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The Situationist International in Britain

Modernism, Surrealism, and the Avant-Gardes

Sam Cooper

The Situationist International in Britain

This book tells, for the first time, the story of the Situationist International's influence and afterlives in Britain, where its radical ideas have been rapturously welcomed and fiercely resisted. The Situationist International presented itself as the culmination of the twentieth century avant-garde tradition—as the true successor of Dada and Surrealism. Its grand ambition was not unfounded. Though it dissolved in 1972, generations of artists and writers, theorists and provocateurs, punks and psychogeographers have continued its effort to confront and contest the 'society of the spectacle'. This book constructs a long cultural history, beginning in the interwar period with the arrival of Surrealism to Britain, moving through the countercultures of the 1950s and 1960s, and finally surveying the directions in which Situationist theory and practice are being taken today. It combines agile historicism with close readings of a vast range of archival and newly excavated materials, including newspaper reports, underground pamphlets, psychogeographical films, and experimental novels. It brings to light an overlooked but ferociously productive period of British avant-garde practice, and demonstrates how this subterranean activity helps us to understand postwar culture, late modernism, and the complex internationalization of the avant-garde. As popular and academic interest in the Situationists grows, this book offers an important contribution to the international history of the avant-garde and Surrealism. It will prove a valuable resource for researchers and students of English and Comparative Literature, Modernism and the Avant-Gardes, Twentieth Century and Contemporary History, Cultural Studies, Art History, and Political Aesthetics.

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Introduction

'Seen from over here', postulated a British ex-member of the Situationist International in 1974,

> the SI has a lot to answer for: it has spawned a whole stew of "revolutionary organisations", usually composed of half a dozen moralists of the transparent relationship; these have inevitably foundered after a few months—though not without bequeathing weighty self-criticisms to a breathless posterity. Idiots. Worse: cures. Yet their traits are undoubtedly linked organically, genetically, to the original SI in its negative effects: the SI is responsible for its negative offspring.[1]

This anonymous verdict was made two years after the Situationist International (SI) had been disbanded, and seven years after its English Section had been expelled. The ignominy and frustration of that expulsion are evident in the writer's vituperative tone and oedipal account of the SI's influence in Britain. With more distance from the events, this book tells a different story. It does not take sides, nor attempt to weigh up the relative merits of the Continental original and the British offspring; rather, this book recognises that Anglo-Franco antagonisms spurred both to sharpen their theory and practice for the better. This book contends that the Situationist project remains of critical importance to our interrogation of the relationship between politics and aesthetics in contemporary society. More specifically, this book contends that the SI's British interlocutors help us to uncover what is alive and what is dead, what might be taken forward as well as what must be left behind, from the Situationist project.

The SI was founded in 1957 through the unification of a handful of European avant-garde groups of varying obscurity. Britain was represented by the London Psychogeographical Association, which consisted of just one member. Over the next fifteen years, the SI would develop one of the most capacious and incisive programmes of cultural critique of the second half of the twentieth century. The scope of its interests and activities is reflected in the vast range of thinkers and practitioners who have since drawn on its work: from artists to architects; philosophers to protestors; marketing executives to insurrectionary anarchists.

Less is known, however, about the Anglicised strains of Situationist activity, and what is known is known cloudily. This book charts a history of British engagements with the SI and its Surrealist precursors, and in so doing it offers a context for a wide range of contemporary cultural activity, and a new perspective on the international avant-garde tradition. It places the more familiar manifestations of British Situationist practice—punk rock, for example, and psychogeography—alongside more subterranean practices, all of which it historicises into what is increasingly recognised to be a crucial dynamic of Anglophone modernism: the long-standing tension between the institutions of British culture and Continental avant-garde excesses.

Britain versus the Avant-Garde

McKenzie Wark has called for attention to 'the supposedly minor figures' at the SI's margins. Their 'borrowing and correcting' from the SI, Wark suggests, might have more resonance today than do the group's 'great men' and its now canonical texts.[2] Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Jakob Jakobsen have recently illuminated the Scandinavian versions of the Situationist project, which dared to challenge the SI's ambivalence about the role of artistic production in the critique of capitalism.[3]

In this book are the British corollaries, whose different cultural conditions throw forth other implications and possibilities for Situationist practice. The internationalism expounded by many avant-garde movements has proven to be a complex thing for practitioners and critics to negotiate. Surrealism, for example, has been practiced and critiqued as a 'message from nowhere' and the work of 'the avant-garde at large', but what was called Surrealism in Paris in 1924 was very different to what was called Surrealism in London in 1936. As such, avant-garde internationalism must be considered alongside its dialectical counterpart—that is, the movements' origins in and responses to specific places, cultures, and histories.[4] The reception of Situationist theory by British practitioners has been more than an exercise in cultural translation; it has also been a mode of production of an identifiable British Situationist practice. The SI's conceptual product is pliant, and the process of its Anglicisation has revealed new applications as well as unforeseen aporia.

