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Julian Eagles

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The Spectacle and Détournement: The Situationists’ Critique of Modern Capitalist Society

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The rise of the so-called ‘anti-globalization’ movement saw a renewed interest, amongst some sections of this movement, in the ideas of the Situationists. The Situationists developed a global critique of modern capitalist society. With this in mind, this article assesses the coherence of the Situationists’ critique as a global theory of social change. In the article I examine the Situationists’ concept of the spectacle by undertaking an ‘immanent critique’. The article argues that a tension exists between the two central claims of Situationist theory: that modern capitalist society, compared with capitalist society prior to its emergence as ‘the spectacle’, has stronger powers of domination and mystification; and, that proletarian revolution is highly likely to take place against spectacular society. It is suggested that, within the framework of Situationist theory, this tension can be lessened provided proletarian revolution is considered as a process that is not entirely spontaneous. Further, it is argued that, if Situationist theory is to account not only for a transient ‘proletarian revolution’, but also for the possibility of a revolution that endures, then a (nonspectacular) revolutionary avant-garde would need to be conceptualized as an organization that intervenes more than the Situationists suggest.

Keywords: Spectacle; Situationists; Debord; Vaneigem; Alienation; Consumption; Freud’s Theory of the Instincts; Proletarian Revolution; Détournement

This article examines the Situationists’ concept of the spectacle. I consider the following central claims of Situationist theory: (1) that modern capitalist society,
compared with capitalist society prior to its emergence as ‘the spectacle’, has stronger powers of domination and mystification; and (2) that proletarian revolution is highly likely to take place against spectacular society. The article is divided into three sections. In the first section, I present a brief outline of the Situationists’ concept of the spectacle prior to Guy Debord’s formulation of an ‘integrated spectacle’. In the second section, I discuss how spectacular society functions. In the third section, I examine the issue of resistance to the spectacle.

I

The Situationists argued that capitalist society had become a society of the spectacle. With the rise of the spectacle, a new stage of capitalist development had begun. Capitalist society had reached a stage of economic development whereby a post-capitalist society could now be created, a society communist in orientation, and based around the orderly, and yet free, development of playful activities.3

The essential feature of the spectacle is the rule of the commodity form over lived experience.4 This came about as the productive forces developed under capitalism, giving rise to economic growth. An economy of shortage was transformed into an economy of abundance. In this context the commodity came to dominate areas of social life where, hitherto, it was absent.5 It is at the point in history when ‘the commodity completes its colonization of social life’,6 that the Situationists consider spectacular society emerges.
There are two forms of spectacle, the concentrated and the diffuse—although Debord did revise this in the 1980s with his notion of an ‘integrated spectacle.’ The diffuse spectacle ‘is associated with the abundance of commodities, with the undisturbed development of modern capitalism.’ The societies that most readily fit this description are the industrially advanced capitalist societies of the West. In the concentrated spectacle commodity production is less well developed, and capitalism is highly bureaucractized. The societies that fit this description include the so-called ‘communist’ societies (such as in the USSR and the Eastern bloc, China and Cuba), Fascist regimes in industrially advanced societies—during ‘moments of crisis’—as well as various societies in the underdeveloped world. With these two forms of spectacle, the Situationists declared all societies around the world to be dominated by the spectacle–commodity economy.

Debord argues that, prior to the emergence of spectacular society, there was a ‘spectacular aspect’ to separate or hierarchical power within human societies that had established a social division of labour and had formed classes. This spectacular aspect concerns religion and its imagery. Religion is the ‘outcome’ of a socially divided world. It is the projection of human beings’ ‘own powers’ into another world—heaven. These exiled human powers then return to dominate human beings in an alien form, God, and this alien power justifies hierarchy and social division in the real world. Debord suggests that, before the emergence of spectacular society, the ‘frozen … imagery’ of religion—including, presumably, its visual imagery—offered the materially impoverished masses ‘an imaginary compensation’ in the form of a mythical paradise in heaven.

For the Situationists, the society of the spectacle arose in the 1920s. At this time modern capitalist society had a level of technological development that enabled the ‘religious mists’ to descend to earth in the form of the spectacle. As Debord writes:

The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion…. The absolute denial of life, in the shape of a fallacious paradise, is no longer projected onto the heavens, but finds its place instead within material life itself.

Workers, in the capitalist production process, have their powers ‘snatched’ from them; they create an abundance of products which come back to dominate
them in an alien form—that is, as commodities. Furthermore, spectacular society, which is socially divided, achieves an illusory unity as it appears as a community in which all human beings, through the consumption of commodified goods and reified roles, can attain total fulfillment. Indeed, the power of this illusion stems from material reality, in that the majority of individuals, according to the Situationists, are affluent enough to consume the mass-produced spectacular goods and roles now on offer. Spectacular society, nevertheless, is a society in which people cannot achieve genuine self-realization. It is, for Debord, ‘separation perfected’.  

II

The Situationists argue that the ‘everyday life’ of workers has become transformed as a result of modern capitalism’s development of a system of mass consumption. Wage-workers, they suggest, have become ‘worker-consumers’. In a society in which ‘economic necessity’ becomes replaced ‘by the necessity of boundless economic development’, ‘the satisfaction of primary human needs’ becomes replaced ‘by a ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs’. The productive forces have reached such a level of development that the material abundance created, although solving ‘the basic problem of survival’, does so ‘in such a way that it is not disposed of, but is rather forever cropping up again at a higher level’. A ‘realm of augmented survival’ arises which remains bound to the ‘old poverty’, in that the ‘vast majority’ have to participate as wage-workers to have their basic needs met—such as food and shelter—and yet goes beyond it as, in a society awash with commodities, ‘alienated consumption is added to alienated production as an inescapable duty of the masses’. In other words, for capital accumulation

