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"A New Language of Critical Theory": Debord's Style of Negation

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how a negative critique operates in the work of French philosopher and avant-gardist, Guy Debord. This article also assesses the aesthetic and political effects of Debord's negative critique. I discuss how Debord handles the difficult, if not impossible, task of formulating a mode of expression that does not fall victim to recuperation by spectacular society, and how his strategy of negation bears the weight of a stylistic tradition (with roots in the works of Hegel and Marx) which Debord works with and against. I pay particular attention to Debord's pointed but easily overlooked critique of Roland Barthes, whose theorization of a "writing degree zero" signifies for Debord an idealized negation of style, and not the proper language of critical theory, which must be a more subversive "style of negation." Finally, I suggest that the ultimate historical failure of Debord's political program does not undermine its value as a critical apparatus, and that the unfinished and uncertain character of Debord's theory is a necessary and useful aspect of his praxis, rather than an ideological defect.

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> The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.
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> —Karl Marx[1]
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> The poem teaches us to contemplate thoughts instead of changing them.
>
> —Simone Weil[2]

In a singularly representative gesture, Guy Debord famously published his book *Mémoires* (1959) with a sandpaper jacket. Not only does this gesture neatly express a certain amount of discomfort Debord wanted (or at least was willing) to inflict upon his reader, it also reflects materially a desire which originated at the ideological level: the desire to damage any books it was placed beside on a bookshelf. The origin behind the sandpaper cover admittedly detracts from its mythos: the material was actually chosen by the book's printer, V.O. Permild, and approved by Debord's collaborator, artist Asger Jorn.[3] Still, this design choice must be seen as a deliberate practice of Debord's philosophy. This unusual choice of material is a logical extension of an impulse that is foundational to Debord's style; namely, the impulse to unsettle the pre-established order, to deface and desanctify. Although this design choice is the most obvious example of this impulse, the sandpaper jacket is emblematic of a strategy that extends beyond the merely material. Such a material choice, after all, is also an aesthetic one, and it is in Debord's aesthetics that the real sandpaperly qualities of his philosophy come to light.

With the sandpaper jacket in mind, we might use this tactile strategy to frame a tentative philosophical model for understanding Debord's sometimes frustrating literary style. If one was to place *Mémoires* on a bookshelf, its abrasive sandpaper cover would not only damage the other books in its company, but it would actively devalue them, and potentially render them unfit for resale. As Permild writes in a letter to Jorn with palpable glee, "Can you imagine the result when the book lies on a blank polished mahogany table, or when it's inserted or taken out of the bookshelf?"[4] *Mémoires* might not affect the words inside the books surrounding it, nor can the book itself actually change or comment on the literary value of these texts, but it would clearly make itself troublesome company for them, while simultaneously troubling its own status as a collectible item (Debord called *Mémoires* an "anti-livre").[5]

The active mechanism in both cases is negation—the intention is not necessarily to propose a positive critique of, or alternative to, the other ideas which might be set beside or against *Mémoires*. Rather, the intention is to efface those ideas, to draw attention to their impermanence and contingency, to unfix their appearance as neutral vessels of wisdom or information. Although Debord's term *détournement* (imperfectly translated as "rerouting" or "hijacking") has gained the most traction as the unifying theoretical concept of the Situationist International (SI) project, both Debord and Asger Jorn (co-creator of *Mémoires*, as well as a founding member of SI) recognized détournement's foundation in a concept that is equally important for Debord's project: negation. Jorn writes in a May 1959 exhibition catalogue, "Détourned Painting," that "Détournement is a game made possible by the capacity of *devaluation*."[6] This thought is further clarified in December of the same year in an unsigned article published in *Internationale Situationniste #3*, the third edition of the Situationist International's central bulletin: "Détournement is thus first of all a negation of the value of the previous organization of expression."[7]

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1 Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, by Friedrich Engels (Progress Publishers, 1969), 61.

2 Note in the margins of Weil's pre-war notebook (written between 1933–1937). Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 42.

3 V.O. Permild, *Erindringer om Asger Jorn*. Galerie Moderne, 1982, quoted in Christian Nolle, "Books of Warfare: The Collaboration between Guy Debord & Asger Jorn from 1957–1959."

4 Nolle, "Books of Warfare".

5 Guy Debord, "Attestation," in *Mémoires: structures portantes d'Asger Jorn; suivi de, Origine des détournements* (Paris: Allia, 2004).

6 Alternatively translated as "devalorization." Asger Jorn, "Détourned Painting," trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Rive Gauche Gallery, May 1959), https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/painting.html.

7 Situationist International, "Détournement as Negation and Prelude," trans. Ken Knabb, December 1959, https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/detournement.html.

