

3 The Torrent of History

A scandal: historian Stephen E. Ambrose admits that he plagiarized many passages of his book *The Wild Blue*. Ambrose's books on General Custer and Richard Nixon also turned out to contain a good few sentences derived from other works. More scandal: the historian Doris Kearns Goodwin admits that she borrowed passages in her book *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys* from three works by other authors. Still more scandal: she then concedes that in 1987 her publisher, Simon & Schuster, paid to settle a legal claim by one of them under a confidentiality agreement. She said she confused verbatim notes with her own words.¹ Take pity on our poor authors! Not even they can tell their own words from another's. They are caught between the monotonous consistency of official historical narratives and the demand that the middle-class author have a unique *vision* that is his or her personal property. No wonder they resort to copying one another. Hypocrisy is the hush money that vice pays to virtue. Given the poverty of middle-class history, perhaps what the times require is a double reappropriation: both of the history of Debord and company, and of the mode of historical thinking to which they aspired, and which they occasionally achieved.

The Marquis de Vauvenargues once wrote that “old discoveries belong less to their original inventors than to those who put them to use.” So it is with some justice that lines lifted from the soldier-aphorist should show up, with some slight but key corrections, in the *Poésies* (1870) of Isidore Ducasse, the self-styled Comte de Lautréamont (1846–90). The purpose of the *Poésies*, he wrote, was to take the most beautiful poetry and “correct it in the direction of hope.” Thus Vauvenargues' maxim “One can be just, if one is human” becomes “One can be just, if one is not human.” In a celebrated passage, Lautréamont expands on his distinctive poetics: “Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. It closely grasps an author's sentence, uses his expressions, deletes a false idea, replaces it with the right one. To be well made, a maxim does not call for correction. It calls for development.” It's a passage often taken as saying something about poetics, less often as saying something about history. Lautréamont corrects, not back to a lost purity or some ideal form, but forward—to a new possibility.

Lautréamont's best-known work is *The Songs of Maldoror* (1869), a giddy fringe-romantic epic, which includes the murder of children and sex with a shark. A drunken God presides from a throne of gold and shit. The works of Man don't amount to much, either. The pyramids of Egypt are “those anthills reared by stupidity and slavery.” It was a surrealist favorite. In a famous line, set to become a cliché, Lautréamont anticipates the surrealist aesthetic: “As beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella.”² But there was more to Lautréamont, and the Letterist International would make off with the best of it.

In a beautiful passage, Lautréamont writes:

Flights of starlings have a way of flying which is theirs alone and seems as governed by uniform and regular tactics as a disciplined regiment would be, obeying a single

leader's voice with precision. The starlings obey the voice of instinct, and their instinct leads them to bunch into the center of the squad, while the speed of their flight bears them constantly beyond it; so that this multitude of birds thus united by a common tendency towards the same magnetic point, unceasingly coming and going, circulating and crisscrossing in all directions, forms a sort of agitated whirlpool whose whole mass, without following a fixed course seems to have a general wheeling movement round itself resulting from the particular circulatory motions appropriate to each of its parts, and whose center, perpetually tending to expand but continually compressed, pushed back by the contrary stress of the surrounding lines bearing upon it, is constantly denser than any of those lines, which are themselves the denser the nearer they are to the center.

Lautréamont is here describing his own swarming poetics—only these lines are lifted straight out of the natural history writings of the Comte de Buffon.

In the early 1950s, something of a scandal ensued when it was discovered that Lautréamont had purloined some of *Maldoror's* most thrillingly poetic passages from text books. The method announced in the *Poésies* had already been practiced in *Maldoror*. Some, like the literary critic Maurice Saillet (1914–1999), felt the need to defend Lautréamont.³ Saillet was one of the founders of the self-styled College of Pataphysics. He was a noted scholar of the works of Alfred Jarry (1873–1907), to whose memory the College was consecrated. Started in 1948, the College was a playful, armchair version of the avant-garde impulse. Some of its instigators had day jobs. Others, like Jacques Prévert, Raymond Queneau or Boris Vian were well-known writers. While Saillet could defend Lautréamont in the spirit of linguistic play, the Letterist International credited him with the discovery of a more far-reaching method. Their name for it was *détournement*, as in to detour, to hijack, to lead astray, to appropriate. And it was no joke. The task was to systematize it and—more to the point—practice it.