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17 Ibid., para 31.
18 As regards the distinction between commodity fetishism and reification, Adam Schaff lucidly comments on this as follows: ‘The categories “fetishism” and “reification” are organically linked with each other; are, in fact, different expressions of the same social relationship which consists in the obscuring of relations between persons by the relation of things. The theory of fetishism declares that the commodity takes on the traits of a fetish when the value-relation appears on the surface as a relation between commodities and not between the persons creating these commodities whose labour is the basis of the exchange value of the commodity. The theory of reification proclaims that relations between people appear on the surface as relations between things and in this sense become “reified”. Both theories speak about the same thing, with the difference that the theory of fetishism deals with this relation from the aspect of the commodity-thing which assumes a human trait alien to it and becomes a type of fetish; the theory of reification approaches this same relationship from the aspect of relations between persons which have been endowed with a thing-like character, which have been reified’ (Adam Schaff, Alienation as a Social Phenomenon (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1980), pp. 80–81).
23 Ibid., para 40.
24 Ibid., para 47.
25 Ibid., para 42.
to continue the vast majority must participate, to a greater extent than had hitherto been the case, in the system of consumption.\textsuperscript{26}

For the Situationists, spectacular society can reproduce itself provided the masses consume the huge range of commodities (both goods and roles) on offer to them. It is through their consumption of spectacular commodities, that individuals become passive spectators of their own lives. Both goods—such as, ‘cars, refrigerators, TVs’\textsuperscript{27}—and roles—such as ‘citizen, parent, sexual partner . . ., consumer’\textsuperscript{28}—are intimately linked to visual images that depict each particular good or role as ‘the totality of the commodity world’.\textsuperscript{29} The Situationists term alienated goods and roles linked with images, ‘image-objects’\textsuperscript{30} Although visual images—whether in the form of news, advertising, cinema or television\textsuperscript{31}—depict ‘what society \textit{can deliver} . . . within this depiction what is permitted is rigidly distinguished from what is possible’.\textsuperscript{32} As spectacular society actually has the ‘economic infrastructure’ upon which a ‘grandiose possible development . . . could be based’,\textsuperscript{33} genuine self-realization for all, according to the Situationists, is a possibility here and now. Spectacular images, however, depict an affluent \textit{commodified} world; a world within which individuals can supposedly, but not actually, attain the fulfilment of their desires.\textsuperscript{34}

Now Debord claims that ‘[t]he spectacle is money one can only look at’.\textsuperscript{35} For the Situationists, spectacular images are an ‘abstract representation’ of the totality of the commodity world, a world where exchange-value has increasingly come to dominate use-value.\textsuperscript{36} Spectacular images act as a general equivalent of commodities; they are an abstract representation of a world colonized by alienated goods and roles. In a sense, spectacular images act like money—as a general equivalent—but their role as a ‘currency’ does not involve a quantitative measure of labour. As each spectacular

\textsuperscript{26} In \textit{The Revolution of Everyday Life} Vaneigem quotes what he believes to be an apposite remark by General Eisenhower: ‘To save the economy, we must buy, buy anything’ (1994, p. 67).
\textsuperscript{27} Knabb (ed.), \textit{Situationist International Anthology}, 2006, op. cit., p. 121.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p. 159.
\textsuperscript{29} Debord, \textit{The Society of the Spectacle}, 1995, op. cit., para 49.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., \textit{The Society of the Spectacle}, 1995, op. cit., para 15.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, para 6; Vaneigem, op. cit., p. 128.
\textsuperscript{34} This is not to suggest that the Situationists believe all images are false. To quote Debord: ‘The reigning deceptions of the time are on the point of making us forget that the truth may also be found in images. An image that has not been deliberately separated from its meaning adds great precision and certainty to knowledge’ (Guy Debord, \textit{Panegyric Volumes 1 \& 2}, transl. James Brook and John McHale (London: Verso, 2004 [1989]), p. 73).
\textsuperscript{35} Debord, \textit{The Society of the Spectacle}, 2004, op. cit., para 49.
\textsuperscript{36} Debord, \textit{The Society of the Spectacle}, 1995, op. cit., paras 46, 47, 48, 49; Knabb (ed.), \textit{Situationist International Anthology}, 2006, op. cit., p. 136. Note that for Marx exchange-value is the form of appearance of value, and abstract labour is the substance of value. Abstract labour refers to ‘human labour in general’ (Karl Marx, \textit{Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One} (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990 [1867]), p. 142), which is represented in commodities—’their common quality’ (ibid.), and enables each commodity to exchange with other commodities as equivalents.
image makes visible ‘the totality of the commodity world . . . in one piece,’ each (spectacular) image has, it seems, something in common with other images; that is, ‘whatever society as a whole can be and do.’ In other words, spectacular images have the power to invert the particular role or good with which they are associated into a thing that can supposedly offer the consumer the totality of the spectacle’s commodities and allow him or her to attain complete or total fulfilment. However, when an individual actually consumes an image-object he or she finds that the role or good does not bring about the realization of his or her desires and dreams; at this moment the individual experiences ‘disillusionment.’ Yet the spectacle has, it seems, the power to manipulate real desires and influence the individual to consume further commodities.

In *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, Vaneigem claims that ‘[i]nauthentic life feeds on authentically felt desires.’ Vaneigem alludes here to the idea that spectacular society reproduces itself, in part, by drawing strength, in some way, from the pleasurable passions or real desires of the individual. Debord may also be referring to such an idea when he writes: ‘Of arms and the man the spectacle does not sing, but rather of passions and the commodity.’ In this connection, Vaneigem remarks that ‘[p]leasure is the principle of unification.’ Further, he suggests that the ‘pleasure-principle, is the lifeblood of every attempt to realise oneself’ and that the individual can attain self-realization through the passions of creativity, play and love. However, he notes that when ‘[i]solated, the three passions are perverted.’ With this in mind, I think it can be said that, for the Situationists, the spectacle is able to perpetuate itself through manipulating the individual’s desire to experience pleasure.

