A Situationist Portrait of Power: Cybernetics, May ’68, and The Situationist International

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Abstract

This article presents the critique of cybernetics as central to the history of one of the twentieth century’s most infamous avant-garde movements: the Situationist International (SI). Bringing together and analysing a series of seemingly marginal events in the build-up to May ’68, this article shows how the SI’s portrait of cybernetics as an emerging form of social power and control foreshadows later developments in French radical thought. This little-noted trajectory in the situationist movement also highlights the ways in which aesthetics, theory, and politics are inextricably tied together in the events of May ’68.

Keywords

Situationist International – Guy Debord – cybernetics – information theory – Norbert Wiener – May ’68

1 Introduction

On 26 January 1968, the Paris Nanterre University exploded in a ‘veritable riot’.¹ For the first time in French university history, a student demonstration violently collided with law-enforcement officers on campus grounds. It was the

¹ Mazuy and Le Cornu 1988, p. 134.
Dean, Pierre Grappin, who, after months of disturbances by ‘activists, situationists, and revolutionaries of all stripes’, decided to break with French archaism and called in the cops to intervene.2

‘Everything now went wrong’, one observer sympathetic to the Dean remarked: ‘the demonstrators armed themselves with everything they could find at hand – chairs, benches, iron poles from bulletin boards… The police were overwhelmed, forced out of the building, pursued on the campus, and stoned’.3 The rioting students – some of whom called themselves the Enragés after radicals of the same name during the French Revolution – celebrated their victory by triumphantly setting vehicles ablaze on the surrounding parking lot.4 Little could they have known that they had just ignited a fire that, in a more than metaphorical sense, ‘set all French universities aflame and shook up the entirety of French society’.5 The rest is history: the history of May ’68.

The ‘explosion’ of May ’68, the French statesman Charles de Gaulle proclaimed in a televised speech in early June, ‘was provoked by groups in revolt against modern consumer society and technological society … who delight in negation, destruction, violence, anarchy, and who brandish the black flag’.6 The Situationist International (henceforth si) – the avant-garde movement that officially accepted the Enragés into their ranks shortly after the Nanterre riot – was undoubtedly one of those groups that de Gaulle had in mind as he tried to contain the nationwide rebellion of May ’68 in the now all-too-familiar narrative of ‘outside agitators’.7 This article revisits the si’s ‘role’ in the events of May–June ’68 from the perspective of their critique of what de Gaulle called ‘technological society’.

In the postwar era, an entire generation of philosophers, intellectuals and artists grappled with the ways in which new forms of computer-assisted automation were rapidly changing both work and leisure. During the 1950s, the enigmatic term ‘cybernetics’ took centre stage in discussions about ‘technological society’ and became a discursive proxy for postwar information science and communication technology more broadly.8 It is the American polymath Norbert Wiener who is generally credited with introducing the term in his influential book, *Cybernetics* (1948): a scientific study of ‘control

2 Dreyfus-Armand 1988, p. 103.
4 Dumontier 1990, p. 106.
6 Viénet 1968, p. x.
7 For a contemporary critique of the narrative of outside agitators in the context of the George Floyd rebellion, see Haslett 2021.
8 Mindell, Segal and Slava 2002.
and communication’ processes in closed systems, mechanical or otherwise, via advanced feedback technologies.\textsuperscript{9} However, beyond its use as a novel scientific approach to modelling information circuits, cybernetics also offered a powerful philosophical framework for reinterpreting the social world as a malleable totality or ‘system’. This broader interpretation of cybernetics as a science pertaining as much to conditions in the laboratory as to society at large was particularly influential in France, partly because the French physicist André-Marie Ampère – as French intellectuals never tired of pointing out – had originally used the term ‘cybernétique’ as early as in the nineteenth century to describe the science of ‘government’\textsuperscript{10} By the mid-1950s, influential French thinkers like Henri Lefebvre, Cornelius Castoriadis and Jacques Ellul, to mention merely those who most directly influenced the situationists in this regard, were theorising and vividly discussing the social implications of cybernetics and automation. Castoriadis’s intellectual exchanges with the American Trotskyist organisation known as the Johnson–Forest Tendency was an international pivot for the New Left’s keen interest in the class dynamics of what Raya Dunayevskaya (referencing Wiener) memorably called the new ‘monster machine’\textsuperscript{11} For the SI, too, the monstrous cybernetic machines became a key concern.

The situationists saw in cybernetics more than just scientific breakthroughs in computing technologies and automation procedures. To the SI, cybernetics was a worldview with the potential to transform reality itself. The SI’s relationship to the history of cybernetics is anything but straightforward, and remains, with few exceptions, a crucial but neglected affair.\textsuperscript{12} In the early phase of the SI in the late 1950s, one can arguably detect a kind of ‘secret fascination’ with cybernetics – the Dutch situationist Constant Nieuwenhuys’s cybernetic optimism was particularly unbridled.\textsuperscript{13}

Though Constant is an obvious reference point for the situationist fascination with cybernetics, his contribution belongs to an earlier, more experimental and techno-optimistic phase of the SI. In the context of the period examined here, in the long run-up to May ’68, Debord had explicitly renounced the cybernetic enthusiasm of Constant, who had resigned in 1960 just as the situationists moved into what is sometimes described as their ‘political’ phase. Approaching May ’68, the situationist perception of cybernetics went

\textsuperscript{9} Wiener 1948.
\textsuperscript{10} For a comprehensive history of cybernetics in France, see Le Roux 2018.
\textsuperscript{11} See Dunayevskaya 2000, p. 264. For an emblematic Marxist discussion of cybernetics in its ‘application to capitalist production and distribution’, see Mattick 1962.
\textsuperscript{12} See: Ardenne 2001; Nadeau 2018; Marcolini 2012, Kohlbry 2023.
\textsuperscript{13} For assessments of Constant’s work, see: Busbea 2007; Sadler 1999; Wark 2015; Wigley 1998.
from negativity to outright hostility: cybernetics was seen as embodying late capitalist scientific-bureaucratic technologies of social control. To Debord in particular, cybernetics was seen as part and parcel of a counter-revolutionary scheme of technological control, instrumental to what the situationists would famously call the ‘colonisation of everyday life’.