If there was a precedent in avant-garde poetics for *détournement*, it came not from the Paris surrealists around André Breton (1896–1966) or even the dissidents around Georges Bataille (1897–1962) but from their Belgian contemporary Paul Nougé (1895–1967). It was Nougé who saw in Lautréamont not a prophet of excess but the inventor of a method. There is, he says, “a certain inclination common to a few minds which leads them to find the elements of creation as close as possible to the object to be created; to the extent that the thing to be desired would come into being by the introduction of a single comma in a page of writing; of a picture, complex in its execution, by the animation of a single stroke of black ink.”⁴ The texts Nougé corrected ranged from a Baudelaire poem to porn. Some were originally published in *Les Lèvres Nues* (1954–1958), a magazine edited by his friend Marcel Mariën. *Les Lèvres Nues* also published the text that gave this method its name: “A User's Guide to *Détournement*,” by Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman.

Gil Wolman (1929–95) was not entirely of the Saint-Germain tribe. He had a home to go to—and often brought others to crash there. He lived with his mother. His Jewish father, deported during the war, never returned. Unlike Debord he had a real gift for Letterist poetry. Where Isou chiseled it down to the letter, Wolman pushed on to a poetry of pure sounds, and on again, to a performance art of the diaphragm, of the epiglottis, of corporeality itself. He also

pushed Letterist cinema past Isou's comfort zone. Isou's *Treatise on Spit and Eternity* deployed stock footage, scratched images, discrepancies between image and sound; Wolman's *L'Anticoncept* (1950) used no images at all. Unlike Isou's macho posturing, the voice-over of Wolman's film evokes in gentle and sensuous terms the experience of wandering the streets and making love where one can: "in the rain we kiss in the parks I caress you through your dress our muscles tense on the grass ..." ⁵

Debord and Wolman both pushed Letterism against itself. "Negation is the transitional term to a new period," as Wolman had written in the preface to *L'Anticoncept*. "Negation of the intrinsic, immutable, pre-existing concept, projects this concept outside of matter, reveals it after the fact to an extrinsic reaction, becomes mutable by as many reactions." Which could be a somewhat abstract way of formulating Isou's theory of the poetry of history and the history of poetry, a key point of reference for both Debord and Wolman. For a moment during the mid 1950s Wolman and Debord's projects flowed together, but the smallest differences would end up pulling them apart. For the moment they were comrades in a civil war against a culture intent on settling for some warmed-up leftovers, banalities such as abstract painting, Beat writing, or existential philosophy, as if these would suffice to fill the void opened up by the war itself.

In "Why Letterism?" (1955) Debord and Wolman characterize the first decade after the war as a time of generalized failure to effect change and a retreat into merely formal elaboration. "One knows, moreover, to what laborious phenomenological refinements professors devote themselves, who otherwise do not dance in cellars." ⁶ Art and thought appear as a dismal mess—albeit a profitable one. "On a spiritual level, the middle class are always in power." It matters little whether the work takes the form of the bourgeois novel, socialist realist art, the literature of commitment, or the (pseudo) avant-garde: each is just a tactic for restoring middle-class sensibility. "It is necessary to finish with this spirit." This is why there was nothing for it but to join the Letterists, who at least unleashed a potentially fatal *inflation* in the arts, with their reduction of all its forms to the elementary particles of the letter. But the Letterists got caught up in their own fame. Isidore Isou and his factotum Maurice Lemaître (b. 1926) happily appear in a light entertainment called *Around the World with Orson Welles*. They don't notice Welles's sly glance to camera, that makes the viewer complicit in silent ridicule. ⁷

Letterism at least pushed formalism to the limit, where it collapsed of its own accord. It was proof of the relative independence of formal development within the arts from social and economic determination. In "Why Letterism?" Debord and Wolman steer between Isou's purely formal theory of art and Marxist determinism. Art has a relative autonomy, its forms develop in their own time, only partly coinciding with a wider historical process. Isou's theory of the formal development of art is linear and autonomous. For Debord and Wolman, development might require going back in order to go forward. For instance, the Precocity movement of the seventeenth century might now reveal itself as a great precursor, a critique in advance of capital's separation of living space from work space according to function. Despite the slanders of Molière, Precocity's devotion to strolling, to conversation, its ideas about décor and architecture, are resources for the construction of a whole attitude to life. ⁸

“We write so that our works—which are practically nonexistent—remain in history.” This is the hint in “Why Letterism?” of the significance of *détournement*, which Debord and Wolman only begin to grasp one year later in “A User’s Guide to *Détournement*” (1956). The originality of the Letterist International consists in understanding form not as literary form, in terms of genre, style, poetics and so forth, but as material form, as the book, the film, the canvas. Materiality is the key to the lag by which past culture shapes present culture. If the effects in the architectural domain seem mostly negative, there might be some hope in the lag effect of certain texts. But for past works to become resources for the present requires their use in the present in a quite particular way. It requires their appropriation as a collective inheritance, not as private property. All culture is *derivative*.

