analysis of “the proletariat as subject and as representation,” the

often-overlooked theoretical core of the book. *Détournement* was formulated, at least in part, in recognition of the very *absence* of a revolutionary subject and of lack of a “natural” language in which to express that subject (contra the doctrines of socialist realism).

Perhaps the greatest divergences of opinion were expressed around what is the most historical chapter in the book: that which outlines differing responses of the visual avant-garde to the Algerian war of independence in 1961 and 1962. Both Bourg and Sapiro question my reading of Raymond Hains and Jean-Luc Godard; their primary objection is that I “superimpose” a very political reading onto a body of art that precisely refuses to deliver a political message. I would argue, in brief, that it is less *me* who applies this reading to the work, than *the very context in which they were operating* in 1961 that imposed such a political reading. Hains may well have wished to maintain a position of skepticism, disenchantment, and ambiguity, but under the conditions of this particular historical moment, such a stance was untenable. The most astute critical writing of the time recognized this fact, and while it may be true that we cannot simply assimilate Hains’ position to the “reactionary fatalism” of Fauvet, his impossible desire to hold the extremes at bay was itself an ideological position with a relatively determinate origin. There was more to this than the mere refusal, as in the *nouveau roman*, to deliver a message; however significant that turn away from engagement might have been a decade earlier, by 1961 it had very different implications. (The ideological ambivalence of the entire milieu of *nouveau réalisme*, the French equivalent of Pop Art, is worthy of study in this regard.) It is not a matter, then, of claiming that Hains was reactionary but of claiming that the presentation of “La France déchirée” was conducive to that prolonged sleep by which Edgar Morin and others had characterized contemporary French society. The exhaustion of the project of the *affichistes*—the very limit of its possibilities—is encountered in this exhibition, and it is no coincidence that a politicized art practice in France would take very different directions in the following years: with artists like Daniel Buren developing a self-reflexive critique of the art object and its institutional setting (which had remained neutral for Hains and colleagues), while a revitalized figurative painting by artists such as Bernard Rancillac and Gérard Fromanger explored the possibilities of a new form of artistic “engagement.” (The two opposing practices would come together briefly in the popular ateliers of May-June 1968.) But this is a story that has yet to be fully or adequately told.

The dispute over my interpretations of this moment is even sharper regarding my reading of Christo’s *Temporary Wall*, which Horn calls “fanciful.” Both Horn and Bourg express concern about a lack of clear evidence for reading this work as a kind of memorial to the victims of 17 October 1961, and indeed I admit in the book that my evidence is largely circumstantial. Horn takes this as cause to dismiss my interpretation, concluding, “Ultimately, of course, it should not necessitate extensive training to unlock the subversive message of a given piece of art.” But of course this is untrue. If the meaning of events or artworks were self-evident, we could all, historians and art historians alike, close up shop and call it a day. Meaning, however, is seldom so clear as Horn would have us think and never more so perhaps than in our own moment. For artists attempting to formulate a critical or political practice this is especially true. By 1962 just what form such a practice might assume was no longer clear, certainly not to artists in France. Artists like Christo who were asking such questions had to think about critical form as much as critical content. This is one important aspect of the aesthetic strategies examined in “*The Beautiful Language of My Century*,” an acknowledgment that no preexisting audience or available form could adequately address the new conditions of contestation in late capitalist culture. Hence the continual risk of being misunderstood or of not being recognized at all. But this has always been the danger confronted by avant-garde practices in the twentieth century, from Dadaism to Soviet Productivism and factography. The likelihood of failure is inscribed in their very ambitions, and so the history of the avant-garde is often one of obscurity, opacity, and misrecognition.

Only careful, speculative (but hardly fanciful) interpretation can restore to us the horizons of meaning within which this sort of artwork operated. And that interpretation will be based, as here, primarily on the visual evidence of the work itself; as art historians we cannot rely on external documentation to verify a reading (or can do so only in the rarest of circumstances) but only read the sparse textual sources for their aporias and silences.[6] This demarcates perhaps a crucial distinction between the work of the historian and that of the art historian and is the cause for much of the misunderstanding between the two disciplines. The artwork cannot be considered a mere illustration of an event or of a preexisting ideological position—it is not a placeholder for a truth held “elsewhere”—but plays rather an active role in the constitution of such ideological positions. It is an “event,” or as Jacques Rancière would have it, it is an instantiation of that “*partage du sensible*” through which politics is articulated.[7] And that event is accessible only through the work of interpretive analysis. Art history is a discipline that constructs knowledge on the basis of self-reflexive argumentation with previous interpretations, and I think any comparison of my own with those of earlier commentators on Christo’s work will speak in my favor.