In fact, the perceived incompatibility of 'Britishness' with 'avant-gardism' serves paradoxically to privilege this particular version of the Situationist project in the re-examination of the whole. The notion that the two are incompatible has been discursively reproduced by a great many critics. One word that recurs in this book is 'peculiar'. Different aspects of British life are always being described as peculiar: its reserve, its provincialism, its much-caricatured empiricism. In the *New Left Review* in the 1960s, Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn attributed such peculiarities to the precocity of capitalism on these islands, to the absense of a completed bourgeois revolution of the type experienced in France, and to the subsequent preservation of the aristocracy and its values in unhappy harmony with those of

industrial capitalism. E.P. Thompson took issue with the Franco-centrism of their analysis, with its implication that Britain would be less peculiar if only it was more like France. Thompson agreed 'as to the mediocrity, sloth, and parochialism of much contemporary British thought', but he did not agree that British empiricism would be overcome by dismissing the idiosyncratic character and vernacular idiom of British working-class resistance in favour of 'some tarted-up Sartrean neologisms.'[5]

More recently, Martin Puchner has offered another account of how British peculiarity has precluded a productive relationship with the transformative aspirations of social movements from the Continent. From Wyndham Lewis onwards, Puchner argues, British artists have 'reacted *to and against* the various avant-gardes' that constitute what Peter Bürger has described as the historical avant-garde tradition, based around the Futurist—Dadaist—Surrealist axis.[6] While this 'to and against' relation is prescient, the history told in this book challenges Puchner's broader context of the 'rear-guardism of British modernism'. British modernism's rear-guard position, he writes,

> is a defensive formation that places itself within the field of advancement but is sceptical of its most extreme practitioners; it seeks to correct and contain the avant-garde's excesses without falling behind and losing touch with it entirely.[7]

Meanwhile, in *Romantic Moderns* (2010), Alexandra Harris documents what she describes as 'a modern English renaissance' that took place in the late 1930s, when British artists, writers, and architects turned back towards 'the local' and 'the particular', which had supposedly been so derogated by the abstractions and the internationalism of high modernism and the historical avant-garde. Harris quotes the painter Paul Nash, who asked in 1932 'Whether it is possible to "go modern" and still "be British" […] The battle lines have been drawn up: internationalism versus an indigenous culture; renovation versus conservatism; the industrial versus the pastoral; the functional versus the futile.'[8] Harris chooses to focus on figures like John Piper, Graham Sutherland, and John Betjeman. As the Second World War approached, Harris argues, these 'Artists who had previously felt compelled to disguise themselves as avant-garde Frenchmen were now to be found on English beaches sheltering their watercolours from the drizzle.'[9]

The British Situationists documented in this book certainly did not consider the SI too extreme, as in Puchner's account; for them, the SI was often not extreme enough. Likewise, those British Situationists followed in the footsteps of British Surrealists of the 1930s, who themselves were not simply waiting to drop the avant-garde façade and return to their rain-soaked watercolours, as in Harris's account. The various efforts to develop a British Situationist practice provide an opportunity to reassess the relation between Britishness and avant-gardism—to move away from Nash's dichotomies, or at least towards an understanding of their dialectic relation. To revisit these

moments of British negotiations with an avant-garde tradition characterised as quintessential European, if not French, is to reconsider the discursive reproduction of 'Britishness' and the international character of the latter. The point is not to defend Britishness in a parochial, anti-cosmopolitan, or otherwise nationalist manner. Rather, the point is to demonstrate what avant-garde internationalism has gained from translations and exchanges across different geocultural contexts.[10]

Late and Belated Modernisms

We must think historically. We cannot fully understand the Situationist project if we look only at its manifestations in and around Paris, nor if we divorce it from the historical avant-garde tradition of the earlier twentieth century. For those reasons, this book constructs a long history. It begins with the arrival of Surrealism to Britain in the 1930s, twenty years before the SI was founded, but it looks to make much deeper historical connections. Resistance to the enclosure of common land for private interests in the eighteenth century, for example, was as much of an influence on British Situationists in the 1960s as were contemporary events across the Channel.

