© Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.
Through the filter of memory studies, the period after World War II appears as a caesura, a decade of shock or disavowal in which the recent events of the war seemed unassimilable into the dominant 1950s social discourses of reconstruction, liberalism, advertising, suburbia, youth, leisure, spontaneity, and Cold War brinkmanship. The hegemonic art movement of the decade, Abstract Expressionism, foregrounded momentary experience and the artwork’s own process of making, while Informel in Europe gave heightened attention to the act of painting as an existential mark in the void. Both sides were preoccupied with the idea of returning to a “zero degree” of painting, a Sartrean “will to place [oneself] at the beginning of the world.”² If, as Andreas Huyssen observes, “modernist culture was energized by what one might call ‘present futures,’” post-war high modernism was marked by its obsession with the present moment and its radical inability to envision a future.³ Asger Jorn and the Situationist

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1. “Le cinéma après Alain Resnais,” *Internationale situationniste* 3 (1959), p. 9. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
International, however, still viewed themselves as “partisans of a certain future of culture, of life.” They took a critical position toward both the retreat from politics in postwar abstract painting and the tendency of mainstream visual culture to subsume the past and future into an endless series of spectacular presents. As Thesis 158 of Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* asserts, “The spectacle, as the present social organization of the paralysis of history and memory, of the abandonment of history built on the foundation of historical time, is the false consciousness of time.” The contemporary anxiety and skepticism surrounding any attempt to imagine a future, and in particular an alternative future to the eternal present of global capitalism, was inaugurated in the aftermath of World War II when the war generations began to experience memory not as the comforting paradigm of tradition (or a long-discredited classicism) but as the traumatic experience of mass destruction.

Jorn and Debord would disagree over the possibilities of art as an appropriate medium to register a critique of memory or anything else, leading Jorn to publicly leave the SI in 1961. Jorn’s view has been largely overshadowed by the ideological purity of Debord’s anti-art stance. The eccentricity and continual evolution of Jorn’s theories contest the very idea of theoretical rigor for which Debord’s work is known. Even after he officially left the SI, Jorn maintained his characteristically multivalent artistic practices, funding critical actions (including Debord’s own films) while participating in Jacqueline de Jong’s dissident *Situationist Times* project and continuing to paint and exhibit at private galleries throughout Europe. Any serious consideration of Jorn’s work must address the paradoxical relationship of painting to Situationist practices, for the singular dialogue between aesthetics and critical action that Jorn developed in this period is one of the most significant aspects of his career.

Jorn and his Situationist colleagues criticized the way the ascendancy of gestural abstraction had reinforced painting’s individualism and isolation from all other spheres of politics and culture, via the rhetoric of formalism in

5. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1995), p. 114. Debord’s use of the term “memory” here is itself notable since, as Kerwin Lee Klein describes, the term nearly dropped out of social-sceince discourse in the 1960s. After an initial wave of exploration alongside the development of psychology around the turn of the twentieth century, memory reemerged again, particularly in relation to identity politics in the 1980s, revisiting questions of popular history, humanism, and the sacred, in part as a reaction to poststructuralism. Kerwin Lee Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse,” *Representations* 69 (Winter 2000), pp. 44–67. Huyssen provides a critical account of the rise of memory as a major global area of study since the 1960s, when decolonization and new social movements led to a search for culturally specific memory traditions. This investigation accelerated in the 1980s with a series of debates about the representation and historicization of the Holocaust. Huyssen argues that memory discourse remains nationally defined, which suggests that contemporary memory discourses are reaction formations against economic globalization. Huyssen’s account cuts to the heart of what is at stake in the expanding discourse of memory studies—not the future of the memory industry, an increasing preoccupation of scholars, but rather the need to remember the future, once so essential to modernism. Huyssen, “Present Pasts,” pp. 56–77.
Greenbergian theory and of spiritual transcendence in Informel. This essay investigates the way Jorn’s monumental painting *Stalingrad* (1957–72), the coda to his series History Pictures begun in the Cobra period, rejected both formalism and transcendence in favor of more disconcerting and socially complex questions of memory and history. *Stalingrad* was a product of its time in that it responded more to the threat of global nuclear holocaust—a threat that since the signing of the NATO pact in 1949 had remained at the center of media attention—than to any direct question of the representation of the war or the Holocaust. In 1962, Jorn wrote that the great inhumanity of both the camps and the bomb was their dehumanization of people as a mass:

> The threatening thing about the German concentration camps as well as the American Hiroshima explosion lies in no way in the atrocities, which are no worse than those happening in many other places on earth. The shattering thing is their colossal and blind mass effect that makes humanity more and more valueless.7

The problem, Jorn and the Situationists believed, was not violence *per se* but its mass dissemination in the name of economic and political power, a power that could only be contested through *détournement* of the visual technologies in which it was manifested. Though it does not use the techniques of *détournement*, *Stalingrad* is a radical negation of monumental images of commemoration, subverting both the public scale of postwar modernism, which threatened to turn private memory into spectacle, and the contemporary manifestations of history in lens-based media that were steadily replacing history painting as vehicles of hegemonic knowledge of the past.

Memory, Paul Ricoeur reminds us, is always associated with images.8 One of the postwar period’s most significant visual responses to wartime memory, Alain Resnais’s 1955 documentary *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*), was controversial precisely because of the authenticity of the photographic and filmed images of the deportations and the camps that Resnais decided after long consideration to reproduce.9 Yet although *Night and Fog* was released less than a year before Jorn began *Stalingrad*, Jorn’s painting refuses the discourse of representation in favor

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of a palimpsest of erased images and gestures that question the very status of painting as a medium of memory. These canceled gestures function, I argue, not as a sublime reference to trauma via abstraction but rather as a complex, dialectical negation of the tendency of mainstream photography, cinema, and television to spectacularize catastrophe. *Stalingrad’s* interrogation of history is directly related to the subversion of memory in *Mémoires*, a book Debord conceived as a capricious account of his own memories of the Lettrist International in 1952–53, for which he asked Jorn to contribute “supporting structures.” Both *Mémoires* and *Stalingrad* critique the public written and visual accounts of memory relating to the war and its aftermath in Europe. In complex and radically different ways, they represent memory as a process rather than an image, at once collectively shaped and radically private. They demonstrate that in the personal space of the memoir the act of recollection automatically registers the invasion of public spectacles of sentiment, clichés that render equally obsolete the modernist canvas as a site of authentic expression.

*No Man’s Land*

In 1956 or ’57 Jorn began work on the largest oil on canvas he ever produced. *Stalingrad*, at over three by five meters, bears the marks of a long and complex personal history. The dates 1957–60–67–72, appearing in the lower right corner of *Stalingrad*, were the years Jorn reworked and exhibited the painting. *Stalingrad* was an expansion of Jorn’s long dialogue with mural decoration and, since most of his painting was relatively intimate in scale, a response to monumental postwar abstraction. In fact, it began as an abstract picture with little or possibly no relation to the battle story at all. Jorn began with an 18-foot swath of canvas he could now fit into the larger studio that Umberto Gambetta helped him construct in his house in Albisola. The initial composition was a colorful gestural painting involving his typical zoomorphic visual symbols. According to Piet de Groof, “It was in dazzling colors, beautiful shimmering colors emanating from a white background.”10 Unfortunately it was never shown or photographed in this state; the work was not publicly exhibited until 1962, in the European section of the exhibition *Art Since 1950* curated by Willem Sandberg at the 1962 World’s Fair in Seattle. It was there that it acquired the title *Stalingrad* for the first time, possibly relating to visual changes that Jorn made in the late 1950s. The title changed several times; “Le fou rire” (Mad laughter) is inscribed on the back, indicating that it may have actually been the first title of the work.

