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H-France Forum, Volume 3, Issue 1 (Winter 2008), No. 2

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.

Review essay by Steven Ungar, University of Iowa

"Well, it's a long, long time/From May to December." Reading Tom McDonough's *The Beautiful Language of My Century* recasts these lines from Kurt Weill-Maxwell Anderson's 1938 "September Song" as a cautionary reminder against the pitfalls of facile commemoration. The reminder pertains because the subtitle of McDonough's book—*Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945-1968*—takes on urgency in light of reassessments already marking a milestone anniversary of "that peculiar insurrection May 68" (p. 3). Writing this response in late December 2007 adds an edge to song lyrics that evoke the temporal trajectory of a sentimental education some forty years in the making. *Quarante ans déjà ?!!* This echo also reminds me that what McDonough invokes as "my century"—the title comes from the final page of Guy Debord's 1959 *Mémoires*—asserts a view of the century in full from the perspective of those whose stakes in May 1968 were marked by a generation involved with counter-cultures and counter-discourses that hovered between rock (the Who's "My Generation" and "Won't Get Fooled Again") and critical theory (Michel Foucault's concepts of power-knowledge and of counter-discourse). In both cases, the persistence of these references related to mass culture and popular entertainment suggests the nature of various public spheres McDonough means to engage.

The fact that Debord (1931-94) was not statistically part of the cohort of postwar youth in Europe and in the United States for whom May 1968 marked a certain coming of age has not diminished assessments of his role in the Situationist International (henceforth SI) between 1957 and 1972. Alongside Roland Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero*—about which McDonough offers astute insights—and *Mythologies*, Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) remains a key reference for understanding cultural militancy in postwar France from the 1944-45 Liberation through May '68. The 2006 publication of Debord's *Oeuvres* in the Editions Gallimard's Quarto series marked a mainstream recognition of a personal trajectory whose marginality it co-opted. If this recognition risks being characterized as an instance of co-option, others will surely see it as supporting the ongoing relevance of Debord's writings.[1] It does so by aligning a reassessment of the early postwar period in France with a European avant-garde going back to Kurt Schwitters, Marcel Duchamp, and the legacy of an evolved montage aesthetic in which the SI's notorious practice of *détournement* holds a pivotal role: "Almost forty years after the events of May '68, and a decade after Debord's death, this seems ... the most vital aspect of their legacy, and the one with the greatest lessons for the present" (p. 6).

I have left *détournement* provisionally in French because direct translations of the term into English as "cultural theft" (p. 9) and "appropriation" (pp. 9, 107) as well as McDonough's characterization of it as educational or cultural propaganda (pp. 43-44) fail to convey the semantic force of a practice I would liken instead to willful and potentially violent acts of diversion. Synonyms of the verb *détourner* in English include verbs such as redirect, deflect, reroute, switch, and sidetrack. Depending on context, *détournement* might convey the diversion of funds or the hijacking of an airplane. McDonough asserts that instead of a history of *détournement*, his book offers a tour of it as concept and practice (p. 13) in order to: (1) retrace

various forms of critical culture as they have developed from the decade preceding the events of May '68 in France; and (2) explore "how these forms have come down to us in the present" (p. 8). A major statement of how McDonough conceptualizes this tour occurs in a reference to "the aim of all the cultural strategies of contestation explored in this book" (p. 8). The placement of the adjective "cultural" in this passage is crucial because it posits the scope of these strategies in ways that set it apart from the markedly unqualified notion of contestation. In so doing, McDonough would appear to qualify in advance the impact of practices among individuals such as Debord, Jean-François Lyotard, and Michel de Certeau, for whom the avant-garde was not merely aesthetic and cultural but more often (if not always) political in its assumptions and goals.

The placement of the adjective "cultural" discloses the extent to which each of the five case studies whose consequences he describes as having "particular purchase on or stake in our own time." "As such," McDonough writes, "[this volume] aims less at a blanket coverage of the moment under consideration than at a select focus on what in the period seems most alive for us today" (pp. 8-9). The lessons McDonough assesses in conjunction with the active period of the SI divide into contemporaries and descendants/offshoots. The effect indeed helps him to deliver on his goal to trace evolving forms of contestation to the present. My favorite among the case studies is his second chapter devoted in large part to two acts of contestation during the summer and fall of 1962. The first of the two concerns the phenomenon of *décollage* in the form of twenty-one posters exhibited in June 1961 at Pierre Restany's Galerie J by Raymond Hains and Jacques Villeglé under the title *La France déchirée* (France in Shreds). The exhibit title is literal as well as figurative. The posters in question were composites of several posters whose random lacerations and tatters were seen as bearing witness to the anticolonial insurgency in Algeria, "in revolt since 1954" (p. 55). McDonough links the practice of *décollage* to Marcel Duchamp's selection of commonplace objects and *nouveaux réalistes* such as Yves Klein and Jean Tinguely before adding that while "there were no set politics in the practice of *décollage*, there *was* a politics entailed in the choice to display these works together, at that particular moment" (p. 61, emphasis in the original text).

