

THE SPECTACLE OF DISINTEGRATION



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In memory of:

Mark Poster

*The mode of information*

Bernard Smith

*Place, taste and tradition*

Adam Cullen

*The otherness when it comes*

*It may not be what it looks to lack totality.*

Anna Mendelssohn

*I sense the River Neckinger beneath the paving slabs, the queasy toxicity shifting to St. Saviours dock.*

Laura Oldfield Ford

## I Widening Gyres

A person of sharp observation and sound judgment governs objects rather than being governed by them.

Baltasar Gracián

When the storm hit the Hansa Carrier, twenty-one shipping containers fell from its decks into the Pacific Ocean, taking some 80,000 Nike sneakers with them. Seattle-based oceanographer Curtis Ebbesmeyer used the serial numbers from the sneakers that washed up on the rain coast of North America to plot the widening gyre of ocean-going garbage that usually lies between California and Hawaii. Bigger than the state of Texas, it is called the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre, and sailors have known for a long time to steer clear of this area from the equator to fifty degrees north.

It's an often windless desert where not much lives. Flotsam gathers and circles, biodegrading into the sea. Unless it is plastic, which merely photo-degrades in the sun, disintegrating into smaller and smaller bits of sameness. Now the sea here has more particles of plastic than plankton. The Gyre is a disowned country of furniture, fridges, cigarette lighters, televisions, bobbing in the sea and slowly falling apart, but refusing to go away.<sup>1</sup>

New Hawaii is the name some humorists prefer for the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre now that it has the convenience of contemporary consumer goods. Or one might call it a spectacle of disintegration. It is as good an emblem as any of the passing show of contemporary life, with its jetsam of jostling plastic artifacts, all twisting higgledy-piggledy on and below the surface of the ocean. Plastic and ocean remain separate, even as the plastic breaks up and permeates the water, insinuating itself into it but always alien to it.

The poet Lautréamont once wrote: "Old Ocean, you are the symbol of identity: always equal to yourself ... and if somewhere your waves are enraged, further off in some other zone they are in the most complete calm."<sup>2</sup> But this no longer describes the ocean, which now appears as far from equilibrium. It describes instead the spectacle, the Sargasso Sea of images, a perpetual calm surrounded by turbulence, at the center always the same.

When Guy Debord published *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), he thought there were two kinds: the concentrated and the diffuse spectacle. The concentrated spectacle was limited to fascist and Stalinist states, where the spectacle cohered around a cult of personality. These are rare now, if not entirely extinct. The diffuse spectacle emerged as the dominant form. It did not require a Stalin or Mao as its central image. Big Brother is no longer watching you. In His place is little sister and her friends: endless pictures of models and other pretty things. The diffuse spectacle murmured to its sleeping peoples: "what appears is good; what is good appears."<sup>3</sup>

The victory of the diffuse spectacle over its concentrated cousin did not lead to the diffusion of the victor over the surface of the world. In *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988), Debord thought instead that an integrated spectacle had subsumed elements of both into a new spectacular universe. While on the surface it looked like the diffuse spectacle, which molds desire in the form of the commodity, it bore within it aspects of concentration, notably an *occulted state*, where power tends to become less and less transparent.

That the state is a mystery to its subjects is to be expected; that it could become occult even to its rulers is something else. The integrated spectacle not only extended the spectacle outwards, but also inwards; the falsification of the world had reached by this point even those in charge of it. Debord wrote in 1978 that "it has become ungovernable, this wasteland, where new sufferings are disguised with the names of former pleasures; and where the people are so afraid ... Rumor has it that those who were expropriating it have, to crown it all, mislaid it. Here is a civilization which is on fire, capsizing and sinking completely. Ah! Fine torpedoing!"<sup>4</sup>

Since he died in 1994, Debord did not live to see the most fecund and feculent form of this marvel, this spectacular power that

integrates both diffusion and concentration. In memory of Debord, let's call the endpoint reached by the integrated spectacle the *disintegrating spectacle*, in which the spectator gets to watch the withering away of the old order, ground down to near nothingness by its own steady divergence from any apprehension of itself. Debord: "that state can no longer be led strategically."<sup>5</sup>

And yet the spectacle remains, circling itself, bewildering itself. Everything is impregnated with tiny bits of its issue, yet the new world remains stillborn. The spectacle atomizes and diffuses itself throughout not only the social body but its sustaining landscape as well. As Debord's former comrade T. J. Clark writes, this world is "not 'capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image,' to quote the famous phrase from Guy Debord, but images dispersed and accelerated until they become the true and sufficient commodities."<sup>6</sup>

The spectacle speaks the language of command. The command of the concentrated spectacle was: OBEY! The command of the diffuse spectacle was: BUY! In the integrated spectacle the commands to OBEY! and BUY! became interchangeable. Now the command of the disintegrating spectacle is: RECYCLE! Like oceanic amoeba choking on granulated shopping bags, the spectacle can now only go forward by evolving the ability to eat its own shit.

The disintegrating spectacle can countenance the end of everything except the end of itself. It can contemplate with equanimity melting ice sheets, seas of junk, peak oil, but the spectacle itself lives on. It is immune to particular criticisms. Mustapha Khayati: "Fourier long ago exposed the *methodological myopia* of treating fundamental questions without relating them to modern society as a whole. The fetishism of facts masks the essential category, the mass of details obscures the totality."<sup>7</sup>

Even when it speaks of disintegration, the spectacle is all about particulars. The plastic Pacific, even if it is as big as Texas, is presented as a particular event. Particular criticisms hold the spectacle to account for falsifying this image or that story, but in the process thereby merely add legitimacy to the spectacle's claim that it can in general be a vehicle for the true. A genuinely critical approach to the spectacle starts from the opposite premise: that it may present from time to time a true fragment, but it is necessarily false *as a*

*whole*. Debord: "In a world that really has been turned on its head, the true is a moment of falsehood."<sup>8</sup>

This then is our task: a critique of the spectacle as a whole, a task that critical thought has for the most part abandoned. Stupefied by its own powerlessness, critical thought turned into that drunk who, having lost the car keys, searches for them under the street lamp. The drunk knows that the keys disappeared in that murky puddle, where it is dark, but finds it is easier to search for them under the lamp, where there is light—if not enlightenment.

And then critical theory gave up even that search and fell asleep at the side of the road. Just as well. It was in no condition to drive. In its stupor, critical thought makes a fetish of particular aspects of the spectacular organization of life. The critique of content became a contented critique.<sup>9</sup> It wants to talk only of the political, or of culture, or of subjectivity, as if these things still existed, as if they had not been colonized by the spectacle and rendered mere excrescences of its general movement. Critical thought contented itself with arriving late on the scene and picking through the fragments. Or, critical thought retreated into the totality of philosophy. It had a bone to pick with *metaphysics*. It shrank from the spectacle, which is philosophy made concrete. In short: critical thought has itself become spectacular. Critical theory becomes *hypocritical theory*. It needs to be renewed not only in content but in form.

When the US Food and Drug Administration announced that certain widely prescribed sleeping pills would come with strong warnings about strange behavior, they were not only responding to reports of groggy people driving their cars or making phone calls, but also purchasing items over the internet.<sup>10</sup> The declension of the spectacle into every last droplet of everyday life means that the life it prescribes can be lived even in one's sleep. This creates a certain difficulty for prizing open some other possibility for life, even in thought.

Debord's sometime comrade Raoul Vaneigem famously wrote that those who speak of class conflict without referring to everyday life, "without understanding what is subversive about love and what is positive in the refusal of constraints, such people have a corpse in their mouth."<sup>11</sup> Today this formula surely needs to be inverted. To talk the talk of critical thought, of *biopolitics* and *biopower*, of the

*state of exception, bare life, precarity, of whatever being, or object oriented ontology* without reference to class conflict is to speak, if not with a corpse in one's mouth, then at least a sleeper.

Must we speak the hideous language of our century? The spectacle appears at first as just a maelstrom of images swirling about the suck hole of their own nothingness. Here is a political leader. Here is one with better hair. Here is an earthquake in China. Here is a new kind of phone. Here are the crowds for the new movie. Here are the crowds for the food riot. Here is a cute cat. Here is a cheeseburger. If that were all there was to it, one could just load one's screen with better fare. But the spectacle is not just images. It is not just another name for the media. Debord: "The spectacle is a social relationship between people mediated by images."<sup>12</sup> The trick is not to be distracted by the images, but to inquire into the nature of this social relationship.

Emmalee Bauer of Elkhart worked for the Sheraton Hotel company in Des Moines until she was fired for using her employer's computer to keep a journal which recorded all of her efforts to avoid work. "This typing thing seems to be doing the trick," she wrote. "It just looks like I am hard at work on something very important."<sup>13</sup> And indeed she was. Her book-length *work* hits on something fundamental about wage labor and the spectacle, namely the separation of labor from desire. One works not because one particularly wants to, but for the wages, with which to then purchase commodities to fulfill desires.

In the separation between labor and desire lies the origins of the spectacle, which appears as the world of all that can be desired, or rather, of all the appropriate modes of desiring. "Thus the spectacle, though it turns reality on its head, is itself a product of real activity."<sup>14</sup> The activity of making commodities makes in turn the need for the spectacle as the image of those commodities turned into objects of desire. The spectacle turns the goods into The Good.

