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Re-Reading The Situationists

Theory, Practice and the text, *The Society of the Spectacle* in Critical Perspective.

by

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This dissertation is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Wales, Newport 2006.

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Abbreviations.

The abbreviations below are used within this thesis in order to cite frequently used works. Where these abbreviations are used, they refer to either individual authors or the collective editorials of the situationists and are referenced accordingly. Full reference details will be provided in the bibliography. I intend for these abbreviations to replace the full title of unattributed situationist texts but also that the reading is simplified in terms of the nature of the length of the titles of various texts. All abbreviations refer to the collective works of the situationists and all are accessible via <http://members.optusnet.com.au/~rkeehan/>

<i>SS</i>	Society of the Spectacle
<i>P/Pot.</i>	Preface to the Potlatch
<i>Comments</i>	Comments on the Society of the Spectacle
<i>Cap.</i>	Captive Words
<i>Thesis</i>	Thesis on Cultural Revolution
<i>Preface</i>	Italian Preface to the Fourth Edition of Society of the Spectacle
<i>Rumours</i>	Selected Rumours
<i>Decomposition.</i>	In and Against Decomposition
<i>Stud.pov.</i>	On Student Poverty
<i>Report.</i>	Report on the Construction of Situations
<i>Avant-Garde</i>	The Avant-garde is undesirable
<i>Judgements.</i>	For a Revolutionary Judgement of Art
<i>Repetition</i>	Repetition and novelty in the constructed situation
<i>Dérive</i>	Theory of the Dérive
<i>Introduction</i>	Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography
<i>R/ Pot</i>	The Role of the Potlatch then and now
<i>I.S.</i>	Articles used from Internationale Situaitioniste
<i>New Forms of Action</i>	The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Art and Politics
<i>Moments</i>	The Theory of Moments and the Construction of Situations
<i>Questionnaire CSE</i>	Response to a questionnaire from the Center for Socio-Experimental Art.

Introduction

The Situationist movement can be seen as an artistic avant-garde group whose field of operation remained, and still does, within contemporary social organisation. They exist as a self proclaimed revolutionary group tied to a vein of experimental investigation, searching for the possible ways to unlock the technological advances that lay within capitalism. What inspired their search is an insight into capitalist relations which declares that capitalism, rather than meeting its own concept of complete freedom and choice within the wide possibilities of technological and material freedoms, operates within the realms of a spectacle of life; an abstract image of living, that represses the real and ephemeral possibilities of time and space. The situationist's search for technological and material freedom, apart from that offered under this spectacle of life, enlivens the possibility for constructing everyday life free from the historical hardships and pressures of immediate social and physical survival. As a result of the contestation that emerges from these insights, the situationists have paid their part in contributing to the developing forms of theoretical and practical revolutionary contestation that emerged most notably in the twentieth century.

The intensity of the situationists' project centres on their express purpose to rediscover and realise complete social change. However, as progenitors of the avant-garde, the situationists believe that they offer a pioneering and innovative system of analysis that fuses both art and creative human passions. This fusion suggests that art carries with it the human ability to realise the *full universal*,

practical potential of the technological abilities within a social system. By contextualising art and the creative possibilities of artists within the abilities of the capitalist productive system, the situationists argued that they had identified the historical foundations for realising social change. Moreover, they claimed that the fusion of art and the expansive ability of capitalist production could, once and for all, liberate humanity from the survival imperative premised on basic, material survival to unbridled survival of passions and desires.

As a result of their early contestation, the situationist's analysis of contemporary society, while being straightforward and simple, is nonetheless very effective at dismantling the mystical forms that they claim represent and mediate social relations (Plant, 1992). However, a simplistic approach to understanding *how* the situationists developed this understanding of social relations, rather than highlighting their depth and complexity, inspires instead a certain avant-garde 'simplicity'. Such a simplistic approach has often resulted in many studies attempting to unravel the situationist legacy by presenting them as a post-avant-garde movement whose heritage and legacy stretches from the surrealist and dadaist movements, and leaving it at this. Caught in this 'revolutionary' style, they have found themselves inheriting an 'artistic tradition' that seeks to reflect and lament on the lost pleasures of the everyday; of the loss of critique in art, spontaneity, and the hedonistic desires that have long come to represent the interests of the artistic avant-gardes.

The application of a purely artistic or aesthetic aspiration to the situationists also serves well to keep their revolutionary movement largely unrecognised within

the more 'serious' realms of contemporary critical discourse. The results of what can only be described as a combined misrepresentation has given them a largely hidden role "in the development of twentieth-century culture and politics" (Plant, 1992 p.1). As a result, critical theorists who reject their theories out of hand either completely ignore the historical foundation of situationist ideas of social organisation, or, just as problematically, their revolutionary movement and ideas are shielded by any number of admirers who stubbornly guard and elevate both their analysis and practice away from close scrutiny. Inevitably, much of what exists as an understanding of their work remains tied to post-situationist movements which receive little in the way of serious attention. Furthermore, while there is a growing interest in terms of serious academic debate, this attention still suffers by the misrepresentations that the situationists as a movement face and therefore only occupies, I want to argue, the smallest proportion of attention that the situationist legacy deserves.

There is little doubt then that any serious analysis of the situationists must, in order to understand their whole programme of social critique, resist presenting their works in neither artistic, philosophical nor theoretical terms alone. Moreover, it is by no accident, too, that to access the influences that underpin such theories and practices, often means transgressing certain contemporary boundaries and limits that are experienced by remaining within either this artistic or philosophical interpretation of their ideas. One such boundary that is *given* to the situationists is their separation from their 'unofficial leader', Guy Debord.

A particular process of separation between their ideas of both theory and practice had always been anticipated by the situationists, and, in many regards, this separation is evident in the recent attempts to either explain their theory and practice by referring to their avant-garde forms alone; that is, by a simplistic appeal to revolutionary groups to realise artistic, avant-garde abandon as a revolutionary tactic in itself. Alternatively, other theorists and writers attempt to understand Debord as a philosophical master apart from the situationists; a modern Marx leaving Debord as the icon, the theoretical mastermind who co-ordinated the practical situationists to good effect¹. Debord remains in this position primarily due to the academic or nostalgic desire to equate him with a mastery of thought that is seldom related to or articulated within the originality of situationist ideas and terms. The seriousness of Debord seems more often to be understood by separating his analysis of contemporary social organisation; his theoretical analysis of capitalist relations, from that of the artistic and aesthetic 'bohemianism' of the avant-garde situationists, and, as a result, is elevated to the lofty heights of grand philosophy. However, I want to argue in this thesis that while this separation is surely justified on certain grounds, Debord does rise above and beyond the situationists on a number of theoretical and practical issues. To leave these separations unresolved risks losing sight of the precise unity Debord, and indeed other situationists, attempted to achieve with their own analysis of capitalist society.

¹ Anselm Jappe and Len Bracken are examples of this where their works seem to focus on Debord rather than on Debord's unwavering efforts at contextualising himself as a situationist.

Practice and Theory, Bridging the Divide

There exists no shortage of commentary that recognises that both Debord and the situationists believed that their theories, their ideas, and the critical apprehension of contemporary capitalism could only be found by maintaining a unity with a *practical* understanding of these very same ideas. Seeking understanding, and thus moving towards a resolution of the separation that the situationists claimed revolutionaries experienced within modern capitalism, they argued that their theories and ideas are understandable, are only possible, through practical “acts of rebellion, subversion and negation which foreshadowed it and continue to assert the discontent and disrespect inspired by the economic, social and discursive relations which define contemporary capitalism” (Plant, 1992 p.1). The situationists claim that such acts of rebellion and subversion can emerge with practices such as the construction of situations, the *dérive* and *détournement* and as such, are vital to their overall programme of social contestation. However, as practical acts, they are rarely expanded by exponents of post-situationist theory, beyond a descriptive discussion of what these actions involve.

It would seem that these engagements with the surrounding material world are in fact critical attempts at securing means or modes of action that move individuals beyond a purely descriptive realm of thought and towards a critical apprehension of the forms of social organisation that exist under the spectacle. These acts are an attempt to evoke a certain revelation or insight into the possibilities of an alternative mode of social organisation. Such practices form a central role in situationist activity and will, in due course, receive the explanation

they deserve. However, while this may form part of a wider recognition of the situationists' theoretical and practical agitation, there is still, I want to suggest, a reluctance to study Debord's work within the wider ambit and unity of situationist ideas *and* practice. Debord still remains, and this is widely acknowledged², apart and distant from the very group of which he was irreducibly a part. This I aim to address within the body of this thesis

This misconception of Debord's contribution to situationist theory, as I claim it, remains because much of the existing forms of analysis of situationist and Debordian ideas maintains a separation between the artistic side of the avant-garde situationists and the philosophical mastery of Debord. This seems to avoid the potential of placing these same ideas within the context of a totality of practical and theoretical subversion that I want to claim is evident in Debord's text. This is despite the efforts of Debord and the situationists warning of the dangers of separating their revolutionary ideas from the conscious, practical and material means towards actualising these ideas in post-modern capitalism (I.S.# 9 1964, Questionnaire). Once these ideas have separated from their source of realisation; the technological, material and aesthetic possibilities of contemporary social organisation, then so too, they argue, enters a more decisive loss of revolutionary understanding. Moreover, this can only lead as it has, to a devalued understanding of Debord's position on the real issues that underpin his text, *The Society of the Spectacle (SOTS)*.

² The bureau of Public Secrets and Situationist International Online are two very good websites which attempt to deal with both Debord and the situationists collecting a very wide range of situationist and post situationist works.

The real issue that underpins SOTS, however, is Debord's attempt to avoid a purely descriptive discussion of the situationists and their practical acts of rebellion. He always knew that a descriptive explanation of social organisation was never enough given that the situationists were regarded by Debord as the most radical practitioners of theory of this century (Debord 1979, Preface). Therefore, if he was to engage in a text of theory, then he too had to inspire a practical element; an element that I want to argue remains as a central reference point of both situationist theory and practice.

Understanding Debord's commitment to theory, I want to suggest, is fundamentally important for an analysis of his text because without situationist practice, without the complex engagements with practice and play, Debord's presentation of *situationist* theory can only remain one element of the situationist's collective attempt to explain social organisation as a spectacle. Simply put, his theory would remain descriptive. The theory contained in SOTS, therefore, remains as just one element in a complex set of interactions whereby Debord's text is a "communication containing its own critique" (Questionnaire, CSE 1964) and this is discovered within the practical confrontations between Debord's theses and elements of situationist practice contained within the text's *structure*.

This is why I have committed my thesis to an analysis and re-examination of Debord's text alone. That is, I want to show that a critical examination of SOTS is essential to the understanding of the situationist movement as a whole. The most accurate and *un-polluted* way of achieving this is to examine SOTS within the communication and critique that Debord lays within his text in its written

form but also within its structure. That is, I want to show not only why, but equally *how*, Debord cannot be read in the singularity that he already occupies because I want to illustrate how this misses his commitment to situationist practice.

Equally, I want to demonstrate that understanding SOTS can also give the reader a clearer understanding of the situationists without having to understand the Western-Marxist influences that both the situationist's and Debord's writing contains. That is, the situationists and Debord knew that "It is natural that the spectacle we reject rejects us in turn. Situationists are more readily discussed as individuals in an effort to separate them from the collective contestation" (I.S.# 9 1964, Questionnaire) that they were to embody. These same theorists, the post-modern thinkers and theorists of the spectacle are, according to the situationists, those responsible for this separation. Hence, my study of Debord's text as a complex of situationist interactions means also that I *have* to show how he engages SOTS' critical examination of the spectacle but without the complex of theories that already claim to understand the modern spectacular forms of social organisation and thus Debord³.

This unification of Debord and the situationists results not simply in a re-reading of a theoretical text that is understood by using existing material or theory but instead a re-experiencing of the foundation of situationist theory and practice.

³ A number of influences can be found or at least hinted to in Debord's and the situationist's writings. These will include post-structuralism and post-modern themes as well as Hegel, Lukács and Marx. However, as is usually the case, Both Debord and the situationists found some fault or other with the theorists that 'represented' these themes and therefore, I prefer to remain committed to Debord's analysis of the situationists.

As a result, we will find that Debord takes us on a journey, an experience of reading that is inspiring, exciting and emotional but within the context of the readers' own realm of understanding and experience.

My analysis, my experience of reading Debord's SOTS, emerges as creative, as situationist, which is a testament to the situational, practical element that still exists in SOTS. This is an important reason for any study of Debord because he can provide a clear foundation upon which to construct a critical analysis of the situationist idea that;

Since human beings are molded by the situations they go through, it is essential to create human situations. Since individuals are defined by their situation, they need the power to create situations worthy of their desires (I.S.# 9 1964, Questionnaire).

I want to show that SOTS is a map of the theoretical and practical basis of a situationist explanation of social organisation that allows the reader to lose and at the same time re-discover herself under a changing but understood series of situations. Situations that are otherwise controlled in a system of social organisation of commodity-fetishism, that Debord and the situationists were to term a 'spectacle of life'. I want to show how I can offer a development of this terrain, but rather than explain this landscape, rather than theorise on its possible directions and its obstacles within the context of pre-existing social theory, I develop instead the situationist tools that Debord laid out in the structure of SOTS. These tools have helped me draw together both the theoretical and practical elements of not only his text, but of the SI too, in an attempt to facilitate the reader with a particular and personal experiential foundation upon

which to create and conduct their own physical research, their own situation within the material foundation of spectacle organisation. With this situationist map, SOTS, individuals are armed with the practical ideas of the *dérive*, the constructed situation and the many other situationist practices that exist.

In essence I want to show how Debord's SOTS remains fundamental to understanding not only his theories and the situationists, but, equally, the historical foundation on which they build their practical and theoretical contestation of the spectacle. In this role as catalyst for situationist ideas, SOTS plays, to very good effect, the game of cat and mouse; a relentless avoidance of co-option into the pre-existing world of the commodity relation. Understanding commodity relations is fundamental also to understanding why Debord structured his text as I claim, because the commodity relation aids to subvert and reduce critical activity to that of a predefined relation. It is one that is bought and sold, bartered and defined, but always at a distance from the originality of its productive source. Avoiding co-option to the commodity relation remained, and still does, a central characteristic of the situationist's overall tactics .

My position will show how Debord, with situationist ideas and practice, seeks to avoid what he and they claim is the reduction of social knowledge and meaning that is characteristic of the commodity relation within modern capitalism. This being so, I will argue that Debord's revolutionary ideas in his text, cannot be separated from the situationists as is often claimed (Jappe, 1999). Instead, I want to demonstrate that it is by uniting situationist practice with Debord's theoretical insight that Debord's text reveals its most precise understanding. I want

to show how Debord seeks to develop a penetrating means to presenting his work that has to be understood in situationist terms as both theoretical *and* practical.

The Text as Practice and Theory

There are, of course, certain difficult areas that will need to be discussed. For instance, Debord has always declared that he wrote SOTS with the situationists in mind. Indeed, in his *Italian Preface* to SOTS in 1979 he seemed to acknowledge this when he said that “In 1967, I wanted the Situationist International to have a book of theory” (Debord 1979, *Preface*). He was quick to show that he regards the situationist movement as “the extremist group that had done the most to bring back revolutionary contestation to modern society” (ibid). Yet, Debord held that while this was so, while the situationists have identified and revealed the most penetrating form of revolutionary contestation to date, it was nonetheless reaching “the culminating point of its historical action” (ibid). Thus, SOTS remains the theoretical handbook, a penetrating analysis of contemporary organisation that seeks to move beyond the role of the situationists, while remaining tied to situationist theory and practice.

Ironically, this may also drive a wedge between Debord and his own unity with radical, situationist ideas and practice. By Debord presenting *his* theory to the situationists as a revolutionary group, he seems to suggest a certain separation or advance of his work beyond that of the situationists. More accurately, he seems to present his text as the final location, the culminating point of situationist analysis that can finally actualise what the situationists were to identify as the spectacle.

This is true to some degree because Debord does expect his text to remain ever present in the troubles of the 1960's, but he also expects his text to remain as a handbook for "the vast subversive sequel that these troubles could not fail to open up" (ibid). In addition when he goes on to claim that "As a matter of fact, I believe that there is nobody in the world capable of being interested in my book apart from those who are enemies of the existing social order and who act efficaciously, starting from this position" (ibid), I believe he unwittingly gives the grounds for the separation between both his position and situationist theory, thereby each moving into differing forms of understanding.

However, my reason for studying Debord, is that I can show clearly that he presents his text as the resting point for situationist theory. This is by implication first of the situationists claim to a theoretical/practical unity to social action, and second his presentation of a book of theory. Therefore, I present my study of Debord as a means to demonstrate how he must also present his text in ways that allude to situationist practice. Furthermore, by Debord claiming that his text can access the desires and ambitions of revolutionary contestation, he fails to indicate quite how this text is able to edify his understanding of the forms of situationist practice that can achieve this. Hence, Debord's elevation as the sole *theoretical* master of situationist ideas is due in part to what I want to claim is Debord's inexactness and ambiguity towards situationist practice that we will come to see, *is* contained in his text SOTS.

Debord always prided himself as having been proven correct with what he has presented with his text and this goes some way towards indicating the source to

his practice and his theory within SOTS. So much so, he declared that “There is not a word to be changed in this book in which, apart from three or four typographic mistakes, nothing has been corrected in the course of the dozen or so reprints it has known in France” (Debord 1979, *Preface*). He flattered himself and found great pleasure in being “a very rare contemporary example of someone who has written without immediately being contradicted by the event, and I do not mean contradicted a hundred or a thousand times like the others, but not once” (ibid).

He certainly does believe, then, that he has achieved something with his work in both theory and the way in which his text was to be proven right by the practical events of post 1960’s Europe. Also, to a large extent, Debord seems to have understood not only his epoch, but the long and winding path of history that has brought contemporary society to its present system of organisation. The struggles that mark epochal history, the anachronistic conflicts between owners and owned that characterises Marxism, emerge into a situationist analysis of post-modernity that seeks to understand, develop and move on from the foundations left by historical thinkers such as Lukacs, Marx and Hegel⁴.

Locating Debord within a Marxist tradition may seem odd, especially when Debord and the situationists are revered for their avant-garde tendencies and their commitment to play as a tactic for the revolutionary change of everyday life. While these activities are central to the situationists and to Debord, so too is their

⁴ Lefebvre is worth mentioning here because he, Debord and the situationists spent considerable time together in the early years of the formation of the situationists and in this respect, I am sure shared many ideas.

understanding of philosophy, of theory and of the history of struggle and critical thought.

This relation to the complex theories of Marx is not arbitrary as indeed Jappe points out (Jappe 1999 p.2). However, Jappe goes further than I intend to because he claims that Debord's theories, and as a result those of the situationists, cannot be understood, cannot be properly detailed unless his ideas are contextualised within Marxist thought generally (Jappe 1999 p.5). I suggest that this is not only counter-productive to a general reading of SOTS; it is also potentially misleading for the situationists. While the writings of Marx have a very important place in Debord's writing, so too does Debord's critique of Marxists and definitions of Marxism. Hence, I want to suggest that it is not a pre-requisite to understand Marx in order to understand Debord⁵.

Debord is quick to justify this point because he claimed that orthodox Marxism was already weighed down by interpretation that was simply misleading readers of Marx (*SS#* 79). Debord acknowledged the growing disgust for those who used Marx like some religious doctrine, some bearded colossus who overlooked the justification of oppressive, revolutionary ideology imposed on the working-classes as the ideology of freedom and of historical struggle carried out under the banner of people's movements (Jappe 1992 p.3). Within this context Debord was to point out that Marx or more accurately interpretations of his thought, especially in the

⁵ Debord and the situationists refused their association as Marxist, which is most evident when they claimed that they were Marxist "Just as much as Marx was when he said, "I am not a Marxist." (Questionnaire *Internationale Situationniste* #9 (August 1964). Both Debord and the situationists had conceded that Marx had been overturned in the wave of interpretations that represented Marxism.

nineteen fifties and sixties, were incapable of explaining the developing epoch of the spectacle⁶ (ibid). That is, orthodox Marxism has failed, as Debord and the situationists see it, to understand the spectacle and its commodity-fetishism because orthodox Marxism was a fragment of old revolutionary theory revised and reinterpreted in the pursuance of power and control (Debord 1979, *Preface*). Thus the claim to revolutionary ideas that *Marxism* and interpretations of Marx claims, rather than explaining the epoch of the spectacle had instead created an outdated but dominant set of ideas or theories that have oppressively guided the proletariat into a realm of incomprehensibility; a realm that has opened up proletarian ideas of practical change to the static penetration and ideals, of what we will come to see, is an abstract realm of spectacular ideas.

Debord is at pains to avoid this reduction and incomprehensibility of Marx and this is because, as he claims, “One knows of the strong tendency of men to uselessly repeat simplified fragments of the old revolutionary theories” (Debord 1979, *Preface*). This may explain why, in part, he refused to acknowledge too many of his sources in SOTS because he wanted to avoid his theories ending up as repeated fragments being used to understand the situationists⁷.

If, in other words, we attempt to understand Debord as a Marxist, as Hegelianized, as a post-modernist or any other ism or ‘trend’, then Debord’s

⁶ Jappe (1999) points out that a generation of intellectual versions of “Marx was combined with any number of authors [which led followers of Marx] to read him through lenses borrowed from elsewhere” (P.125). This is fundamental in understanding the reasons why Debord attempted to steer readers away from Marxism in SOTS, thus resist using other reader’s lenses, and instead find SOTS for themselves. On the other hand, more accurately, Debord attempts to resist revision.

⁷ Collectively, the situationists were scornful of “an entire generation of leftist thinkers forced into retreat [who] can only conceive of exhibiting itself as the caricatural image of *submission*”

SOTS becomes revised and reproduced within the very system he contested and thus interpreted in any number of ways that removes him from his central task; an understanding of the revolution of everyday life. I argue then, that if we are to understand him and in turn understand the situationists, we must first listen to Debord and allow his ideas and his complex analysis of social organisation fuel and expand our own contemporary understanding and analysis of the spectacle. It is only then that we will be able to identify his use of other theories.

However, while I suggest that readers must be careful of using other theories or interpretations to understand Debord, it is nonetheless evident in SOTS that these thinkers heavily influence Debord. For instance, the central historical theme contained in a number of theses in SOTS shows Debord clearly using a Lukácsian interpretation of Marx to illustrate his ideas of history (Jappe 1999). That is, human history is part of natural history and the natural history of man is equally the production of a human nature that has developed within and through historical activity (*SS#* 125). Debord does then remain closely tied to a “Lukácsian tradition in Marxism, refining certain aspects of it and sharing certain of its problems” (Jappe 1999, p.3).

While this is so, Debord argues that he did not simply interpret Marx or anyone else for that matter. Debord understood Marx because Marx speaks truthfully of *his* epoch. Marx elaborated and explained what he claimed underpinned his epoch and Debord argued that “those who really want to shake an established society must [also] formulate a theory that fundamentally explains it, or which at least seems to give a satisfactory explanation of it” (Debord 1979,

Preface). Debord is doing precisely this in SOTS. He is speaking truthfully, as he sees it, of *his* epoch, which means SOTS is not simply a theory of what is happening within our epoch. Neither is it a Hegelian/Marxist blueprint of ‘what to do’ stemming from an analysis of an earlier epoch. It is rather an experimental development of how to explain, experience and contextualise Debord’s epoch as an extension of the historical activities and foundation of previous epochs. While this undoubtedly includes Marx and Hegel, Debord is concerning himself with the restrictions and absurdities of a Post-War spectacle, all the while *discovering* the possibilities of change. Hence, it is not an interpretative exercise that Debord undertakes of Marx, Lukács and of Hegel⁸ it is a fundamental development of their critical ideas but within a *practical* critique of the Post-War economy of commodity exchange.

My main aim within this thesis then is not to shed light on Debord’s contemporaries or of his historical influences. While this has a valuable part to play in understanding and contextualising some of the influences that underpins Debord’s ideas, it does not explain how Debord developed his text within the contemporary theoretical/practical foundation that characterises the situationists, which *is* my task. Instead, to explain Debord’s text, I want to shed light on Debord’s complex use of a grammatical context and written structure that I want to claim he uses in order to advance what is, in essence, a *practical* situationist critique of the modern society of the spectacle. I want to advance the theoretical

⁸ This is not, of course, exhaustive of Debord’s influences because he talks of and uses a great many authors of both a contemporary and historical nature. Debord never published or detailed a

issues that remain at the heart of SOTS, where they seem to have remained, untouched.

It is an historical understanding, however, that finally brings Debord to the claim that he had no doubt “that the confirmation all my theses encounter ought not to last right until the end of the century and even beyond” (ibid). However, I want to reiterate that for Debord’s theses to receive the confirmation he claimed they deserved, they would each need to be understood practically as well as theoretically. Debord cannot present his text without some indication or at least some potential, for this same text to be practised. It is the practice that remains to be presented within Debord’s SOTS. Therefore, while Debord’s theses have lasted beyond his century, and have remained a constant source of interest for revolutionaries, thinkers, students and any number of other sources, SOTS still remains a handbook towards understanding the situationists and the foundation of the history of *practical*, as well as theoretical, revolutionary struggle.

What makes Debord’s account of his own work interesting is the fact that he had long argued that he, along with the situationists, had the authority to the revolutionary claims they had, simply because they finally succeeded in understanding the intrinsic elements of what formed the basis of contemporary social organisation. What makes this even more significant is the fact that this penetrating insight into social relations rested on one key aspect: the history of social struggle. Debord understood the constituent factors of modern society because he had envisioned, so he believed, “the whole of the historical movement

bibliography and hence many of these authors have to be lifted from Debord’s writings

that has been able to edify this order, and which is now beginning to dissolve it” (ibid) and it is this historical understanding, this insight of historical movement and struggle, that would carry his SOTS well beyond Debord’s own century.

Furthermore, Debord presents this as the key for the enemies of the existing social order to act “efficaciously, starting from this position”, (ibid). I want to demonstrate that this can be understood much more clearly than it is currently, by undertaking an analysis of SOTS that incorporates situationist practice. Understood in this way, the analysis that Debord’s text contains, not only serves to direct generations of thinkers to the constituent factors of any social organisation. The history it contains, can also remain responsible for the dissolution of this same order, and there is no exception, at least as Debord sees it.

Despite the confidence Debord held for his text, I believe SOTS has not realised its true potential; it has not intersected the society of which he is so scornful, and it has not achieved the goals he felt it could. Furthermore, and in its turn, why is it that the theory that SOTS makes evident, and which Debord claims is the only weapon the proletariat needs to formulate its critical and revolutionary language, still remains seemingly impotent in the wake of the all powerful capitalist relation? Rather than the current form of social organisation “meet more exactly its concept, and the real movement of its negation” (ibid) this social form is continuing to increase in power and in scope.

themselves.

Theory, Structure and Revolutionary Practice.

I want to expand some of the areas I raise above by showing that there are a number of *theoretical*, *structural*, and *practical* reasons towards explaining why modern capitalism has escaped the penetration of a situationist analysis. More succinctly, I want to suggest that Debord's SOTS is structured in such a way that once detailed and understood, opens up many of the issues facing Debord and the situationists to a wider and more penetrating system of analysis than currently exists.

Identifying how Debord's SOTS has a less than conventional structure goes some way towards explaining this. It may well prove significant enough to suggest that maybe Debord's own work may need a critical re-reading that can identify that his text does not suffer from its theoretical content alone; nor that SOTS fails to reach the theoretical and historical analysis of social organisation that Debord sets it. Indeed, Debord's historical analysis is quite evident not only in his text, but also in interpretations of Debord's work (Jappe, 1999).

Equally, while there are criticisms to be made of Debord, I believe that the reasons Debord's SOTS has remained on the periphery of current theoretical debate concerning a wider understanding of social organisation, is due more to the ways Debord presents his work, than with the theoretical issues SOTS raises. I am suggesting that a means to obtaining a more accurate understanding of Debord's text rests with the structure and the content, and it is this that needs to be analysed together and contextually. This combination, I will argue, can maintain Debord's strict links to forms of situationist practice such as the constructed

situation and the *dérive*; and in doing so, illustrate the historical influences Debord uses to form these same practices within the text.

SOTS has an unusual structure, this I will claim, is clearly evident. Furthermore, I want to argue that this structure, where it exists, seems to support the idea that an alternative study of SOTS is possible. My main contribution to a study of Debord's theories, however, will benefit from showing that this structure cites and relies on practices such as the constructed situation and the *dérive* and this proves fundamental towards understanding the contemporary and contextual role of SOTS.

The possibilities of this alternative structure are evident in at least two ways. First, SOTS is comprised of two hundred and twenty one individual theses that Len Bracken (1997) believes are formulated in such a way that they "can [be] read like Zen koans" (Bracken 1997, p.132). Each thesis, each historical moment has to remain locked within a realm that becomes understood, *unlocked*, only once translated in both a practical and experiential way. Second, Debord consistently argues that history is key to understanding contemporary forms of social development as a *spectacle* and as such, history is central to Debord's theory. I will, of course, be drawn to explain more of what the spectacle is, but it is no coincidence that out of nine chapters, Debord's attention to the development of class relations and the coming to existence of the human world should appear both physically and symbolically in chapter five, the direct centre of SOTS.

Bracken also recognises this, and attempts to decipher Debord's koans and in the process claims that, out of the nine chapters that contain these two hundred

and twenty one theses, Debord orders them into three distinct sections and these appear as follows.

Chapters I, II, III, and VI “focus on the concept of the spectacle and the spectators”. This forms the first distinct section, in Bracken’s view, whereby the second emerges with chapters VII and VIII. These “relate to the theories and practice of unitary urbanism and cultural subversion that Debord developed while in the L.I [Letterist International] and the S.I [Situationist International]”. Section three follows from chapters IV, V and IX that

represent a wide ranging revolutionary strategy of proletarian self organisation into the workers’ councils when the revolutionary moment arrives—the qualitative leap of revolutionary transformation of the totality in a moment of total history (Bracken 1997, p.130).

My claim differs in that I believe that Bracken is not strictly giving the explanation that Debord had in mind. He does loosely structure an explanation to each chapter and focuses on particular elements within chapter IV and V. Also, he locates how Debord’s influences from Marxism appear in the ways he develops the demands of the proletariat and a developing awareness of the movements of a distinctly human, material, form of time and space. Bracken shows how Debord develops this with the proletariat’s desire to live within a freedom from pure survival, a freedom of historical time (ibid, p.148). Furthermore, he is also able to point out how Debord distinguishes between concepts of time and the ways in which the owner and owned relation emerges historically and subsequently, how Debord is able to argue that “humans are identical to time. But this time is experienced differently—a “static society organises time in terms of its immediate

experience of nature, on the model of cyclical time” (SS# 126) and the “dominant class possesses for itself alone the irreversible time of the living” (SS# 128).

I will be drawn to explain how Debord distinguishes between concepts of time and space and how these play an important part in his overall theory. However, I also want to show, how Bracken, as do many other interpreters of Debord, fails to locate sufficiently the wider, theoretical and practical implications of analysis of Debord’s SOTS; how this disrupts an adequate understanding of concepts of the state, and how this may subsequently impact on any understanding of his concept of the spectacle.

Towards the task of a re-reading of Debord’s text, I want to begin by detailing who the situationists are and what they hoped to achieve with their critical analysis of capitalist, commodity relations. This will lead me to develop the concepts of separation and how separation plays a fundamental part in understanding situationist theory. We will find that concepts such as recuperation will provide some situationist responses to these processes and how these emerge within the arena of spectacular relations. I will also want to demonstrate how and why Debord has been separated from the situationists, but why he must be reunited with them if his text is ever to emerge within a wider understanding than it receives now.

This will prove to be important because before we can attempt to address the overall concerns of this study, a serious analysis of Debord’s seminal text SOTS, we have first to understand both the spectacle’s use of separation and the respective positions of the situationists and Debord as a result. In so doing, we

will, to some extent, identify some of the difficulties that inhibit a clear analysis of the situationists and how it seems that the term 'situationism' is itself riddled with errors in modern definitions. Furthermore, by analysing the tensions that still exist between what is situationist and what is Debord, we will necessarily be drawn to develop some of the situationists' key concepts that attack separation such as recuperation.

I will also want to consider how art and the critique of art helped to form a valuable source of experimental practice such as the construction of situations. Practices such as this, I will argue, form a fundamental platform from which to understand SOTS. I will also argue that Debord was able to reconstruct these practices within and through the text; practices which once understood in this way, that is textually, will allow me to re-present SOTS to theoretical scrutiny.

Therefore, I intend to demonstrate a situationist understanding of theory and how this developed into certain forms of revelatory practice. By developing an understanding of these practices early on, and how these appear in other situationist texts, I will begin to explain how Debord's own structure in his SOTS develops along the same principles that these practices suggest. This will lead us to certain texts such as Tom McDonough's *The Naked City*.

Once I have spent time detailing these issues up to and including chapter eight, I will show from chapters nine onwards how this prepares us for an historical reading of the influences to Debord's and the situationist's theories and practices. It will emerge in a form that resembles a narrative, an historical insight that will highlight situationist practice as a form, a medium for understanding the

structure to Debord's development of history. This reading of Debord will enable me to illustrate how time and space remain crucial but are solidified as a critical approach when used in conjunction with the textual practice of the *dérive*. This will mean that my analysis will *have* to show not only why Debord's use of history stands at the heart of his SOTS. My analysis will also have to show how Debord achieves this within the practical forms I suggest, because it is only then that the starting point to *understanding* proletarian history *practically* and symbolically emerges as an oppositional form against spectacle relations, as Debord intends it to.

History rests in the centre of SOTS, I want to suggest, because it is there that the principles of the constructed situation and hence the *dérive* can start within a combined search for theory and practice within Debord's text. By understanding the constructed situation, the *dérive* becomes a tool with which to unlock the epochal situations of the spectacle that aids the reader to embark on a stroll, a drift through the historical terrain of material survival and struggle. Debord's construction of the *dérive* in SOTS is important, I will claim, because it is by superseding the taken-for-granted conventions of the text and by entering into the meaning of the text from the centre, that also allows the reader the movement within which to abandon certain rules and conventions of reading.

This will include an open approach to the language his text contains that does not claim that Debord wanted to be read 'middle out' because physically, this sort of direction makes this problematic. He did, however, want his work to find *its historical meaning* from the centre and the symbolic choice of direction, placed

within the context of theory and practice, be struggled with in order to realise the ways both he and the situationists developed their own theories. Such a *dérive* will identify SOTS as a cartography of the revolutionary situations of history that has a number of directions that will lead me to show that the central position of history forces the reader to choose and struggle over these decisions but within a framework of situationist practice.

This will lead me to an analysis of the state and the way in which Debord etches this throughout SOTS. What makes this analysis important is the fact that it will allow me to demonstrate the nature and use of certain forms of language in the text, the process of history and its culmination within a collective, organised form and how this emerged as the spectacle relation.

It is then, to the first chapter of this construction that I now turn.

Chapter Two; The situationists. A Critical Reconstruction.

Tom McDonough, in his introductory text to the journal *October*, opens his text with a plea for the “careful analysis of the Situationist legacy, a project of archival retrieval, reconstruction, and historicization” (McDonough 2002, p.Xvii). This was some two years ago but his plea is a “direct response to the alternating disdain (Debord as the solitary dissident, the brilliant “stylist of pessimism”) that Debord and the situationists more generally seemed to inspire in equal proportions” (Ibid). McDonough is responding to what he and indeed others regard as the mythologizing of the Debordian legacy. Not only this, but his plea for a “direct response” to understanding this legacy seems to be the ‘way forward’ towards Debord

taking his place among the writers of his generation, that he cease to be an absolute value, and enter into the world of relative values and intellectual exchange, that finally, as scholars it is our responsibility, to pass from the phase of spectacular (i.e., laudatory or deprecatory) reception of his works, to another, the phase of *interpretation* (Jean-Marie Apostolides 1999, p.Xvii).

Such a proposal is not that easy to undertake because this legacy is often contradictory where genuine translations of situationist work can often remain misguided or at worst wrong (McDonough, 2002). It is by undertaking a critical interpretation of the situationists that we can begin to redevelop a situationist understanding of social organisation, and allow those who wish to study their

legacy to enter back into understanding the world of theoretical and practical agitation. First, however, we must present Debord in a light that does not depict him as a stand-alone theorist.

Debord's own work is encapsulated to a high degree within the situationist's own project of complete and radical social change. There is already a problem here because even when their combined efforts are studied, there still remains a tendency to valorise their contribution to social understanding and thus clouding precisely what is specifically situationist and to some extent, what is Debord. Much of this difficulty exists because of the situationist's 'radical' origins that lay within the practical/theoretical agitation operating in a post avant-garde artistic tradition. Such agitation is characteristic of that found within the 'artistic' movements or genres such as dadaism and surrealism. Their 'unorthodox' 'playful' abandon, and the distinct line of libertarianism and pleasure seeking that this brought to "popular resistance and autonomous struggle", not only characterises their long term project of "hostility to every aspect of existing society" (Plant 1992, p.1), but also characterises their direct refusal to participate in the critical separations between theory and practice created by modern critical discourse.

However, such a 'playful' agitation seems to have concealed their more 'orthodox' and deeply penetrating Hegelian/Marxist traditions. Debord has a part to play here with his own work in SOTS because this is a complex analysis of the history of social organisation that incorporates an understanding of Hegelian, Marxist, Lukacsian and a number of other historical writers. Both Debord and the situationists are strongly influenced by the 'seriousness' of these philosophical

traditions that subsequently developed a more robust approach to concepts such as labour and the organisation of social ideas. Such an approach led them to the hypothesis that each has a significant role in the revolutionary situations that make up history. Yet despite this, it is Debord alone who is often separated from the situationists' total programme of social change, and in doing so, is considered to be the heir of the young Georg Lukacs of *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) (Jappe, 1999 p.4).

Nonetheless, the situationist's revolutionary confrontation to existing society owes a great deal to this combination of artistic and the more traditional philosophical studies of social organisation that "finally developed a more overtly political position" (Plant 1992, p.1). This led Debord to claim that "From now on, any fundamental cultural creation, as well as any qualitative transformation of society, is contingent on the continued development of this sort of interrelated approach" (Debord 1963, *New Forms of Action*). Therefore, it is of paramount importance to study Debord in light of his activities as both a situationist and as a theoretician, an historicist and a thinker of the history of revolutionary contestation. By adopting such an approach and by studying Debord in this light, his text will prove to be all the more interesting.

However, for the moment, a difficulty still remains with undertaking a critical perspective of situationist works; a difficulty in which a tendency remains for existing analysis of situationist ideas to refuse to study both Debord and the situationists in such an interrelated approach as called for by Debord. It may well be that this, as a result, forces most commentators to remain focused primarily on

one side or the other of this artistic avant-garde or traditional philosophical combination. Their political position, for instance often rests with “categories—of avant-gardist purity, or of chronological and ideological division (“artistic” versus “political” phases or wings)” (McDonough 2002, p.Xvii) that seem to separate and hinder understanding not only this group but equally hinders any movement beyond them (ibid).

Debord’s separation as the wizard of French prose (Clark, 1999) and the deep penetrating thinker of twentieth century capitalism, has seen him reach the dizzy heights, willingly or not, as the iconic leader of the situationists, precursor to Baudrillard (Plant, 1992) and as a post-modern icon of twentieth century thought (Jappe, 1999). He is also accorded the highest ‘satisfaction’ of being the theoretical weight behind a large number of situationist ideas (Jappe, 1999). While the situationists nuzzle comfortably within the playful world of artistic avant-garde theory, Debord attains the serious nobility of the philosophical traditions.

