
H-France Review Vol. 16 (July 2016), No. 140

Anna Trespeuch-Berthelot, *L'Internationale situationniste: De l'histoire au mythe (1948-2013)*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2015. 568 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. 29.00€. (pb.). ISBN 978-2-1306-1970-3.

Review by Tom McDonough, Binghamton University.

Much more than a conspiracy, the spectacle is a form of destitution [misère]. And those who write for the newspapers of our time...what could they say of any relevance about a film that attacks, as a whole, their customs and ideas, and that moreover attacks them at the very moment when they themselves are beginning to feel them collapse in every particular? The debility of their reactions complements the decadence of their world.

— Guy Debord, “Refutation of all judgments” (1975)[1]

Guy Debord’s impatience with, not to say loathing of, any who would claim the mantle of the Situationist project or attempt to historicize the movement of which he was the primary instigator is the stuff of legend. We hear it firsthand in his dismissive attack on the critical reactions to his 1974 film, *La société du spectacle*. For him, the feebleness of such responses merely echoed the broader decline of a society subsumed to the logic of an all-powerful commodity economy, a society whose immiseration he understood to be intellectual, as much as economic. During his lifetime, Debord would consequently arm himself against any and all such responses by exercising the most careful control over his writings and films, over the legacy of the Situationist International, as well as over his own voluminous archives. “À la fin de sa vie,” writes Anna Trespeuch-Berthelot, “Guy Debord (1931-1994) ne doute pas que le récit historique de son mouvement passera à la postérité sous la forme qu’il avait préparée.” He would, however, be sorely disappointed in that certainty; as Trespeuch-Berthelot hastens to remind us, the “réception de l’Internationale situationniste...fut d’une vigueur et d’une étendue telles qu’elles bouleversèrent ses plans” (p. 12). Her book aims to trace that reception over a sixty-five-year timespan, from the moment of the group’s obscure emergence out of postwar artistic formations to Debord’s apotheosis as a “national treasure” at the spring 2013 exhibition of his archives, held by the Bibliothèque nationale.

Trespeuch-Berthelot is undoubtedly correct to draw our attention to what she calls the “prodigieuse postérité” (p. 25) of the Situationist International (1957-1972) and to the place it has come to occupy in our “représentations collectives”—a place that stands in such stark contrast to its relatively brief historical existence as an “organisation aux dimensions modestes qui resta longtemps confidentielle” (pp. 23-24). In France and elsewhere, the theoretical paradigms and militant attitudes developed within the SI have since been taken up and translated by the varied domains of art, politics, and intellectual life. We have witnessed, especially over the last two decades or so, the rise of many different “situationisms,” whose complementary and competing perspectives are attested to in the proliferation of books, essays, and exhibitions addressing various aspects of the group. *L’Internationale situationniste* hopes to decipher the “formation de ce palimpseste mémoriel” for its readers (p. 31). It is a lightly revised, updated version of Trespeuch-Berthelot’s 2011 doctoral thesis, “From the Situationists to situationism: genesis, circulation, and reception of a critical theory in the Western world (1948-2009),” written at the

Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne under the supervision of Pascal Ory. There, as in the new book, she undertakes what she calls a work of *débroussaillage*, although whether her readers are left with a surer vision of the stakes entailed in the SI's posterity remains very much an open question.

Trespeuch-Berthelot, we might say, proves unable to see the forest for the trees in the decidedly overgrown thicket of successors to the Situationist mantle. That signal weakness is perhaps, paradoxically, rooted in what one might consider the book's primary methodological virtue of studied neutrality toward its subject. The author carefully avoids the "deux types d'écueils" that she notes are habitually encountered in considerations of the SI's reception: either the group's legacy is undervalued, written off as the product of a "reconstruction mythifiée, et amplifiée, de l'aventure situationniste"; or it is subject to the "effet de loupe" and indulgently considered to be ubiquitous. "Dans les deux cas," she cautions, "on omet les filtres, la chronologie et les échelles de cette réception qui rendent les filiations plus complexes qu'il n'y paraît" (pp. 25-26). Trespeuch-Berthelot endeavors to restore those filters, chronology, and scales with a historian's archival thoroughness, carrying out her analysis of the SI's reception both prior to and following its self-dissolution in 1972. That entails addressing the roles played by several players: the Situationists themselves, and especially Debord; those who considered themselves the SI's direct heirs, the so-called "pro-Situationists"; and, finally, various other cultural mediators, from curators and art historians to publishing houses and book critics.