The ruling images of any age service the ruling power. The spectacle is no different, although the ruling power is not so much a ruling monarch or even a power elite anymore, but the rule of the commodity itself. The celebrities that populate the spectacle are not its sovereigns, but rather model a range of acceptable modes

of desire from the noble to the risqué. The true celebrities of the spectacle are not its subjects but its objects.

Billionaire Brit retailer Sir Philip Green spent six million pounds flying some two hundred of his closest friends to a luxury spa resort in the Maldives. The resort offers water sports and a private beach for each guest. Much of the décor is made from recycled products, and there is an organic vegetable garden where residents can pick ingredients for their own meals.<sup>16</sup> "Sustainability" is the Viagra of old world speculative investment. Sir Philip is no fool, and neither is his publicist. This retailer of dreams has the good sense to appear in public by giving away to a lucky few what the unlucky many should henceforth consider good fortune. And yet while this story highlights the fantastic agency of the billionaire, the moral of the story is something else: even billionaires obey the logic of the spectacle if they want to appear in it.

The spectacle has always been an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise. But things have changed a bit. The integrated spectacle still relied on centralized means of organizing and distributing the spectacle, run by a culture industry in command of the means of producing its images. The disintegrating spectacle chips away at centralized means of producing images and distributes this responsibility among the spectators themselves. While the production of goods is out-sourced to various cheap labor countries, the production of images is *in-sourced* to unpaid labor, offered up in what was once leisure time. The culture industries are now the *vulture industries*, which act less as producers of images for consumption than as algorithms that manage databases of images that consumers swap between each other—while still paying for the privilege. Where once the spectacle entertained us, now we must entertain each other, while the vulture industries collect the rent. The disintegrating spectacle replaces the monologue of appearances with the appearance of dialogue. Spectators are now obliged to make images and stories for each other that do not unite those spectators in anything other than their separateness.

The proliferation of means of communication, with their tiny keyboards and tiny screens, merely breaks the spectacle down into bits and distributes it in suspension throughout everyday life. Debord: "The spectacle has spread itself to the point where it now permeates

all reality. It was easy to predict in theory what has been quickly and universally demonstrated by practical experience of economic reason's relentless accomplishments: that the globalization of the false was also the falsification of the globe."<sup>16</sup> Ever finer fragments of the time of everyday life become moments into which the spectacle insinuates its logic, demanding the incessant production and consumption of images and stories which, even though they take place in the sweaty pores of the everyday, are powerless to affect it.

It is comforting to imagine that it is always someone else who is duped by the spectacle. Former movie star turned tabloid sensation Lindsay Lohan allegedly spent over one million dollars on clothes in a single year, and \$100,000 in a single day, before consulting a hypnotist to try to end her *shopping addiction*. Lohan's publicist denied the story: "There is no hypnotist, and Lindsay loves clothes, but the idea that she spent that much last year is completely stupid."<sup>17</sup> The alleged excess of an other makes the reader's own relation to the spectacle of commodities seem *just right*. It's all about having the right distance. For Debord, "no one really believes the spectacle."<sup>18</sup> Belief, like much else these days, is optional. The spectacle is what it is: irrefutable images, eternal present, the endless yes. The spectacle does not require gestures of belief, only of deference. No particular image need detain us any longer than this season's shoes.

They call themselves the Bus Buddies. The women who travel the Adirondack Trailways Red Line spend five and even six hours commuting to high-paid jobs in Manhattan, earning much more money than they could locally in upstate New York. They are outlier examples of what are now called extreme commuters, who rarely see their homes in daylight and spend around a month per year of their lives in transit. It is not an easy life. "Studies show that commuters are much less satisfied with their lives than non-commuters." Symptoms may include "raised blood pressure, musculoskeletal disorders, increased hostility, lateness, absenteeism, and adverse effects on cognitive performance."<sup>19</sup> Even with a blow-up neck pillow and a blankie, commuting has few charms.

For many workers the commute results from a simple equation between their income in the city and the real estate they can afford in the suburbs, an equation known well by the real estate development companies. "Poring over elaborate market research, these

corporations divine what young families want, addressing things like carpet texture and kitchen placement and determining how many streetlights and cul-de-sacs will evoke a soothing sense of safety. They know almost to the dollar how much buyers are willing to pay to exchange a longer commute for more space, a sense of higher status and the feeling of security."<sup>20</sup> By moving away from the city, the commuter gets the space for which to no longer have the time. Time, or space? This is the tension envelope of *middle-class* desire. Home buyers are to property developers what soldiers are to generals. Their actions are calculable, so long as they don't panic.

There are ways to beat the commute. Rush hour in São Paulo, Brazil features the same gridlocked streets as many big cities, but the skies afford a brilliant display of winking lights from the helicopters ferrying the city's *upper* class home for the evening. Helipads dot the tops of high-rise buildings and are standard features of São Paulo's guarded residential compounds. The helicopter speeds the commute, bypasses car-jackings, kidnappings—and it ornaments the sky. "My favorite time to fly is at night, because the sensation is equaled only in movies or in dreams," says Moacir da Silva, the president of the São Paulo Helicopter Pilots Association. "The lights are everywhere, as if I were flying within a Christmas tree."<sup>21</sup>

Many Paulistanos lack not only a helicopter, but shelter and clean water. But even when it comes with abundance, everyday life can seem strangely impoverished. Debord: "the reality that must be taken as a point of departure is dissatisfaction."<sup>22</sup> Even on a good day, when the sun is shining and one doesn't have to board that bus, everyday life seems oddly lacking.

Sure, there is still an under-developed world that lacks modern conveniences such as extreme commuting and the gated community. Pointing to this lack too easily becomes an alibi for not examining what it is the developing world is developing toward. And rather than a developed world, perhaps the result is more like what the Situationists called an *over-developed* world, which somehow overshot the mark.<sup>23</sup> This world kept accumulating riches of the same steroidal kind, pumping up past the point where a qualitative change might have transformed it and set it on a different path. This is the world, then, which lacks for nothing except its own critique.

The critique of everyday life—or something like it—happens all

the time in the disintegrating spectacle, but this critique falls short of any project of transforming it. The spectacle points constantly to the more extreme examples of the ills of this world—its longest commutes, its most absurd disparities of wealth between slum dwellers and the helicopter class, as if these curios legitimated what remains as some kind of norm. How can the critique of everyday life be expressed in acts? Acts which might take a step beyond Emmalee Bauer's *magnum opus* and become collaborations in new forms of life? Forms of life which are at once both aesthetic and political and yet reducible to the given forms of neither art nor action? These are questions that will draw us back over several centuries of critical practice.

Once upon a time, there was a small band of ingrates—the Situationist International—who aspired to something more than this. Their project was to advance beyond the fulfillment of needs to the creation of new desires. But in these chastened times the project is different. Having failed our desires, this world merely renames the necessities it imposes as if they were desires. Debord: "It should be known that servitude henceforth truly wants to be loved for itself, and no longer because it would bring any extrinsic advantage."<sup>24</sup> Here we have an example of what the radical sociologist Henri Lefebvre called *historical drift*, where "the results of history differ from the goals pursued."<sup>25</sup>

The difficulty in the era of the disintegrating spectacle is to imagine even what the goal of history might be. Take the Tunisian revolution for instance. Mehdi Belhaj Kacem: "January 2011 is a May '68 carried through all the way to the end. It is a revolution that has more in common with the Situationists ... that is, a revolution carried out directly by the people, than with the Leninist or Maoist 'Revolution', in which an armed avant-garde takes over power and replaces one dictatorship with another..." Moreover, "for the first time in history it was the media—television, radio or newspapers—that played catch up to a new kind of democratic information ... That is one of the major 'situationist' lessons of this revolution: an absolute victory over one 'society of the spectacle.' Which means that, tomorrow, others, and not only Arab dictatorships, might fall."<sup>26</sup>

Let's concede to Mehdi his optimism, speaking so soon after the



events. Let's concede also that he is probably correct in his assessment of the success in Tunisia of what are essentially Situationist organizational and communications tactics. One still has to wonder which way histories can drift once Big Brothers are deposed and exiled. Is to be freed from dictators the limit to the twenty-first century's desires? As the Situationists wrote in the wake of the success and failure of the Algerian revolution some forty-odd years previously: "Everywhere there are social confrontations, but nowhere is the old order destroyed, not even within the very social forces that contest it."<sup>27</sup> As we shall see, revolutions are not exceptions, they are constants—but so too are *restorations*.

The critique of everyday life is the critique of existing needs and the creation of new desires. The everyday is the site of tension between desires and needs. It is where the productive tension between them either halts or advances. Today we may safely say it has come to a halt. Everyday life has been so colonized by the spectacle of the commodity form that it is unable to formulate a new relation between need and desire. It takes its desire for the commodity as if it were a need.

The attempt to revolutionize everyday life, to forge a new relation between need and desire, was decisively defeated. The emblem of that defeat is the signal year 1968. Even if the transformation that seemed so imminent at the time was impossible, now it hardly appears at all. And yet the everyday may still function as a fulcrum of critique, even if the work upon which such a critique might now build is not to be found in the optimism that effloresces in 1968, but the grim determination of those who lived through and beyond the moment of failure, and yet did their best to keep the critical edge sharp.