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The purpose of this article is to examine some of the ways that this Debordian negative critique operates, and to suggest that Debord's stylistic intervention into "theory" is not limited only to an artistic move, but also constitutes a political one. By highlighting the significance of negation to Debord's aesthetic and political practice, I argue, one is better equipped to understand the continuing relevance of his theorizations, and the ways they might continue to resist capture by the spectacular systems they describe. I will discuss some of the stylistic heritage Debord writes both with and against, particularly arising out of a Marxist-Hegelian tradition, and how this "style of negation" differs from Roland Barthes' theorization of a "writing degree zero," or what Debord calls the "negation of style."[8] In conclusion, I argue that the Situationist International movement, though it did not achieve the revolution it was yearning for, remains a powerful expression of a negative critique, which may be recuperated by a capitalistic political economy in discrete instances, but which persists as the negativity immanent to that system. Debord's negative critique may remain forever incomplete, but is, in the final analysis, unavoidable.

The approach of a negative critique or theorization provides the theorist with a good deal of insulation from criticism, since there will always be more ways of describing what an object or state of affairs is not rather than what it is. As a result, the reader who opens Debord's signature text, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), looking for a straightforward analysis of the modern ills of capitalist society or a systematic program of action may be left disappointed. The basic premise of Debord's signature work is that the alienation produced by a capitalist economic system has now colonized the political, aesthetic, and semiotic spheres of everyday life, leaving us with a totalized "social form mediated by appearances."[9] What Debord calls "the spectacle" is best understood as the governing and replacement of reality by appearances, the substitution of genuine connections between people with illusory relations to commodified images that have now become our only points of reference for "reality." However, Debord's book is far from a straightforward economic or cultural analysis. Rather, it is presented as a series of aphorisms, often cryptic in nature, which sometimes seem to be skating around the characterizations they claim to be providing.

There are two very tempting criticisms one might launch at *Society*: firstly, that Debord fails to illustrate in any conclusive way what "the spectacle" actually is, and secondly, that he fails to explain what the concrete alternatives to the spectacle actually might be. As Eric-John Russell notes, "it has been a frequent judgement that *The Society of the Spectacle* fails at providing any coherent concept of spectacle."[10] Although Debord briefly introduces the concept of an accumulation of "images detached from every aspect of life" (which he does not even explicitly call "spectacles"), he is far more concerned with defining the spectacle negatively or dialectically than positively or synthetically.[11] His explanations often proceed by establishing negative boundaries before mapping out positive terrain: "The spectacle is not a collection of images[…]"; "The spectacle cannot be understood either as a deliberate distortion of the world or as a product of the technology of the mass dissemination of images"; "[The spectacle] is not something *added* to the real world"; "The spectacle cannot be set in abstract opposition to concrete social activity".[12] Debord's investment is in showing us what the spectacle is *not*, how it does *not* function, how it ought *not* to be understood. The recognition of Debord's literary style as primarily negative helps explain why what he calls his "theory of the spectacle" reads nothing like a "theory" in the scientific sense of the word, and how it calls into question any such totalizing or prescriptive analysis.[13]

8 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 144 [§204]. For *Spectacle* citations I've given the page number in my edition of the English translation (or the French edition where needed) and the section number (where applicable) for reference to other editions.

9 Eric-John Russell, *Spectacular Logic in Hegel and Debord: Why Everything is as it Seems* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 2.

10 Ibid., 17.

11 Debord, *Spectacle*, 12 [§2]. This negative aesthetic methodology has a precedent in French letters in Mallarmé, who wrote in an 1867 letter "*je n'ai créé mon oeuvre que par* élimination" [I created my work only by *elimination*] (quoted in Saldívar, 55). Debord uses a quote from the same Mallarmé letter as part of his collage in *Mémoires*.

12 Debord, *Spectacle*, 12–13 [§4, 5, 6], 14 [§8].

13 Ibid., 7.

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One can sense in his work a legitimate difficulty he is faced with as a stylist of theory, one which he himself acknowledges and even foregrounds: namely, the difficulty of inheritance. Debord is at pains to distance himself from other avant-gardists, many of whom made independent claims to the founding of a new kind of writing which would invalidate old forms and open up new windows of expressive possibility. Such was almost a rite of passage for the radical artist or critic of the period. I have in mind especially Barthes' "writing degree zero," which I will address specifically, but a better starting point would be French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé's claim in an 1864 correspondence: *J'invente une langue qui doit nécessairement jaillir d'une poétique très nouvelle* [I am inventing a language which must necessarily burst forth from a very new poetics].[14] Others include, to different ends, Hugo Ball, who inaugurated in his 1916 "Dada Manifesto" a poetic style "meant to dispense with conventional language, no less, and to have done with it," and the later Samuel Beckett, who in his *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (1949) reveals his "dream of an art unresentful of its insuperable indigence and too proud for the farce of giving and receiving," or what he elsewhere called a "literature of the unword" (itself a "writing of absence," in Barthes' terms).[15] Debord's own claim to linguistic novelty is staked out in *The Society of the Spectacle* as such: "Critical theory [*La théorie critique*] has to be communicated in its own language—the language of contradiction, dialectical in form as well as in content: the language of the critique of the totality, of the critique of history. Not some 'writing degree zero'—just the opposite. Not a negation of style, but the style of negation."[16]