As I show in this article, and in more detail in a forthcoming book, the SI’s critique of cybernetics informs the notion of a ‘situation’ and the critique of the ‘spectacle’ while also prefiguring later theorisations of capitalist forms of power in French thought. In this article, I recount and analyse how a series of strategic confrontations with key representatives of French cybernetics fuelled the SI’s critique of technological society and foreshadowed the ‘explosion’ of May ’68. I begin by looking closer at a particular remnant from the Nanterre riot: a little-discussed situationist poster that here functions as a historically composite ‘portrait of power’ that perfectly exemplifies how, in the history of the SI, political interventions always combine with and are inseparable from aesthetic gestures.

A few days after the riot, a poster picturing Dean Grappin appeared on the walls of the University of Nanterre. Above the figure of Grappin, who is depicted as towering over a circle of cops with their batons drawn, a caption set in bold type spells out in capital letters: ‘EN ATTENDANT LA CYBERNÉTIQUE, LES FLICS’: waiting for cybernetics, the cops.

In the atmosphere of post-riot urgency, three Enragés members – René Riesel, Patrick Cheval, and Gérard Birgogne – swiftly designed and printed this poster over the weekend. On the morning of Monday 30 January, the students at Nanterre walked into hallways plastered over with freshly minted posters that greatly ‘impressed everyone’. The poster perfectly captured the radical mood at Nanterre and aesthetically conveys the situationist ‘portrait of power’ in the build-up to the events of May–June 1968. The Nanterre poster exemplifies

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14 Routhier 2023. In this work, I show how the concept of ‘the spectacle’ broadly anticipates the analysis of late capitalist power in the French collective Tiqqun’s The Cybernetic Hypothesis (Tiqqun 2001).
15 Duteuil 2017, p. 124.
16 For the best available partisan overview of the situationist involvement in May ’68, see Viénet 1968.
FIGURE 1 Poster on the wall of Université Paris-Nanterre, 1968
the SI’s intertwining of politics and aesthetics while providing a window onto a little discussed ‘cybernetic’ nexus of French radical thought in May ’68.17

At the time when the poster was made, the term cybernetics signified to radicals an emerging paradigm of late capitalist power rather than merely a politically neutral scientific hypothesis. An earlier tract by the Enragés, for instance, had argued that the ‘university ghetto’ was on the brink of ‘cybernetisation’ along with the rest of capitalist society.18 In the context of the poster, the figure of Dean Grappin clearly stands in for what the tract describes as capitalist society’s ‘cops, priests, cyberneticians, professors, and sociologists’ as a whole.19 The wider context for the critique of the ‘cybernetisation of society’ is the highly centralised French administration under de Gaulle and the emergence in popular discourse of a new type of technocratic elite, the jeune cadre. As Kristin Ross puts it, the jeune cadre’s ‘social prominence in the early 1960s was the sign of a successful postwar transformation in French corporate bureaucracies away from older patriarchal or heavy-handed styles toward a more flexible, American-inflected practice of management’.20

From this perspective, the poster’s aesthetic equation of the term ‘cybernetics’ with a broader nexus of technocratic management, social domination and police power aligns it with the situationist analysis of late capitalist society more broadly: an analysis spelled out in two pivotal SI-publications from 1967, the Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations by Raoul Vaneigem and La société du spectacle by Guy Debord.21

Echoing these key situationist works, the Nanterre poster draws attention to cybernetics as a new form of post-sovereign, impersonal and abstract social domination that mainly operates through spectacular forms of technologically-assisted coercion rather than through the use of brute force and violence – which it must nonetheless take recourse to when push comes to shove. In the broader visual economy of the poster, then, the term ‘cybernetics’ seems to function as shorthand for a more elaborate diagnosis of capital’s extended sway over social life under changing historical circumstances: what Debord and Vaneigem would analyse under the respective rubrics of le spectacle and le pouvoir, spectacle and power. One cannot help noticing, for instance,

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17 For an assessment of the broader influences of cybernetics on French thought (in France and internationally), see: Lafontaine 2007; Geoghegan 2011; Bernes 2017.
18 See Dumontier 1993, p. 105. The tract, entitled Le déshonneur des poètes, was distributed in December 1967 during an interruption of a poetry reading session conceived in the spirit of Jean Jacques-Lebel’s ‘Happenings’. A transcription is available in Duteuil 2017, p. 110.
21 Vaneigem 1967; Debord 1967.
how Grappin, the patriarchal figure at the centre of visual attention, seems to be dissolving – quite literally – into the mechanisms churning beneath him and supporting, if only for a little longer, his sovereign stance. Notice also how the chair under Grappin is suspended in mid-air, creating the impression that the seat of his power, his professorial ‘chair’ perhaps, is being kicked away from underneath him and whirled into the maelstrom. But does the poster portray a crisis of power or its consolidation?

Grappin appears unusually stoic, his gaze firmly fixed on the horizon. Is he blissfully ignorant, the poster seems to ask, of the fact that the era of personal ‘authoritarian’ rule is coming to an end? Or is the Dean calmly awaiting his cybernetic redemption; the point when society will be, to borrow from Richard Brautigan’s famous contemporaneous poem, ‘all watched over by machines of loving grace’? A time when power will no longer have to resort to corporeal violence to maintain its fragile social equilibrium but can instead rely on the cybernetically potentiated ‘mute compulsions’ of capital?

The antinomy between traditional forms of capitalist exploitation and brutality, which in Marxist analysis is closely tied to the term ‘primitive accumulation’, and the supposed self-sufficiency of advanced ‘cybernetic’ technologies as means of exerting social domination and control, lies, I would argue, at the heart of the situationist ‘portrait of power’. Tracing the situationist critique of cybernetics through its historical instantiations is thus not only a way to shed light on a little-noted chapter of the SI. It is also, and more importantly, a way to revisit some historical tensions within post-Marxist analyses of power while calling for renewed critical attention to the uneven and combined forms of late capitalist coercion.