Taking the everyday as a site for critical thought has several advantages. For one thing, you're soaking in it. It is not the special property of initiates of a particular kind of art or literature. It remains beyond the reach of even the most tactile and ductile of philosophies. Nor is it a domain walled off and subjected to the specialized tools of this or that kind of social science. Hence a critique of the everyday avoids a pre-emptive fashioning of a comfortable zone for thought detached from what is generally taken to matter to most people.

Lastly, the everyday has the peculiar property of being made up of slight and singular moments, little one-off events—situations—that seem to happen in between more important things, but which unlike those important things tend to flow into each other and connect up, flowing, finally, into some apprehension of a totality—a connection of sorts between things of all kinds. The trick is to follow the line that links the experience of concrete situations in everyday life to the spectacular falsification of totality.

These days extreme commuters may be working while they travel. The cellphone and the laptop make it possible to roll calls while driving or to work the spreadsheets while on the bus or train. They allow the working day to extend into travel time, making all of time productive rather than interstitial. Isn't technology wonderful? Where once, when you left the office, you could be on your own, now the cellphone tethers you to the demands of others almost anywhere at any time. Those shiny phones and handy tablets appear as if in a dream or a movie to make the world available at your command. The ads discreetly fail to mention that they rather put you at the world's command. The working day expands to fill up what were formerly workless hours and spills over into sleepless nights.

The thread that runs from the everyday moment of answering a cellphone or pecking away at a laptop on a bus to the larger totality plays out a lot further. Where do old laptops go to die? Many of them end up in the city of Guiyu in China's Pearl River Delta, which is something like the electronic-waste capital of the planet. Some sixty thousand people work there at so-called *recycling*, which is the new name for the old job of mining minerals, not from nature, but from this second nature of consumer waste.

It is work that, like the mining of old, imperils the health of the miners, this time with the runoff of toxic metals and acids. In Guiyu, "computer carcasses line the streets, awaiting dismemberment. Circuit boards and hard drives lie in huge mounds. At thousands of workshops, laborers shred and grind plastic casings into particles, snip cables and pry chips from circuit boards. Workers pass the boards through red-hot kilns or acid baths to dissolve lead, silver and other metals from the digital detritus. The acrid smell of burning solder and melting plastic fills the air."<sup>28</sup> The critique of everyday life can seek out otherwise obscure connections between

one experience of life and another, looking for the way the commuter on a laptop and the e-waste worker melting chip boards are connected. It considers the everyday from the point of view of how to transform it, and takes nothing for granted about what is needed or what is desired.

## 2 The Critique of Everyday Life

What good is knowledge if it isn't practiced? These days real knowledge lies in knowing how to live.

Baltasar Gracián

Henri Lefebvre started this line of thought with his 1947 book *The Critique of Everyday Life Volume 1* and raised it to a fine pitch with that book's second volume in 1961. But the group who really pushed it to its limit was the Situationist International, a movement which lasted from 1957 until 1972, and which its leading light Guy Debord would later describe as "this obscure conspiracy of limitless demands."<sup>1</sup>

While their project was one of "leaving the twentieth century," in the twenty-first century they have become something of an intellectual curio.<sup>2</sup> They stand in for all that up-to-date intellectual types think they have outgrown, and yet somehow the Situationists refuse to be left behind. They keep coming back as the bad conscience of the worlds of writing, art, cinema and architecture that claim the glamour of critical friction yet lack the nerve to actually rub it in. Now that critical theory has become hypocritical theory, the Situationist International keeps washing up on these shores like shipwrecked luggage. Are the Situationists derided so much because they were wrong or because they are right?

Consider how their legacy is isolated and managed. The early phase of the Situationist project, roughly from 1957 to 1961, is safely consigned to the world of art and architecture. Its leading lights, such as Pinot Gallizio, Asger Jorn, Michèle Bernstein and Constant Nieuwenhuys, all have books and articles dedicated to managing their memory.<sup>3</sup> The period from 1961 to 1972 is considered the political phase, and its memory is kept by various

leftist sects who reprint the writings of Raoul Vaneigem, Guy Debord and René Viénet, and are mostly concerned with the critique of each other.<sup>4</sup> Of more interest to us now perhaps is Post-Situationist literature, in which former members or associates, including T. J. Clark, Gianfranco Sanguinetti and Alice Becker-Ho, restate or revise the theses of the movement, which runs more or less from 1972 to Debord's death in 1994.

The life and work of Guy Debord, the one consistent presence in the movement, is fodder for all kinds of recuperations. For biographers he is a grand grotesque, or a revolutionary idol, the hipster's Che Guevara. Certain enterprising critics have turned him into a master of French prose.<sup>5</sup> By recuperating fragments of the Situationist project within the intellectual division of labor, its bracing critique of everyday life as a totality, not to mention the project of constructing an alternative, tends to disappear into the footnotes.

In 2009 the French Minister of Culture, Christine Albanel, declared the archive of Guy Debord a *national treasure*. The archive, in the possession of Debord's widow, Alice Becker-Ho, contains a holograph of *Society of the Spectacle*, reading notes, notebooks in which Debord recorded his dreams, his entire correspondence, and the manuscript of a last, unfinished book, previously believed to have been destroyed. Yale University had already expressed interest in acquiring the archive, prompting the Bibliothèque Nationale, or French National Library, to make securing the Debord archive a priority.

The fund-raising arm of the Library holds an annual gala dinner to hit up its big benefactors for cash, and its 2009 event displayed Debord notebooks to tempt donors. Present were several board members, including Pierre Bergé (co-founder of Yves Saint Laurent) and Nahed Ojeh (widow of the arms dealer Akram Ojeh). Only €180,000 was raised, a fraction of what the Library had to find for Becker-Ho. "This evening depends upon the spectacular society," fund-raising chief Jean-Claude Meyer admitted in his speech. "It's ironic and, at the same time, a great homage." But if the Library could make an archive out of the Marquis de Sade, then anything is possible. The gala dinner took place in the Library's Hall of Globes, a monument to the presidency of François Mitterrand, who Debord particularly detested.<sup>6</sup>

The gulf that separates the present times from the time of the Situationist International passes through that troubled legacy of the failed revolution of 1968 and 1969 in France and Italy, in which Situationists were direct participants. There was no beach beneath the street. Whether such a revolution was possible or even desirable at that moment is a question best left aside. The installation of necessity as desire in the disintegrating spectacle is a consequence of a revolution that either could not or would not take place.

Even if a revolution could not take place in the late twentieth century, in the early twenty-first century it seems simply unimaginable.<sup>7</sup> It is hard not to suspect that the over-developed world has simply become untenable, and yet it is incapable of proposing any alternative to itself but more of the same. These are times in which the famous slogan from '68—"be realistic, demand the impossible"—does indeed seem more realist than surrealist.

And yet these are times with a very uneasy relation to the legacy of such intellectual realists. Debord in particular is at once slighted and envied, as he was even in his own time. He was, by his own admission, "a remarkable example of what this era did not want."<sup>8</sup> He seemed to live a rather charmed life while doing nothing to deserve it. Debord: "I do not know why I am called 'a third rate Mephistopheles' by people who are incapable of figuring out that they have been serving a third rate society and have received in return third rate rewards ... Or is it perhaps precisely because of that they say such things?"<sup>9</sup>

Not the least problem with Debord is that of all the adjutants of 1968 he was the one who compromised least on the ambitions of that moment in his later life. "So I have had the pleasures of exile as others have had the pains of submission."<sup>10</sup> Unlike Daniel "Danny the Red" Cohn-Bendit, he did not become a member of the European Parliament. As Debord wrote in 1985, looking back on the life and times of the Situationists: "It is beautiful to contribute to the ruination of this world. What other success did we have?" The key to the Situationist project of transforming everyday life is the injunction "to be at war with the whole world lightheartedly."<sup>11</sup> This unlikely conjuncture of levity with lucidity, of élan with totality, has rarely been matched.

It's not as if there aren't enough studies of the Situationist International and its epigones. While written in another context, these lines from Becker-Ho seem to apply: "Time and again in all the works dealing with the same subjects and sharing the same sources, one finds the same bits of information paraphrased more or less successfully, often with the same words endlessly repeated. Other people's findings, acknowledged in underhand fashion, re-emerge as so many new discoveries, stripped of quotation marks and references, and more often than not adding nothing to what is already known on the subject. But what this does is allow the whole field of information going unchallenged to be enlarged quantitatively, and on the cheap..."<sup>12</sup>

Culture is nothing if not what the Situationists called *détournement*: the plagiarizing, hijacking, seducing, detouring, of past texts, images, forms, practices, into others. The trick is to realize in the process the undermining of the whole idea of the author as owner, of culture as property, that *détournement* always implies.<sup>13</sup> Thus this study makes no claims to originality. Rather, in its act of inflating the whole field of information on the cheap, it seeks only to encourage others in this far from fine art of cultural inflation. The Situationist archive is there to be plundered. Unlike Becker-Ho, *The Spectacle of Disintegration* makes no proprietary claims, but it does set out to be a version of these materials of use to us *now*.<sup>14</sup> It's the past we need for the critique of this present.