It is true that Debord, as editor and part author of a number of situationist articles, had a significant influence on what was to emerge as situationist. To separate him from the combined foundation of Marxist/avant-garde traditions though, and to separate his ideas historically from the situationists, may mean reducing a large proportion of their *collective* weight to Debord himself at the expense of the practical movement of the situationists. To undertake such a separation, in other words, runs the risk of muddying not only situationist theory but also Debord’s own efforts in SOTS. This is presumably what McDonough seems to be warning against, that is, as Debord intends, it is time to move

beyond the avant-garde categories of cultural meanings that define the situationist's own era and into an historical, critical interpretation of their project within our own, contemporary era. SOTS plays its part in this because it contextualises both a contemporary as well as historical narrative of social struggle and in this historical sense, occupies both the starting point, but also the end, of a contemporary interpretation of the situationist movement.

Taking McDonough's warning seriously then means recognising that another reason exists for exploring why such separations between Debord and the situationists need to be fully analysed and understood before SOTS can achieve a more insightful reading. In some way, we are already beginning to explore some of these separations, but there is, however, still confusion to be found here. While the above may be the case, that such separations between Debord and the situationists may hinder understanding their overall project, it is still claimed that the ideas of the situationists and those of Debord are not *necessarily* identical in every regard.

This has to be acknowledged, argues Jappe (1999) who cites Debord as having stressed the existence of a separation between him and the situationists in 1957 and in 1985 (Jappe, 1999). Jappe argues that many of the unattributed articles in the situationists journal, *Internationale Situationiste*, (IS) while expressing the collective opinions of the situationists, showed the possibility that Debord, as editor in chief, would nonetheless present his ideas in these articles as ideas of the collective group apart from his own (Jappe, 1999). Debord, it seems, as editor

in chief, had the opportunity to use these articles to present his ideas as collectively situationist even if this was not strictly the case.

This is not quite how the collective situationists see it in the first edition of their journal, because there they claim that

As a rule, this bulletin is edited collectively. The various articles written and signed individually must also be considered of interest to all of our comrades, and as particular points of their common research. We are opposed to the survival of such forms as the literary review or art journal (IS #1 1958, *Editorial Notes*).

So, in general terms, all their texts, whether written anonymously, individually or collectively, had to aspire to the overall ideas and tactics of the situationists or these texts would never have made print.

It is not a case of Debord being responsible for inciting the possible route to a separation between situationist ideas and practice and a subsequent distance between himself and the overall situationist strategies for total change. Separation is a reductive process and the situationists knew this only too well. In essence, they had long recognised that the position of their criticism, their dissent and the critical resistance that developed, occupied an internal relation to the very structure they were opposing. So, no matter how this criticism and practical dissent manifests, it is impossible for the:

individual subject to stand outside the spectacle and pronounce on it from a position of clean removal, and any attempt to develop critical analysis of the totality of social and discursive relations must recognise that the meanings, tactics, and goals with which it works are always implicated within the relations of power they resist (Plant 1992, p.75).

This is a significant step towards understanding why the situationists and Debord appear to present their theories in a seemingly abstract almost mystical way. They came to realise that their own practice and the dissemination of their own revolutionary ideas; their own practical efforts to engage critically within an analysis of contemporary social organisation, were already subject to meanings and tactics that exist within the very relations of power they were attempting to resist (Jappe, 1999). Once the critical field of operation made clear its potential to revolutionary goals and aims, the only available means within which to articulate these goals and ambitions was already part of the very structure such analysis sought to address. This succeeds in diverting and redeveloping goals and aspirations into a language and understanding that is already familiar to that systems field of operation (ibid).

Hence, the situationists felt that to present their ideas and practices openly within such a realm, only made the processes of separating revolutionary ideas from the practice needed to make these ideas actual, much easier and therefore, less effective. Hence, any critique that uses the terms and language of the spectacle has already reduced its legitimacy because this critique becomes quickly indistinguishable from that which already exists. Therefore, to perform a separation between Debord and the situationists, to separate and to render their ideas and theories as either Debord or situationist, only leads to a partial understanding of their theories and one they tried hard to avoid. No understanding is complete while this separation exists because each and every idea, while not precisely the

same, still sought one overall, collective but creative aim; revolutionary, social change against the spectacle.

The Spectacle as a critical concept

Understanding the situationists and Debord also means understanding their critical concept of the spectacle. As a critical concept, the situationists attempted to demonstrate how social organisation, in its highest form of abstraction, mediated human relations to the most intense forms of privation (Plant, 1992). This spectacle, while seemingly representing productive history only represents its modern betrayal by commodity production, which is not history. All that is bought is historical and all that is historical is bought. The situationists, as a result, consistently but always critically, define this human relation to capitalism as a relation to the spectacle of life (SS, 142).

This focuses on an analysis of modern capitalism that rather than meeting more the aesthetic and material needs of a society reflected within technological advances, instead reduces life to a commodified relation. The situationists argue that this does nothing else but render the human relation, the sensual relation to technology, to its material and aesthetic history, its developed world, as obsolete. The commodity relation is an abstraction from the possibilities of a social system, yet it is all there is left for the human relation to experience, which remains but only to be seen from afar. It is the human world and the natural world whereby time and space, material and experience, merge into and only with the commodity relation. Thus, the spectacle emerges as the only context within which to place

any critique of the commodity relation, which subsequently enshrines these same ideas and practices as its own. The basis of this is to be found in an understanding of the intensity of commodity fetishism.

Fetishism is an application borrowed primarily from Marx but equally influenced by Lukacs. We find this range of influence in Debord's use of a quote at the very beginning of chapter two in SOTS.

The commodity can only be understood in its undistorted essence when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole. Only in this context does the reification produced by commodity relations assume decisive importance both for the objective evolution of society and for the stance adopted by men towards it. Only then does the commodity become crucial for the subjugation of men's consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression....As labor is progressively rationalized and mechanized man's lack of will is reinforced by the way in which his activity becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative (*SS* intro chapter 2).

Hardly surprising that fetishism is contained in a relation in which material objects maintain certain characteristics. These characteristics are not intrinsic to the material object itself but instead attributed to these objects by the prevailing social conditions, ideological conditions, as if these are characteristics enshrined within its very nature (Bottomore, 1999). They are not in the imagination in as much as some metaphysical value that cannot be apprehended. It is instead a relation that is premised on a certain value of commodity abundance, which claims a value for the commodity in its abstractness. These values are *placed* and supported by a society whose form of organisation is understood and developed via other modes of commodified relations; relations that remain responsible for the extension of a commodified existence in such a way as to appeal to the senses of creation and

in doing so, organise social ideas, social life in terms of these pseudo creations (Debord 1963, *New Forms of Action*). This forms a wider separation within the technological possibilities of a society because the only possibility for alleviating survival, for social revolution, is to be found within the 'creativity' of the commodified relation. The real possibilities of unmediated survival, the widest possible extent of technological possibility, is removed and separated from immediate realisation and replaced by the commodity (ibid).

The situationists' critical understanding of the spectacle is, as a concept, a methodological attempt to demonstrate the starting point to understanding contemporary social organisation. It is an analytical plane from which a unification of the theory, and the practical understanding the theory requires can be apprehended. Once this critical understanding is reached, it is then that the individual can realise and contest the commodified object beyond the ideological justifications commodification receives under the advanced spectacle (Debord 1963, *New Forms of Action*). .

The fetishist ideology that the spectacle conveys does not carry the same ideological meaning that Debord placed at the heart of his SOTS. Indeed, the term ideology is not used in SOTS unless it is to convey the struggle between truth, reality and illusion. Hence the historical nature of the spectacle does not represent this struggle, this relation between the possibilities of truth and reality but instead another form, another system of ideas that have gone insane. It is not ideology in the Debordian sense, it is instead a *weltanschauung* (SS# 4).

The spectacle cannot be understood as an abuse of the world of vision, as a product of the techniques of mass dissemination of images. It is, rather, a *Weltanschauung*, which has become actual, materially translated. It is a world vision, which has become objectified (SS# 4).

Historical ideology represents the sensual but real search for the reality or possibilities of productive forces, which remain as a force towards recognising historical change. It remains contingent on an understanding of the anachronistic oppositions between owners and owned, the possible and the impossible but still premised on the realities of epochal, productive possibilities to create historical situations.

Debord's SOTS attempts to present the spectacle as a *Weltanschauung*, a historical idea that has become real and objectified into a world of vision for a good reason. That is, he wants to show how the dissemination of images, the relations of spectacular abundance in which the possible is only a moment of the impossible is not simply a process of artificial domination. Instead, Debord wants to argue that it is an historical process through which the distortion of history and the ideas of workerist history, have emerged in systems of distorted ideologies, that have become deformed around the 'revolutionary' ideas of Stalinism and Leninism. In addition, as the situationists see it, such 'isms' have become real in themselves and paraded as some icon of truth. Concepts of fair pay and the unionisation of labour succeeded in maintaining another interpretation, another form of *labour history*. Thus, it would seem that Debord is attempting to steer his theory away from a simple critique of what exists as a contemporary analysis

of the spectacle and hints towards an historical analysis of the ways this historical interpretation emerges.

When Debord claims that the spectacle is a totality and as such should be grasped as a totality, means he not only refers to the spectacle in its unity but claims also that it is a form and content which also appears as united. This seems to be supported when in *Thesis On Cultural Revolution* Debord claims that “The traditional goal of aesthetics is to make one feel, in privation and absence, certain past elements of life that through the mediation of art would escape the confusion of appearances, since appearance is what suffers from the reign of time” (Debord 1958, *Thesis*). These appearances are obviously an early allusion to the development of the spectacle of appearance.

The Situationists, however, “consider cultural activity, from the standpoint of totality, as an experimental method for constructing [the situations of] daily life, which can be permanently developed with the extension of leisure and the disappearance of the division of labor (beginning with the division of artistic labor)” (ibid). Therefore, while the spectacle is a collection of images, it nonetheless remains a totality because, despite its claims to revolutionary change, it organises social experience on the premise of commodity culture.

The difference for Debord and the situationists is obvious: the cultural decay that they claim is evident with the spectacle only remains while it exists as both form and content, as a completed experience *of the existing mode of production*. This is clear when Debord argues the form of the spectacle, the forms as information or propaganda, as advertisement or direct entertainment organise a

multi-farious system of content. The spectacle, then, as the *present* form or as, Debord shows, the definitive situation of socially dominant life, remains an eclipse of socially possible life. The unity that Debord's critique shares with the situationists can neither be missed, nor can it be separated, because both are tied to the view that attempts to show the existence of a world in which decisions and choices are already made in social production, and act in determining the content of human life beyond any true desires or aesthetics expressed within that life. The situationists act in everything they undertake to demonstrate this one aspect. Therefore, while there may be some subtle differences in approach between the two, this is not to be read as some fundamental split between ideas and practice.

This may make Jappe's understanding of Debord as offering an 'undeniable' separation from situationist ideas a little problematic. There is, as I see it, no categorical evidence to date to be found in articles dating from either 1957 or 1985 by Debord, or the situationists, that confirms this separation. Furthermore, this seems to disagree with Debord's own position, also in 1985, where he argues "It is also known that outside the Situationist International, no-one has ever bothered to formulate a *central critique* of this society" (Debord 1985, *P/Pot*).

Not only is Debord claiming that no other theorist, commentator or writer has bothered or been able to develop a central critique of modern society up to and including that date of 1985. No one has done so outside of the Situationist International. Thus, Debord's own work and ideas as a central critique of society, by his own insistence, must fall into this category of situationist ideas and

ambitions or he risks placing his work above and outside the situationists, of their overall practices and any other form of writing or text and denying its central critique. I want to illustrate with SOTS that he does not separate himself from the situationists but wholeheartedly embraces their theories and practices with the text.

Whether or not Debord can be separated from the situationists as a theorist and writer then is important for a number of reasons. Primarily though, history and the theory and practice of historical situations, which includes writing, is fundamental to the situationist project. This being so, it is important for any historical analysis of the situationist's work and this must reasonably include Debord, to understand this tactical diversity and the processes that the situationists took to counter the separations they claim they faced between them and their creative theory and practice.

This directly affects Debord because for him to be taken seriously seems to involve a separation between his ideas and those of the situationists. However, I want to reiterate that this is problematic because if his writing is to form the central theme of situationist activity and understanding, then he has to be read as a situationist and not separately from them, their practices included. And this being the case, Debord's SOTS, while recognising his own individual creation of a *work of art*, must stand as the critique of the total society of which he was a part, and necessarily recognise the role of the situationists in general as the most radical movement to bring back social contestation (Debord 1979, *Preface*). By maintaining the seriousness of Debord's project within the broader scope of

situationist theory and practice will allow not only situationist analysis to emerge throughout Debord's SOTS. It will also allow me to illustrate just how Debord achieved this.

It is vital then, if we are to understand what Debord attempted with SOTS, to discuss further how and why the situationists seem, despite their efforts to avoid this separation, to have nevertheless become separated from Debord and how this has *given* particular meanings beyond what the situationists had intended. The central concept here then is the term situationist and it is one that I wish to guard slightly and define its meaning in order not to create any confusion. I will endeavour to form analytic clarity of what the term situationist means both to a contemporary analysis, but also its meaning historically and how this can be different to the meanings that it seems to attract in contemporary discourse of situationist ideas. By developing this, I will lay the foundation for discussing what impact this may have on situationist ideas and how this seems to have affected a wider understanding of Debord's text. This will allow me to discuss, in a later chapter, how these issues may be addressed by the key concept of recuperation and how this can form the beginnings of a platform from which to understand Debord's use of the text. First, then, let us locate what 'situationism' means as opposed to situationist.

Nostalgia beneath fact? 'situationism'.

There are a number of secondary sources through which to understand the term situationist. The Oxford English Dictionary offers us one source in which, one

would assume, a clear, defining explanation could exist. The dictionary claims that the situationists represent;

a revolutionary political theory and movement...that regards modern industrial society as being inevitably oppressive and exploitative, a system in which the individual is no more than a commodity. The movement rejects all conventional politics and demands a comprehensive revolution in relationships, work, and all aspects of everyday life. Influenced by surrealism and Dada, situationism came to public attention through the French magazine *International Situationiste* from 1958 and was an inspiration behind the strikes and student uprisings of May 1968 (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

However, is this the place to explain what situationism is? Is it “enough, for now, to know that it is a movement in contemporary thought, in much the same way as surrealism, dadaism, existentialism, etc[?]” (Puttemans, *La Gauche* 1963).

In the original works in the *International Situationiste*, a situationist, by the situationists own definition is one “Relating to the theory or practical activity of constructing situations. One who engages in the construction of situations. A member of the Situationist International” (I.S # 1 1958, *Definitions*). There are some parallels with the definition above, but with one significant difference. Being a situationist has nothing to do with situationism; that is, being a situationist does not simply assume an automatic progression to situationism. Situationism is rather:

A meaningless term improperly derived from the above [situationist]. There is no such thing as situationism, which would mean a doctrine for interpreting existing conditions. The notion of situationism is obviously devised by antisituationists (I.S # 1 1958, *Definitions*).

Situationism is a term constructed outside of situationist theory, outside their practice and thus has no link with the originality of situationist theory. Clearly, the use of the term situationism proves to be antagonistic to, rather than

complimentary to, the originality of the situationist's ideas. Nevertheless, does this use of a 'made up term' fundamentally undermine these ideas? According to the situationists it does. That is, such a definition, such an 'ism' renders the term itself as meaningless within their theory and only exists in order to perform a particular function. This function is long recognised by the situationists in as much as these definitions, these forms of organisation, corresponds to the commodified interpretations of the era. The historical significance of this will be discussed shortly but an 'ism' performs a reduction of critical theory and it is one that does not aid the phase of *critical interpretation* called for by Jean-Marie Apostolides.

Whether such disinformation is to be considered a problem is a question that has many differing answers. Debord certainly attempts to provide some of these answers and in this process he argues that:

Disinformation is actually inherent in all existing information; and indeed is its main characteristic. It is only named where passivity must be maintained by intimidation. Where disinformation is named it does not exist. Where it exists, it is not named (Debord 1988, *Comments*).

The term situationism, the situationists argue, seems to suffer a similar programme of disinformation. The term forms part of an organised programme of selected information designed to propagate a doctrine, an interpretation for existing conditions that does not explain the situationist project. Instead the critical term, as the situationists had intended it, loses its effectiveness that emerges finally, into a diluted or reduced form of their practical theory. Spectacular disinformation, as

a result, attempts to develop a passivity that is required to maintain a particular spectacular viewpoint or understanding.

Just as there is no "Situationism" as *doctrine*, one must not let certain former experiments be called Situationist achievements — or everything to which our ideological and practical weakness now limits us. But, on the other hand, we cannot concede even a temporary value to mystification (Debord 1957, *Decomposition*).

In fact, this quote would seem to suggest that not only is there no defining of situationist activities, there is no definition at all for this simply risks categorising the situationists into predefined and externalised roles. This externalisation is an important process for the spectacle and, as we will come to see, it is one that is completely unacceptable to the situationists.

Situationism as a concept is a mystification of situationist activity that attains a meaning which only becomes valid and *officially* recognised when such meaning is made outside of the situationists own theory, and within the dominant thought of social intercourse. Situationism, as an ideology that is conjured up within the dominant thought of commodity relations, *does not create historical situations*, does not form new sensations and ideas, instead it interprets and pre-defines *possible* situations, but from within its own commodified epoch.

It is for this reason that Debord claimed that no one had formulated a central critique of this society outside of the situationists because no other theorist or writer wrote with the desires of the constructed situation in mind. That is, each writer or theorist of social organisation, the situationists argue, is happy to accept certain elements of what already exists and any critique of this sort would have already exposed itself to the recuperating forces it hoped to avoid. Therefore, such

critiques do not attempt to construct a realm beyond the immediate world of the spectacle and thus do not, nor could not, be situationist. Critical discourse of this type can only become part of the passivity of disinformation whereby such discourse remains within a spectacle of understanding. Each attempt to explain the epoch explains, mistakenly, as the situationists would argue it, from the spectacles own position and in this case maintains precisely the role of separation between theory and practice. By holding to the *existing* means within which to express critical discourse, academics, politics and the media merely correspond to the spectacles own accepted forms of practice and it is this that Debord and the situationists want readers to understand.

The term and subsequent practice of situationism is therefore a critical form that has already been absorbed by attempts to *explain and interpret* situationist theory and practice. It emerges as a form of propagandist ideology, a socially accepted term constructed by antisituationists⁹ in order to divert or misdirect followers or practitioners of situationist practice away from its originality; a process that mystifies situationist theory. Such a manoeuvre has a certain ideological role, at least as the situationists see it.

This is why the critique of ideology must in the final analysis be the central problem of revolutionary organization. Lies are a product of the alienated world; they cannot appear within an organization claiming to bear the *social truth* without that organization thereby becoming one more lie in a world of lies (Khayati 1966, *Of Student Poverty*).

⁹ Anti-situationists were interpreters of the existing system who developed doctrines, who taught and directed a set of beliefs as possibilities towards social change. This is opposed to the originality of the situationists' desires of practicing and experiencing these possibilities but within the tools, technological and material tools, available within their epoch that already played a role in defining these desires.

This form of *reduction* is in fact not new to the history of theory or practice. It is claimed that it happened to Marx, because “When Marx’s theories are reduced to simple economic doctrine concerning the supposedly inevitable pauperisation of the proletariat, it is easy enough to trumpet the error of his thought. Here is a Marx eminently suitable for classroom discussion” (Jappe 1999 p.2). The separation between Marxism as theory and its exposition as practice did not go unnoticed by Marx and Debord is quick to point this out:

Throughout his life, Marx had maintained a unitary point of view in his theory, but the *exposition* of the theory was carried out on the *terrain* of the dominant thought and became precise in the form of critiques of particular disciplines, principally the critique of the fundamental science of bourgeois society, political economy. It is this mutilation, later accepted as definitive, which has constituted "marxism." (SS# 84).

Without being drawn into a definition of Marxist thought, the point here is to illustrate that Debord, as well as the situationists, sought to avoid what they considered to be historical, reductive processes. They not only attempt to avoid these reductive processes in the practice of ideas but also within the development of means and tactics that present these ideas in alternate and revolutionary ways. These means, these developing revolutionary means, seek to avoid further, the reductive processes of the spectacle and in doing so, present alternate, practical ideas for social organisation. One such means, I want to argue, is to be found in Debord’s text.

Realising that the situationist’s chief concern was a total and united critique of modern society is important in order to understand their wider, united ambitions.

That is, their task was to analyse and question the modern developments of a dominant system of thought in which “Everything is said about this society except what it really is: a society dominated by *commodities* and *spectacles*” (Khayati, 1966, *Of Student Poverty*). They did not aim to produce specific, static concepts, separations or individual critiques which simply describe the hierarchical nature in which these social orders had, as they explained, decomposed cultural and social dissent. Debord did not, in his SOTS, merely describe the modern form of social organisation, with or without its historical analysis. Nor did he attempt to generate an understanding of these modern forms of organisation from pre-existing explanations. Instead, *situationist activity* attempts to develop concepts and ideas that create “tactics [that are] decided in situ, depending upon just what is available when” (Trocchi 1963, *A Tactical Blueprint*) and this is the essence of Debord’s SOTS.

Any attempt at a situationist theoretical/practical analysis of social organisation has to harness existing points of practical dissent, points of struggle that manifest against these orders and, in doing so, enter into a series of constructions that aid to interrupt and resist bourgeois techniques and desires that produce and sustain them; not from predefined critiques but from a tactical blueprint of general concepts of change. Situationist theory seems to suggest that each individual must act in ways that attempt to recognise the processes that have been put in place that develop separations between social theory and practice. Not only this, but also the separations between creative play and its exploitation with a view to release,

once and for all, the social conditions of the time that allows each individual the possibility to realise the integration between play and material, time and space.

Knowledge of the processes that underpin these acts of separation is central to the situationists own theory and any understanding of the situationists and Debord has to take into account the reasons why they conducted certain practices, developed certain theories, in the ways that they did.

They were always aware of the problems they faced with the process of separation, and, with this in mind, it is vitally important to show how Debord attempts to avoid this with his text. In doing so, Debord, as we will come to see, has to be read not as an iconic master separated from the situationists. Instead, he should be read as a master of the history of *situationist* thought, of practice and of the means with which to present this. He wrote truthfully of his epoch, as truthful writing demanded, and in doing so he was able to recapture his ideas that the possibilities of alternative forms of social organisation exist and show equally, how these organisational ideas were informed, discovered, through practical means. He strives to maintain the unity of the situationists and as a result, can only be understood as a product of situationist practice and agitation. To separate Debord from the avant-garde heritage and practice that underpinned the situationists is equally to separate SOTS from its practical understanding that is situationist. SOTS, while read in this separated form, can only ever remain vague and abstract.

By undertaking an interpretation of Debord's work in this way, by locating both his avant-garde tendencies and his complex uses of the likes of Marx and

Hegel we will be brought to one process above all that plays a major role in the situationists theory of separation. This process forced the situationists from openly revealing their practices, their theories and their art of change. To motivate the proletariat's knowledge of the expansion of the modern bourgeoisie, the situationists identified the forces of recuperation and the ways that the dominant classes use this to co-opt, incorporate, retain and redefine creative social relations as a spectacle. By identifying these processes, the situationists were also able to understand the ways in which the defining situations of the epoch, that is, the epoch's technical abilities to live its time, were also redefined to a commodity relation. It is this to which I will now turn my attention. By doing so, I will begin to lay the platform from which to argue that the text that Debord presents is fundamentally structured to avoid these processes of recuperation.

Chapter Three; The Spectacle and

Recuperation

The situationists did not believe that their path to total and complete social change was one without danger. They had already identified the processes of separation and the role that the spectacle had in this. This, combined with pondering how to bring capitalism and the spectacle back into open confrontation, posed one of the main problems they had to overcome, and with good reason. All forms of criticism, all forms of dissent and all criticism of a social system were being developed back into the very system they attempted to contest. No matter how these desires of change were expressed, it seemed, and no matter how groups sought to contest their social world, they were almost always already subject to incorporation to the system of the commodity relation: the situationists term this as recuperation.

Recuperation is “the idea that avant-garde innovations might be recovered [separated from its origin] for use by the reigning social order, that revolutionary negativity might be recouped to strengthen bourgeois affirmation” (McDonough 2002, p.Xiii). This is not quite the same as co-option neither does it carry quite the same meaning as integration. Recuperation is instead a process through which “all forms of criticism, dissent, and resistance occupy an internal relation to the system they oppose” (Plant 1992, p.75). However, before I can adequately explain what the complex theory of recuperation entails and the processes that it develops

as a practice, I must first identify a little of the historical, artistic heritage that the situationists brought to bear on the spectacle and how this emerges into practices designed to avoid separation and recuperation. Moreover, by identifying their artistic heritage at an early stage, I will be able to show how Debord moves within theory and art later on in this thesis.

The Situationists and The Critical Avant-Garde

Rather than remain tied to an inevitable backwash of failed revolutionary attempts, the situationists recognised the need to offer forms of dissent that had to occupy forms of resistance on two fronts. They had already recognised their internal relation to the system they were contesting, and, in doing so, recognised that they did not have to accept that “the means and ends of resistance are always already defined by these relations” (Plant 1992, p.75). They argued, as a result, that not only does such dissent have to realise the needs for a transcendence of the current separation between the technologically possible and the allowed. It also has to be aware that to avoid integration into the political safety valve of the political mainstream, critical dissent has to be presented by means that subvert and contradict the already defined processes that seek to integrate social dissent in the first place (Plant, 1992).

One such means is to infiltrate the disjuncture between the abilities of a rich technological world and the mediated, mystical form of survival amongst the cultural world of commodities. The spectacle had already, by the time Debord was writing, achieved its highest conceptual state; that is, technology had proceeded to

such a stage that much of the human world had become transformed beyond all realms of pure survival. Questions of the scarcity of material wares, questions that had been at the forefront of historical materialism, were no longer posed in the same way and hence, human survival itself took on a different meaning. The freedom to experience and move amongst the terrain and technology of capitalism is a promise that is most evident within the spectacle and this promise, the legitimating process for capitalist production, maintains the spectacles conceptual legitimacy.

The dis-juncture that the situationists claim exists, however, was that while this may be the case, that material production had outstripped survival, survival was still a relevant question, but one posed in terms of a survival amongst the spectacle's technology of commodity relations. This led them to recognise that the historical "advances in production and in constantly improving technological potentials, are proceeding even faster than nineteenth-century communism predicted. But we have remained at a stage of over equipped prehistory" (Editorial Notes 1963, *Ideologies, Classes and the Domination of Nature*). That Debord viewed history as over equipped is important for one notable reason; technology had moved far beyond that which it reflected in its *material use*.

One vital question that this raised, one that the situationists placed within this juncture between the possible and impossible, and one that remains to this day is; "what use was being made of the immense accumulation of means now at society's disposal? Had life, as actually experienced by ordinary individuals, become richer?" (Jappe 1999, p.4). More succinctly, had life become as rich as it

has been claimed within capital relations? The answer for the situationists, despite this *'over equipped'* history, was obviously 'no', and it is this that prompted further research for a different relation with their technological and material world. This research emerged as the practice of desires and ideas, most notably, the constructed situation.

The situationists, in this quest for higher forms of understanding, had long aspired to the negative abilities of avant-garde art for a number of reasons. First, "As a negative movement which seeks the supersession of art in a historical society where history is not yet lived" (ibid), the situationists sought to reconstruct an *art* through which to recognise the dominant culture of bourgeois ideas and practices. Such an art called on all the desires and ambitions of a society to realise their potential in the vein of rich freedoms that spectacular capitalism espouses through which the situation "can be extended in time or be condensed." (Moments 1960). Rather than maintain the desires of society within the dominant art and culture of commodity relations, the situationists called for an art that moved beyond these commodity interpretations into a realm of unbridled productions of passions that seeks to found itself on the objectivity of artistic production.

The dominant arts of bourgeois society could in fact already be seen in its "dissolution [and] is simultaneously [therefore]" exposed as the pretender to universal art when, and only when "an art of change and the pure expression of impossible change" (*SS*# 190) appears on the horizon of proletarian consciousness. "The more grandiose its reach, the more its true realization is beyond it. This art

is perforce *avant-garde*, and it *is not*. Its avant-garde is its “disappearance” (ibid). This signals the role of the avant-garde whose revolutionary task is to expose the disjuncture between the possible and impossible. Its disappearance signals its own success in recognising its demands and in opening up the realms of the impossible and hence, its *historical* role, its reflection of social relations, is taken up among other reflections, other avant-garde interpretations. In the case of spectacular capitalism, the commodity is the reflection of bourgeois art in all its vain manifestations as gallery art or as the latest gadget, the latest motorcar or the newest form of kitchen. But as bourgeois art dissolves, its re-emergence is secured at each successive point by each new ‘creative’ commodity, the next, more prized ‘innovation’.

Debord seems to refer then to the possibilities of a moment of real, material living observable in a particular form of art, but one that is contingent on recognising the total, technological and material abilities of the epoch. The more radical this art, the more it demands and requests of the abilities of an epoch, the less chance it has to be realised while the dominant class remains in a position to obstruct, separate and block these challenges to the developing technological abilities of the epoch. Thus, in its turn, the possibilities of these radical fulfilments are expressed differently to that which already exists, because these demands enter the terrain of competing ideologies for the reality of productive ability. It is a moment of expressed grandeur and opulence, possibility and change; of formal change and of grand designs in architecture, personal relations and the technical apparatus towards the material goods needed to support this. It

is not just these ideas of change however, it is also the means developed to realise these desires that is important within these historical situations.

The fact that the situationists conceive of art as being able to move beyond its centre and towards another plane of realisation, seems almost akin to art losing its historical concept of eternity; losing its freedom of creation but in doing so also finds another, more intense form (*SS# 189*). This carries with it the ephemeral principle it discovers in the world and links to the manner in which it is communicated; in the festival, in practice, in the text and hence in the theatre of conflict which expresses every meaningful expression in relation to a place as its “own centre of unification” (*SS# 189*). It is an individual art yet it is still an art that has the potential to express the nature of universal, material interests, in its interdependent links with the struggle for the control of the developing material world. Art, in the situationist sense, is a search for the true moment of the lived that can be reflected in the technical organisation of a given society and this is certainly contained within the presentation of their practices, Debord’s text included.

Yet art held another, fundamental indicator in modern society because the situationists had long declared that “Dadaism and surrealism are the two currents which mark the end of modern art” (*SS# 191*). Thus, dadaism and surrealism;

are contemporaries, though only in a relatively conscious manner, of the last great assault of the revolutionary proletarian movement; and the defeat of this movement, which left them imprisoned in the same artistic field whose decrepitude they had announced, is the basic reason for their immobilization (*SS# 191*).

Here we are beginning to witness a significant distinction. The situationists argue that not only does art exist on two very different levels, art is equally reflective. Reflective, that is, with social and conscious change that exists within the only revolutionary class capable of recognising complete and total change, the proletariat. Not only are the situationists using Marxist categories of the proletariat and the relation they have to the diversity of human activity or labour as creative, they are also claiming that art has a role in both its manner of critique and *how this critique is presented*. This is instrumental to Debord's SOTS because he is attempting to develop such an art, a critique of social organisation but one that is relayed via the structure, the form and through the theoretical content of the text. We will come to this shortly, but it is by understanding situationist theory and practice in this way, that we will also understand how Debord attempts to cement a certain situationist account of the practical and theoretical struggles for social change up to SOTS.

The situationists have long been criticised for their understanding of avant-garde artistic theory because it seems to incite a sense of abandon or a series of hedonistic desires towards realising social change. It may well be this that has contributed to their theoretical separation because it is within the heritage of avant-garde art, within bourgeois culture, is it that *situationism* remains. In addition; it may be this that constructs and encourages their understanding in a somewhat vague and abstract manner.

However, it is still Debord's SOTS that I am heading towards because Debord attempts to develop this situationist understanding of social organisation into a

complex weave of history, art and the relation this has with the proletariat. In doing this, he also attempts to re-unite the situationists with proletarian struggle. It is by developing their understanding of art, and of recuperation that we can begin to uncover some underlying principles of the development of situationist theory, and the means through which this has been presented in SOTS.

Recuperation and Exploitation

The situationists' use of social theory, along with the likes of Marx, their use of the avant-gardes and critical art, has illustrated one important development of situationist ideas and practice. The situationists claimed that by moving beyond the traditional notions of the exploitation of labour contained within the likes of Marxism, they could identify how recuperation had led to forms of exploitation which had taken on a new and more perverse state. The epoch that had signalled Marx's use of the proletariat and their dehumanisation by exploited labour had, as far as the situationists saw it, given way to a newer form of exploitation that had to be interpreted in an altogether different way. Interpreted, that is, in "The new signs of negation multiplying in the economically developed countries", (SS# 115) that had moved beyond surrealism,

signs which are misunderstood and falsified by spectacular arrangement, already enable us to draw the conclusion that a new epoch has begun: now, after the workers' first attempt at subversion, *it is capitalist abundance which has failed* (SS# 115).

This association with revolutionary thought and the practices of the avant-garde, is an important factor in understanding the ways that the situationists developed

their practices. However, there are other, equally important points to raise here. By claiming that a new epoch has begun, Debord is also attempting to open a doorway for the situationists and their radical definitions of social organisation. That is, by recognising recuperation, they not only developed a process through which to understand how radical ideas and practices were co-opted into the spectacular system of commodity capitalism. The very nature of these radical ideas were in themselves a creative process within a system that recognised the technological abilities of the epoch, and thus sought to disrupt all creation that had already originated from that systems own technological, commodified interpretation.

To explain this, to identify how exploitation existed within the redirection of innovative and creative ideas, the situationists argued that the cultural translations of this epoch were within the dominant forces of the commodity. Historically, this had differed because art, the creative manifestation of the possibilities of change, emerged from within the system of total organisation that gave the possibilities to these in the first place. The manifestation of a critical art has, the situationists claim, been an historical act which demonstrates that the technological abilities of an epoch become fundamentally interpreted within the class that claims responsibility for its ownership. However, by demonstrating that these technologies were not only united, but were inextricably contingent upon the owned as a reflection of progressive movement, these same interpretations helped to reinterpret the epoch within a wider interpretation of technological development. Debord's historical analysis, and it is one that we will come to, reveals that he is asking

for another interpretation; another art to resurrect itself and counter the translation of the epoch that has asserted itself within capital abundance. This emerges within an advanced form of situationist analysis.

Debord recognised early on that such a translation, that is, a translation that had the power to expose bourgeois materialism must also recognise that the bourgeoisie:

needs to maintain a certain degree of criticality and experimental research among a minority, but must take care to channel this activity into narrowly compartmentalized utilitarian disciplines and avert any holistic critique and experimentation (Debord 1957, *Report*).

The domain of culture that represented bourgeois ideas sought no less than to divert the taste for creation and innovation. This is because these processes remain dangerous while they remain within the domain of the truly experimental avant-gardes who, it seems, have the ability to recognise, interpret and live the totality of its world. Any critique or any development of ideas that results from such experiments carried out by these revolutionary avant-gardes, has the potential to move beyond the representations given through the commodity relation and enter into a more intense construction of situations. Once achieved, such knowledge can openly reveal the co-opting means that exist which are used by the dominant class to control an *incomplete* understanding of the human world. Debord expresses just this when he claims that:

In the domain of culture, the bourgeoisie strives to divert the taste for innovation, which is dangerous for it in our era, toward certain confused, degraded and innocuous forms of novelty. Through the commercial mechanisms that control cultural activity, avant-garde tendencies are cut off from the segments of society that could support

them, segments already limited because of the general social conditions (Debord 1957, *Report*).

One of the consequences of this contradiction, so it seems, is that creative, critical acts or creative processes are bought, or more accurately commodified into novel forms of bourgeois art and thinking. A bourgeois mode of aesthetic theory which interprets and explains revolutionary art, but from within a realm of mediation by commodification.

This mediation process is evident with avant-garde art which so shocked the world in the early part of the twentieth century such as Marcel Duchamp's (1887-1968) *Wheel* (1913), or his *Mona Lisa with a moustache*. This demonstrates the processes of bourgeois commodification, of recuperation because this art soon found itself hanging on the walls of the rich and famous, or otherwise hanging in museums and art galleries especially by the 1950's and 60's (Plant 1994, p.4). Separated from their original, revolutionary intent, these museum pieces become representations of *bourgeois* art and culture and in turn, redirect critical art towards a 'newer', but more bourgeois mode of cultural interpretation. It is also this, however, that begins to signal the start of the new cultural epoch; because it is here that an altogether different style of negation is not only required, but it is also one that is unavoidably developing: the situationists.

The situationists were quick to maintain and acknowledge the revolutionary potential that the avant-garde developed with their redirection of commodified objects. For the situationists, however, this was not enough, and they still claimed that "The avant-garde of today that does not reiterate accepted mystifications" of

the commodity relation, means that this avant-garde “is nevertheless socially repressed. The movement society desires is the one that it can buy up — it is the pseudo-avant-garde (*The Avant-garde is Undesirable* January 1961).

The situationists do not claim that the avant-garde movements that provided the irrevocable foundation of revolutionary thought for the situationists, did not attempt to contest socially accepted mystifications. Instead, it is more that the avant-garde’s fate as a revolutionary movement against recuperation, commodification and the consumerism of early capitalism was sealed with their failure to counter this in everything they undertook. The movement that society wanted, argued the situationists, quite simply met with the requirements of a system of bourgeois commodification, because this is all that remains through which to contest this same form of social organisation. The situationists believed that members of a commodified society falsely *required* a commodified distribution of revolutionary practice and ideas because this was the only *official creative process* open to social groups.

The situationists did of course attempt the “Revolutionary alteration of the present forms of culture” and Debord suggested this “can be nothing less than the supersession of all aspects of the aesthetic and technological apparatus that constitutes an aggregation of spectacles separated from life” (Debord 1962, *Judgement*). The situationists searched for meaning, for the relations and the problems of social organisation in this *new* epoch; not at the recuperative surface level of that society, the bourgeois level, and therefore that society’s own aesthetic and technological reflection in ‘cultural’ goods. Instead, they conducted a search

“at the deepest level, at the level of *its function as a spectacle*” (ibid). Hence, the search for meaning, to achieve an understanding of this functioning world apart from that of the commodity relation, requires, they insist, an altogether different art, the art of critique or more accurately the revolutionary critique of *all aesthetics and all commodified art*. This form differs historically because it has to reflect the dominant contradictions inherent within the modern reflections of cultural identity with commodity relations.

In their dissociation from all that claimed to mediate modern critique, Debord in particular acknowledged the avant-garde’s use of the proletariat as a revolutionary class and hence, in doing so, acknowledged their debt to the likes of Marx. Debord, speaking for the situationists as a revolutionary movement in 1957, attempts to develop this combination of a revolutionary critique of art and philosophy and declared that:

First of all, we think the world must be changed. We [the situationists] want the most liberating change of the society and life in which we find ourselves confined. We know that such a change is possible through appropriate actions (Debord 1957, *Report*).

Debord, while not transparent here, identifies that it is both thought and practice that, while not laying claim to specific origins and specific sources, relies on this avant-garde/philosophical trail. This left him and the situationists attempting to discover fundamental cultural *creations*, “as well as qualitative transformations of society”, but within a theoretical framework. These creations are dependent on actions that are themselves “contingent on the continued

development of this sort of interrelated approach". (Debord 1963, *The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Art and Politics*).