Before 1962, Jorn only showed the picture privately to potential collectors, offering it in 1957 to Belgian industrialist Philippe Dotremont (no relation to Christian Dotremont) in Brussels. After Dotremont turned it down for its unfin-

ished appearance, collector Albert Niels bought the painting on the condition that Jorn “finish” it. Jorn, unsatisfied with the painting, took this as an incitement to radically rework—or arguably destroy—it. Pierre Alechinsky states that Jorn took a large can of brown paint, the color of excrement, and a wide house-painter’s brush and covered the canvas with it. According to Niels’s son, he obliterated the initial colorful figures by covering the canvas with a layer of grayish white and khaki using large brushes, a palette knife, and perhaps a paint roller, repeatedly altering the canvas on visits to Belgium between 1958 and 1960. These radical alterations may have inspired Jorn to connect the work to the battle itself; he typically titled works after they were finished or at least in process. Visible today are extensive swaths of white, gray and light brown with vivid red and blue marks peeking through. Jorn reclaimed the canvas by exchanging a number of smaller canvases for it with Niels in the 1960s. In 1967, it was shown in the Salon de Mai in Paris, and Jorn painted the dark green area over an earlier bronze-colored layer at the top edge of the picture while it was literally on the walls of the Salon, after hours. He also stripped some of the surface layers with turpentine to reveal expanses of white, themselves already obscuring the colors underneath. It was shipped a month later to Havana, Cuba, along with a number of works from the Salon, by the French exhibition committee as a gesture of international friendship.

13. A detail of the center left of the painting, a remnant of a bearded face, even appeared on a 1967 Cuban commemorative stamp. See Troels Andersen, Jorn i Havana, trans. Peter Shield (Rødovre, Denmark: Sohn, 2005).
Today the full title is *Stalingrad, le non-lieu ou le fou rire de courage*. Jorn personally approved the English title *Stalingrad, No Man’s Land, or the Mad Laughter of Courage*. Jorn’s inspiration for the title that has ultimately framed its reception as a riposte to monumental history painting was the specific story of the momentous battle at Stalingrad (now Volgograd) in the harsh winter of 1942–43. The battle was one of the most momentous and disastrous of World War II, a Soviet victory achieved only after hundreds of thousands of soldiers on both sides died of injuries and starvation in the freezing snow. The battle of Stalingrad, famously, was a turning point in the war, marking the beginning of the end for the German Army. In France, it was also seen as a strong indication that the Soviets were committed to the defeat of Nazi Germany, ending all speculation of a renewed Nazi-Soviet alliance and lending further ideological support to the underground Resistance largely armed and organized by the Communist Party in Paris. Jorn related his picture not to published accounts of the battle, but rather to a personal story told to him by his Italian friend Umberto Gambetta. Gambetta had participated in the battle as part of the Italian Eighth Army sent by Mussolini upon Hitler’s request after the German Army became bogged down in Russia. After years in a Soviet prison camp, Gambetta walked the entire way home to Italy after the war. He must have conveyed to Jorn some of the battle’s traumatic impact upon thousands of soldiers and prisoners of war.

On several occasions, Jorn explained to the author of his catalogue raisonné, Guy Atkins, the multivalent meanings of the work’s subject and his intentions for it. Atkins recorded Jorn’s explanation as follows:

In the mid-fifties I was haunted by the stories told to me about the Battle of Stalingrad. Umberto Gambetta . . . gave me first-hand accounts of the catastrophic debacle in which hundreds upon hundreds of men died of cold alone. In such a battle the human tragedy outweighs every other consideration. It is impossible to be partisan, even though the battle decided the future of the Western world. It was a turning point in our destiny. Why and how does such a turning point come about? I always wanted to make a painting that would be an action rather than portraying an action, [in] contrast with Guernica . . . . Guernica still exists whereas Stalingrad was completely wiped off the map. It became a “non-lieu,” a “non-place.” The magnitude of such an act of destruction transcends the human scale. . . . The name “Stalingrad” is, in a way, immaterial. It stands for an anonymous battle-field with snow. Yet the idea of painting a picture like this can also be seen within the nineteenth-century tradition of painting historical scenes: Napoleon’s retreat before Moscow. But my picture is an inner record of a historical event.16

Jorn evidently conceived of the central problem of Stalingrad as the problem of history painting in the Cold War era. His expressed desire to depict an “inner record” of Stalingrad is complicated, however, by two points: the fact that he did not otherwise consider subjectivity as entirely “inner,” and the material operations of the canvas itself that emphasize its relation to the present moment of viewing.

Jorn’s understanding of the battle was a memory constructed dialogically, his emotional response itself a response to the description of a friend. The situation epitomizes Maurice Halbwachs’s concept of “collective memory,” in which memories are never purely individual but rather only come into existence as they take shape socially. In the 1950 text La mémoire collective, the culmination of thirty years’ work on the subject, Halbwachs describes the way memory develops after the fact in a specific social context. He writes, “We find in society all the necessary information for reconstructing certain parts of our past represented in an incomplete and indefinite manner.”17 The theory of collective memory relates closely to Jorn’s dialogic understanding of subjectivity and his emphasis on its relation to direct experience. According to Halbwachs, “Our memory truly rests not on learned history but on lived history.”18 This evokes both Jorn’s idea that his picture should be

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18. Ibid., p. 57.
an event rather than portray one, and the Situationist argument that the only authentic experience is the collective creation of situations. Yet the painting, far from becoming any event beyond individual aesthetic experience, actually functions between history and memory in a “no man’s land” shaped by its critical perspective toward both discourses in postwar visual culture, the former increasingly isolated from art, and the latter ultimately tied to commemorative practices related to specific social groups and marked by a particularly sacred character that *Stalingrad* rejects.

Interpretations of the meaning of this “no man’s land” start with the traditional view of the painting as a site of personal conflict for Jorn: “No man’s land is his battlefield, and there he stands helplessly alone before the unknown.”19 As Atkins recorded, Jorn’s own comments on the picture indicate a typically modernist understanding of the work as a personal struggle:

In such a battle the human aspect predominates—that so many die on each side and one can no longer take sides. Courage and all heroism become overwhelmingly absurd. The picture began there. It was a failure, because you cannot finish such a picture without destroying yourself.20

Yet Jorn was not an artist who worked in isolation; he also believed in a “capacity to create an interior between [one]self and others.”21 He openly deplored the attitude of angst and isolation that seemed to drive other postwar expressionists, like Wols, Pollock, and de Staël, to their deaths.22 His complex understanding of the relationship of subjectivity, collectivity, aesthetics, and politics made no assumption that painting alone was enough to effect social change (an assumption exemplified in Barnett Newman’s famous statement “If... others could read [my work] properly it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism”).23 Yet *Stalingrad* directly questions the individual’s role in the making of history, in that it represents a struggle to face the destructive scale of recent history from a singular perspective. *Stalingrad* was his own perhaps unwilling statement that the pre-WWII paradigm of emotional expression was powerless in the face of the collective horrors revealed by the war, both meaningless and useless to halt the self-perpetuating violence of history. It pushed personal expression to a breaking point that reveals deeper motivations than perhaps even Jorn himself could articulate.