Debord occasionally identifies his enemies, but more often leaves them unnamed, expecting his readers to suss them out by context. In this case, Debord is writing against Roland Barthes, who published his first book, *Writing Degree Zero* [*Le Degré Zéro de l'Écriture*] in 1953.[17] The early Barthes theorizes the emergence of a "writing degree zero," a new mode of writing which marks the simultaneous "murder" of literature and the signs which produce it as a present object, these signs being what make up "bourgeois consciousness."[18] Barthes predicts that this kind of writing, realized in "colourless writing like [Albert] Camus's, [Maurice] Blanchot's or [Jean] Cayrol's, for example, or conversational writing like Queneau's," will be the final stage of literature before its disappearance.[19]

This theoretical new mode of writing arises from Barthes' critique of French realism, associated with Guy de Maupassant, Émile Zola, and Alphonse Daudet, arguing that "far from being neutral, it is on the contrary loaded with the most spectacular signs of fabrication."[20] This diagnosis of realism, especially Barthes' use of the word "spectacular," seems to be surprisingly in line with Debord's assessment of the images of culture as "self-portraits of power" and "falsifications of life."[21] Realist writing, for Barthes, necessarily fails to be convincing *qua* realism because it places a premium on the labor of the reader: "the natural sentence is transformed into an artificial one meant to bear witness to its purely literary purpose, which means, in this instance, what it cost in labor."[22] In political terms, the writing of past revolutionaries, the class of artists who are supposed to antagonize the bourgeoisie, is itself a "well-behaved" bourgeois form

14 Michael Temple, "Mallarmé, Par Jacques Derrida," in *The French Connections of Jacques Derrida*, ed. Julian Wolfreys, John Brannigan, and Ruth Robbins, 19.

15 Hugo Ball, "Dada Manifesto."

Samuel Beckett, *Proust & Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (John Calder Publishers, London, 1999), 112; Dirk van Hulle and Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 144.

16 Debord, *Spectacle*, 144 [§204].

17 The first English translation of *Spectacle*, the quality of which Debord had concerns about, completely missed this jab at Barthes, translating "le degré zéro de l'écriture" as "the nadir of writing." Sam Cooper, "The Style of Negation and the Negation of Style: The Anglicization of the Situationist International," *The Sixties* 6, no. 1 (June 1, 2013), p. 69.

18 Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero and Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Jonathan Cape Ltd. 1984), 6.

19 Ibid., 6.

20 Ibid., 56.

21 Debord, *Spectacle*, 19 [§24], 45 [§68].

22 Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 57.

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incapable of disturbing the order of signs (and thus the order of social reality).[23] As Mallarmé paradoxically concludes a sonnet, "*Le sens trop précis rature / Ta vague littérature*" [Too precise meaning erases / Your vague literature]—too much attention to detail actually attenuates the poetic power of literature.[24] Truly revolutionary writing must endeavor to create an entirely new situation for the writer which sidesteps the constraints of literary language. If this sounds familiar, it is because this is precisely the same goal articulated by the Situationists. Despite Debord's claim that he wants to achieve the very opposite of Barthes' vision of literature, he ends up sounding much more like an ally of Barthes' than an antagonist at first glance.

Importantly for Debord, *la style de la négation* is not equivalent to a Modernist revolution of everyday language.[25] Such conscious attempts to escape the literary cliché and step outside of history fail by replacing the old laws of literature with their own new laws. Debord's preference for the style of negation over the negation of style is specific to his mode of aesthetic negotiation from within spectacular society, rather than a claim to any kind of external truth or aesthetic neutrality. The way Debord deploys rhetorical figures, occupying tropes and quotations and attempting to destabilize them, is centered on this internally-oriented (or immanent) negativity. Although Barthes talks of a "reduction to a negative mood," and of the abolition of "the social or mythical characters of a language," what he envisions as a new mode of literary production is not ultimately a mode of negation.[26] There is a subtle but important distinction to be made here between *negation* and *absence*: Barthes calls for the "style of absence," Debord for the "style of negation."[27] The ideal absence Barthes imagines is a "neutral and inert state of form," quite the opposite of Debord's mode of literary intervention, which is neither neutral nor inert.[28] Barthes' "writing degree zero" is not a negation of literature, because it does not stage a conflict between itself and prevailing modes of writing. It instead seeks to differentiate itself by existing on a different stylistic plane altogether (a utopic "zero level").[29]

Although there is clearly a political dimension to the "Adamic world" Barthes writes of "where language would no longer be alienated," the almost theological abstraction he writes with affords him the latitude to be cagey about his politics without risking self-defeat.[30] As with the Dada and Surrealist movements, which Debord criticizes as deficient and ineffective, the politics of Barthes' argument do not need to extend any further than his style to accomplish what he means to accomplish.[31] The same criticism may, indeed, be applied to Debord, but such a criticism would ignore that, for Debord, the concrete political acts he took part in were also contiguous with his literary style. Style-as-politics is a completely self-conscious tactic of Debord's, where the same may only be an alibi for Barthes. After all, while both Barthes and Debord articulated critiques of the invasion of ideology into our cultural products, only one of the two claimed to head a political movement.