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38 Ibid., para 49.
40 Vaneigem, op. cit., pp. 81, 191; Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1995 and 2004, op. cit., para 69. There is, however, one role, that is above all other roles, which gives access to the whole realm of consumption and appears to bring forth total fulfilment; this is the role of the consumption celebrity. By identifying with stars of consumption, people live vicariously through them and attain some compensation for their fragmented lives (Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1995 and 2004, op. cit., paras 60, 61).
42 Vaneigem, op. cit., p. 138.
45 Vaneigem, op. cit., p. 252.
46 Vaneigem, op. cit., chap. 23. I think the Situationists’ claim that inauthentic life in spectacular society feeds on authentically felt desires rests upon a conception of human nature which, to some extent, follows that put forward by Marx. The Situationists, following Marx, outline an ‘essentialist’ element to the nature of human beings—the need for food and shelter as well as the capacities for creativity and love. That said, the Situationists’ remarks concerning the human ‘essence’ go beyond Marx given that they add the capacity to play as an aspect of human nature. In this regard, I think the Situationists assume that play becomes modified in different historical periods; that is to say, they believe the activity of play is not fixed throughout history. For a discussion of the issue of Marx and human nature see Ian Forbes, *Marx and the New Individual* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), pp. 41–53.
47 Vaneigem, op. cit., p. 237.
Vaneigem writes that while creativity and play have been blighted by prohibitions and by every sort of distortion, love, without escaping from repression, still remains relatively the freest and most easily accessible experience.48

What I think Vaneigem is suggesting here is that love, compared with the passions of creativity and play, is less vulnerable to recuperation (co-option); furthermore, this implies that the spectacle is able to manipulate, to a greater extent, creativity and play.49 I would suggest, then, that it is by stimulating, and then modifying, the (pleasurable) real desires of the individual to create, play and—to a lesser extent—love, that the spectacle generates false desires50 that influence the individual to consume spectacular roles and goods continually. For the Situationists, as I noted earlier, each commodity is intimately linked with images. Further, as Vaneigem and Debord allude to a linkage between desires and commodities, this suggests an assumption that images act to stimulate passions or real desires. In addition, as Vaneigem makes reference to the ‘pleasure-principle’,51 this suggests a Situationist belief that human passions operate in accordance with the Freudian pleasure-principle. Taking the above Situationist beliefs and assumptions into consideration, then, I think the following can be argued: that individuals consume alienated roles and goods repeatedly as the spectacle continually stimulates, although then represses, their passions or desires to create, play and love. That is to say, the passions of individuals undergo a type of repression as they are ‘rechannelled ... in roles’ or in the consumption of goods;52 and, such goods and roles frustrate genuine self-realization.53

What the spectacle achieves, then, through its manipulation of the individual’s desire to experience pleasure—given Vaneigem’s claim that pleasure is the principle of unification—is an illusory unity. To quote Debord: ‘The spectacle ... unites what is separate, but it unites it only in its separateness’.54 Yet to what extent can spectacular society manipulate and control the desires of human beings?

If we consider that the Situationists claim that the spectacle ‘cannot totally reify people [as] ... it also needs to make them act and participate, without which
the production and consumption of reification would come to a stop', then it seems that there are limits as to the extent to which the spectacle can control the passions of individuals (see Section III). Indeed, the Situationists believe that proletarians retain the ability to become critical of, and rebel against, the spectacle. They argue that proletarians are not deeply integrated into spectacular society, and give a range of examples of rebellious activity to illustrate this, such as wildcat strikes and the actions of juvenile delinquents. Moreover, after the events of 1968 in France, Viénet claimed that ‘if the revolutionary crisis of May showed anything it was precisely the opposite of Marcuse’s theses: that the proletariat had not been integrated, and is the major revolutionary force in modern society’. So, although the Situationists, like Marcuse, consider that modern capitalist society reproduces itself, in part, through manipulating the instincts of individuals, they nevertheless also suppose, unlike Marcuse, that proletarians are not deeply integrated into this society.

The central thrust of Situationist theory, I think, suggests that a spectacular society is one in which the vast majority of the population experience controlled pleasure within a significant part of their lives—that is, within almost all areas of their lives outside work. For the Situationists, workers are alienated in the realm of production and labour is an activity that is not pleasurable. In addition to this the spectacle alienates people in the realm of consumption. Yet outside the domain of work people are alienated in such a way that, in their leisure time, they experience

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55 Knabb (ed.), Situationist International Anthology, 2006, op. cit., p. 106. This claim is made in an unsigned article in the magazine Internationale situationniste. I assume that unsigned articles express the collective view of the Situationist group.

56 René Viénet was a member of the Situationist International from 1963 to 1971.


59 What I think the Situationists allude to, when they refer to spectacular society harnessing the pleasurable passions of creativity, play and love—so that individuals can experience ‘pseudo-gratification’ (Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, 1995, op. cit., para 59)—is that the spectacle manipulates the sexual instinctual drive.

60 Situationist theory, I think, alludes to the notion that it is the allure of pleasure in the realm of consumption that adds to the mystification of workers when in the domain of work—wage labour. As regards the idea that labour is not pleasurable, I think the Situationists believe that to the extent any labour would remain to be undertaken in a post-capitalist society, it could not become fully pleasurable and creative; and, hence, could not be transformed into the activity of real play—for further details, see my PhD thesis. J. Eagles, ‘Situationist Theory: its origins, concepts and place in modern European thought’ (PhD thesis, London School of Economics, 2005).

