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DIGGING FOR APPLES: REAPPRAISING THE INFLUENCE OF SITUATIONIST THEORY ON THEATRE PRACTICE IN THE ENGLISH COUNTERCULTURE

This article is a development of a paper submitted to last year's ASTR conference at City University of New York as part of a panel discussion on the legacy of the 1960s. That paper was prepared to the conference brief that submissions should involve some reflexive investigation of research methods and scholarly practices. Reviewing existing material written on the causal links between Situationist theory and theatre practice in the 1960s counterculture in England, I began to question the "fit" between these two areas. A critical narrative concerning the development of a post-Brechtian theatrical style in the work of a generation of English political dramatists—such as Howard Brenton, Trevor Griffiths, and David Edgar—during the late 1960s and early 1970s has come to read Situationism as a dominant shaping force. On closer examination, however, this relationship is neither as clear nor as convincing as this now commonplace critical model would suggest. Additionally, neglected and underreported instances and examples—some of which are explored in this article—seem to tell contrasting, or more complex, stories about the forms and practices of English theatre in the counterculture. Investigation of some of these issues has led me to consider why it is that particular historical orthodoxies develop to account for movements and moments in cultural and performance history. What happens to make a small and, at the time, not widely published or read group of theorists such as the Situationists take on a retrospectively key position in scholarly accounts of cultural history? Thus, this article investigates the transmission of Situationist ideas in English theatre practice to conclude that there may be a broader, more idiosyncratic, history to read against dominant accounts of influence and causation.

THE LEGACY OF SITUATIONIST THEORY

In the mid to late 1980s a series of commentators began to investigate the work and ideas of the Situationist International, a many-tentacled body of

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European arts theorists and practitioners whose work spread across cultural and political formations between 1958 and 1972. Their writings gave voice to the politicized aesthetic thinking of a libertarian, anticapitalist, anti-Soviet Left, and always seemed to remain one step ahead of the developing cultural upheaval of the times, either through the sheer evasiveness of their theoretical or artistic constructs and practices (Situationist talk is always of tendencies and strategies, of the denial of coherent programs, and of manifestos dropped as soon as adopted), or else through the condemnation of other competing movements and voices.

The critical writings of the SI, in the journal *Internationale Situationniste*, Raoul Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (1967), and in Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), suggested that the experience of contemporary life was that of an oppressive commodified mass of illusion and image—which they termed the “Spectacle”—through which capitalism had established the primacy of appearance over being. At the same time, they suggested (in a development of existentialism) that there were ways in which this Spectacle might be broken open, or disrupted, to contradict or cancel out this alienation. In their writing and actions, members of the SI held that a variety of radical practices—whether in everyday life, in politics, or in art—might aid this disruption and become prime catalytic elements in a wider revolutionary crisis.

As the initial manifesto of the movement suggested, the concept of the *situation* (which gave the group its name) was the ground zero from which their intellectual critique might be put into action. “Our central idea is that of the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances [*sic*] of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality.”¹ The situation might comprise the *détournement* (the reversal of “pre-existing aesthetic elements” in an artwork)² of a kitsch painting through graffiti, it might take the form of a literal *dérive* (a pleasure-inspired wander) through the streets of Paris, allowing chance and play to shape the structure of everyday experience, or it might involve a metaphorical *dérive* through the conventional forms of literary fiction and biography (as in Debord and Asger Jorn's *Mémoires*). The group's ambitions and philosophies were not confined to challenging dominant notions of aesthetics: “The very difficulty of succeeding in the first Situationist projects is proof of the newness of the domain we are penetrating. That which changes our way of seeing the streets is more important than what changes our ways of seeing painting.”³ This quotation anticipated the development in the later work of the SI of a political vision that became closely associated with student unrest in Europe in the late 1960s. In particular, the radical critique of contemporary society's alienating spectacularity was influential in both the scandalous takeover of the University of Strasbourg student union by SI affiliates in 1966 (in order to publish a critique “on the poverty of student life”),⁴ and the later Paris events of 1968, where Debord and fellow Situationists claimed a central role in the Occupation of the Sorbonne and the culture of sloganeering and spontaneity that characterized it.⁵

The SI's writings coined, employed, or developed a series of theoretical positions that were to be picked up in the ensuing period by cultural commentators concerned with the development of radical political and philosophical ideas. These include the modeling of "everyday life" as a space that offered strategies by which to disrupt the ideological determinations of the Spectacle;⁶ a dada and surrealist influenced emphasis on the subversive properties of pleasure, play, and fantasy in engineering such "escape attempts"; a then-fashionable return to the young Marx of the *1844 Manuscripts* to develop a notion of "alienation" under capitalism that might account for the spectacle's annexing of the imagination; and the concept of *psychogeography*, a term coined to describe the complex interrelationship between mental and physical landscapes. These ideas were to contribute to the positioning of the SI (and Debord in particular) as innovative thinkers whose work anticipated some of the theoretical concerns central to the postmodern.⁷ They also help to account for the wide range of fields in which the SI's work has subsequently been influential.