Situationist thought is often imagined as a species of Marxism, particularly of the Hegelian variety. Sometimes it is regarded as the inheritor of the fringe romantic poetry of Arthur Rimbaud and the Comte de Lautréamont. Sometimes its project is imagined to be that of superseding the avant-garde movements of Dada and Surrealism, and presenting a spirited rival to contemporary movements as diverse as Fluxus, Oulipo or the Beats. Sometimes it is recalled as a precursor to punk rebellion, anarchist dumpster-diving or post-modern fabulousness.<sup>15</sup> That the Situationists took on the whole world does seem to align it with the more obstreperous of all these currents. What the Situationists fought against, much more vigorously than any of these movements, was their own success. The aim was to preserve something that could escape recuperation as mere art or theory. As Debord writes, "nothing has ever interested me

beyond a certain practice of life. (It is precisely this that has kept me back from being an artist, in the current sense of the word and, I hope, a theoretician of aesthetics.)"<sup>16</sup>

The Situationists could be insolent, recalcitrant, insubordinate, but at their best their project of transforming everyday life had a playful quality. Everything is at stake, but the world is still a game. This attunement to life connects the Situationists to a quite different legacy. Michèle Bernstein, Gianfranco Sanguinetti and in particular Guy Debord were fond of quoting quite different sources which point toward different ancestors: Niccolò Machiavelli, Baltasar Gracián, Carl von Clausewitz and the Cardinal de Retz were, in their different ways, writers who tried to put into words the lessons of their own actions or the actions of others upon their time. Situationist writing thus belongs to that tradition of inquiries upon everyday life that ask: how is one to live? And that posit answers that are more than a critical theory, but form the tenets of a *critical practice*.

Debord was particularly fond of the *Mémoires* of the Cardinal de Retz (1613–79). A leader of the Fronde, that last aristocratic resistance to the imposition of absolutist monarchy in France, Retz contributes a quite particular orientation to everyday life that Situationist thought and action observes in its finest hours and neglects in its lesser moments. Writing a hundred years before Rousseau, Retz was not concerned with an armchair analysis of his inner life. He was crafting a public self, styling himself as a being in action. His *Mémoires* are an account of his successes and failures, but an account further perfected. A key quality with which Retz imbues his life is disinterestedness. His conduct of his affairs is something like a work of art or a well-played game. The chief aesthetic quality is being worthy of the events that befall him. He is versatile rather than a specialist. Often he acts from behind the scenes, an unseen power. The prevailing style is a certain appropriateness and consistency.

There is a certain aggrandizement to Retz, as there is to the Situationists, particularly Debord. Events are presented as if he was at the center of them. But what undercuts this seeming self-importance is a sense of the ridiculous quality of power in this world. Neither Retz nor Debord suffers fools gladly. Above all, this appreciation for human comedy relieves the writing of the bitterness of

defeat. As Debord writes, in a style that is a modernized Retz: "I have succeeded in universally displeasing, and in a way that was always new."<sup>17</sup> To take this world seriously would be comic; to see the comedy of it is perfectly serious. What the Situationists share with Retz is a comic approach to life as a game which commits one to the cause of the world. Or to quote Debord, quoting Retz: "In bad times, I did not abandon the city; in good times, I had no private interests; in desperate times, I feared nothing."<sup>18</sup>

Like everything else, the Situationists got caught up in the spectacle. They became a mere image of themselves. Critical reception of them finds itself led by the nose into accepting a spectacular version, in which the whole project is reduced to Debord's personality, which is in turn reduced to a certain fanaticism.<sup>19</sup> Alain Badiou reduces Debord to psychoanalytic terms, as posing an image of the real against the symbolic and imaginary. Simon Critchley sees him as a religious rather than an ethical thinker. Jacques Rancière sees only aesthetic project.<sup>20</sup> Such readings take certain tactics at face value. Debord is not a modern Pascal, but a modern Retz; it is not faith but the game that is at stake.

"Of all modern writers," Debord said, quoting the eighteenth-century writer François-René Chateaubriand, "I am the only one whose life is true to his works."<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the most enviable thing about his life is that he managed to avoid wage labor. He did not work for the university or the media. And yet he produced several films, edited a journal, ran an international organization, and wrote a few slim books. Debord: "I have written much less than most people who write, but I have drunk much more than most people who drink."<sup>22</sup>

The drinking did him in. Peripheral neuritis is one of the more painful conditions from which a hard drinker can suffer. As a good Stoic, Debord put his affairs in order. He collaborated on a television documentary with Brigitte Cornand. He prepared his correspondence for publication with Alice Becker-Ho. He may (or may not) have burned certain documents. Then he shot himself in the heart. In the words of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, one of Debord's favorite writers: "When the grave lies open before us, let's not try to be witty, but on the other hand, let's not forget, but make it our business to record the worst of human viciousness we've seen without

changing one word. When that's done, we can curl up our toes and sink into the pit. That's work enough for a lifetime."<sup>23</sup>

Debord was not by any means the only member of the Situationist International to leave her or his mark, and if other members did not exactly dazzle their century, they may yet have their chance to inform ours. The wager of this book is that critical practice needs to take three steps backwards in order to take four steps forward. First step back: the early, so-called *artistic* phase of the Situationists is richer than is usually imagined, and not so easily recuperated as mere art or architecture as is often supposed. Second step back: the political thought in action of the Situationists in the sixties is not well understood, and much of what transpired in this period still speaks to us today, if it is seen more broadly than May '68. An early book, *The Beach Beneath the Street*, set itself the challenge of retracing these two steps.

*The Spectacle of Disintegration* concerns itself with a third step back: that the defeat of May '68 did not mark the end of the Situationist project, even if the organization dissolved itself shortly afterwards. This book begins again with the story in the seventies, via the work not only of Debord but also his collaborations with his last comrade in the Situationist International, Giancarlo Sanguinetti, with Debord's second wife, Alice Becker-Ho, with his patron and film producer Gérard Lebovici, with professional filmmaker Martine Barraqué, with video documentarian Brigitte Cornand, and in the independent work of three former members of the Situationist International: T. J. Clark, Raoul Vaneigem and René Viénet. It is a disparate body of work through which we can read the last quarter of the twentieth century. They still dare us to outwit them, outmatch them. They dare us to stake something. There is more honor in failing that challenge than in refusing it.

This book is not a biography of Guy Debord. It is not a history of the Situationists. It is not literary criticism or art appreciation. Out of what is living and what is dead in the Situationist legacy it concerns itself mostly with what is living. If the Situationist slogan LIVE WITHOUT DEAD TIME is to be understood at all, it can only be in writing which treats its own archive as something other than dead time. The project is to connect Situationist theory and practice with everyday life today, rather than with contemporary

art or theory. Hence the presence of certain anecdotes, cut from their journalistic context and taken on a journey, a detour, relieved of their fragmentary context and connected to a theoretical itinerary which treats them as moments of a lost totality. As the Situationists said: "One need only begin to decode the news such as it appears at any moment in the mainstream media in order to obtain an everyday x-ray of Situationist reality."<sup>24</sup>

Debord, like Retz and so many others, failed to transform the world of his own time, but this failure is the basis of a certain kind of knowledge. Right thinking in this tradition depends on the confrontation of thought with the world. History's winners are confirmed in their illusions; the defeated know *otherwise*. Debord: "But theories are made only to die in the war of time."<sup>25</sup> At least the Situationists found strategies for confronting their own time, to challenge it, negate it, and push it, however slightly, toward its end, toward leaving the twentieth century.

As impossible as that task was, leaving the twenty-first century may not be so easy. It is hard to know how to even imagine it. Perhaps a place to start, then, is by returning to some situations where it seemed possible to leave previous centuries. One of the virtues of writing in a Situationist vein is that it opened up the question of an activist reading of past revolutions. In our opening two chapters, we look back over the seventies writings of Clark and Vaneigem, but through their eyes look back again over the whole series of French revolutions and restorations. Then, we turn our attention to the rather critical accounts Sanguinetti and Viénet offered, from firsthand experience, of the Italian Autonomists and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, moments which, strangely, are back again, in a rather spectacular fashion, as touchstones for twenty-first-century political thought. After that, we pursue the tactics of Debord and Becker-Ho for keeping alive the spirit of contesting the totality as the era of the disintegrating spectacle was dawning.

### 3 Liberty Guiding the People

To follow the times is to lead them.  
Baltasar Gracián

Suppose a team of archaeologists from an alien civilization came upon the ruins of the disintegrating spectacle, but all they had with which to understand it, besides some blasted fragments, was one or two books by T. J. Clark. What sort of sense would they make of it? Of course, we are already ourselves those very aliens. Much of what we now think of as what was once modern comes down to us in bits and pieces, as inscrutable as ancient Egyptian funeral art. But Clark's books might be singularly useful for this unearthed modern, since certain of his books quite consciously read the art of the nineteenth century as intimations for the twentieth century. As Clark reflects in *The Sight of Death*: "The advantage of the historical allegories in my previous books was that, if I was lucky, a point occurred at which the politics of the present was discovered in the histories—the distant histories—generated out of the object in hand."<sup>1</sup> These allegories might have further resonance in our own times.