Rather than chiseling language down to its bare elements, Debord and Wolman propose something else. Not the destruction of the sign, but rather destruction of the *ownership* of the sign. “It is necessary to eliminate all remnants of the notion of personal property in this area.” *Détournement* offers “an ease of production far surpassing in quantity, variety and quality the automatic writing that has bored us for so long.” The surrealist appropriation of Lautréamont’s *Poésies* took up his cry that “poetry should be made by all” and read it through *Maldoror* as a poetry that bypassed conscious individual intention in the interests of the collective imagination.⁹ The Letterist International’s version of a poetry made by all meant two quite other things.

One is that it should be made by and for all the senses at once. Thus *dérive* as method creates psychogeography as a knowledge via which to design whole new poetic ambiances—the *unitary urbanism* anticipated by Chtcheglov. The other sense of a poetry made by all is a poetry made by the communal appropriation of the past in the present. Chombart’s aerial surveys of Paris, not to mention his detailed social science on its everyday life, is not to be quoted but appropriated, *détourned*, for not only understanding but living the city otherwise.

“Clashing head-on with all social and legal conventions,” *détournement* “cannot fail to be a powerful cultural weapon in the service of the real class struggle. The cheapness of its products is the heavy artillery that breaks through the Chinese walls of understanding. It is the real means of proletarian artistic education, the first step towards a literary communism.” The text is true to itself. Debord and Wolman took more than a few lines from Saillet’s defense of Lautréamont, and corrected, or rather, developed them. Where Saillet spoke of a communism of genius, this becomes a literary communism. The term *genius* still clings a little to the romantic idea of the text as the product of an individual author’s unique gift.

A more crucial *détournement* is from Marx and Engels’s famous *Communist Manifesto* (1848):

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians’ intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one

word, it creates a world after its own image.¹⁰

The inflation introduced by *détournement*, even more than that of Letterism, is the development that undermines bourgeois culture in turn.

Capital produces a culture in its own image, a culture of the work as private property, the author as sole proprietor of a soul as property. *Détournement* sifts through the material remnants of past and present culture for materials whose untimeliness can be utilized against bourgeois culture. But rather than further elaborate modern poetics, *détournement* exploits it. The aim is the destruction of all forms of middle-class cultural shopkeeping. As capital spreads outwards, making the world over in its image, at home it finds its own image turns against it.

It's easy to miss the significance of this claim, buried as it is in a text that spends quite a bit of time on the poetics of *détournement*. Debord and Wolman discuss a metagraphic composition by Debord—a memorial for Kaki—and the way classified ads about bars for sale contribute to the affect of a remembrance for a suicide. “A User’s Guide to *Détournement*” could be reduced, in other words, to a somewhat limited and clinical statement about *intertextuality*. Tom McDonough: “To carry class conflict into the realm of language, to insist upon the central place that realm occupied in the collective construction of the world to be made, to announce the arrival of a ‘literary communism’—these were the inseparable aims of Situationist *détournement*.”¹¹ Quite, but it is all too easy to elide the significance of literary communism, which is not merely something added to modernist poetics. It is its undoing. It brings class struggle both into and out of language.