The Situationists' understanding of recuperation suggested that while such dissenting voices may well be co-opted into the system of dominant organisation and thus deactivated, these same voices "are actually subject to the processes of inversion which give an entirely new and affirmative meaning to critical gestures" (Plant 1992, p.75-76). Surrealism may have failed to move beyond the imagination to social change, but their critical dissent and its origins, its *methods* and its *language*, remain indicators or possibilities towards formulating other critiques and languages of social criticism. While it is recognised that these critiques still apprehended the reality of capitalist development at that point, then so too is it possible to recognise the realistic potential for social critique by generating a knowledge base of how these groups were recuperated.

Thus, the situationists conceded that "it is quite natural that our enemies manage to partially use us...just like the proletariat, we cannot claim to be unexploitable within given circumstances" (I.S # 9 *Now*, *The SI* 1964). By refusing ideological purity and refusing to be reduced to a doctrinal and political situationism; and, furthermore by claiming that they recognised the integration and separation of their projects into the prevailing social system, the situationists too, were able to declare that, by "not leaving the current field of culture," they equally emptied "that gesture of meaning by the qualification that neither would they mix with their enemies" (ibid).

The Situationists then, long recognised the difficulties that concepts and activities had to face with the dual forces of separation and of recuperation. In doing so, they also recognised that what becomes significant is not only questions and ideas of social change, the ideas of an epoch, but also how to organise these ideas of dissent in order to realise the social revolution upon a terrain that is other than the dominant thought of what is already accepted. Speaking the language of revolution but in a different language than that which is tolerated; or, more accurately, how these are *presented* in forms of strategy and tactics and not simply another form of bourgeois propaganda.

The situationists, because of this dissociation, identified a number of actions and practices that they believed could result in such a heightened awareness of these underlying principles. Debord has been instrumental in indicating the power of language, of the written word and the power of the text. Yet despite the fact that the situationists collectively claimed that such heightened awareness was possible, and despite Debord's insistence of the situationist's legacy through his SOTS, his text seems to attract less attention than it may deserve in terms of its theoretical and practical links with the situationists.

There is very little effort needed to integrate Debord's SOTS, for instance, with a general reading of the situationists as a whole. While there may be some differences in basic means towards demonstrating the potential of situationist revolutionary activity, through various forms of art and of writing, the essence of their research remains unequivocally faithful to a complete and radical form of social change.

However, we have not covered enough ground from which to present Debord's text. There are still other areas that we need to discuss before this is made possible, and it is to their practice that I need to turn to next. While situationist theory occupies a central feature within Debord's SOTS, situationist practice is at its core, as a practical form. Debord's problems towards presenting a complete but critical analysis of contemporary society still remain within the concepts and processes of recuperation and separation, and in view of this, he had to devise a text that could at least resist much of this and remain both practical and theoretical. To truly supersede this, Debord had to perform certain tasks, certain practices that could act in response to the developing terrain of proletarian consciousness. These practices, these means towards realising the underlying principles of social change, and the possibilities of constructed situations, could equally reveal the possibilities of a realm of pure desire and freedom that could guarantee a freedom from the exploitation of repressed creativity *in whatever form this practice took*.

We will have some difficulties of course, because we will be drawn to ask; how can these raised states emerge through an understanding of the text? This is still a little mysterious, but it is precisely through understanding the links these have with the avant-garde and the relentless pursuit of a Marxist analysis of the proletariat that we can begin to witness a particular *Debordian* way of mediating *situationist practice and theory*. This, we will soon see, can be found evolving along a peculiar line contained within the text.

So, before I can bring analysis to the situationist text or more accurately, before I can truly justify the claims that there are links between situationist theory and practice evident within the structure of the text, ultimately, Debord's text, I must first take a sharp look at how the situationists disassociated their practice from mainstream critique. This will locate the forms that situationist practice has taken, how these practices link with theory, but, importantly, how these practices emerge theoretically into the text. By developing this chapter in relation to the previous chapter, that is by developing how the situationists linked both theory and practice, we will begin to notice that the situationist text does indeed have a structure, a process that attempts to avoid recuperation and commodification by the very practices that the situationists are themselves recognised, such as the construction of situations. Not only this, we will also begin to recognise that any subsequent understanding of a situationist text, once these processes have been accounted for, will be all the more worthwhile.

Chapter Four; Creative Practices and The

Constructed Situation

The situationists developed a number of ideas and theories that pondered the many problems that they claimed now face modern society. In common with Marx, the situationists argued that it is simply not enough to think social, revolutionary change, concepts of change have to emerge with appropriate actions. However, as we have already seen, the exploitation that the situationists were claiming to exist, no longer emerged solely within the relation between labour and the partial separation of the material results of this labour, the material object. While labour still exists and while the surplus that this produces remains to a large degree within the dominant classes, the essence of exploitation, argued the situationists, had moved to another, altogether different but obscure plane.

One pivotal feature of SOTS that indicates this is Time and History where Debord invokes his concept of cyclical time. Cyclical time is a mode of differentiating sequences of time, which finds its ultimate interpretation in the spectacle. I will detail this in full when I discuss time and history later, but it is a particular understanding of the mode of cyclical time that imposes a particular outlook of time on the proletariat. A circular movement of space and time in which a circular relation ideologically constrains the creativity of 'free time'. Historically, this free time was a time explored by the avant-gardes, by the owners of the epoch and by those who were able to apprehend the most

adequate, technical meaning to the epochal history or organisation and thus live their situation. It is a time that human industry releases for itself but one that had been, until the possibilities of capitalism changed this, predominantly used up by owners of history. These owners did not simply exploit by their use of labour but instead by their organised redirection of the *real adventure we have all embarked on* as human beings and this rests within an understanding of the human appropriation of nature.

Man is the world of man and a new civilisation can only be based on man's free and experimental creation of his own world and his own creation. This creation will no longer accept any internal division or separation. Life will be the creation of life itself. The total man will be confronted only with his ever-increasing appropriation of nature, of his own nature, finally elaborated, in all of its beauty and terror, as our 'worthy opponent' in a ludic conflict where *everything is possible* (Clarke et al 1967).

Hence, creation is the central, but indisputable project that encompasses all other issues. What remains significant is the possible domination and use of the total and free creation of the human world in which "A society's basic perspective on this question determines the choices among the alternative directions presented at each moment of the process, as well as the rhythm and duration of productive expansion in each sector (ibid).

The organised domination of the economy is also a particular domination of definitions of time and the *reasons* for the directions that human production takes which determines what human society is *allowed* to experience. This only fetters what the situationists deemed to be the creative aspect of human activity.

This, as a relation to the spectacle of time and organisation witnesses:

The spectacle [which] subjugates living men to itself to the extent that the economy has totally subjugated them. It is no more than the economy developing for it. It is the true reflection of the production of things, and the false objectification of the producers (*SS# 16*).

Producers in the spectacle are objectified as sovereign beings free to move among the nature of the commodity relation. Survival, the original source of this truly human mastery of its nature, its objectified existence as history, is found within the individual as a sovereign subject finally re-united with its object. History is *presented* as the very essence and indeed the successful discovery of the nature of objects. This, for the situationists, of course, is a false consciousness, whereby “The spectacle, as the present social organisation of the paralysis of history and memory, of the abandonment of history built on the foundation of historical time, is the *false consciousness of time*” (*SS# 158*). This is because all that exists to buy or use is all that is permitted, and all that is permitted is decided within the spectacle of hierarchical power imposed under a cyclical system of time, mediated and organised through commodity exchange. The seasons of Christmas, of Easter, of work and play; times already defined and layered so as to produce experiences already accounted for. The historical objectification of survival, the very structures and dimensions that exist as social life, are returned, but in a difference of form: a form of consumer choice.

This seems to suggest that such ‘choice’ is all that exists in which consumer choice maintains the image of choice in a fragmented system that gives no choice and no freedom of time other than that which is already accounted for. It is the current justification for the total expansion of productive abilities and maintains

these productive processes, but only ever to its own ideas and image of commodity consumption. The reason for existence, the meaning of social life, is commodified. Thus, the spectacle within which this is contained becomes:

the omnipresent affirmation of the choice *already made* in production and its corollary consumption. The spectacle's *form and content* [emphasis added] are identically the total justification of the existing system's conditions and goals. The spectacle is also the *permanent presence* of this justification, since it occupies the main part of the time lived outside of modern production (*SS# 5*).

The spectacle is the arbiter and the justification of 'free time' whereby the rising objectification of commodities results in a more acute but commodified definition of historical production; a separation from the real relations and needs of production and apart from any qualitative understanding of need within productive survival. Instead, the world of productive survival emerges as a separate world in which the needs of survival, the production of desires, are fulfilled by the abstract commodity away and apart from modern productive abilities.

Capitalist expansion, under this emerging separation from the realities of production, results in the Spectacle's audience encompassing all that constituted society as a totality, but only in a more intensified form of privation. The proletariat, the bourgeoisie and even those capitalist bosses now merely look at what is little else than a show world of real life in which objectification, the whole of human industry, is bought and sold whereby each and every one is part of that commodity process. Thus, individuals and groups thinking about life as

spectators, not actually participating or experiencing a life other than that advertised (Plant, 1992).

The situationists were claiming something rather different than when they identified the ways in which they were exploited. Exploitation became evident in the ways that the creative potential of the situationists was itself recuperated and redirected towards the commodity relation. Rather than appealing to the redirection of labour and the collective distribution of labour/commodity relations, the situationists were claiming that it is labour, technically organised and controlled labour, which needs to be understood differently. Therefore, they were not only proposing certain appropriate acts, to organise and recognise higher forms of social unity and experience, they were also pointing towards a set of actions with a completely different purpose to that conceived of under the workerist parties of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

They had already, as a result, encountered problems to their practical agitation by refusing to reveal their creative path for fears of the exploitative process of commodification. They claimed that due to the commodification and predetermination that human thought and action now found itself within, they were left with the *only* possible type of creative act remaining outside of the commodification process; the only remaining act that could offer any means of transcending the alienating system of spectacular, capitalist production. This they were to find and subsequently describe as the construction of situations (Debord 1957, *Report*).

How the situationists recognised that the constructed situation was the only remaining act that was or is available to contest the social reality of capitalism, has a historical route and it is one we will come to but it is, nonetheless at first, a little puzzling. Furthermore, there is little to explain just how the constructed situation is, itself, revolutionary. To address this, we need to discuss exactly what a constructed situation means to the situationists, but equally, this will begin to develop the historical path I believe needs to be taken towards understanding Debord's practical element to SOTS as both a writer of situationist theory and as a constructor of situations.

I want to give examples of how the constructed situation works in practice among individuals and groups, but also how this practice has been transcribed by Debord in to the pages of the text. More precisely, Debord's unity with the situationists in his text appears along and within the ways in which he presents his text structurally. More discussion will be needed on this point but it is by showing the constructed situation that I aim to move on to how the situationists, but in particular Debord, presents this through his text.

Constructed Situations

First of all, the situationists believed that "A revolutionary action within culture must aim to enlarge life, not merely to express or explain it" (Debord 1957 *Report*). They were of course contesting first and foremost the commodity relation, which they claimed dehumanised the human world by detailing, living and transforming that world to one of a predefined existence of commodity relations.

The critical relation that revolutionaries and commentators had of the commodity relation and any subsequent contestation of this relation did little more than reaffirm the commodities status. This left the situationists with a proposition that claimed while other actions remain, other 'revolutionary' actions, they were convinced that none of these actually challenged the prevailing social order while tied to the commodity relation. These critical affronts merely explained the possibilities of this epoch by developing and mingling with the spectacular epoch's pre-definition and hence, the commodity relation.

Through the constructed situation, the situationists suggest that they can recognise an enlargement, a 'higher' form of unity, by recreating time and hence everyday life on a new basis that resists any immediate predefinition of commodified actions. By redefining their epoch and recognising the possibilities for a truly enlarged aesthetic experience beyond the commodified world, the situationists attempted to harness and use the technical abilities within which to create, build and recognise an altered situation. This left the situationists to claim that "all that did not consciously elicit this only worked for the continuation of the show world which dominates" social creativity (Chasse and Elwell, 1970).

The situationist's conception of a constructed situation is not simply limited to an avant-garde use of the existing technical and geographical means to create artistic ambiances. Instead,

A situation is also an integrated ensemble of behavior in time. It is composed of actions contained in a transitory decor. These actions are the product of the decor and of themselves, and they, in their turn, produce other decors and other actions (IS# 1 1958, *Preliminary Problems in Constructing a Situation*).

The situationists felt they could not simply orient these actions and forces but rather experience and live them. Therefore, and as a result, they do not limit themselves

to merely empirical experimentation with environments in quest of mechanistically provoked surprises. The really experimental direction of situationist activity consists in setting up, on the basis of more or less clearly recognized desires, a temporary field of activity favorable to these desires (ibid).

The source of these desires seems to rest within the material and technological possibilities of the current mode of technological organisation as well as the realms of the urban and physical geography of the streets. These technical abilities of social organisation *objectively* create and harness these desires because these technical means illuminate an advanced mode, an increased possibility to the enrichment of human survival. By undertaking this process of a constructed situation, a practical and potentially defining moment of the possibilities of an epoch, can alone “lead to the further clarification of these simple basic desires, and to the confused emergence of new desires whose *material* roots will be precisely the *new reality* engendered by situationist constructions” (ibid).

Such a practice suggested “a changeable environment” that could be “developed harmoniously with the desires of the inhabitants and conducive to the ‘construction of situations’ (Plant 1992, p.5), in which there could exist a realisable alternative to the current dehumanised form of social organisation. This could only mean that the specific concern of Debord and indeed the long term ambitions of the situationists, was the identification and:

use of certain means of action and the discovery of new ones, means which are more easily recognizable in the domain of culture and customs, but which must be applied in interrelation with all revolutionary changes (Debord 1957, *Report*).

Debord is appealing directly to the dominated classes here, because means that are more recognisable in the domain of culture and customs can only exist to the classes who have the ability to recognise an alternative in the first place. Recuperation of dissent is not only in retrospect, but it is also the means through which the development of bourgeois translations takes place. Therefore, these are only recognisable after the event. To discover new means in the domain of culture and customs must be indicating something different to bourgeois translations, and thus must indicate a differing sector of understanding. It remains significant then that the situationist's believed that a discovery of the new means to recognising social revolution could still exist within the world of customs and culture. "That is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality" (ibid) was equated with a similar change and passion to social consciousness in both culture and customs but within, by and for the revolutionary classes.

This led the situationists to claim that they "must develop a systematic intervention based on the complex factors of two components in perpetual interaction: the organisation of the material environment of life and the behaviors which it gives rise to, and which radically transform it" (ibid). This suggests that the technological and material movements of a social system, not only provide a more material form of survival; in its turn, this movement also develops historical

ideas and behaviours which mirror and decorate human life in ways that reflect social development upon which the whole edifice of material history rests.

Such a perspective underscores the situationist's attempt to retrieve the proletarian dimensions of Marxism while remaining within the heritage of desire and passion for a superior, passional quality to social life. By identifying the social conditions of production, situational epochs of technical development that coincide with a change in social ideas, they seem to offer the origins of a qualitative *proletarian culture*.

The constructed situation involves this complex of art, of theory and of politics that once combined and transformed into alternative, practical interpretations, emerges into a superior understanding of social organisation. It seeks to unearth the history of changeable environments that reforms and transforms human society. A society transformed into a possible world of harmonious desires that remain as a clear testament to the existence of a realisable alternative to the current form of social organisation. The situationists and Debord use certain means of action, and Debord does attempt to show how the possibility to discover new ones exists. By maintaining such situationist practice, Debord places SOTS as a direct attempt to deliver this process, this means to achieving this higher understanding, because not only does he incorporate the theoretical foundation upon which these ideas are founded, he also places these ideas in the only way that can recognise his work as that of a situationist: his text as practice.

While it may not be clear just yet where this is contained within SOTS, it is only by developing the processes that the situationists and Debord recognised, the

practices that brought them to these ideas, that we can ever find where these processes are in the first place. In other words, Debord, I want to argue, is directing the reader to a situationist understanding of their practice and theory by structuring his text around practices such as the constructed situation and thus, leading to a situationist's analysis and understanding of social organisation. If I can adequately demonstrate that Debord is getting the reader to practice the construction of situations via the text, then I too can demonstrate how Debord unites, not separates, the situationists and his SOTS.

However, before we can get to what will prove to be a conceptual and hence sometimes difficult reading, there are still some difficulties with the concept of a constructed situation. Despite its centrality to situationist practice, and despite everything that seemed to move the situationists to believe that the essential, theoretical elements of their research rested with their hypothesis of the construction of situations (Jacobs and Winks 1997), the constructed situation as a practice is not easy to define or understand. There must also be difficulties in demonstrating the complex differences between different cultures, between bourgeois culture and proletarian culture.

It seems peculiar too that a concept that is claimed to reveal these cultures and one that subsequently rests at the heart of situationist theory remains, even to this day, shrouded in any number of myths and inconsistencies. What is more, this entire *abstract* notion of the constructed situation is still owed to the avant-garde movements, of Letterism for instance, who are, in this case, maintained by

situationist practice but expanded in order to comment upon the mature development of capitalist society (ibid).

The constructed situation though is a little more complex than is initially perceived by some of its followers. Furthermore, its recognition as an avant-garde practice within mainstream theory does little to illuminate this complexity. As a practice, the constructed situation is, in essence, a process of experimentation that “makes its appearance as undirected, unconscious, meaningless, spontaneous; it becomes conscious with its first repetition, when it can be described and analyzed” (Lausen 1963, *Repetition*).

These acts of experimentation result in moments, ambiances that rather than pre-existing within commodified definitions, emerge as undefined and in need of complex description and analysis. In the bourgeois world of quantitative production, these experiences and ambiances take on material definitions but these definitions rely in the very first place on the *discovery* of these experiences by the creative, by the proletariat. In the world of situationist experiments, these experimental results become defined or redefined within the passion and quality of works of art that move beyond material definitions alone.

One way in which the situationists described this was to imagine a situation in which “an *emotionally moving gathering* of a few people for an evening” was arranged. The situationists own account offered that;

we would no doubt have to distinguish: a director or producer responsible for coordinating the basic elements necessary for the construction of the decor and for working out certain *interventions* in the events (alternatively, several people could work out their own interventions while being more or less unaware of each other’s

plans); the direct agents living the situation, who have taken part in creating the collective project and worked on the practical composition of the ambiance; and finally, a few passive spectators who have not participated in the constructive work, who should be *forced into action* (I.S # 1 1958, *Preliminary problems in constructing a situation*).

A collective project that opposes pre-defined actions and moves away from commodified 'artistic creations'. The constructed situation denotes "an activity aimed at *creating* situations, as opposed to passively recognizing them in academic or other separate terms" (IS# 9 1964, *Questionnaire*). This helped the situationists to "envisage a sort of situationist-oriented psychoanalysis in which, in contrast to the goals pursued by the various currents stemming from Freudianism, each of the participants in this adventure would discover desires for specific ambiances *in order to fulfil them* (I.S # 1 1958, *Preliminary problems in constructing a situation*). This left the constructed situation and the necessary décor and ambiance down to each person, to seek

what he loves, what attracts him. (And here again, in contrast to certain endeavors of modern writing — Leiris, for example — what is important to us is neither our individual psychological structures nor the explanation of their formation, but their possible application in the construction of situations.) (ibid).

Hence, the situationists argued that "Through this method one can tabulate elements out of which situations can be constructed, along with *projects to dynamize these elements*" (ibid original emphasis). Therefore, the constructed situation is not a borrowed masterpiece of prose or of painting that has a market value, the perfection of the commodity relation. Instead, the constructed situation maintains the ephemeral set of demands once laid down by surrealism, as a

minimum. This minimum demands a wholesale change to modern conditions of life, in art and creativity, to chance and freedom of chance.

The situationists go beyond surrealism, though, because rather than concentrating solely on art, play and chance, the situationists tend to go beyond art, to supersede art. Once superseded, once the bourgeois culture of art had been practically overcome, then bourgeois material definitions alone could no longer represent the voices of the artistic world of the bourgeoisie. These new voices, placing art once again in the hands and language of the proletariat, of the situationists of history, meant they had already moved towards transforming revolutionary language in order to plan a future society beyond that conditioned by the modern accumulation of capital and beyond the material commodity. The construction of new affective states plays a significant role in this where if these altered states are successful, these conscious repetitions “will be set into the rules of the game — experiment into play” (ibid), and passionate play always required a greater use and understanding of the technological foundations of the material world.

Seemingly, to justify the need for such experimental play, Debord constructs a melodramatic picture that contrasts alienated activity with this prospect of unrivalled play. He claims that modern social activity is in dire need of this ludic form of the practical encounters of play and experiment, but he does not move away from maintaining the need to organise, control and plan the technological forms needed to realise these new possibilities of aesthetic productions; Debord’s maintenance though is a conscious control of this environment by all and this can

only emerge from un-exploited creative play. This also led the situationists to argue that “the global spectacle in its appearance as the imagery of happy unification surrounded by desolation and horror at the tranquil centre of unhappiness” (Jacobs and Winks 1997 p.48), succeeded only to leave limited possibilities to social life. “Suicide and anaesthesia are these possibilities offered by the current society” (Lausen 1963, *Repetition*).

This may well lead to one of the main reasons that a constructed situation remains mythical and seemingly deficient because while the situationists claimed they offered a complete and radical break with all artistic forms and ‘illusions’, the situationists have always remained a cultural movement in the narrow sense of the term. They maintain and rework “certain stylised, almost ornamental, concepts” (Jacobs and Winks, 1997) which were developed out of avant-garde practice but seemingly inheriting the un-resolved contradictions and difficulties of post modernity these avant-gardes had already experienced. This still left the situationists with the difficulty of how can modern art, that which the situationists claimed could go beyond the bourgeoisie, escape the commodifying and recuperating structure of spectacular society when it relied on capitalism for its very source of recognition as a form of social organisation?

This poses considerable difficulties for subsequent analysis of Debord’s text because Debord has to explain how his SOTS can offer a creative step beyond what already exists in terms of meaning and of bourgeois culture. He has to explain, in other words, how the text can supersede commodified art in the bourgeois world of commodity relations and still maintain its revolutionary stance,

which he claims it does. Especially when he argues that he left the situationists with the only book of theory that they needed (Debord 1979, *Preface*). Furthermore, no other group, revolutionary or not, had at their disposal a book of revolutionary theory other than the situationists (ibid). This makes understanding SOTS all the more important in its theoretical, practical and creative forms.

But if the situationists are merely inheriting the avant-garde's un-resolved contradictions then, whether they like it or not, they are equally running the risk of remaining commodified, including the text, unless they can explain adequately the processes that removes them from this relation. Relying on the constructed situation and the "role of avant-garde currents, wherever they may appear" (Debord 1963, *The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Art and Politics*) can pose more problems than it may solve.

Even though it is the self-confessed role of the avant-garde's to link people and the experiences these avant-gardes have collected, where "together; [they are] to help unify such groups and the coherent basis of their project" (ibid) this still seems to leave the artist in a position that enables them to see past processes of recuperation and commodification that recognises the material possibilities of technical society. This seems yet another claim of superiority of one group to explain the epoch over another with no real grounding of why this should be the case. This could only mean that any artist, any writer attempting to supersede art or using art to recognise revolutionary change, Marxist or not, fell to the same problems as any other action tied to the current system of organisation. How could an artist be recognised, how could they eat and drink if it were not for the

sale and production of their crafts? Even revolution comes with a price tag. Therefore, at what stage can the revolutionary language of the avant-gardes appeal beyond current conditions to processes that inspire and encourage revolutionary thinking?

Despite the problems that the situationists face, they still act as if they can;

make the World a sensuous extension of man rather than have man remain an instrument of an alien world, [*this*] is the goal of the Situationist Revolution. For us the reconstruction of Life and the rebuilding of the World are one and the same desire. To achieve this, the tactics of subversion have to be extended from schools, factories, universities, to confront the Spectacle, directly. Rapid transport systems, shopping centers, museums, as well as the various new forms of culture and the Media, must be considered as targets for scandalous activity (Vague, 1966).

The construction of situations attempts to go beyond the ruins of the modern form of exploitation contained within the modern spectacle, and beyond the old world of alienation and exploitation, and in doing so, reveal the possibilities, the “modern possibilities [of a new epoch] of production which call for a superior organization of the world” (Debord 1957, *Report*) that reflects the massive technological achievements of history. They sought to unite the past world of revolutionary contestation within a technological world of immense possibility.

They are, in part, dependent on the ideas of Marx and his theory of ideology, but by avoiding what they claim is the confusion of Marxist thought “that has been profoundly distorted in the workers states” (ibid), the situationist project sought to “rupture the spell of the ideology of our commodified consumer society so that repressed desires of a more *authentic* nature could come forward” (ibid). This could then allow the situationists to base their tactics or urban praxis and the

construction of the situation on the subsequent recognition of the potential to liberate desires to a future of 'true' fulfilment. They do not *define* what these desires could or would be, but rather they will emerge in the revolutionary process of situation-creation.

It would seem then, that fundamental to the situationists' larger conception of revolutionary activity, is a project that relies on an inherent human quest for liberation and freedom of the mental senses with the technological and material expansion of the human world as a human right. This involves the removing of the division between labour and leisure, work and play into a society where the "logic of the game once again took precedence in human affairs" (Lee and Shlain 1992, p.172). This only furthers their intention to *construct and plan* realms in which "even the wildest dreams" could be realised and "flood the market with a propaganda of desire raising expectations beyond those realisable in capitalism" (Plant 1992, p.5).

This freedom however:

should in no way be confused with allegiance to the "modern" culture that can currently be found in Western Europe. This culture is the historical opposite of creation, and it is necessary to seek superior constructions of life. In the Workers' States and here, real freedom is the same — and so are its enemies (*I.S.# 1958, Freedom to Read, but to read What?*).

The situationists are nonetheless still forced to recognise of course that the spectacle, to maintain its legitimacy and validity, reformulates in a vigorous way, all forms of culture and practice to that defined within the commodity relation, in essence, their concept of freedom still has to account for and avoid recuperation.

Despite this careful analysis of the revolutionary path to come, the situationist's claim to authentic experience only compounds their developing problems. This is precisely because these proposals seem to appeal to an abstract experience void of any concrete realisation. The situationists' quest to liberate desires and recognise a future of 'true' fulfilment, a concrete world of desires and passions not only meets well with their hedonistic label. Quests such as this, quests that search for the meaning of liberation and heightened consciousness have been practised in the 1960's and has been a source of *induced* and novel enlightenment for millennia. Not only this, but they cannot wait for change to reveal its 'true' nature until after the *planned* event. Situationist theory must, if it is to offer any substantiation of its claims, point to the construction of a concrete world that does not simply rely on the promises of a group of theorists claiming heightened revolutionary ideas.

This leads to other, equally important questions. What does situationist experience in either its concrete or authentic form mean, and where are its markers with which to gauge not only its authenticity but also its revolutionary authority to such claims? To draw a response to these questions is vital if we are to get to Debord's text and locate how these practices emerge in the reading. If the text contains a route to a qualitative, aesthetic reading, as I want to claim it does, then it is reasonable to assume that the situationist text has to find a means to appeal beyond the quantitative, commodified appeal of the materiality of capitalism. If the text is to articulate this in forms that contain revolutionary ideas and lifestyles of a sort that are not forced upon the proletariat from within the

authority of the system of spectacular capitalism; where and how do these revolutionary ideas exist? Debord seems to suggest, though he is in no way explicit how, that these revolutionary ideas certainly exist in SOTS. If this is the case, if SOTS exists as a book of theory that can aid in the construction of realms of unbridled desires, these questions, while they remain hanging, forces us to move much deeper into an analysis of Debord and the situationists than may at first seem necessary.

The reason for this is that so far, we seem to have nothing more with the situationists and Debord than an almost nostalgic appeal to a revolutionary history and a ludic form of disassociation from mainstream society. These situationist ideas seem to reveal little more than a stimulus of the senses with slogans of “never work” and the “playful” occupation of the fragmented remnants of revolutionary theory. All this seems to rely on a position of possibilities that claims to move beyond the current mode of existence yet remains isolated and restless within the commodified avant-gardes of history (Jacobs and Winks, 1997).

The situationists, by showing that their account of capitalism as a spectacle emphasises the need for authenticity in everyday experience and that this mirrors the false sensuality of capitalist culture, seem to remain in the abstract manner within which their theory was first formulated, because they seem to be unable to offer concrete evidence of these higher forms of awareness of the existing social forms of organisation. Appealing to the manner in which the technological, material environment of life changes behaviour and thought, and the ways in which the modern spectacle now hinders and restricts this material thought from

moving beyond the current dominant, a commodified *translation* of the epoch, is not quite enough. Maybe, after all, Debord's reluctance in SOTS to appeal to these nostalgic slogans, to move away from this emotive use of a refusal to labour, is a signal of a developing shift from situationism to a theory that is Debord's own separation from the situationists.

The situationists do seem to exist in an egotistical world of specialisms by claiming to offer the *only* tools with which to find these 'higher experiences'. By isolating the *only* practices remaining to contest the capitalistic totality of commodity relations, the situationists, and this is no less the case with Debord's assurance that his text, SOTS, is one of superior mastery, appear to have opened the chasm between elite vanguardism and theoretical agitation they sought to bridge (Jacobs and Winks, 1997). Their claim to offer the proletariat a way out of the commodity relation, if their ideas and practices are followed to the letter, seems to lead the revolutionary classes straight back into an abstract realm of superior ideas and an inadequate programme of action that simply supports an exploited realm of recuperative commodities (ibid).

The constructed situation, rather than offering a praxis toward social revolution, may well serve to maintain the group in a realm in which one group contests their ideas above those of other ideas but realisable within the authority of situationist practice. Once this abstract appeal remains abstract and subsequently strips the situationists of their class perspective; once they become yet another group competing for ideas on the premise of desirable practice, and planned but covert actions, the situationists, so it seems, offer no more than a compatible set

of beliefs comfortable within any commodified value system competing for the power of translation (Jacobs and Winks, 1997). The destruction of bourgeois values and their dominant ideas was already a proposal set in place by surrealism and by the avant-garde within culture historically. The situationist's appeal to yet other sets of avant-garde ideas seems, for the moment, to have forced the situationists project to that of an ideological performance as good as that already in existence.

The situationists, then, in their attempt to avoid recuperation and to formulate a theory and practice that sought to reveal the abstract nature of what was presented as concrete within the spectacle, this bedrock of situationist theory "is easily assimilable within—and itself assimilates—the immediate forms of lived experience in dominant culture" (Jacobs and Winks 1997, p.55). The extent of this assimilation is founded on "the general positive program of the situationists [which] was formulated on an abstract level—i.e., without any immediate relation to specific struggles and issues—its neutralisation by modernist ideology was a forgone conclusion" (ibid, p.55). The very appeal to the practices of self management and to a 'lifestyle' of freedom and the creative abilities of human individuals are the very slogans sent back to haunt the situationists and their theory of the spectacle because it is these that appear as the poetry of advertisements, of revolutionary practice, revolutionary transformations of *capitalism* and the bourgeoisie. No longer are we, as individuals absent from the creative centre of our world for, as we will see, creation is at our fingertips.

This is a lot to take in one visit and in some ways, we will be drawn back to some of these points later in this thesis. The points raised above certainly have validity to a critical approach to the situationists and there are without doubt areas of situationist theory that have certainly been ideologised. It may well be for this reason, these criticisms of situationist theory and practice, that interpretations of Debord have sought to remedy this by placing Debord as somewhat different or outside of the avant-garde tendencies of the situationists as a whole. I have already argued, however, that this is not necessary because Debord is well able to deal with this himself. What is needed to identify how he does, is an analytical but critical interpretation of his text.

Nevertheless, we are still left with a question for Debord's SOTS. Do these criticisms cast a surreal doubt over Debord's text and its ability to indicate the possibilities to realise social change? In many ways, my hypothesis relies on a developed programme of situationist theory and practice because I have already suggested that these forms of theory and practice are to be found within the structure of the situationist text, especially with Debord's. While the criticisms that the situationists face remain, I want to show that these apply only to those that have been found 'out there', 'in the 'street,' so to speak, and is that area of situationist practice which has become most recognisable, and nonetheless the most recuperated, as we have seen. The situationists did attempt to shield themselves from this and, in part, I want to show they have done this too well and succeeded in obscuring the realm they sought to open up: proletarian contestation.

Equally, the theoretical portent that Debord placed in the heart of his SOTS, his historical analysis, has also found itself revised in Marxist and Hegelian terms, as avant-garde, as no more than a description of social organisation but never as a theoretical and practical account of the intensity, history and practice that underpins situationist thinking. It is this that I want to explore further.

This remains my project with the situationist text, because the situationists and Debord still stand in the shadows of both social theory and avant-garde practice, along with their critics, without ever really having their claim to a unity of thought and practice fully analysed and exposed from their own textual analysis. However, there is still a little more work needed before we can get to this analysis. The difficult and dangerous path to social change is no more evident than in Debord's text and it is for this reason, I believe, that accessing its meaning is proving a little more difficult than is at first appreciated. This is all the more reason, as I aim to demonstrate, that we should not turn back just yet.

This path remains, for the moment, committed to the situationists logic of recuperation, which still remains tied to their belief that the spectacular development of capitalism was fundamentally static, that it strives to constantly affirm its bourgeois culture of commodity consumption and, as a result, lost its historical, revolutionary claims. This affirmative quality was a "strategy of fragmentation, of *partial* use, whereby the dominant culture strove" (Debord 1957, *Report*) to divert the new away from the only class that can expose the revolutionary potential of productive abundance. Debord developed this in 1957 when he claimed that the dominant culture of commodity relations under

capitalism sought to “divert [détourner] the taste for the new, which has in our era become a threat to it, into certain debased forms of novelty, which are entirely harmless and muddled” (ibid).

The diversion of the passional quality of the new is interesting, and it is an area that we have partly covered. However, we need to cover this in a little more depth now because it is this, the diversion of dominant culture and the reclamation of this quality that stands to represent the historical foundation to situationist theory and practice within the parameter of the text. Therefore, there is yet one more stop to be made before we can adequately begin to explore the situationist text.

Tom McDonough constructed a delicate understanding of such a text, and it is one we will discuss shortly, in which Debord introduced a theory of practice in which this diversion can take place, but one he had placed throughout the structure of his work. To understand this, we will locate the situationist response to this, the *dérive*.

Chapter Five; Drifting with the situationists;

The Dérive

The development of the theory and practices of the situationists has taken up a large proportion of the analysis contained in this thesis so far. This may seem a little detailed especially when the interest of this study is the situationist text and in particular Debord's use of SOTS. It is for good reason though that this has been undertaken, because it is not until the situationists have been studied that Debord's own work begins to reveal its own logical process. Intrinsic to this are several key areas that I have identified and these, I have argued, need to be fully understood before a wider interpretation of Debord's SOTS can be obtained.

Just to recap on these areas: firstly, I have identified that separation plays a key role in the ways that the situationists developed both their theory and their practice. While the situationists and indeed, interpretations that followed their own work, have long signalled what they claim is a reductive process to their and any other critical theory, this still drew us into a discussion of situationist theory and the means and tools they employ to recognise these separating processes. How, for instance, the construction of situations seeks to transcend the boundaries of taken-for-granted desires and relations. This, we saw, showed how the constructed situation aims to use surrounding space in order to create alternative definitions to

social time and experience, alternatives to taken-for-granted assumptions and to derive alternate meanings to the commodity relation.

However important these concepts are to situationist theory, one more area needs to be discussed. The reasons will become clear why this, as is the constructed situation, remains central to a number of situationist texts because I want to show how a situationist practice termed the *dérive* appears not only in their subversive actions on the streets. This practice, the *dérive*, along with the constructed situation, also appears structurally in a number of situationist texts and it is this that now needs particular detail. Once I have indicated what the *dérive* means, how it is practiced and the implications for situationist theory, I will want to move onto a particular text that shows all the signs of a *dérive* and a constructed situation. By showing that these concepts appear in both a subversive textual practice and subversion on the streets, we will then be in a strong position to begin to locate what this means for Debord's SOTS.

The Dérive and the Streets of the Spectacle

What is evident with the analysis I have offered so far, is that the situationists clearly want individuals to transcend what they declared were the inherent failures of the cultural movements that had taken revolutionary thought to its current moment. This left them to claim that individuals, or groups, by combining certain aspects of their theories and by practising certain revolutionary actions, this, in the present moment of a spectacular land rich in promises, but little in true lived experience, could recognise certain environmental and experiential factors. Once

these factors were made apparent, this could work towards a collapse of the distinction between revolutionary politics and cultural criticism (Plant, 1992).

The avant-gardes play a significant role in this historically because it has long represented or acted as the safety-valve of a society regulated by bourgeois interests. As Marx had long indicated, bourgeois interests “must above all prevent a new beginning of revolutionary thought” (Debord 1957, *Report*). This prevention of a new signal to revolutionary thought demonstrates the restrictive practices that have, historically, remained at the foot of all class conflict. With Surrealism and the advent of artistic works that disrupted and shocked the taken for granted artistic world, the bourgeoisie recognised the danger this posed. Once co-opted, once surrealism fell into ordinary aesthetic commerce, bourgeois aesthetic theory “would like people to believe that surrealism was the most radical and disturbing movement possible” (ibid) in its new, controlled model representing bourgeois enterprise.

What the bourgeois world feared from Surrealism was that it attempted to show that the bourgeoisies tendency to re-produce experience, the emotional and passional quality of a life full of material experience was not confined to the use of the materials of labour alone, but also the environment in which these situations, the interaction between time and space, took place. These streets of play, these environments of experience were incorporated into a developing emphasis within cultural capitalism, within urban planning, geographic planning and urban regeneration. However, while city and urban planning declares itself as the locus through which to “broaden architectural concerns to the whole

atmosphere of time and space and the possibilities of living it” (Plant 1992, p.57), the fundamental contradiction, for the situationists, is urban planning, city planning is little else than a planned route for the movement of the commodity. The construction of roads, new and more modern housing developments operate within a playing field in which the successful urban environment was ever more able to access the world of commodity use. Closer amenities, easier commuting distance, faster transport networks and more access to shopping centres as well as the sale of property (Debord 1959, *Situationist Thesis on Traffic*).

In contrast, the situationists argued that the planned city had historically formed the locus for the movement and understanding of the forms of language that contributed to an expansion of the revolutionary conceptions of the epoch. The city, the urban environment is the historical reflection, the articulation of the unity between the material and aesthetic world whereby the aesthetic emerged, historically transformed, by material development. The situationists are arguing though that in the contemporary city, “there is no longer any Temple of the Sun” (Chtcheglov, 1953). The city no longer represented the truthful, technological and revolutionary possibilities of the epoch and the revolutionary forms and expressions that the avant-gardes had brought to bear on the negation of desires and emotion. Despite rapid change, these images remained to articulate a loss of feeling, of emotion that remained tied to a loss of experience where “Between the legs of the women walking by, the dadaists imagined a monkey wrench and the surrealists a crystal cup. That’s lost. We know how to read every promise in faces — the latest stage of morphology” (ibid).

The situationists pointed to the means that were being employed to condition desire and the poetry of the advertising hoards was one such means. The forms and desires that words took only served to maintain a certain aspiration toward dominated, spectacular material accumulation. Adverts that aspired to a particular emotion, to particular desires and to moments, space or places at which to discover these desires and emotions as experience. As Chtcheglov (1953) showed:

All cities are geological. You can't take three steps without encountering ghosts bearing all the prestige of their legends. We move within a *closed* landscape whose landmarks constantly draw us toward the past. Certain *shifting* angles, certain *receding* perspectives, allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space, but this vision remains fragmentary. It must be sought in the magical locales of fairy tales and surrealist writings: castles, endless walls, little forgotten bars, mammoth caverns, casino mirrors (Chtcheglov, 1953).