Nonetheless, the Situationist project remained distinctly modernist in its concerns and methods, even though its modernism was not the modernism of its prewar antecedents. The 'enabling conditions' of modernism—for Perry Anderson, these include the existence of a bourgeois industrial order alongside the socioeconomic institutions that it failed to entirely surpass, the incomplete arrival of mechanisation, and the possibility, real or imagined, of revolution—had changed into something different by the time the Situationists appeared.[11] They would describe the new conditions as the 'spectacle', and they recognised that this spectacle required a new set of responses from a revolutionary avant-garde movement. Revolutionary organisations, wrote the SI's Guy Debord, 'can no longer combat alienation by means of alienated forms of struggle.'[12]

As the conditions of early twentieth century modernity developed into the conditions of spectacle, the historical avant-garde and its tactics became increasingly remote. To paraphrase T.S. Eliot, the Situationists knew more than the Surrealists did: the Surrealists' fate was that which the Situationists knew.[13] The Situationists studied and critiqued the shortcomings of Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism. With a programme that corrected its precursors' errors, the SI presented itself as the culmination of the historical avant-garde tradition, that is, as the fullest realisation of a radical modernism whose end goal was, following Arthur Rimbaud, to change life.

Many critics have come to agree that the SI stood at the cusp of an epistemological shift. Some have described that shift as one from modernism to postmodernism, but this book joins with others who argue that modernism never really went away, it just entered a different cycle: 'late modernism', understood as both period and aesthetic category.[14] The Situationist project,

and the ways that it continues to be adopted and adapted by practitioners with congruent ambitions but wildly different tactics, demonstrates how vital, radical, and open modernism remains.

In contrast to the commentator who began this introduction, the art historian T.J. Clark has continued to defend the SI even though he too was expelled as part of its English Section in 1967. He and fellow expellee Donald Nicholson-Smith have written that, back in the 1960s, Left organisations in Britain attempted to 'discredit' the philosophy of the Situationists by labelling it as a mere infantile disorder.[15] Such organisations, not least the New Left, refused 'to entertain the idea that the ground and form of the "political" was shifting, maybe terminally, in ways that put the Left's most basic assumptions in doubt.'[16] What the SI offered, unpalatable to the New Left, was a holistic perspective 'intended to keep the habit of totalization alive'—a habit inherited from radical modernism and its outlier avant-garde movements. But the SI also made clear 'what a labor of rediscovery and revoicing (indeed, of restating the obvious) that project would now involve'.[17]

Late modernism is predicated on precisely that effort to continue the modernist project even, or particularly, when it appears to have been defeated. Late, in this case, has the association of both 'belated' (which is why avant-garde activity in perennially late Britain illustrates late modernism so well) and 'late style', as in the mature style that comes after much practice. For earlier cycles of modernism, with their emphasis on novelty and rupture, the problems of predecessors were less pressing. As André Breton wrote, 'When it comes to revolt, none of us have any need of ancestors.'[18] But what happens when Breton is your ancestor? How can you maintain the 'anti-tradition' of the avant-garde? Joshua Clover has recently written about the 'genealogical avant-garde' in contemporary Anglophone poetry, which makes its claims 'largely by reference to previous avant-gardes'. The genealogical avant-garde, he continues, is defined by a contradiction: 'it has no choice but to affirm the very cultural continuity which it must also claim to oppose.'[19]

One example of the shift from a modernist paradigm to a late modernist one comes by way of what this book calls 'the dissolution of the avant-garde', that is, the continuation of avant-garde practice in the absence of self-identifying avant-garde groups or 'isms'. One of the realisations of the British practitioners who observed the SI was that they could not mimic the militaristic group organisation that it had inherited from the historical avant-garde tradition. The form was dated, alienated. Its familiarity and comprehensibility contradicted Situationist theory that elsewhere celebrated clandestinity. British Situationists sought new forms of social presence, and explored what type of activity might correspond with a more clandestine, invisible, or spectral avant-garde. In such instances, this book questions whether 'rear-guard' and 'belated' are historiographically useful accounts of British modernism. Perhaps the essentially patrilinear model of avant-garde

succession is itself a problem. Certainly, processes of Anglicisation that divert the Situationist project into other historical currents have amplified rather than contained the resonances of avant-garde praxis.

The Problem of Récupération

As it moves through its historical narrative, this book introduces key concepts, texts, and moments from the SI's existence. Those concepts include spectacle and situation, and dérive and détournement, though particular attention is given to the concept of récupération (hereafter recuperation). This concept has come to dominate and debilitate discourse about the avant-garde tradition as a whole. The Situationists used the term to discuss how critical practices become co-opted by the institutions and regimes that those practices once opposed. It is a key mechanism of the spectacle, which uses recuperation where other regimes use censorship, coercion, or violence against their opponents. It is also a central concept of late modernism, because it provides one account of what happened to earlier cycles of modernism. But the recuperation of the avant-garde has become a trope within critical discourse, taken as an historiographical fact.