One way to grasp the genesis of the disintegrating spectacle might be to rewind it, back before it sped up, before it flung apart. What Situationist writing might have going for it in this task is that, as Clark puts it: "It was the 'art' dimension, to put it crudely—the continual pressure put on the question of representational forms in politics and everyday life, and the refusal to foreclose on the issue of representation versus agency—that made their politics the deadly weapon it was for a while."<sup>2</sup> Clark can help us to formulate the problem of thinking aesthetics and politics together, within the vicissitudes of historical time.

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Clark was, however briefly, a member of the Situationist International, and while his books are by no means a mere pendant to that fact, they respond to it; and respond, more particularly, to the stresses of a certain kind of political time through which Clark has lived. His writing was for him "a place to shelter from the storm. Doing art history—being an academic—was a compromise. It was as much as I had the nerve to do."<sup>3</sup> (An aside: And who am I, and who are you, dear reader, to ask of anyone anything more? Only those who throw stones can begrudge us our glass houses.)

Clark recalls standing on the edge of a demonstration in the late sixties, on the steps of the National Gallery in London, "discussing the (sad) necessity of iconoclasm in a revolutionary situation with my friend John Barrell, and agreeing that if ever we found ourselves part of a mob storming through the portico we ought to have a clear idea of which picture had to go the way of all flesh; and obviously it had to be the picture we would most miss."<sup>4</sup> Which picture would Clark choose? We shall find out later. Suffice now to say that it did not come to that, and perhaps just as well.

It is sometimes lost on readers familiar only with the opening overture of Debord's infamous book that the spectacle is not just some vast and totalizing shell that secretes itself out of the commodity form and envelopes all around it. While it may be the dominant form of social life, it is not the only one. Clark: "The spectacle is never an image mounted securely and firmly in place; it is always an account of the world competing with others, and meeting the resistance of different, sometimes tenacious forms of social practice."<sup>5</sup> Clark enlarges and refines the sense of the struggle over social form, and the role within the struggle played by the making of images. For while society may have become in part disciplinary, it has never ceased to be spectacular in its totality.<sup>6</sup>

If there is a limit to Clark—evident particularly in the later texts—it is in the way the auras of certain images start to become stand-ins for a contest of forces, struggling not just over what images can mean but also over what they can do. Clark: "If I cannot have the proletariat as my chosen people any longer, at least capitalism remains my Satan."<sup>7</sup> A Satan which art alone is not up to the task of confronting.

There are times when aesthetics and politics appear as discrete

and free-standing categories. At other moments they can't help but fall over each other, which in the French context at least might be telegraphed by the following dates, and from the events that spill forth from them and evaporate into history: 1789, 1830, 1848, 1871, 1945, 1968; from the first *successful* French revolution, via the Paris Commune and the Liberation, to the last failed one. While Clark will have quite a bit to say about epochs of restoration, where art and politics interact only tangentially, of particular interest is the kind of time where they fuse. "Such an age needs explaining, perhaps even defending."<sup>8</sup>

Modernity is all about beginnings, and it might as well be said to begin with *The Death of Marat* (1793) by Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825). David shows Marat dead in his bath, clutching the letter written to him by his murderer. It's an image of a secular martyr, but not exactly a secular image. It was first shown at a ritual occasion, contrived by David. Quite a struggle went on over the meaning and ownership of the cult of Marat. While Marat was close to the Jacobin faction, the Enragés—the most radical expression of the most radical class, the sans-culottes—claimed him as one of their own. The image of Marat hovered for a moment, caught between the role of martyr to the state on the one hand, and friend to the sans-culottes and their demand for a thoroughly social revolution on the other.

"Surely never before had the powers-that-be in a state been obliged to improvise a sign language whose very effectiveness depended on its seeming to the People a language they had made up, and that therefore represented their interests."<sup>9</sup> The Jacobins had a tenuous grasp on state power. They relied on the sans-culottes for direct action against their enemies to the right, but having moved against the right, the Jacobins turned instead against their erstwhile allies to their left. The sans-culotte passion for direct democracy was a hindrance to the Jacobin claim to the state at a time of war.

*The Death of Marat* is a remnant of a historical event: the people's entry into history. For Clark, this is the cause of modernism itself, even if it doesn't usually know it. Robespierre and the Jacobins claimed to represent a pure and united people, forever to be purged of traitors, but this double act of representation, at once political and aesthetic, required vigilance. As for the people, as Clark put



it with a chilling phrase: "It had to be killed in order to be represented, or represented in order to be killed."<sup>10</sup> Marat dead stood for the people, but the body was not up to the task. Representation as a whole isn't up to the task, but doesn't see it. The obsession with the false during the revolution did not lead to a questioning of representation in general.

Not the least extraordinary thing about David's version of Marat is that the whole top half of the portrait is a vast, blank space, a tissue of empty brushwork. It signals, in part, Marat's self-sacrificing austerity. For Clark, it is something more. Marat could hardly embody a revolution when nobody could confidently claim possession of its spirit. David's portrait could not quite work the old magic of the religious image, but nobody was quite ready to let the spiritual charm of images die. "Art had come out (been dragged out) of the Palais de Fontainebleau. That did not mean it was ready to understand its place in the disenchantment of the world. The whole history of modernism could be written in terms of its coming, painfully, to such an understanding."<sup>11</sup>

The blank wall behind Marat is "the endless, meaningless objectivity produced by paint not quite finding its objects, symbolic or otherwise, and therefore making do with its own procedures."<sup>12</sup> The revolution put in place a regime of the image in which for the first time the state was the representative of the people, but the people themselves could hardly be represented. The Jacobin notion of the people was empty, pure opposition to the parasites of the aristocracy. It was a problem that would take a century to resolve, and the name of that solution is the spectacle, but in solving the problem, the spectacle dissolves the people into itself—then itself dissolves.

The people appear on the historical stage in *Liberty Guiding the People* (1831), by Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863). It is an image of the myth of a revolution in which the bourgeoisie believed, if only for a little while. In 1830 the bourgeoisie has defeated tyranny and gained a constitution, all in three glorious days at the barricades. Delacroix's painting both restates and rephrases this myth. It repeats the forms of the popular lithographers, in that the barricade has become a stage, with characters propped on it rather than cowering behind it. Delacroix's Liberty is a woman, but not quite the conventional symbol. What unadorned Liberty reveals a

little too much is the naked power of popular revolt. Delacroix's contemporary Honoré de Balzac saw in her eyes only "the flames of insurrection."<sup>13</sup> This is not exactly the liberty the bourgeois revolutionary bargained for.

Who exactly is Liberty guiding? The bourgeois in his top hat is surrounded by the rabble. If revolution is the door through which the people enter history, then it makes a troubling figure for bourgeois thought. Outnumbered, it might only be a matter of time before the rabble turns against their allies of the moment. And they did: By the time Delacroix's picture was hanging in the Salon of 1831, a new class war was on in earnest. The people didn't particularly want a constitution; they wanted bread and work and wages. They wanted a social revolution. The picture was an anachronism. It was quickly spirited out of sight, not to be seen again until the next revolution. What the bourgeoisie wants to remember henceforth is not revolution, but restoration. The revolution through which the people enter history is the revolving door that also spirits them back out if it again.

Delacroix's picture resurfaced in 1848, but he was not the painter of that revolution. Clark assigns that honor to Gustave Courbet (1817–77). By the 1840s, when Courbet came into his own as an artist, bourgeois power was an established fact. An insecure one, to be sure, but established, and artists could not but wonder "whether bourgeois existence was heroic, or degraded, or somehow conveniently both."<sup>14</sup> What would come to be known as the artistic and literary *avant-garde* was already an established part of cultural life, the antechamber of success. Also already in play was the *avant-garde* gambit of attacking the *forms* of the dominant order, whilst offering that order, knowingly or not, new forms.

The *avant-garde* rubs shoulders with, but is not the same as, *bohemia*. In mid-nineteenth-century Paris, bohemia was not yet a fantasy spun out of the *Scenes from Bohemian Life* of Henri Murger as *La Bohème* of Giacomo Puccini, let alone *Rent* by Jonathan Larson.<sup>15</sup> It was a genuine social class, outside of the ruling order, closer to the dangerous classes than the intellectuals. Clark calls them "the first debris of industrialism."<sup>16</sup> What bohemia lacked in aesthetic sophistication it made up for in recalcitrance. It was the genuine unassimilated force: "the real history of the *avant-garde* is the history

of those who bypassed, ignored, or rejected it; a history of secrecy and isolation; a history of escape from the *avant-garde* and even from Paris itself."<sup>17</sup> Or in short, the only *avant-garde* worthy of mention is that which was unacceptable even to the *avant-garde*. Bohemia contains at least some element of the inassimilable waste product of spectacular society, what it pushes on ahead of itself, rather than what it leaves behind.