The material operations of *Stalingrad* refute any expressionist reading of it as depicting an “inner reality.” It contains no complete gestures or images, but presents instead a record of painting over and washing away. The painting is a monumental palimpsest of accumulated incoherent gestures reminiscent of graffiti; its primary action is one of concealing and erasure. The paint is applied in scribbled, graceless, interrupted strokes that critique the grandiosity of triumphant gestural abstraction as practiced by Informel and Abstract Expressionist painters. Its gestures pile upon each other, meaningless and self-defeating. The “no man’s land” signifies first of all the gestures of canceled representation taking place on the picture’s surface. Jorn’s library in Silkeborg includes a volume of Roman Jakobson’s essays in which Jorn underlined the phrase “C’est ainsi que le champ de la signification est resté un No Man’s Land.”24 The foregrounding of mark-making and erasure underscores the primary processes of signification, in which meaning is always created differentially and never ultimately present, much less directly expressible. Yet Jorn was highly critical of Structuralism’s subordination of human experience to scientific knowledge.25 Any consideration of the painting as a comment on signification itself fails to account for the political critique inherent in the picture, according to which *Stalingrad* speaks not only about the general operations of signification

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but also the particular difficulty of expression in a contemporary age defined by Cold War political rhetoric.

The cancellation of imagery in *Stalingrad* participates profoundly in the broader critical discourse of proscribed representation famously expressed by Adorno in his caveat “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”26 Adorno later qualified that the brutality that threatens to make art irrelevant after Auschwitz renders art all the more necessary: “The abundance of real suffering tolerates no forgetting…. Yet this suffering …also demands the continuing existence of art while it prohibits it.”27 Art must embody this paradox through a negative critique of society’s prevailing tendency to claim it has mastered its troubled past. Along similar lines Jorn suggests that painting in his day, whether the outmoded congratulatory representations of classical history painting or the modernist humanism of Picasso’s *Guernica*, was an insufficient response to the catastrophic scale of recent events. He told Atkins that *Stalingrad* was a response to the postwar view of the Spanish Civil War:

I detested the gang of intellectuals who associated themselves with the war: Hemingway, Dos Passos, Malraux, Ilya Ehrenburg. Picasso’s *Guernica* presented a challenge to me, because Picasso’s manner of portraying this event is completely alien to me. *Guernica* is painted from the standpoint of the involved and indignant spectator. It is the direct symbolical portrayal of an incident. I, on the other hand, wanted to depict not the outer but the inner reality of an act of war.28

The “inner reality” points not only to the operation of the painting on the spectator but also, perhaps, to the reality of art itself in a society that continues to depend on war. The Situationists repeatedly critiqued mainstream politics, journalism, and advertising for exaggerating the nuclear danger and the need for personal security.29 A series of “Métagraphies” produced by Debord in his Lettrist days had already suggested détournement as an alternative to expressionist protest by juxtaposing journalistic imagery, including a photograph of General Franco, with ad slogans like “pretty lips are red.”30 This playful resurrection of Communist aspirations refuses to leave history sealed in the past. Through a more Adornian negation, *Stalingrad* succeeds in embodying the inevitable fail-

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29. Even after Jorn left the SI, Jorn and Debord proposed a collaboration called Mutant, the only action of which was to distribute a tract denouncing the United States government’s bomb-shelter propaganda. Asger Jorn and Guy Debord, “European Critique of the Inadequate Program . . .” (1962); translated at infopool.org.uk/6211.html (accessed January 30, 2012).
ure of painting to address the complexity of contemporary political realities. In contrast to Adorno’s aesthetic theory, however, Jorn’s aesthetics in general required a positive exuberance—a “wonder, admiration, and enthusiasm”—in order to make possible any critical meaning. This exuberance is visible throughout his paintings after the mid-1950s—except in *Stalingrad*. More than any other work Jorn created, *Stalingrad* uses a negative dialectic to raise questions of tragedy, history, and their representations. Adorno’s somber description of art’s double bind seems particularly suited to *Stalingrad’s* record of struggle and erasure:

The darkening of the world makes the irrationality of art rational: radically darkened art. What the enemies of modern art, with a better instinct than its anxious apologists, call its negativity is the epitome of what established culture has repressed and that toward which art is drawn. In its pleasure in the repressed, art at the same time takes into itself the disaster, the principle of repression, rather than merely protesting hopelessly against it.\(^{32}\)

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The repression of imagery becomes an index of the repressions of postwar politics and mainstream abstract art. For Jorn the annihilation of Stalingrad came to stand for the impossibility of visualizing catastrophe without turning it into spectacle, but also the present threat of nuclear annihilation. His painting acknowledges the use of images of history in the active shaping of current events.

In *Pour la forme* Jorn defends the independence of art from theories that limit it to either self-expression or instrumentalization. The problem, he writes, is “how to avoid a complete automatism, a transformation of our intelligence into an instinctive and standardized reflex?” He resists any attempt to define art positively, seemingly relegating it to a “no man’s land” defined only by its critical relationship to contemporary society. Rather than a zero degree, he conceives of abstraction as a response to preexisting imagery. He quotes a statement of Bachelard: “One always wants imagination to be the capacity to *form* images; however, it is rather the capacity to *deform* images, furnished by perception . . . to liberate us from initial images, to change images.” In this period Jorn theorized an artistic autonomy that was not divorced from politics, as in Greenbergian formalism; it was, rather, more in line with Adorno’s aesthetics, responding directly to the world from a critical distance that kept it free of instrumentalization. Addressing art’s isolation from the broader public, Jorn writes, “Our cultural situation precludes any possibility for a searching, forward-looking art of a less isolated character than abstract art, just as scientists and other cultural figures must remain isolated until the causes of this missing collectivity are removed.” In the wake of the explicit political divisions of the war and its aftermath, art’s relationship to postwar society could only be imagined as a no man’s land. *Stalingrad* is the “non-site” of a missed encounter between art and politics specific to the mid-1950s.