Why, then, does Debord make things so difficult for himself? Despite his evasive style, Debord consistently urged that his theory was worthless unless it was put into use.[32] Would it have made more sense, then, to drop the avant-garde schtick and enter the arena of politics, if only as an *enfant terrible* of the establishment? The situation, of course, is more nuanced than that, and Debord's style comes from a very particular historical tradition, and is realized in a particular context. At the time of the writing of *Spectacle* in the 1960s, the French Communist Party had fallen victim to ideological division and reduced membership, and it found itself

23 Ibid., 60.

24 Stéphane Mallarmé, *Sonnets*, trans. David Scott (Shearsman Books Ltd, 2008), 100.

25 Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 165 [§204].

26 Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 64.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 72.

30 Ibid., 73.

31 *Spectacle*, 136 [§191].

32 See especially Debord's report to the seventh SI Conference in Paris, where he opens: "The SI's theory is at least clear on one point: it must be put to use." Situationist International, *The Real Split in the International: Theses on the Situationist International and Its Time, 1972*, trans. John McHale (Pluto Press, 2003), 130.

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unable to regain the popular support it once had.[33] The Surrealists had been generally aligned with Marxism (most concretely in André Breton's co-authorship of an art manifesto with Leon Trostky), but fell short of serious political engagement, and Stalinism had already soured the name of "communism" for general audiences.[34] Debord's Situationist International project was nothing less than a *poetic* infusion (in the Aristotelian sense of a transformational action) into a weakened political discourse, allowing for the reopening of discussion which could not easily be closed off again by conventional political methods. And although Debord sought to create a new political situation for the common person, he was at the same time reviving a less obvious Marxist literary tradition, which manipulates particular rhetorical figures to push the range of discourse beyond convention from within its own limits.

Debord's writing is packed to bursting with rhetorical tension—the tension of paradox, chiasmus, ambiguity, unacknowledged quotation (plagiarism), and misquotation (and in later works, self-quotation). Each of these stylistic elements finds its origin in the negative capacities of détournement and devaluation. By "style" is meant here the deliberate selection of tools for the presentation of ideas. This definition might apply just as well to material choices, like the sandpaper jacket of *Mémoires* or the graffitiing of a street wall, as to textual tools like rhetorical devices. Though any definition of style is almost guaranteed to leave something wanting, style is a useful entryway into Debord's thought precisely because the stylistic mode he inhabits is reflective of the ideas he uses it to describe (negation, spectacularity, alienation from truth). This relationship to style is an effect of Debord's critique operating in the negative, since many of his stylistic choices double as critiques of the given object of explanation and the way it, too, conceals meaning. We might think of Debord's style as operating dialectically—that is to say, Debord mystifies his own meaning in order to reveal the extent of the mystification he is attempting to negate in the process. The monopoly spectacular logic has on language and representation demands a stylistic strategy that does not lend itself to an easily assimilable presentation.

Debord's "style of negation" is in large part descended from Karl Marx (who arrives at this style via Hegel), and has a tradition all its own that Debord must negotiate with. As a stylist, Marx was enamored with the chiasmus, "A figure of speech by which the order of the terms in the first of two parallel clauses is reversed in the second."[35] The chiasmus is a figure of creative negation; by reordering the relationships between terms, it annuls the original meaning of a phrase while establishing a new meaning in the negative space of the original. Using this device, Marx tells us in *The German Ideology* that "circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances," and "It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness."[36] On the more concretely political level, Marx famously reformulated Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's *The Philosophy of Poverty* [*Philosophie de la Misère*] into *The Poverty of Philosophy* [*Misère de la Philosophie*] as an attack on Proudhon. As in this move, sometimes style can enter into the real world as an overtly political practice.

Debord also makes generous use of double negation, in other words, the negation of the negation—another technique first articulated by G.W.F. Hegel and then adopted by Marx and Friedrich Engels.[37] This can be seen in phrases like "society's real unreality," in which the "unreality" of spectacular commodities is negated to mean the "real" stuff of the world we find ourselves in.[38] The spectacle itself takes the form of the "visible negation of life," and the goal of the Situationist International was to completely disrupt (i.e. negate) the spectacle, to

33 "The PCF, despite the stability of its position as the largest opposition party, has not been able to gain the support of a majority of the working-class nor to move much beyond twenty per cent of the electorate at large." Kenneth R. Libbey, "The French Communist Party in the 1960s: An Ideological Profile," *Journal of Contemporary History* 11, no. 1 (Jan. 1976), 156.

34 André Breton and Diego Rivera, "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art" (Trotsky did not undersign the manifesto).

35 Chris Baldick, "Chiasmus," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

36 Karl Marx (with Friedrich Engels), *The German Ideology, including Theses on Feuerbach and Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (Prometheus Books, Amherst, New York, 1998), 62, 42.