There are also at least brief comments to be made on the subjects of the reciprocal readymade and festivity. A politicized reading of Marcel Duchamp’s work was indeed a *mis*reading of that work but a productive one for a number of artists in the 1960s; what amounted at its origins to little more than a rebellious prank (using a Rembrandt as an ironing board) became some half-century later a means to reconnect with a genuinely anarchistic line of cultural activism. And what was important about this reinvention of the strategy of the reciprocal readymade was the way it rejected precisely what Bourq characterizes as the “statically predictable trope” of the end of art: whatever the utopian expectations for art’s supersession into a practice of life after the revolution, the reciprocal readymade provided a means for making use of art in the here and now, shorn of any utopian longing. (It is just these qualities that have made the strategy so attractive to contemporary artists searching for means to utilize art as a tool of intervention in social structures.[8]) Horn points to a potential omission at the end of this chapter—in my discussion of Daniel Buren’s fall 1968 exhibition at the Galleria Apollinaire in Milan. Perhaps too telegraphically, I had attempted to signal the broader social context (“There would be no consolation on offer here, it was back out into the city streets—themselves unlikely to offer much solace in that turbulent season” [p. 134].), but Horn argues that this setting needs to be foregrounded in order to properly understand Buren’s gesture. I’m not so certain. Buren’s show would have needed to be scheduled at least six months in advance, prior even to the May events, and so should not be read as some punctual commentary on current occupations in either Milan or Paris. And I am less sanguine than Horn concerning Buren’s knowledge of Italian protest at the time—certainly there is little evidence in his writings, or in contemporary criticism, for making such a link. That evidence points rather to a longer-term engagement by Buren with those debates around the use value of the artwork that are the subject of my analysis. It would in fact be other figures, like the American artist Gordon Matta-Clark, who would respond in more explicit ways to the Italian Autonomia in the 1970s, as in his *Arc de Triomphe for Workers* (1975), proposed for a building occupied by young militant workers in Milan.[9]

Lastly, Bourq rightly asks that I push my analysis of festivity further, and in particular that I explore the root causes of this vogue for a radicalized ethnography. I suggested one within the book, in discussing the lingering influence of Popular Front discourses of leisure on Henri Lefebvre’s work, but this is only part of the story. The other, perhaps more radical, component, derives from the critique of colonialism as it developed within Surrealism and impacted on experimental ethnography through figures like Michel Leiris and, later, Claude Lévi-Strauss. Within the context of postwar decolonization, these academic developments assumed wider

importance and motivated this move toward models of festivity in political theory, and with the widely perceived importation of colonial strategies to the metropole itself, this model of subaltern protest could only become more attractive.

By way of conclusion, I would like to recall Guy Debord's 1978 film *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, which closes with a view of the open waters of the Venetian lagoon—beautifully shot by his longtime cameraman André Mrugalski—and the subtitle “To be begun again from the start.”[10] Coming at the end of this melancholic reflection on the director's lost youth in a bohemian Paris of the 1950s and indelibly marked by the ebbing of the revolutionary tide that had swept across much of the continent of Europe and elsewhere over the previous decade, this paradoxical concluding sentiment calls attention to a central question that, it seems to me, lies near the heart of each of the generous responses to my book. I might formulate that question explicitly by paraphrasing Raymond Williams' inquiry about modernism: when was *détournement*? This question of temporality, even more so than that of outlining the paradigm's characteristic operations, is perhaps the crucial problem both for us as historians of the (recent) cultural past and for those of us who are concerned as well with the prospects for a critical cultural practice in the present. “To be begun again from the start”—this subtitle suggests one answer. The injunction to repeat the film is also a demand to recapture the historical moment it had addressed, to return to those struggles, “to change life” (as Rimbaud succinctly had described it), and to make good on failed promises. The etymological roots of the word “revolution”—from the Latin *revolvere*, “to turn” or “to roll back”—are here rhymed with the literal action of the film coiling around its spool in a neat gesture of modernist aesthetic self-reflexivity opening out onto an eschatological conception of social transformation in which the past is thrown back into play in the present. The past is never simply past, we might say, but always awaits its revolutionary redemption.

But this notion of the ever-present possibility of return, of the circular quality of revolutionary action in its “rolling back,” is not the same as the belief that “all things seem to be possible—at all times,” as Horn characterizes my stance. This was certainly not Debord's understanding, nor is it my own. The title of the latter's film suggests as much: the celebrated Latin palindrome, “in girum imus nocte et consumimur igni”—known as “the devil's verse”—translates roughly as “we wander in the night, and are consumed by fire” and already gives a clear indication of the expenditure and loss that lie near the heart of the practices under consideration here. (Attributed to an anonymous Roman author, the palindrome is said to refer to the passing of the months, or alternately to the mayfly, which is drawn to the candle only to be consumed by its flame.) Having thrown itself without reserve into the revolutionary struggle, the Situationist International had been consumed, a term we should understand in its dual meaning of fulfilled (consummated) as well as used up. *In girum imus nocte...* was an elegy for that lost moment, which could never be brought back to life but which could only be “begun again from the start” by others, in different places, at other times.