2 The Police: A Social Logic

Let us turn our attention once more to the situation of the Nanterre riot and try to expand on its historical ramifications. The text within the Nanterre poster, barely legible in the photo, gives us an idea of the stakes at Nanterre:

22 Brautigan 1967.

23 ‘The silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker. Direct extra-economic force is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases’ (Marx 1976, p. 899). For a systematic and persuasive conceptualisation of Marx’s concept of silent or ‘mute compulsion’, see Mau 2023.
Comrades! Grappin-the-truncheon, shoulder to shoulder with [François] Bouricaud, supported by the arguments of [Edgar] Morin and [Alain] Touraine, has shown the extent of what he would like to ‘deny’ by placing his ghetto and their rackets under police protection. The Lateran Treaty that still governs this old world and its modernist university has proven its last resort and raison d’état: the recourse to police violence clarifies what is meant by ‘dialogue’ on campus. Abuse of confidence to the Left, abuse of power to the Right.

So that spirit be wrested from its cell
Let us fan the forge’s flames ourselves
And strike while the iron is hot
(The Internationale),

NANTERRE, 29 January, 1968

The text requires some discursive unpacking, but one thing that stands out in the original poster is that the text’s punctuation consists of swastikas. This provocative typographical innovation by the Enragés ‘design committee’ did not fly well with all students. Grappin, after all, was publicly known as an ancien Résistant (the French honorary term for a former Resistance fighter) and a fellow traveller of the French Communist Party. The swastikas, however, were not just a generic insult but a specific reference to rumours that Grappin had asked members of his teaching staff to procure a ‘blacklist’ with the names of unruly students. And with someone like Daniel Cohn-Bendit – a son of German Jews who had fled to Paris during the Second World War – repeatedly singled out as a troublemaker, it was a short step to assume antisemitic motives on the part of Grappin and his administration.

The date on the poster, 29 January, suggests that the text responded to Grappin's official disavowal of what he considered ‘gratuitous accusations’ in an open letter addressed to the students at Nanterre. According to Grappin, there never was any blacklist. Grappin’s ‘denial’, to which the poster’s text refers, was ‘unanimously’ supported by his trusted staff in the Assemblée: a printed circular affirmed ‘categorically’ that ‘there is not, and has never been

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26 The letter is reproduced in Duteuil 2017, p. 125.
any “blacklist”. However, Henri Lefebvre, who was a professor at Nanterre at the time, complicates this claim:

The stimulus was this business about the blacklist, and I was the one who concocted the blacklist. What happened was that the administration phoned my office and asked for a list of the most politically disruptive students. I told them to get lost; I frequently had to say to the dean in those days, ‘Sir, I am not a cop’. So the blacklist never existed, in black and white. But they were trying to do it, and I told the students to defend themselves; I stirred things up a bit.

Whether Lefebvre’s anecdote is ‘apocryphal’ or not, as Kristin Ross speculates, it appears that there might have been some not entirely ‘gratuitous’ reason for the students to protest against the blacklist, even in the face of its apparent non-existence. What aggravated the students at Nanterre even further in the days before the riot was that some of them had spotted, and photographed, alleged plainclothes police officers on campus. In the student procession on 26 January, students carried enlarged portraits of cops attached to sticks. When the police arrived on campus to shut down the protests, they forgot neither their uniforms nor their truncheons. From that point on, the Dean-who-called-the-cops would be known, as the poster relates, as Grappin-la-matraque, Grappin-the-truncheon.

To many radical students, the police intervention on 26 January confirmed a sneaking suspicion that the supposed political neutrality of the university was an illusion that veiled its real function: to help the capitalist state maintain its social rule. Behind the neutral functionalist façades, the partisans of the state and les forces de l’ordre were at work. As the text in the poster states, police violence is never far from the rhetoric of ‘dialogue’. In this context, then, the concept of the ‘police’ refracts a more complex social analysis of power that would soon crop up in French thought. As Ross reminds us by way of Jacques Rancière, the figure of the police ‘as a kind of logic of the social: the logic that assigns people to their places and their social identities, that makes them identical to their functions’, is a steady trope of French post-68 critical theory.

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27 Ibid.
28 Ross and Lefebvre 1997, p. 82.
30 See Viénet 1968, p. 27.
In the wake of ‘68, a period of massive concern with public order and its breakdown, when the government’s tangible fear of the population taking to the streets again had manifested itself in a dramatic increase of police presence everywhere – in cafés, museums, on street corners, wherever more than two or three people gather – philosophy and theory begin to bear the trace of that presence.\footnote{Ross 2002, p. 24.}

But the figure of the ‘police’ as a metonym of power was, as the Nanterre poster suggests, already addressed in situationist-inflected critical discourse long before May ’68. As I argue on the basis of the historical events recounted in this article, the situationists came up with one of the earliest and most original analyses of the police as a social logic extending from the depth of the factory to the peculiar décor of modern urban existence and further yet into the most intimate fabric of everyday life. The critique of cybernetics is at the heart of the SI’s version of what we, taking our cue from Ross again, might call the ‘police conception of history’. The Nanterre poster’s association of ‘cybernetics’ with ‘cops’, then, points to a little-remarked nucleus in the history of May ’68. In the following, I wish to broaden the scope of May ’68 by focusing on the cultural and intellectual mutations that prefigured it by almost a decade. I do this by tracing a series of strategic attacks by situationists on the representatives of a perceived nexus of ‘cybernetic’ power.