The posters on display in June 1961 disclosed ongoing violence in France and in Algeria. Moreover they did so at moment McDonough aptly describes as a crucial conjuncture in the wake of the failed April 1961 putsch among French generals opposed to the secret negotiations the French government under Charles de Gaulle had undertaken with the independent Algerian National Liberation Front, known in French as FLN. The evocation of June 21, 1961 in Agnès Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7* included an actual radio news broadcast mentioning the trial of Major Georges Robin, who had been implicated in the failed putsch. During the same period, the *Organisation de l'Armée secrète* (OAS) began a series of attacks that were to include an attempted assassination of De Gaulle. Five months later, some four hundred North Africans died after police under the authority of Maurice Papon broke up an October 17 demonstration protesting a newly imposed curfew. If the full significance of the crucial conjuncture of June 1961 is heightened in retrospect, its role at the time was that of a structuring absence: "The Algerian war was, in a sense, everywhere and nowhere, present daily in Parisians' newspapers as bulletins from the Evian conference and stories of nighttime bombings against supporters of independence, but largely absent from their everyday lives" (p. 61).

In line with Situationist practices were installation projects proposed by the Paris-based Bulgarian Christo Javatcheff as direct interventions affecting circulation in urban spaces. McDonough's analysis moves from deadpan description and an "explanation of [their] possible uses" (p. 89) to the evolving context of post-October 1961 protest. Commenting on what came to be known as *Project for a Temporary Wall of Metal Drums (rue Visconti, Paris 6)*, he writes that the physical incongruity of the temporary wall of rusting oil drums "would enact a violent cut in physical space as well as in the physical representation of that space, halting traffic but also disrupting the comfortably intimate image of the *quartier*" (p. 92). In so doing, the project denied those who encountered it "the stance of contemplative passivity that even 'La France

déchirée' had enjoined" (p. 96). Associations linking the temporary wall to the barricades erected by supporters of the 1871 Paris Commune suggest a reference to urban resistance and militancy. Also to the point was the fact that the oil drums were made of the same materials used to construct the temporary shanty towns (*bidonvilles*) that housed many French Algerians who were victims of street violence in Paris in 1961 and 1962. In this sense, McDonough concludes that the spatial cut made by the temporary wall erected on June 27, 1962 forced its audience to confront its identification with or rejection of the capacity of a state power to determine "who and what had the right to appear within public space" (p. 97). I agree with that conclusion and would add only that McDonough's use of the term "audience" limits in advance the potential impact of this confrontation in ways that might not account for those whose access to the temporary wall might have had little to do with aesthetic or even political concerns that Christo presumably meant to engage. As I see it, then, the targeted public sphere in this instance was less that of people for whom the project was a gesture than that of people whom the unexpected encounter of this object in and across the narrow rue Visconti would rob of a quiescence as an effect or consequence that even committed art objects such as those in "La France déchirée" might never provoke.

The differences between committed art and Situationist practice that McDonough analyzes in his chapter on "La France déchirée" and Christo's street projects is one measure of the legacy of the postwar contestation whose lineage he explores in subsequent chapters related to more work of Daniel Buren and Pierre Huyghe. What this chapter and this book do especially well are to add to an ongoing inquiry into the 1945-1968 period marked by a transition from Fourth to Fifth Republics in response to a decolonization whose cultural dimensions continue to revise received accounts grounded in political institutions. The evolving nature of this inquiry on both sides of the Atlantic is itself a worthy object of study. While the historiography of the period is not of primary concern to McDonough, it is well worth noting how his book adds to recent studies in French and English.[2] In terms of writing history, McDonough's book inadvertently engages issues of periodization whose grounding in multiple durations (à la Fernand Braudel's notion of *la longue durée*) remains a healthy supplement to chronologies that retain their intellectual relevance. 1957 to 2008 is not a *longue durée* in a strict sense of hundreds of years, but questions related to the inscription of individual events within longer durations still apply.[3]