Clark identifies the bohemian's game as what Slavoj Žižek would later call over-identification. Clark: "the Bohemian caricatured the claims of bourgeois society. He took the slogans at face-value; if the city was a playground he would play; if individual freedom was sacrosanct then he would celebrate the cult twenty-four hours a day; laissez-faire meant what it said. The Bohemian was the dandy stood on his head."<sup>18</sup> Such a strategy had its limits. By the 1840s it offered little more than a shopworn romanticism, turned more toward nostalgia for the past than to present exigencies.

For Henri Lefebvre, romanticism is a viable strategy for advancing onto the symbolic terrain within what he calls the total semantic field.<sup>19</sup> It digs into the past to find the figures that still trouble the present. For Clark this is a temptation to be resisted. The promise of transforming everyday life has to be rooted in the materiality of everyday life itself. For Courbet, bohemia nevertheless offered a space within which to make a break with the expectations of the art world. His break from bohemia and its tired romanticism, in turn, would come via a return to his provincial roots.

From the bourgeois point of view, February 1848 was the beautiful revolution, but soon the bloom faded. Karl Marx: "The June revolution is the ugly revolution, the repulsive revolution, because realities have taken the place of words, because the republic has uncovered the head of the monster itself by striking aside the protective, concealing crown."<sup>20</sup> February was a bourgeois struggle to make again a constitution and secure its own power, with some few concessions made to popular power to secure its support. June was the uprising against bourgeois power when concessions proved not to concede enough. The *avant-garde* was for the revolution in February but against it in June; bohemia was not so biddable.

With the suppression of the popular forces, Courbet retreated to Ornan, and discovered, in the countryside, the missing element,

something bohemian life couldn't supply—everyday life: "Courbet saw that the commonplace was not the life of other people, but his own life."<sup>21</sup> For Clark, the *Burial at Ornans* (1851) is one of Courbet's greatest achievements. It is an image of a religious ceremony, but it is not a religious image. It dissociates ritual from belief. It is not explicitly anti-clerical, which makes it all the more effective. Courbet pictures a kind of collective distraction, at once religious and secular, comic and tragic, sentimental and grotesque.

More challenging still is that it pictures the rural bourgeois. It confounds the myth of the unitary character of rural life, and at a time when the bourgeois replaced the aristocrat as the locus of peasant hatred. Courbet pictures the countryside at a time when power within it shifts toward the rural towns, and the countryside as a whole is absorbed within capital. Courbet at his best limns the relation between forces that animate the scene. His is a realism that thwarts art's supposed mission to imagine the *ideal*. The working of the canvas doesn't purify appearances, revealing an essence, but neither is it a fidelity to them.

With the defeat of the Parisian proletariat in June 1848, the role of Paris as center of political contest was for the moment eclipsed. What emerged in the shadow of Red Paris was Red France. The French peasantry had its own issues: land hunger, debts, rights to the commons. In 1848 the French peasantry arrives on the political stage as an actor in its own right. In 2010 the Thai peasantry did the same. After a populist prime minister was deposed in a judicial coup, the so-called Red Shirt movement came down from the countryside to Bangkok to try to force the end to a quasi-feudal political regime in which the monarchy presided over a state and army that represented only shifting compromises among business interests.

Early in March 2010 the Thai army reported the theft of six thousand assault rifles, but who stole them? Was it what the government called *terrorist elements* in the Red Shirt movement? Or did the army steal them from itself, so it could blame any violence in a coming confrontation on the opposition? When the Red Shirt demonstrations came later that same month, they were the biggest in Thai history, and largely peaceful, apart from a few grenade explosions in which nobody was killed. The Red Shirts poured what they claimed was their own blood on Parliament and called for elections

to end the undemocratic rule—of the Democrat Party. Not getting what they wanted, they expanded their occupation from the Phan Fah Bridge to the Rajprasong intersection in the heart of Bangkok's tourist and commercial zone, and then into the nearby shopping district.

As part of a crackdown on Red Shirt-aligned media, including websites and radio stations, the army tried to shut down a TV station sympathetic to them. The Red Shirts stormed the station and occupied it, restoring broadcasts, at least temporarily. The army tried to retake Phan Fah bridge without success, killing two dozen people. The Red Shirts built bamboo barricades in the Rajprasong district, and held up a train coming from the Northeast carrying military vehicles.

A Red Shirt leader declared at this point that "we do not condone but we cannot control. There is no more control among the followers." Attempts at a ceasefire negotiation failed. Red Shirts forced their way into Chulanongkorn hospital near their Rajprasong barricades searching for troops, but they did not find any. The government added US\$8 million to the Bangkok police budget. Khattiya Sawasdipol, a former army officer advising the Red Shirts, was shot in the head by a sniper while being interviewed by the *New York Times*.

In May, helicopters dropped leaflets on the demonstrators urging them to decamp, while they fired back with homemade rockets. Their encampment was surrounded, and the army launched an assault with armored cars. There were occasions of mutiny among the government forces, shooting at the army instead of the Red Shirts, but the government prevailed. Red Shirt leaders surrendered in an attempt to prevent further violence, only to be jeered at by an unrepentant rank and file. The stock exchange, banks and shopping centers went up in flames.<sup>22</sup> Whether or not one takes 1848 to be the moment when the peasantry enters history, in its own right, with its own demands, let's not pretend it ever left it.

The French peasantry in 1848 did not have websites or broadcast stations, but it did have its own forms of expression: songs, pictures, almanacs, secret societies meeting in the woods. The urban left would take some time grasping how to ally itself with all this. The party of order was quicker off the mark, casting the ethereal

chains of religious devotion over the populace, while enacting laws to suppress traffic in popular almanacs.

This folk art was not as dangerous as it seemed. Far from being a pure expression of autonomous peasant consciousness, popular art had for a long time imitated that of the ruling classes. By the middle of the nineteenth century, it was a strange amalgam. Popular images included Napoleon and the Wandering Jew, Charles Fourier and the saints. Popular art carries new information but is full of reversals, distortions, exaggerations. Courbet appropriated this system of changes and inversions to make images for a dual public and with doubled meanings. "He exploits the area in which men still think and make images with materials long since falsified by history."<sup>23</sup>

Courbet's method, Clark claims, is what the Situationists call *détournement*: "Instead of reverence, a brutal manipulation of one's sources. Instead of pastiche, confidence in dealing with the past; seizing the essentials ... discarding the details, combining very different styles within a single image, knowing what to imitate, what to paraphrase, what to invent."<sup>24</sup> That there is a traffic between high and low art in Courbet is not all that original or notable. What matters is the direction: "Instead of exploiting popular art to revive official culture and titillate its special, isolated audience, Courbet did the exact opposite. He exploited high art—its techniques, its size, and something of its sophistication—in order to revive popular art."<sup>25</sup> Here is the key Situationist tactic *avant la lettre*.

Courbet confounded the expectations of both left and right: the left wanted a glorification of simple rural life; the right wanted the preservation of the myth of rural harmony. He addressed the possibility of a public that knew itself to be in a state of displacement. "Courbet's public was exactly this labyrinth, this confusion, this lack of firm outlines and allegiances. It was industrial society in the making, still composed of raw and explosive human materials."<sup>26</sup> His achievement was to appropriate from both high and low culture the means to give expression to the possibility not just of a popular art, but of a popular power with one foot in peasant rebellion and the other in the radical traditions of the urban tradesmen, bohemia and the dispossessed.

Courbet is the artist who both grappled with the most pressing problems of representation in his time and got the furthest with

them: "In the middle of the nineteenth century both bourgeois and popular culture were in dissolution: the one shaken and fearful, trying to grapple with the fact of revolution; the other swollen with new themes and threatened by mass production. What might have happened—what Courbet for a while tried to make happen—was a fusion of the two."<sup>27</sup> But it was not to be. The vicissitudes of the art market made themselves felt soon enough, but far from being a failure of Courbet alone, this was a general failure.

The failure of a public, political art sets the stage for the more agreeable avant-garde of Impressionism, which discovers what can be achieved in the restricted space that remains. Impressionism is the art of the moment in which "the circumstances of modernism were not modern, and only became so by being given the form called 'spectacle.'"<sup>28</sup> In short, Impressionism was the art that traced the consequences for representation of the colonization of everyday life by the commodity form, even if it did not quite know it.

Impressionism knew itself to be the art of a Paris transformed by the urban planning of Baron Haussmann, and the moral panics that ensued from it. It was a vague but widespread feeling: "Something had gone from the streets; a set of differences, some density of life, a presence, a use."<sup>29</sup> Part of this feeling mapped a real transformation. Haussmann tried to evict the working class from its old quarters, leaving a Paris divided geographically by class. Bourgeois Paris would be in the west and working class in the north and east. The whole space of the city would be opened up to traffic. The political city, the city of the barricade, gives way to the city of circulation. The city as horizon of collective action has to be erased, but so too the city of distinct quarters, each a microcosm of trade and manufacture. Industry became a city-wide affair, with bigger markets, bigger players, tighter margins. In place of the small shop, the big department store, and with it the deskilling of retail. The shop assistant became a whole social category. One kind of capitalism supersedes another.

It was capital that changed things, but popular discourse blamed the city. In the 1860s people believed Paris was disappearing and being replaced by something unreal. Everyday life is becoming a matter of consumption rather than industry. "Paris was in some sense being put to death, and the ground prepared for the *consumer*

*society.*"<sup>30</sup> The unitary world of the quarter, where everyone knows everyone and everyone can measure their social distance from each other directly, was disappearing.