\section{The SI against Cybernetics}

In its balance sheet of May ’68, the SI highlighted an event that took place a few years earlier at the University of Strasbourg as ‘evidently a prelude to the activities of the Enragés in Nanterre’.\footnote{Internationale situationniste 1969, p. 25.} The ‘prelude’ in question was an attack on one of the leading French cyberneticians of the time, Abraham Moles, who, on 26 October 1966, was about to take up the position of departmental Chair as a newly promoted full professor in social psychology at Strasbourg. A few minutes into his inaugural lecture, some situationist partisans among the students started hurling overripe tomatoes at Moles, forcing him to retreat from the lecture chair to seek cover. According to the historical records of the event, several ‘incredulous and confused’ students came to the professor’s aid.\footnote{Bertrand and Schneider 2018, p. 188.}
While some followed on the heels of Moles to offer him towels and convince him to return to finish his lecture, other more vigilant students tried to apprehend the troublemakers. Amid the confusion, the lecture hall erupted in a flurry of paper sheets with the message (in a font mimicking that of an early IBM computer): ‘MOLES: Programme les Futurs Cadres’ (Moles, programming the future cadres).

The Moles incident is as much a ‘prelude’ to May ’68 as it is part of the historical anatomy of the ‘Strasbourg scandal’, a now well-chronicled chapter in the history of the SI. The Strasbourg scandal hinged on the fact that some students, allegedly acting in accord with situationist directives, had succeeded in getting themselves elected to the AFGES (Association Fédérative Générale des Étudiants de Strasbourg) – the local branch of the French National Student Union UNEF (Union Nationale des Étudiants de France) – with the sole purpose of declaring its self-dissolution.

The material centrepiece of the scandal is a now-infamous pamphlet carrying the voluminous title: De la misère en milieu étudiant, considérée sous ses aspects économique, politique, psychologique, sexuel et notamment intellectuel et de quelques moyens pour y remédier (On the Poverty of Student Life: A Consideration of Its Economic, Political, Sexual, Psychological and Notably Intellectual Aspects and of a Few Ways to Cure It). A group of student partisans of the SI boldly distributed the pamphlet at the Palais universitaire de Strasbourg during the official annual alma mater celebration of 1966. Apart from its explicit content, the reason why the pamphlet became the source of scandal was that the press revealed that it had been funded by the AFGES: a costly affair, considering that it was printed in a first edition of no less than ten thousand (!) copies.

While the circumstances of the funding, printing, distribution and reception of this pamphlet belongs, by now, to the official prehistory of May ’68, SI scholars have paid less attention to the marginal events that, beginning with the first attack on Moles, ‘announced’ the pamphlet. As André Bertrand and André Schneider, two of the protagonists of the Strasbourg scandal, recall in their revisionist account of the Strasbourg scandal (which is now commemorated

34 Bertrand and Schneider 2018, pp. 188–9.
35 Ibid.
36 See: Amorós 2018; Bertrand and Schneider 2018. The following summary relies on these two key works.
37 Bertrand and Schneider 2018, p. 211.
38 Moreover, another 10,000 copies were printed in a ‘second edition’ in March 1967 (Bertrand and Schneider 2018, p. 25). In contrast to the ‘first edition’, the SI now figured as co-editor of the pamphlet.
as part of France’s ‘immaterial patrimony’), the Moles affair provides a crucial backdrop to the events that unfolded in Strasbourg.39

A letter from Debord to Mustapha Khayati, one of the principal authors of the pamphlet and a main situationist instigator at Strasbourg, corroborates that claim. Referring to the attack on Moles as the ‘Robot Operation’, Debord describes the attack on the cybernetician as nothing less than a historical achievement:

Dear Mustapha,
Bravo for the Robot operation. (Useful detail for history: was it yesterday or Tuesday?) We hope that the operation will become widely known – even without official reaction.... The post festum reaction of Moles is quite sublime. Secure in his robotised world ... these ideas are, now, flung back into his face in a precisely befitting historical figure. One can say that he has finally seen the Spirit of the Times appear in a tomato!40

The term ‘Spirit of the Times’, while it invokes Hegel’s World Spirit or the notion of a Zeitgeist, appears, more specifically, to be a reference to Edgar Morin’s book L’esprit du temps. Essai sur la culture de masse (1962), which theorised the effects of the so-called Second Industrial Revolution on everyday life.41 When L’esprit du temps was first published, it was considered, as one reviewer noted, ‘the first in-depth study of mass culture ever published in France’.42

Considering the situationists’ and particularly Debord’s animosity towards anything associated with Morin (the journal Arguments that Morin co-founded in 1956 was a favourite target of abuse for the SI), the reference to Morin’s book was hardly meant as praise.43 Debord’s use of the term ‘Spirit of the Times’, considering the context, seems to imply that a society of capitalist mass culture – for which Moles was considered a first-rank apologist – would inevitably turn against itself in an ‘auto-immune’ response or cybernetic feedback loop. The story of the overripe tomato becomes a parable of nature’s vengeance against ‘technological society’.

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39 Bertrand and Schneider 2018 is one of the few historically detailed accounts of the Moles affair and its relation to the events at Strasbourg.
41 Morin 1962.
42 Matarasso 1963, p. 37.
43 In 1960, the SI called for an unconditional boycott of Arguments and of anyone who collaborated with this ‘most representative’ venue of a ‘conformist and pseudo-leftist intelligentsia’. See Internationale situationniste 1960, p. 13.
In a diagnosis somewhat similar to that of Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Debord seems to be suggesting that the Moles affair points to a dialectical inversion where scientific rationalisation and cybernetic mass control turn into their opposites: riots, mass spontaneity, and, potentially, revolution.44 ‘In hindsight’, as SI scholar and Debord biographer Anselm Jappe notes, the attack on Moles might ‘seem a little tame, and it would doubtless have aroused but scant attention had it occurred two years later than it did’.45 But in France at this point it was unheard of to defy the authority of an honoured professor. The fact that within only a few years of this incident the university walls would cry out to the professors the crudest insults, like *crève salope* (drop dead, bitch!), testifies to the turbulent pace with which students challenged existing norms in the run-up to May ‘68.