The Situationist International has been seen as an umbrella for radical innovation in the visual arts. In this context, the art of Asger Jorn and Jorgen Nash, the films of Gil Wolman and Guy Debord, and the architectural theories of Ivan Chitchevlov developed a new progressive agenda for arts practice in a society increasingly dominated by commodification. The SI have also been read as presenters of a manifesto for the antagonistic carnival of punk,⁸ positioned as part of a tradition of developed anarchist thought,⁹ offering a particularly "pure" political formulation for the transcendence of the alienation of modern capitalism,¹⁰ and, in the heat of the countercultural moment, seen as provokers of the wave of politically motivated violence that struck Western Europe in the early 1970s. In this latter context, "Situationists" became both the U.K. Government's most feared subversives, according to English security guru Major Richard Clutterbuck,¹¹ and the prime influence behind the terrorist campaign to disrupt modern capitalist society outlined in *The Angry Brigade*, Gordon Carr's account of the 1972 anarchist conspiracy trial at the Old Bailey.

Such a wide variety of appropriations and contextualizations of the work of the Situationists, as artists, activists, and theorists, is, in retrospect, an illustration of both the potency of the concepts they articulated and the drama of their inscription in a particular historical moment. It may also indicate something of the easy adaptability of the often gnomic musings of Debord and his colleagues to the agendas of theorists of rock, politics, or arts practice (a persistent rumor had it that Debord was an *Encounter*-style CIA provocateur). For the remainder of this essay, however, my concern is with a further area in which Situationist ideas have been seen as significant: theatre and performance. In this context, the key claims made for the Situationist movement are that it was either a prescient anticipator of emergent definitions of performance (in tandem with other movements in the moment of the 1960s) or that it was a catalyst in its historic moment for new models of theatrical and performance practice.

SITUATIONIST THEORY AND ENGLISH THEATRE

The analysis and program put forward in the SI's writings linked the fields of politics, critical theory, arts practice, and—through Vaneigem's account in *The Revolution of Everyday Life* of the choreographic mechanisms of spectacle—performance. Commentators have read a combination of these elements as directly influencing a group of politicized writers and practitioners in the English theatre during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Situationism becomes a central element in a rich brew of influences, noted by John Bull in his *New British Political Dramatists*, Peter Anson in *Disrupting the Spectacle: Five Years of Fringe and Experimental Theatre in Britain*, Sandy Craig in *Dreams and Deconstructions*, Richard Boon in his full-length study of *Brenton, The Playwright*, David Edgar in his article on “Ten Years of Political Theatre 1968–1978” in *Theatre Quarterly*, and—perhaps most crucially in establishing this link—Howard Brenton in his reflections, in *Theatre Quarterly* and the short-lived arts magazine *20/20*, on the ways in which his theatrical writing developed through the late 1960s. These influences culminate in the Paris events of May 1968 and have a catalytic effect on a number of English theatre practitioners such as Brenton, Trevor Griffiths, Chris Wilkinson, Heathcote Williams, and Snoo Wilson, and to some extent other writers such as David Hare and Stephen Poliakoff (associated with Brenton in the short-lived Portable Theatre).¹²

For these commentators, the English—and possibly British—political theatre that emerged after 1968 sought to replace hegemonic theatrical modes with new politicized forms that would celebrate the chaotic, playful, and humane against the co-optive totality of the spectacle. They identify a new style, or school, of playwriting practice concerned with the disruption of the theatrical spectacle as a parallel to the wider political disruption of the spectacle of capitalism.¹³ David Edgar, writing in 1978, suggested that this generation, “conscious, perhaps, of the degeneration of Brecht's techniques to the condition of a theatrical cliché . . . [is] forging a style that uses opposite methods to the same ends,” a style that Edgar claimed “clearly arises out of the spectacle-disruptive, Situationist era of the late 1960s.”¹⁴

John Bull's positioning of Situationism as a major post-1968 influence on these writers was part of an attempt to identify a restricted field of factors shaping the “new British political dramatists” of his book's title. The theatrical self-referencing, that Situationist concern with spectacle and the mediation of the everyday invites, led Bull to place them at the center of the changing theatrical landscape. In an account of the Paris events, Bull suggests that:

It is not difficult to start conceiving the May revolt as a piece of extended street theatre—a street theatre which invited participants to play out their contradictions in the world and which denied any distinction between reality and art.¹⁵

Bull's link, which underpins the general approach of this school of thought, suggests that the creation of "situations" might in this moment have also become the province of the theatre practitioner.