37 Hegel: "We have to think pure change, or *think antithesis within the antithesis itself*, or *contradiction*. …[I]t is the opposite of an opposite, or the other is itself immediately present in it" (Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford University Press, 1977), 99 [§160]).

38 Debord, *Spectacle*, 13 [§5].

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détourn the existing modes of expression and so create a positivity out of two negativities (the negation of the negation of life).[39] Although Hegelian-Marxist terminology is everywhere in *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord was not only interested in the philosophical applications of double negativity; he also took advantage of its stylistic value. The layering of negativity enables evasiveness and mobility; it obscures meaning and indicates aloofness, but remains accountable to rigorous parsing. We see this in his political tracts, but also his more literary writings, like his autobiography *Panegyric* (1989), as when he writes: "I have never really aspired to any sort of virtue, except perhaps that of having thought that only a few crimes of a new type, which could certainly not have been cited in the past, might not be unworthy of me."[40] Debord's winding literary style consistently holds true to his prescription that the new "critical theory" of the Situationist International needs to "exemplify the negative spirit it contains."[41]

One might reasonably wonder whether, by using the term "critical theory," Debord is invoking the tradition of the Frankfurt School. It is not exactly clear—Debord makes no mention of thinkers like Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse in *Society of the Spectacle*, despite affinities between their critical orientations; however, he had books by both thinkers in his library so was likely familiar with their work.[42] Certainly, work like Debord's can be accurately labeled a "critical theory" in the most general sense, but he is not always imagined as having much to do with the Frankfurt School lineage. Recently, Eric-John Russell has suggested that Debord should be historicized within the same critical tradition as Frankfurt School theorists, not just because of their common interest in attacking commodity fetishism ("knowingly or not") but also because of their shared logical underpinnings in Hegel and Marx (and, by extension, their deployment of negation as a critical technique).[43]

When looking at these negative stylizations in Debord, the concern naturally arises of whether Debord's politics can (or should) ever really aspire to be anything more than style itself. Is Debord ultimately playing the part of Marx's philosopher, who interprets the world but does not change it? It seems more likely that this quote from Marx sets up a false binary between interpretation and change—what would it mean, after all, to change something without first doing the work of interpreting the situation to be changed? Debord vehemently opposed the accelerated capitalist mode of production whereby the worker, by playing their part in the process of production, is also facilitating their own separation from that world (alienation). The capitalist class, in Debord's analysis, has "monopoliz[ed] the understanding of productive activity, of work," and so the workers' comprehension of the whole of society is a prerequisite for enacting social change.[44] And this comprehension cannot begin to be thought until there is a conceptual apparatus for assessing it—this, for Debord, is the new language of a critical theory.

There is a case to be made, then, for Debord's stylistic revitalization of Marxist theory as being itself a political maneuver. Debord writes in his *Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of the Society of the Spectacle* that previous attempts at the "supersession of art" in the form of "auto-destructive modern poetry" had failed and left the "battlefield" empty—"I think that the recalling of these circumstances is the best elucidation that can be brought to bear on the ideas and the style of *The Society of the Spectacle*."[45] The "battlefield" metaphor is telling, especially as Debord was an avid reader of war history and strategic texts.[46] He writes in *Panegyric*, "I have been very interested in war, in the theorists of strategy… And so I have studied the logic of

39 Ibid, 14 [§10].

40 Debord, *Panegyric*, 17.

41 Debord, *Spectacle*, 144 [§206].

42 Russell, *Spectacular Logic in Hegel and Debord*, 23.

43 Ibid.

44 Situationist International, "Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program."

45 In his chapter on Debord, Alastair Hemmens offers a useful footnote: "Note that Debord always spoke of the 'supersession' or 'sublation' of art by using the term 'dépassement,' which is the French translation of the Hegelian, German term 'Aufhebung': to abolish and, at the same time, to preserve". Alastair Hemmens, *The Critique of Work in Modern French Thought*, Palgrave Macmillan, Studies in Revolution and Literature (2019), 162. Debord, *Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of the Society of the Spectacle*, 10.

46 Russell, for instance, writes, "An overwhelming amount of his archival notes are devoted to war strategy and a scrupulous attention to the history of both modern and ancient warfare". Russell, *Spectacular Logic in Hegel and Debord*, 209.

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war."[47] This "logic of war," which Debord derived in particular from Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, takes uncertainty and unpredictability as its organizational principles. As Alexander Galloway notes regarding the war-based board game Debord developed with his wife, Alice Becker-Ho, "His aim was to achieve imbalance through asymmetry, such that the game would not lapse into predictable strategies and styles of play."[48] This style of gameplay is reflective of the strategy of Debord's literary play, which similarly attempts to avoid easy assimilation by keeping its opponents (but also necessarily its allies) guessing. Debord saw the writing of *The Society of the Spectacle* as a much-needed tactical storming of a political and artistic arena that had been abandoned by the previous generation of avant-gardists.