Détournement is merely a means to an end. Literary communism is a precursor to architectural communism, to the *détournement* of built form and the ambiances it can generate. A poetry made by all and a poetry made for all the senses unite in a proposal for the “exact reconstruction in one city of an entire neighborhood of another.” An idea which, bizarrely, almost happened—although not entirely as Debord and Wolman intended. In 2008, Dubai businessman Saeed Al Ghandi signed a £350m agreement with the French city of Lyon to build a replica of it in Dubai. “He fell in love with Lyon while strolling along the river-bank,” according to José Noya, a Lyon bureaucrat. “He wants to recreate Lyon’s soul.” The idea sprang from a plan to build a university in Dubai, in partnership with the University of Lyon, that would rival Abu Dhabi’s version of the Louvre. This second Lyon would cover an area of about 700 acres, about the size of the Latin Quarter of Paris. The reproduction would not include Lyon’s sub-Corbusian tower blocks.¹²

Détournement is the opposite of quotation. Like *détournement*, quotation brings the past into the present, but it does so entirely within a regime of the proper use of proper names. The key to *détournement* is its challenge to private property. *Détournement* attacks a kind of fetishism, where the products of collective human labor in the cultural realm can become a mere individual’s property. But what is distinctive about this fetishism is that it does not rest directly on the status of the thing as a commodity. It is, rather, a fetishism of memory. It is not so much commodity fetishism as *co-memory fetishism*. In place of collective remembrance, the fetish of the proper name. The name Lyon, for instance: Al Ghandi’s project is a merely a quotation, no

matter how vast the scale. *Détournement* restores to the fragment the status of being a recognizable part of the process of the collective production of meaning in the present, through its recombination into a new meaningful ensemble.

Key to any practice of *détournement* is identifying the fragments upon which it might work. There is no particular size or shape. It could be a single image, a film sequence of any length, a word, a phrase, a paragraph. What matters is the identification of the superior fidelity of the element to the ensemble within which it finds itself. *Détournement* is in all cases a reciprocal devaluing and revaluing of the element within the development of a unifying meaning. *Détournement* is the fluid language of anti-ideology, but ideology has absolutely nothing to do with any particular arrangement of signs or images. It has to do with ownership.

Michel Foucault (1926–84) undermines the romantic theory of authorship by speaking of *discourse* as a distribution of author functions.¹³ For Foucault, a statement is authorized by a particular form of discourse, a regime of truth, a procedure for assigning truth-value to statements. It's not hard to see why this captivated the minds of academics. It made the procedures in which academics are obsessively drilled the very form of power itself. As if that by which academics are made, the molding of their bodies to desks and texts, that about which they know the most, even more than they know their allotted fields, were the very index of power. Reading Foucault is like taking a master class on how the game of scholarship is to be played, and with the reliable alibi that this knowledge of power, of knowledge as power, is to be used in the interests of *resistance* to something or other. *Détournement*, on the other hand, turns the tables, upends the game.

The device of *détournement* restores all the subversive qualities to past critical judgments that have congealed into respectable truths. *Détournement* makes for a type of communication aware of its inability to enshrine any inherent and definitive certainty. This language is inaccessible in the highest degree to confirmation by any earlier or supra-critical reference point. On the contrary, its internal coherence and its adequacy in respect of the practically possible are what validate the symbolic remnants that it restores. *Détournement* finds its cause on nothing but its own practice as critique at work in the present. *Détournement* creates anti-statements. For the Situationists, the very act of *unauthorized* appropriation is the truth content of *détournement*.

Needless to say, the best lines in this chapter are plagiarized. Or rather, they are *détourned*. (It hardly counts as plagiarism if the text itself gives notice of the offense—or does it?) Moreover, many of these *détourned* phrases have been corrected, as Lautréamont would say. Plagiarism upholds private property in thought by trying to hide its thefts. *Détournement* treats all of culture as common property to begin with, and openly declares its rights. Moreover, it treats it not as a *creative commons*, not as the *wealth of networks*, not as *free culture* or *remix culture*; but as an active place of challenge, agency, strategy and conflict.¹⁴ *Détournement* dissolves the rituals of knowledge in an active remembering that calls collective being into existence. If all property is theft, then all intellectual property is *détournement*.

Not surprisingly, official discourse has a hard time with this concept. The decline of critical theory in the postwar years is directly correlated to the refusal to confront *détournement* as the most consistent approach to a knowledge made by all. The meandering

stream that runs from the Letterist International to the Situationist International and beyond is the course not taken, and remains a troubling memory for critical thought. The path not taken poses the difficult question: what if one challenged the organization of knowledge itself? What if, rather than knowledge as a representation of another life, it is that other life?