In that light, the toppled ‘chair’ underneath Dean Grappin on the Nanterre poster seems to acquire a precise historical reference. Whether or not the attack on Moles in 1966 was actually ‘the first time’ that a ‘university professor was chased from his chair’, as the situationists would claim, the ‘robot operation’ set in motion a series of violent interruptions of university courses that contributed to the growing disrespect for the ‘professorial chair’ as May ‘68 approached.46 The situationists later noted with apparent content that their guerrilla tactics *did* indeed resonate with the Spirit of the Times, since soon after the attack, Moles was given the same treatment in March [1967] at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs de Paris, where this certified robot was to lecture on urbanistic methods for controlling the masses; this latter refutation being carried out by about thirty young anarchists, belonging to groups that want to bring revolutionary criticism to bear on all modern issues.47

These two consecutive attacks, in October 1966 at Strasbourg and in March 1967 in Paris, were, however, merely the culmination to an even longer campaign against France’s most prominent cybernetician.

In the ninth issue of the SI’s eponymous journal, *Internationale situationniste*, published in August 1964, one finds a little-noted transcript of Debord’s first correspondences with Moles.48 Moles writes:

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44 Although the book was not translated into French until 1974, Adorno was frequently published in French journals such as *Arguments* and *Communications* during the 1960s.
45 Jappe 1999, p. 82.
48 Debord 2013; translation slightly amended here and throughout.
Monsieur,
I learned about the situationist Group through my friend and colleague Henri Lefebvre. The significance of the term ‘situationist’ therefore comes largely from what Lefebvre has told me and from reading several of your bulletins, to which I kindly ask for a subscription.49

The formal politeness notwithstanding, Moles’s ‘open letter’ to the situationists should not be mistaken for a fan letter. Its tone oscillates between an apparent sincerity and a thinly-veiled irony bordering on parody:

I certainly would like to see in your publications a study on what you call a ‘situation’: an individual who, for some reason, walks upside down on the ceiling rather than on the floor, would he be in a new situation? A tightrope walker, is he in a rare situation?50

Moles’s suggestion is that the ill-defined term ‘situation’ be reconceptualised within a strictly scientific ‘information-theoretic’ framework. The ‘novelty’ or ‘rarity’ of a specific situation, Moles argues, could then be accurately measured.51 From this proposition, Moles drives the situationist notion of a ‘situation’ ad absurdum. ‘Sexuality is most obviously’, Moles muses, ‘open to a great number of new situations’:

The manufacture, biologically conceivable, of women with two pairs of breasts is, without any doubt, a proposition from biology to tradition. The invention, in addition to the two traditional sexes, of one, two, three, $n$ different sexes, offers a sexual combination which follows the theory of permutations and suggests an immense number of amorous situations ($n$ factorial).52

Moles implies here that the situationist conception of a ‘situation’ is so vague and general that it dissolves in the $n$ factorial. He enumerates a dozen or so (perceived) morally transgressive acts, criminal activities or types of deviant behaviour that would all qualify as ‘situations’ if one followed the situationist logic to its own – to Moles’s eye absurd – conclusion.

49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
Moles was pressing all the right buttons in his open letter to the situationists. Hardly anything could be more out of tune with the situationist notion of a situation than the idea that ‘novelty’ in and of itself would constitute progress. At least not ‘progress’ in any sense of the word acceptable to an avant-garde movement whose aim in the game of ‘constructing situations’ was to bring about a revolution that would put an end to the capitalist ‘system’ in its entirety (and not merely add an immense number of ‘new’ or ‘rare’ situations to that system).

Debord had made it clear on several occasions – for instance in one of the founding documents of the si, Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l’organisation et de l’action de la tendance situationniste internationale (1957) – that the term ‘situation’ was incompatible with the ‘debased forms of novelty’ allowed under capitalist relations of production.\(^\text{53}\) Considering the fundamental differences in the conception of a ‘situation’, with the si aiming to create situations that would lead to the overthrow of capitalism and Moles hoping instead to expand its field of operations, Moles’s open letter should not be mistaken for a ‘hopeful enquiry’.\(^\text{54}\) Rather, Moles’s letter is an affront to everything the situationists stood for. Unsurprisingly, Debord’s riposte is ruthless:

\[\text{Petite tête,}\]
\[\text{It was useless to write to us ... the capacity to think of anything else does not enter your programming. Scarcely is it necessary, therefore, to point out that you have understood nothing in any of the situationist materials you have read (in which, evidently, you missed all the basics). Tilt. Redo your calculations, Moles, redo your calculations ...}\]

Debord’s response is indicative of the larger stakes of this quarrel, which contains in miniature the lines of conflict that characterised May ’68.\(^\text{56}\) As one of the most fervent French popularisers of cybernetics and ‘communication’ sciences in the realm of culture and the arts, Moles was the perfect target for the situationists. But how did Moles come to represent everything the situationists abhorred about ‘technological society’?

\(^{53}\) Debord 2022.
\(^{54}\) Grindon 2015.
\(^{55}\) Debord 2013.
\(^{56}\) See Ardenne 2001.
4 The Ideology of Communication

Moles’s path to becoming France’s leading cybernetician begins with a series of free extrapolations from Claude Shannon’s and Warren Weaver’s seminal work *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (1948) and, in equal measure, Wiener’s *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (1948). From these works, Moles arrives at an idea of ‘communication’ as a social panacea.

In decentralised theories of markets and prices by liberal economists such as Friedrich Hayek, as well as in their Soviet command-economy counterparts, the shared assumption about ‘communication’ – or successful exchange of systemic ‘information’ (whether in living, organic tissue or in electronically controlled environments) – is that it keeps the world spinning. In this worldview, the world is, essentially, a feedback loop of endlessly exchanged information. Recoded in information-theoretic terms, ‘communication’ thus became the “strong currency” which allowed for free conceptual trade among disciplines.