The Situationist International, for which *Society* was meant to form the theoretical basis, was founded as an attempt to at least temporarily succeed where every past avant-garde movement had failed. In the 1961 tract "The Avant-Garde is Undesirable," a group of SI members writes that "The duty of the avant-garde consists solely and utterly in enforcing its recognition before its discipline and its program have become watered down—and this is precisely what the Situationist International intends to do."[49] As one can expect from a style of negation, difficulties in establishing identity and purpose arise: How does the SI intend to accomplish this task of artistic supersession? Even if we accept that Debord's stylistic intervention is itself a form of political praxis, we have not yet addressed how Debord could possibly escape the pitfalls of all the avant-gardes before him. Debord's quotation of Baudelaire's famous line "*je voulais parler la belle langue de mon siècle*" [I wanted to speak the beautiful language of my century] on the final page of *Mémoires* makes it clear that Debord recognizes his debt to a historical French avant-garde, in whose shadow he was always writing.[50] Debord does not even need to use a rhetorical figure to détourn this phrase; the desire to speak the language of his century is already détourned by his ventriloquizing this desire (to speak the beautiful language of his century) through a poet from a *different* century.

The question remains then, of how one could possibly negate the history of style, as Debord sought out to do, when this negation itself has such a storied history. The answer, I think, lies in the ends of this negation rather than the means. Whereas French Surrealists like Raymond Queneau and émigré Modernists like Samuel Beckett and James Joyce were concerned with reimagining the aesthetic dimensions of writing (whether as a literature of exhaustion or of possibility), style is for Debord only a proxy for politics. It is true that Debord adopted stylistic techniques from Hegel and Marx, and that he was invested in the creation of a new language of critical theory. However, Debord, unlike Barthes, had no interest in the revitalization of writing *as such*. Moreover, Debord was an ardent critic of aesthetic idealism and had no qualms about making strategic alterations to his literary style. This is evident at the outset of his follow-up book, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, when he writes: "I obviously cannot speak with complete freedom. Above all, I must take care not to give too much information to just anybody. Our unfortunate times thus compel me, once again, to write in a new way."[51] Debord's commitment is not to a stylistic ideal, but what he views as a political one—namely, whichever "mode of exposition" is needed to both communicate and "embody" a negative social critique.[52]

Barthes, who maligned realism for its bourgeois ideology, seemed to overlook the bourgeois overtones of his utopia of neutrality delivered in the form of writing. The ambiguous politics of Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero* might explain some of the criticism he faced with respect to concrete political engagement: When Barthes neglected to join the students' demonstrations in Paris in May 1968, students at the Sorbonne consequently détourned a phrase of his and posted it on the university wall: "Barthes says: 'Structures do not go out in the street.' We say: 'Neither does Barthes.'"[53] Debord's commitment to revolutionary fervor, on the other hand, was only interested in art insofar as it reestablished a connection between laborer and

47 Debord, *Panegyric*, 55.

48 Galloway, *Uncomputable: Play and Politics in the Long Digital Age*, 195. For more on Debord and Becker-Ho's board, game, *Kriegspiel*, see Galloway, 178–212.

49 Helmut Sturm et al., "The Avant-Garde is Undesirable."

50 Debord, *Mémoires*.

51 Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988), trans. Malcolm Imrie (Verso, 1990), 1–2

52 Debord, *Spectacle*, 144 [§206].

53 Yue Zhuo, "The 'Political' Barthes: From Theater to Idiorrhythmy," *French Forum* 36, no. 1 (2011), 61.

production, and at the point where the two were no longer separated, there would be no need for art (at least, art as we recognize it within a capitalist system). The handwriting or *écriture* proper of the Situationist International was never meant to be sealed between the covers of a book; it was much more at home graffitied onto the walls of Paris (a task Debord indeed took upon himself).[54] The revolution, Debord was convinced, will take place in the streets, not in the publishing houses, in the art galleries, or on the air (hence Debord's claim that, were Marx to publish *Capital* in the present day, he would refuse television appearances to speak on it).[55]

Debord's writing sometimes betrays a tension he felt between the roles of artist and activist—a tension Barthes the literary critic did not have to confront as fully. Although Debord frequently rebuffed avant-gardists and sought to be remembered less as a writer than as a prophetic strategist, his oeuvre is too easily dismissed as just another French avant-garde project which ultimately failed to change the social conditions of its time.[56] There is still no consensus on the extent to which the May 1968 student protests in France can be attributed to Debord and his associates; Debord's autobiography gives one the impression that he sees himself as nothing less than a military general of the uprising. Alternatively, German Situationist Dieter Kunzelmann, one of the artists ejected from the Situationist group, claims in an interview that Debord created wholesale the myth of SI's involvement with the uprising, and that he was in the Bahamas during the protests.[57] Debord, in spite of his self-assured persona, was determined to ward off the image of himself as an armchair revolutionary.[58]