Meanwhile, *détournement* has become a social movement in all but name. Here the Situationists stand as a prophetic pointing of the way towards a struggle for the collective reappropriation and modification of cultural material. One that need only become conscious of itself to reimagine the space of knowledge outside of private property. Every kid with a BitTorrent client is an unconscious Situationist in the making. What remains is the task of closing the gap between a critical theory gone astray, still caught up in the model of knowledge as property, and a popular movement that cannot quite develop its own consciousness of its own power. As Wolman wrote in his preface to *L'Anticoncept*, "there is no negation that does not affirm itself elsewhere." There might be a link between so-called plagiarism and progress after all.

At stake is the viability of history itself. Officially, history is a spiritless chronicle of events, one damned thing after another. It is so unsatisfying that apocalyptic thinking about time has made a big comeback. To some it seems more plausible that they will shake hands with Jesus than that they could have a hand in their own destiny. But there is official history and there are other histories, including a history of the desire not to end history but to partake of it.

The very idea of history as a process of collective self-making has itself been through a few historical stages.¹⁵ Along came Friedrich Engels (1820–95) and his mechanical time, grinding on. Then came György Lukács (1885–1971) and his expressive time, history as totality, the parts reflecting the whole. Then came Louis Althusser (1918–90) and structural time, differences meshing and permutating. Then, in desperation, some brought back from the dead Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) and his messianic time, which recasts history from the perspective of its redemption.

As the twentieth century flopped from one horror movie to the next, many gave up on history, but what looked to them like defeat was to others the napalm smell of victory. Sure, the Marxists had their history, which developed through its own internal laws of motion from feudalism to capitalism to socialism, but for Walt Rostow (1916–2003) the latter is just a wrong turn, the industrial state gone mad. The real terminus of historical action was American liberal capitalism. Or perhaps there was another stage to come, what the sociologist Daniel Bell (1919–2011) christened the *post-industrial society*.¹⁶ The computer will overcome all the alienating shortcomings of capital. Work itself will become playful and creative. Commodities will not be mass-produced but custom-made. Not socialism with a human face but capitalism with a smiley face.

The cold war was a clash of historical fictions, Marxist versus anti-Marxist. The outcome seemed far from certain. But with the memory of the communist role in the Resistance fading, Moscow's grand narrative seemed less and less appealing. This left fellow-traveling Western artists and intellectuals with few choices. One was to attach themselves to another promised land. For Régis Debray (b. 1940), this was Cuba. For Althusser this was China. The renewal of history would come via the third world's overthrow of imperialism. The revisionists left the

destination of socialism intact, just changed its address and the route to get there. Another choice was to go back to the past in search of the turning point where the narrative of history went wrong, and to become, if not the actual, then at least the spiritual inheritor of the October revolution. This was the choice of the Trotskyites. Alternatively one could abandon historical time altogether, like Jean-François Lyotard (1924–98), and announce the postmodern as a time beyond all these choruses of the grand recital of history.¹⁷

The Situationists will take another tack. They will not abandon historical thought, nor chime in with one or other chorus as the representative of its destination. To them all the capitals of this world, from Washington to Moscow to Beijing, are capitals of the same spectacular society. This tiny band would set themselves against power in its totality. A futile project, perhaps, but powerful in its very futility, in casting the whole century in negative relief. Against the abandonment of historical possibility on the left, and the triumphant declaration that this is the best of all possible worlds on the right, it's time to step back into the current. The other history, the historical practice left unexplored, restores causality but renders it fluid, complex, turbulent. But not for all that arbitrary or formless. History is no machine, no structure, nor does it call for the solace of a merely figurative redemption.

By the mid 1950s Guy Debord achieved some notoriety with his film *Howls for Sade* (1952), and drew around himself the motley collection of drunks, drifters and geniuses known as the Letterist International.¹⁸ He painted its slogan by the banks of the river Seine—"Never work!"—and did his best to live up to it. He discovered that this implied another, even harder discipline, the unwritten slogan: "Make no art!" In later life Debord would turn the milieu from which the Letterist International spawned into a legendary counterpoint to the spectacle, perhaps even more central than the legend of May '68. Yet in 1957 the Letterist world was more of a constraint on its own ambitions for upending the world. The Letterist International too had to die in the war of time. It was no longer adequate to its own discoveries.

The Letterist International passes on to the Situationist International the practice of a negative action, which lays bare the gap between everyday life in twentieth century capitalism, and what it leaves to be desired. What the Letterist International have going for them is the consistency of an everyday life lived as negation. What they do not have is either the depth of experience or the consistency of theoretical invention that might come with it. That will come from the encounter with Asger Jorn.