The customary view in these accounts is that, in the chief theoretical concepts of the SI—of the spectacle and its disruption, of *détournement*, of *psychogeography*, and of the ludic disruption of the spectacular scene—some theatre practitioners and dramatists found both an analysis of the landscape of contemporary society upon which they could base their theatre writing and hints of the forms that new arts practice might take. The Situationist analysis suggested that mediated images of consumption had overloaded the collective imagination and created constant cycles of dissatisfaction and unease. The pictures of contemporary existence in plays such as Howard Brenton's *Fruit*, Portable Theatre's multiauthored *Lay-By*, or Heathcote Williams fantasias on alienation *The Local Stigmatic* and *AC/DC*, indicated a consanguinity with this world view.¹⁶ At the same time, the notions of the disruption of the spectacle, of play, of *psychogeography*, or *détournement*, would seem to be offering blueprints for theatrical activity that could exist outside of the theatre space itself, and that (as I've suggested in a previous article on Situationist theory and theatre)¹⁷ echoed wider countercultural thinking about performance.

SITUATIONIST THEORY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ENGLISH COUNTERCULTURE

While pointing to links between the analyses of the contemporary situation offered by the SI and a group of male dramatists who in the early 1970s were beginning to move from the burgeoning theatrical Fringe into the mainstream institutions, commentators tend to leave examination of the wider relationship between Situationist theory and the specifics of the counterculture developing in England relatively unexplored. In particular, they have not constructed a comprehensive account of countercultural dramaturgy or the relationship between such concerns and the political formations of the period. The neglect of these is partly explained by the need to locate Situationist theory in relation to a specific academic discipline (Theatre Studies), but also by the desire to establish a direct and unmediated causality and influence, that is, to find examples of texts and ideas that narrate a coherent story of influence and emulation in theatrical practice.

A wider focus on the life of the counterculture problematizes the "influence" model because it is difficult to locate clear relationships of cause and effect between the Situationist International and the English counterculture (and, apart from Alexander Trocchi and the peripherally linked John McGrath, the membership of the SI and of this wave of political dramatists in the U.K. was predominantly English) and between the SI and the relatively parochial institutions and discourses of the English theatre in the 1960s. Bull points out that British playwrights "were rarely interested in the global scale,"¹⁸ whereas France was the more localized space shaping homegrown writing. Richard

Boon's account of Brenton's work goes further in acknowledging the difficulties caused by viewing Situationist influences as direct and unmediated:

Arguably, Situationist ideas are present in nascent form in the public/private dichotomies of *Revenge* and, more obviously, of *Christie [In Love]*; but . . . these plays were as much developments of his own personal anti-culturalism as reflections of his political reading. It is impossible to identify a particular moment when Situationism begins to influence Brenton's thinking.¹⁹

The problem of unpacking where Situationist ideas are surfacing during this period partly lies in the confusion resulting from an English counterculture's criticism expressed as partisan personal recollection,²⁰ and partly in the contradictions and controversies surrounding the nature of Situationist theory, who the Situationists are/were, and the extent to which a program of action or a theatrical style might or might not be considered "Situationist." (The SI was at pains to obfuscate its ideas, even banning the use of the term "Situationism.")

Situationist ideas were afloat in the wider waters of English counterculture in the 1960s in three main forms. First, the Situationist concern with representation, with the power of the commodified image, and with the authoritarian nature of spectacle were seductive intellectual ideas in an age of action and prescient precursors of now commonplace critical positions in postmodernism. This material was hurriedly translated, debated, and filtered into arts schools and the squats from which a metropolitan underground operated,²¹ and, undoubtedly, individual arts practitioners adopted elements of the Situationist *analysis* of contemporary society and of spectacle in their own work.²² Many of these are individual, self-attested cases of the taking on and manipulating of particular elements of Situationist thought, however, and it is perfectly possible to read apparently definitive accounts of 1960s movements in English arts practice that make almost no reference to Situationist theory.²³ The most directly contemporary account of the Fringe theatre of the period is Peter Anson's, and it inherits its Situationist title, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, from Brenton's use of the term, rather than from an engagement with the Situationist International's work. A writer whose plays read as Situationist-influenced, such as Heathcote Williams, might as readily be seen to offer ideas and analyses emerging from the writings of Marshall McLuhan and Vance Packard, from Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse (whose work, as David Cauter observes, "in notable respects runs parallel" to that of the Situationists),²⁴ or from the literature of William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg.