In the first volume of *Panegyric*, Debord goes to great lengths to establish his association with the rejects of society, the class of "rebels and poor people."[59] He writes: "It is the fact of having passed through such a milieu that later permitted me to say sometimes, with the same pride as the demagogue in Aristophanes' *Knights*: 'I too grew up in the streets!'"[60] He writes of a group of people who were so disenchanted with modern society that they were left with no other choice than to attempt to bring about its total abolition via "the transformation of all aspects of social life."[61] These people are thugs, criminals, dangerous people, he makes sure to tell us. Being obsessed with war history, and identifying himself not as a philosopher but as a "strategist," we can surmise that Debord was making a deliberate move with his rhetorical appeals to "the streets," as if to say, "How dare you accuse me of not putting my theory into practice?"[62]

Part of his anxiety about his critics and future reception stems from the inverse relationship he observes (among writers who fought in wars) between skill as a writer and success as a military strategist: "It must be acknowledged that those amongst us who have been able to perform wonders with writing have often shown less evidence of expertise in the command of war."[63] When we consider the overall legacy of Debord as a stylist, we cannot think of his success as a stylist of theory without also thinking about his own anxieties of posterity, of being

54 Hemmens, *The Critique of Work in Modern French Thought*, 137–8.

55 *Preface to the Italian Edition*, 6. A case in point here is the official decision of the SI Central Council to exclude the band of German artists dubbed the *Spur* group from their national SI section, on account of their deliberate failure to act according to the discipline of the S.I. "in order to 'arrive' as artists". "The Exclusion of the Spurists," *Internationale Situationniste* #8, 1963.

56 Sam Cooper establishes this at the outset of his essay on Debord's style: "despite the disavowals of disciplinary specialism across his various self-authored panegyrics, Debord fits the mold of the littérateur disconcertingly well". Cooper, "The style of negation," 66.

57 Situationist International, "Nothing to Talk About" [der Worte sind genug]. Published in Art-Ist 08 / *Situationist International*, Istanbul 2004. Ed. Sezgin Boynik and Halil Altindere.

58 When I call him "self-assured," I have in mind Debord's insistence in the *Preface to the Italian Edition of the Society of the Spectacle*, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, and *Panegyric*, among other texts, that everything he wrote in *Society of the Spectacle* has been and will continue to be vindicated by history. *The Society of the Spectacle*, he wrote in his 1988 *Comments*, "has since shown with some astonishing achievements that it was effectively just what I said it was". Debord *Comments*, 3–4.

59 Debord, *Panegyric*, 15.

60 Ibid., 22.

61 Guy Debord and Pierre Canjuers, "Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program," trans. Ken Knabb, July 1960.

62 Galloway, *Uncomputable*, 201.

63 Debord, *Panegyric*, 56.

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relegated to the ash heap of history along with the Surrealists, Dadaists, and Letterists. These avant-garde movements were certainly successful in their capacity as art movements, but not as strategic interventions. Their high profile of visibility obviated their function as vehicles for revolutionary thought and action, because visibility and the automatic association of ideas with images are the primary tactics of the dominating spectacle. These movements failed to offer up a revitalized language of critique which could outlive its integration into the market.

This is part of the reason why comparing Debord's "style of negation" to Barthes' "negation of style" is illuminating, because it shows the stakes Debord was willing to accept as a stylist. Although both critics wrote polemically, Barthes' critique of literature sets its own horizons at the limit of style. A political utopia, for Barthes, might eventually manifest itself in the form of a proliferation of modes of unalienated and unstyled writing. Debord, conversely, did not prophesy a new chapter in the history of art, or writing, or film, which would rescue writing from its alienation, but instead sought a rerouting of cultural signs for the purpose of exposing exactly how dystopic our world is. Debord's critique inhabits style in an attempt to overthrow it, to inspire others to do the same, and to incite deliberate action to which his theory can be accountable. Whether the action ultimately proves successful or not (and anything short of a revolution could probably be called unsuccessful), the stylistic intervention was made, the reinvigoration of Marxist critique was offered up to society, and the stage was set for the miscreants of the world to make a new situation for themselves. Debord's style of negation makes his prose slippery, and makes his agenda hazy, but nevertheless he maintained, as Marx did, that the theory he invented was only ever a statement of what the underclass of society already knew to be true.

Both Debord and Barthes understood the tendency for a ruling ideology to co-opt, or in Situationist terms, *recuperate*, the ideas and artistic products of radical groups and assimilate them into the prevailing discourse of commodities. Regarding Modernist attempts to deliver the written object from history, Barthes writes that "such upheavals end up by leaving their own tracks and creating their own laws."[64] Similarly, Debord writes that Dadaism and Surrealism, "the two currents that marked the end of modern art," ended up hopelessly "trapped within the very artistic sphere that they had declared dead and buried."[65] Debord had already faced the explicit recuperation of his ideology in 1953, when he wrote one of his slogans, "NE TRAVAILLEZ JAMAIS" [NEVER WORK] on a wall of the Rue de Seine in Paris. A photographer, amused by the graffiti, took a picture of the scene and used the photograph in a run of tourist postcards along with the tongue-in-cheek caption, "superfluous advice."[66]

> When, ten years later Debord chose to reprint a copy of the image in *Internationale situationniste*, this time with the words 'preliminary programme of the Situationist movement', he received a letter from the publishers of the postcard that included a demand for financial compensation of 300 francs for copyright infringement.[67]