The situationists attention to morphology entered also into the practice of the *dérive* because as a basic practice, it is one that they thought could achieve an understanding of an *original* form or conception of space. It is a "mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. The term also designates a specific uninterrupted period of *dériving*" (IS # 1, 1958 *Definitions*). The *dérive* is another of the basic situationist practices that involves a quite literal drifting from one ambiance to another, through a number of unitary ambiances but with each *dérive* resulting in the potential for a changeable environment apart from that form which already existed. "Dérives involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll" (Debord 1958, *Dérive*).

Debord located certain aspects of the *dérive* in relation to the Surrealist experiments in social space and the aimless strolls of the Surrealists Aragon, Breton, Morise, and Vitrac that took place in May 1924 (McDonough, 2002 p.258). Debord's attention to the surrealist legacy showed also how "The Surrealists had embraced chance as the encounter with the totally heterogeneous, an emblem of freedom in an otherwise reified society" (McDonough 2002, p.259). However, chance, insisted Debord, "is a less important factor in this activity than one might think" (Debord 1958, *The Dérive*).

While the *dérive* was a series of moments spent drifting this is not to suggest that they were pointless activities of mere abandon to forms of chance encounters.

A *dérive* involved pilgrims of:

one or more persons during a certain period [who] drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there (ibid).

By undertaking these activities, participants of these moments believed they could finally rediscover, harness, and understand the effect of certain factors or "psychogeographical"¹⁰ contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones" (ibid).

The understanding of the *dérive* is equally an understanding that these fixed points of contact are in fact predefined routes structured within the dominant

¹⁰ Psychogeography was another situationist concept that studies "the specific effects of the geographical environment (whether consciously organized or not) on the emotions and behavior of individuals" (IS #1 1958 *Definitions*). Hence, the *dérive* was able to conjure up the experiences of the city and participate in the manifestation of the geographical environment's direct emotional effects and relay these as experiences and as communication.

thought and culture of commodity dispersal. Therefore, the *dérive* is a developing form of knowledge of the appropriation of urban space, the restructuring of the urban environment through a conscious reworking of the terrains and contours of the capitalist city. This, in turn appropriates this “urban space in the context of what may be called a “pedestrian speech act”, in that “the act of walking is to the urban system what speech is to language” (McDonough 2002, p.260).

It is a moment of a constructed situation in which expression, desire and communication of desire can be released and subsequently realise its own time and space within the redefined abilities of the terrain of experiment. The passage of meaning or possible meanings in a series of translations which direct a particular but transitory conveyance of desires and emotions that depend on the urban structures and language of a particular experimental terrain. Such appropriation, not only redefines social space to the experiences of the participants, it also redefines the commodity relation by sealing off its already defined urban passage and rendering it to the defining practice of the situation. This redefining process, this revolutionary practice of confronting meaning, places the participants in these movements in a realm in which they can find themselves, define themselves but within and to the possibilities of that terrain, or epoch. By defining their activities and actions within the terrain of struggle that represents the historical accumulation of social space, these same revolutionaries can contest the wider realm of both time and space.

The situationists argued that the *dérive* enabled participants to witness the urban environment from an alternative perspective that was predicated on moving

and experiencing their landscape that usurped the totalised and commodified image of the developing spectacle of city organisation. This offered a fragmentation of this total world and subsequently opened up the complexities and contradictions of a static modern social life. Such a conscious appropriation of the urban environment, argued the situationists, forced this opening up that subsequently created a clear understanding of “divisions and fragmentations [that were masked] by abstract space, the contradictions that enable political struggle over the production of space to exist at all” (McDonough 2002, p.260) and in its turn, realise a re-conceptualisation of the historical mediations that masked the potentially unified processes of time and space.

Acting on these contradictions of space and the differences between permitted and denied access to the complete boundaries of space, and this is a reminder of the situationist's debt to Marx, the situationists thought they could access a recognition of the disjuncture between social organisation and organised social appearances. By identifying and understanding this disjuncture that masked the possibility of an aesthetic construction of space, a disjuncture that concealed the time within which this space could reveal itself, the situationists also claimed they could understand other potential routes towards establishing processes that could achieve 'higher' forms of unity. Such raised states of awareness could, subsequently, reveal a total process of social mediation. This amounted to an appropriation of time that reveals itself into a more adequate understanding of social space and its content that not only contradicted the epoch's defining processes. This also revolutionised the space and time within which this totality of

experience could be found, and hence, the factors that underpinned this in the first place.

The goal of the *dérive* then is both this letting-go of the usual motives for movement but equally its necessary contradiction. The contradiction inherent in this is that the subsequent domination of psychogeographical variations by the knowledge and calculation of their possibilities is equally a recapturing of the surrounding environment, and a development of an alternative set of motives for defining space; redefining movement and reintroducing play but from a more creative perspective. Rather than occupy a realm in which these variations, these contradictions are merely translated into ‘positive’ commodities, those who follow the *dérive* can find a constructed space that is subject to personal, experiential definitions, which relies on individual and group production away from the commodity relation. It is, then, with “Those who conduct [these] experiments in everyday life [who] are also those who make up the revolutionary avant-garde (and this avant-garde is us) (Lausen 1963, *Repetition*) because this emerging, revolutionary avant-garde, fundamentally redefine and reflect the possibilities of modern society.

The scope and nature of this experimental field of study may remain vague or delimited “depending on whether the goal is to study a terrain or to emotionally disorient oneself” (McDonough 2002, p.260). But this field, the goals of the participants and the results can nonetheless remain immensely varied but equally impossible to isolate and cement to a particular terrain and a particular mode of static thinking that the situationists claimed was characteristic of the spectacle.

This does not help to counter the abstract nature of situationist theory, but this, once again, underscores their attempts to offer an *experimental* approach to discovering this theory and subsequently to discovering certain controlling elements of a participant's surroundings that encourage other experimental acts. By redefining space and by developing other ways of interpreting and experiencing their geographical environment, the situationists felt their parameter for the *historical* construction of situations varied immensely and hence their experiences of time and space.

This experimental edge worked well, firstly because Debord and the situationists use it to discover how other participants witnessed their own surroundings and how this worked toward the constructed situation. They, also recognised how this process worked for other observers of social movement and the restrictions such movement seemed to meet. In doing so, the situationists were following a growing movement, which recognised advanced methods for adjusting, directing and screening human reactions to live particular definitions of time and space. In essence, they were recognising a series of methods for conditioning human beings that had become a good deal more complex.

The Dérive and Experimental Conditioning.

Such conditioning methods, Debord identified, recognised also that "It is now possible for human reactions to be triggered in a predetermined direction," and this conditioning had reached such a stage that:

Scientific progress...has been constant, with advances in the experimental study of the mechanisms of behavior; the discovery of

new uses for existing systems; and the continuous appearance of new inventions. For many years, experiments have been conducted into subliminal advertising (with the insertion into films of unrelated images at one twenty-fourth of a second, undetectable to conscious perception but nevertheless sensible to the retina) and silent advertising (with ultrasonics) (Debord 1958, *The Struggle for the Control of the New Techniques of Conditioning*).

An example of the ways in which such conditioning operates is to be found in a study titled *Paris et l'agglomération parisienne* (Bibliothèque de Sociologie Contemporaine, P.U.F., 1952). Debord shows how Chombart de Lauwe notes that “an urban neighborhood is determined not only by geographical and economic factors, but also by the image that its inhabitants and those of other neighborhoods have of it.” (Debord 1958, *Dérive*). Debord uses Chombart de Lauwe to good effect because, in the same work Debord moves further to show how he illustrates “the narrowness of the real Paris in which each individual lives... within a geographical area whose radius is extremely small,” (ibid), their daily encounters vary only to the extent of the slight changes possible within this geographical area. De Lauwe locates and charts all the movements made by a student covering this small space made within one year. The student was living in the 16th Arrondissement of Paris and he was able to show that the student’s “itinerary forms a small triangle with no significant deviations, the three apexes of which are the School of Political Sciences, her residence and that of her piano teacher” (ibid).

Chombart de Lauwe’s analysis illustrated for Debord how the *dérive* along with the results of this experimental behaviour in the terrain of a constructed situation, can undermine this small triangular space by giving:

examples of a modern poetry capable of provoking sharp emotional reactions (in this particular case, outrage at the fact that anyone's life can be so pathetically limited)—or even Burgess's theory of Chicago's social activities as being distributed in distinct concentric zones, will undoubtedly prove useful in developing *dérives* (ibid).

The *dérive* plays a significant role in situationist practice because it seeks to identify and undermine the *restrictions put in place to movement and the experience of space*. What must be made clear is that this is not simply restricted to physical, social movement; it is human movement in its entirety. Debord and the situationists felt that almost all of existing human activity had been in some way or other, defined within the commodity relation and this includes the ways in which the text itself is developed. This places the situationist text in a position in which it can act as a means through which to obtain an understanding, an articulation of the situationist *dérive* and in so doing, the *dérive* can be seen as effective in removing obstacles and blocks to the text. Very similar to the meanings that can be achieved within the geographical realms of a city, the active movement of a person within the street, the textual *dérive* that will be shown to exist in Debord's SOTS achieves a similar function. But before the *dérive* is effective, it has to be understood and it is here that Debord's use of SOTS becomes instrumental to this.

It is in these conditions that Debord sought to develop a very different role to situationist practice because he was all too aware that the text had long been reduced to a generalized disappearance of all real ability. Rather than relaying social ideas and a development of the landmarks of universal history, as Debord claimed Marx had achieved, the text could be used to function for individual

stardom and hence “join the spectacle, in order publicly to adopt, or sometimes secretly practice, an entirely different activity from whatever specialism first made their name” (Debord 1988, *Comments*).

Debord goes on to claim that:

Where 'media status' has acquired infinitely more importance than the value of anything one might actually be capable of doing, it is normal for this status to be readily transferable; for anyone, anywhere, to have the same right to the same kind of stardom (Debord 1988, *Comments*).

This means that “almost every aspect of international political life and ever more important aspects of internal politics are conducted and displayed in the style of the secret services” (ibid) in order to avoid this blanket coverage of transferable rights to stardom. It is this, though, that we need to concern ourselves with because the readily transferable status of individuals and roles, from philosopher to cook, in a society in which “A financier can be a singer, a lawyer a police spy, a baker can parade his literary tastes” means one thing (ibid). By understanding that:

The people within these tendencies who become well-known are generally accepted as exceptional individuals, on the condition that they accept various renunciations: the essential point is always the renunciation of a comprehensive contestation and the acceptance of fragmentary work susceptible to diverse interpretations (Debord 1957, *Report*).

A division of critique, of contestation and therefore of practice. To separate Debord in the ways that he has been then, from both the situationists and the text, reveals less about his theory and more about the tendencies of the spectacle. Furthermore, this develops:

decoys, disinformation and double explanations (one may conceal another, or may only seem to), the spectacle confines itself to revealing a wearisome world of necessary incomprehensibility. This tedious series of lifeless, inconclusive crime novels has all the dramatic interest of a realistically staged fight between blacks, at night, in a tunnel (Debord 1988, *Comments*).

Debord is detailing the need for an identification of a situation, a textual situation, and this is reliant on the wider process of the *dérive* because it is a process that attempts to identify and overcome obstacles that otherwise restrict and hinder the constructed situation.

The modern text, rather than translating experience, was encountering the same process as television and the media in general. In essence, its role was emerging as transference of ideas and desires but only of that translated and accepted within dominant culture. The *dérive* in fact emerges in the situationists' text as a toll that has to be understood, paid and practised in order to overcome the obstacles to understanding the text that had been put into place by the authors of the spectacle. Debord knew only too well that his work would be recuperated, exploited and re-interpreted, and it is in this understanding that he placed SOTS as a tool that is multi-disciplinary.

This understanding of the situationists' use of the constructed situation and the *dérive* will prove important then for a number of reasons. First, as practices, they claim to counter the taken for granted and static assumptions of social space as a process toward constructing and acting out the development of historical situations. That is, by locating the ways in which the environment and the surrounding spatial field restricts and hinders social activity, the *dérive* can point towards

alternatives or at least the existence of these restrictions in the very first place because its essence and its realisation remains contingent on creative processes. Overcoming these restrictions leads towards the freedom and space within which to define and construct an ambiance of qualitative situations of meaning.

It is important, therefore, to understand these physical practices but to concentrate on just this area risks missing other, more concealed indications of their practices. These practices, as I have suggested, were also performed abstractly beyond that of pure experience in the commonly taken sense. That is, these practices were performed in areas such as the text. This does little to quell the growing frustration at the abstract nature of certain situationist practices and this only adds to the difficulties in explaining how these revolutionary actions are understood via the text. Debord will, in time, have to substantiate his claim and show how the revolutionary classes of the proletariat, will be able to pick these texts up and recognise their own revolutionary potential.

However, some of the tools towards this task have already been outlined. It is by way of the possible unity between the constructed situation and the practice of the *dérive* that the reader is equipped for another way into the situationists' use of the text. Without spending the time that I have to construct these movements, the subsequent interpretative penetration of Debord's SOTS would remain difficult, and certainly abstract, because it is these practices that remain at the very heart of SOTS. The point here, and this will be drawn out later in this thesis, is that understanding the *dérive* equips the reader with a critical, situational analysis that forces each reader to develop both the means and the methods to overcome the

spatial obstacles that are found not only in the urban environment, but also in SOTS. The historical understanding of the constructed situation aids this same reader to develop a practical means with which to analyse these obstacles, these results of experimental reading and thus, allows the reader the *time and space* within which to explore situationist ideas beyond that of the commodity. This is a complex construct and it is for this reason that significant effort has been placed in setting out what these mean as practices in order that these can be appreciated before we get to Debord's text.

It is the text, then, that we need to concern ourselves with next because it seems that situationist theory and practice still relies on *tactical and strategical* processes. There are a number of reasons for this hypothesis and hints to a tactical and strategical blueprint do exist in a variety of situationist works. For instance the situationist, Alexander Trocchi (1964) was "looking for a word to designate a possible international association of men who are concerned individually and in concert to articulate an effective strategy and tactics for this cultural revolution" (Trocchi 1963, *Sigma: A Tactical Blueprint*). Trocchi continued his tactical search with his work and project, *A Revolutionary Proposal: Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds* where he claimed that:

At the beginning of these reflections, I said that our methods will vary with the empirical facts pertaining here and now, there and then. I was referring to the tentative, essentially tactical nature of our *every* act in relation to a given situation, and also to the international constitution of what we might call the new underground (Trocchi 1963, *A Revolutionary Proposal: Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds* emphasis added).

The fact that Trocchi refers to every act as comprising a tactical nature is equally an indication of the situationists attempt at a totalised theory and practice that left no stone unturned. This has reasonably, to extend to their writing also, and this is picked up with Tom McDonough's analysis of a Situationist Map called *The Naked City* (1957).

We have seen above, how the understanding of the forms that words take and the subsequent study of these forms as a poetic form of morphology had shown how the city had itself changed and the language of possibility was etched in the faces of every one, and it was this that led Chtcheglov (1953) to claim that "We [situationists] know how to read every promise in faces — the latest stage of morphology" (ibid).

I now intend to expand my own analysis of the role of the situationist text, which will rely on much of what has been presented above. Debord's SOTS, I want to show has a clear morphological intent that echoes a certain developing critique of the forms and systems of language that have come to represent not only the spectacle but, equally, the revolutionary voice of proletarian contestation. By locating Tom McDonough's analysis of a situationist text that he claims develops a textual *dérive*, will also show how this emerges within SOTS. By undertaking and subsequently understanding McDonough's analysis, we will have developed some strong evidence that will draw together three main strands remaining from the previous chapters.

The first is the existence of tools with which to locate symbolic but practical passages through the situationist text. By understanding the *dérive* and by

deciphering the constructed situation, the attempted revolutionary elements that are contained within certain texts make themselves apparent. Secondly, we will witness why Debord cannot be separated from the situationists, as discussed within chapter Two, because it is only through understanding the depth and scope of situationist practice that we can finally encounter and decipher these tools in the first place. By developing these practices, and by understanding a situationist use of these revolutionary tools, each reader develops a situationist understanding of SOTS which means that SOTS must, by implication, contain the possibilities toward realising a constructed situation. While this remains somewhat ideological, this is what Debord attempts, and it is, therefore, a necessary discussion to undertake. Finally, the third element that will be drawn together with the previous two is the irrefutable evidence that situationist texts such as these do exist and that they contain very much the essence of the practices I have detailed above.

McDonough's analysis is important if only to further strengthen my claim, but we will also be shown that his conclusion reflects the existence of not only the evidence of a written construction of a situation, but also the textual evidence of a *dérive*. This is intriguing for a number of reasons, but McDonough's analysis represents one of only few examples of research into the situationist text in this way. It is, therefore, by such analysis of situationist texts that we will be able to move towards understanding the role of the text in historical writing of both theory and practice but also, how this forms a central feature of situationist theory and practice. Let us look now at Tom McDonough's close analysis *The Naked City* (1957).

Chapter Six; Debord and the Text.

In an attempt to uncover the practical form and means that Debord used to disrupt the dominant language of social organisation, Tom McDonough, in an article written in 1994 called *Situationist Space*, offers a close analysis of a text that he argues aspires to the tactical social practice of the *dérive*. The text in question is a Situationist Map called *The Naked City* (1957). McDonough suggests that *The Naked City* attempted to articulate particular means and ways that once recognised, could feed into the readers' own desires and sense of adventure but ultimately indicate the potential toward situational change, the constructed situation.

McDonough's research identifies that not only does the structure of this text lend itself to forms of practice such as the constructed situation and the *dérive*, it is also, by understanding the text's limitless forms of conclusion, that the reader is able to come to a number of conclusions but from within the same text and at each visit. What makes this map interesting is not only McDonough's way of deconstructing its structure; what is also interesting for my study is to recognise that its author is Guy Debord.

McDonough's analysis of *The Naked City* goes to some length to explain the components of this map, its overall structure and the ways in which the map works. For instance, McDonough shows how the map resembles a train track in which there are a series of turntables and fragmented pieces, nineteen in all, composed as a collage. The subsequent construction of the route or journey is

joined by a system of arrows that hint to, but do not stress precise direction; more like hints of possible directives or turntables that can move in a number of differing directions. While this map is situationist, McDonough shows that its historical origin lies elsewhere. In fact, this practice is borrowed from the avant-garde's use of plagiarism where this map is a plagiarised idea on how to experiment with maps. This map though is a further appropriation of an original that had been made in 1653, published in 1654.

La Carte du Tendre is the original map that depicts the whole range of feelings between love and hate as if they were actually the different parts of a country. Like the original map, this relation to feelings and emotions is attempted through the reader with the *Naked City*. Each reader is encouraged to look for patterns or links that they would otherwise not get from a language dictionary. It is an exploration of both the space of the urban geography, but also the human emotions that are linked to and affected by the ways in which this urban landscape is structured and experienced in time. It is a geographical experiment not just of the city but one that emerges as a cartography of a possible conscious awareness of the possibilities of journeys, of movement, and hence, a subsequent realisation of the restrictions to this same movement (McDonough, 1994).

The various segments, despite being linked with directing signs, were nonetheless composed in such a way so as the "users of these maps were asked to choose a directionality and to overcome obstacles, although there was no 'proper' reading" to be gained by the map (McDonough 1994, p.243). The map is comprised of a number of directions that seek to détourne or redirect their

original emphasis and turn what is a defined and *specific* realm of urban space into a generalised world of possible movement and freedom. Or, otherwise seen as a reading that was chosen as:

a performance of one among many possibilities (of the course of the love affair in the *carte du Tendre*; of the crossing of the urban environment in the *Naked City*) and would remain contingent. The subject's achievement of a position of mastery, the goal of narrative's resolution, was thereby problematized (McDonough 1994, p.245).

This performance seems to bring the reader to a position of creative personality. In essence, the *real* function of *The Naked City* is performative. It uses the structure and "language within certain conventions in order to bring about" a differing set of effects in a reader (Eagleton 1996, p.118).

The act of opening up and revealing the nature of the social body through the city's architectural symbols is implicit in the very structure of the map (McDonough 2002, p.245). With the use of such means, the situationists believed they could help to direct individuals toward a realm where these same users can experience or witness, "The sudden change of ambiance in a street within the space of a few meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres" (Debord 1955, *Introduction*). It is a textual guide that helps the user along "the path of least resistance which is automatically followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the physical contour of the ground); the appealing or repelling character of certain places" (ibid); a process of *dérive* that illustrates a series of symbolic architectural structures of Paris that prevented

movement and presented Paris as a Great architectural obstacle (McDonough 2002, p.245).

Debord indicated that texts such as *The Naked City* could do more than this, because he suggested that “these phenomena all seem to be neglected” (Debord 1955, *Introduction*). That is, these “great obstacles” of the streets, of neighbourhoods are seen not as some cause created outside of that individual. These obstacles to ‘free’ movement exist as some endogenous or ‘natural’ feeling “where [individuals] generally simply assume that elegant streets cause a feeling of satisfaction and that poor streets are depressing, and let it go at that” (ibid). These individuals never seem to envisage that these streets and these forms of architecture that make up the city are not only constructed outside of them, but can be “uncovered by careful analysis and turned to account” (ibid).

This practice of textual drifting undoubtedly remains abstract but the intention of the situationists with these encounters is to heighten the possibility that they exist as practical, situational experience but equally, these experiments can be relayed or understood via the text. By confronting the restrictions to the freedom of space and time, restrictions encouraged by the commodity relation and modern capitalism, the spectacle ends up, the situationists argue, maintaining and continually introducing advanced forms of these restrictions and obstacles that subsequently prevent any creative movement. The spectacle maintains the commodity relation, but it is with experimentation that the situationists, and in this case with Debord’s text, that they sought to indicate certain means to

transcending these social restrictions to creativity by actively involving the reader in the texts' limitless creation.

Quite how this is achieved is something that has proved elusive. McDonough's attention to the *Naked City* goes some way to address this where he identifies *The Naked City* as a map of social consciousness that details Debord's account of the obstacles that are faced by individuals in their pursuit of desire, fulfilment and passion. McDonough attempts to develop a careful analysis of Debord's text through which other users can experience and practice the potential freedom of the streets. This has, in a clear way, uncovered Debord's *The Naked City* as aspiring to a revolutionary tactic in itself that sought to rekindle the proletarian desire for creativity and change.

McDonough seems to suggest that an understanding of the city and the bourgeois restrictions put into place by the commodity relation, can be achieved by understanding an alternative culture; apart from the dominant ideas of commodity consumption, in both its structure and in its limited use of *language*. This development of an alternative culture, another but fundamentally truthful explanation of a system of ideas, proletarian *ideology* and ideas, could radically and systematically, divert bourgeois values away from the commodity relation because proletarian values existed on a qualitative, rather than quantitative, understanding.

This seems to suggest that to understand *The Naked City* and its intended meaning, the adherence to conventions of *dominant, defining* ideas related to the style or ability of reading and understanding maps, needs to be suspended. The

reader enters the difference of ambiance and of meaning upon which they are able to enter the text without their usual predefined expectations and relations to the text and their surrounding environment of commodity relations. This seems to indicate a de-bourgeoisification which includes the reader's relations to work and leisure activities, and without all their other usual motives for understanding the text and their position in social organisation. The relation that the reader takes up, if practised, is one that Debord believes will remain proletarian but fundamentally creative and constructive.

This is all still very problematic for the situationists though because such a process assumes that each proletarian individual can access these constructed worlds value free, or at least free from the values that define and translate bourgeois culture, the commodity. It is one thing to claim that experimenting with the surrounding environment can lead to a development of an alternative understanding of dominant culture; but to claim that all values and experiences can be suspended seems to leave the experimenter with little with which to experiment. That is, if each individual enters these experimental realms without any predefined relations, then the relation that exists between experiment and experimenter is also suspended. This is a problem because each relation between experiment and the undertaker of that experimental act, already presupposes a relation in the very first place.

Furthermore, how can the results of experiments be defined or understood if there are no relations that can aid in a 'truthful' understanding of these processes? How can the results of these experiments, defined against a de-limited background

of interpretation, be sure to represent the truth of proletarian history and desire? Had this already not been the claim developed within Soviet Marxism?

One possible way out of this, of course, is the situational claim that the usual relations to experimental behaviour search for the new, the different and thus the discovery of technological ambiances that defy the norm and in their turn find better or more adequate means to articulate the new. But if these relations to the norm are suspended then at what point can these comparisons be made and how can their objectivity be tested? Of course, Debord had already claimed that: “Situationist techniques have yet to be invented” but their intention was “to multiply poetic subjects and objects — which are now unfortunately so rare that the slightest ones take on an exaggerated emotional importance — and we have to organize games for these poetic subjects to play with these poetic objects (Debord 1957, *Report*).

This was the focus for their entire program, “which is essentially transitory” (ibid). Their situations will be “ephemeral, without a future”. A creation of passageways and avenues that reflect the desired route to a real life (ibid). By maintaining relations to these experiences that are not defined or preconditioned, the situationists believe that the technological process alone would, or at least had, the potential to, define their activities and desires in an objective link with the technological abilities of an epoch and thus, practically reorganising and redefining social space and time. These experiences remain as unexplainable, but nonetheless real, because their underlying relation is still tied to the historical technological abilities of social organisation. These only become true once these experiences are

repeated within the epoch's ability to *reproduce* these experiences within the technological apparatus that first inspired them. A relation through which the experiment becomes detailed, conscious, only by developing further the means by which to experience once again the ephemeral passions without a future.

This task though, and again it is to Marxism that the situationists seem to turn, "presents itself only when the material conditions necessary to its realization already exist, or at least are in the process of formation" (ibid). It is with this that we can begin to develop what it is the situationist's hoped to achieve with their theory and practice, because they only ever planned to enter into "a phase of small-scale experimentation", that will begin to *highlight these material possibilities*. By attempting to experience those possibilities, and the restrictions that a dominant class puts into to place to avoid this experiential realm, ideas, material ideas, emerge in search of the sources to these material pleasures, and:

in addition to the direct means that will be used for specific ends, the positive phase of the construction of situations will require a new application of reproductive technologies. One can envisage, for example, televised images of certain aspects of one situation being communicated live to people taking part in another situation somewhere else, thereby producing various modifications and interferences between the two. More simply, a new style of documentary film could be devoted to "current events" that really are current and eventful by preserving (in situationist archives) the most significant moments of a situation before the evolution of its elements has led to a different situation (ibid).

I would hope that I can begin to justify the route that I have taken through both the situationist's and Debord's analysis.

The location of situationist archives is no less than that to be found within SOTS. Debord has secured a particular meaning, a particular *historical* ambiance

through which a reader can once more access not only material space and time, but also a situationist explanation of this. By developing what is a situationist analysis along these terms, along the concepts of the *dérive* and the constructed situation, as I have shown, Debord has left an account of the most significant moments of the situations that have marked the basis of material, epochal history as understood through a situationist analysis in his SOTS.

And this is supported when Debord claims that

All the branches of knowledge, which continue to develop as the *thought of the spectacle*, have to justify a society without justification, and constitute a general science of false consciousness. This thought is completely conditioned by the fact that it cannot and will not investigate its own material basis in the spectacular system (SS# 194).

This is Debord's project with SOTS because his intention is to develop a material and practical basis, coupled with a theoretical analysis of the spectacle. By introducing a material analysis of history and theoretically and practically juxtaposing it against the centrality of Time and History, Debord is confident that the situationists succeed in embedding their analysis of the spectacle into the consciousness of the reader, thus opposing time and space, which is founded on a material analysis of history.

By recounting these situations, by recounting the historical situations that have produced humanity, it became clear that it was now time for humanity to create its own historical situation. "Since the individual is defined by his situation, he wants the power to create situations worthy of his desires" (IS# 9 1964, *Questionnaire*). A reciprocal relation in which the technology of survival produces a

realm of human desires, of increased modes of survival which in response redefines and reproduces the technical environment to meet the expansion of these modes of survival, desires, and the creation of historical situations. SOTS maintains this in its historic as well as contextual role in which it ensures it retains an understanding and knowledge of these situations, but, equally the practice that the situationists had created in order to live *their own historical situation*. They insisted, therefore “Up till now philosophers and artists have only interpreted situations; the point now is to transform them” (IS# 9 1964, *Questionnaire*) in terms of a conscious control of the technological and material means with which to realise the historical moment.

Debord’s SOTS can now emerge into another possible realm of meaning because to read SOTS means equally to understand all this and practise the situationists development of the constructed situation and the *dérive*. SOTS is performative and attempts to mirror the type of function found in *The Naked City*. A function that seeks to develop the reader’s sense of social space and the passing of time, by placing itself as a kind of desired ambiance but combined with a material practice in which the reader participates in a search for social space as a social practice; it is creative in its practice, its language and in its presentation of theory.

Quite literally, the text becomes an historical account of human situations that can aid in a de-commodification of the subject in order to re-discover the poetic *transformation* of objects but in a radically different language to that of the dominant classes. It becomes a process that the reader can experience, an

experience of social space beyond conventional experiences and beyond the pre-structured conclusions of what a text, or what a social ambiance, *should* offer.

The significance of *The Naked City* as a form of practice, and this will be true also for SOTS, is that while its interpretation can be readily found in its visual parameter, in its many sketches and pictures, it is nonetheless also contextual. That is, its meaning changes to and within the context in which it is practiced and understood. Yes it remains abstract, but it does so intentionally in order to recognise what Debord claimed to be the familiarity of an abstract world. The key to understanding the possibilities of moving beyond this abstract world is to be found within the technological and material realms of an organised society. Thus, the situationists:

want to put the material equipment at the service of everyone's creativity, as the masses themselves always strive to do in revolutionary situations. It's simply a matter of coordination or tactics. Everything we deal with is realizable, either immediately or in the short term, once our methods of research and activity begin to be put in practice (IS# 9 1964, *Questionnaire*).

It is its methodology that underpins SOTS because without it, SOTS would remain impotent in the wake of the spectacle relation. Debord develops the material and technological understanding of social history and in doing so, he lays the foundation on which a wider understanding of human development can be placed. However, for this to have any meaning, any historical legitimacy within situationist understanding, Debord *has* to also detail in some way a means for this history to be researched, practiced and thus, realised.

In the case of the *Naked City*, this makes the map's meaning contingent not on its original context, the city as is given, but instead any number of different *situations* and *solutions*. It is meaningful in *situ*, not through the author but instead as a direction developed by the author and interpreted by the reader's use of the tools, practices and theories provided by its structure. The intention behind this is no clearer than when Debord cites "A friend...that had just wandered through the Harz region of Germany while blindly following the directions of a map of London" (Debord 1955, *Introduction*). The objective remains to counter the obstacles and problems that each practitioner discovers to the freedom of movement and in doing so, to practice both the *dérive* and the constructed situation. Debord has attempted to maintain situationist tools in a relation to the ever moving social context; the organised technological and political realm that forms ideas rather than that which carries ideas from the previous epochs alone. In other words, Debord has attempted to maintain the fluidity of situationist ideas within the text both historically and contextually.

This develops an altogether different reason for analysing the practices of the situationists. Their works, while they do aspire to a difficult realm of abstract and ideologically fatal ideas (Jacobs and Winks, 1997), their practice remains tied to experimenting within their immediate world, and certain of their texts remain faithful to this. Essentially, these texts seek historically to analyse their current situation, and thereby express it's meaning from a particular standpoint, and this remains within the realms of a series of alternative creative tasks. Their methods and their ways to achieving this may differ internally and between differing

members of the situationists, but their theory attempts, none the less, to lay its *tools* for such analysis as ahistorical and applicable to all situations at and beyond the contextual situation they experienced. Debord's claim that he left the proletariat with the only remaining revolutionary tool is evident in SOTS. These tools, therefore, are fundamental to this *situationist* analysis.

McDonough's analysis has helped to show that this could well be the case because, by understanding situationist theory, their practices and the context they found themselves within, we are far more able to identify more fundamental, situationist ideas. The textual structures, the codes and methods they employ, once apprehended in historical hindsight, McDonough, with his appeal to archival reconstruction has shown how the reader or analyst can arrive at the threshold of a penetrating system of meanings that quite literally allow the reader to walk into an alternative realm and from there enable them towards a more 'accurate', situationist understanding of their immediate relation to *their* social world. If, by these practices, each individual could apprehend their world, their immediate world, as an abstracted form that moves beyond but nonetheless recognises the spectacular, then their quest was heightened in their search for exact opposites from dominant bourgeois ideology.

This hypothesis relies on a position in which each activity, each practice that finds its experimental footing, also demands in practice its absolute technological and material opposite from the spectacle. Once experimental behaviour illuminates the impossible, the search, the ephemeral search, is loaded towards finding its

technological and aesthetic solution that already informs the possibility of these behaviours.

The abstract world of the *dérive*, for instance, demands, by its realisation and practice, concrete manifestation in the reality of a freedom of movement. It is by practising this new found geographical experiment with their surrounding environment, that these students of social dissent can also practice social critique by mapping and telling their own journey, their own, restricted but *proletarian* account, through feelings, thought and practice communicated as “a pedestrian speech act” (McDonough 2002, p.260). It is an act that can be contained, translated and articulated through the text. The significance of this altering landscape is its context is equally applicable to any number of interpretative frameworks and thus offers the possibility to question the *structures* of social reality and dominant ideology in a number of ways but within and from the same text. This is only possible because Debord has attempted to fuse situationist practice with the ever-fluctuating changes to ideas and thoughts contained in an expansive technological world. By subverting taken-for-granted meanings and by overriding social expectations practically within the text, the situationists felt they could nudge individuals into a differing realm of social consciousness that these individuals found and experienced for themselves.

No interpretative network, no ideology, no preconceived idea can develop these practices because such ideology in the spectacle already attempts to assuage any *recognisable* revolutionary content. The result has to be both a practical and theoretical landscape in which the possible combinations are almost unlimited.

Hence, to understand the structure and nature of *The Naked City* is also to understand its method, its tactics, in achieving this 'higher understanding' or alternative understandings of the individual's relation to their immediate world both in *theory and practice*. Such a methodology hopes to "achieve something in the saying: it [composes] language as a kind of material practice in itself, discourse as social action" (Eagleton 1996, p.118)

Yet, if we are to bridge that mythical status that Debord seems hard bent to inherit, and if Debord is to "take his place among the writers of his generation" (Jean-Marie Apostolides 1999, p.XVii), then we must ask this: to what extent does analysing practices such as those given above, the collective works of the situationists in areas such as the constructed situation and the *dérive*, prove successful to this cause? It is one thing to present the intention behind situationist practice, but it is an altogether different task to analyse the source, existence and utility of such practices in discovering revolutionary ideas and practice. How can readers truly practice these acts of diversion and deviation that remove them from the norm, but more importantly how do they ever get to recognise these acts in the first place?

The situationists and Debord only encourage these difficulties to this understanding because they apparently rely on "Marx's supposed strictures against the formulation of any blueprint of a revolutionary society as absolving it from the task of elaborating a comprehensive theory of the revolutionary process" (Jacobs and Winks 1997, p.51.).

There is increasing acknowledgement among translations of the situationists that their own theories, and this is even supported by the situationists own account, refuse to say exactly how, or with what tools, their ideas and practices can be truly understood (Debord 1961, *Judgements*) In part, we have already taken account of this difficulty by identifying certain tools along with the origins of their theory and practice. However, it seems that we are no nearer exorcising the spirit that haunts the situationists own works, because this has relied on my presentation of a series of analytical and theoretical assumptions from within the text itself. This difficulty only serves to steep the situationists into the mystical realm they so dearly wanted to avoid.

Debord does not help this either with his SOTS, because Debord's theory, if it is to exist at all, has to in some way or other, appeal to something beyond that which it describes, and in some way reveal a certain path to its analysis and its realisation, without suggesting the nature or scope of its ambition (Jacobs and Winks, 1997). If he is presenting a social theory in SOTS, which he seems to claim he is, then why does he not simply say so, and explain how and where to access this theory?

Concepts such as recuperation and commodification are fine, but how do individuals get to realise and understand these hidden processes if there is little to indicate their origins. His failure or reluctance to do so has only resulted in more and more attempts to translate Debord and the situationists with ever more mystical accounts of their ambitions. Debord also recognises this when he admits that he felt others, who had commented on his book and "who later published

new books on the same subject [as the spectacle], demonstrated that it was quite possible to say less” (Debord 1988, *Comments*).

Equally, if Debord recognises that translations of SOTS, and mediocre ones at that, are reducing the “revolutionary content that could be discovered in that critique” (Debord 1988, *Comments*) then what is it that compels both he and the situationists to construct their revolutionary critique in such a concealed manner that runs the risk of losing sight of the revolutionary group they are searching for, the proletariat? They are not completely vague about their ideas and practices because we have already seen how the situationists sought to plan a society based on desires and emotions which could be realised in the full use of social production. To appeal beyond the current mode of organisation to a far off land seems somewhat ideological and utopian, especially when, to get to this land, the revolutionary class have to discover the only route which has been laid by Debord and the situationists.

Both Debord and the situationists seem to encourage this utopian reading because by claiming that these situationist movements attempt to go beyond the current state of dire restrictions to human life and thus can be transcended by practice and experience, they are certainly appealing to an idea of alternative social organisation. This remains, to a large extent, interpreted through the abstract appeal to another ‘way of living’ another form of ‘everyday experience’ that will prove *itself* ‘better’ than that in existence. Despite the huge development of material wealth that has been found within capitalism, it would appear that the situationists are requesting that this be put on hold, so to speak, so that we may

find an alternative means with which to *use* the technological apparatus that is responsible for this material surplus. After all, any desires and emotions that were experienced beyond the commodity were already as a result of this apparatus, but restricted within the spectacle

He and the situationists expect, by an appeal to situationist analysis and practice that the proletariat, upon which this is contingent, will undertake the final experiment of conscious social change by experiencing, translating and developing an account of what the situationists claim is their own hardship and dehumanisation. Despite any aesthetic possibilities that may exist within the spectacle, all these remain alienated while they are mediated through a commodity society. Thus, while the proletariat attempt these revolutionary changes, they only have to hold onto the *belief* that a more radical, but nonetheless more adequate, social change will emerge if the revolutionary apocalypse defined by the situationists is undertaken; an apocalypse, which means usurping the dominant image of material surplus until after this great event. It would appear that this subjects the proletariat to a position in which it is judged by not so much by what it is, but rather what it does (Jacobs and Winks, 1997).

This, once again, places the proletariat at the mercy of definition; that is, for the proletariat to be truly recognised and for their revolutionary struggle to survive, it must first recognise actions and activities that are revolutionary. So while Debord was confident that the world had to be changed, and that the most liberating change was possible, he claimed that this was only “possible through appropriate actions (Debord 1957, *Report*).

This is an indication of a dichotomy developing in Debord's theory because this still means that the proletariat, instead of being at the point of objective reality, and thus the point of productive understanding and the precursor to the complete overthrow of alienated life, they still remain, nonetheless, subjected to interpretations and translations of what exactly is an appropriate action. By pointing towards the practical use of constructed situations, and by detailing the *dérive*, we are somewhat closer to understanding how Debord felt these actions could emerge; but this still does not relieve Debord of his responsibility to identify how and why these actions exist as they can, that is objectively. Yet it is this same process, the identification or the externalisation and ideologising of the proletariat that renders their activities prone to recuperation and reduction.

SOTS, if it exists as Debord has claimed it does, as a book of theory, must by implication, exist as an example of the ideas of the situationists, but more so a book of analysis and practice through which the proletariat may find themselves by practising these superior ideas of situationist theory. The real revolutionary content of their actions can then realise their own definition in relation to the context within which they are fighting their alienation.