Something of this paradoxical sense of revolutionary temporality informs my own work. On one hand, “*The Beautiful Language of My Century*” is intended as a historical study, an attempt to reexamine a range of disparate politico-aesthetic practices that loosely cohere around the notion of *détournement*; on the other hand, however, the book aims to be other than a historical study. Bourg rightly demands that we ask how *détournement* is going, and I hope that the final chapter of the book—a study primarily of the work of contemporary French artist Pierre Huyghe and its connections with the practices discussed in earlier chapters—would suggest the complexity of any accurate response. Once again, it is important to note that I do not simply advocate the currency of *détournement*—far from it. Part of my aim in concluding with Huyghe, rather than with the more logical discussion of May '68 itself, is to critically distance this past from our own moment, to refuse in other words the utopian gesture that would insist on a straightforward

continuity of strategies from the 1960s to the present. The link from past to present is more complicated and presumably involves acknowledging the insuperable distance separating them while at the same time attempting, in however mediated a form, to bring that past into play once again—to begin again, from the start.

But of course the question of when *détournement* suggests rather more clear answers than the ones I have offered so far. Bourg suggests one himself: we can locate the time of *détournement* squarely between that of the Surrealists and that of Jean Baudrillard. This is not, strictly speaking, wrong, and others have told precisely this story with some fluency.[11] But this is not the story I am interested in telling; my goal has not been to slot the Situationists and their contemporaries comfortably into a twentieth-century intellectual history as some crux on which hinges the turn from an earlier revolutionary avant-garde to a properly postmodern resignation. Rather I have wanted to isolate those features of Situationist theory and practice that may be said to have exceeded the settled frameworks of interpretation: *détournement* as a means of counter-conditioning; festival as a moment of the violent instauration of subjectivity amid reification; the artwork as instrument, and so on. My hope for “*The Beautiful Language of My Century*”—a hope that I will not claim to have realized—has been to remap our sense of the intellectual field of leftist culture in postwar France or rather to show how a group of artists and writers tried to do so. And this group, far from being “beautiful souls” or “angels of purity”—as a growing critical consensus would have it—worked precisely within the most degraded and debased aspects of everyday life, trying to piece its fragments into a new configuration that might point the way toward some fundamental transformation of that life. This was the task of *détournement*, and I hope I have written an *éloge* to it, but I will conclude by noting, as Debord might have said, that *tout est à rejouer*.

## NOTES

[1] See Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, and Boston: David R. Godine, 1984). The early reception of the Situationist International within the North American art world was largely determined by the framework of these critical postmodern strategies of appropriation; see *On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International, 1957-1972*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, and Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1989). My work, it is important to note, has been both conditioned by and written in reaction to this historical reception.

[2] I am thinking here of the characterization and critique of French and English film theory and practice, many of whose terms could be transferred to the debate over *détournement*, in D.N. Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

[3] Guy Debord, “One More Try if You Want to be Situationists (The SI *In* and *Against* Decomposition)” (1958), trans. John Shepley, in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, Coll. “OCTOBER Books,” 2002), p. 53 (translation modified). Michel de Saint-Pierre (1916-87) was a French author and journalist whose works were marked by his militant Catholicism and royalist beliefs.

[4] On the subject of Debord’s films, see my “Calling from the Inside: Filmic Topologies of the Everyday,” *Grey Room* no. 26 (Winter 2007): 6-29. Bernstein’s novels have yet to receive an

---

adequate treatment as anything other than Situationist *romans à clef*, but see Odile Passot and Paul Lafarge, "Portrait of Guy Debord as a Young Libertine," *SubStance* 28, no. 3 (1999): 71-88.

[5] For a useful treatment of *Tel Quel's* history, see Danielle Marx-Scouras, *The Cultural Politics of Tel Quel: Literature and the Left in the Wake of Engagement* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

[6] The classic example of this method is T.J. Clark, "Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of Manet's *Olympia* in 1865," *Screen* 21, no. 1 (1980): 18-41.

[7] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

[8] See, for example, the exhibition "The Future of the Reciprocal Readymade (The Use-Value of Art)," held at Apexart in New York, 17 March-17 April 2004, curated by Stephen Wright.

[9] On Matta-Clark, see Pamela M. Lee, *Object To Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 2000).

[10] Guy Debord, "In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni" (1978), in *Complete Cinematic Works*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Oakland, Calif.: AK Press, 2003), 193 (trans. modified).

[11] Most notably, perhaps, Sadie Plant, in *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

Tom McDonough  
Binghamton University  
tmcdonou@binghamton.edu

Copyright © 2008 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the [Editor-in-Chief of H-France](#).