61 The Situationists took the concept of alienation from Karl Marx—see the ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts’ of 1844 (Early Writings (London: Penguin, 1992 [1974])); they also adopted his related concept of commodity fetishism outlined in Capital Volume One (Marx, Capital, op. cit., chap. 1). They took another related concept, reification, from George Lukács—see History and Class Consciousness (London: Merlin Press, 1983 [1923]). Lukács argued that it is only proletarians at the point of material production who are in a position to contest reification (ibid., pp. 171–172; Andrew Feenberg, Lukács, Marx, and the Sources of Critical Theory (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986 [1981]), pp. 161–162; Andrew Arato and Paul Breines, The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism (London: Pluto Press, 1979), p. 134). The Situationists, however, maintain that reification can be contested by proletarians (both worker-consumers and socially marginalized groups) whether within or outside the sphere of work.
(controlled) pleasure through the consumption of commodified goods and roles. In so far as proletarians adopt spectacular roles and consume goods, they become distracted from developing an awareness of their real desires.\(^62\)

Let us now consider what relevance this has to the societies of the concentrated spectacle, which are, according to the Situationists, less materially affluent, and in which the spectacle’s rule is, in part, perpetuated by a personality cult of the ‘absolute star’ and the violence of the police.\(^63\) It could be argued that the concentrated spectacle functions to some extent through harnessing the (real) desires of individuals to create, play and (to a lesser extent) love. Yet given that the concentrated spectacle has a less highly developed system of consumption, there are fewer commodified goods and roles on offer for the masses to consume in their leisure time than in the more industrially advanced societies. Thus the concept of spectacle begins to look rather stretched in its concentrated form.

That said, I think it is to some extent possible—within the terms of Situationist theory—to stabilize the concept of spectacle with respect to the less industrially developed societies. It could be suggested that the concentrated spectacle, in addition to manipulating the sexual instinctual drive, also manipulates the individual’s instinct for self-preservation to help reproduce itself. If we assume that the Situationists (given what they have to say about Freud) accept Freud’s earlier dualistic model of the instincts—namely, a self-preservation instinct and a sexual instinct\(^64\)—then it could be argued that the regimes of the concentrated spectacle reproduce themselves, in part, by publicizing various threats to the individual (especially via images). The feeling of fear that these threats (whether supposed or real) generate within the individual is then soothed as each regime also purports to offer each individual protection, for instance, from subversive enemies within society.\(^65\) In this way, the proletarian individual’s vital instinctual impulse of self-preservation is stimulated such that the individual is made to feel extremely fearful or anxious about some threat to his or her existence. In turn, as the threat is lifted, the individual is relieved of the pain or unpleasure produced by an increase in instinctual tension.

In this connection, the Situationists argue that at the global level the concentrated and diffuse forms of spectacle are ‘mutually reinforcing’,\(^66\) and, it seems that fear

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64 Vaneigem suggests that Freud made a ‘mistake’ with his later formulation of a death instinct (op. cit., 1994, p. 162).

65 Debord maintains that the concentrated spectacle’s bureaucratic economy ‘must be enforced by permanent violence’ (Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, 2004, op. cit., para 64); I think this implies that fear assists with the reproduction of the concentrated spectacle. Furthermore, Vaneigem remarks that ‘a whole spectacle is organised around particular sufferings’, such as ‘asylums and prisons’, so that ‘those whose fear of going in there makes them rejoice to be on the outside’ (op. cit., 1994, p. 47); I think the implication here is that fear plays some role in the functioning of spectacular society—whether, it seems, in its concentrated or diffuse forms.

assists with the functioning of the spectacle at this level. For example, Debord suggests that

[the bureaucratic regimes in power in certain industrialised countries have their own particular type of spectacle, but it is an integral part of the total spectacle, serving as its pseudo-opposition and actual support.]

In other words, as the authoritarian ‘communist’ regimes appeared as the alternative to diffuse spectacular societies, the individuals within the diffuse spectacle could easily be persuaded to be fearful of the alternative society and become ‘relieved’ that they lived under the protection of diffuse spectacular regimes.

Yet even if the concept of spectacle can become more stable in relation to the less developed societies, through the manipulation of the self-preservation instinct, such a concept cannot encompass the possibility of the total revolutionary transformation of modern capitalist society without an assumption of material abundance. Let me explain.

I think the broad thrust of the Situationists’ theory—whilst the Situationist group remained in existence—points towards the notion that the spectacle manages to reproduce itself, outside of the realm of work (in large part), through the manipulation of the individual’s pleasurable passions or desires—to create, play and love—which derive from the sexual instinct. In this regard, the Situationists imply that the materially affluent diffuse form of spectacle, given that it has a more developed system of mass consumption, manipulates the individual’s sexual instinctual drive to a greater extent than the concentrated spectacle, in order to perpetuate itself. The Situationists believe that each individual can attain self-realization through the passions of creativity, play and love; they also assume, I think, that a complete self-realization requires that humankind make full use of its available technology and productive capacities. It is, therefore, only in a spectacular society which produces an abundance of commodities—in which the vast majority of individuals, in almost all areas of their lives outside work, have their passions harnessed for the consumption of spectacular goods and roles—that genuine self-realization for all becomes a possibility. In other words, it is only in a materially abundant spectacular society that proletarians are in a position to transform the (controlled) pleasures of the spectacle into genuine pleasures—through the technique of détournement—so that a post-spectacular society could be created. That is to say, a society where all individuals would be able to achieve a genuine realization of their passions to create, play and love.

So, although the Situationists, as we have seen, claim that the spectacle is a concept that encompasses all societies around the world—and to some extent (within the terms of Situationist theory) this can be considered the case—I think this

68 Debord also suggests that as the ‘global alliance of pseudo-socialist bureaucracies’ starts to disintegrate, the bourgeoisie in the diffuse spectacular societies begins to lose a pillar of its support (ibid., para 111).
concept has most explanatory power vis-à-vis the industrially advanced societies (see below).

III

Let us now consider how the Situationists deal with the issue of resistance to the spectacle. The Situationists argue that the spectacle constitutes the entirety of modern capitalist society, incorporating everything from production, to consumption, to the city environment to the spectacle’s potential gravediggers—the proletariat. They maintain that the proletariat ‘is tending to encompass virtually everybody’,70 it is made up of wage labourers (both blue and white collar) as well as marginalized groups such as students, youth and the lumpenproletariat.71 For the Situationists, then, the spectacle’s potential opponents are actually a part of the spectacle.