*Stalingrad* not only depicts the snowy battle as a nuclear winter; it calls to attention art’s fraught relation to Communism at the moment when public intellectuals from a wide spectrum of society were reexamining their initial postwar enthusiasm for the Party, whose ties to the Resistance made it briefly resurgent throughout Western Europe in the late 1940s. Communism had been a central Cobra reference, symbolizing a collective avant-garde practice opposed to the occultist tendencies of Bretonian Surrealism. By the mid-1950s, the situation of Communist politics could be described as a “no man’s land” in light of the increasing recognition of Soviet Communism’s failures. Jorn’s contempt for the intellectual response to the Spanish Civil War was a reaction against post-WWII nostalgia for the lost political community of the 1930s at a time when many

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French intellectuals were so enamored with Communism that (with certain prominent exceptions such as Albert Camus) they could not admit the realities of violence and repression in the Soviet Union. Among these intellectuals, the battle of Stalingrad was an explicit symbol of Communism’s possibilities, and the Red Army’s victory solidified their faith both in the Soviet participation in the Allied effort and in Communism as a whole. As Edgar Morin wrote in the memoir of his involvement with the Communist Party from 1943 to 1951:

> For me and undoubtedly thousands more like me, Stalingrad swept away all the criticisms, doubts, and reservations. Stalingrad cleansed all the doubts of the past. . . . The cruelty, the trials, the purges, all found their end in Stalingrad. . . . Stalin was identified with the city that bore his name; and the city with the Red October factory, the factory of the 1917 revolution, and its arms-bearing workers, and all of that with world freedom, the victory finally on the horizon, all of our hopes for a radiant future.

By the time Jorn began painting *Stalingrad*, Morin had been long expelled from the Party. The French intelligentsia, marked by a wide range of individual positions on Communism, had almost totally abandoned its former idealism in the face of the realities of Stalinism.

Jorn had never idolized Soviet society the way prominent French intellectuals like Sartre did, though he held certain utopian views about (pre-Communist) socialist society. He was strongly critical of the Party bureaucracy. In a letter to Danish ex-Communist Aksel Larsen, he avowed, “It was after Stalin’s death that I first understood that bolshevism or the dictatorship of the people is identical with oppression of all human values.” By the late 1950s, the battle of Stalingrad evoked the dashed hopes of leftist intellectuals throughout Europe as it became increasingly obvious that legends of the Communist resistance could no longer mask the glaring mistakes of Stalin and Soviet Communism. In this sense, *Stalingrad* could be read as a critique of what Tony Judt calls the “self-induced

39. He had joined the Danish Communist Party (DKP) as a young man, but was introduced to its politics by a Party outsider, Silkeborg syndicalist Christian Christiansen, who had left the DKP in 1936 after Stalin’s show trials. The DKP was also a nexus for many tendencies of “cultural radicalism” not as closely allied with the Party in other countries, from sexual reform to modernist painting. See Morten Thing, *Komunismens Kultur: DKP og de intellektuelle 1918–1960* (Aarhus: Tiderne Skifter, 1993).
amnesia" of postwar French culture’s tendency toward résistantialisme, the myth that the majority supported the Resistance during Vichy.41 Jorn, meanwhile, maintained his faith in Communism as a utopian possibility, writing that “true communism would be a leap into the domain of liberty and of values, of communication. Artistic value, contrary to utilitarian (ordinarily called material) value, is progressive value because it is the valorization of man himself, through a process of provocation.”42 It was a provocation on Jorn’s part to conjure the battle that signified the left’s greatest hopes for Communism at the point of that movement’s lowest reputation since the war.

*Stalingrad* records a struggle unique in Jorn’s oeuvre because of all his works it most closely approaches both Adorno’s negative aesthetic of art as social critique and the outmoded expressionist paradigm of art as tragic alienation, despite Jorn’s considerable ambivalence about that paradigm.43 *Stalingrad* inevitably becomes a metaphor for the tenuous position of painting as a political project in postwar culture, in light of the Situationist critique of the “global crisis of modern art,” and the SI’s belief that “artistic expression is in no way a true self-expression, a realization of one’s life.”44 *Stalingrad*’s “failure” to produce either an image of history or an expressionist memory is precisely where its critique lies.

*Matter Versus Memory*

Approaching abstraction in the traces of erasure that overwhelm its initial imagery, *Stalingrad* is radically different from Jorn’s semi-figurative works. Its palimpsest character dramatizes the withdrawal of representation via the more direct sensory engagement of the painterly surface. Despite his avowed interest in the reception of visual images, Jorn once remarked that “a picture can only be a picture of the process during which the picture arises, nothing more.”45 He connected memory to the repetition of physical stimuli that lose their power over time, the way memories fade with each recollection. He writes in *Pour la forme* that “the deepening of aesthetic knowledge is thus due to the disconnection from memory. Memory is the principal enemy of presence.”46 Even as Jorn’s

painterly aesthetic evolved throughout his career, the physical experience before the work of art remained primary, foregrounding the present rather than the past. In this, Jorn’s view was in some ways typical of the postwar generation, so determined to move forward even if it meant disavowing the past. The manic festivities apparent in certain Helhesten and Cobra paintings register, after all, a sort of polemical determination to enjoy the moment, rather than dwell on the tragedies of the war that were everywhere still evident. Jorn’s painting by 1956 had evolved to a more distinctly critical materialism, in the context of his investigations of ceramics at the International Ceramic’s Congresses he organized in Albisola, Italy, in 1954 and 1955. The “industrial paintings” he produced with Giuseppe “Pinot” Gallizio and others in a parodic assembly-line process combine spontaneous gestural spatterings with nonart materials like eggshells, sand, resin, and metal filings.47 Jorn was less interested in the Bergsonian embodiment of memory within matter than in situating the viewer strongly in the present, using the grotesque to parody the banal materialism of postwar consumerism.

While Jorn’s approach shared with Abstract Expressionism and Informel a certain refusal to signify the traumatic memories of the war in favor of immediate material presence, his painting rejected the overblown rhetoric of purity and transcendence in those movements. Abstract Expressionism celebrated the heroic, monumental gesture, above all in Pollock’s drip paintings that foreground their own process and literal presence over representation.48 Informel, too, focuses on a zealous experience of the painterly present, suppressing memory in favor of the moment of creation. Georges Mathieu was the ultimate exemplar of this process of making the event of painting a transcendent performance of genius, creating giant canvases in full costume before a live audience, in public spectacles performed on the anniversaries of famous battle scenes.49 Mathieu’s gestures are the antithesis of the parodic, childlike, and diminutive brushwork of Jorn’s painting; his focus on historic battles from centuries past is the opposite of Jorn’s involvement in contemporary history. Jorn insisted instead on awkwardness, kitsch, and vulgarity.

The year before Jorn began Stalingrad he painted several key works, including Tele-Visioner, a lurid depiction of the television as a monstrous device sending


alien radiation into the surrounding space, and *Nürnberkgkram*, a hilarious send-up of the cheap wooden toys made in Nuremberg.\(^{50}\) Featuring a masklike rabbit face crystallized with resin and surrounded by silvery drips and gaudy red and blue smudges, *Nürnberkgkram* is a direct comment on the proliferation of consumer goods as the postwar economic miracle took hold in Italy and Germany. Its grotesque materiality not only critiques the rhetoric of transcendence in Informel discourse and the nationalist claims for the movement to revive the avant-garde in France, but also registers the way in which the proliferation of commodities and advertisements were coming to dominate everyday life, collapsing political engagements and partisan memories beneath an avalanche of kitsch.\(^{51}\) Such works critiqued mass culture’s tendencies to reduce history to

\(^{50}\) This work may also obliquely refer to the military tribunals held at Nuremberg in 1945–46, in which the Allies notoriously rewrote international law, creating the first international definition of “war crimes” in order to retroactively apply it to prosecute Nazi officers—a problematic application of victor’s justice that Jorn would later compare to the obscenity trial of the Gruppe Spur artists in 1961. Asger Jorn, “Konstens frihet,” *Drakabygget* 2–3 (1962), p. 3.