Second, Situationist theory visualized a total political transformation powered by those impulses that have always been the preoccupation of the avant-garde in the modern era. Slogans, pranks, and antagonistic subversions of representation became revolutionary gestures when allied to a Hegelian and Marxist critique of capitalist culture. Situationist theory linked radical thought

and behavior with the total transformation of the age.²⁵ In this respect, the May events in Paris in 1968 certainly illustrated that both the ideas and the actual organizations of Situationism were active in the moment, again, as anthologized and propagated by the organization and its members. The degree to which the SI exists as a body documented in theoretical writings rather than in a more ephemeral medium such as performance practice, however, is perhaps a partial reason for its subsequent reappearance as a key historical force.

Third, Situationist theory engaged with theatricality, with the performance of the political. It appeared to Situationist-inspired activists that theatre might offer both an analytical key to the spectacle's workings and a blueprint for the propagandist demonstrations and pranks that sought to disrupt it. In an article written for the short-lived proto-Situationist journal *Klept* in 1970,²⁶ Bruce Birchall suggested something of the contemporary influence of Situationist theory on left-wing performance, such as providing a rationale for acts of guerrilla theatre. Theatre's revolutionary potential, Birchall states, was based on its "directness, a width of vocabulary, a sense of being closer, personally, to the centres of action," a feeling of authenticity akin to that sought by the Situationist sloganeer Jed in Howard Brenton's *Magnificence*, whose anarchistic fervor is driven by a desperation to "make it real,"²⁷ leading to his murderous confrontation with a government minister he sees as culpable for the death of his child. To Birchall, theatre can create some form of unique, transcendent experience that it derives from its communal, live nature, and that is somehow, because of these features, revolutionary. Self-styled Situationist writers such as Birchall clearly claimed its ideas and label, but any discussion of the theatrical forms and experiments of the counterculture in Europe and North America makes clear that Birchall's sense of theatre's power and political potential is not limited to Situationist thinkers.

Noting that traces of Situationist influence are present in the historic moment is insufficient to identify Situationism as a key to the forms and concerns of the theatre of the 1960s. The notion that Situationist theses might translate smoothly into theatrical representation seems to be contradicted, first, by the nature of the institutions that, by their historical centrality, are most readily documented as the sites of performance (e.g., the Royal Court, the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company, or the subsidized metropolitan and touring companies of the 1970s). Edgar, for one, was alive to this problem, noting that whatever the development of a Situationist-indebted aesthetic in the period, "the plays themselves are not, of course, performed anywhere near the working class."²⁸ In fact, the lacing of Situationist ideas into the context of broadly naturalistic, text-based English drama would appear to have presented an irresolvable contradiction. The conventional categories of theatrical and of dramatic discourse that characterize the mainstream of English theatre in the period (and by that I mean the Left mainstream) were themselves threatened by the theoretical project of the Situationist movement, and the containment of Situationist impulses within mainstream theatrical forms was frequently

awkward. Perhaps apocryphally, Brenton's *Magnificence* suffered its own Situationist intervention when a member of the audience stood up in the stalls during a performance to declare that he was not prepared to watch good actors wasted on such "insipid bourgeois crap"—a highly effective disruption of the spectacle—and Trevor Griffiths's *Comedians*, while seeming to break the "screen" of naturalist form in its deployment of a "live" performance in the center of the play, restores naturalist formal closure at its conclusion. Indeed, the adoption of the rhetoric of Situationist theoretical positions into dramas that continued to model themselves on character conflict reduced Situationist analyses to stylistic elements. Howard Brenton's *The Saliva Milkshake*, for example, contains the language of spectacle in the alienated voices of the young terrorist and the old friend upon whom she calls for help in a moment of crisis, but not the substance of an assault on spectacle that Situationist theorists advocated.