What was so troubling was the anomie of everyday life, the interactions with so many anonymous strangers, who were not always what they seemed. Everyone seemed to be passing as what they were not. To navigate such a city takes maps, catalogues, field guides. The citizens of such a city can only interact with each other via representations that make its strange and fluctuating appearances legible. The city becomes spectacle, a city made to be looked at—for those on the make.

Not that this was to everybody's liking. In 1871, the Paris Commune would attempt to divert history onto another path. For the first time, the proletariat had its own revolution. While the representatives of the state retreated to Versailles, the communards became authors of their own history, if not at the level of government, then in everyday life. That the Commune had no real leaders might not be a weakness, and at least it had the wit to arm the people. It may not have understood power, but it understood the city, and intervened in its space. As Marx said, it suffered from too many trying to refight the old revolutions to grasp the originality of its situation. Or as the Situationists put it: "The Paris Commune succumbed less to the force of arms than the force of habit."<sup>31</sup>

"In our opinion, the Parisian insurrection of 1871 was the grand and highest attempt of the city to stand as the measure and norm of human reality," writes Henri Lefebvre.<sup>32</sup> Product of unique circumstances, and doomed from the start, when the ruling *Versaillese* return, the Commune closes a whole era of revolutionary politics, and perhaps not just politics. Clark: "After Courbet, is there any more 'revolutionary art'? After the Commune, and what Courbet did in that particular revolution, is there the possibility of any such thing?"<sup>33</sup> Charged with instigating the destruction of the Vendôme column during the Commune, Courbet faced imprisonment and exile, and became an enduring hero to the left.

The new city becomes the site for the painter who stays with the truth of appearances. But this imagining of the city is a kind of fetishism, an inability to see capital at work. Those workings are too spectral. Clark: "Capitalism was assuredly visible from time to

time, in a street of new factories or the theatricals of the bourse; but it was only in the form of the city that it appeared as what it was, a shaping spirit, a force remaking things with ineluctable logic—the argument of freight statistics and double entry book keeping. The city was the sign of capital: it was there one saw the commodity take on flesh—and take up and eviscerate the varieties of social practice, and give them back with ventriloqual precision.<sup>34</sup> The city becomes the figure that both reveals and mystifies capital at work. Modern art becomes the art of this city, and, unknowingly, the keeper of at least a few capital secrets.

#### 4 The Spectacle of Modern Life

Things have their seasons, and even certain kinds of eminence go out of style.

Baltasar Gracián

Modern art is good at symptoms. It is good at recording the perceptual effects of a certain kind of transformation of sensation, but not always so good at the diagram of forces that animates those appearances. Modern art invents a whole city of images of the city as images. Clark: "This, I should say, is the essential myth of modern life: that the city has become a free field of signs and exhibits, a marketable mass of images, an area in which the old separations have broken down for good. The modern, to repeat the myth once more, is the marginal; it is ambiguity, it is mixture of classes and classifications, it is anomie and improvisation, it is the reign of generalized illusion."<sup>1</sup> The separation of public and private life, and the invasion of both by the commodity form, is coming but is not yet perfected. The artist who worked this seam most assiduously was close to the Impressionists, but borrowed much from Courbet: Édouard Manet (1832–83).

The late nineteenth century is the time of the construction of the *middle class* as an entity separate from the proletariat. Manet shows with extraordinary clarity the sites in which it was produced: pop culture, the leisure industry, and suburbia. Three pictures, and three women's bodies, encapsulate this emerging spectacular regime, starting with Manet's *Olympia* (1863). By the 1860s, the bourgeoisie was used to the idea of an avant-garde. It had decided to be ironical about it. Manet still managed to find the weak point in bourgeois indifference.

The problem was not that *Olympia* was an image of a prostitute. It was not unusual for Salon pictures to be of prostitutes, but the acceptable image of the prostitute was the courtesan. The courtesan was what could be represented of prostitution. Money and sex could meet in private, in the brothel, or in the spectacle, in the representation of the courtesan. But the prostitute could not be made public. The courtesan is the acceptable image of modern desire. She was supposed to play at not being a prostitute. She was supposed to be the false coin in the realm of sexual purity. She was supposed to almost but not quite *pass* for respectable. She was what in twenty-first-century parlance offered something more than a mere hooker's hand-job. She is the ancestress of the *girlfriend experience*.<sup>2</sup>

The girlfriend experience was the invention of a pimp by the name of Jason Itzler. Other escort services offered the porn-star experience, where the client was supposed to receive something like the most perfectly commodified sex for his money. Itzler spotted a gap in the market for something else: "I told my girls ... we have to provide the clients with the greatest single experience ever, a Kodak moment to treasure for the rest of their lives. Spreading happiness, positive energy, and love, that's what being the best means to me. Call me a dreamer, but that's the NY Confidential credo." The women who worked for his NY Confidential were supposed to repeat a mantra to themselves before meeting their client, to the effect that he was actually her boyfriend of six months standing, whom she had not seen for three weeks.

Itzler found the perfect vehicle for such a service in 2004: Natalia McLennan, a former Canadian tap-dance champion. "I'm a little money making machine, that's what I am," recalls McLennan. "Yes, he sold the shit out of me, but he sold me as myself, someone anyone can be comfortable with, someone who really likes sex. Because the truth is, I do. I loved my job, totally." But, says Itzler, "If she ever did it with anyone for free, it would have broken my heart."

Both Itzler and McLennan seem conflicted about the nature of their business. McLennan: "Maybe it sounds crazy, but I never felt I was in it for the money." Itzler: "I thought I could save the world if I could bring together the truly elite people." Itzler even tried to turn NY Confidential into a reality TV show.<sup>3</sup> While hardly worthy of comparison to a Manet—and these days what is?—like *Olympia*

the *NY Confidential* TV pilot blurred the boundaries of public and private, sex and love, money and gift. Itzler went to prison as much for a category mistake as a crime.

The name, for a start, is a joke: *Olympia* was a popular trade name for prostitutes. The brothel, like the Salon, put desire under the rubric of a classical goddess. *Olympia* undoes the category of the courtesan, or tries to. She is not a courtesan passing as a lady, but a hooker passing as a courtesan. Or rather, "she" is an artist, and artist's model—Victorine Meurent—passing as a hooker, passing as a courtesan.<sup>4</sup> This *Olympia* challenges the playful relation of money and desire. On its long road to disenchantment, the bourgeois lost faith in God, but it still believes in desire.

If even the image of prostitution escaped from the spectacle it would be an embarrassment. It implies that money has cuckolded even desire. "The fear of invasion amounted to this: that money was somehow remaking the world completely ... Such an image of capital could still not quite be stomached."<sup>5</sup> At least not in 1860; by 1960, things would be different, the frontier of what could not be stomached would be elsewhere, but was likely still being played out across women's bodies.

The official nude was supposed to be about something other than the naked body of desire. *Olympia* pictures also the disintegration of a genre. "If there was a specifically bourgeois unhappiness, it centered on how to represent sexuality, not how to organize or suppress it."<sup>6</sup> The nude became embarrassing. *Olympia* gave female sexuality a particular body, rather than an idealized and abstract one. It gave female sexuality not just a body to look at, but one that returned the viewer's gaze, and in returning it, created a space for a self reserved from the purchaser's look. The look it confounded was the look of both the art lover and the john.<sup>7</sup>

Argenteuil is about twelve kilometers from the heart of Paris, and by the early twenty-first century was one of its most populous suburbs, easily reached via the Transilien railway line. In the late nineteenth century it was still partly farmland, given over to grapes and the white asparagus named after it. The railway came in 1851. The market gardens gave way to factories, which were extensively bombed during the war, leading to a vast urban development plan in the postwar years, then suburban sprawl,

and even a little gentrification in the prettier parts with a view of the city.

That this was Argenteuil's fate was not entirely clear in the late nineteenth century. It was a liminal space, to which the railway brought both factories and tourists, work and leisure, and sooner or later one had to yield to the other. For a while, it seemed destined to be a playground, a spectacular version of nature, made of parks and leisure zones. It framed the city with a more or less woody border. For the artists of the avant-garde, the suburb is a special zone, where the modern mix might be detected. "A landscape which assumed only as much form as the juxtaposition of production and distraction (factories and regattas)."<sup>8</sup>

Manet's *Argenteuil, les canotiers* (1874) is a big picture, made for the Salon. A couple sit by the riverside, boats behind them, and in the background, the factories on the other shore of the river. (The river, a vivid blue, is not quite as nature painted it. The color came from indigo dumped by a chemical factory upstream.) He looks at her; she stares into nothingness. Bored, perhaps, or indifferent, or blandly masking feelings for which there is no longer any public form or language. She is fashionably dressed, but the dress does not become her. She is uneasy.

Clark makes much of the disjointed quality of the picture. "Manet found flatness rather than invented it."<sup>9</sup> Her straw hat really is flat, a disc pinned at the back into a cone. "It is a simple surface; and onto that surface is spread that wild twist of tulle, piped onto the oval like cream on a cake, smeared on like a great flourishing brush mark, blown up to impossible size. It is a great metaphor, that tulle, and it is, yes, a metaphor of painting."<sup>10</sup> It is the brushy top half of *The Death of Marat*—domesticated.