The SI was tactically hyperbolic about the extent of recuperation. As a result, the post-SI discourse of recuperation has tended to lack nuance. It has become a truism to declare the SI as well as the whole avant-garde tradition to be recuperated. This truism appeared to be vindicated by the designation of Guy Debord as a French 'National Treasure' when his archive was acquired by the Bibliothèque nationale de France in 2011. The Dadaist Hans Richter had already argued that the avant-gardes of the second half of the twentieth century had replaced the 'uncompromising revolt' of the historical avant-garde with 'unconditional adjustment.'[20] Drawing a clear distinction between the historical avant-gardes and hollowed-out, recuperated 'neo' avant-gardes, Peter Bürger's landmark *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1972) also constructed an historiography based on what Benjamin Buchloh later called a 'fiction of the origin as a moment of irretrievable plenitude and truth.'[21]

Taking recuperation as an inevitable and unavoidable mechanism of spectacular society, recent schools of critical theory have retreated to an untenable position that at times dismisses the very possibility of critical art today—that is, the possibility of aesthetic experiences that are antagonistic to or profoundly irreconcilable with the 'lifeless bright sameness' of the market and bourgeois ideology.[22] Such experiences are dismissed either as always-already recuperated, or as replacements or even obstructions to effective and authentic political action. This position is untenable because it allows only a 'consolatory role for the aesthetic', and ignores the irreducibility, specificity, and variety of aesthetic experience.[23] This position has taken the SI's tactical hyperbole literally; a different response, undertaken by this book, is to put pressure on the SI's discourse of recuperation, while also exploring other possible responses to what is nonetheless a very real phenomenon.

This book thus seeks to develop a more sophisticated theory of recuperation, which might be able to destabilise its assumed inevitability in the same manner as the SI sought to destabilise the reified status of the spectacle. Because the SI had observed Surrealism's fate, it was deeply conscious of its own recuperation in the future. In the very first article of the first issue of its journal, it lamented the transformation of Surrealist automatic writing into 'brainstorming', as just one example of a once-revolutionary practice becoming yet more fodder for advertising.[24] Even in its inaugural texts, the SI anticipated the time when it would become as recuperated as the movements that preceded it. Frances Stracey has observed that 'this self-consciousness of the condition of failure was fundamental to the SI's sense of their past'; we might add that it was also a particular late modernist anxiety.[25] The SI's 1961 conference in Gothenburg, which we'll revisit frequently in the coming chapters, was an important moment because in that conference's debates a paradox of Situationist aesthetic theory became clear: the SI did not trust aesthetic representation in an age of spectacle, but it had only aesthetic representation to articulate that distrust. However, the SI's anxiety about recuperation was not necessarily pessimistic or defeatist, but tactical, a type of hyperconsciousness used as a guard against reification.

Not only did British Situationists need to negotiate the SI's complex anxieties about recuperation, but they also needed to establish their own relationship to the concept. Some of their responses included invisibility to avoid the spectacle, vulgarity to repel it, and intense formal reflexivity to sabotage it. These will be explored in due course.

But beyond its effort to document and to catalogue, this book seeks to challenge the hegemonic account of recuperation. After all, in the SI's analysis, the spectacle, the mediation of lived experience by representations, is not infallible. Capital's colonisation of social life is not irreversible. Stracey puts a lot of stock in a wonderful phrase used by the SI on this same point: 'the reversible coherence of the world.'[26] The SI's immanent critique of the spectacle involved appropriating already-existing materials and rearranging them to reveal the contingency of their present arrangement and thus the possibility of interrupting the reproduction of spectacular ideology and, even more, the possibility of a different organisation of social life. The SI gave the name détournement to this tactic, which 'reradicalises previous critical conclusions that have been petrified into respectable truths and thus transformed into lies.'[27] However, all of the SI's most vital tactics work on the same principle: the constructed situation, from which the group took its name, is a transitory moment in which social relations beyond the spectacle's reach might be experienced. As was often the case, the idea wasn't entirely original. Many avant-gardes had used similar tactics, described by Viktor Shklosky as ostranenie, or defamiliarisation. That Surrealism had its own versions of détournement, revived and revised by the SI, is evidence in itself that recuperation is never final or complete.