The book is divided into two long sections, the first of which, "L'IS actrice de sa réception," essentially constitutes an extended rehearsal of the group's history. By this point that story, at least in skeleton form--the SI's origins as an artistic avant-garde in the 1950s and subsequent development into a highly atypical political movement of contestation and social critique in the years around 1968--is known well enough to feel superfluous here. She tells the tale dutifully, citing the now-extensive archive of primary documents and even making her own modest contribution to our source material on the group: she is the first to cite the files on the SI held by the Renseignements généraux, the French intelligence agency. In this section, Trespeuch-Berthelot is best when detailing the interpersonal and inter-group filiations between the SI and other leftist formations in the second half of the 1960s, although this, too, has been recounted elsewhere.^[2] But her lack of interest in the stakes, in the theoretical purchase the SI had on its time--characteristically, Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, indisputably the most significant publication to come out of the group, is dispatched in three short pages--leaves us with an oddly lifeless account.

Trespeuch-Berthelot refuses, here and elsewhere, to engage with what one might consider a central historical question--why did people read these essays fifty years ago, and why do they continue to today?^[3] Her lack of curiosity is signaled, perhaps, by the almost complete absence of any of the rich secondary, interpretive materials on the SI--materials that, in the positivist logic of her historical approach, must necessarily be relegated to the realm of "reception." She recognizes this problem toward the very end of her volume, where she acknowledges the limits of her approach: "ces considérations ne doivent pas dissimuler la force intrinsèque des idées ni la portée des oeuvres," which, she writes, have undoubtedly suffered "de notre parti pris : une focalisation sur les circuits de la pensée et les réseaux tissés entre les homes [sic], indispensables vecteurs sans lesquels tout 'chef d'oeuvre ou toute théorie 'visionnaire' n'existeraient tout simplement pas puisque leur valeur est le résultat d'une reconnaissance publique" (pp. 502-503). But is it? It is hard to believe that the SI, with its Hegelian-Marxist understanding of the dialectical force of the negative at work in history, would concur with her one-dimensional yoking of a revolutionary theory's use-value to its "public recognition," as if it were simply one more product seeking recognition within a cultural marketplace.

The intellectual circuits and social networks that interest Trespeuch-Berthelot occupy the lengthy second section of her study, entitled "La réception posthume." Here, notably, we trace the emergence of numerous small radical groups in the wake of the collapse of the hopes of '68 and of the dissolution of the SI itself in 1972; these "pro-Situationists," prone to self-destruction and internecine quarrels that remain incomprehensible to all except those directly involved, survived into the 1980s, those "années

d'hiver" of reaction that the author characterizes as a "période de purgatoire pour l'Internationale situationniste" (p. 321). Much of the literature produced by such groups, published in miniscule journals such as *La Banquise* [Ice floe] or *Os Cangaceiros* [Bandits], is admittedly all but indigestible in its dedication to superficial polemics, but Trespeuch-Berthelot may still be faulted for too often providing us with little more than a disjointed catalogue of shifting personnel and short-lived projects. What we require instead is guide through their ideas, and a sense of whether they have anything to tell us today. The problem with her approach becomes more acute by the time we reach a properly "post-Situationist" movement by the later 1990s; within the broad milieu of the alter-globalization movement, she identifies the emergence of a "nouvelle ère de l'herméneutique situationniste" in journals such as *Tiqqun* and, later, the writings of the Invisible Committee, which broke from the reverential attitude toward Debord and the SI that had hobbled the pro-Situationist movements.[4] Having established no criteria by which to decide upon the relative importance of one reception of the SI over any other, she passes over these truly significant moments with the same superficiality with which she treats long-forgotten scandals of the post-1968 French far left.