The only action that the theoretical models of Situationist analysis truly offered the dramatists reading them was to step away entirely from the institutions and formulations of drama as it existed, and to undertake a literal disruption of the spectacle by breaking with the form of conventional theatre, just as Guy Debord's filmmaking and experimental novels attempted to destroy their particular forms.²⁹ Certainly, the adherents of the SI working in the visual arts pushed through a formal radicalism in their work that those in performance who claimed to draw on the same theory failed almost completely to emulate. The history of the co-option of Situationist theory into academic processes embodied similar conflicts.³⁰

The difficulty of reducing the Situationist impulse to a prescriptive aesthetic code continually reveals such contradictions. The dominant impressions arising from the exploration of Situationist theory on stage is that these ideas offered a version of vicarious rebellion that injected a rewarding dramatic intensity into the political theatre. Works that adopted it frequently revisited that untheorized and romantic striving for revolutionary transcendence that emerged from the work of Raoul Vaneigem, but, as I have suggested, failed to follow the logic of the analysis they adopted—a rejection of theatrical convention in favor of the "guerrilla" style deployment of antitheatrical methods. The final section of Brenton's *Magnificence*, for example, reveals a surprisingly conventional coda—one perhaps reflecting the opposition influential members of the English Stage Company felt toward the play.³¹ In it, the arc of blazing and impassioned rhetoric employed by Jed is reshaped after his death into something more palatable by his colleague Cliff, who celebrates the dead revolutionary's anger, but mourns the waste that his murder and inadvertent suicide represents. The play manipulates this ambiguity repeatedly, and, as Boon suggests, "despite Brenton's rejection of Jed *politically, theatrically* the play is his."³²

While the commentators who recovered the relationship between the body of Situationist thought and its apparent appearance in English political theatre

were right to see it as an element in the melee of countercultural positions and attitudes occurring during the 60s, despite Howard Brenton's avowed *desire* to write *psychogeographically* or to stage the idea of *détournement*, a fit between these ideas and the formal elements of performance is difficult to establish. On closer examination of English political theatre within the wider counterculture, Situationist ideas tend to appear as one element, in proximity to other political and aesthetic currents, in a fast-moving cultural tide. Situationist theory is more useful as an interpreter of these historical events than as a shaping force; indeed, to employ it as a coherent causal element is to contradict its key tenets, to restrict and to simplify its complexity.

Even adoptions of Situationism's rejection of conventional artistic forms throw up problems if seen as models of "Situationist" performance. Many counterculture movements during the 1960s aimed to employ theatre as a vehicle for communicating agitation because it might transmute representation into reality, but, as a contemporaneous example of Situationist-inspired street theatre illustrates, forcing this transcendence in terms of Situationist theory was itself fraught with complications.

David Widgery's *The Left in Britain, 1956–1968* (1976) contains an extract from a short "indoor play" called *Education and the Worrying Class*. This "cartoon-style" theatre provided a structure for a partly improvised performance. A series of scenes were played out by two actors to highlight education as a cul-de-sac for the disaffected and disengaged. The pieces, reducing the characteristic elements of student life to a series of satirical sketches, follow the agit-prop model, but, as a blueprint for a larger intervention, quickly became confused. In 1972, John Barker and James Greenfield, the authors of *Education and the Worrying Class*, were among four defendants jailed for ten years for the Angry Brigade bombing conspiracy, when their strategies for transcending alienation became embroiled in "spectacularisation" by playing into the hands of the spectacle's recuperative processes and becoming immersed in the representation of rebellion.³³

OTHER VOICES IN THE ENGLISH COUNTERCULTURE

The uneasy relationship between Situationist theory and theatre underscores the need to be suspicious of the claim of influence and of the easy fit between cause and effect that it implies. Other, seemingly marginal or insignificant historical forces shed a different, more complex (and perhaps less theoretically reassuring) light on particular moments in the 1960s. In 1969, for example, the apparently endless altruism of the Beatles led to the establishment of the theatrical wing of their empire. In a manifesto published in the *International Times* in London, the Apple Peel Theatre Company, a group funded by the Fab Four and based at the Brighton Combination on England's South Coast, declared themselves part of the "freak" revolution. Their manifesto appears to suggest consanguinity with other radical tendencies in performance in

Western Europe and America, particularly with the desire to use the communality of performance to counteract the bewitching false consciousness of capitalism. Using the practice of theatre as a venue for transformative change, Apple Peel aimed “[t]o establish an empathy among the people at the performance, so that the work is the result of everyone’s contribution, active or silent, and not merely the effect of illusion.”³⁴

The manifesto is an obscure but intriguing mixture of a number of the impulses and positions that theatre sought to assimilate at the time, and suggests, again, that Situationist theory was only one of a range of overlapping, influential ideas. It contains elements of a Marcusean critique of the art–life divide, of the immersive performance program of the Living Theatre (influential visitors to London in 1968), of commitment to cultural work as socially and politically interventionist (an approach that organizations using the building in which they were to be based—the Brighton Combination—would pioneer in England), and of the collision of mainstream pop and countercultural “freak” culture, which repeatedly led the Beatles, and John Lennon in particular, to financial and polemical flirtation with radicalism.