As cultural theorist Michael Denning has shown, ‘communication’ was one of the keywords for a generation of New Left intellectuals who came of age in the mid-1950s. To critics of a Marxist bent, the term ‘communication’ carried with it some of the libidinal energies previously invested in the idea of ‘communism’. As Denning notes, Raymond Williams’s classic study *Communications* (1962) is the Anglo-Saxon touchstone for a Marxist reinterpretation of ‘culture’ in the light of postwar communication sciences.

It is worth also remembering that in 1961, a year prior to the first publication of Williams’s book, three of the most important French Marxist intellectuals at this time – Georges Friedmann, Roland Barthes and Edgar Morin – founded the pivotal journal *Communications*, which continues to be published to this day. Bringing together work by thinkers as diverse as Theodor Adorno, Roland Barthes and Daniel Bell, *Communications* perfectly exemplifies that peculiar French amalgam of Western Marxism, emerging structuralism and *end of ideology* discourse.

While Debord indeed belongs (in terms of age at least) to the generation of critics that Denning describes as New Left, Debord explicitly rejected the reformist ethos and abhorred the idea of ‘communication’. To Debord, the

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57 Shannon and Weaver 1964; Wiener 1948.
58 Mattelart and Mattelart 1995, p. 43.
59 Denning 2004, p. 83.
60 Barthes, arguably, was not straightforwardly a ‘Marxist’ thinker.
study of culture from the point of view of a sociology of communication was insufficient and one-sided:

Sociological and cultural theories so well hide the question of power that experts can write thousands of pages about communication or the means of mass communication in modern society without ever observing that this communication they speak of is unidirectional, that the consumers of communication have nothing to respond to.61

In these editorial notes entitled ‘priority communication’, Debord addresses the ballooning ideal of a frictionless, neutral and apolitical flow of ‘communication’ from the point of view of a Brechtian critique of unidirectionality. But Debord did not believe in ‘participatory’ forms of cultural engagement as a solution to the passivity of existing forms of communication, and he had little hopes for didactic art.62

Debord’s critique of the cybernetic fads (structuralism most notably) in the journal Communications corresponds, on another level, to his critique of how new and potentially revolutionary technologies are co-opted by counter-revolutionary forces: a prime example of which is found in ‘the way the state kept total control of French television throughout de Gaulle’s presidency from 1958 to 1969’.63

The situationist critique of ‘communication’ – a cybernetic watchword if there ever was one – has to do, at bottom, with the dialectic of decolonisation and modernisation.64 With the waning of the external French colonial empire, the state tightened its inward grip on the metropolitan population (a still greater part of which consisted of immigrant workers from decolonising countries). The situationist catchphrase ‘the colonisation of everyday life’ needs to be interpreted in the light of the cultural changes that followed on the heels of decolonisation. Spectacularly diverting attention away from the raging wars in the colonies, French postwar culture is saturated with spectacular forms of ‘communication’ – from cybernetically-inspired proto-participatory art forms to French New Wave cinema to the more traditionally unidirectional and mind-numbing TV appearances of de Gaulle.

62 For an estimation of Brecht’s method in relation to the avant-garde, and with a view to the specifically, see Bernes 2018.
63 Rasmussen 2016, p. 105.
64 A dialectic that is brilliantly explored in Ross 1996, and Feldman 2014.
The task of the avant-garde, according to the S1, was not to invent new aesthetic forms of immersive communicative experience, but to challenge the reign of passivity in all domains, the arts included. In fact, Debord would claim (referring to the upheavals in Congo) that the only ‘worthy sequel’ to the historical avant-garde’s affront to the capitalist order is ‘the spontaneous revolt of a people’. The Congolese, according to Debord, had successfully appropriated ‘the foreign language of the masters as poetry and as a form of action’:

We should respectfully study the expression of the Congolese during this period to recognise in it the greatness and effectiveness (cf. the role of the poet Lumumba) of the only possible communication that, in all cases, accompanies intervention in events and the transformation of the world.

Echoing Marx’s famous Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, Debord aligns the S1’s programme of ‘realised poetry’ with ‘intervention in events’ and the ‘transformation of the world’. Contrary to the idea that the S1 adhered to ‘the safest possible understandings of capitalism, rather than to start from the position and the struggle of the oppressed’, it is clear from the above – and from many other anti-colonial texts by the S1 – that the transformation of the world implied supporting ongoing struggles abroad. But, unlike many on the French Left at the time, Debord was not content with a Third Worldist perspective. Because their views were somewhat at odds with the current political views of the time, Sophie Dolto and Nedjib Sidi Moussa argue in their study of the S1’s anti-colonialism that ‘the S1’s uncompromising internationalism ... has been either forgotten or construed as a Eurocentric archaism, which might

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66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 The S1 repeatedly analysed anti-colonial upheavals ranging from Algeria to Congo, as well as riots springing from the Black civil rights movement in the USA. For the S1, these struggles formed a revolutionary continuum in what Erick Corrêa calls their ‘double socio-political critique. The S1 aimed at a ‘total decolonisation of life’ and rejected both the ‘colonisation of everyday life’ within the capitalist metropoles as well as the militaristic and nationalistic ideologies of national-liberation movements abroad. See Corrêa 2023.
69 Andrea Gibbons claims that the S1 largely ignored the anti-colonial struggles (Gibbons 2015). Recent scholarship, however, has convincingly demonstrated the S1’s internationalist perspective and their enduring commitment to global revolutionary decolonisation; see Dolto and Moussa 2020, and Corrêa 2023.
explain the enduring myth that the group was solely concerned with revolutionary movements in the developed world.\textsuperscript{70} While never losing sight of the liberation struggles abroad, one of the Si’s guiding motives throughout the 1960s was to prepare the terrain in metropolitan France for synchronous forms of action, for ‘intervention in events’ within the Hexagon itself.