\(^{51}\) On the nationalist reception of Informel as a postwar School of Paris, see Natalie Adamson, *Painting, Politics, and the Struggle for the École de Paris, 1944–1964* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2009).
entertainment and to suppress oppositional perspectives through the myth of consumer choice.

In *Stalingrad*, the action of painting as palimpsest signifies the loss of representations of collective memory, rather than an individual tragedy. *Stalingrad*’s opposition to *Guernica* indicates painting’s newfound isolation from authentic depictions of memory as the subjective response to historical events. Jorn and Debord address questions of memory directly in *Mémoires*, made during the period when Jorn was painting over the initial imagery of *Stalingrad* in Belgium from 1958 to 1960. Public representations of memory had become equally clichéd in visual and print media as the number of media formats and audiences exploded after the war. As the postwar mass media focused on reconstruction, consumption, and leisure, memories of the recent war seemed fragmented compared to the public commemorations of WWI. Shaped according to individual affiliations, the memories of collaborators, resisters, Free French, concentration-camp victims, Jews, émigrés, and numerous other identities vied with each other for public recognition—and often, as in the case of Holocaust memories, remained private.52 By the late 1950s, De Gaulle’s myth of national unity had become hegemonic in France, ironing over these distinctions. The publication of his *War Memoirs* in 1954–56 may have inspired Debord to conceive his own ironic *Mémoires*.

*Mémoires* observes the spectacular collapse of the difference between memory and history through the genre of the memoir itself.53 *Mémoires* reduces textual and visual representations of memory to a cliché (literally, a printer’s stereotype). Yet détournement also forces the reader to rethink each text in relation to the present moment, or indeed to a future that now appears full of possibilities—to the precise degree that memory is emptied out of the page. Equally significant is its visual aesthetic, shaped by Jorn’s “supporting structures” though they are rarely discussed or recognized (the visual aesthetic of *Mémoires* owes much to the earlier project *Fin de Copenhague* that Jorn initiated). The text fragments and visual elements, from collaged maps and city plans to Jorn’s abstractions, immerse the reader in a vivid present, subverting the memoir by setting text into play with the gestural mark, the legible with the abstract.54

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53. The texts dwell on questions of memory in quotations from Pascal to Shakespeare; anyone interested in decoding them can consult the “manual” compiled in extraordinary detail by Boris Donné, *Pour Mémoires* (Paris: Allia, 2004).

54. While I cannot fully explore its meanings here, its impact on both Jorn’s conception of memory and Debord’s later autobiographical projects cannot be overstated. Debord’s film *In Giron Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni*, realized in 1978, and the text *Panegyric* (the two volumes published by Gérard Lebovici in 1989 and 1997) approach much more closely the genre of written or visual memoir than either *Mémoires* or the twenty-minute “anti-documentary” film Debord made about his Lettrist experience in 1959, *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps*. 

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The visual dynamism and violent colors of Mémoires have a visceral impact on the reader. Although Debord stated that the book was made entirely of preexisting elements, Jorn’s additions short-circuit the reader’s attempts to rationally comprehend the texts by making reading a vivid, abstract process, alternately playful and destructive. He scraped, splattered, smudged, and pooled the ink, using a pen to make marks that seem drawn with a matchstick. The ink blots were then printed in colors “as glaring and incoherent as possible,” in an iris-print method that blends colors on a single page. The process emphasizes the uniqueness of each object despite its serial printing. More physically disorienting than the texts, the colored marks scatter in all directions. They even transgress the horizontal plane of the page through flung-ink shapes that index their own violent trajectories toward its surface. Repeatedly, texts in Mémoires are crumpled as in a trash bin, and the ink has been applied in violent, graffiti-esque scratchings that evoke destruction not only of the legibility of the text but of the page itself.

By focusing the reader on the physical experience of the work, Jorn’s marks complement Debord’s chosen texts: together they destroy contemplation and activate the reader’s critical engagement. The ink marks consist of a grammar of abstract form, from Rorschach images to spills, pen scrapings, stains, and liquid pours. Their printing parodies the presumed originality and authenticity of abstract painting, and though reminiscent of Informel painting, the printed structures are the opposite of virtuosic. Jorn’s marks make violent, funny, and scatological gestures. The pale semi-figurative drip accompanying Pascal’s phrase “Eloquence prolongs boredom” makes the painterly gesture diminutive and accessible in the banal format of the book. These are painterly signs for the ordinary—the drip returned to its original aleatory and/or scatological associations, diminished from Pollock’s grand scale. They make a particularly Jornian claim to memorialize a banal, marginal subjectivity, singular but not spectacular. They help transform the partial texts into the memoirs of the anonymous reader, who attaches his or her own memories to the spectacular fragments.

Debord writes that spectacular society creates an endless cycle of nostalgia precisely because it erases the possibility of authentic memory:

Individual lived experience of a cut-off everyday life remains bereft of language or concept, and it lacks any critical access to its own antecedents, which are nowhere recorded. It cannot be communicated. And it is misunderstood and forgotten to the benefit of the spectacle’s false memory of the unmemorable.

His own obsession with representing the past seems to result from this perception of its utter impossibility. If Debord’s pessimism led him to refuse any possibility of subjectivity critical of the spectacle (especially in later writings such

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as Comments on the Society of the Spectacle), however, the visual devices in Mémoires remain much more open-ended in their critique.\textsuperscript{57} They are relics of Debord’s experimental collaboration with Jorn. Mémoires presents memory as a process, shaped by a wider social context yet radically private. The book provides a provisional and fugitive space, cut off from preconceived (literally, pre-remembered) signification, for the inscription of new memories. The exuberant take on momentary experience in Jorn’s work sets it apart from much post-war work dealing with memory and history, such as the cinema of Resnais or the Elegy to the Spanish Republic series of Robert Motherwell, work that is more frequently characterized by immobilizing emotions of nostalgia, loss, or even the sublime.

Because Jorn’s painting refuses identification and commemoration, Stalingrad cannot be properly understood as monumentalizing traumatic affect in the register of the sublime, a reading that may be tempting given its scale and the violent aspect of its erasure. Stalingrad approaches a totalizing abstraction that in his own description—“the magnitude of such an act of destruction transcends the human scale”—relates to the sublime horror commonly related to the events of the Holocaust and the devastation of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Newman’s

\textit{The Stations of the Cross} exemplifies the use of total abstraction as a way to depict the horror of those events by eschewing representation completely. Mark Godfrey makes a convincing case that the series relates to Holocaust memory, but he specifies that “Holocaust memory here neither means the acquisition of knowledge about history nor the recollection of historical events. Holocaust memorial instead requires the subject’s repositioning himself with regard to the demands of memory.”\textsuperscript{58} The “demands of memory” point here, as they do


in *Stalingrad*, to political crises in the present; like Jorn, when Newman wrote about the “terror” of contemporary events, he mentioned Hiroshima on several occasions but remained silent about the Holocaust. This silence was not unique; Western culture at large was relatively silent about the Holocaust until the investigation of it in cultural memory in the 1970s.