In particular, this book intervenes into what have become reified and dead-end debates about recuperation to propose that it might not be

teleological, but rather ontological. Recuperation might not occur in time and once and for all, but instead it might be a condition discursively reproduced by the avant-gardes and their commentators. The afterlives of any given aesthetic object cannot be foretold, nor can its recuperation be measured in any objective way.[28] As Paul Mann, whose *Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (1991) is also wary of the hegemonic discourse of recuperation, has observed: 'The avant-garde's historical agony is grounded in the brutal paradox of an opposition that sustains what it opposes precisely by opposing it.'[29] The common ground, the source of the paradox, is for Mann that both bourgeois society and the avant-garde are both discursive economies. So, as the avant-garde continues to generate discourse about the overcoming of bourgeois society, it also—paradoxically—contributes to the maintenance of the latter's own discursive economy. Mann does note, however, that Russian avant-gardes have not yet been recuperated into 'official culture'. Recuperation, therefore, appears to be somehow specific to Western, late capitalism, and therefore contingent.[30]

To demystify recuperation would allow us to rethink avant-garde historiography without recuperation as its propulsive mechanism, and to reconsider the assumed inevitability of recuperation. It would also allow us to reconsider what might be the concerns of a radical aesthetic practice today—that is, in today's conditions, but also in relation to a reconceptualised history of the avant-garde that recognises its later twentieth century manifestations not as degraded repetitions but as late modernist revisions. The form of this book contributes to that reassessment. A narrative method is not adequate to account for a model of avant-garde influence that is not linear but is diffuse, recurrent, and radically revisionist. The book's final chapter abandons a narrative method, and foregoes a decisive conclusion. The story is not yet over.

Towards a Heretical Method

To complement its intervention into avant-garde historiography, and its suggestion that maybe, just maybe, the SI was not entirely correct about recuperation, the book undertakes a heretical reading of the Situationist project. It explores new archives that suggest patterns of influence beyond the oedipal rebellion that so troubles the British ex-Situationist above; more than that, the book submits those archives to what another of the book's subjects calls, in a different context, a 'relentless though appreciative critique'.[31]

The SI professed disdain for aesthetic or political specialisation, which it took to be a sign of one's failure to grasp the totality of relations within the spectacle. Nonetheless, its work has usefully been submitted to a range of specialised discourses and disciplines: artistic, architectural, urbanistic, philosophical, etc.[32] One of the ways in which this book's approach is heretical, other than not taking the SI or its followers at their word, is that it places emphasis on the discursive, rhetorical, and irreducibly literary

character of the Situationist project. Specifically, it was a late modernist literary project, focussed on the expository work of form rather than the affective or argumentative work of content.

To be 'literary', for the SI, was an insult. At the end of the 1950s, the Situationists directed that insult at the British novelists and playwrights known as the Angry Young Men, who were 'tepidly literary'. In fact, the Angry Young Men were

> particularly reactionary in attributing a privileged, redemptive value to the practice of literature, thereby defending a mystification that was denounced in Europe around 1920 and whose survival today is of greater counterrevolutionary significance than that of the British Crown.[33]

So many of this book's themes addressed in one quotation: the separation of Britain from Europe; the accusation of a supposedly countercultural element actually being recuperative; the suspicion of specialised aesthetic practice; the problem of modernism's belated arrival to monarchical Britain. But the SI's acknowledgement of the rupture that happened 'around 1920'—'in Europe' but they presume not in Britain—is key.

The practices of the SI and of British Situationists are intrinsically literary, not merely because their critiques of capitalism are informed by a wealth of literary sources, but because they acknowledge and play on their own textuality. They mobilise modes of textual representation that resist, or infer a different ontology to the spectacular phase of capitalism and its appropriation of other forms of representation. This is another lesson learned, or revised, from modernism: the Situationists use intense formal reflexivity—Clark's preferred phrase, from Adorno: 'Teach the petrified forms how to dance by singing them their own song'—to exacerbate not an aesthetic dilemma but a social one: how to overcome the misrepresentations of the spectacle?[34]

Another Situationist dictum that this book approaches with a healthy dose of heresy is the claim that 'There is no such thing as Situationism.'[35] There was to be no such thing because the emergence of the term would signal the ossification and recuperation of the group's work. But the SI was so proprietorial about its practice that, in effect, a Situationism authorised by the Paris group did emerge—and because the English Section didn't adhere to that precise Situationism, it was expelled. It might now be more useful to speak of Situationisms, as suggested by Rasmussen and Jakobsen, to account for the multiple negotiations and adaptations of the project across different contexts. Though the SI used 'International' in its title as an ironic call-back to the days of worker and communist internationals, we might take that word seriously. And at the same time, the influence of other critical approaches on Situationist theory may serve to correct some of the SI's shortcomings: the SI and many of its successors, for example, had alarmingly little to say on gender and race.