Most interesting, in the context of the article, is the relative obscurity of the Apple Peel Theatre Company itself. I have currently found no mention of their existence in any other account of the theatrical practice of the time, and even in those texts that deal with the Combination as a local phenomenon representative of an emerging tendency in political theatre practice,³⁵ there is no further mention of this particular group. There are plenty of possible reasons for this. The underground press of the day is full of schemes, ideals, and plans that appear in a manifesto of radical commitment and disappear in a blaze of indifference. It may be that the funding of the company was illusory, that their benefactors found their own financial worries too pressing. It may be that the form of performance, which Apple Peel sought to create, was out of step with the moment and the place (certainly, accounts of working at the Combination in the early 1970s suggest just how awkward the interface could be between the cultural activist and the local population that he or she has parachuted in to help). Or it may be that raising this manifesto to the level of anything other than a curio with resonances of other movements is an act of academic wishful thinking.

I earlier mentioned the events surrounding the Angry Brigade in Britain, the group to which a number of the works produced by this wave of dramatists alluded, among them Brenton’s *Magnificence* and *The Saliva Milkshake*. A group, like many others in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with a strong sense of the theatrical aspects of terrorist “gestures,” and with a critique of contemporary society derived, in large part, from Situationist theory, the Angry Brigade was tried in 1972 on charges of conspiring to cause explosions. The trial was the longest criminal trial in English history and ended in four acquittals and four convictions, a complex and inconsistent judgment. One associate of the group I have interviewed found himself watching the convictions with outrage,

convinced that they would provoke a revolution. A demonstration outside the prison a week later passed off peacefully, and then . . . nothing. Nearly thirty years later, his comments on the moment suggest recognition that the tendencies, which he saw as inexorable historical logic, were in fact local, specific, and more than slightly idiosyncratic. He recalled making a trip soon after from London to Edinburgh by coach, and being astonished to see no “long hairs” on the entire journey.³⁶

My anonymous interviewee may have been mistaken to see himself as at the center when he was unable to spot the margins of his world. The individual involved as a participant in an immersive theatrical event may be mistaken to see his or her own shifting consciousness as part of a universal movement, rather than a localized one. If we take these particular examples of phenomena associated with the moment of the counterculture, however, what might we find when we seek to reconstruct the picture of forces and movements at work on a larger and more rigorous academic scale? Neither Apple Peel nor the interviewee is able to place itself/himself at the center of cultural debate, to claim through their presence that their work or experience reflects definitive, weighty, or in any way authoritative truth. Rather, they stand as ephemera in a scene already weighted down with moments, impulses, and events that vanish as soon as they appear. Even so, their stories reveal something of the specifics of the countercultural landscape outside of a clash of strongly defined historical forces.

WHY THE SI?

If, as I’ve suggested, the SI’s “influence” on the English counterculture of the 1960s is in many ways a good “cover” story that, on closer inspection, grows increasingly incoherent, why has it come to be placed so centrally in the writing of histories of that moment, and that moment’s theatre?

The Situationist International’s work was thinly translated and disseminated in England during the late 1960s and was elusive, open to interpretation, and never intentionally committed to a course of social action. It is difficult to pin the theoretical projections of the group to a particular tendency or movement, given the schisms, expulsions, and changes of opinion that characterize SI. There are relatively few practitioners, activists, or thinkers who at any point claimed to be Situationists, in part because those who made the claim were derided by the group’s leaders, and in part because the group’s history is schismatic and convoluted. The theatrical culture that has been read as influenced by them is also a thin and localized one, perhaps made more prominent by its historical circumstances, in particular, the subsidy and patronage that led Edgar to note that of eight new plays produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1978–1979, five were written by “socialist revolutionaries.”³⁷

Major Situationist concepts link with those that have coalesced from experiment, coincidence, and chance elsewhere in the moment of the

counterculture. What tends to surface when reading SI influence on the English theatre backward (and one might say the same of the wider counterculture of the 1960s) is the random and partial nature of influence, of translation, and of the adoption of concepts, and of localized, everyday experience that misreads, partially appropriates, or adapts ideas in a flux of possibility and opportunity. It is part of the SI's legacy that its writings seem to offer a coherent "fix" on this confused scene—enough for English security expert Major Richard Clutterbuck to claim them at the time as *the* most dangerous threat to Western democratic society. In gathering up the phenomena of the moment to construct such cultural, or political histories, however, the complexity and awkwardness of the historical moment is smoothed out.