Leisure can be a key site where the abstract workings of capital present themselves to the realm of sensation. "The subcultures of leisure and their representation are part ... of a process of spectacular reorganization of the city which was in turn a reworking of the whole field of commodity production."<sup>11</sup> The landscape of leisure emerges as the symbolic field for the conflicts of a spectacular identity. At stake are the forms of freedom, of accomplishment, naturalness, individuality.

These were traditionally bourgeois attributes, but the new

middle class claimed them as their own. *Canotiers* is an image of leisure that doesn't quite prove leisurely. The woman in her boating outfit and hat does not quite seem at ease. Leisure is not quite the free time it is supposed to be. Capital is already producing its own specific disappointments. In 2006 Anousheh Ansari, a successful telecommunications entrepreneur, spent A\$20 million on a tourist trip—into space. But all she could think to do when she got there was look at the view and eat chocolate.<sup>12</sup>

Leisure becomes a site of tension, just like work. It is work. Manet's last painting, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882), stocks all the ambiguities of the new, spectacular version of the popular. It's a scene from a café-concert, or what now might be called a nightclub. But in the late nineteenth century it was still something of a novelty, with its fake marble under electric light, its singers in ostentatious gowns, singing simple pop songs that are poor in melody but rich in inflection. Clark's claim for it is that the "café-concert produced the popular."<sup>13</sup> The café-concert generalized the instability of class. It made class contingent, a matter of passing, and called forth an art of mixture, transgression, ambiguity, in which the new middle class are the heroes, always angling for a way to exploit its edges.

This new middle class was creating a new class consciousness, which stressed what separated it from the proletariat, even if that claim struck the bourgeoisie, and its cultural functionaries, as ridiculous: "their probity was awful, their gentility insufferable, their snobbery outright comic."<sup>14</sup> And yet the avant-garde painters loved them, in their way. Their very ambiguity made them the perfect figure for the times. Modernist art tried to take its distance from the middle class and its entertainments, but artists are paradoxically fascinated by them. This usually served bourgeois interests. A characteristic of Situationist aesthetics and politics, with a nod back to Courbet, is to borrow modernism's contempt for the middle class, but for proletarian purposes.

Clark: "The middle class of the later nineteenth century, and even in the early years of the twentieth, had not yet invented an imagery of its own fate, though in due course it would do so with deadly effectiveness: the world would be filled with soap operas, situation comedies, and other small dramas involving the magic power of commodities..." not to mention the pilot for the *NY Confidential*

reality TV show. "But for the time being it was obliged to feed on the values and idioms of those classes it wished to dominate; and doing so involved it in making the idioms part of a further system in which the popular was expropriated from those who produced it—made over into a separate realm of images which were given back, duly refurbished, to the *people* thus safely defined."<sup>16</sup> This inchoate spectacle learns to feed on, and transform, popular expression, extracting and selecting images. Hence the utility of modernism as a counter-project based on contempt for the result. But it is not as if there is a pure popular art that pre-exists its spectacular fate. The Situationist move is not to discard inauthentic pop in favor of an authentic popular, rather it is to appropriate the modernist critique of the popular as the basis for a new aesthetic and political project.

Clark: "It is above all collectivity that the popular exists to prevent, and doing so means treading a dangerous line."<sup>16</sup> It's the same line that threads through *The Death of Marat* and *Liberty Guiding the People*. The representation has to engage the real desires, frustrations, boredoms of its public. Yet it has to arrest these affects and make of them nothing more than spectacle. "Those who possess the means of symbolic production in our societies have become expert in outflanking any strategy which seeks to obtain such effects consistently; but they cannot control the detail of performance, and cannot afford to exorcise the ghost of totality once and for all from the popular machine."<sup>17</sup>

Armed with the techniques of the *avant-garde*, one can follow in Courbet's footsteps and re-appropriate the appropriators. The middle class are specialists of the image. "Popular culture provided the *petit bourgeois* aficionado with two forms of illusory 'class': an identity with those below him, or at least with certain images of their life; and a difference from them which hinged on his skill—his privileged place—as consumer of those same images."<sup>18</sup> This is the power of the middle class over the proletariat, its marking itself off both by its distance from the popular, and its possession of the power to mark that very distance. Hence the popularity in the early twenty-first century of reality shows in which workaday proles compete to become designers or chefs.<sup>19</sup> Becoming middle class means command of the surfaces of what now constitutes the popular, from a well-plated dish to kitchen renovations.

The middle class may be exempt from the rigors of manual labor, but it nonetheless encounters new kinds of labor, affective labor, cultural labor, for which it is hard to sustain much enthusiasm. Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* shows a woman working behind a bar, fashionably made up. "The face she wears is the face of the popular ... but also of a fierce, imperfect resistance to any such ascription."<sup>20</sup> It might also be the face of someone whose feet ache. The other's leisure is her labor. It can't but provoke a certain boredom. Behind her is a mirror, which famously does not quite reflect the scene we see in front of it. The effect is cinematic. The mirror shows a moment before or after the one we see in front of it. There are two alternating moments, the act of serving, and waiting to serve. Which comes first? It doesn't matter. The picture is an alternation of these two moments, of working and waiting, and neither with any pleasure. She is, in a word, a *waitress*.

Once upon a time New York nightclubs catered to the aristocracy of the fabulous, to those with the looks, the style, or the connections to gain admittance to the world of the night.<sup>21</sup> That all changed with the invention of bottle service. Buy a table for some astronomical sum, and mere money will admit you to this world which once excluded the bridge-and-tunnel crowd, with their real jobs and neat suits. Sucking the credit cards out of their wallets became the main game, and the nightclubs became big business. Nightclubs ceased producing their own special kind of celebrity, and became dependent on attracting the sports and entertainment stars of their day. The nightclub became, in other words, just an enterprise dependent upon the spectacular, rather than one of its prime engines of efflorescence.

The game became one of attracting celebrities, who might in turn attract the bankers and hedge fund men for the VIP rooms. The general admission crowd down on the dance floor would be largely for decoration. The kinds of mixing of the classes that both troubled and thrilled Manet's contemporaries will now be carefully vetted. Managing such intercourse calls into being new kinds of labor. Rachel Uchitel was a VIP concierge director. She was an ambassador of client desire, making sure the big names and big spenders came to her club and kept on coming. "People say 'Oh Rachel, she's such a star fucker,' that I only hang out with celebs. No. I hang out



with successful people. I hang out with people who matter, and I'm honored to." Uchitel became famous in her own right for fifteen seconds in connection with a famous sporting identity. The attention was not exactly welcome. Uchitel: "I have big breasts, yes. But I'm really offended by the notion that I used my sexuality."

Or anybody else's. For one of the roles of a VIP concierge director is to introduce people who matter to women they may find attractive. "It's not our job to get anybody laid," Uchitel insists.<sup>22</sup> But it was her job to populate the VIP rooms with women as attractive as they are discreet. Models, perhaps. Or almost-models. And it is the job of club promoters to bring these almost-models in. The contemporary nightclub, in other words, is a sophisticated machine for the highly selective mingling of money and sex. Or perhaps just the promise of sex, and sometimes just the promise of money. Whether the girls put out or the boys shell out is none of the club's concern.

The nightclub is now a long way from the café-concert, with its only partially organized traffic between money's desires and desire's money. Manet glimpses the beginnings of a spectacular industry that has since been perfected. Now that the threat of the dangerous classes seems half a world away, at least from a New York nightclub, the danger to guard against is not that the rabble might reject the desires on offer, but that it might rather embrace them with too much gusto. Leisure, sex and suburbia are no longer marginal sites within which new kinds of spectacular economy grow. They are the very center and essence of that spectacular economy.

## 5 Anarchies of Perception

There are occupations that enjoy universal acclaim, and others that matter more but are barely visible.

Baltasar Gracián

Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) offers a different kind of leisure in *Two Young Peasant Women* (1892). It is a painting of the end of the French peasantry, the fixing of something passing. Not that being a peasant was all that pleasant. It was hard work, but still, shot through with utopian promise.

Valuing peasant life was a way of resisting the disenchantment of the world, but Pissarro's painting is not an idealization of the image of the peasant as a remnant of the past. It is something more specific. Pissarro paints *idleness* as a moment within the field of work, as the peasant's ability to choose the moment to be idle. He found a way of looking at the people without being disciplinary or sentimental. There are certain things Pissarro's peasant women are not asked to be: figures of sympathy, for one. Clark rightly stresses the rarity of this as an achievement. Unlike Manet's women, they are indifferent to the gaze.

Pissarro's way of seeing is, in effect, *anarchist*. Not in the sense of painting a doctrine, but rather in working, through the act of making art, to a certain understanding of the social world. Anarchism is the theory of a freedom compatible with order. "It is the anarchist temper—vengeful, self-doubting, and serene—out of which *Two Young Peasant Women* comes."<sup>1</sup> Pissarro arrived at it through the materiality of painting itself. In this canvas, the singular and universal are no longer in opposition. It's something Pissarro wrestled with in trying to absorb the influence of Georges