McDonough cites some of these books while addressing the specificity of avant-garde practices during and in the wake of the 1945-68 period in the form of case studies marking the possibilities of cultural theft—Debord's *détournement*—as a tool of critique. This dual or split temporal focus—from 1945 to 1968 and from 1968 to the present—derives from his assertion early on in the book that Debord's "beautiful language" of contestation continues to be recycled as a subject of appropriation and subversion (p. 11). The pages he devotes in a closing chapter on recent installations and videos by Pierre Huyghe thus engage the legacy of SI practices of contestation by refusing the unproblematic revival of their radicalism (p. 201) in ways that might all too easily lead to its reification as a commodity and spectacle. His final case study—examining Huyghe's film, *Les grands ensembles* (1994/2001)—marks yet another act of *détournement* in which images of high-rise housing projects built in suburban areas in the late 1970s evoke adolescent and gang violence such as that depicted in Matthieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (1995) and Jacques Doillon's *Petits Frères* (1999). Three images mounted vertically show two high-rise towers behind leafless trees and globe lights against a reflective surface that might be snow or ice. As in a kind of filmstrip, the images from top to bottom frame a progressive close-up. Their stripped-down effect abstracts space in the mode of a decor that recalls stage productions of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The abstraction is enhanced by blankly illuminated windows implying otherwise invisible but possible human occupation. Its initial evocation of the high literary modernity of early postwar France is all the more

unsettling in light of the extent to which Huyghe hijacks the decor by overlaying it with a secondary reference. The images convey the evolved status of these projects as a monument both to a model of postwar prosperity associated with the period of prosperity in France following 1945 known as *les Trente Glorieuses* and to a subsequent decline that has recast them as updated versions of the shantytowns they were meant to replace. Even more to the point, Huyghe's film predates the October-November 2005 violence in the same suburban areas that prompted then Minister of the Interior and future President Nicolas Sarkozy to refer to teenage delinquents as *racaille* [scum]. The same holds for Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's video, *Europa 2005—27 octobre* concerning the deaths of the two Parisian teenagers whose electrocution in a high-voltage electric transformer while hiding from police prompted the violent demonstrations and Sarkozy's inflammatory remarks.

Looking at Huyghe's *Les grands ensembles* through Debord's "beautiful language" of the twentieth century allows McDonough to end his book with a case study in line with the equivocal nature of the Situationists who spoke to artists of politics and to politicians of art.[4] The lack of a distinct human presence in the three images is likewise in line with a cultivated invisibility that set Debord, Raoul Vaneigem, and others among the SI apart from postwar artists, writers, filmmakers, and intellectuals for whom personal or partisan commitment was the norm. This invisibility, in turn, heightens differences between McDonough's sense of contestation in postwar France and that to be found in one of the first books that marked my own perspective on the period, Mark Poster's *Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From Sartre to Althusser*. (For the record, Poster mentions Debord once, placing him among "young radicals" for whom Henri Lefebvre's visions of the festival and new urbanism "resonated loudly." [5]) Finally, the images from *les grands ensembles* are in line with conditions of alienation and violence generated by a capitalist society against which the SI asserted its psychogeography of socializing urban spaces anew.[6] The images from Huyghe's *les grands ensembles* deploy absence and understatement to convey the persistence of Debord's "beautiful language" into the present century with an unsettling force fully equal to the more direct provocations in *La France déchirée* and Christo's *Project for a Temporary Wall of Metal Drums*. McDonough's success in conveying evolved forms of this persistence is a measure of the key contribution his book makes to critical understanding of postwar France between 1945 and 1968 and the complex legacy of the SI surrounding May '68. May to December? Perhaps it's not such a long, long time after all.

## NOTES

[1] Among books in English devoted to Debord and/or the SI, *The Beautiful Language* adds substantially to McDonough's previous collection of essays, *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002) and to Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

[2] In French, these include: Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman, *Les Porteurs de valises: La Résistance française à la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: Seuil, 1979); Jean-Pierre Rioux and Jean-François Sirinelli, *La Guerre d'Algérie et les intellectuels français* (Brussels: Complexe, 1991); Laurent Gervereau, Jean-Pierre Rioux, and Benjamin Stora, *La France en guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: BDIC, 1992); Guy Hennbelle, "La Guerre d'Algérie à l'Écran," special issue of *CinémAction*, no. 85 (1997); and Joël Roman, *Esprit: Ecrire contre la guerre d'Algérie, 1947-1962* (Paris: Hachette, 2002). Relevant texts in English include Philip Dine, *Images of the Algerian War: French Fiction and Film, 1954-1992* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995) and *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); James D. Le Sueur,

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*Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics during the Decolonization of Algeria* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, rev. ed., 2005); and David Carroll, *Albert Camus the Algerian: Colonialism, Terrorism, Justice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

[3] The key reference for multiple durations remains Fernand Braudel's 1958 article, reprinted in translation as "History and the Social Sciences: The Longue Durée," in *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 25-54. For chronology, see Anne Simonin, ed., *Le Débat*, no. 50 (May-August 1988), devoted to "Notre Histoire: matériaux pour servir à l'histoire intellectuelle de la France, 1953-1987" and a follow-up volume, Anne Simonin and Hélène Clastres, eds., *Les Idées en France, 1945-1988* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).

[4] Vincent Kaufmann, "The Situationists," in Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed., *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 105. See also Kaufmann's *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry*, Trans. R. Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

[5] Mark Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From Sartre to Althusser* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 257.

[6] Kaufmann, "The Situationists," 106.

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