Rather than reading Newman’s abstraction as sublime, following the artist’s own interpretation and the exegesis of Jean-François Lyotard, Godfrey situates *The Stations of the Cross* as a Holocaust memorial operating in the present moment of viewing. Lyotard, by contrast, theorizes an “immanent sublime” that rejects the transcendent, an aesthetic that conveys the social task of contemporary avant-garde painting: to counter the search for knowledge of a technocratic age with an allusion to an unrepresentable with nothing edifying about it. Yet his conception isolates modern art from the direct relationship of aesthetics to social action that Jorn and the Situationists espoused. Jorn’s aesthetic theory could not have been further from denying representation in the name of some higher moral authority. The artist’s aesthetic was intolerant only toward intolerance itself. *Stalingrad* makes manifest the spectacular power of the imagery of collective memory to perpetuate intolerance as well as violence in the guise of commemoration. Rather than a traumatic reaction to a particular event, it signifies the traumatic failure of such collective images, whether photographic or painterly, to prevent further violence.

*Non-Lieux de Mémento*

*Stalingrad*’s subtitle “The Mad Laughter of Courage” parodies the official celebration of heroes, while the phrase “no man’s land” suggests multiple possible meanings, from its military designation as a neutral border zone to the fogginess of human memory itself, as well as the inadequacy of its visual documentation. It evokes an explicit critique of memory’s transformation into history via a limited and alienating set of nationalist images and ceremonies of public commemoration.
tion. Jorn’s reference to Stalingrad as a “non-lieu” also intersects suggestively with Pierre Nora’s later concept of lieux de mémoire (“sites of memory”), reframing his Situationist-period projects as a direct aesthetic confrontation with the institutionalization of memory.

*Les lieux de mémoire*, Nora’s massive research project that resulted in over 150 texts published in seven volumes, reenergized discussions of history in France in the 1980s–90s. Nora explicitly acknowledged the increasingly complex and fraught relationship between memory and history in the contemporary period. For Nora, the two concepts, while historically distinct—one private and subjective, “living” and sacred, the other public and objective, reconstructed and critical—are mutually dependent because the very operation of history perpetually threatens memory. The “sites of memory” explored in the project are not just physical objects or locations, historical accounts or personal memories; they are amalgamations of all these things. As Nora writes, “Lieux de mémoire exist because there are no longer any milieux de mémoire, settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience.” Nora’s observation that “memory, once the legacy of what people knew intimately, has been supplanted by the thin film of current events” directly recalls the Situationist notion of spectacle. His characterization of the “memory without a past that eternally recycles a heritage” appears indebted to Debord’s description of the cooptation of experience in *The Society of the Spectacle*. Unlike the Situationist project, however, Nora’s historiography is driven by an evident nostalgia and a sense of loss at the decline of the nation, a “world that once contained our ancestors.” His conflicted position as a historian attempting to rewrite history through the methods defined in memory studies suggests a recuperation of once-oppositional tactics opposed to the Situationist project of resistance.

Nora’s theory is indebted to the earlier writing of Halbwachs, whose studies of “collective memory” challenged the interpretation of memory as a purely individual phenomenon. In Halbwachs’s description, memory is not an individual phenomenon but forms itself discursively in collective contexts defined by membership in specific social groups. The renewed interest in Halbwachs’s theory today relates to the widespread applicability of its concern with subjective interpretations of memory.
of the past that develop in specific sub- or trans-national social contexts. Halbwachs argued that a collective memory, or “lived history,” lasts only a brief period of time, related to the lifespan of the group that defines it, before it becomes the written, impersonal, retrospective form he variously calls “learned history,” “historical memory,” or “general history.” Jorn’s work, as already noted, also approached memory as an intersubjective formation, and participates in this critical territory where memory and history are interrelated, each existing as a point of critique regarding the other.

In many ways Stalingrad—the battle, the stories, the propaganda, the documentaries, the histories, and, lastly, Jorn’s painting—is an exemplary lieu de mémoire, its meaning evolving as the Cold War reshaped the reception of Communism in the West. The ways the battle has been reenvisioned in numerous cinematic and televised versions, from wartime newsreels to the Paramount film epic Enemy at the Gates (2001), provides ample material for a study in itself. Jorn could have seen a newsreel of the battle during the war (newsreels about Stalingrad were produced by the U.S., Britain, Germany, and the U.S.S.R.) or numerous documentaries made for cinema and television afterwards. As we will see, Jorn saw an unspecified television documentary of the battle in 1972. If newsreels largely drove public perceptions of the war, Stalingrad signifies an eviscerated screen emptied of the heroic images of battle that turned the actual battle’s tragic losses into wartime propaganda. Yet Nora’s lieu de mémoire project does not directly address the artistic construction of memory images; nor does it investigate the role of lens-based practices in mediating our relationship to history that so preoccupied the SI—what Giorgio Agamben has termed the “close tie between cinema and history.” Jorn’s painting was a direct response to the photographic, cinematic, and televsional representations of history, and one profoundly marked by his relationship with the filmmaker Debord.

The lieu de mémoire project notoriously disregards oppositional perspectives on France’s colonial legacy, immigration, and contemporary urban life. The recognition of antagonistic claims to memory is fundamental to the Situationist project, which critiques elitist tendencies that make visible only the collective memories of cultural institutions of power such as the state-sponsored media. Stalingrad and Mémoires interrogate the hegemony of institutionalized history that represents selected memories as universal in the formats of the memoir, the documentary, the

72. For one such study, see Robert G. Moeller, “‘In a Thousand Years, Every German Will Speak of This Battle’: Celluloid Memories of Stalingrad,” in Crimes of War: Guilt and Denial in the Twentieth Century, ed. Omer Bartov, Atina Grossmann, and Mary Nolan (New York: New Press, 2002), pp. 161–90.
individualistic cinema of the auteur, and the postwar painting practice that replaced historical engagement with transcendent abstraction. Their non-lieux de mémoire attack the very idea of official sites of memory—whether national, professional, regional, ethnic, or religious—even as a progressive approach to history.

Jorn’s perspective on Stalingrad makes clear that such a military catastrophe could not be comprehended through any existing language of representation, other than a negative one such as détournement, a “communication containing its own critique; a critique containing communication.”\textsuperscript{75} Stalingrad and Mémoires each propose a sort of détournement of a lieu de mémoire, enacting a critical erasure of the public representations of both historical and personal memory. The painting appears to construct itself as a “site of memory” only in order to critique the very concept by making vividly material the impossibility of a proper symbolic memorial. Jorn wrote that “modern art today has perhaps become the last point from which the human being can raise himself above the external world he has more and more relinquished to the automatic self-control of mechanics.”\textsuperscript{76} In Stalingrad Jorn specifically condemns the “mechanization” of subjective reactions to events in the mainstream media—yet in this one instance, he seems to also question the possibility of expression itself. For Jorn, human expression always remained fundamental, and perhaps for that reason he viewed this work, begun before the formation of the SI but of all his paintings the most closely aligned with its anti-expressive stance, as a failure. Stalingrad instills in the observer a profound sense of loss not over the battle itself, but rather over the loss of a shared language through which such a catastrophe could be publicly envisioned and mourned.