Here, the Apple Peel Theatre Company may again be instructive. The orthodoxies of rock journalism tend to read a shorthand of influence and derivation onto recent historical moments. Rock journalism's tradition clearly establishes the detailed difference between 1966 Beatles (mod clothes, granny glasses), 1967 Beatles (psychedelics, concept albums), and 1968 Beatles (revolution, heroin, introspection). Theatre historiography may do the same. Clearly, there are traceable complexes of evidence to suggest that Brenton's late 1960s theatre group, Portable Theatre, to which he brought his Situationist ideas, is the influential and shaping weight of the culture of its moment, particularly since some of those associated with it went on to proselytize loudly about the shape and form of the theatrical culture that followed. The Apple Peel Theatre Company, however, through its barely registered obscurity, and my anonymous interviewee, with his acknowledgment of a distorted view of the place of metropolitan counterculture, perhaps suggest that it is in the equivalent study of failure, insignificance, and lack of influence that we may find a more comprehensive image of the fabric of the past.

As scholars of performance considering the particular moment of the 1960s and its historical and social contexts, we find ourselves assessing evidence to establish trends, patterns, relationships, causes, and effects. We may read specific performances or other cultural phenomena as exemplifying theoretical models, or we may investigate, through the frame of theory, the specific practices, conflicts, and events of an era. Still, in the case of an episode that, however much we research and uncover, is finite, acts of ordering and labeling may be wishful. In place of this reading of theory, we might employ the careful consideration of why a form of performance or style of theatrical expression or concern with a particular ideological grouping gains its prominence, and whether that prominence is a result of the well-evidenced and clear causal relationship between cultural forces, or the result of a "chance" appearance of an artifact within the record. A less weighty and significant reading of instrumentality in theatre history, and a commitment to the situatedness of performance, to the experience and negotiation of events and their influence, might help us to steer away from overarching, but overgeneral, models of historical transmission.

ENDNOTES

1. Guy Debord. [1957], "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organisation and Action," in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), 21.
2. Knabb, 45.
3. *Ibid.*, 25.
4. Internationale Situationniste [1966], *On the Poverty of Student Life, Considered in its Economic, Political, Psychological, Sexual and Particularly Intellectual Aspects and a Modest Proposal for Its Remedy*, trans. Anonymous (London: Dark Star/Rebel Press, 1985).
5. See David Caute, 68, *The Year of the Barricades* (London: Paladin, 1988), and René Viénet, *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May 1968*, trans. Anonymous (New York and London: Autonomedia & Rebel Press, 1992).
6. The model of everyday life was developed in tandem with the work of Henri Lefebvre, an early Situationist associate and later author of the *Critique of Everyday Life*, trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 1991) and of *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1971).
7. For a developed account of these relationships see Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge, 1992).
8. Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992); and, for a riposte, John Lydon, with Keith and Kent Zimmerman, *Rotten: No Dogs, No Blacks, No Irish* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1994).
9. Ken Knabb, ed., *Situationist International Anthology*; Stewart Home, *The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War* (London: Aporia Press & Unpopular Books, 1988); Len Bracken, *Guy Debord, Revolutionary* (Venice, CA: Feral House, 1997); Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: Harper Collins, 1992).
10. John Berger, "Lost Prophets," *New Society* (6 March 1975): 600.
11. Richard Clutterbuck, *Guerrillas and Terrorists* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977). See also Clutterbuck, *Protest and the Urban Guerrilla* (London: Cassell, 1973).
12. John Bull, *New British Political Dramatists* (London: Methuen, 1984); Peter Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle: Five Years of Fringe and Experimental Theatre in Britain* (London: Pitman, 1975); Sandy Craig, *Dreams and Deconstructions* (Ambergate, U.K.: Amber Lane Press, 1980); Richard Boon, *Brenton, The Playwright* (London: Methuen, 1991); David Edgar [1979], "Ten Years of Political Theatre 1968–1978," *The Second Time as Farce: Reflections on the Drama of Mean Times* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1988); Howard Brenton, "Petrol Bombs through the Proscenium Arch," *Theatre Quarterly* 5.17 (1975): 4–20. See also Brenton's review of the MIT/ICA/Pompidou Centre exhibition: "Showcase Spectacles," *20/20* (May 1989): 24–26.
13. Examples would be Brenton's *Fruit*, and *The Saliva Milkshake in Plays for the Poor Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1980), *Christie In Love, Magnificence*, and *The Churchill Play in Brenton, Plays One* (London: Methuen, 1986), Trevor Griffiths's *Comedians* (London: Faber & Faber, 1976), works by Portable Theatre such as Brenton, Hare, Griffiths, Poliakov, Clark et al.'s *Lay-By in Plays and Players* 19.2 (1971): 65–75, and the unpublished *England's Ireland*, as well as other less clearly indebted theatre texts such as Heathcote Williams *AC/DC* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1972).
14. Edgar, 43.
15. Bull, 13.
16. Heathcote Williams, *The Local Stigmatic*, in *Traverse Plays*, ed. Jim Haynes (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1966), 169–90.
17. Graham White, "Direct Action and Dramatic Action," *New Theatre Quarterly* 36 (1993): 329–40.
18. Bull, 10.
19. Boon, 55.
20. Examples include Nigel Fountain, *Underground, The London Alternative Press, 1968–74*