Now from what has been argued so far, it can be seen that a tension exists between the two central claims of Situationist theory. To recapitulate, these claims are: (1) that modern capitalist society, compared with capitalist society prior to its emergence as ‘the spectacle’, has stronger powers of domination and mystification; and (2) that proletarian revolution72 is highly likely to take place against spectacular society. However, can a way be found—within the framework of Situationist theory—to lessen the tension between these two claims so that Situationist theory can account not only for a transient ‘proletarian revolution’ (such as the May 1968 uprising in France), but also for the possibility of a revolution that endures?

Before addressing this question, I must clarify what the Situationists mean by the following: the spectacle’s power of recuperation (co-option); the technique of détournement; and proletarian revolution.

The Situationists claim that radical criticism is vulnerable to recuperation. Recuperation refers to the power the spectacle has to absorb radical criticism; once absorbed, ‘criticism’ then acts to strengthen spectacular society. One way in which this takes place is through the use of revolutionary ideas in advertising. Vaneigem alludes to the idea that advertisements tap the ‘deeply-felt revolutionary desires’ of the (proletarian) individual (to create, play and love) to encourage him or her to buy commodities.73 For instance, he cites the example of Watney’s Red Barrel beer being sold ‘under the slogan “The Red Revolution is

70 Ibid., p. 111.

71 Just how broad the Situationists’ concept of the proletariat is, becomes clear in the following passage: ‘In the context of the reality presently beginning to take shape, we may consider as proletarians all people who have no possibility of altering the social space–time that the society allots to them (regardless of variations in their degree of affluence or chances for promotion). The rulers are those who organize this space time, or who at least have a significant margin of personal choice’ (Knabb (ed.), Situationist International Anthology, 2006, op. cit., p. 141). I think that the Situationists do not, however, consider the peasantry to be a part of the proletariat (Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, 1995, op. cit., para 114).

72 The Situationists—in general—consider that proletarian revolution will take place against a ‘well-functioning capitalist economy’ (Vienet, op. cit., p. 121).

73 Vaneigem, op. cit., p. 168.
Coming”.

Now, given that, for the spectacle to draw strength from the individual’s (real) desires, it must stimulate such desires, it appears that it is in this way that dissent may be generated; and any dissent, in turn, becomes vulnerable to being taken up and utilized to strengthen the spectacle once again.

Indeed, the Situationists argue that the stakes are high for the spectacle when it recuperates dissent. The absorption of radical criticism is not free from risk as proletarians may reclaim the authentic meaning of the spectacle’s distorted ‘revolutionary’ propaganda. Although the spectacle has the power to absorb criticism, the incorporation of dissent is somewhat precarious as recuperated criticism can be retrieved through the technique of *détournement*.

*Détournement* involves taking elements—such as images and phrases—and rearranging them into ‘new combinations’ that challenge their previous meaning—the meaning now being drawn from the new context. *Détournement* retrieves the original meaning of the element(s) and in the process creates something that is subversive. Thus, elements of the spectacle can be commandeered as they are playfully rearranged to contest the meaning of the spectacle’s propaganda.

Prior to the emergence of the Situationists, various avant-garde groups, such as Dada and the Surrealists, had developed techniques to challenge the notion of art, artistic creativity and bourgeois culture in general. Marcel Duchamp had presented ‘ready-made’ objects as works of art. Duchamp chose certain mass-produced objects and then placed them in an unfamiliar context. For example, he took a urinal and signed it ‘R. Mutt’; he entitled it ‘Fountain’ and entered this for an art exhibition in New York in 1917. Duchamp’s ready-mades acted as a challenge to existing assumptions about artistic creativity and originality. Taking inspiration from the Dadaist and Surrealist practice of decontextualizing commonplace objects, words and images, the Situationists practised this technique of *détournement* by, for example, taking well-known comic strips and diverting their meaning through the alteration of the words within them.

The Situationists also practised *détournement* in the urban environment. Just as the Dadaists and Surrealists had created playful forms of activity in the city in a quest to unify art and life, so the Situationists also sought, through play, to subvert the city environment and unify art and ‘everyday life’. The Situationists experimented with playful behaviour through the *dérive*.

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74 Vaneigem, op. cit., p. 168. Implicit in this example is the notion that it is through ‘proletarian revolution’ that the individual’s pleasurable (real) desires can be genuinely realized.
75 Vaneigem, op. cit., p. 168.
77 Ibid., p. 230.
80 Ades et al., op. cit., chap. 7.
In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.81

The dérive also serves as a means of ‘psychogeographical’ research. Those wandering the city, by taking conscious note of the specific effects of the geographical environment on their emotions and behaviour,82 can draw up maps delineating ‘zones of distinct psychic atmospheres’.83 Such maps can be utilized to plan a future city structure, a city within which the desires of each individual would be liberated and harmonized with those of all other individuals.84 The Situationists claim that, when a majority of proletarians practise détourment, through the construction of situations,85 spectacular society may be totally subverted; that is to say, ‘proletarian revolution’ threatens to overturn the spectacle completely.

The Situationists outline a broader conception of proletarian revolution compared with Marxist orthodoxy. Although they accept the classical Marxist notion of the seizure of control (and socialization) by the proletariat of the means of production, they also hold to a vision of human emancipation from other forms of power that classical Marxists consider more peripheral (for example, alienated consumption, images, the urban environment). For the Situationists, proletarian revolutions encompass ‘the abolition and the realization of art [which] are inseparable aspects of a single transcendence of art’.86 Specialized art will come to an end, and everyone will become an artist as ‘art’ becomes ‘the construction of a passionate life’.87

‘Proletarian revolutions’, they maintain, ‘will be festivals or nothing, for festivity is the very keynote of the life they announce.’88 Furthermore: ‘Play is the ultimate principle of this festival’.89

To return to the two central claims of Situationist theory mentioned above—that the spectacle has very strong powers of domination and mystification, and that proletarian revolution is highly likely to take place against spectacular society—I think an argument can be developed, based upon comments made by Vaneigem, which to some degree lessens the tension between these claims. In The Revolution