We will, in the following chapters assess to what extent this simply adds another vanguard party to the equation of a history of vanguard theories of proletarian revolution. On the face of it, it does seem that the situationists desire to have their theories and practice imposed upon the proletariat does add weight to such a position of vanguardism especially in light of the subsequent situationist

tendency to associate all the “quality” revolts of modern history such as Watts and May 1968 with situationist theory (Jacobs and Winks, 1997).

But it is Debord’s book as a book of theory we need to begin to develop because if it is the book of theory that Debord claims it to be, then it has to be, or at least aspire to be, a book of practice or Debord risks alienating both situationist theory and practice, as a unified response to modern capitalism. Similarly, if Debord’s book remains only theoretical, then he only has the assurance that this is a book of theory, the qualitative assurances of the possible results of practice that it contains, which will be found precise only once realised with its unity between theory and practice.

The following chapter will now begin to unravel Debord’s SOTS and it will do so on the basis of what has preceded this chapter. In order to achieve this, we will be drawn to understand the uses of language and the means employed to subvert revolutionary language. This will enlarge on a number of key points raised above and in doing so, this thesis will demonstrate how and why they will need some more explanation.

Chapter Seven; The Society of the Spectacle

So far, we have seen how the situationists and Debord sought to develop a particular, critical understanding of human social relations, and how this understanding has found its way into the development of the text. There is little doubt that the text has its place in situationist theory and by understanding this, it does seem to help towards understanding what Debord had in mind when he wrote SOTS. He is surely in a vein of textual presentation of theory where he aims to secure a particular meaning and understanding of the disjuncture that the situationists claimed existed between social, proletarian meaning and that of the spectacular relation.

However, while we may now be in a position that allocates a particular theoretical understanding to the role and purpose of the situationist text, this does not bring us close enough to actually understanding Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*. If we are to take Debord's direction and understand SOTS as the book of theory he had intended it to be, then there is a little more work needed. In order to contextualise what Debord had in mind with the structure he developed to present his theory and his practice, this theses now has to give attention to the specific role that writing and language has in situationist theory.

Debord and critical discourse

The situationists had long aspired to revolutionary developments of critical language in both writing and practice. However, Debord is a little more

instrumental in understanding this practice because, it is he who is most expressive of the ability that both the writer and writing has to reveal what he considers to be the true histories of human development. Indeed, “the only true histories are those that have been written by men (*sic*) who have been sincere enough to speak truly about themselves.” (Debord 1989, *Panegyric vol.1*). What Debord means by this is clear enough if his Marxist leaning is understood. Humans make history, but they do not make it just as they please. They do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past (Marx 1977, p.169). Hence, it is only by detailing these circumstances, by expressing the ways humans encounter certain moments of change by writing these moments truthfully, and from the experiences of the dominated classes, that the true nature of history is revealed.

Debord’s historical perspective plays a major role into the ways he perceives and uses writing as a revolutionary medium of the proletariat’s voice. In his fidelity to Marx, Debord seems to have found his own material ideas emerging within the historical concepts of the proletariat, labour, work and the commodity relation. This encouraged Debord to argue that critical theory, to be communicated at all, must be communicated in a language that delivers the true results of its activities and does not attempt to speak the language of reform or structuralism or any other ism. It does not waver, nor does it shirk its responsibilities, but instead meets them head on in the ‘truthful’ reflection of social production. Debord attempted to capture this when he claimed that:

Critical theory must be *communicated* in its own language. It is the language of contradiction, which must be dialectical in form as it is in content. It is critique of the totality and historical critique. It is not "the nadir of writing" but its inversion. It is not a negation of style, but the style of negation (*SS# 204*).

In this, he attempts to indicate that a style or a certain practice exists within which:

the *exposition* [emphasis added] of dialectical theory is a scandal and an abomination in terms of the rules and the corresponding tastes of the dominant language, because when it uses existing concrete concepts it is simultaneously aware of their rediscovered *fluidity*, their necessary destruction (*SS# 205*).

Debord is not simply claiming to destroy and wreck aimlessly. It is the text and writing that acts as a means, a form, through which the contradictions that he claims exist in a social system are disturbed by these abominations of rules. As we have seen, acting on these contradictions allows the subsequent recognition of the disjuncture between social organisations and organised social appearances. While Debord refuses to be drawn to describing or offering a blueprint of a revolutionary society, he is still aspiring to writing as a realistic point of discovery for those who choose to read from the standpoint of the proletariat. Debord then, is talking of practice that exists both in its manifest forms on the streets but also a practice in the form of a text, of writing.

The Society of the Spectacle is an attempt to create such a critical text but as a text it is structured in an altogether different way, a different perspective to that of *The Naked City*. True, its interest was to contest taken for granted meaning within the spectacle, but Debord's SOTS seeks instead to go to the very heart of this meaning and resurrect something completely different to that of other

situationist texts; that is, the restrictions and obstacles that he believes prevents proletarian *history* from emerging. The main purpose of SOTS, then, seems to remain an attempt for the reader to understand and develop an awareness of the geographical terrain of the spectacle, of the passing of time while signalling towards forms of historical social practice that can undermine and reveal this terrain. SOTS is a textual *dérive* that attempts to identify and transcend the obstacles that a developing capitalism has placed in front of a developing proletarian consciousness. This makes SOTS much more fundamental than *The Naked City* because SOTS attempts to recall the historical battlefield of proletarian contestation and the long awaited victory of proletarian revolution.

Debord had long held the activities of the situationists in the highest regard in this respect, and hailed them as the extremist group that had achieved more than any other revolutionary group in bringing back such revolutionary practice and contestation against the spectacular of modern society (Debord 1979, *Preface*). The situationists existed victoriously, Debord claims, in which “it was easy to see that this group, having imposed its victory on the terrain of critical theory, and having skilfully followed through on the terrain of practical agitation, was then drawing near the culminating point of its historical action” (Debord 1979, *Preface*). SOTS was the ever present book of theory in these troubles but existed too for the troubles that were “soon to come and that would pass it on after them to the vast subversive sequel that these troubles could not fail to open up” (ibid).

Debord undoubtedly perceives his work to be a portentous piece of theory that in some way either anticipated what was to come or, at least, what was already

occurring in revolutionary theory and practice. Debord's contribution to the theoretical and practical activities of the proletariat, however, is written and presented from the *standpoint of the proletariat*. This is, of course, important for any theory claiming to recognise and thus deliver social change via proletarian activity because it is only "When the proletariat demonstrates by its own existence, through acts, that this thought of history is not forgotten, the exposure of the *conclusion* is at the same time the confirmation of the method" (SS# 77).

While brief, this thesis from *The Society of the Spectacle* is actually quite complex. Debord is claiming that the proletariat, by showing its existence as a class of its own, as a dimension to the historical process in contradiction to the bourgeoisie, also reveals, through acts, that the bourgeoisies' conclusion has not been forgotten. This conclusion is demonstrative of the historical struggle for the technological ability to assuage survival and its wider conclusion in the concepts of living. Debord recognises in this the physical release that this offers from the restrictions of human survival to the natural world and these possibilities remain while the proletariat maintain their contestation to live this release.

The process that reveals this conclusion will also confirm the practice and action that exposes these concepts of living as a conclusion. It will reveal the separation from history as well as the masking of the historical process of time and space. This can expose the object of history, the economic translation of history as a productive process alone, in which an object that claims to reveal its subject, will be shown to exist at the expense of the living proletariat and of humanity.

The economic translation of history remains bourgeois for as long as this translation remains the expression of historical relations (*SS*#82). The economic can only ever remain a partial explanation of historical relations because the economic is the *mediating* process through which the technical abilities of the epoch are passed to and experienced by, the proletariat. This is bourgeois because the role of mediation maintains only a partial revelation of the total abilities of an epoch. However, it is the different forms that have represented, organised or mediated this economic relation that Debord is attempting to isolate within SOTS because these forms, these owning forms, can equally reveal the historical nature of social organisation and social control.

This was working from Hegel who Debord agreed had moved beyond an interpretation of the world into an understanding of the transformation of the world (*SS*#76). However, Debord recognised, as did Marx, that Hegel remained critical in thought alone and thus did not detail the source of the technological practice that led to this transformation (*ibid*). Therefore, according to Debord, Hegel only understood the world from *its* own internal conclusion which was always bourgeois while it was technology and material alone (*ibid*). What Debord is claiming is that to understand the completion of a particular epoch of history is not simply to accept the conclusions that are openly presented because in this revolutionary epoch, the bourgeois thinker sought only a reconciliation with the results of these revolutions (*SS*# 75). However, the external preservation of thought is the conclusion given to the bourgeois revolutionary epoch because it is the thought and practice of material expansion that has characterised its history.

Therefore, its externality to both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is also an externalisation of historical thought but from only one class, the bourgeois class (ibid).

In other words, this spells, the end of the bourgeois revolution as particularly bourgeois and as separate. However, the owning class of history succeeded in masking this preserved thought by a means of identifying the proletariat, the inheritors of history with the external results of production, of economic relations and thus objectifying the results of bourgeois history as the results of the totality of history. The political, capitalistic translation of history, the defining epoch of bourgeois revolutions, of commodity explanations, remains so long as it is a means to explain the world in reference to a history as completed with the sole recognition of the object alone. A reference in which all contestation is closed simply because bourgeois history, to recognise itself, has to dissolve itself as only one arm of the historical process, but one that offers itself as the sacred spirit of the productive economy as the whole of history and as the object *separated from history*

This left Debord with some difficulties, of course. To rid SOTS of any of the dominant ideology that characterised history, to protect it from recuperation, so evident in other situationist practices but fundamentally, to provide its proletarian foundation, Debord had to present this theoretical portent to the world in ways that protected its own historical and, as he seems to believe, proletarian, understanding. SOTS' existence remains as a particular proletarian conclusion.

The Role of the Potlatch

To understand how Debord attempted to present his work in order to avoid recuperation, is more clearly revealed in the varied avenues that Debord explores through which to deliver his text to the situationists, and hence the proletariat. It is clear that the academic route could not have been an option for this merely occupies one of the direct routes to recuperation¹¹. These academic circles, argue the situationists, provide only curators of poetic language that reduce revolutionary questions to one of commodity relations alone. Debord had already concluded that to achieve a sensuous extension of the world as an extension of humanity, rather than humans consistently remaining as an alien of this world “the tactics of subversion have to be extended from schools, factories, universities, to confront the Spectacle, directly” (Vague, 1966). Hence, none of the usual forms of presenting critical discourse and practice would suffice, because these are already propagating the possibilities to seeds of change.

SOTS could remain, as did the situationist’s journal, *Internationale Situationiste*, an increasingly read journal, primarily for a small circle of cohorts with the long term strategy of its wider dissemination being sold in the market. None of this would have done though for a book given such high esteem as Debord gives it, nor could it have suited its immediate role of revolutionary theory because this

¹¹I have to be mindful of this within my approach to Debord and the situationists. There are clear contradictions between my approach, that is an academic approach and the long term hostilities that the situationists maintained towards any academic analysis of their works. While I do not distance my thesis from the criticisms and contradictions this develops, that in situationist terms, my thesis is a recuperation of their works by a mystical cretin, as they would refer to me, it is nonetheless an area of situationist theory that requires illustration.

still relied on a market system to distribute a book of proletarian practice that contested this market place. For SOTS even to be accepted would have meant, in most circumstances, its theses being revised. This was not an option for Debord.

Debord's presentation of SOTS comes in an altogether different but nonetheless, interesting form: the form of a *gift*. The intentions of Debord may not be entirely clear yet, but it is possible that the celebrity of SOTS as a text and its submission to the world comes from having been:

given out in the form of the *potlatch*: that is to say of the sumptuous gift, challenging the other party to give something more extreme in return. By this means, people of such magnanimity show that in their own way, they are capable of anything (Debord 1993, *Attestations*).

While not directing his readers explicitly to this ceremonial reception in SOTS, Debord nonetheless highly regards the potlatch as a practical activity. Indeed, Debord wrote of the potlatch in 1959 by claiming that the:

Potlatch was the name of the information bulletin of the Lettrist International, 29 issues of which were produced between June 1954 and November 1957. An instrument of propaganda during the transitional period from the insufficient and failed attempts of post-war avant-gardists to the organization of the cultural revolution now systematically initiated by the situationists, *Potlatch* was without doubt the most radical *expression of its time* [my emphasis], that is to say the most advanced search for a new culture and a new life. (Debord 1959, *R/Pot*).

The potlatch was a ceremonial feast that originates among certain Native American peoples (which was effectively legislated against within America) of the northwest Pacific coast. The host of these feasts distributes gifts requiring reciprocation. These ceremonial exchanges of gifts were a means in which to trade, to communicate, to celebrate birth, and to compete among other tribal members. As important to all this, these ceremonies were an opportunity to

enhance status. There was no material basis, no expectation to material accumulation to these exchanges, they were purely symbolic to the status of those who were performing.

However, despite any festive experience, the mutual reciprocation would last until such times as either the guest or the host were unable to reciprocate their potlatch exchanges resulting, quite literally, in one of the party destroying its status. Surplus was not at issue. Indeed these ceremonies were a point of contact in which the sharing of surplus took place, which helped to distribute rather than isolate local bounty and technology.

To extrapolate from this that SOTS is a form of potlatch may seem a little arbitrary. However:

provided that the work of dissemination is done in confrontations that disturb the public peace – the discontent felt everywhere will be heightened and made more bitter by the sole faint knowledge of the existence of a theoretical condemnation of the order of things (Debord 1979, *Preface*).

This is the situationist's science, the science of struggle and the science of theory. Hence, to enter into the potlatch and to challenge the very status of the dominance of ideas and practices, Debord seems to confer on SOTS its ability to be the condemnation of the order of things. By conducting a search for the source of desire and emotion and by confronting each exchange with a reciprocal act, the practice of Potlatch existed so as to disturb the taken-for-granted explanations of a social system and develop a social awareness of material possibility.

This confrontational science is not one that is missed by Debord, and he certainly lauds its use. In quoting Marx, Debord goes on to suggest that "Marx's theory is fundamentally beyond scientific thought, and it preserves scientific thought only by superseding it: what is in question is an understanding of *struggle*, and not of *law*. "We know only one science: the science of history" (*The German Ideology*) (SS# 81). In just this one quote, Debord has summed up the historical content and role of SOTS. Not only is it scientific thought in terms of its understanding of social struggle within the spectacle; it is also the history of struggle and it is this that Debord seeks to develop by presenting SOTS as a potlatch. His use of this confrontational practice attempts to introduce an automatic, *scientific* understanding of struggle for social meaning by forging its history on the terrain of the social struggle for the control, at each epochal succession, of the *objective* technological abilities that influenced social ideas and desires. The historical exchanges that have characterised the anachronistic relations between owner and owned is also characteristic of Debord's attempt to show that early history was premised on conflicts that had no recognised material basis, no expectation to material accumulation alone and, hence, no dominant bourgeois, accumulating class.

Instead, the historical class exchanges that Debord attempts to develop, we will come to see, is a point of historical contact in which the mutual reciprocation between owners and owned, between labour and accumulation, would last until such times as the owning class could no longer reciprocate the bounty of these technological exchanges within their own epochal meaning. The results of these

conflicts are no different than the potlatch exchanges where, quite literally, one of the party destroys its status, and in turn, forces another epochal mode for understanding the technological and material developments of social exchange. Surplus was not at issue. Indeed Debord's analysis of these historical conflicts is no different to his analysis of the potlatch, because these ceremonies were a point of contact in which the sharing of surplus took place, which helped to distribute rather than isolate local bounty and technology.

It is not too radical a proposal especially when it is seen that Debord claims that the potlatch has a new task, that is:

The new task of *Potlatch*, in a different context, is as important as the old. We have moved on, and thus increased our difficulties, not to mention the chances of contributing to a completely different end than that intended (Debord 1959, *R/Pot*).

Not only is he claiming that they are working towards an end that differs with any proposed to date, but he is also claiming that the role of the potlatch is instrumental in this process by increasing the difficulties and thus by highlighting social struggle for meaning, for desires, and an inauguration of a search for the impossible. The situationists remain in this task "the real innovators until the overthrow of all the dominant conditions of culture — with this central contradiction: we are at once a presence and a contestation in the so-called "modern" arts" (Debord 1959, *R/Pot*).

The central contradiction remains in the realm of the potlatch, notably, its existence as an instrument of propaganda but one based on the reality of an alternative experience that differs to that of the dominant bourgeois ideal; the

potlatch seeks to distribute *freely*¹², apart from that of the commodity relation. Not only this, to present these acts in a vein of theory that demands a reciprocal action means that the possibilities of a technological system are stretched towards realising its limits and thus the possible points of *creative* expansion. The negative propaganda that this creates, if preserved, can be superseded and thus deliver or realise “a superior cultural terrain” (Debord 1959, *R/Pot*). They warn, however, that their methods:

cannot be drawn from the given means of aesthetic "expression," nor from the tastes that feed on them. The SI might be a good instrument for the supersession of this laughably stagnant world; or it could congeal into an even greater obstacle: a "new style." We intend to push it as far as it will go. We intend *Potlatch* to work usefully toward this end (Debord 1959, *R/Pot*).

What more than a book of theory, presented to the extremist group, the situationists, in the form of a gift that expects in return, something much more. If this is the case, and Debord seems to suggest this is so when he claims that; “In 1967 I wanted the Situationist International to have a book of theory” (Debord, 1979, *Preface*), then Debord has some issues to settle. Debord certainly anticipates his work to be read widely, but he seems to have intended that his theory, from the very beginning of its developments, be presented *first* to the situationists.

Debord has illustrated this because he has already shown that he presented his work, his translation of the epoch, to the situationists when they most needed it,

¹² The situationists were among the pioneers of anti-copy right work. They refused to have their works collected under a copy written law and in doing so, offered their texts freely, to be plagiarised, copied and distributed as and how the individual or group desired. In IS #1 they pointed this out “*All texts published in Internationale Situationniste may be freely reproduced, translated and adapted, even without indication of origin*”. This is the essence of potlatch.

before and among the events of May 1968, because they were the only revolutionary group, to that date, that had *acted* upon the translation of the epoch. Is Debord claiming then that it is for the situationists to interpret his work, being the only radical group to have successfully challenged social organisation of the spectacle and by implication *the most proletarian*? I have already claimed that the process through which the text takes the reader is already situationist, but if its meaning is contingent on situationist theory and practical understanding *first*, then the reader can only ever enter the full meaning of the text as a situationist, imbued with situationist theory.

If this is so, it will mean at least two things. First, it will mean that the text, as a practical activity in the situationist sense, can only be understood from a situationist analysis; but we have already seen the complexity of situationist analysis and its reliance on certain acts and theories that often makes its wider understanding equally complex. Furthermore, McDonough (2002) clearly reveals that the situationists and Debord, remain in the “chronological and ideological division of artistic versus political and, their resulting practice can only ever remain separated from the unity of an artistic/politico movement (McDonough 2002, p.xvii). Debord’s attempt to unite both theory and practice in SOTS is fine, but in doing so he seems to be suggesting that he is writing in a way in which he believes he is articulating and practising, sincerely and truthfully, the experiences of the situationists and of his epoch (Debord 1989, *Panegyric vol.1*).

Considering that the situationists had long felt they had reached the highest stage of critical theory and practice that marked their epoch, does this not simply

add more weight to the claim that the situationists are no more than a vanguard group who will lead the proletariat by their own ability to translate the epoch? SOTS, as this *translation*, remains the code book to which these ideas can explain all that is needed, but its code remains resilient to only the most dedicated situationist analysis. The proletariat, as a mass of revolutionary potential, is once again, it seems, being led by the intelligence of the situationist's understanding of the science of struggle as *the* scientific explanation of the epoch.

Secondly, how can a situationist theory be present in the troubles ahead, proletarian troubles, when that theory is already one that has been revealed in an altogether different language than Debord had intended. Can the proletariat, after all, rediscover this language; the objective translation of the epoch through situationist analysis and practice, and rediscover SOTS as a practical understanding of the spectacle? More accurately, can SOTS remain a cartography of history and used in a differing context as a map set against the contemporary terrain of the spectacle. No different, I would suggest, than Debord's friend who "wandered through the Harz region of Germany while blindly following the directions of a map of London" (Debord 1955, *Introduction*).

This may well prove to be the case because Debord's structure, while it remains tied to the constructed situation and the *dérive*, means also that any person reading the text could well learn and develop situationist practice by practising the text. That is, by freely experiencing the text and by placing it within a theoretical/practical context, Debord has attempted to maintain an understanding of situationist practice. Clearly, if my hypothesis is correct, Debord,

by structuring SOTS in the ways I have claimed, encourages a re-reading of situationist ideas and practices within the context of an advancing spectacle.

These are some difficult issues that SOTS has to deal with and, in time, within this thesis, we will attempt to do justice to the analysis that is required in order to understand these claims. However, it is still with SOTS that we need to concern ourselves because, despite his efforts, Debord was always cautious to the reception that SOTS received and was aware that:

Most often commentators pretended not to understand to what usage a book can be destined if it will never be able to be classified into any of the categories of the intellectual productions that the dominant society wants to take into consideration, and if it was not written from the point of view of any of the specialized trades that it encourages (Debord 1979, *Preface*).

And “of course, in some circles [Debord was] considered to be an authority” (Debord 1988, *Comments*).

It was just this process, that the situationists termed recuperation, that Debord intentionally hopes to avoid, while at the same time meeting it head on with the process of the potlatch. Debord quite cheerfully accepts that a good percentage of the interest in his work will result from specialised, intellectual elites who “devote themselves to maintaining the spectacular system of domination” (Debord 1988, *Comments*) and have, therefore, a specific interest in recouping certain ideas and certain practices, even amongst the ranks of the proletariat. Other readers, will “persist in doing quite the opposite” (Debord 1988, *Comments*).

Debord does not intend to present his theses then, as philosophers and social theorists seem to do, as “authorities and who would encourage people to believe

that there can be competence and authority in matters of justice, in matters of beauty, of happiness and perhaps even of truth” (Seidler 2001, p.131). In doing this, Debord is already alluding to a separation between two particular receptions of his work; those who will recoup ideas and those who will attempt precisely the opposite.

These two camps, these authorities of truth and justice presented by the spectacle receive critical discourse, but Debord contested their effectiveness in developing any critical language towards the prevailing spectacle while they remained tied to the language of spectacular domination. Any ‘critical’ language formed within these authoritative groups, Debord argued, existed only within and from the media professionals “with only a few respectful rectifications or remonstrations” (Debord 1988, *Comments*). Their incoherence is taken all the more seriously the more miserably they contradict themselves from one detail to another within the generalized fraud” (IS # 9 1964, *The World Of Which We Speak*). While hardly extravagant in these remonstrations it is their extreme ignorance of the spectacle’s authority that both supports and justifies their “personal and professional solidarity with the spectacle's overall authority and the society it expresses makes it their duty, and their pleasure, never to diverge from that authority whose majesty must not be threatened” (Debord 1988, *Comments*).

While Debord is attempting to avoid these authorities of the spectacle, he does reveal, nonetheless, that he has written his SOTS in a way that while not offering and aspiring to truth and justice in any *specific* way, SOTS does, nevertheless, offer a message that goes beyond the *dominant* authorities of the spectacle. By

writing SOTS from a 'class position', Debord, I believe, feels he has been able to develop some 'secret' clause that can certainly out-wit these authorities.

While this is the case, Debord has always claimed, nonetheless that there is nothing mysterious, nothing secret about what he nor the situationists propose. So maybe there are chances within SOTS for the proletariat to regain the language of dissent. And in 1979 this seemed to be borne true when SOTS was to find, "for the moment, its best readers" (Debord 1979, *Preface*) in the workers of Italy.

Italian workers:

who can be held up as an example to their comrades in all countries for their absenteeism, their wildcat strikes that no particular concession can manage to appease, their lucid refusal of work, and their contempt for the law and for all Statist parties -- know the subject well enough by practice to have been able to benefit from the theses of *The Society of the Spectacle*, even when they read nothing but mediocre translations of them (Debord 1979, *Preface*).

The mysterious nature of SOTS and the inability to understand its critical content seems to be due largely to the inability of the reader as opposed to the legibility of the text. Debord's example of the Italian workers indicates that despite "mediocre translations", the Italian workers could both understand and *practice* its theses. Furthermore, this seems to be indicating that it is the position of the reader, in relation to their social position within the society of the spectacle, that will in some way or other, inform this meaning.

There remains then, a particular language to discuss, and this is the language of dissent. Such a language exists, so the situationists and Debord believe, that could apprehend more accurately the means and tasks that face the revolutionary classes. The potential of the industrial city has already given way to a distinct

morphology and understanding of the possible route through which to apprehend the unfolding reality of the new epoch of technology. Such a form of language can organise and unify concepts and practice with a long-term view to discovering the means towards accessing new desires and new emotions.

The next task therefore, is to begin to develop the scope and diversity of the possibilities of a language of dissent, and to discover to what extent Debord creates this in his own texts. I will suggest in chapters nine and ten that he does, and it is by identifying how he achieves it, that there appear a number of interesting aspects to Debord's theory. However, before I attempt this, I will discuss the uses to which Debord and the situationists placed language.

Chapter Eight; The language of dissent.

Understanding the role of the dominant language of any social organisation plays an important part to the situationist's overall approach to their revolutionary theories (Becker-Ho 1995). Therefore, I want to suggest that Debord's analysis in SOTS is a testament to the importance of his use of language, and the ability he seems to ascribe to it to act as an instrument of social, proletarian power. Yet despite any analysis I may offer here, there still seems to be reluctance among other commentators to examine Debord's text in terms of its language. This reluctance has led to few examples of a committed and structured attempt at reading and understanding the systems that Debord has erected within his own use of language and words. This is despite the fact that the situationists believe that

When speech ceases to be the individual exercise of resolve and intelligence, it becomes the mere instrument of a higher power. Speech represents this power and is represented by it. Anyone then speaking this language comes to identify with it; they will talk the way it does (Becker-Ho 1995, *The Language of Those in The know*).

Language and speech have a clear, defining role then in the way they structure and mediate particular ways for understanding the forms of organisation that come to represent civil society. It seems reasonable to suggest that for situationist theory, the apprehension of language can itself be revolutionary when it truthfully reflects or expresses social understanding in ways that are altogether different than that which already exists.

One clear example of the situationists' use of language in this way rests with Alice Becker-Ho (1995), a long-term partner of Debord and fellow situationist.

Becker-Ho suggests that it is within the creation of a new language of criticism and dissent, extracted from within the organisational structure of which it is a part, that revolutionary theory can “effectively organize an independent and unified practice” (Becker-Ho 1995, *The Language of Those in The know*).

Such a critique does not depend solely on the language that exists in the old world for this language already occupies its own point of reference, its own social justification. Every critique of that world has already “been made in the language of that world” (Khayati 1966, *Cap*), and, as such, exists beyond conventional critique. Every movement claiming to be revolutionary, has to invent its own understanding of dominant language, its own understanding of the current forms of social organisation. This language remains officially artificial while it remains external of the dominant acceptance of social hierarchy. Therefore, while such a speech is “created out of nothing” and while this is “a speech which is artificial in form”, this developing language is not arbitrary because the meaning of these words;

is divorced from the sound and image commonly attached to meaning by those languages in current use. In this way, the so-called dangerous classes put both themselves and their language firmly “in the picture”. The language of slang is essentially the enemy’s vernacular *turned upside down*, then *disguised* (Becker-Ho 1995, *The Language of Those in The know*).

These potentially revolutionary terms and what are developing definitions of *alternative forms of social organisation* represent themselves in their own terms that remain a source through which to gauge its own revolutionary activity.

The situationists believe that by undertaking a revolutionary act in both action and language, such a unity of action develops terms that seek to undermine and “destroy the dominant sense of other terms and establish new meanings in the “world of meanings” corresponding to the new embryonic reality needing to be liberated from the dominant trash heap” (Khayati 1966, *Cap*). Therefore, only those who experience a proletarian, dominated and dehumanised existence within the context of a hierarchy of social organisation can comment in a language commonly understood among the repressed. This language is a more material and more authentic language when it also recognises and reflects the full aesthetic possibility of a particular epoch of social organisation.

This seems to resurrect a certain artistic, aesthetic materialism premised on a Marxian analysis of class position and social meaning. Debord, in support of this, claims that;

The spectacle subjugates living men to itself to the extent that the economy has totally subjugated them. It is no more than the economy developing for itself. It is the true reflection of the production of things, and the false objectification of the producers (*SS# 16*).

The proletarian producers of the materialist, capitalist economy, find their reflection, their falsified objectification, in the production of commodity things. Their *true* reflection, however, which can be isolated and discovered by understanding social development and by anthropological history, demonstrates that this reflection is not to be found in the production of things, of mediated commodities that speak their own commodified language. This language contrasts human activity as confined and distorted to the rule of things. Instead, the truth

of human activity, human reality is to be found in the freedom to construct the human world on collective desires and ideas that reflect the true nature of social accumulation and human practice in terms of the technical ability to produce.

This makes the authoritative form of commodified language given out under spectacular relations as a denial of 'man'; a denial of 'human essence' and ultimately a dehumanisation of social worth. This rests on the principle that any mediation of the technical abilities of an epoch away from those who are subject to them remains in a process of exploitation. As we have discussed, the commodity only ever remains a partial representation of the technical ability of the epoch, and any language that supports this, such as the language of marketing, is equally alienating.

However, Debord must air caution here, because he may have entered into SOTS a moral appreciation of spectacular organisation as he fails to demonstrate early enough in his own scheme why his critique, why his study of spectacular forms, does not simply become another language of denunciation of spectacular organisation; another form that specialises in describing the proletarian position. Not only this, but in his claims that the spectacle presents itself as "the *main production* of present-day society" (SS# 15) that "The spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible. It says nothing more than "that which appears is good, that which is good appears (SS# 12). Ultimately, when "Considered in its own terms, the spectacle is *affirmation* of appearance and affirmation of all human life, namely social life, as mere appearance (SS# 10).

Debord does little to explain how this spectacle can *present itself* as the final achievement of human history, of human desires, and on the power of the spectacle to present itself as a complete form of sensory gratification. This does not seem to explain either how the development of a particular experimental study of the forms of words emerges into a situationist language that claims to explain the objective difference between these two historical positions. This is important if only to demonstrate how the situationists account for, and subsequently stop, the dominant classes, the capitalist classes, from apprehending this developing form of situationist language.

While it may be useful to insist that the use of language in a *certain way* obscures “the new embryonic reality” (Khayati 1966, *Cap*) developing from the apprehension of productive processes, Debord, in his representation of situationist theory, has, nonetheless, to still account for two worlds of meaning and how these possibilities exist side by side, and appear how and when they do. More precisely, he has to be able to demonstrate the process through which the proletariat not only differentiate between these two represented worlds, but also how *they* can be sure that the choice they make, the world that Debord seems to suggest exists, is truly the right version of reality. Debord’s eclectic concept of the spectacle and an appeal to the technological reflection of otherness may not be enough.

Debord attempts to account for some of these difficulties by claiming that the same reasons that prevent the adversaries of social change, the adversaries of a language of social change, “from definitively fixing language”, exist precisely for the same reasons that the situationists felt they could encourage a subversive

language. Meaning within the spectacle is not fixed, they agree, because “A definition is always open, never definitive” (ibid). The situationists argue that their language, their perspective, has “a historical value”, in which their terms of reference, their reflective understanding of the forms of social organisation “are applicable during a specific period, linked to a specific historical practice” (ibid). Any language that attempts to define historical practice and forms of organisation, can never remain definitive because this language is already subject to the forces of historical activity.

One example the situationists use is the concept of a “political movement”. They claimed that these words, rather than denoting the revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat, instead illustrate a “specialized activity of a group and of party bosses at the head of that group who derive the oppressive force of their future power from the organized passivity of their militants” (SI# 9 1964, *Questionnaire*). Debord never claimed that the owning classes were incapable of apprehending the embryonic state of change, and hence unable to apprehend the language of change. He was rather insistent that this had in fact been the very source of understanding the history of human development that was not contained in capitalist and spectacular development alone. Instead, Debord was advocating a three dimensional system within which social mediation reflected the true nature of both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, and not just the interests of the ruling classes. While unions and representatives of work forces focus on fair pay, and a fair working week, their position is already mediated by virtue of its relation to

commodity reproduction. These concepts of fairness in the working week only ever benefit the production of things, of objects.

The situationists, and this was a position taken up by Debord in SOTS, argue that words, on the contrary, have worked historically for “the dominant organization of life . . . Power merely provides words with a false identity card . . . It creates nothing, it recuperates” (*I.S. # 8 1963, All The Kings Men*). Such an inversion of meaning and words, “is evidence of the disarming of the forces of the protest that depended on those words. The masters of the world thus seize signs, defuse them, and turn them upside down” (Khayati 1966, *Cap*). The critical concept of the ‘spectacle’ was intended to express this disarming process and in doing so, sought to characterise what the situationists saw as a new form or stage in the accumulation processes of commodity of capitalism. This new but more pernicious process required the wholesale submission of facets of human life, human social life in which the understanding and expressing of recreation, patterns of speech, all fell to the same life force sucking power of the commodity market (Clarke, 2004).

Those who developed the analysis in the first place resisted the idea that this colonization of everyday life was dependent on any one set of technologies, but notoriously they were interested in the means modern societies have at their disposal to systematize and disseminate *appearances*, and to subject the texture of day-to-day living to a constant barrage of images, instructions, slogans, logos, false promises, virtual realities, miniature happiness-motifs (ibid, p.3).

This, the situationists argue, is a significant problem for the development and use of language within the spectacle, because understanding the forms of dominant language remains at the heart of all the struggles that have ever existed between

the social forces striving to abolish the present alienation and those striving to maintain it. It is a war of words, struggling to apprehend the meaning to social production and technology, and therefore inseparable from the very material terrain of those struggles (*I.S. # 8 1963, All The Kings Men*). This seems to make for good sense, for it is clear that we all “live within language as within polluted air” (*ibid*) and in this case, the use of language may well filter out our own understanding of experience and the possibilities of future experience within the true abilities of an epoch.

Both Debord and the situationists are warning against the assumption that we know what words mean or that their political or social meanings are moments at which to recognise the stability of social organisation. How can we otherwise recognise that terms such as revolution, a term that is increasingly based on an inversion of the reality of technological revolutions and which have marked epochal history, are instead reflections of the mediating forces of commodity reproduction. Revolution is such a standardised term in much of the advertising vocabulary used to market new products that it no longer carries with it any understanding of its true potential when linked to the abilities of an epoch. The revolution in IT, the revolution in phone technology, the revolution in washing powders all dilute rather than explain revolutionary potential to live the epoch of capitalist regeneration.

However, “words do not play. Nor do they make love, as Breton thought, except in dreams. Words *work* — on behalf of the dominant organization of life” (*ibid*). Words, do not work by themselves, but are instead directed and

manipulated, structured and organised but still, and in no way impotent, conveying the possibilities for understanding the differences between fiction and reality. The situationists, and this is no less the case with Debord's SOTS, are cautioning against seeing the relationship between social organisation and social meaning as a simple matter of the relations between material distribution. Rather, words, and the organisations that develop systems and means with which to explain their epoch, are all forms of political and social writing which link, clash and connect in powerful and complex ways. Debord insists this is the case with the spectacle, because despite the fact that Debord is seen as the inimitable author of the spectacle, (Clarke, 2004) efforts to understand and re-assess Debord's concept are not futile, but fundamental to the legacy of the situationists. Debord aims to do just this and develop and maintain a language of dissent and thus, leaving words in a realm that makes for uncomfortable times:

Unfortunately for the theoreticians of information, words are not in themselves "informationist"; they contain forces that can upset the most careful calculations. Words coexist with power in a relation analogous to that which proletarians (in the modern as well as the classic sense of the term) have with power. Employed by it *almost* full time, exploited for every sense and nonsense that can be squeezed out of them, they still remain in some sense fundamentally alien to it (ibid).

The fact that those theoreticians of information and those responsible for the dissemination of the dominant language of social hierarchy remain, in some sense, fundamentally alien to language is a clear indication that not only is Debord staying away from all those intellectuals who claim to represent the revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat. He is, by implication, claiming that the true

language of revolution originates from somewhere other than the dominant world of the spectacle, yet is reliant on this spectacle as its complete opposite, as its reflection.

Debord, in opposition to the spectacle and the intellectuals of this spectacle, is attempting to show that the situationists “represent the highest degree of international revolutionary consciousness” (IS # 9 1964, *Questionnaire*) by operating in a complete and direct refusal to participate within the commodified meanings and the language of spectacle domination. “This is why [The Situationist International] strives to illuminate and coordinate the gestures of refusal and the signs of creativity that are defining the new contours of the proletariat” (ibid) because the proletariat’s “irreducible desire for freedom” is “Centered on the spontaneity of the masses” (ibid), which is equally reliant on the spectacle’s inability to disguise and prevent the true potential of productive forces.

The proletariat, and Debord draws the analogy to words, have *almost* always worked for the dominant power of social organisation. Therefore, the alienation each *power* experiences in the spectacle, those who work within and support the dominant language of the spectacle, and those who are organised by this spectacle, remains fundamentally the same: alienation from the true possibilities of social organisation. It is the optimism of this quote that remains important because by nature of the term *almost* suggests that there still remains openings, moments at which the possibilities for understanding a new reality can emerge. The only location that Debord can give for the origins of this language is that of the

subjected class of history, and this is, again, the proletariat in their relation to technology.

It is precisely this that Debord develops in SOTS and thus concurs with the situationists in that revolutionary language can apprehend and distinguish the true reflection of the reality of its context. However, in the same way that this reflection, this truthful insight into the possibilities of social organisation is recognisable by the proletariat; its release onto the terrain of bourgeois culture, commodity culture, redefines revolutionary, proletarian desires and activities within the language and words of commodity exchange. They are recuperated by the dominant class that has historically adopted this language at each stage of social development as its own. The owning classes of history, the owners of the language of organisation and power, hold the key also to concepts of social change that reflects their own system of ideas and interests. The subversion of such a language is equally a strategic practice that uses subversive language to its full potential *before* it is co-opted.

The upshot of this is that the owning classes adopt a language that has already existed, then advance and use this language, this reflection of the developing base, as a justification, an affirmation, of the current system of organisation. Its 'new' value now only remains to the extent the owning class maintains its own dominant perspective, which remains in the hands of those who represent the accumulation of the quantitative materials of production and its subsequent forms of *explanative* organisation. Proletarian language *is*, argued Debord, the language of subjective, qualitative and productive forces that has an *historical value* because

proletarian terms of reference, the proletariat's position to history and their understanding of this language is "applicable during a specific period, linked to a specific historical practice" (*J.S. # 8 1963, All The Kings Men*). It is language that is able, because of its point of reference being closest to the point of ephemeral, qualitative production, to negate existing meanings while these meanings rely on definitive and specific meaning.

The claim is not that this language is "a mere specialized jargon, nor is it a language grafted on to conventional speech" (Becker-Ho 1995, *The Language of Those in The know*). It is, instead, the new outlook that is exclusive to revolutionary classes because they are closest to the base of reality, creative, artistic production. It is not a language that is

simply discreet and defensive. It theorizes what is about to be done: it already is a project. It never talks for the sake of talking. For those who can understand this language, every aspect of it carries the permanent confirmation of their vision of the world (*ibid*).