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(London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988); Jonathon Green, *All Dressed Up* (London: Pimlico, 1999) and *Days in the Life: Voices from the English Underground, 1961–71* (London: Heinemann, 1988); Stuart Christie, *The Christie File* (Seattle: Partisan Press, 1980); Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968); Jim Haynes, *Thanks for Coming* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984); Roger Hutchinson, *High Sixties: The Summers of Riot and Love* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1992).

21. See the English Section of the Situationist International, *The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution* (n.p., 1967—author's papers); King Mob, *King Mob Echo* (London: n.p., 1968); *Two Letters on Student Power* (London: n.p., 1968); Christopher Gray, *Leaving The Twentieth Century: The Incomplete Work of the Situationist International* (London: Freefall Publications, 1974); "Paddington Bear," in *Once Upon a Time There Was a Place Called Nothing [sic] Hill Gate . . .* (London: BM Blob, 1988); Marc Rohan, *Paris '68: Graffiti, Posters, Newspapers and Poems of the Events of May 1968* (London: Impact Books, 1988); Peter Stansill and David Zane Marowitz, *B.A.M.N. Outlaw Manifestos and Ephemera* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1971) and *Suburban Press* (Croydon: n.p., 1973); Jamie Reid and Jon Savage, *Up They Rise: The Incomplete Works of Jamie Reid* (London: Faber, 1987).

22. In the theatre, examples include Brenton and Chris Wilkinson (*I Was Hitler's Maid, Plays for Rubber Go-Go Girls*); in literature, examples include the "experimental" novelist Alan Burns, who wrote *Babel* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1969) and a fictionalized account of *The Angry Brigade* (London: Alison & Busby, 1973), and the novelist and SI member Alexander Trocchi, who wrote *Sigma Portfolio* (1964) and *The Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds* (1964) (both available in the Little magazines collection, University College, London); and in the graphic arts, examples include the English artist and SI member Ralph Rummey.

23. David Mellor, ed., *The Sixties Art Scene in London* (London: Phaidon, 1993).

24. Caute, 200.

25. See note 21, above, and Angelo Quattrochi and Tom Nairn, *The Beginning of the End: May 1968, What Happened, Why It Happened* (London: Panther, 1968).

26. Bruce Birchall, "Some Notes on Political Theatre, Particularly Street Theatre," *Klept* (London: n.p., 1970), 13.

27. Brenton, *Brenton, Plays One*, 105.

28. Edgar, 44.

29. See Guy Debord, *Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes, 1952–78* (Paris: Éditions Champ Libre, 1978); also Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, *Mémoires* (Copenhagen: l'Internationale Situationniste, 1958; reprint, Paris: Éditions Pauvert, 1993).

30. T. J. Clarke, former member of the English Section of the SI, notes the "absurdity involved in making 'spectacle' part of the canon of academic Marxism." See T. J. Clarke, *The Painting of Everyday Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985), 10.

31. See Boon, 82–83, and Philip Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre, 1965–1972* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 144–55.

32. Boon, 82–83.

33. See Aida Hozic, "The Inverted World of Spectacle: Social and Political Responses to Terrorism," in *Terrorism and Modern Drama*, ed. John Orr and Dragan Klaić (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), for a clear model of this process.

34. *International Times* (London), no. 52 (14–27 March 1969).

35. See Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution* (London: Methuen, 1980), Bull, and Boon.

36. Author's interview, conducted June 1998.

37. Edgar, 24.