\textit{History Memory Painting}

The propagandistic representation of the battle of Stalingrad reached epic proportions in the 1953 Soviet commission for a panoramic painting and colossal monument for the site the year after Stalin’s death. The Moscow-based Grekov Battle Painting Studio produced a gigantic panorama, nearly 400 feet long by 52 feet high. The Defeat of the Fascist Armies at Stalingrad represented with epic fervor the Red Army forces completing their final encirclement of the German Army on January 25–26, 1943. It required several decades to complete, and was not unveiled until 1982 in a specially designed Volgograd Panorama Museum.\textsuperscript{77} The

work exemplifies the way postwar Socialist Realism not only revived traditional history painting but took it to bombastic extremes during the Cold War, resisting cinematic documentary precisely because it lacked the inspirational and heroic qualities of painting.\(^78\)

Jorn began a direct reexamination of history painting in the Cobra period, when he situated his work as a sort of painterly “realism” in opposition to the representationalism of Western painters allied with Communism like André Fougeron. He wrote, “The true realism, materialist realism, comes from the research and the expression of forms faithful to content.”\(^79\) He sought the new form of history in a series of predominantly black and monstrous representations he called “War Visions” (*Krigsvisioner*). These have nothing to do with expressionist visions of WWII, but respond to the possibility of future war, signaled by the Berlin Blockade and the signing of the NATO agreement in 1949, as well as the outbreak of war in Korea in 1950. They situate Jorn’s “no man’s land” in its broader signification of the space between fronts on a battlefield or between militarized national borders. When Atkins asked Jorn about *Stalingrad*, Jorn replied:

> Until 1950 I believed in the reality of the Cold War confrontation. I painted *The Pact of the Predators* in 1950 to symbolize the pact of the NATO powers. After 1950 the consequences of nuclear war surpassed the human imagination and could no longer be expressed in pictorial terms. The same is true of the Battle of Stalingrad.\(^80\)

In fact, Jorn’s “War Visions” anticipate Stalingrad’s negation of representation in significant ways. At the time, Jorn was living in poverty with his wife and three children in Suresnes, outside Paris, suffering from malnutrition and soon to be diagnosed with tuberculosis and transported to the sanatorium in Denmark where he would remain for almost two years. For Atkins, who considered these “dark paintings” an artistic failure, “it is impossible to consider them outside the context of the personal crisis of which they are a direct expression.”\(^81\)

Unfortunately, this biographical analysis has foreclosed other possible readings, in which their implosion of aesthetic signification takes on vital meaning.

*Pact of the Predators* (*Rovdyrpagten*) is a tragicomic painting of two or more inter-

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78. According to Palmer, when escalating costs threatened the panorama project, the organizers rejected outright a suggestion to replace the painting with a cinematic panorama. Ibid., p. 394.
80. Jorn, quoted in *Asger Jorn: The Crucial Years*, p. 49.
twin, barely discernible monstrous creatures engaged in a battle to the death. Jorn
advised Constant at the time of his desire to depict “the essence of struggles among
men by means of primitive, simple, fantastic beasts” in order to “arrive at symbols
common to all.”

No human presence, neither iconic representation nor indexical
presence by means of a coherent gesture, stands for an appropriate emotional
response here. Instead, cartoonlike figures Jorn called “aganaks”—“ribby, scaly, leath-
ery or bristly low-slung creatures”—embody what appears to be a struggle with the
material of painting itself.

The visceral image envisions the NATO pact as a brutally aggressive
move rather than a defensive shield, as the U.S.
claimed.

Taken to this visual extreme, however,
angst becomes comic, fulfilling Jorn’s recom-
mandation to “make oneself ludicrous in order to
transform the ludicrous . . . into wisdom.”

This battle results in a blackout of representation itself
in a crude heap of scribbled marks, a prequel to
the monumental whiteout of Stalingrad. The
destruction of the image already indicates a loss of
confidence in its potential to convey the scale of
political events and their dissemination via a series
of new lens-based imaging technologies. The domi-
nance of black in this period of Jorn’s work, in fact,
coincides with a turn to black-and-white imagery in

Abstract Expressionism, which has been productively read as a reference to news
imagery and a crisis in the depiction of historical events on canvas that supersedes
the artists’ individual problems.

Both the American artists and the Danish
Helhøsten group saw the reduced palette of Picasso’s Guernica as a reaction to a poli-
tical catastrophe filtered through the mass media and signified by shades of white,
grey, and black.

The related 1950 History Pictures (Historiebilleder) point to Jorn’s interest in
history painting as a mixing of fiction and truth, an idiosyncratic perspective on
events that makes history more like memory. These are dark, friezelike pictures of

Sørensen and Jette Skovbjerg (Copenhagen: Søren Fogtdal, 2001), p. 301. He associated the use of fan-
tastic or monstrous symbolic imagery with popular illustration (Grandville and Walt Disney), social
satire (Swift and Holberg), fantastic painting traditions (Bosch and Brueghel), and Viking and non-
Western art. See also the discussion in Andersen, Asger Jorn: en biografi, vol. 1, p. 200.
83. For Jorn’s description of aganaks, see Guy Atkins, Asger Jorn (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 34.
85. Jorn, undated letter to Constant, Museum Jorn archives, quoted in Andersen, Asger Jorn: en
biografi, vol. 1, p. 198.
aggressive, monstrous forms that trample upon each other, surging toward the edges of the canvas. Jorn describes his 1949 *Nelson Orders the Bombardment of Copenhagen, 1807* as painted “under the whole tense international atmosphere of war at the time.”88 An indignant reader of the Danish newspaper *Information* pointed out after seeing the work that Nelson in fact had died in 1805; he had also never actually ordered the bombardment of the city.89 Jorn defended the historical inaccuracies, asserting that “history is more for our time, and . . . realism in art is that which lives today. My Nelson picture was thus an actual picture from the moment when the NATO pact was signed, a little souvenir, if you will.”90 He thus suggests that history exists only in relation to memory in the present. He also directly connected the picture to the possibility of nuclear war, joking that if the Danish Admiral Vedel, a partisan of NATO, gave the order to bombard Copenhagen, then the picture’s title could be changed to *Admiral Vedel Orders the Bombardment of Copenhagen, 1967*. “I only linked a tall tale to Nelson,” Jorn claimed, acknowledging the way “history’s well-known figures become myths.”91 His History Pictures represent not history but rather its continual reinterpretation. They depict the process of recollection rather than the act of commemoration, suggesting memory with all its lapses, exaggerations, emotional distortions, and imaginary revisions.