One can scarcely imagine a more pointed irony than Debord's revolutionary slogan being made into such a cartoonish example of alienation, with Debord being asked to pay for the usage of his own transgressive image. Such an anecdote casts a serious umbra of doubt on the idea that any revolutionary language can remain so. In Debord's time as well as ours, Salvador Dalí prints can be bought in almost any countercultural retail store (a contradiction in itself). Punk bands inspired by anarchist and anti-capitalist sentiment accrue large fanbases and then sign on to monopolistic record labels. After around seven weeks of protests in the events of May '68 in Paris, the movement lost its inertia; negotiations between trade unions and the French government, plus a counter-demonstration by the Gaullist party, signaled the return to business as usual. The Situationist International group disbanded in 1972 when it became clear that remaining together as a group for any longer could only undermine their objectives. First edition works of Debord are now collector's items, and with a quick Google search one can buy a first edition copy of *Mémoires* (which Debord never really intended for public circulation) for $5,000. And so it is hard to blame Debord, given this bleak state of affairs, for declaring himself vindicated over and over again throughout his career.

64 Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 62.

65 Debord, *Spectacle*, 136 [§191].

66 Hemmens, *The Critique of Work in Modern French Thought*, 137.

67 Ibid.

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A systematically united workers' or students' revolution, at this point in history, seems very unlikely. One kernel of solace we retain, both in terms of stylistic options and pragmatic ones, is to continue to operate in the negative space of the spectacle, to keep alive Debord's spirit of negativity by stubbornly interrogating our social conditions, formulating critiques, and creating art which is more meaningful to us than it is to the market, and which calls the value of spectacular commodities into question. If Debord's prose strikes us today as reading too much like the philosophy which Marx thought interpreted the world instead of changing it, or like the poem which Simone Weil thought could only teach us to contemplate thoughts instead of changing them, then we must reevaluate why these aesthetic modes persist as proxies for political action among self-identified radicals.

One compellingly elegant answer to this question is provided by Theodor Adorno: "If philosophy is still necessary, it is so only in the way it has been from time immemorial: as critique, as resistance to the expanding heteronomy, even if only as thought's powerless attempt to remain its own master and to convict of untruth, by their own criteria, both a fabricated mythology and a conniving, resigned acquiescence on the other of untruth."[68] Philosophy, as well as progressive art, remains in the negative space that can never be fully accounted for by the positive totality spectacular society is meant to stand in for; it is that unrecuperated form of negativity that paves the way for social action in the service of a speculative truth. In the hands of Debord, this philosophy finds its mode of expression in both writing and in societal engagement, both of which are different mediums which nevertheless demonstrate the same commitment to convicting "fabricated mythology" as falsehood.

For Adorno, as for Debord, the only kind of hope to be found in the arc of history lies in "the concept whose movement follows history's path to the very extreme."[69] This is to say, the kind of work that expands the boundaries of discourse to expose the falsehoods and contradictions most recently expressed in historical development. This work, of course, is approached differently by avant-garde artists as it would be by union organizers or identity-based coalition builders. However, these different interventions into the way we think about and operate in everyday life are frequently sites of cross-pollination and generativity, united in their opposition to the false unity of spectacular society. This opposition is forever a moving target, because society is always in motion. "Avant-gardes have only one time," Debord once wrote, "and the best thing that can happen to them is to have enlivened their time without *outliving* it. After them, operations move onto a vaster terrain."[70]

As prophetic as Debord may wax sometimes, he was careful not to promise anyone a utopia. But even without a final destination in mind, or deliverance in sight, the Beckettian phrase "I can't go on, I'll go on" strikes an undeniable chord. A 1961 Situationist manifesto insists: "Artists and intellectuals! Support the Situationist movement, for it chases after no Utopias. It is the only movement that will relieve the condition of contemporary culture."[71] What does it mean to promise relief without utopia? Perhaps the Situationists were so candid about the strength and totality of the spectacle that they knew better than to augur a deliverance from alienating ideology as the early Barthes did. Debord and the adherents of his project knew well that the weapon of negation can only have any force in opposition to a dominant ideology—without ideology, there would be nothing to détourn. The lack of certainty and salvation that a negative approach entails did not bother Debord. "It is permitted, but not desirable, to wonder where such a predilection to challenging all the authorities could positively lead," he wrote in his autobiography.[72] Quoting from (but not citing) Blaise Pascal, Debord rhapsodizes an answer: "'We never seek things for themselves but for the search'; certainty on this subject is long-established."[73] Debord orients our search and gives us (sometimes literally) a map to follow, which may not lead to any identifiable destination. But in the absence of our seeking, the objects of our search are already hopelessly lost.

68 Theodor Adorno, "Why Still Philosophy?", in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (Columbia University Press, 2005), 10.

69 Ibid., 17.

70 Debord, "In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni" (1978).

71 "The Avante-Garde is Undesireable."

72 Debord, *Panegyric*, 51.

73 Ibid.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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