By claiming that these meanings also prevent proclaiming any definitive meaning to social change, Debord operates through SOTS the class divisions that have been at the heart of history and equally, at the heart of Marxism. By developing general perspectives that are changeable at any moment Debord would appear to occupy a position that, on the face of it, represents material and qualitative reality. For example, Debord is claiming that the owning classes of history can only maintain their definitions of social relations by specifically identifying their ideas as the only ideas to the 'truth' of revolutionary social discourse. By defending these ideas with all the power of the state and

fundamentally solidifying these ideas as definitive within the bureaucratic organisations of state instruments, this same class prevent the language of proletarian change from recognising itself as the origin of that language of power in the very first place. The conflict between definitive meaning and ephemeral passion, remain an indication to the power of words, and to the power of the state to maintain these terms of reference.

This seems to depend in part on the Marxian concepts of essence and appearance, but the situationists seem to want to move on from this and claim that instead, to apprehend social reality, is to also apprehend the language that most adequately explains this. In the dominant language of the owners of productive forces, this language works to maintain, define and transform the productive world towards more accumulative, more quantitative concerns. The *ideology* of the proletariat is the irreducible desire for subjective freedom in time and space and it is this relation, this search for freedom and the productive possibilities for enriched freedom that can finally, and most adequately, explain a productive epoch in practice. It is by living the total productive possibility of an epoch that the true reflection of both the productive and aesthetic potential emerges. More accurately, both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat emerge through each other's reflective process that ultimately defines each other's worlds. However, as we will come to see, the negative anxiety that rests at the heart of all separated history maintains a certain impetus for change. This will need to be left for further discussion and explanation in following chapters.

However, the fundamental difference between the two worldviews is the use to which co-opters of social discourse put proletarian language other than that designated by the proletariat itself. It is not so much conscious awareness that the situationists believe is the key to proletarian revolution, because the proletariat are already potentially conscious of their revolutionary ideas within the spectacle and hence their class. For the situationists, this revolutionary consciousness is clearly evident by wildcat strikes, by contempt for the law and “the gestures of refusal and the signs of creativity that are defining the new contours of the proletariat” (IS # 9 1964, *Questionnaire*). It is instead the meaning and truth of the ways in which they are organised by the language of production. By subverting this co-opted language, by not speaking the language of the co-opters of history, slang, as Becker-Ho argues it, “is the complete opposite of a language spoken by slaves: it is therefore alien to all forms of ideology. Authorities everywhere know this only too well, and dread the thought of it” (Becker-Ho 1995, *The Language of Those in The know*). This language is one that captures and articulates the realities of an emerging base of productive possibilities and it is this that fundamentally questions the reigning orders of co-opters.

Revolutionary language as détournement.

Debord has placed a large emphasis on language and its potential to transform consciousness which seems to leave SOTS in a position of waiting, dormant almost, until the first rains of revolutionary language and action could spark its theses back into motion. However, the class relation of situationist writing and the

role of the text that this indicates is one that is rarely articulated in the ways I am describing. Despite this, such a position is clear in a number of situationist texts, as we have seen. Alice Becker-Ho, for instance, states that “Authorities everywhere know this only too well, and dread the thought of it”, (Becker-Ho 1995, *The Language of Those in The know*). The thought that Becker-Ho is seemingly referring to is the historical reflection of the abilities of an epoch, the reflections of change, the reflections of history and the reflections of the proletariat manifesting in the thought of the proletariat. This is translated into a language that reflects the truthful abilities of social production, and it is here that the seeds of revolt are sown. Hence, just as chemical agents, Debord’s SOTS would unite once more within a theoretical/practical framework only once SOTS is practised from the revolutionary base, the material base securing its thought along with its own reflection within a language of a resurrection of a productive history.

This leads to the situationist claim that:

Every revolution has been born in poetry, has first of all been made with the force of poetry. This phenomenon continues to escape theorists of revolution — indeed, it cannot be understood if one still clings to the old conception of revolution or of poetry — but it has generally been sensed by counterrevolutionaries. Poetry terrifies them. Whenever it appears they do their best to get rid of it by every kind of exorcism, from auto-da-fé to pure stylistic research. Real poetry, which has “world enough and time,” seeks to reorient the entire world and the entire future to its own ends[...]with all those around the world who, with us or without us, are preparing to fight for the long revolution are equally the emissaries of the new poetry (*I.S. # 8 1963, All The Kings Men*).

By interrupting the flow of meaning, and interfering with the overall *appearance* of meaning, Debord’s work, so he thought, can exist as a physical

source through which a process of *détournement* can take place and recognise further that “It is impossible to get rid of a world without getting rid of the language that conceals and protects it, without laying bare its true nature” (Khayati 1966, *Cap*). In this manner, the ownership of language and the dissemination of the official discourse of social order are equally

the house of power, the refuge of its police violence. It is, in essence, its articulation as an organising state. Any dialogue with power is violence, whether passively suffered or actively provoked. When power wants to avoid resorting to its material arms, it relies on language to guard the oppressive order (ibid).

Détournement is a situationist practice that stands for the:

détournement of pre-existing aesthetic elements.” The integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu. In this sense there can be no situationist painting or music, but only a situationist use of those means. In a more elementary sense, *détournement* within the old cultural spheres is a method of propaganda, a method which reveals the wearing out and loss of importance of those spheres (IS # 1 1958, *Definitions*).

Détournement is the reuse of what the situationists claim are “pre-existing artistic elements in a new ensemble” (I.S # 3 1959, Editorial Notes; *Détournement as Negation and Prelude*). The avant-gardes of history are one source through which these pre-existing elements can be retraced whereby the;

two fundamental laws of *détournement* are the loss of importance of each detoured autonomous element — which may go so far as to completely lose its original sense — and at the same time the organization of another meaningful ensemble that confers on each element its new scope and effect (I.S # 3 1959, Editorial Notes; *Détournement as Negation and Prelude*).

Détournement seeks to undermine “the “conservers” of old poetry, who increase its dissemination while the state, for quite different reasons, is eliminating

illiteracy” (I.S. # 8 1963, *All The Kings Men*). Such people are curators of the old world of subversion existing as they do to preserve a history of failed opportunities of change. These curators conserve in their movements a “mass of poetry [that is] naturally preserved around the world, but nowhere are there the places, the moments or the people to revive it, communicate it, use it” (I.S. # 8 1963, *All The Kings Men*). Nor can there be unless by way of this process known as détournement, “because the understanding of past poetry has changed through losses as well as gains of knowledge; and because any time past poetry is actually rediscovered, its being placed in the context of particular events gives it a largely new meaning” (ibid). A largely constructed past but constructed of obdurate and three dimensional factors: the owners, the owned and the technology that distinguishes, reflects and thus defines these relations. Any new poetry, any new language, defines the developing context within which it finds itself, whereby every aspect of this new relation emerges alongside the other.

This adds to détournement’s power, which “stems from the double meaning, from the enrichment of most of the terms by the coexistence within them of their old and new senses” (I.S # 3 1959, Editorial Notes; *Détournement as Negation and Prelude*). This makes it practical “because it is so easy to use and because of its inexhaustible potential for reuse” (ibid). Debord draws considerable attention to the epistemological development of détournement as knowledge constructing when he claims that:

In 1958, Asger Jorn gave me the chance to go further. I published *Memoirs*, which was composed entirely of extremely varied quotations, with the lone exception of the one phrase, itself brief,

that was mine. This anti-book was only offered to my friends, and no-one else was informed of its existence. "I wanted to speak the beautiful language of my century. I wasn't too worried about being heard (Debord 1993, *Attestations*).

He does not want to be heard, for this is simple pedagogic practice. He wants his SOTS to be understood and read and, in its turn, the beautiful language of truth and subversion, the poetry and the seeds of social change experienced. SOTS is a gift to his friends, those of the situationists and the proletariat and no other act is made of it. This text, as a morphology of spectacular forms, can show how to construct the realm of situations and to locate a *dérive* through the history of proletarian struggle and ultimately, *détourn* all meaning that already exists. These remain as a series of tools, of practices that, even to this day, exist as a testament to the belief Debord holds in the sublime power of words.

Essentially, *détournement* exists as a necessary practice that pursues:

Marx's thought...to continually make it more precise, to correct it and reformulate it in the light of a hundred years of reinforcement of alienation and of the possibilities of negating alienation. Marx needs to be *détourned* by those who are continuing on this historical path, not moronically quoted by the thousand varieties of coopters (Khayati 1966, *Cap*).

It would seem that SOTS is not only the book of theory that Debord left to the situationists and other extremist revolutionaries; it seems to exist also as a *détournement*, a *dérive* through Marxist thought, for instance, in order to recapture and critically develop the forms of critique that had been diverted away from Marxism. Debord has shown that Marx had already identified and illustrated the proletariat. Hence, in doing so, the language and ideas of the two great classes of history are finally revealed in SOTS as two sides of historical development. Both

exist as two diametrical explanations of history in which the owners of productive forces finally reveal the true nature of their historical role as developers of the productive forces of social organisation. The owned appear as the qualitative search for freedom from survival that represents not only their history but equally that of all humanity because their search remains tied to the technological and material realities of production that defines and shapes all desire.

The complexity of this historical relation will be drawn out later in this thesis when the concepts of time and space are discussed, but for the moment it is the way in which such a disclosure is able to reveal, the third dimension to history in its fullness and finally, the overall *appearance* of historical meaning. Such an understanding can, in this sense, reveal also the search for an underlying meaning, an underlying understanding of the historical path that can finally reveal the underlying meaning that exists within the spectacle.

This historical analysis towards understanding these foundations of the situationists term the spectacle, may well reveal that its meaning is itself arbitrary and open to contestation. However, Debord argues that there is a route towards surmounting the *epistemological* split that has emerged with the onset of the spectacle. The separation between the dimensions of history, the reflective process of historical life that is now maintained with, and to, the spectacle alone, is equally the submission of historical life to a two dimensional existence. The spectacle maintains its relation by being ever more capable of presenting images of life, of experience and of subjective desires by developing the technological processes of *commodity* redistribution as modern history itself. No longer is the

intractable voice of history found in past earth shattering events. Historical, revolutionary activity is more likely to be revealed, to be found in hairstyles, clothes or mobile telephones that mark the epoch and thus maintains a pseudo history of revolutionary change. The historic reflections of the technological means with which to alleviate survival are surrendered instead to an ahistorical spectacle that alleviates commodity survival alone. By surrendering meaning to the nature of the subject's knowledge of a system that already claims that this subject is the all knowing, then so too, the situationists believe, to the revelation that this all knowing subject is far from the truth because it is all there is to the subjects existence and nothing more.

The truth or epistemological foundation that Debord thought he had established in SOTS we will find, but we will be drawn to recognise that it is one that recognises that both thought and practice as being historically contained in the other. Debord attempts to show that it is no good recognising any thought of the proletariat without first accessing the tangible results of their practice unmolested by the language of the dominant forces of social organisation. Hence, it is no good enforcing a practice that does not emerge from proletarian thought and poetry. Each cannot be recognised without the truth of the other and this could only be found within the activities of a project that seeks complete unification of both time and space, time and history, technology and material, that is not separated by any form of separate power or hierarchy other than that which *coincided* with the conscious production of time and space. The total revolution can only ever remain a proletarian one based on the subjective apprehension of

the total world and the technology it possesses, and SOTS is charged with just this.

My analysis of SOTS shows Debord's position on the very essence of the human search that recognises not only time but the development of time; the production of man by man and the possibilities of a movement of these producers in the world they are producing both historically and within a contemporary framework. Any alienation from the complete understanding of the space of construction is equally an alienation from understanding historical, human movement and the technology of that movement. It involves separation, the abuses of time and space, and it is for this reason that Debord seeks to understand the processes that not only reunite subject and object, but the realisation of its existence as united, the historical aspects of particular developments of nature because these are the very source of unrestricted movement and the unrestricted knowledge of these processes.

Debord argued early on that there was an epistemological split, which was developing into an unbridgeable chasm, and was not halting with the progress of SOTS as he thought it might. The warning shots of this are evident in *Comments*. Debord warns that "in this brief work there will be only too many things which are, alas, easy to understand" (Debord 1988, *Comments*). The split was widening and quickly found itself being back filled by the very thinkers of the spectacle into a machinery of two-dimensional thinking. On the one side there remained both the owners and owned of history, but fundamentally guided and regulated by the mediation of spectacular relations. The moronic quoting of Marx and the

divisive tactics of the spectacle economy “by the thousand varieties of coopters” (ibid) that it employed, ensured that critical comment of either the owned or the owner, recognised itself only by becoming recognised within the spectacle. The distance between the classes, the conflicts between two world views that have been instrumental in ensuring that the historical voices of the bourgeoisie and proletariat remain on the social and political wavelength of social change, was itself at risk of being consumed, united, but within the abstract and dominant ideology of the spectacular classes alone. Hence, these two worlds were soon to find themselves both unified and divided within the ideology of the spectacle relation.

This meant that the:

choice between informationism and poetry no longer has anything to do with the poetry of the past, just as no variant of what the classical revolutionary movement has become can anymore, anywhere, be considered as part of a real alternative to the prevailing organization of life. The same judgment leads us to announce the total disappearance of poetry in the old forms in which it was produced and consumed and to announce its return in effective and unexpected forms. Our era no longer has to *write poetic directives*; it has to carry them out (*I.S. # 8 1963, All The Kings Men*).

What Debord claims to be recognising, then, was this total dismantling of revolutionary critique, and the seeming dismissal of Marxism as a revolutionary perspective. No longer is the intractable voice of the proletarian perspective readily apparent. This poetic voice has “fallen silent in the realm which it had spoken for over a century, that is in the realm of social and political struggles” (Lyotard 1993, p.130). Nor is the revolutionary struggle of the bourgeoisie apparent. The

bourgeoisie, whose epoch reflected and finally defined the historical role of the proletariat, emerges within the spectacle as the owners of historical accumulation but whose historical role has become swamped within the spectacle of over equipped history.

It is for this reason that the time has been given in the early stages of this thesis to the reconstruction of situationist theory and practice, the developments of the theoretical and practical text and language, and how this emerged within a history of struggle. Before Debord's intentions and ideas can be fully realised in SOTS, he has to be brought first into such a context, a contemporary context, and analysed against a backdrop of an ever expanding understanding of the forms of a commodified world.

Debord can then be seen to be claiming that the justification for change is itself subverted and recouped by the forces that exist within the spectacle. It appears that this is appealing to some form of objective insight that can be regained through an appreciation of the dismantling, the *détournement* of existing language and meaning. This process can result in a qualitative production and a subsequent presentation of a text that has at its centre a directive that attempts to show how this can be achieved. However, this is a feature of my research and little seems to exist outside of my research to show this. Other than an indication that this system of analysis exists not only in his SOTS, but also within other texts such as *Comments*, within Marx and within the very language offered by the systems of the spectacle, we are left with little more to go on than speculation.

The practices and theories I have outlined certainly shows what Debord expects the reader to do, but he does not answer some very difficult questions already raised. First, he does not give a clear description of how the practical mechanisms identified above are to work within SOTS. Indeed, it is only by careful analysis that we will find any indication that these mechanisms exist at all. There have been a number of reasons raised why this may be the case, none more than recuperation, but, nevertheless, there is still very little to go on. Second, especially in light of Debord's claims that SOTS ranks among "three books of social critique of such importance published in the last hundred years (Debord 1975, *Refutations*), what advantage does an understanding of SOTS give to the proletariat and how do they recognise their own language of subversion?

It seems, then, that my next chapter involves some quite difficult tasks if I am to offer any support to Debord's SOTS. However, the intentions now are to begin to develop the awareness that the reading that I claim exists, benefits from approaching it from the particular direction I have structured. My intentions now are to develop the central aspects of Debord's text premised on the analysis I have already given. That analysis, by locating differing aspects of SOTS first, and by explaining the positional markers that Debord spent many years developing, will help towards uncovering a much more complex relation that his text has with social theory than may well have been considered.

There will be a need to explain how Debord is able to capture what I have claimed is a practical reading within SOTS but equally, how Debord seems to have intended that this is itself relayed to the proletariat. There are a number of

difficulties with Debord's account that we have located, and we could cover many others. Areas such as Debord's vanguardism, the ability of a text to physically involve the reader; how the proletariat can access this meaning and the extent to which Debord and the situationists merely construct a utopian vision of the world to come. I will also attempt to locate how, in certain, but nonetheless important practices, we get to notice how Debord makes some very subtle shifts in meaning within his writing but more so in SOTS. We will soon see, in other words, how he seems to think that a qualitative, subjective reading of SOTS will appear.

Notice above, for instance, where Debord has separated the state and those who speak. When in *All The Kings Men*, Debord claims that "the "conservers" of old poetry, who increase its dissemination while the state, for quite different reasons, is eliminating illiteracy" (*I.S. # 8 1963, All The Kings Men*), he is claiming here for two separate roles to the state and the conservers of the relics of revolutionary language. Debord does this throughout SOTS in a number of different ways in which each contextual deviation from the expected meaning is testament to another avenue from within SOTS, but an avenue that leads to a number of difficult readings. Just as with *The Naked City* and *La Carte du Tendre*, Debord uses a system of textual directives and arrows with which to illustrate certain historical movements. In the case of SOTS, however, these directives are in certain shifts of language, particular context such as chapter positions and the weight of historical materialism that supports this. These combined seek to develop a complete détournement from the vogue of theoretical meaning and practice. It is this that I believe we should now concern ourselves with.

By distinguishing certain means that exist in chapters IV but mostly chapter V, I will want to show how the reader is *equipped* to read the rest of SOTS and indeed their own social context from a very different, but fundamentally *historical view point*. We can then see how concepts of the state are dealt with and how time and history has a particular developmental role. Furthermore, by articulating the role that Debord gave to concepts of time and to the way in which this has been cemented within history, we will come to witness how he premises his whole critique on the separation of both with a view to oppose these to the spectacle. I want to show also that while some of these points are recognised by a variety of other interpretations of Debord's work, they nonetheless, as critical concepts, suffer if not understood within the framework I have been describing. Therefore, the critical analysis of Debord's SOTS will now benefit from the foundation that I have provided. The first area that needs to be understood is that of history.

Chapter Nine; Debord and History

Towards identifying particular structural aspects of Debord's SOTS, I have introduced the reader to a number of different situationist practices such as the *dérive* and the constructed situation. The reason for such detail is that these remain part of a wider analysis that I claim is needed in order to better apprehend and understand Debord's SOTS. The reading this prepares us for is important because I want to begin to show how chapter five of Debord's text, *Time and History*, resembles a narrative, a historical insight, that if understood within the context of the structure I have identified, helps to highlight situationist practice and language much more clearly than has been realised to date.

I have hinted how such practice and language is to be discovered within Debord's chapter structure, which is comprised of two hundred and twenty one theses, contained in nine chapters. Until now, I have only alluded to the significance of this combined structure and its importance to the meaning contained in SOTS. However, my intention now is to illustrate much more clearly the structural elements of SOTS and the manner in which they aid the reader's ability to unlock the *historical* meaning these contain. This will mean me having to develop and expand on the previous chapters that will allow me to demonstrate

how Debord deliberately opposes the analysis he offers of the spectacle in the four chapters that precedes chapter V and those that follow it. The reasons for Debord developing this opposing relation will become clear in the course of the following chapters but I want to argue that it is not until the historical origins of the spectacle are understood, origins that Debord develops in chapter V, that I can detail Debord's concepts of historical time. I will suggest that once this is understood, that is, once Debord's attention to history is contextualised and made clear, then so too an understanding of developing or progressive concepts of human time and experience that oppose the static spectacular forms that the situationists claim characterised contemporary society.

The reading of Debord that I want to present will prove somewhat difficult because to justify my development of situationist practice and to highlight Debord's structure in terms of particular words or language, I will need to address some contradictory yet key areas. The first of these will ask a fundamental question of Debord's text, that is; why does history rest at the centre of his SOTS, in chapter V? This remains a fundamental question because, I will suggest, it is only by understanding the historical origins of the spectacle's particular but partial *organisation* of time is it possible to contest the meaning to this form of organisation in the first place. That is, Debord's intention within SOTS can begin to materialise when it is realised that he constructs an alternative but historical position to that which he claims characterises the spectacle.

By developing this historical understanding in relation to his attention to the restricted and commodity mediated form contained within the spectacle, I will

show how he is holding onto the potential for each reader to realise and contest the spectacle. This seems to suggest that Debord is attempting to articulate his analysis of history but within a meaningful development of historical time that, once understood within chapter V, moves the reader into a potentially antagonistic position toward the spectacle in the following chapters. Once he achieves this potential antagonism, he moves the reader into an understanding of the constructed situation and the *dérive*. If these are understood within the context of situationist practice detailed earlier, then these, as practices, can become tools with which to unlock the epochal situations of the spectacle that aids the reader to embark on a stroll, or a drift through the historical terrain of material survival and struggle. It is then that the reader is facilitated with a wider recognition of the restrictions and controls placed on human experience within spectacular organisation.

How Debord achieves this oppositional structure in SOTS does not rest on the fact that the origins of the Situationist movement remain fundamentally tied to the artistic avant-garde. It is true, as we have seen, that the relationship that the situationists have with avant-garde ideas and practices witnessed the situationists, as the avant-gardes did before them, freely seeking out, identifying and experiencing the ‘impossibilities’ of a social system. This actively involves them within an “experimental investigation of possible ways for freely constructing everyday life, and as a contribution to the theoretical and practical development of a *new* revolutionary contestation” (Debord 1963, emphasis added, *The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Art and Politics*). However, the new forms of revolutionary contestation they claim to have developed relies on the principle that

“any fundamental cultural creation, as well as any qualitative transformation of society, is contingent on the continued development...of an interrelated approach” (ibid). Therefore, the situationists, and Debord’s SOTS will play its part here, are suggesting that it is a *continuation of fundamental creations* that meet head on the perceived or given, limitations of a social system. This meeting remains creative only to the extent it seeks out and illustrates the *true* material and experiential possibilities of an epoch.

However, this creative, but interrelated approach has not been developed by academics or, to any significant degree, post situationists. Yet I want to suggest that it is this failure to develop an interrelated approach that seems to conceal rather than highlight the essence of Debord’s SOTS (McDonough 1994). That is, Debord’s understanding of history, his use of language and his subsequent development of situationist practice and how this emerges as a theory of spectacle relations, have been confused rather than understood. However, I have already detailed much of this in previous chapters and it is therefore now time to begin to address my own question, that is; why does *Time and History* rest at the centre of SOTS in chapter V, and how does understanding this chapter prepare us for a reading of SOTS?

My first task towards addressing this question is to identify certain disagreements within post-situationist theory as to the relative ease, or not, of understanding Debord’s historical analysis. I will be drawn to discuss why a number of theorists disregard the historical complexity that Debord’s SOTS contains and how, as a result, move in favour of a simplified or slimmed down

analysis of time and history. By developing disagreements to Debord's historical analysis early on, I will be able to illustrate more clearly how and why my suggestion of an analytical structure to Debord's SOTS not only differs to much of what is accepted as post-situationist analysis. My suggestion of an analytical structure will allow me also to show how my approach can offer a way of understanding SOTS apart from some of the misperceptions that already exist.

The Centrality of *Time and History*

Debord goes to some lengths in chapter V of SOTS to show his understanding of the history of social struggle and this is undoubtedly important to detail. One reason for this, I want to suggest, is that the history of social struggle and its relation to the possibilities of realising social change is indicative of the fundamental foundation that underpins the whole expanse of situationist ideas and theories of social, revolutionary action. Debord attempted to articulate the revolutionary aspect of situationist theory but his inclusion of a historical analysis of social struggle sought also to unite history with its revolutionary medium—the proletariat (Jacobs and Winks, 1997).

This seems to indicate a particular ambition of Debord and his text, especially when it is realised that he remains wholly committed to articulating history in order that the reader can discover and access a complete understanding and hence the final actualisation of the spectacle relation (ibid). In this preparation, Debord argues clearly that the spectacle relation had finally succeeded in subverting the revolutionary potential of practical, creative actions, which had once characterised

the revolutionary avant-garde of history. He signals this with his very first line in SOTS where he claims that “In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation (*SS# 1*).

However, Debord's understanding of the processes of historical change brought him to a refusal to accept that the revolutionary process had completely disappeared and moved away into represented forms, along with the capitalisation of modern humanity. By detailing and reliving the historical moments that characterised human, practical struggle, SOTS seems to be left to transcribe this historical understanding into the reader's own potential but very much developing, revolutionary understanding, by detailing, point by point, what Debord considers to be truly irreversible, historical moments. For instance, he locates ancient Greece, the Egyptians, the Romans and the advent of feudalism and how each theorised, developed and organised concepts of time and history.

Debord's analysis of history seems to have been prompted by his claim that “The coherence of this society cannot be understood without an all-encompassing critique, illuminated by the inverse project of a liberated creativity, *the project of everyone's control of all levels of their own history*” (Debord 1963, emphasis added, *The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Art and Politics*). History, therefore, remains important for Debord and his text; because it seems to be a possible reminder or a window of opportunity from which to reach a potential understanding of historical social relations and the route these relations have taken to get to their present moment within the spectacle. By developing and

maintaining this understanding, Debord's text suggests that each individual has the potential to realise and create their own history within and to the spectacle by *living* the total historical possibilities of the epoch and away from represented, commodified forms.

However, despite Debord's call to an all-encompassing critical aspect of the historical path of spectacle relations and the call to struggle it engenders, the spectacle still seems to have become a banal description of modern life rather than the powerful critique he had intended (Jappe, 1999). It is true that some academics attempt to address this growing banality and indicate the historical importance to his analysis of the spectacle. While this is so, it still seems that the full scope of Debord's historical understanding is not completely contextualised within his SOTS and ultimately the historical origins of the spectacle relation.

This seems to fair no less the case with the expectation of the reader where indeed, according to Ken Knabb, little effort is needed on the part of the reader to understand the connections between history and the spectacle. So much so that if at any time;

you find the opening chapters too difficult, you might try starting with Chapter 4 or Chapter 5. As you see how Debord deals with concrete historical events, you may get a better idea of the practical implications of ideas that are presented more abstractly in the other chapters (Knabb, 2002).

Knabb is right of course and Debord is certainly easier to read after the central and historical aspect of his text is understood.

However, I have a question of this relative ease to understanding Debord's SOTS; if Debord is truly an easy read once this central aspect of his theory is

understood, chapters 4 and 5, why did he place these in the middle and not at the very start of SOTS? What I mean to say is, if Debord's text and the meaning to the chapters this text contains relies ultimately on his central chapters, does he run the risk of providing an over complex and somewhat unnecessary structure? Moreover, would this indicate also a case of bad craftsmanship in as much as the idiosyncrasy of his structure confuses rather than reveals the true nature and intention of the text? I would suggest it is rather more than this.

Knabb is but one example of a number of writers who have emerged as important figures in translations and understanding of situationist ideas and practice. However, the problems I believe that the likes of Knabb still face surrounds the failure to adequately articulate quite how and why Debord approached SOTS in the way that he did. Knabb's reluctance to answer the historical questions that underpin Debord's central chapter of history, fails to explain adequately enough why he seems to have created problems to reading his text. So when Knabb goes on to claim that:

The book is not, however, as difficult or abstract as it is reputed to be. It is not an ivory-tower academic or philosophical discourse. It is an effort to clarify the nature of the society in which we find ourselves and the advantages and drawbacks of various methods for changing it. Every single thesis has a direct or indirect bearing on issues that are matters of life and death. Chapter 4, which with remarkable conciseness sums up the lessons of two centuries of revolutionary experience, is simply the most obvious example (Knabb, 2002).

I want to argue for Debord's structure and show that for Knabb to develop SOTS in its historical, theoretical and practical form, he has to explain precisely why chapter V remains in the position it does. Not only this, if Debord is the

master of the text that he is claimed to be, and Knabb supports this when he claims that “Every single thesis has a direct or indirect bearing on issues that are matters of life and death” (Knabb, 2004), then Knabb is unlikely to be able to claim bad craftsmanship for this would undermine Debord’s text. This is something that Knabb would not attempt to do.

Instead, Knabb’s insistence to stick to his explanation of why Debord structures SOTS in the way that he does seems to confuse rather than illuminate that it is only by developing these central chapters in line with practices such as the historical, constructed situation, can we develop a rather different understanding of Debord’s use of the structure in SOTS. It is not a case of bad craftsmanship but instead a considered and thought out structure that needs to be contextualised within a theoretical understanding of *Time and History*, its relation to the spectacle, as well as situationist practice that can remain a part of the continued development of an interrelated approach of the sort Debord indicated

Chapter IV may, with the conciseness that Knabb identifies, sum up the lessons of revolutionary struggle but he fails, nonetheless, to explain how and why these opposing revolutionary activities could emerge in the first place. This, we will come to see, is reliant on chapter V. So while Knabb can claim that Debord’s text is not as difficult as it’s reputation may suggest and while each thesis of the text has a direct or indirect bearing on matters of life and death, this still does not address one fundamental issue; why is it, that two of the most important chapters that Knabb identifies, “are the least often read” (Jappe 1999, p.32). This being the case, not only has there been a general acknowledgement that Debord

does pose particular problems to a clear understanding of his intentions. Debord is responsible for this by creating these misconceptions.

This develops further implications for Debord's text, though, because if Jappe is correct in claiming that these are the least read chapters (Jappe 1999 p.32), then it means also that, as centrally important chapters dealing with concrete events, their overall meaning is completely missed. In essence, despite the ability these chapters seem to be imbued with to unlock the meanings to other aspects of the text, and despite the possibilities that these chapters may mediate the whole meaning of the text, these chapters are suffering from misinterpretation and as a result are confusing rather than 'enlightening' readers.

I want to argue that the primary reason for this is that these chapters are not being understood within the context of the areas I have already raised. That is, by defining certain historical aspects of the text within a situationist understanding of time, theory and practice, Debord's text begins to work in a number of interesting ways that can finally relate to the practices of the constructed situation and the *dérive*.

Another writer of situationist theory and practice, Len Bracken (1997), recognises some of the issues I raise above and in this respect, is right to point out that part of the reason that Debord is difficult to read is due to attempts by readers "to read a thesis in the middle of the book without having comprehended the development of thought up to that point" (Bracken 1997, p.149). Hence, Bracken is suggesting that these chapters should be read in relation to the development of Debord's text as a whole. It is by achieving this that further

recognition will emerge that Debord would not have had the foundation to recognise and claim the opposite relation to spectacle relations, as I have noted above, had he not formulated this in “the context of a view of history such as in chapter V” (Bracken 1997, p.156).

It is still noticeable however, that Bracken’s interpretation of Debord’s SOTS does not attempt to explain why he should have left his informative chapters in the position that he did. That Bracken is right to draw attention to the centrality of history and the role it has in distinguishing the spectacle role, Bracken does not show any other reason as to *why* Debord should structure his text in the way that he did. Even if he did want to demonstrate the centrality of history, Debord could have achieved this without the need for the structure he developed by simply directing the reader at the start of his text. There is, I want to argue, a more important reason for Debord’s structure and this rests with the other interest of Debord’s chapter *Time and History*, that of time.

Debord signalled the need for this structure, of course, because he had long argued that capitalist relations of production have *imposed* a particular sense of time, “a sense of linear time on a world whose pre-industrial time had been experienced as cyclical” (Plant 1992 p.27). The differences between what Debord was to term cyclical and irreversible time will be discussed below but their importance to understanding his overall structure should not be underestimated. For it is only by understanding the historical tensions between concepts and definitions of time will we be able to understand Debord’s position which claims that “Man, “the negative being who *is* only to the extent that he suppresses Being,” is

identical to time.” (SS# 125). Otherwise overlooked, this quote, I want to argue, is critically important to an analysis of Debord’s text and the structure that underpins its meaning. Debord, by directly contrasting human meaning as being identical to time, means also that understanding time occupies a decisive form in my own analysis of Debord, the situationists and their practice; this is because it is *how* time becomes organised can we also discover Debord’s attention to historical class relations.

I want to begin my analysis of these central chapters by suggesting that we must remain cautiously clear of the cultural reform that Debord and the situationist’s claim exists to subvert all forms of true revolutionary creation and this means remaining faithful to Debord’s text alone. Rather than developing SOTS with Knabb’s insistence that the text is relatively simple, I want to continue to demonstrate that it is rather more difficult than Knabb¹³ allows his readers to understand. A simplistic approach, while suitably positioned to understand aspects of Debord’s text, does not, nevertheless, prepare the reader for the wider complexities that underpin the spectacle. Also, I want to go further than Jappe and Bracken and show that Debord’s alleged simplicity is in fact a fundamental misrepresentation. Such a simplistic understanding of Debord does not furnish a reader with the tools with which to understand not only how but also

¹³ Knabb’s translation of the text contained within Debord’s films is due to be widely distributed in 2004/5. He is responsible, with Alice Becker-Ho for the forthcoming sale and I would imagine copyright of these films. Noting that the situationists are the pioneers of anti-copyright, Knabb’s translations may pose considerable dilemmas for subsequent analysis of situationist theory while contained within legitimised translations.

why “The victory of the bourgeoisie is the victory of *profoundly historical time*” (SS# 141).

To demonstrate this, the following chapters will remain within a *situationist* analysis of Debord’s text that will claim that while translations, these post situationist creations of revolutionary language remain tied to the politics of the managers of cultural innovation, these managers of cultural reform, this;

Paid intellectual labour [that] normally tends to obey the law of the industrial production of decadence, where the contractor's profit depends on the speed with which the job is carried out and on the bad quality of the material used (Debord 1979, *Preface*).

they also remain tied to misrepresentations. The translations that Debord is indicating here are of his own text and the translations that were to follow. He is also showing however, that;

Whether it is a matter of housing, the meat of a reared ox, or the fruit of the ignorant spirit of a bad translator, the consideration of sovereign importance is that one can now obtain very quickly (and for less cost) that which, before, demanded rather long hours of qualified work. It is true enough, on the other hand, that translators have little reason to pour over the meaning of a book, and above all to learn the language in question beforehand, when nearly all the current authors who publish have written books in such evident haste that they will be out of date in a very short time (Debord 1979, *Preface*).

Debord did not write his text in haste nor did he leave it for mediocre translations. His text starts and ends in the qualified hours, the *time* needed to *explore and find* it. An exploration that not only remains reliably clear of the cultural reform that faced the avant-gardes of dadaism and surrealism. It is also an exploration of meaning that remains faithful to situationist practice. One of the *only* places that this can be found unmolested by the spectacle, is within the heart

of the situationist text and in this case, the centrality, the heart of *Time and History* within Debord's SOTS.

I want to move on from here and begin to locate specific areas of Debord's chapter *Time and History* and show how this chapter not only resembles historical situations that have formed the basis for the long and winding path of time and history. This chapter also works to direct the reader towards a sense of a changing of historical time, historical concepts and definitions of human time. Equally, I want to draw the reader's attention to the importance that Debord gives to the historical processes that he identifies as making up history. This will then allow me to detail how each thesis that Debord presents, is an historical situation, a construction of situations, that renders the text reliant on the essence of a *dérive* that transcends and moves beyond the obstacles that may be put into place within and through a spectacular reading. A journey that begins from the very understanding of time and being, the very first sentence of chapter V.

This begins, I want to show, with the very first distinction that Debord makes between Being and being. Debord does not explain the differences between Being and being within the context of his chapter but instead shows how they remain as illustrations of experiences and ideas of the human world but separated from the reality of human creation by an externalisation, an unconscious manifestation of an organising, translating Being. This distinction remains indicative of what Debord was to argue as the unconscious relation between organised experiences of time and organisers of time and the historical modes through which these meanings became articulated. I will need to explain these distinctions of organisation further

within the context of the chapters to follow but I want to show how it is the distinction between organised and organiser that remains central to Debord's development of meanings to time and history. Debord's text exists to demonstrate the historical but temporary unity of time and history at the revolutionary moment and the practice that remained inherent in the unification of time and history at that situation defining epoch. By undertaking this analysis, I want to explain and show how and why Debord structured his text in the way that he did and how, as a result, Debord's text remains faithful to situationist practice. Hence, I want to argue that Debord's centralising of history in his chapter *Time and History*, gives way to a practical understanding of this same history once it is understood situationally. This is suggesting, therefore, that it is a historical, unifying attempt of both theory and practice. It is these issues that I now turn my attention to.

Chapter Ten; SOTS and an analysis of Time

Understanding the history contained in SOTS is a fundamental prerequisite, I have claimed, to developing the overall meaning to Debord's text. This remains significant to such a degree, that if its overall position in SOTS, that is, the historical importance of Debord's chapter *Time and History*, is not contextualised within and against the spectacle practically, then SOTS can only remain misunderstood. Hence, I have claimed in a number of places, that understanding history in its contextual and structural positions is fundamental not only to Debord's text, but also to the legacy of the situationists. However, understanding this history is of no use on its own because, as the previous chapters have highlighted, situationist practice is crucial toward realising and articulating the potential opportunities for radical, social change. This can only mean that an understanding of history and the practical, revolutionary elements that the situationists claimed existed within their practices, are interrelated.

This makes the task of the reader who undertakes an analysis of SOTS rather more important than may at first become apparent. Their task is not simply to read SOTS. It is instead a task that requires the reader to enter into a personal if not practical journey within the text whereby the history of social struggle and the tools and practices with which to recognise that struggle, situationist practice, are employed and used to their greatest effect, revolutionary change. That is, these tools can begin to unlock and realise the opposing nature and the practical

elements with which to contest an opposite relation to spectacular organisation. But this is so only once it is recognised that Debord's historical analysis of time is an antagonism or opposition to spectacular concepts of time and organisation that he develops with his attention to the spectacle in other chapters.

The only way that I can demonstrate this reading is to develop the one aspect of Debord's articulation of *Time and History* that we are yet to give any significant attention to. That is, Debord's analysis of time and its relation to history, especially in the context of the spectacle and situationist practice. However, this will prove problematic simply because this relation, the opposing structure of Debord's text and his concept of time are intended to remain experiential. SOTS pays attention to time but only in terms of its potential to experience the full technical and productive abilities of an epoch. Hence, SOTS as a text, is as much in the experience of the reading as it is in the analysis I am about to detail.

The manner in which Debord's structure attempts to hold onto this experiential reading is at first complex but ultimately straightforward. Nonetheless his attention to historical concepts of time and organisation has withstood the contemporary impulses that a spectacular reading can give SOTS. Impulses contained in editorial changes, in standardised readings with introductions and conclusions. His text remains clear also of the usual methodology of presenting a text in which a text moves in a clear, and straight line from start to finish. Debord's SOTS is a complicated weave but by maintaining the physical and central structure of history,

forces the reader, each time, to enter the heart of the text, history and time, at each and every reading.

In the chapter above I have given some brief indications of the importance of time and its contradictory stance against that of spectacular time. However, it is the way in which Debord structures the opposing nature of historical time in SOTS that is to prove both an enduring critique of spectacular relations and the locus for recapturing the possibility to contest the spectacle relation but from an analytical platform that questions the spectacle's own foundation, its concepts of commodified time, of commodified experience.

Simply claiming that an opposing critique against the spectacle exists is not enough, of course, to be able to claim that Debord's structure exists in the way that I claim. I have to now begin to articulate this structure within the context Debord had intended and detail an understanding of time in relation to the previous chapters. These have concerned themselves with situationist practice and the way in which practice was charged with rediscovering time and space and the relations of spectacle organisation. It is my intention then, to begin to address concepts of time and their relation to history, and the role these have in SOTS

Time and History

The artist and avant-garde, Asger Jorn, who was also a situationist, moves towards a situationist understanding of time and claims that "For humanity, time is nothing but a succession of phenomena from a point of observation in space, [human history] while space is the order of the co-existence of phenomena in

time or process” (Jorn 1960, *End of the Economy*). Debord’s attention to time is similar and this is to be found in the very first sentence of Debord’s chapter V. This begins by claiming that “Man, “the negative being who *is* only to the extent that he suppresses Being,” is identical to time.” (SS# 125). While not suggesting a particular conception of a human essence, Debord seems to claim that humanities development is not given or fixed but is instead a movement that is identical with the historical process of the self creation of man in time. Thus, “Man’s appropriation of his own nature” his knowledge of being human “is at the same time his grasp of the unfolding of the universe” (SS# 125) and a slow erosion of an externalised essence of Being.