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82 Ibid., p. 52.
83 Ibid., p. 10.
84 Ibid., pp. 1–8, 38–39.
85 The Situationists suggest that constructed situations are ephemeral moments of life which are ‘designed to be lived by’ (Knabb (ed.), Situationist International Anthology, 2006, op. cit., pp. 40–42). They consider that, to the extent people consume the commodified goods and roles offered to them, they become passive spectators of their own lives. It is, however, through the construction of situations that people come to live life actively in accordance with their real desires.
89 Ibid., p. 429. This notion of rebellion as a playful festival has been taken up and utilized by some sections of the ‘anti-globalization’ movement; for instance, the street parties and carnivals against capitalism seen in the protests against international gatherings of world leaders—such as at G8, World Bank and EU summits.
Vaneigem suggests that the consumer society’s endeavour to co-opt human passions or desires leads to consciousness of human ‘creativity’ becoming strengthened before it then becomes repressed. As he writes:

Nobody, no matter how alienated, is without (or unaware of) an irreducible core of creativity, a camera obscura safe from intrusion from lies and constraints. If ever social organisation extends its control to this stronghold of humanity, its domination will no longer be exercised over anything save robots, or corpses. And, in a sense, this is why consciousness of creative energy increases, paradoxically enough, as a function of consumer society’s efforts to co-opt it.90

On my reading, the spectacle needs to harness the passions of individuals (to create, play and love) to reproduce itself. To co-opt these passions or desires the spectacle stimulates (real) desires and then subjects them to a repressive modification. It is when the desires of individuals are stimulated, but before they have yet to be co-opted, that consciousness of ‘creativity’ increases.

Therefore, if creative energy is within all human beings and it is from this that ‘spontaneity’, that is, détournement, can arise,91 and, if consciousness of this energy increases as the spectacle attempts to co-opt human creativity, that is, before it actually manages to co-opt it, then it is at this time that the possibility that détournement will occur increases. Yet détournement can only be realized if this greater awareness of the (proletarian) individual’s creativity leads him or her to practise détournement.

However, even if we assume that (proletarian) individuals can go beyond an enhanced awareness of their creativity and practise the technique of ‘subversion (détournement)’,92 does this mean that they also attain a revolutionary consciousness? Although I think the Situationists consider that a majority of proletarians in revolutionary moments have an enhanced awareness of their creative powers and practise détournement,93 I think they also suppose, particularly in their writings about the Watts riots of 1965 and the May 1968 rebellion in France,94 that those proletarians who manage to practise détournement may or may not attain a revolutionary (Situationist) consciousness. In their analysis of the May 1968 movement in France—which they considered the most serious proletarian uprising to challenge post-war capitalist society—the Situationists claim that this playful uprising showed that, although those in the movement expressed ‘[h]atred of coopters’, the movement ‘did not ... reach the theorectico-practical knowledge of how to get rid of them’.95

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91 I think that, when Vaneigem uses the term ‘spontaneity’ in chapter 20 of The Revolution of Everyday Life, he alludes to détournement.
92 Vaneigem, op. cit., p. 264.
93 Vaneigem, op. cit., p. 194.
94 For the Situationists’ analysis of the riots that took place in the Watts district of Los Angeles in 1965 see ‘The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy’ in Knabb (ed.) Situationist International Anthology, 2006, op. cit., pp. 194–203; for their analysis of the May 1968 uprising in France see ‘The Beginning of an Era’ in ibid., pp. 288–325 and Viêtet, op. cit.
Moreover, Viénet suggests that ‘[t]he great majority of the masses mobilized by the revolutionary crisis of May began to understand what they were living [emphasis added].’ The implication here is that the majority of those involved in the May 1968 movement had not attained an advanced—or put another way, highly developed—revolutionary consciousness. That said, I think the Situationists consider that at least some proletarians were able, during the uprising of 1968, to gain such a consciousness. With the above in mind, if we consider that the spectacle strives to recuperate dissent, then those proletarians who have an enhanced awareness of their creativity and practise détournement, but who fail to gain an advanced revolutionary consciousness, would be highly susceptible to the spectacle’s powers of recuperation.

How, then, could such proletarians (the majority of those in rebellion in 1968) attain a revolutionary consciousness to counter the recuperative power of the spectacle? For those who do manage to rebel against the spectacle, but who do not attain a highly developed revolutionary consciousness, it seems that this consciousness can be gained through the assistance of those who have managed to acquire such a consciousness—in other words through the intervention of an avant-garde revolutionary group.

So, if we consider that the Situationists assume that, where the spectacle is most powerful, in the most industrially advanced societies, it is compelled, to a greater extent than in less industrially developed societies, to stimulate desires (that is, increase proletarians’ consciousness of creativity) and then subject these desires to a repressive modification. Moreover, if we also consider—given what I argued previously—that Situationist theory implies that an avant-garde revolutionary group is required to assist most proletarians to gain a highly developed revolutionary consciousness, whether or not they have managed to go beyond an awareness of their creativity to practise détournement, then it appears possible, to some extent, to lessen the tension between the claim that spectacular society’s powers of domination and mystification are very strong and the claim that proletarian revolution is highly likely to take place against spectacular society.