Further chapters skip back and forth in time to chronicle the legitimation of the SI within the publishing world and elsewhere in the "champ intellectuel" (chapter nine) and the subsequent elevation of Debord in particular as a "mythe français" (chapter ten). The problem here is certainly not with Trespeuch-Berthelot's thoroughness—her bibliography, while hardly complete, is nevertheless lengthy enough to compel her publisher to omit it from the volume and make it available instead online—but with her mistaken belief that the SI's reception follows a linear path, from the time of the group's activity, through the pro-Situationist years, to its present glory.[5] Such a historicist reading is however untenable; the post-Situationists of today did not, on the whole, evolve out of earlier pro-Situationist tendencies nor do their critical models depend on the latter. When Julien Coupat, who would become one of the founders of *Tiqqun* in 1999, discovered Situationist thought, it was not via some underground review but rather via Debord's writings themselves. He would read *The Society of the Spectacle* while studying with Luc Boltanski at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales. The story of the reception of SI is, I want to suggest, much stranger and less expected than the one Trespeuch-Berthelot gives us. It is not a straight path from revolutionary political movement to recuperation by the institutions of the state; rather, a twenty year-old student could in 1994 still pick up a copy of Debord's book, by then published by Gallimard, and find in it a paradigm with which to contest our present world. The posterity of the SI can only be told as a series of *Tigersprünge*, as Walter Benjamin might have put it.

I opened with a passage from one of Debord's films in which he refuted the critics who had the temerity to review his work. For Debord, their "reception" was just one more indication of the immiserated condition of modern society. In 1996, his widow Alice Debord and the executor of his literary estate, Patrick Mosconi, composed an open letter on Debord's "legacy" that was published in *le Monde*. It read, in part: "Il n'y a pas de problème d'héritage Debord. Il n'y a qu'un problème Debord. ...[1] n'y a rien à faire fructifier, ni réhabiliter, ni embellir, ni falsifier. Il n'y a pour finir que Debord, son art et son temps tels qu'il les a révélés.... Il n'y a pas d'héritiers." [6] This too might be read as a cautionary note for Trespeuch-Berthelot's project. It is not that Debord and the SI have lacked for "reception"—far from it, of course. But anyone undertaking the task of addressing that reception must be willing to do more than chronicle the ever-accumulating bibliography of titles and decide precisely where someone's misreading of the group's heritage becomes productive, where the "Debord problem" is reinvented anew.

NOTES

[1] Guy Debord, "Refutation of All the Judgments..." in *Complete Cinematic Works*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Oakland, CA and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2003), pp. 112-113 (trans. modified; original published in 1975).

[2] See, for example, Laurent Chollet, *L'insurrection situationniste* (Paris: Éditions Dagorno, 2000), a useful book that, admittedly, suffers from precisely the “magnifying effect” criticized by Trespeuch-Berthelot. Chollet attributes the origins of seemingly every revolt of this period—from the Provos to the Italian insurrection of the 1970s—to the influence of the Situationists.

[3] Although these questions have no single answer, one indication of what an adequate response might look like is provided by Anselm Jappe in his *Guy Debord*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

[4] Much of the writing of these groups has been made available to English-speaking audiences thanks to the publishing house Semiotext(e); see The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, bk. 1, *Intervention Series* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009); Tiqqun, *Introduction to Civil War*, trans. Alexander R. Galloway and Jason E. Smith, bk. 4, *Intervention Series* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010); Tiqqun, *This Is Not a Program*, trans. Joshua David Jordan, bk. 7, *Intervention Series* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011); Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, trans. Ariana Reines, bk. 12, *Intervention Series* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012); and The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, trans. Robert Hurley, bk. 18, *Intervention Series* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2015). Useful introductions to this strain of thought may be found in “Whatever Future: Interview with Alexander R. Galloway,” *Idiom* (October 25, 2010), accessible at <http://idiommag.com/2010/10/whatever-future-interview-with-alexander-r-galloway/>; and Jason E. Smith, “The Politics of Incivility: Autonomia and Tiqqun,” *The Minnesota Review* 75(Fall 2010): 119-132.

[5] The bibliography can be found at http://www.puf.com/puf_wiki/images/c/c7/Bibliographie_IS.pdf

[6] “Au courrier du ‘Monde’: Autour de l’héritage de Guy Debord,” *le Monde*, November 1, 1996: 12.

Tom McDonough
Binghamton University
tmcdnou@binghamton.edu

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172