Debord would seem to suggest that time is nothing without some form of defining content, a creation of productive possibilities of human space, that defines and creates meaning to a particular development of a human world. Therefore, human space, human construction and the progressive movement of humanity throughout history becomes a yard stick, a concept or measurement of human progress defined within and against concepts of the freedom of time to live and experience a developing, human world. From this, Debord would appear to suggest that “To appropriate one’s own nature means first and foremost to appropriate the fact of being a historical being” (Jappe 1999 p.32). Therefore, while time is intrinsic to history, time as a moment, as experience of history is unrecognisable without the form of productive history which remembers, defines and acts as an organising process for recognising the content of that history in terms of a movement of time. It is an historical process whereby material history is the

marker within which time itself emerges as a defining moment of humanities release from pure and immediate survival to external nature.

The creative processes of human industry that Debord identifies in *Time and History* goes some way then towards a brief analysis of human history. My understanding of Debord's analysis of history can be given, albeit briefly, by showing how Debord considers the historical, human domination of nature as an increasing ability to organise, explain and understand the developing technical world. What changes, both in history and in time, is how each successive epoch or change in time attempts to define its developing, material and experiential world by understanding that "Time is the change that is only conceivable in the form of a progressive movement in space, while space is the solid that is only conceivable in its participation in a movement" (Jorn 1960, *End of the Economy*). Momentous and irreversible forms of historical action that transform social conditions, transform social space and in the process define and transform concepts of progress, time and living, which finally emerge in Debord's SOTS as particular and specific movements of history.

To summarise Debord's chapter, *Time and History*, risks leading to a simplified construction of his intentions. However, he seems to move through a number of historical moments that tends to suggest that so long as agricultural forms of production remained, then so too definitions of time that related to and were experienced within cyclical nature. That is, before capitalist production, time was "Lived in relation to the seasons, the hours of light and darkness, and the phases of the moon, the time of pre-industrial societies returned upon itself and

embodied no sense of progress” (Plant 1992 p.26). Cyclical time appears to represent moments in which changes in the progressive movement of human material and experience are unconscious, static or at least relatively inconceivable. This sense of ‘progress’ seems to become defined, then, within different concepts and understandings of organised time. This shows that;

History is itself a real part of *natural history*, of the transformation of nature into man" (Marx). Inversely, this "natural history" has no actual existence other than through the process of human history, the only part which recaptures this historical totality, like the modern telescope whose sight captures, *in time*, the retreat of nebulae at the periphery of the universe (SS# 125).

Debord is not indicating that his text be read as a proletarian, revolutionary unification with the *objects* of history that can guarantee this understanding of progress for, as we have noted, in the spectacle this has already been achieved with the onset of the commodified subject/object relation; that is, the pseudo unification within the abstract commodity relation has already offered this unification with the material object. This is not adequate simply because this object already exists as an expression, a representation and an explanation of a worldview, a bourgeois view of time and experience while the mediation of commodity production remains.

The situationists argue instead, and this is repeated in SOTS, that the truth of humanity’s relation to time and of the progressive unfolding of a particular human universe is instead discovered through the recognition of an economy, an *objective* and creative economy that has the potential to unite material and experience, the ability to define time in terms of the total, technological abilities of the epoch

and in doing so, unite the creative abilities of both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In this 'objective' sphere, the development of technologies directly relates to concepts of universal human progress and the freedom from survival in terms of abstract needs and wants because it is this that maintains the characteristics of both spheres of human material history. And it is only when "The unconscious movement of time manifests itself and becomes true within historical consciousness" (*SS*# 125) is it also possible to realise the possibilities for a *conscious* control of human, creative production. And the only time that SOTS uses history to reveal this historical consciousness is with Debord's articulation of the revolutionary bourgeoisie.

The essence of Debord's historical understanding is located then within the ways he is locating the need for social understanding and social practice to change in relation to its understanding of a progression in the unity of time. An understanding of time that is modified and developed within the owning classes of history, who, as a necessity, organise space, materials and experience in order that its own concept of living, its own partial understanding of time, remain. So when Debord states simply that "Man...is identical to time" (*SS* #125), Debord has maintained a certain structural direction in SOTS that is asking that each reader understand this one point; that is, each historical defining moment of the organisation of time is identical to humanities own concept of their experiences of time. However, historically, this identification has been founded on the ability of the dominance of an *organising* class to explain and develop concepts of time and experience that maintain cyclical time within each mode of organisation.

Therefore, an organisational group who claim inheritance over time and movement defines each historical moment but within ideas and concepts that best meet that groups material needs, experiences and desires. It is, in other words, Debord's development within SOTS of an origin to class distinction.

It is this understanding of the organisation and definition of time that SOTS attempts to develop because it is with the preciseness of situationist practice, each reader is able to understand the historical, *class* processes that have organised and defined concepts of time (Debord 1988, *Comments*). Fundamentally, Debord is using this same line, "Man...is identical to time" (*SS*# 125) in direct contrast to the previous and subsequent chapters in his SOTS. That is, he is urging the reader to locate how her own concept of time and the processes through which that time is defined within the cyclical nature of spectacular society (*SS* # 126). I am suggesting that by understanding the constructed situation, the reader is then encouraged to enter into creative moments by nature of their search for meaning to a developing form of irreversible time and this stimulates a journey through which to discover alternative concepts of time that can contradict and challenge the prevailing spectacular concepts of the space and time of the living.

An example of this is found within the situationists' concept of 'free time' (IS # 4 1960 *The Uses of Free Time*). Based on the arguments that can also be found within SOTS, Debord clearly shows that the commodity relation already defines this sense of 'free time' within the spectacle (ibid). Therefore, the possibilities to realise the full and irreversible potential of human society, the technical abilities to assuage all forms of material survival, is also defined above and *beyond that*

societies ability to live time because free time is already predefined and pre-organised. This makes understanding the commodities relation to time all the more important because it remains, according to Debord that is, as

the domination of society by "intangible as well as tangible things," which reaches its absolute fulfillment in the spectacle, where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which simultaneously impose themselves as the tangible *par excellence* (SS # 36).

This makes all forms of debate that attempts to equate 'free time' with commodity consumption a pseudo claim to a freedom to live and is ultimately counterrevolutionary. This is because these debates "equate free time with passive consumption, as if the only use of free time was the opportunity to become an increasingly full-time spectator of the established absurdities" (IS # 4 1960 *The Uses of Free Time*) of commodity culture.

Equally, commodities which claim to transform human life in terms of experience, according to Debord, are also erroneous because these, as we saw in previous chapters, are pre-defined activities that can do no more than define and control human activity and human experience within a cyclical and thus static mediation of aesthetic pleasures. It is for this reason that Debord constructs his concept of time because "There can be no free use of time until we possess the modern tools for the construction of everyday life. The use of such tools will mark the leap from a utopian revolutionary art to an experimental [and irreversible] revolutionary art" (Debord Thesis on Cultural revolution, I.S. #1) By developing an understanding of the restrictions the spectacle places on *concepts* of time and by showing the ways in which the commodity relation defines

commodity history and pop culture, *Time and History* in SOTS tries to develop an alternative sense of history, space and time within which to contest this spectacular world.

History and The Creation of Situations

The means that Debord employs to demonstrate this development of time is left to an understanding of the situationists who, in order to ground their practices within the spectacle as *historical* and thus, progressive acts, argue that it was left to the activities of the creators of revolutionary, historical situations (IS # 4 1960 *The Uses of Free Time*). These creators can then translate their epoch but from the reality of their total understanding of the unmediated but profoundly *creative possibilities* of time, organised within a greater knowledge of social space, that could historically define and discover that epoch's total but progressive ability (Debord Thesis on Cultural revolution, I.S. #1). Hence, these defining moments of contestation, these moments of enhanced creative reflection, have the ability to experience and understand a wider conception of both time and history than that which exists under the commodity spectacle.

By recounting the historical situations that had produced humanity within its context of technological development, Debord uses SOTS to argue that it is possible to recount or look back, at each historical moment and view how humanity created its own historical but progressive situation toward a conscious but organised understanding of time and history (SS# 125). These creations are premised on the understanding that the individual is already being defined by that

situation in the first place. As the feudal era defined its proletariat within the boundaries of serfdom, and its organisers as masters of the organising state, so SOTS maintains a role which ensures it retains an understanding and knowledge of these historical situations as definitions of time and experience. I believe that Debord is suggesting that by indicating the movements of history that have defined historical situations, historical epochs, and once the essence of the relations within these epochs is apprehended and understood, the possibility of this understanding, can move each reader into a realm that can realise their own relative but historical understanding that exists apart from the commodity relation and thus, the spectacle. That is, by contrasting Debord's historical concepts of time within chapter five of SOTS, and by showing the movement of time in history, he is developing a spatial awareness that can be contrasted against the spectacle in which the reader can consciously explore concepts of time discovered within practices such as the constructed situation and thus, become situationist practitioners (*SS# 125*).

The constructed situation remains central to SOTS then because it indicates the constructive need to define and characterise one's epoch but from within the full capabilities that already partially mediate and define that individual or society. The difference that the situationists want to claim though is that the early forms of this process operated under different, historical circumstances. That is, early revolutionaries were not conducting their revolution on the plain of conscious awareness of the *total* possibilities of the unity of the human, material world of time and space (*SS# 74*). Nor did these revolutionaries recognise the historic

development of the spatial awareness of the possibilities of a conscious universal creation of a particularly human understanding of time (ibid). The possibilities of a conscious construction of a human material world of experience were noted in “The unconscious movement of time [that] manifests itself and becomes true within historical consciousness” (SS# 125) and this is only once the bourgeoisie attained their revolutionary potential in the development of clear historical relations between labour and material where “men find themselves obliged to view their relations in a clear manner” (SS# 74).

Debord’s analysis of history is complex then and in some respects defies simplistic analysis. This is not a completed analysis of Debord’s understanding though and there is more to do to bring his analysis anywhere near a satisfactory conclusion. Before this conclusion is reached however, some difficulties with Debord’s account need addressing. That is, if the dominated classes are to realise the long and winding road of practical struggle and how this has culminated within the practices proposed by the situationists, such as the constructed situation and the *dérive*, and if the situationists are to remain creative revolutionaries and not “become just theorists of revolution” (Jacobs and Winks 1997, p.27), Debord still has to develop an historical account as to how and why he offered a situationist book of theory in 1967. That is, if the creative aspect of the situationists is to reveal the revolutionary possibilities of consciously living their materially enriched time within an epoch, then Debord has to be able to detail why and how his text is able to participate in the revolutionary struggle rather than define what form that struggle is to take.

If the radical, creative and subjectivist aspect of the proletariat is to recognise itself as historically objective in its definition of the historical situation, then Debord has to clearly show to what extent these radical claims can be contrasted against the quantitative formulations and demands of the dominant classes of history. By allowing these concepts to become recognised in their totality within the fantastic and democratic tendencies of the dominated classes, Debord seems to maintain his own contradiction. If proletarian consciousness of the developing abilities to live time and the historical, objective practice this engenders will be recognised and “developed independently by workers themselves” (Jacobs and Winks 1997, p.27) from within the totality they are contesting. Equally, if this consciousness is defined and worked upon within the domain of practical agitation within a clear recognition of the experiences of time, then why did Debord need to develop a book of practice and theory? Does his text offer little more than a *representation* of both? This is fundamentally important to address if we are to understand Debord because at present he seems to have left the proletariat within a dichotomous position that forces them to function in two ways; as practical revolutionaries who are becoming aware of their historical situation and spontaneous activists responding to situationist, material translations of history while still remaining subject to or remaining as, theoreticians informing this history.

This could no doubt cause Debord certain problems because while he believes that the situationists, as the most advanced representation of proletarian activity, can formulate practical concepts of social change in both theory and practice, it is

still left to the situationists, so it seems, in which the proletariat find their activity *pre-defined* in terms of theoretical and planned activism and spontaneity. By translating activity outside of the totality of proletarian relations and by externalising proletarian thought, has Debord done little more than that which he has accused the owning, historical classes of? That is, has he merely created and defined the proletariat in terms of another form of social understanding but from within the situationists foundation of aesthetic pleasures, within concepts of time?

Not only are the situationists responsible for this *creative* spontaneous translation of the proletarian abilities of an epoch that moves beyond their own world of pre-defined experience. They are also responsible for developing the activity with which to realise the spontaneous means that may recognise this as social change. They may claim that their theories were never imposed on the proletariat and that their activities and ideas were situationist in as much as they were only there as translations of the possibilities of an epoch and in this sense, to be taken up and followed if desired (Debord 1961, *Judgements*). They never intended, so it seems, for their ideas to be imposed but rather were templates of the truthful activities of a revolutionary avant-garde (Debord 1963, *New Forms of Action*). However, this is not entirely convincing of the situationists because there is little doubt that both Debord and the situationists wanted their ideas and theories to be practiced and taken up by virtue of their desire for complete social change (Debord 1957, *Report*). I am suggesting also that this is one reason why Debord seems to have structured his SOTS accordingly.

This possible but contradictory stance seems to rest with the concepts of time whereby the movement of history seems to suggest an almost inevitable system of change. As we have noted, time and history do not stop, they are, as a unity, in constant movement and it is this that the situationists, and Debord in his text SOTS, rely upon to signal the prospects to radical change; a change that has to be practically encountered, experienced and thus recognised. Their concepts of change rest within what seems to be a coincidental but nonetheless possible relation with the movement and advancement of the situations that Debord claims are inherent within time and history along with the developing technologies this recognises. However, in doing so, and this remains the same for SOTS, their revolutionary programme “remained, purely and simply, the fusion of radical ideas” etched out in the ‘perfection’ of situationist practice because it is still, according to the situationists, with situationist practice and ideas, that the proletariat is able to recognise its own situation and thus its historical revolutionary role (Jacobs and Winks 1997, p.27).

Furthermore, this seems very close to a deterministic reading in that it is by waiting, by interpreting the material conditions of an epoch within defining moments, or situations that the concomitant development of material ideas will emerge. If we can recall, the situationists knew that a revolutionary “task presents itself only when the material conditions necessary to its realization already exist, or at least are in the process of formation” (Debord 1957, *Report*). Is this no more than another reading of Marx, which forecloses on bourgeois organisation and domination once the conditions are right for revolution. Once material

conditions 'ripen', and this is the central aspect of Debord's development of history in SOTS, then so too does a shift from a metaphysical consciousness to that of the technical awareness to realise these material possibilities of an historical epoch. But we are still left with interpretive frameworks that seek to aid this process and this still remains a task for those most in the know and in this case, the situationists will try to claim this title with their creative, but revolutionary practices.

While these criticisms remain, I still want to demonstrate, however, that Debord's structure of SOTS attempts to rid his text of these problems by imposing a practical but *conscious* structure within which to understand the development of an historical, situationist theory. This is echoed when we see that for Debord, the struggle for the technological developments of an epoch is also the material science of history (*SS# 74*). It is this that he seems to rely on in SOTS in that by understanding history and the forms of struggle this has inaugurated, also opens the realm of scientific theory. Such a historical theory is capable of offering a scientific explanation of the historical struggle for the methods and practices of the defining social conditions of human history because it speaks not of material ideology alone but instead a proletarian, practical understanding of this in terms of its understanding of time and history (*ibid*). If understanding social struggle can also explain the means through which social organisation is carried out, then Debord's SOTS is an attempt to solidify the core of this in a struggle between theory and practice carried out within the historical

realms of time found within the structure of SOTS and culminating within the spectacle.

Debord does, of course, claim to offer a situationist theory (Debord 1979, *Preface*) and, in their turn, the situationists will forge this into a practice that forms another mode toward understanding the material conditions, the current human situation, which present themselves and the ways this affects proletarian consciousness. Seemingly, the concepts of history and time are intrinsic to this understanding. But this is so only by understanding the historical meanings these have found over the periods of their struggle and how this has informed practical struggles for the technical ability to survive. By developing history, by understanding the processes through which proletarian theory has emerged, Debord presented this in the only way he thought possible; both situationally and hence practically.

Jappe (1999) shows that Debord had accounted well for the fact that;

whatever real experience the individual manages to achieve in his daily life is alien to official time and remains unintelligible to him for he *lacks the tools* to relate his own lived experience to the lived experience of society at large and thus invest it with greater meaning (Jappe 1999, emphasis added p34).

These tools are those that are fundamental, in situationist terms, for analysing and interpreting the material and thus technical conditions within which they find themselves. The constructed situation, the *dérive* and the interactive processes these demand are the very same types of processes required for SOTS but only once the spectacle's definition of time and experience is understood. Debord seems to emerge out of this in a struggle, a conflict between meanings that are founded on

an accumulation of wealth beyond those who created this very same wealth. Debord is a search for a meaning that can understand and change this relation in terms of the processes that had occurred historically. The interpretive tools to find these relations begin and end within the central chapters of SOTS and it is there, if apprehended by the reader within the framework of creative practices such as the *dérive* and the constructed situation, Debord feels that these tools will emerge into a wider form of *theory realising practice* apart and beyond the situationists.

The analysis that Debord gave to historical situations led him to declare later that “It could be said that the construction of situations will replace theatre in the same sense that the real construction of life has increasingly tended to replace religion” (IS# 1 1958, *Preliminary Problems in Constructing a Situation*). And it is this same construct that he hopes the reader will gain by seeking to unite time and history, material and time, experientially and in the quest for a ‘real’ life premised on technical freedom to create the materials for an aesthetic survival and in turn, recognise the situationists claim of the universal desire to live time and space.

I now want to develop this further and move onto what I want to demonstrate is a second stage to Debord’s history. In essence, the scope we have covered above locates the development of time and history, material and time and the human processes that forged epoch defining situations. This has helped in establishing the historical essence and focus that the situationists use for their constructed situation. However, it does little in terms of demonstrating the ways in which the search for a unity of time and history is also a means through which

to understand how this has been organised. That is, there is little to suggest how the organisational principle of dominant classes account for and justify its own use of time and history and the ways this is defined in modes of time and of change.

This will prove to be important for my analysis of SOTS because understanding concepts of time not only remains at the heart of situationist theory and practice. It also remains at the centre of SOTS. Therefore, I want to move on to show that reading Debord's text as I am suggesting, in which meaning itself has developed historically from the externalisation of humanities own creation of an otherworldly Being into that of a material and technological basis premised on human material creation, also gives rise to differing concepts of time. By developing this shift in historical meaning and in emphasis, I will attempt to show in the next chapter, how Debord is able to define the changing historic situation materially and how this emerges into a different foundation from which to explain the human world. Furthermore, I will also begin to show how Debord attempts to apprehend this shifting emphasis to the historic situation and in the process, differentiates and defines two aspects to human time; irreversible and cyclical time.

Chapter Eleven; History and Social Struggle

The practices which I claim are at the heart of SOTS, practices such as the *dérive* and the constructed situation, are indicative of the ways in which the situationists attempted to unite and experience the human world. That is, the situationists had long sought to live and experience the theoretical and practical unity of both time and the materials of history but within a conscious manifestation of both in terms of material and experience. This left them tied to achieving what they claimed was a *conscious* change of the social world in which concepts of the possibilities of a united time and history were finally revealing the true potential for civil society to “rationally master the new productive forces and create a new civilization” (Debord 1957, *Report*).

However, this still reveals little of the *historical* impetus that the situationist's claim still remained evident within the spectacle for complete social change. That is; how did the conflicts within this historical relation still maintain an essence for social change and how did this remain to be discovered within the spectacle and to what extent does SOTS detail this?

To understand what the situationists meant by a conscious change to social organisation has been covered, partly, in previous sections but the task still remains to clarify how and why the situationists deemed they were able to develop and offer a practical and conscious change that differed from what was otherwise unconscious history. In other words, what was the historical impetus for change if it remained unconscious? What did they mean by unconscious and conscious change? And how did Debord relate his concepts of the historical, proletarian struggle to the possibilities of a new, more conscious history within his own interpretation of the defining practice of the constructed situation in SOTS?

One way in which he attempts to articulate this within situationist theory and practice is to be found in the ways that Debord separates the classes of history within his concepts of irreversible and cyclical time. I will be drawn to discuss how this formed the historical, irreversible basis for class conflict which will lead me to detailing what Debord considered to be the historical, but necessary separation of concepts of time. This will indicate also how the potential to realise a revolutionary concept of time and history and the moves this makes towards social change emerges within the spectacle. The significance of this chapter to my analysis of SOTS is to develop the historical processes Debord used in order to detail the rising class of the bourgeoisie and how it is this that finally releases the potential for the full realisation and use of free time. This will allow me, once completed, to move onto an analysis of Debord's use of the state/State relation in SOTS.

Irreversible and cyclical time; Two historical trajectories

Debord, in his quest to understand the differing forms of social organisation that has made up history, seems to have followed closely to Marx's own theory of proletarian struggle. His historical account of human development differed to Marx's though in as much as Debord did not ground "the proof of the scientific validity of proletarian power on *repeated* past attempts" (SS# 87). Debord did not view the victory of proletarian struggle by supporting what he argued to be a "linear image of the development of modes of production brought on by class struggles which end, each time, "with a revolutionary transformation of the entire society or with mutual destruction of the classes in struggle" (ibid). Instead Debord attempts to show that in spite of all class confrontations "*the bourgeoisie is the only revolutionary class that ever won*" (ibid) and in this sense, is the only class for which "the development of the economy was the cause and the consequence of its taking hold of society" (ibid) in terms of both organised time and history. The bourgeoisie, according to Debord, emerged into the owners of the historical *translation* of the economic movement of social organisation and in this sense, those who became organised by such translations were equally those who remained at the base of all historical movement of time, the proletariat.

Debord's concept of time is an interactive process between a developing but historical, human understanding of time released from immediate survival and the general understanding of a spatial realm within which to experience this time. Furthermore, Debord's development of SOTS as an understanding of time is attempting to articulate a unique development of the organisers of these

explanations and meanings to social intercourse. That is, those who are most able to express and explain this world are those who are most able to apprehend the total possibilities of the epoch. These are the owners of myth because these organisers of social explanations remain tied to a world that exists beyond immediate explanation. As a result of their theories of the human world, these developing organisers also take the privilege and esteem for these profound insights into the human world¹⁴ and thus the historical birth of the concept of the living, the owners and organisers of time and consequently, the interpreters and theorists of human time and history.

SOTS uses this to show that it is with the maintenance of myth and those who ordain particular developments of myth, that we see the living also transcend the conceptually static cycles of cyclical time. The cycles of nature, the representations of cyclical survival premised on the migratory seasons that impose the repetitive understanding of human time, of cyclical time, that gives way to a temporal return of humanity within a mode of time that chews away at cyclical survival. It is a “social appropriation of time, the production of man by human labor, [which] develops within a society divided into classes” (SS# 128). This social appropriation is developed and separated into a realm that is occupied by a process, a movement of time that Debord terms irreversible time. Debord suggests in his SOTS that;

The social appropriation of time, the production of man by human labor, develops within a society divided into classes. The power

¹⁴ Religion and philosophy are good examples of this whereby each seeks to understand the human world and explain its course as history.

which constituted itself above the penury of the society of cyclical time, the class which organizes the social labor and appropriates the limited surplus value, simultaneously appropriates the *temporal surplus value* of its organization of social time: it possesses for itself alone the irreversible time of the living (*SS#* 128).

Irreversible time emerges as a time set aside for the living who subsequently construct and organise the meanings and justifications of this *use* of time (*ibid*). This is not so much to conceal or disguise the material world. Instead, it is to open up this world and explain it but only within particular, restricted definitions of progress and movement that form the basis of the source of this material construction alone and thus, partially. In essence, each translation of epochal time, that time which is owned by the dominant system of organisation, redefines the historical situation but from within a realm of mystification and representation (*SS#* 132). This develops irreversible time and the historic, situational meanings which develop as a rite conceded by the gods, for instance or some metaphysical order. It is a series of concepts of a development or measure of time that concedes a metaphysical rite for the expansion of material history.

Debord tries to develop SOTS in such a way that allows the reader to recognise this historical relation and that the rise of the purveyors of understanding and myth, their mediation of social organisation was necessary (*ibid*). This is because their irreversibility of time, their creative development of thought that explained most accurately the material and technological developments of progressive history and time was equally an understanding of human progression in terms of time and space, material and experience. This is Debord's intentions at the start of chapter V when he quotes that "Man, "the negative

being who *is* only to the extent that he suppresses Being," is identical to time" (SS# 125) because it is a clear attempt to show that a suppression of Being is equally a movement of humanity beyond myth and beyond externalised explanations of human progress and towards a human being.

This historic situation, was used by Debord to show that representation and mediation "is not only a necessity, it is civilization itself. For us man is man solely by virtue of technological mediation, and he needs the spectacle to gain access to his truth. It is via illusion that man discovers his reality" (Debray 1995, p.468). It is only by discovering illusions or misconceptions surrounding the social organisation of time and the development and use of human time from survival is it possible for individuals or groups to realise the potential for change that each epoch signals. Debord's contrasting yet historical development of time in chapter V against that of his other chapters in SOTS is tantamount to Debord drawing out what he claims are the origins of the illusions of spectacular organisation.

SOTS continues to show the contrasting forms of historical time, between unconscious history and spectacular history, by claiming that the developing forms of explanation and the dominance they achieved over meaning were spontaneous but only in relation to a developing technological world. The early historical practices were not carried out on the plane of conscious change but were instead actions tied to a realm, an epoch that was still in a process of development. Hence, these early forms of organisation are not premised on relations of exploitation carried out consciously but instead exploitation carried out under the principles of a conceptual right that has been given to those most able to create,

organise and define the material meaning and thus live the historical situation.

Therefore;

The wealth that can be concentrated in the realm of power and materially used up in sumptuous feasts is also used up as a squandering of *historical time at the surface of society*. The owners of historical surplus value possess the knowledge and the enjoyment of lived events (*SS# 128*).

Debord uses SOTS to show that these actions, these still revolutionary transformations of human social organisation are carried out under an unconscious appropriation of time and knowledge because these actions remain tied to the role given to metaphysical explanations, a dominance of Being, that influences, defines and structures the social organisation of man. While these metaphysical representations remain, these points of externalised explanations, then each moment of confrontation that fundamentally questions social existence, openly challenges these modes of experience because neither the owned nor the owners of history can adequately explain the epoch as their own creation. Hence, these are not exploitative actions because humans, in this sense, increase surplus temporal time for the living by maintaining the surplus value of time within temporal, worldly issues but unconsciously of the total ability of productive technology. It is then “The owners of historical surplus value [who] possess the knowledge and the enjoyment of lived events” (*ibid*). It is not the process of time that automatically creates human material history but instead the practices and experiences of both but measured through the knowledge but mythical concepts and explanations of those most able to apprehend the possibilities of the epoch.

SOTS, and it is to Debord's structure that we must concern ourselves, becomes instrumental in showing how this is a marked and significant distinction to the processes carried out under the spectacle relation because these actions, these increases of surplus survival, the increase in the possibilities of a true aesthetic expansion of time and material history, are carried out within the realms of an awareness, a universal but conscious understanding of the human role to the construction of its world. Both the organisers and organised within the spectacle realise their role in constructing their world, but the tools that are available to construct this world, the concepts and ideas that explain the total possibilities of an epoch, are themselves partial and misrepresented. Debord, by developing an understanding of this awareness, by revealing what he considers is a conscious awareness of the role of creative practice in the construction of the human world, is also indicating, structurally that is, that the spectacle must also, by his analysis of history demonstrating a progressive movement of material, time and experience, achieve its *historical* distinction, its own concepts of a measurement of time and history and thus, its own set of definitions of human time and experience (SS# 90).

However, we have already discussed the nature of the spectacle and the manner in which the situationist's claim that it alters human practice and human understanding of creative practice to such a degree that such creation is pre-defined and thus impotent (SS# 40). Human activity is not only *predefined* within the commodity relation, human activity is subordinated in favour of the activities of the commodity relation (SS# 39). Hence, while such practice fails to

recognise its historical role as creator of social experience, the potential revolutionary nature of human creative practice poses little risk to the movement and organisation of spectacular society while it remains abstract of a true reflection of the possibilities of a redefinition, a re-organisation, of time and space.

Debord's progressive but analytical movement through history in his SOTS is attempting to distinguish this changing understanding by isolating the differences between historical epochs and the way in which this progressively differs in terms of material and experience to the epoch the situationists define as a spectacle. He is attempting this by identifying first the historical impetus for social change in terms of lived experience in the realm of irreversible time but also the ways in which this impetus was coincidental with technological expansion that relied on cyclical nature (*SS*# 125-129).

Debord is claiming also, that rather than the organised of history consciously struggle for the forces of technological production, they instead struggle to live the time and history of their epoch that emerges in this expansion of irreversible time that necessarily erodes cyclical survival to external nature (*SS*# 129). Debord appears to suggest, that is, that the masters of the organised attempt to live the material, objective possibilities of their situation that *coincides* with the technological development of both the time and space of material construction, and this necessarily, but historically, opens up the realm that has been historically concealed, cyclical time (*ibid*). This is why Debord uses the concept of the potlatch because the historical process that Debord identifies shows two distinct

classes but each searching for meaning to their social world. Each successive epochal change is a defining moment for both classes of history and one that resurrects the need for more advanced forms of social organisation that finally emerges into the human world of being.

To summarise this difference between time and history is fundamental to developing an analysis of Debord's text because this contextualises a progressive form of history in which the unconscious realm of human activity formed within cyclical time develops as a matter of irreversibility into a conscious form of practice within the spectacle that seeks to bring about social change that is reliant on what Debord was to claim was the objective factors of economic development (*SS# 95*). This differs to the official language of the spectacle because the only official language, the only official experience, is already defined and 'discovered' within the commodity relation. That is, a conscious change that identifies the possibilities, in Debord's terms, of the historical but radically different possibilities of a social creation of time and history alter in the spectacle because time and history are abstract movements of commodified experiences and therefore, void of the wider potentials of historical change (*SS# 40*). Commodified concepts that define progress are measured, true enough, but only against an abstract system of commodified relations. Furthermore, this analysis of history equally demonstrates the developing role that he gives to the organised of history and how he, as well as the situationists, viewed what was to become conscious proletarian activity defined within the epoch of the spectacle.

SOTS distinguishes both theoretically but also structurally the historical foundation for the class conflict between the owners and the owned, organisers and organised. The difference being, the early owners of time and history and their interplay with the world is not intentionally exploitative or false but rather partial, it is materially enriched time but premised on concepts that negate and regulate the reality of time directed to only one particular use filtered to meet only a partial understanding of the possibilities of productive processes (SS# 128). In its originality, these reflections do offer an objective ability to the process of both time and material history but it is with the relentless movement of the base of that society, that the full possibilities of creative movement is realised (ibid) and thus, defines the movement of time, in none other than an historical potlatch

What remains significant to detail, however, is the way in which Debord uses SOTS to translate this historical movement into the political class conflicts that characterised the revolutionary epoch of the workerist unions of the industrial era. SOTS develops the readers knowledge of a shift, a move in conscious awareness in which the productive forces of history, once realised in their full, universal potential of the unity of human creativity, then so too did human awareness of the historical relation of time and history. By developing the foundation to these conflicts, I will want to demonstrate the historical processes that Debord identifies which allows him to theorise how the proletariat finally become conscious of their material world and the way in which this develops the historical struggles between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Furthermore, this will also identify how this

distinguishes what the situationists and Debord conceptualises as proletarian, revolutionary practice and how this manifests a clear distinction between particular concepts of *state* and the role this has in the measurement and subsequent definition of time and material history within the development of the spectacle in SOTS.

History and the communication of meaning

However, before I can achieve this, I still need to demonstrate how Debord develops the importance of language in SOTS and how he attempts to show, as a result, the historical development of class distinctions and the *political* translations these achieve. He begins this in this passage:

The birth of political power which seems to be related to the last great technological revolutions (like iron smelting), at the threshold of a period which would not experience profound shocks until the appearance of industry, [which] also marks the moment when kinship ties begin to dissolve (*SS# 131*).

Dynasties emerge not as a collection of material accumulations alone, but instead as a measure of the *divinity* of the rulers and their understanding of time and the means through which this is organised. The time that this uses up is a mode of time that is experiential, sensuous but fundamentally personal. It is another form of understanding “Irreversible time [which] is now the time of those who rule, and dynasties are its first measure” (*ibid*). What Debord identifies here, however, is writing; writing is a weapon.

In writing, Debord suggests that “language attains its complete independent reality as mediation between consciousnesses” (*SS# 131*). I think what Debord is

attempting to articulate, and again, this is important for SOTS, and I guess situationist theory as a whole, is that writing is a possible objectification of not only consciousness but it is also a conscious route to articulating the developing concepts of an increasing awareness of the dominant and ruling principles of social organisation.

Debord's development of an early understanding of the written word, of an articulation of culture and social structures, of the organisation of the means within which these processes are expressed, is similar to Debord placing these structures within a communicable process that highlights and develops human social awareness. So when Debord claims in SOTS that "With writing there appears a consciousness which is no longer carried and transmitted directly among the living: an *impersonal memory*, the memory of the administration of society. "Writings are the thoughts of the State; archives are its memory" (Novalis) (SS# 131). Writing, for Debord, and this is true also of SOTS, seems to exist as an objectification, a link between consciousness, love and freedom and the mechanisms that persist in seeking the alternative to pre-existing concepts which has found its only *possible* articulation in action, communication and the objectification of the structures that maintain inequality and progress. The development of writing in this sense is, as Debord seems to suggest, a revolutionary portal on social organisation that contains within it the practical keys or at least an elevation of thought and ideas that allude to the possible as a truly reflective moment of the impossible, the emotions and passions of change, that all truthful writing is capable of (Debord 1988, *Comments*).

Therefore, and this is the foundation for my analysis of SOTS, revolutionary writing for Debord remains practical and as such should be communicated in this way by both the writer and the reader. It is a social link, a relationship between the conscious but at times in a communicable sense, the unconscious possibilities that begin to filter into a social mainstream, of the possibilities of alternative concepts of social change. True writing, the language of dissent, and I mean this in the Debordian sense, which is observable in SOTS, is the real communication of forces of dominated social organisation. As with the *dérive* and the construction of situations, these are manifestations of the communicable nature of social dissent but equally, of social control. As practices, these allow masters or organisers of social groups the potential through which to communicate this seemingly incommunicable relation.

So when Debord claims that situationist theory is in the minds of everyone, (Debord 1979 *Preface*) he is referring to the situationists belief that the contradictions that are inherent in any society are equally within the minds of the individuals that make up that social system. As such, in order that these contradictions are realised and expressed, they require *vehicles of direct communication* and SOTS is just this. Debord uses the Egyptian masters of myth and illusion as an historical example, whereby their real historical power, growing “together with a popularisation of the possession of myth and illusion” (SS # 132) was carried out within the communicable chronicle of the masters’ time of power. The chronicle was a vehicle of communication that informed social organisation. This is not dependent on class in that it is a relation that only the organiser can

understand. These concepts of change are in the minds of all but fundamentally defined and communicated within and through the power of the organisers of time and material history. The control of time via definitions of material progression, each material explanation of the epoch relies on the concept of the living as *the* defining model for progressive, material history. Therefore;

All this flows from the simple fact that, to the extent that the masters took it upon themselves to guarantee the permanence of cyclical time mythically, as in the seasonal rites of the Chinese emperors, they themselves achieved a relative liberation from cyclical time (ibid).

The responsibilities of the control of time and the consequential development of material history is given to the organisers of history within SOTS who, to maintain their own ability to define and use experiential material and time, filter this understanding by explanations fostered within myth and illusion. What differs for Debord with the spectacle, is the *only* class to benefit in the communication of revolutionary practice that contests this relationship between organisers and organised are the organised because it is only they who will realise once and for all the possible contradictions to concepts of time and material history. SOTS remains, then, as a statement about the historical and material development of the master's relative liberation from cyclical time (SS # 131). Furthermore, SOTS shows how this, as an historical movement, emerged within the conscious separation of time and material history within the bourgeoisies' reign as masters of material history.

The centrality of this analysis for Debord is to understand that the language used in SOTS is an attempt to show how *definitions and concepts* of time

mediate meaning in a relation that supports the personal lives of rulers and kings as the inheritors and thus organisers of these *material States* of rule (SS # 131). What this indicates is a historical development to the concepts of life, democracy, of morality, of justice and peace but organised and recognised within a relation to the externalisation of meaning that is experienced beyond the immediacies of cyclical time. This we have already discussed but it is the way in which these systems of organisation and their development of social meaning is sealed within a *State* of information, which allows the development of an archived, but fundamentally partial and personal history to maintain a translational point of historical reference (ibid). Rather than revealing the expansion of human material history, these archives reveal instead the pseudo realm of personal histories. These archived forms reveal themselves as historical narratives, as a record of time that remains to be explored and understood in the context of the possibilities of a lived history (ibid) and this is no more different than that which we witness with the personal lives of superstars, politicians and corporate business. Each offers a pseudo life in a pseudo world through which others can explore through a particular mediation of images and lifestyles.

Returning to Debord's development of history in SOTS shows how the spectacle differs from history because, historically, power collapses when material ideas of the epoch, their implementation of material ideas, and the time this sanctions, no longer adequately explain the developing materiality of the epoch in the terms of human, experiential but fundamentally material history. Therefore, the historical but irreversible time of these powers of the dominant class collapses

within the totality of cyclical time. However, what makes this fundamentally irreversible remains with the role that Debord develops of the chronicle and the institutionalisation of this chronicle:

The chronicle is the expression of the irreversible time of power and also the instrument that preserves the voluntaristic progression of this time from its predecessor, since this orientation of time collapses with the fall of every specific power and returns to the indifferent oblivion of cyclical time, the only time known to peasant masses who, during the collapse of empires and their chronologies, never change. The *owners of history* have given time *a meaning*: a direction, which is also a significance. But this history deploys itself and succumbs separately, leaving the underlying society unchanged precisely because this history remains separated from the common reality (SS# 132).

Debord is claiming here that the chronicle is an expression, a progressional and transitional point through which the dominant classes once again take up from where the previous explanation left. Within the spectacle, the only places where these forms of explanation exist are to be found within the commodified arena of explanation. It is this single point that aids a justification of a development of history in Debord's text because SOTS is no less than a chronicle, a narrative of the history of social meaning and social struggle.

Debord is actively opposing the historical chronology of the owning classes against the spectacle in terms of theory but also in terms of structure. And if my analysis is right, and Debord's SOTS is a chronicle of the history of social struggle, then for Debord to achieve this means he must also be attempting to reverse the relations between power. That is, the organisers of material, of time and hence of experience, has historically defined their worlds in the development of myth and illusions within the partial chronologies of history. Their power has

remained intrinsically part of and tied to the economic translation of social organisation. This power is equally the power to define the living, experience and the subsequent methods for organising social progress.