The symbolic inversion between home and abroad, as pointed out by cultural theorists Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, was methodologically inherent to the (now popular) situationist praxis of \textit{détournement}, originally formulated in 1956.\textsuperscript{71} On the front cover of the issue of the post-Surrealist journal \textit{Les lèvres nues}, in which Debord and Wolman published their seminal text \textit{Mode d'emploi du détournement}, the French hexagon was fittingly ‘reoccupied, counter-colonised by Algerian place-names’.\textsuperscript{72}

The basic proposition of the Si – the goal of \textit{détournement} – was the symbolic and actual overthrow of bourgeois class rule and bourgeois ‘culture’ in one single poetic breath inspired by the ‘poet Lumumba’.\textsuperscript{73} One means to do so was to re-appropriate the ‘language’ of the historical avant-garde with the purpose of combatting and superseding apolitical experiments inspired by cybernetics and information theory in poetry and in art:

\begin{quote}
Information theory straightaway ignores the chief power of language, which lies on its poetic level: to combat and to supersede.... Despite the magnificent hypotheses of a ‘poetics of information’ (Abraham Moles), despite the moving confidence of their misinterpretation of [Kurt] Schwitters or [Tristan] Tzara, the technologians of language will never understand anything but the language of technology. They do not know who will pass judgment on all this.\textsuperscript{74}
\end{quote}

‘Intervention in events’ – in other words, \textit{practical} forms of action – became the ideal for the Si who presented themselves as the final arbiters of the truth of the avant-garde: those who would, in the final event, ‘pass judgement’.\textsuperscript{75}

The Si had a diametrically opposed view of poetics to that of Moles, who – alongside his close colleague at the New Bauhaus in Ulm, the German philosopher Max Bense – was instrumental in the attempt to scientifically

\textsuperscript{70} Dolto and Moussa \textit{2020}.

\textsuperscript{71} Toscano and Kinkle \textit{2015}, p. 19.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Internationale situationniste} \textit{2002}, p. 130.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
redefine aesthetics in information-theoretic terms. Moles’s and Bense’s novel art-theoretical agenda, ‘information aesthetics’, became the backdrop for a number of ‘participatory’ tendencies in postwar art. Much of the theoretical discourse of the s1, including the critique of cybernetics and information theory as subverting pseudo-participatory art forms and maintaining the society of the spectacle, was shaped in close dialogue with a number of these ‘new tendencies’ in contemporaneous art and aesthetic theory. The postwar avant-garde infatuation with cybernetics and information theory provides the often-overlooked subtext for a number of situationist writings that deal (even if not explicitly) with cybernetics or the question of technology more broadly. One such text, penned by Mustapha Khayati for the tenth issue of Internationale situationniste (1966), references ‘the supreme (oppressive) rationality of the cybernetic machine’ in the context of the bourgeoisie’s bid to hold on to power through an ‘electronic’ capturing of language. Khayati’s text, which Debord also worked through before publication, underscores how the situationist analysis of the dual operations of spectacle and power – as analysed by Debord and Vaneigem respectively – were sometimes abridged to the rather opaque concept of ‘cybernetics’.

The critique of cybernetics, then, can hardly be understood without reference to the fact that so many artists at the time were heavily inspired by cybernetics and by Moles’s ‘information aesthetic’ reconceptualisation of art. Artists championing these ‘new tendencies’, most notably the GRAV collective, were generally concerned less with producing ‘works of art’ than with facilitating an open-ended process of artistic research that could feed into newly automated lines of mass production. This was a kind of cybernetically-reloaded constructivism that began from the phantasy of ‘full automation’ or work-without-human-interference, and which affirmed the historical avant-garde’s art-into-life programmatic head-on (with little or no

76 Asger Jorn was particularly vocal in his critique of Ulm and of ‘information aesthetics’. Jorn’s polemics against the New Bauhaus constitutes a sort of historical preamble to the critique of cybernetics outlined in this article. For an in-depth account of this particular aspect of Jorn’s thought, see Kurczynski 2014.

77 For a history of participatory art, see Bishop 2012.

78 Historically, the term ‘new tendencies’ refers to a group of artists from former Yugoslavia that linked up with like-minded spirits elsewhere in Europe to form an international art movement comprising artists from groups such as the German group ZERO, Italian groups N and T, the Spanish Equipo 57, and, most importantly perhaps, the s1’s main artworld antagonist, the Paris-based Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel (GRAV) (Medosch 2016). For a comprehensive sourcebook on N and T, which also includes several key texts by Moles, see Rosen (ed.) 2011.

concern that this ‘life’ was premised on capitalist social relations of production). By contrast, the S1, as they stated in a key text entitled ‘The Situationists and Automation’ (1958), claimed that ‘the value of automation’ depended ultimately on the ability to creatively ‘supersede it and open the way for the expression of human energies on a higher plane’.80 The ‘failure to confront the possibilities of our time’, as the text that was originally authored by Asger Jorn states, ‘is symptomatic of the old avant-gardes’.81 In contrast to emerging forms of cybernetic collectivism, whose stated goal was for their ‘artistic research’ to become a motor for industrial progress, the S1 refused assimilation to the neo-avant-garde by continuing to insist on the need for a political rather than a technological revolution. And this insistence, importantly, took place at a point when the concept of revolution, like that of the avant-garde itself, was being transformed and depoliticised. Increasingly over the course of the 1960s, as the idea of communism yielded to that of communication, ‘revolution’ came to signify scientific and technological progress instead of the overthrow of power and the abolition of class society that was the explicit objective of many historical avant-garde movements from Constructivism to Surrealism and Dada. To the S1, most postwar artists and intellectuals had too willingly accepted their defeat and allowed the avant-garde’s revolutionary language to be emptied of historical and political significance, reduced to the cybernetic language of ‘communication’. One question, however, remains unanswered: if the situationist critique of cybernetics, as I have argued in this article, often functioned in situationist discourse as a shorthand for what would soon be more consistently referred to by the concept of ‘the spectacle’, why did the reference to cybernetics as a trope for late capitalist forms of oppression seemingly fall out of use? In Debord’s book, *The Society of the Spectacle*, for instance, the term ‘cybernetics’ is only mentioned in passing as a subfield of the ‘specialised science of domination’.82 One possible explanation for this term falling out of use in the S1’s critical discourse, and in Debord’s work specifically, is that it was seen as rooted in the sociology fads of the day, inseparable from the rise of structuralism as a dominant paradigm of French university thought (which Debord criticises at length in his writings of the 1960s). Debord and the S1 apparently felt that, to contest social domination, they had to intervene strategically in the discursive underpinnings of contemporary forms of spectacular power. As Khayati put it with regard to the cybernetic capturing of words and the situationist attempt to combat this seizure of language: ‘each