96 Viénet, op. cit., p. 13.
97 Ibid., p. 13. To quote Viénet: ‘those who were able to develop the clearest consciousness recognized the total theory of the revolution as their own’.
98 Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, 1995, op. cit., paras 119–121; Vaneigem, op. cit., pp. 199, 273; Knabb (ed.), Situationist International Anthology, 2006, op. cit., pp. 112–113, 285–286, 380–382. At times, Vaneigem does make comments that, I think, are suggestive of the notion that proletarian revolution is a process that takes place in a purely spontaneous fashion; for example, he remarks in The Revolution of Everyday Life that ‘[t]he organisation of spontaneity will be the work of spontaneity itself’ (op. cit., p. 203). Now, these comments might appear to lessen the tension between the two central claims of Situationist theory (see above) so that the theory can account for the possibility of a revolution that endures. However, if we also take into account the Situationists’ analysis of the Watts riots of 1965 and the May 1968 uprising in France—as I believe we must, given the importance that the Situationists place on these rebellions within their thought—then the notion that proletarian revolution takes place in a purely spontaneous manner cannot be considered a way that stabilizes Situationist theory.
That said, assuming that those proletarians who practise détournement without having attained an advanced revolutionary consciousness will not necessarily turn towards a Situationist conception of revolution, and engage in a Situationist praxis—indeed could even perhaps turn to nationalist or religious beliefs—then the following question arises: is Situationist theory left in a position where it allows that détournement can be practised by those who may turn to and uphold values and ideals that are not actually against the spectacle?

To address this question, I shall now consider the case of the events of September 11 that took place in the USA in 2001. These events appear to have the characteristic features of détournement. In the most advanced capitalist society in the world, elements of the spectacle were rearranged—that is, aeroplanes were hijacked and used to destroy the World Trade Centre as well as attack the Pentagon—so that the spectacle was, it seems, diverted, not only where these events took place, but throughout the globe through the visual imagery of the mass media. Yet if those who carried out these suicide attacks were motivated by Islamic fundamentalism, it is clear that the values of this doctrine are antithetical to those of the Situationists. Although the Situationists did not deal with the issue of religious fundamentalism, a way in which the theory might deal with these events is as follows: those who carried out the 9/11 attacks could, I think, be considered to be spurious ‘revolutionaries’ engaged in a struggle for a ‘new’ form of spectacle. That said, these attacks on important centres (and symbols) of capitalist power nevertheless resemble détournement, if we make the assumption that the 9/11 events and the imagery associated with them presented an image of the capitalist world turned upside down. 99 To explore this further, let us consider what the Situationists have to say about those who practise détournement.

The Situationists’ writings are pervaded by an overwhelming optimism that proletarians will utilize the technique of détournement for the purposes of furthering a left-wing revolutionary (Situationist) praxis. The Situationists imply, at times, that détournement is a technique to be practised by those individuals who have acquired a highly developed revolutionary (Situationist) consciousness—that is, by a revolutionary avant-garde. At other times, however, they imply that détournement can be achieved by those who have not attained such a consciousness. For instance, the Situationists allude to the notion that the majority of proletarians involved in the 1968 uprising in France practised détournement through a ‘wildcat general strike’ and an ‘occupations movement . . . [which] . . . was a festival, a game’,100 even though

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99 T.J. Clark, who was briefly a member of the Situationist International, has, together with a number of other members of the ‘Retort’ group, written about the 9/11 events. Retort put forward ‘the notion . . . of September 11 as a moment of image-defeat’ (Retort, T.J. Clark et al., Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War (London: Verso, 2006 [2005]), p. 200). For further details see ibid. I shall not, however, in this article, discuss the assessment of 9/11 by Clark et al. given that they state that they depart from Debord and ‘[t]he version of “spectacle” with which . . . [they] operate is minimal, pragmatic, and matter of fact’ (ibid., p. 19). It is because I am undertaking an ‘immanent critique’ of Situationist theory, as this was formulated in the group’s heyday (during the 1960s), that I only deal with the 9/11 events vis-à-vis the Situationists’ original formulation of the notion of spectacle.

they did not have an advanced revolutionary consciousness. Likewise, the Situationists allude to the idea that, although they lacked a highly developed revolutionary consciousness, the black rioters of Watts in Los Angeles during 1965 who looted goods practised détournement—the act of looting commodities enabling ‘real desires [to] begin to be expressed in festive celebration, in playful self-assertion, in the potlatch of destruction’. Furthermore, the Situationists suggest, it seems, that the rebellious actions of juvenile delinquents, such as ‘the hooligans of Stockholm’,102 who ‘[i]n December 1956 . . . ran wild in the streets of Stockholm, setting fire to cars, smashing neon signs, tearing down hoardings and looting department stores’,103 can be considered instances of détournement. Indeed, Vaneigem refers to juvenile delinquents, who he places in the category of active nihilists,104 as ‘the legitimate heirs of Dada’,105 and suggests that the actions of the Stockholm hooligans revealed ‘that negative pleasure is forever on the point of tipping over into total pleasure—a little shove, and negative violence releases its positivity’.106

At this point it is pertinent to note that the Situationists claim that spectacular society is a highly secular society; it is, as they put it, ‘the heir of religion’. Furthermore, Vaneigem suggests that ‘[n]ihilism is born of the collapse of myth’. So the assumption the Situationists make, I think, about those who practise détournement, is that they range from active nihilists, to those who have a minimal (left-wing) revolutionary consciousness, to those who have a highly developed revolutionary consciousness, and that those who have an active nihilist stance and those who have a proto-revolutionary consciousness can, with ‘a little shove’, go beyond these positions to attain a highly developed revolutionary consciousness. Yet what are we to make of those who are committed to religious beliefs—such as Islamic fundamentalists—who engage in actions that appear to have the characteristic features of détournement?

The Situationists suppose, as I have argued, that those who practise détournement may or may not have a revolutionary consciousness. With this in mind, it might be thought that Situationist theory is left in the position of having to incorporate the events of 9/11 as détournement, if we assume that these attacks presented people worldwide with an image of the negation of the capitalist order. That said, the values of those inspired by Islamic fundamentalism are antithetical to those of the Situationists—such as a commitment to hierarchy and self-sacrifice. To the extent that Islamic fundamentalists—such as the suicide hijackers of 9/11—struggle

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101 Ibid., p. 197.
102 Ibid., p. 121.
103 Vaneigem, op. cit., p. 69.
104 For a discussion of active nihilism see Vaneigem, op. cit., pp. 179–182.
105 Vaneigem, op. cit., p. 164.
106 Vaneigem, op. cit., p. 122.
for pleasure in the revolutionary process, this is pleasure to be experienced through death (martyrdom) and, in the case of 9/11, entailed the deaths of thousands of people other than the suicide hijackers themselves. Such a conception of ‘pleasure’ is clearly alien to Situationist thought. Indeed, if we bear in mind that the Situationists reject the notion of self-sacrifice and claim that ‘[t]he moment revolution calls for self-sacrifice it ceases to exist,’ then in this sense their theory cannot encompass the events of September 11 as détournement. It is here, I think, that we approach the limits of Situationist theory given that the Situationists did not consider that religion would re-emerge as a major force in society and politics.