Yet I do not suggest we label Jorn’s approach, or any modernist representation, “memory painting” rather than “history painting.” Such a term would imply something much more fugitive and ephemeral than Jorn’s painting. In significant ways Jorn’s history painting also refuses to adhere to practices typical of memory. As historian Henry Rousso observes, the recent interest in memory has obscured the critical dimension of history. Memory tends to either idealize or demonize the past, and sug-

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89. The British did, however, bombard the city, targeting civilians, for four days in 1807.
91. Ibid.
gests continuity rather than the rupture that inaugurates history. The meaning of Jorn’s history painting hinges on the recognition of a break with the past, a deliberate and conscious rupture with the normal procedures of memory and history. His is a critical history painting in that it addresses collective identification as a failure.

History and memory are perpetually intertwined, particularly in the case of the history of the present. Thus, it remains important to speak of what Rousso, following Halbwachs, terms “historical memory,” acknowledging both the critical, liberating dimension of rupture inherent to history and the subjective and experiential elements associated with memory. Would Stalingrad, then, be more aptly called “historical-memory painting”? The palimpsest of Jorn’s process suggests the continual writing and rewriting, remembering and reenvisioning, of history. Stalingrad represents the way history expresses collective identity in a manner that is overdetermined and ideological, as for example in the case of the nationalist discourses embodied in canonical history painting. As the work of Jacques-Louis David demonstrates, though, traditional history painting was never about an objective consideration of the past; it was always pointedly political and passionately subjective. In Mémoires, too, the outmoded status of history painting is addressed on two pages that reproduce traditional, militaristic history paintings (or engravings, the medium of their mass transmission): one of the Revolution, linked to the date 1793, and the other a scene from the Trojan War. The détournement of these images of

93. “Historical memory” would be directly opposed to “memorial history,” or memorial as history, the monumental commemorative practices proposing a collective and morally unambiguous public response exemplified in the artwork of Christian Boltanski or Krzysztof Wodiczko.
epoch-defining battles reveals them as dogmatic rather than objective, suggesting that they represent the hegemonic collective memory in the guise of history. Yet the authoritarian aesthetic of history painting—its monumentality, its one-way collective address, its cultural nationalism in the name of the state—parallels the mainstream representation of history in the broadcast media that has rendered it outmoded.

*History, Documentary, and Subjectivity*

Photographic practices slowly replaced history painting in the modern period, and are in obvious ways responsible for the demise of the genre. The response to photography, a practice conceived as having some relationship to objective “truth,” continually evolved in relation to different technologies. As Nora relates: “Modern memory is first of all archival. It relies entirely on the specificity of the trace, the materiality of the vestige, the concreteness of the recording, the visibility of the image. The process that began with writing has reached its culmination in high-fidelity recording.” 94 Painting’s role in relation to history is no longer to present it, but rather to reflect on its (now photographic) presentations. 95 In the wake of an explosion of newsreels as part of the war effort, documentary representations of history delivered in the cinema, in a universal voice to a mass audience, were far more important than any depiction of memory in the 1950s. Such newsreels operated between propaganda and documentary, but they were called “fact films” in the U.S. at the time, signifying their privileged relationship to historical truth. 96 Documentary films of current events also dominated the war years and the two years after the Liberation in France, but in the 1950s few films, documentary or fiction, were made about the war. 97 Jorn’s obliteration of the imagery in *Stalingrad* around 1958 calls to mind the postwar withdrawal of cinematic imagery of the war, and by extension the absence of current representations of contemporary acts of military violence by the state, such as the torture and suppression taking place in Algeria. The painting signifies through negation the innumerable photographic and motion-picture images that suppress ongoing acts of violence in favor of entertaining spectacles. The negation of these documentary images disperses, like static, any specific collective memory of WWII into the endless circulation of signifiers for other catastrophes that makes each event less meaningful in the spectacular system. As the Situationists insisted, this “system” was explicitly social, not technological, enforcing what constitutes history and public memory.

95. For a discussion of this in relation to contemporary painting, see David Joselit, “Painting Beside Itself,” *October* 130 (Fall 2009), pp. 125–34.
In 1972, less than a year before his death, Jorn worked on *Stalingrad* again. He said that he wanted to “paint bullets on it” as if the canvas had been raked with machine-gun fire, after seeing a television documentary on the battle of Stalingrad. The burned-out houses with their empty black windows shown in the video made a strong impression on Jorn, and he wanted to “bring it closer to its title.”98 Jorn clearly responded to the strong visual impression produced by the imagery of the battle, the stark contrasts of black burned-out windows in the monumental white walls of ruined buildings and snowy landscape, as seen in the many anonymous pho-

99. Helle Brøns also makes this connection in Brøns, *Asger Jorn*, p. 75.
register the ineffectualness of representing a traumatic event when the viewer’s reaction is predetermined and/or itself ineffectual.

Jorn’s final additions are thus in direct dialogue with documentary. Although Jorn fails to theorize the potential for subversion within documentary practice, he implicitly critiques its failure as a medium of memory precisely because of its privileged relation to objectivity. At the time of *Stalingrad*’s conception, Resnais was reframing the relationship between documentary and truth in the landmark films *Night and Fog* and *Hiroshima mon amour*. As Emma Wilson observes, the visual aesthetics of *Night and Fog*, with its imagery of piled corpses and the disorienting textures of marsh water and human remains, are extraordinarily concerned with the haptic, a sensory presence that impedes the observer’s vision and thus understanding.100 *Stalingrad*, by contrast, is perhaps the least haptic of Jorn’s normally vibrant surfaces, its abraded surface emphasizing the monumentality of its visual field, which evokes a wall or a screen. Resnais and Jorn suggest complementary strategies of interrogating the relationship between the photographic image and collective memory. Where Resnais destabilizes the assumption of truth in—or productive emotional response to—documentary imagery, Jorn raises the same questions in regard to painting, setting painting in direct dialogue with photographic media and history. *Stalingrad* depicts historical imagery as continually evolving, subject to periodic concealment, recoding, or reappearance depending on changing social needs, with a complexity approaching that of the time-based practices that now replace painting as the primary mediators of contemporary events.

In *Stalingrad* Jorn resists not only the assumption of truth that privileges documentary practices as representations of history, but also the very conventions of appropriate emotional response to historical events. At the same time, Jorn *détourns* the Abstract Expressionist gestural painting by superimposing it with the monumental imagery of history that it disavows. His painting complements *Mémoires* in developing a Situationist understanding of the suppression of history in modernist painting and the institutional co-optation of memory in the rhetoric of fact and universality that characterized the postwar approach to documentary. Both *Stalingrad* and *Mémoires* convey meaning dialogically, rejecting the one-way address of history painting, mainstream documentary practices, expressionist abstraction, and the memoir. These two works made early in Jorn and Debord’s friendship operate in the no man’s land after the end of expressionist responses to history, before the onset of the memory industry with its obsession with personal testimonial. Each strives in its own way for a new form of personal heroism and monumentality: *Stalingrad* with an almost Debordian seriousness unique in Jorn’s oeuvre, the *Mémoires* with Jorn’s more typical playfulness and humor, elements rarely encountered in the later work of Debord.

100. Wilson, “Material Remains: *Night and Fog*,” p. 109. The SI praised *Hiroshima mon amour* not for opening up questions of memory but for its radical form, specifically the predominance of sound over image that would also strongly mark Debord’s later films. “*Le cinéma après Alain Resnais*,” pp. 8–9.