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80 Jorn 2006, p. 56.
81 Ibid.
82 Debord 1994, § 42, p. 29.
word has an “ideological” meaning for power and a real meaning that we think corresponds to real life in the present historical phase. In this light, the critique of cybernetics, which then functioned like a master-concept for sociologists as well as for artists, is arguably the unspoken subtext of Debord’s largely Hegelian-Marxist rethinking of the role of postwar science, technology, media and art under the heading of ‘the spectacle’.

Read against the backdrop of what the SI conceived as the neo-avant-garde’s uncritical alignment with the historical transformation of French society at large, its bureaucratisation and ‘cybernetisation’, the turn of phrase on the poster ‘EN ATTENDANT LA CYBERNÉTIQUE, LES FLICS’ (WAITING FOR CYBERNETICS, THE COPS), acquires more historical depth than an implied reference to Samuel Beckett’s contemporaneous play Waiting for Godot (in French translation, En attendant Godot). From within the history of the revolutionary avant-garde tradition, the phrasing ‘en attendant’ evokes the internal dispute between two fractions of the Surrealist movement in the late 1920s over whether to join ranks with the French Communist Party (PCF) and put themselves at the ‘service of the revolution’.

As chronicled in the earliest histories of Surrealism, and handed down to posterity as an episode that sums up the existential conflict between aesthetic autonomy and political engagement, André Breton defended his personal views, contra fellow surrealist Pierre Naville, that while ‘waiting [en attendant]’ for power to be wrested from the bourgeoisie and handed over to the proletariat in an act of political revolution, it was no less important that ‘the experiences of inner life [be] pursued, and, naturally, without any interference from outside, not even Marxist’. For Breton and his fraction of Surrealists, in other words, the anticipation of the revolution might as well be a time for the free and unrestrained pursuit of art, unencumbered by any ideological doctrines or imposed party discipline. Naville, however, had joined ranks with the PCF and was opposed to Breton’s idea that art could be ‘revolutionary’ without aligning itself with the proletariat’s most advanced political organisations, and joining their struggle.

The SI rejected both these positions: the idea of art as a pastime for artists awaiting the revolution was as repulsive to them as the idea of joining the PCF.

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83 Khayati 2006, p. 228.
84 See the early and influential history of Surrealism by Maurice Nadeau (Nadeau 1964, pp. 100–1). This was Debord’s favourite account of the Surrealist movement.
or admitting any possible kinship with what they called ‘orthodox Marxism’. To the Si, the question of the avant-garde’s role in the revolution was as irreducible to the received wisdom of Marxism-Leninism as it was incompatible with the belief that autonomous art could function as a placeholder for the future realisation of revolutionary desire.

While Breton would have a change of heart and decide to join ranks with Naville in the PCF after all, the Si’s conflicted ultraleft ethos was based on a fundamental rejection of both terms of the Surrealist dilemma between artistic autonomy and political engagement. According to the Si, the revolution would not be a single event, a singular transfer of power and redistribution of wealth from one class to the other. In the situationist imagining of the revolution, the political takes place on all levels, all the time. It is not a matter of seizing the means of production, but of transforming everyday life. Hence, a revolution worthy of the name would have to be the accumulative result of a series of subversive situations that would upend everyday life and put an end to the abstract forms of ‘spectacular’ social domination that characterise capitalism.

Since the advent of cybernetics and automation after the end of the Second World War, there had been a reorganisation of work and leisure that aligned with the new ‘technical’ mindset of social scientists and bureaucrats. Moles was at the forefront of what the Si perceived to be the secret plotting of a counter-revolution that, in the absence of a revolution, would result in what Debord had once described as a totalitarian and hyper-hierarchised cybernetisation ... all aspects of people’s lives controlled to perfection and decimated to a maximum state of passivity both in automated production and in a sphere of consumption oriented entirely to the mechanisms of the spectacle by the latter’s owners.

In a case of supreme historical irony, Debord’s worst fears that the ‘cyberneticians’ were advancing a counter-revolutionary scheme to which society would have to conform was, at least rhetorically, confirmed in a speech that Moles delivered to his artist network in Zagreb in the late summer of 1968 – precisely as the final flourish of May ’68 revolutionary enthusiasm was being quelled by the news of Soviet tanks crushing the rebellion in Czechoslovakia. Moles, as

85 For a history of the Si’s relationship to the French ultraleft, see Simon 2015.
stoically unmoved by the political turbulence of his time as his friend Grappin had appeared to be in the Nanterre poster, proclaimed:

We are currently experiencing a new revolution…. A revolution of automation, of artificial thought, of symbiosis with the machines and of mastery of communication: that is precisely what we have referred to, for quite a few years now, as a ‘secret revolution’, because those that are taking part in it, all of us, are not even conscious of it. In the age in which we find ourselves, a change is operative that will naturally impact our consciousness and determine what we become: from now on, this revolution which has been concealed, occulted, and diffused, emerges as one of the determining factors of the world of tomorrow.87

Moles’s stern faith in a ‘secret revolution’ is still with us today in the AI-discourse that sees technical progress as unidirectional, inevitable, natural and unstoppable. By contrast, the situationist portrait of power, the contours of which have been outlined in this article, insists that there is nothing natural about the way in which ‘cybernetic’ technology is used, now more than ever, to weave the practices of policing ever closer into the texture of everyday life.

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87 Moles 1968, p. 6.