Now, thus far I have been assuming that the spectacle’s powers of domination and mystification are very strong, in that they envelop almost all areas of lived experience. However, the Situationists do, I think, consider the spectacle to be weaker in the less industrially developed societies.

The Situationists maintain that in both the concentrated and diffuse forms of spectacle the workers are mystified in the sphere of production. Yet they nevertheless suggest that the concentrated spectacle has weaker powers to mystify people through consumption. For the Situationists, the people in the societies of the concentrated spectacle, given that such societies have a less well developed system of mass consumption, experience less controlled pleasure through consumption. Therefore, if the spectacle is weaker in less industrially developed societies, and cannot so strongly mystify proletarians (and peasants), then could the rebellious forces within such societies be in a position to overturn the spectacle and create a revolution that endures? This is not something that I think the Situationists can accept, as they believe a rebellion of the oppressed can only succeed in totally overturning the spectacle provided the material conditions exist for the overcoming of scarcity; and, given that such conditions do not exist within the less developed societies, ‘the movements [of revolt] in the underdeveloped zone seem doomed to follow the model of the Chinese revolution.’ Consequently, the tension I identified above—concerning the spectacle’s mystificatory powers and the possibility of proletarian revolution taking place—cannot be lessened to account for the possibility of a lasting revolution, by looking to the struggles of the oppressed in the less developed societies.

For the Situationists, then, the case for the détournement of the global spectacle and a ‘lasting revolutionary victory’ rests upon the pivotal role of proletarian revolutions in the advanced world. This is because it is in industrially advanced societies that the material conditions exist that could enable proletarian revolutions against the spectacle to endure.

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109 Vaneigem, op. cit., p. 110.
111 Ibid., p. 111.
112 Ibid., p. 317.
So, let us return to what the Situationists have to say about the most industrially advanced societies. They assume that in diffuse spectacular societies, which are awash with material goods, there is more adjusted pleasure to be experienced through consumerism than is the case in concentrated spectacular societies. However, to mystify individuals in the realm of consumption, the spectacle is compelled, in order to reproduce itself, to stimulate their pleasurable erotic desires—to play, create and love—and then permit a controlled gratification of these desires. Now given that the Situationists maintain that the spectacle encounters some problems in co-opting human passions—or put another way, the desires that stem from the sexual instinct—this leaves spectacular society in a precarious position; it may be subverted if proletarians pursue their real erotic desires. That said, as I argued above, the Situationists do not consider that proletarians who practise détournement will necessarily have a highly developed revolutionary consciousness.

Therefore, if Situationist theory is not to pull itself apart, then—as I noted above—a way in which it might be rescued from this outcome is through a greater reliance on that aspect of the theory that points to the assistance of a revolutionary avant-garde. Yet even if a small revolutionary group can be considered able to uphold a revolutionary consciousness in an industrially advanced spectacular society, the question remains: how can such a group translate their revolutionary theory into revolutionary practice if the spectacle’s powers of mystification are as strong as the Situationists suggest?

Unlike Marcuse, who in One Dimensional Man saw modern capitalist society’s powers of mystification as extremely strong, and who saw hope for revolutionary change in various socially marginalized groups, the Situationists claim that not only the socially marginalized, but also worker-consumers—a social group Marcuse believed to be deeply integrated into capitalist society—are either presently engaged in, or are on the verge of, rebellion, a rebellion that could bring about the total overturning of the spectacle. It seems difficult, however, to uphold this stance whilst also claiming that the spectacle’s mystificatory powers are very strong, unless a revolutionary avant-garde organization is considered to play a greater role in assisting the majority of the proletariat to attain a highly developed revolutionary consciousness.

In this regard, the central thrust of Situationist theory suggests that proletarian revolutions within the most developed societies are generated by a combination of spontaneous action together with the (somewhat minimal) assistance of a revolutionary avant-garde group, an intervention akin, I think, to that of a Bakuninist secret society. However, if the spectacle’s powers of mystification in these societies are as strong as the Situationists claim, then, within the terms of their

113 I am indebted here to Brian Morris (Bakunin: The Philosophy of Freedom (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1993)) for elucidating Bakunin’s conception of a secret society.
theory, their claim that a majority of proletarians can practise *détournement* and attain, in addition, an advanced revolutionary consciousness—which would bring forth a 'lasting revolutionary victory'—cannot be considered plausible without a (nonspectacular) revolutionary avant-garde group\(^{114}\) assuming a more interventionist role, offering greater assistance, than the Situationists suggest.

\(^{114}\) This would, of course, rule out an organization such as a Leninist party, as the Situationists consider such an organization to be part of the spectacle given its hierarchical structure, its opposition to the workers’ councils, and so on. For the Situationists, a revolutionary avant-garde organization strives for 'revolutionary coherence' (Vaneigem, op. cit., p. 273; Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1995, op. cit., para 121). To quote Debord: 'the revolutionary organization cannot allow the conditions of division and hierarchy that obtain in the dominant society to be reproduced within itself. It must also fight constantly against its own distortion by and within the reigning spectacle. The only restriction on individual participation in the revolutionary organization’s total democracy is that imposed by the effective recognition and appropriation by each member of the coherence of the organization’s critique, a coherence that must be borne out both in critical theory proper and in the relationship between that theory and practical activity' (Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1995, op. cit., para 121).