If, therefore, Debord is attempting to develop SOTS practically by detailing the history of social struggle as a chronology of the powers that reside in the organised as a revolutionary class, then he is also indicating that this power base has to, in some way, be shifted. More accurately, Debord is attempting to show through SOTS, that it is no longer explaining this world that remains to be achieved but instead to consciously experience it because this is the irreversible movement of social organisation that can move beyond the spectacle. Clearly, this is what is meant when the situationists argued that “Up till now philosophers and artists have only interpreted situations; the point now is to transform them” (IS# 9 1964, *Questionnaire*). Thus, his call to ‘arms’, if you like, is Debord claiming that the conscious use of the historic but progressive materials of history be used to their full potential that can finally realise the full use of time and the power to define time but from the base of society that has always been subjected to externalised interpretations of time, the proletariat.

This is why I believe that Debord’s use of history in SOTS is a committed attempt to bring the reader to the point at which human, productive history becomes historical awareness, because it is only once this relation is apprehended in full, the true source of material progress, that the organised of history will recognise their own power base as the inheritors of all material history. This he develops within the bourgeois revolutions of which Marx detailed. We will come

to this shortly but Debord seems to be suggesting that his SOTS is one of the only remaining sources (Debord 1975, *Refutations*), through which a history of social critique can be discovered. Once this critique is found, then the spectacle can be contested, as a patchwork, situationally and spatially, thereby leaving Debord to claim that it is only one class that historically has only one *true* chronology because it is only one class, the owned class, that has historically maintained its struggle to live the totality of time *and* material history (*SS#* 132).

This detailed history in SOTS is attempting to justify the situationist's own understanding for their development of social practice. By acknowledging that the developing material base and not the explanations of the organising classes that sought to explain this base that had characterised early history, had to openly reflect the possibilities of an epoch, the reflections of a material world gave way also to the defining role of labour, of creative practice and thus real, material concepts of change as the transforming principle of history. Historical practice became imbued within the creative processes of social production of which labour has been a *historical part* and thus the realities of concepts of change.

This signals also the origins of the developing *materialist* situation, the historical Marxist analysis of the bourgeoisie and it is their *state* of meaning, of translation, that begins the long *truly historical* process of conscious material accumulation because this united the concepts of both the time and space of material history, that measured time experientially, materially and within the technological abilities of an epoch.

This makes Debord's attention to the importance of the earlier discussion, the collapse of all power back into the cyclical world of common reality, as no longer applicable in quite the same way because this cyclical world is already being chewed away and so too, the mythical realm of restrictive, organised history. Not only do concepts of the historical situation change *materially*. The foundation from which all historical explanations derive had dramatically changed and in turn, so too, the historical, epochal situation. The world of dominated, mythical thought can no longer remain intact because this world is already beginning to find its reflection in the *developing world of bourgeois material translation*. So when Debord claims that "The victory of the bourgeoisie is the victory of *profoundly historical* time," (SS# 141) he is doing so because "this is the time of economic production which transforms society, continuously and from top to bottom" (SS# 141). Time and its reflection in material use become objectively unified by materiality, experience and within the true, technological reflection of universal, material history.

Debord is attempting to show that translations of time that had for so long supported dominant ideas reached its material translation of history within SOTS on a foundation of ideas that came with the first revolutionary class, the bourgeois class, because it is with this class that Debord claims that the full possibilities of time and material history are organised technically and finally released in an expanded mode of concepts of materiality. Mythical explanations and justifications for particular forms of social organisation could no longer justify

themselves other than with material translations. The dominant ideas of history finally gave way, Debord claims, to the truth of all creative historical activity and becomes realised in the technical ability to produce above and beyond anything that had preceded it. A class that emerged from within the common reality of cyclical time who no longer needed external definitions of Being as points of contact or meaning with which to translate its world. From now on in, the historical class of history could define their own world, not via historical interpretation but instead, via fundamental experience.

In doing this, Debord aspires to the notion that “Ideas lose their neutrality when they are directly applicable to life, and as a construction of experience, criticism becomes a material force when it communicates a vision of the world which is useful, and thus, capable of implementation” (Jacobs and Winks, 1997 p.22). The expansion of the concepts of freedom and experience, the concrete manifestation of the materials through which these ideas inform particular forms of experience and concepts of freedom, can only lose their neutrality once the technological means of the epoch are employed partially. That is, once the classes of domination apply their ideas of freedom, the freedom to experience time apart from the creative base and thus *live time directly*, then the objective neutrality of the technical means of production is released into a critical but conscious and material relation.

This historical analysis within SOTS is fundamental to Debord’s system for a number of reasons. First, it is a movement through history, through time and material and through irreversible and cyclical time that shows the slow but also

developing consciousness of material development. Debord is also attempting to show that the situational basis for epochal explanations for social history changes within the material *and* technological developments of the bourgeoisie. Debord appears to be using SOTS to show that once the foundation of organiser and organised had been fundamentally questioned by the massive developments of the industrial era, once the organisational role of this historical state had been superseded by a material and hence more adequate explanation of epochal change, then the new concepts of a materialist state of explanation, of definition, emerges. This material state is responsible, so Debord will argue, for the opening up of a new defining moment and subsequently, redefining historical activity and the historical possibilities of a new potlatch of contestation.

It is this that resembles a *dérive* in SOTS because Debord expected the reader, at the beginning of *Time and History*, to develop and understand what the situationists claimed were distinct contradictions between unconscious, historical time and the conscious abilities within which time may be experienced beyond that of spectacular time. By each reader being able to discover the origins of human history and *practice* Debord felt that they could also develop an awareness of the ways in which social practice, the creation of experience within the human world, has taken a number of forms but all the while remaining within the externalised mode of pre-defined concepts of living. By moving through the historical analysis of human society and by noting the differences in time and history that emerged from a *different mode of creative practice in line with the technological possibilities of an epoch*, Debord hopes the reader will have

experienced the shift from the historic situation of defined and restricted movements within time to the materialist and experiential situation which becomes defined by humanity's full and conscious interaction with the possibilities of the epoch whereby humanity can become "identical to time" (*SS#* 125). In doing so, *SOTS*, Debord seems to suggest, is able to shift the reader from a realm of metaphysical space, or reading that remains tied to an abstract spectacle, to one in which material practice obtains a critical understanding of the domination of commodified time. In other words, Debord is attempting to direct the reader towards a discovery of their own, historically constructed situation and create history for themselves, that directly contradicts the spectacle and in doing so, resurrect a new and more powerful form of contestation.

The centrality of history remains but its role, I am arguing, is to articulate and develop the foundations to an historical narrative upon which to create a new and more powerful set of concepts that lead to a greater understanding of the potlatch and of the constructed situation. Hence, the historical movement of mythical and mediated situations to the final outcome of a material situation, prepares the reader for re-entry into the world of spectacular relations by allowing the reader to recognise the realm of free experiential and materially rich space. Debord's structure within his text testifies to this because now, having passed through history, and having finally reached the possibility of a conscious awareness of historical relations, the spectacle can now return to the reader's awareness but in a potentially very different, but restrictive form. The spectacle

returns as a restriction to the creative possibilities of a truly objective form of both time and experience and not as an emancipation from survival.

This analysis is fundamentally important then because it is this developing awareness, this situational change to social history in SOTS that helps to develop the material versus the mediating state. The explanation that drew Marx towards his recognition of the role of a materialist analysis of history is also the *new* historical situation that not only defined a developing understanding of historical technology. It is a movement within which “the development of capitalism” finally defines the concept of “irreversible time [which] is *unified on a world scale*. Universal history becomes a reality because the entire world is gathered under the development of this time” (SS# 145). This move also defined the emerging powers and subsequent role, of the proletariat to define its own emerging awareness of its own historical role. A materialist explanation that becomes etched and solidified within a new form of explanative *state*. The historical conflicts, the struggle for meaning this engendered is characteristic of the questions posed by the likes of Hegel and those of Marx but it is also characteristic of the struggles that soon shadowed workerist and labour history.

Debord has created this reading in his text and by doing so, he is also showing that it is again that by remembering “it is via illusion that man discovers his reality” (Debray 1995, p.468) that we may also find Debord’s true intent. That is, each and every reader has the potential to create and construct the critical tools and concepts with which to apprehend this material and experiential reality; a reality that has been finally realised within the economic realm in which it had

always existed; material accumulation in terms of universal expansions of time and experience. By chronicling the concept of the historical situation in SOTS and the mythical explanations that had prevented these historical situations from being realised in their material reality as a unity of time and experience, Debord is hoping that such an awareness in this epoch of the spectacle of illusion allows the experimenter to enter the search for a newer meaning to these concepts and thus a different basis of material reality in this, our technically expansive epoch.

Not only this, such an analysis draws the distinction between historical situations of meaning that were reliant on particular states of organisation. The new and growing *proletarian state of meaning* could unite material and experience consciously only once meaning remained within the historical, but distinctly truthful class that had always remained subject to meaning and reflection. By the proletariat organising their own class into a force through which proletarian definitions of material reality could appear, and Debord's SOTS, I believe is an attempted platform from which to begin this organisation, Debord attempted to construct the possibilities of a new and more passionate form to history. In essence, Debord develops a distinct analysis to concepts of the state because it is within the bourgeoisie's concept of time and material history, their concept of a materialist state of explanation, that they not only struggle to live time. The fundamental difference is that the measure of time, that particular measurement of irreversible time, is radically altered because for the first time in history, its true measurement is the true reflection of human experience in relation to the use and consumption of ever increasing material wares. Experience begins to emerge in its

most material and hence objective form in SOTS but under the emerging spectacle of organisation.

Therefore, it is an analysis of Debord's concept of the state that I now wish to undertake because with such an analysis we can begin to witness how Debord's theory accounts for the rise in the spectacle. This analysis will show certain, distinct areas of Debord's text; firstly, Debord makes clear distinctions between a historical state of organisation and the emergence of a material state. Secondly, and this remains a relatively unknown aspect of Debord's text, Debord structures an analysis of the state that once developed and understood, indicates the route through which to practically apprehend the modern spectacle's abuse of materially rich experience, through a situationist analysis of history, and how this suggests that certain situationist practices can recapture the essence and originality of human desires and experience. By detailing his concept of the state, I will be able to demonstrate how the possibility for a proletarian state of unity became deviated from the true reflection of history. Hence, it is an analysis of the Debordian state I now wish to discuss.

Chapter Twelve; Concepts of The State

Clearly, there are significant areas within the analysis that I have offered that support the hypothesis that Debord does structure a particular meaning to his chapter *Time and History*. For instance, I have argued that a reader's understanding of SOTS involves locating certain aspects of Debord's text within practice, certain movements such as the constructed situation and how these are involved in the historical understanding of the concepts of time and history. Furthermore, I have argued that those historical classes who have variously claimed ownership of historical time have also maintained and defined the historical situation encompassed and reflected within concepts of experience and the material world within which to live these experiences. From this analysis, it is also evident, I have shown, that Debord attempts to indicate the slow but tangible development of a human awareness of its creative role in the universal unity of a uniquely human understanding of time and history.

However, picking up from the earlier chapter that discussed language and the possibilities of a détournement of language, I now want to discuss the ways in which Debord developed his concept of the state and the role the state has in arbitrating between a unified and developing awareness of the creative material

world and the interests of those who historically organised social labour. This will demonstrate how SOTS contains an analysis of the state, including its role in the spectacle relation, and how this can be found in the ways in which Debord encourages a *critical* analysis of the language contained in his text.

I want to argue that the centrality of history remains fundamental to an understanding of the state in SOTS because, its role remains tied to an articulation of a historical narrative that once understood, can lead toward more relevant and fundamental concepts and experiences with which to create a new and more powerful situationist understanding of the history of social organisation. This analysis is important for another reason, however, and this is to be found in the ways in which Debord develops his understanding of social organisation and the role the state has in these historical processes. I have already claimed that Debord's SOTS resembles a narrative or historical account of the development of time and material history. However, he is yet to show how the state interacts in the developing, historical awareness of time and history that he seems to suggest is inherent within his text.

Therefore, I want to show how Debord, in a number of ways, uses chapter IV in SOTS to reveal how Marx had performed a vital, historical task in establishing the ways in which "The real movement which suppresses existing conditions rules over society from the moment of the bourgeoisie's victory in the economy" (SS# 73). However, one aspect of Debord's understanding of this movement, and this remains the focus of this chapter, is the political translation of the bourgeoisies victory in the economy. SOTS develops a critical

understanding of this political translation and this is evident when in the same passage as the quote above, Debord claims that “The development of productive forces shatters the old relations of production and all static order turns to dust. Whatever was absolute becomes historical” (SS# 73). This is an important point to raise because this victory, this profoundly irreversible development as Debord describes all *historical* moments, finally reveals the historical and critical relation between material, experience and labour. What is once described as forces of production and the historical relations this has engendered, appears as soon as the real development of productive forces appear.

Hence, as we saw in the previous chapter, the visible processes that were occurring within the bourgeois revolution is the point that drew Marx towards his recognition of a materialist analysis of history. And, as with Debord, this is the *new* historical, but profoundly material situation that defines not only a developing understanding of historical technology and its role in the relations that have characterised history. This move also defines the emerging powers and subsequent task of the proletariat to define a progressive awareness of its own historical relation in the development of history. What remains though is to isolate how Debord’s development of the origins of a bourgeois state of organisation is equally his identification of the political translation of this relation. Furthermore, by detailing this, we will be necessarily drawn to explain how Debord views the rise of Marxism as a means through which to understand revolutionary practice as the truth of the negation of capitalist society (SS# 84) and hence, an alternative translation of social organisation.

Therefore, I want to use this chapter to demonstrate the way in which Debord encourages a critical analysis of his development of the historical, organising state. This will involve my moving onto and developing an understanding of how Debord uses language to convey a series of interpretations to key aspects of the state relation that I claim is contained in SOTS. Further to this, I want to show and elaborate upon the existence of particular relations between the state and Debord's text but especially within the context of how he appears to suggest that the spectacle arose on the foundation of a series of concepts or definitions proffered by a particular set of state translations of material organisation. These relations and the conflicts they inspired developed into a strict set of primary rules that Debord suggests *negated* rather than developed, the possible reality of a human situation premised on the full use of time and material history. This negation of the reality of the human material world allocates the path upon which to fully understand and explore the rise of the spectacle relation.

By developing these relations, I intend to show how Debord uses his SOTS so that the reader can explore a particular experiential reading that can emerge within his text. Furthermore, I want to argue that my analysis can finally draw on the distinctions developed between historical situations of meaning that were reliant on particular states of organisation and those that found their meaning within the modern, *political* translation within a new and growing *proletarian state of meaning*. Finally, this will allow me to show how SOTS indicates that the proletariat, by practically organising their own class into a force through which situational definitions of time and history, experience and the material within

which that experience can emerge, offers the possibilities of a new and more passionate form to history. Debord's historical understanding and thus, development of the organisational state in SOTS is, therefore, my next interest.

Debord and the organisational state.

The point at which an analysis of the state is first realisable in SOTS is in Debord's wish to direct attention to the very fact that any form of explanation that does not attempt to transcend the economic considerations and the movement towards a system of self management works only for the spectacle as a mediation of spectacular desires. It is the dialogue between it and the spectacle. Let Debord explain further;

Now that the constant intervention of the State has succeeded in compensating for the effect of tendencies toward crisis, the same type of reasoning sees in this equilibrium a definitive economic harmony (SS# 82).

The position of the term *State* is important to note because it is used in conjunction with Debord's understanding of history. That is, its context is historical and relies not on the spectacle, as earlier examples in SOTS would seem to suggest. Instead, this seems to rely on its development that originates somewhere within the critical analysis of the history contained before and after its use above. That is, as we will come to see, this history is one premised on concepts of organisers and organised but it is how this organised and organiser relationship exists historically and importantly, how it is translated, that begins to reveal Debord's attention to concepts of the state.

For the moment, however, I want to draw attention to an aspect of the organiser/organised relation which illustrates Debord's continued attention to separation and the impact this has on concepts of the state because notice the capitalisation on the word state in the example above. A little tentative at the moment but it is predominately within theses 80 to 140 that Debord attends to the concept of an *organisational* state in terms of the proletariat *and* the bourgeoisie, that is chapters IV to V. In thesis 87, for instance, there are five references to State, all capitalised. The proletarian State is referenced in thesis 91, in relation to Marx, who "thought that the growth of economic contradictions inseparable from democratic education of the workers would reduce the role of the proletarian State to a simple phase of legalizing the new social relations imposing themselves objectively," (SS# 91). The proletarian State is an intentional directive in showing the reader that a proletarian State is a State of organisation that is subject to the objective development of social relations when tied to a developing, material economy.

However, how does he achieve the contradictory understanding within SOTS that I claim exists? Well, he does so by developing a contrasting state because the bourgeois State in thesis #94 offers a distinction in that "Its known leaders became ministers and hostages of the bourgeois State which destroyed the revolution only to lose the civil war" (SS# 94). Here Debord is claiming a defining role of the political State as bourgeois and in this sense, an organiser of ideas and concepts that remain apart from that of the proletariat. What makes this significant is the means that Debord uses to detail the way in which the relation

between a Bourgeois State and the leaders of the revolution is tantamount to the revolutionary failure to realise social change because of the partial representations emerging from bourgeois interests and hence their partial translation of society.

The masters of State economy in thesis # 103 are further indications of this when its claims are that;

Strictly bourgeois revolution had been impossible; the "democratic dictatorship of workers and peasants" was meaningless; the proletarian power of the Soviets could not maintain itself simultaneously against the class of small landowners, against the national and international White reaction, and against its own representation externalized and alienated in the form of a workers' party of absolute masters of State economy, expression, and soon of thought (SS # 103).

Debord's contrasting structure within SOTS is clearly evident here because he is beginning to show how the development of proletarian power was dismantled, relayed and re-used but through and by a representation of the proletarian workers in an externalized and alienated "form of a workers' party of absolute masters of State economy" (ibid). The power of a proletarian form of workers state could not maintain itself above the power of the masters of a State economy. This is a distinct development of a transition from the possibilities of a proletarian state to that of a State of domination in terms of the economy, expression and even of thought. Debord's structure elucidates a distinct approach to this issue by showing the historical aspects that remain to be discovered underneath this relation. So when Debord goes on to claim that:

Lenin was right every time against his adversaries in that he supported the solution implied by earlier choices of absolute minority Power: the democracy which was kept from peasants *by means of the state* would have to be kept from workers as well, which led to

keeping it from communist leaders of unions, from the entire party, and finally from leading party bureaucrats (SS# 103).

he is clearly showing that this is a transitional point at which democracy was *kept* from peasants by *means of a state* that was already theirs. This is so because when, in the earlier quote, Debord claims that the proletarian power of the Soviets could not maintain itself against the small class of landowners, “against the national and international White reaction, and against its own representation externalized and alienated in the form of a workers' party of absolute masters of State economy”, (ibid) is equally Debord showing the point at which proletarian power is raised above and represented against a newly defined and alienated class against its own representation in the form of a workers' party.

This progressional and morphological development of state relations in SOTS is deliberate. The reason a lower case state is used in thesis # 103 but seemingly referring nonetheless to a powerful State is intriguing. However, if we refer back to Knabb who claimed that “Every single thesis has a direct or indirect bearing on issues that are matters of life and death. Chapter 4, which with remarkable conciseness sums up the lessons of two centuries of revolutionary experience, is simply the most obvious example” (Knabb, 2002). Clearly, if we are to argue with Knabb, or take him literally, we are able to take each thesis on its own merits and this means also that each difference in terminology, each subtle difference, must be investigated with the possibility that each difference contains a meaning in itself.

This leads me to suggest that if there had been no intention toward meaning in the use of two differing forms of presenting upper and lower cased terms, if the use of a lower case state was in no way a hint to a separation of meaning, why did Debord go to so much effort to capitalise some and not all or the other way around? Not only this, we have already seen that historically the state had entered a transitional stage from State of abstract ideological, if not metaphysical, concerns to a material state and in doing so, much more representative of real, material and hence historical developments (SS # 140). Therefore, understanding the historical developments of the state and its role in defining human social organisation remains central to Debord's SOTS because this understanding continues the route that Debord had intended toward the reader accessing the principles of a historical awareness of social relations. Furthermore, it remains a source for understanding what he claims are the separating methods behind spectacular organisation.

Debord attaches considerable importance to his identification of how and why each historical power collapsed and re-emerged as an externalisation of common reality from *within* the realm of cyclical time (SS # 132). With the movement of the bourgeoisie and their own material ideas, they were no longer able to collapse into the realm of cyclical time because this was already too close to their own reality and thus meant that their ideas were becoming increasingly indistinguishable from the material truth of history (Ibid). It is this that Debord uses to show his understanding of the historical S/state and the relations it engenders because the historical movement of the bourgeoisie required a completely different means

towards understanding forms of social organisation, of meaning and of labour and hence a different but profoundly historical understanding of the relations this developed.

Fundamentally, however, Debord's identification of the bourgeoisie's inability to re-organise and redefine their relation to the material world, other than in its truthful experience, its material relation, is also a point of irreversible, revolutionary history. This is indicated within the structure of SOTS when it is evident that Debord is developing a structural attention to a proletarian State, and its progressive form in terms of a history of material struggle. Within this, he is indicating the rise in both the power and material consciousness of the concept of a proletariat that finally has the potential to realise its own role in historical, material relations (SS # 143).

Debord, therefore, is attempting to show through his chapter *Time and History* how the progressive movement of history "brings into clear view the new irreversible time of the bourgeoisie" (SS# 140) but with a crucial difference. "The bourgeoisie is attached to *labor time*, which is liberated for the first time from the cyclical" (ibid). This is not only the process that takes the proletariat, once and for all, from their closed world of cyclical seasons and static societies, this process radically involves "work [that] becomes *labor which [consciously] transforms historical conditions*" (ibid). SOTS creates the understanding that for the first time in history, the bourgeois state of organisation openly relies on the conscious, creative activities of the proletariat to create both its own material

world and the surplus that Marx identified with the bourgeoisie. It is this surplus that historically supports the irreversible *times* of the organisers of social labour.

Debord is arguing that this leaves the bourgeoisie with a problem, of course, because not only are they “the first ruling class for which labor is a value” but they also suppress “all privilege, which recognizes no value that does not flow from the exploitation of labor, [and who] has justly identified with labor its own value as a dominant class, and has made the progress of labor its own progress” (SS# 140).

SOTS is claiming, therefore, that the bourgeoisie, in order to justify their material use of human creativity, have to develop a system of meaning, of concepts and explanation that while offering a material explanation for social organisation, wages and wage survival, nonetheless maintains a certain falsification of the true possibilities of time and history. This State of meaning, this developing but historical situation redefines social revolutionary struggle in the material objective terms of an historical economy *but becomes profoundly distorted within the commodity relation.*

This is the essence of Debord’s SOTS because it attempts to show that the real abilities of the epoch, the sensuous technical abilities to live epochal life as a unity between time and history, those which Debord spent time developing into the structure of his SOTS, continues to advance because this is the historic role of the organisers of material history. This is why Debord’s text remains important because it aims to demonstrate both theoretically and practically, that the ability for dominant political translations to organise the technical world only continues

which, in its turn, moves beyond and further into a surplus of possible experience and thus, materially equipped history. The technical role of reflecting human time and history is surrendered to a *newer* and more abstract defining role of the material commodity relation and thus, reveals only that relation as the truth to human experience. SOTS claims that this is the birth of the spectacle in which the surplus of technical possibility is used up within bourgeois states of control, in warfare, state oppression and secret activities that is supported by an opposing but fundamentally static workers representation. This can only be understood and articulated by understanding Debord's structure. I will be drawn to discuss more of this when we come to the following chapter, the genealogy of the spectacle. For now, I wish to maintain a discussion of the development of concepts of the state.

By Debord locating a transitional period within SOTS, in which the state emerges from historical religions, and by locating his potential revolutionary base within the occupied zones of modern capital (Jacobs and Winks, 1997), Debord is indicating that it is out of the collapse of those reified externalisations of the proletariat that the revolutionary class can recognise itself. More accurately, by SOTS observing the ways in which the developing material base altered historical explanations of time and history, Debord is able to cite a particular moment when the state emerged out of the metaphysical and into the material world. By doing this, he is openly showing how the proletariat's own historically defining situation has also changed from the metaphysical to the material. This structural shift within SOTS is trying to show how the proletariat are once and for all shown to

be, in both theory and practice, the true potential inheritors of historical creativity and the possibilities of a universal, conscious unity of time and history, material and experience.

The concepts to the development of state organisation do exist in SOTS and they do in quite abstract forms. However, it is by approaching Debord's text in the ways I have proposed, an interrelated approach spanning situationist practice, concepts of history and the structure this develops in SOTS that has led to this exposition of Debord's analysis of history. Nevertheless, Debord's analysis of history is not simply an exercise in understanding but a crucial step toward defining the fundamental moments of social history. There is an equally important point to be raised concerning Debord's use of Marx in SOTS. For instance, when Debord locates Marx with the proletariat when:

Marx thought that the growth of economic contradictions inseparable from democratic education of the workers would reduce the role of the proletarian State to a simple phase of legalizing the new social relations imposing themselves objectively[...]A dictatorship without badge, without title, without official right, yet all the more powerful because it will have none of the appearances of power (SS# 91).

This is explicit use of several different emphases and directives. First with the capitalisation of State and its relation to what Debord claimed was the truth of Marx (SS# 84). Second is the relation to objective, social relations and the power this State held because it would be of no title, no abstraction and no official right outside of its own class understanding. But what is fundamentally important to note, and this relates also to an earlier quote from SOTS, is that the power of the dictatorship that Debord indicates above will only be strengthened when it

appears without the *appearance* of power. More accurately, once the proletariat emerge freely, without representation and without the appearance of an official vanguard party of representation of workers' rights, then so too a more powerful class working towards social change.

This leads to more definite uses of this type of emphasis. When for example, Debord claims that it is:

when the proletariat discovers that its own externalized power collaborates in the constant reinforcement of capitalist society, not only in the form of its labor but also in the form of unions, of parties, or of the state power it had built to emancipate itself, it also discovers from concrete historical experience that it is the class totally opposed to all congealed externalization and all specialization of power. It carries the *revolution which cannot let anything remain outside of itself*, the demand for the permanent domination of the present over the past, and the total critique of separation. It is this that must find its suitable form in action. No quantitative amelioration of its misery, no illusion of hierarchic integration is a lasting cure for its dissatisfaction, because the proletariat cannot truly recognize itself in a particular wrong it suffered nor *in the righting of a particular wrong*. It cannot recognize itself in the righting of a large number of wrongs either, but only in the *absolute wrong* of being relegated to the margin of life (SS# 114).

This is a critique of the developing form of workerist party, where two *ideologies* of the workers' revolution opposed each other, each containing a partially true critique of bourgeois society, but losing the unity of the thought of history, and instituting at the same time these same processes, the defining situations but under the auspices of a proletarian State of meaning. By defining the proletariats situation but from radically different positions, SOTS shows how these parties succeeded in once again mystifying the historical situation and leaving the organisers of the surplus of possible material experience continue to

partially equip history but this time uncontested. Moreover, the proletariat whose history is founded on the contestation of material history and the experience of this history, are forced into a world of pseudo contemplation supported by a renewed struggle against material history of commodity relations and thus a distorted and confined commodified history of material consumption emerges, released from all historical critique.

The struggles that placed a name, a title to proletarian struggle externalised and institutionalised a class that has no name other than that which it discovers for itself. Marxism, Debord seems to be suggesting, failed to recognise this in practice, not just because of difficulties in its theory but also the ways in which it became an ideological tool of a particular form of S/state meaning. It is not coincidental either that Marx appears in thesis 137, in a direct relation to the developments of the feudal epoch, because this is indicative of the developing relation between material and ideology and Marx's, in Debord's view, historical analysis of the proletariat. Let us remind ourselves of the essence of what that quote claimed:

The feudal society, born out of the encounter of "the organizational structure of the conquering army as it developed during the conquest" with "the productive forces found in the conquered country" (*German Ideology*) and in the organization of these productive forces one must count their religious language divided the domination of society between the Church and the state power, in turn subdivided in the complex relations of suzerainty and vassalage of territorial tenures and urban communes (*SS# 137*).

SOTS is offering the origins of proletarian understanding of the separations between the material state and the ideological State in direct relation to both a

Marxist analysis of history and Hegelian ideology. Hegelian idealism and Marxist materialism meet in order to understand the epoch and in joining these, Debord is drawing differing distinctions between concepts and understanding of the state and control of social history and its understanding of time (SS # 76-79). The rise of materialism and the maintenance of the spirit are two very different but nonetheless essentially linked forces emanating from the same social whole while at the same time explaining that system from within its own frontiers (ibid). One remains within the metaphysical and is in this sense ideological and thus leads at the vanguard of definitional change that maintains the historic link between the Church and the state, while the other is materially experiential and experimental and develops a rejuvenated link between the material base and the human externalised understanding of this in a material State. However, the search for the revolutionary link with the material State, the organisation of a material world beyond that of the proletariat is a diametrical opposition to what Debord argues is the essence of history (SS # 78). By theorists of proletarian revolution linking organised, political but material translations of the epoch with proletarian activity, proletarian activity became imbued within a complex of interests that could only ever have remained tied to an organisational elite defining and organising a material world beyond that of the proletariat (SS # 96). And it is for these reasons that a situationist analysis of history is important because it reveals the nature of the shifting relations to the material, human world, between activity and the finally, predefined, commodified activity.

I am suggesting that Debord had not intended to simply offer an exposition of how society had been, as he claims, falsified and he did not want to simply suggest that such a society no longer revealed the truth of proletarian organisation. His talk of a general falsification of society (SS # 68), of appearances and the falsified appearances of the proletariat (SS # 24) within SOTS were intended to demonstrate *how* this had come to be and how, as a consequence, proletarian, revolutionary activity also changed and he does so right from the first moment he develops his analysis of history when he uses the term the State in SOTS. His aim is to develop an understanding within his chapter *Time and History* of how concepts of *time* are organised and, as a result, history remains distorted within an organisational State that *presents itself* as the truth (SS # 131-140) . Its dissolution is found only once this presentation is shown to be only a partial representation of a totality of change and history that is subject to technological and material changes. Once understood, SOTS, as I have already suggested, uses an analysis of the spectacle that is located either side of Debord's central chapter, so as to directly contest the direction human organisation has taken.

Debord, I have shown, uses SOTS in various ways to demonstrate this direction. He uses the management of a State bureaucracy, for instance, where he shows that this is also a means of organisation that is to the detriment of the proletariat (SS # 103). Where the significance of this emerges is when Debord uses state power. The smaller *s* is intentional because he is referring to the collective situation and the actions of worker power and the creative, constructing abilities it has. By suggesting a source of unfettered state power (SS # 141), Debord is

playing on the use of words and context to show that this is a *representation* of truth. The power of the state of workers actions is presented in its truth but is immediately falsified when Debord goes straight to the organiser of this power in the dominant politics as an organisational State (SS # 64) . The domination of 'politics', by an organisational elite, however representational their claims may be, always remains partially explained and therefore, is counter revolutionary.

Again, in SS# 64, when Debord shows that the "spectacle belongs essentially to bureaucratic capitalism, even though it may be imported as a technique of state power in mixed backward economies or, at certain moments of crisis, in advanced capitalism" (SS# 64). State power is imported and this is in a direct relation to the proletariat's role as worker and constructor, as the active function of the dominant ideas and concepts of social organisation. Once this has been imported, it then occupies its role as a collective State in which State power is the falsification of state power defining the historical situation, productive organisation, from within a partial representation of time and history.

When Debord uses the term next it is again as State in which the organisers of social or technical power transfer this power into a mode of State run ideology and in doing so define the historical situation but from within a partial representation. Thus separating state power from its use of the technical means and realisation. What emerges to reflect technical society is again understood by the pseudo technical developments of the latest gadget, the latest technical achievement in the commodity relation (SS# 40). Therefore, this remains as a fundamentally, but developing form of mythical society that maintains its cyclical

relation to the production of seasonal commodities but relaying ever more an image of irreversible change. The totality of technical abilities that produce human society are concealed and presented as the commodity, which is an externalised but fundamentally falsified representation of the abilities of an epoch. Hence, it is not the truth of the technical abilities to produce an aesthetic, experiential history premised on the true abilities of that epoch. The position of Debord's analysis of the spectacle in SOTS is paramount to understanding, therefore, the role and position he gives to history.

No historical, revolutionary contestation to date has, from within the proletarian class, finally realised the complete, conscious unity of history and time that Debord suggests is possible. This one factor remains at the heart of Debord's text that can be understood and revealed in its entirety only if his SOTS is read within the interrelated terms I have offered. He and the situationists believed that it is only within the language of the proletariat, defining their epoch from their own *defining* situation, was it likely that a more adequate and powerful understanding of modern relations would or could be developed (SS# 138). To get to any situationist understanding of this voice, the proletarian role and the potential for constructing historical situations, Debord's history has to be analysed and understood in ways that unlock his attention to historical, situational meaning. He has to be read analytically, historically and, as a result, practically because it is by locating Debord's historical analysis in SOTS is it also possible to detail his

use of the constructed situation, the *dérive* and the possibilities of an historical awareness of time and history.

This suggests that to place SOTS within the *theoretical* search for a precise meaning to the processes that underpin the possibilities for *unmediated* human relations has succeeded only to counter Debord's intentions. He does not propose a particular route to social change nor does he suggest that mediation is fundamentally damaging, but rather indicates and highlights the significant features that have occurred, over time, that has resulted in the spectacular mediation of modern social conditions (*SS* # 125). Furthermore, any reading process that attempted to define proletarian relations and the route to the possibilities of a world free of partial mediation generates concepts, means and practices other than those that are situationist. These means and practices could only be understood within established concepts and meaning and was, as a result, insufficient. These ideas, while they remain as a dominant representation of the social whole can only remain partisan to the system that had already co-opted its meaning and can therefore, be implemented and remain useful only to that same system. Debord had obviously observed this and this probably explains partly why he developed SOTS in the way that I claim he has, because he was already claiming in 1979 that:

Of all those who have quoted from this book in order to acknowledge some importance in it, I have not seen one up till now who took the risk to say, even briefly, what it was about: in fact, it was their concern simply to give the impression that they were not unaware of it. At the same time, all those who have found a fault in it seem not to have found any others, as they said nothing else

about it. But each time, this *exact* fault has something that sufficed to satisfy its discoverer (Debord 1979, *Preface* emphasis added).

Debord was attempting to show in both this quote above, which is taken from the Italian Preface to SOTS and in his text, that to analyse history, social practice, the commodity or the state as an outcome, as an exactitude in itself, to seek a satisfactory result in established schools of theoretical understanding of his text alone simply risks missing the whole of history and thus the critical and practical thought that Debord felt he had developed in his language of the historical situation. In this, he is distinctly following Marx who was also quite reluctant to use concepts such as capitalism for instance, in any definitive form preferring rather that these concepts be understood through practical effort and struggle (Bottomore, 1999). Therefore, I want to conclude that to understand Debord's text means also entering into the practical effort and struggle that involves enquiring into the many differing routes that he takes the reader but significantly why he develops these routes in the first place.

I want to suggest, therefore, that SOTS is instrumental, in its complexity of language and structure, for detailing two historical organising powers that exist where each has been responsible for defining the historical situation. One lies at the level of a possibility of complete conscious awareness of the technological abilities of the epoch and thus, potentially, becoming a state power controlled and designated by the totality of that state, the complete control over the results of history. The other is a State controlling the elements that are significant only to its own ideological imprint but fundamentally directing the power base by its own

ideas of organisation. This development, this emphasis on the translating abilities of a particular, dominant but powerful section of social organisation is clearly the key to understanding Debord's concept of the spectacle and how Debord's theses in SOTS conceptualises the commodity relation. However, before I can attend to the development of the spectacle relation, I must first address certain areas of my analysis and the potential difficulties within certain issues of translation. That is, Debord's original text was written in French and therefore, some of the areas of SOTS that I have presented as showing particular emphasis may in fact be more a result of translation and not as part of Debord's wider intention as I have claimed. I want to briefly, therefore, discuss difficulties of translation and issues of grammar.

Issues of grammar?

As I have already indicated, SOTS was originally written in French and therefore, it is reasonable to assume, that some of the issues I raise above could be explained via difficulties within the translation from the French to the English. However, if these 'anomalies' were in the English translation alone then there would be little problem with suggesting my analysis is caught up within the differences in translation and my position would indeed be tentative. However, this is not so, it is also in the French. The term 'state power' is used, but differently, in the ways I have described, meaning SOTS is maintaining two states because historically two potential meanings to the social world existed but were separated and united by myth. The movement of the bourgeois economy from the State is

no more than an indication that this initiated the developing recognition of a proletarian state because the existence of this State, the abstraction from the cyclical base of universal reality, had to represent its opposite in order to exist as an organising power. Fundamentally, this expression, this abstraction emerged into a state of proletarian activity and has to be contained in the French translation because it is not in the language alone that this relation exists. This relation is also contextual within SOTS, as I have explained above.

I suggested this to Ken Knabb who is not only responsible for several texts relating to the situationists. He is also responsible for a *newer* translation of SOTS from French to English. Knabb, in fact disagrees with my position and argues instead that it is no more than a formality within the translation. This is true for the ways marx and Marx are distinguished as well as it is for my theory of the S/state and as a result, Knabb intentionally misses this capitalisation out in his newer translations. Why this is done I do not know, but Debord makes clear his distinction between Marx and marxism and this must be addressed in any interpretation of Debord's SOTS. Knabb claims he does this to aid the readers understanding and to avoid confusion. In a communication with Knabb, whom I contacted regarding the significance of the different use of capitalisation, he claimed that

The difference [to which I] refer to has no significance. In French, "Etat" is normally capitalized when it means the nation or the government, and lowercased in all other senses of the word (the state of nature, the state of someone's health, etc.).

In English it is merely optional, not obligatory, to capitalize "State" in the political sense. Some people (particularly anarchists, since they want to stress the unique significance of this entity) do so, but

it is more common to lower-case all uses of the word. I chose to do the latter in my translation.

I am not sure how this works, however, because if this is the case, if there is no intentional difference in mind, then the reasons Debord contextualised the term the state at certain times in his text would seem to be of no or at least little importance. However, as I have shown, Debord places an emphasis on Marx which gives marxism a particular context. A context, that is, which attempts to contradict the developing marxism of the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Therefore, understanding Debord's use of context makes understanding the concept of the state all the more important because Debord *is* contesting a rising but externalised political translation of a material state.

Debord purposely develops the concept of a State, as a government or form of organisation and lower cases others even though he seems to be referring to an almost exact same meaning. This is true for the English translation as it is the French because while there may be a need in French to name these, as an organising power, then it seems to me this is precisely the point that Debord wanted to be raised but in the context of his structure in SOTS. That is, unless these organising powers emerged from the historical situation, then these organisers may well prove to be no more than political apologetics for an already sorry state.

Furthermore, Debord had always assured his readers that his text was not only one of masterly precision but it was also correct in its analysis to such a point that "There is *not* a word to be changed in this book in which, apart from three

or four typographic mistakes, nothing has been corrected in the course of the dozen or so reprints it has known in France” (Debord 1979, *Preface* emphasis added). Any changes in the typography of Debord’s SOTS needs then, by implication, to be very precise and organised in order to maintain these subtle distinctions.

I am not sure if this is the case with Knabb because I believe it is clear that any State, any reasoning about organisational power, any name that is not proletariat, comes with a context and a capitalisation in order to show its legitimacy *only* as an organising principle in an ideology that seeks to maintain a separation between the technical means of production and its use. The proletariat would not nor could not inherit a title, could not explain a historical situation that was not already theirs. This could never remain capitalised or abstracted from the core of proletarian struggle because this is already a movement into a representation, an externalisation of workers power.

In other words, the proletariat has the potential to organise its own concept of state in both time and experience and it is a legitimate state *that does not capitalise itself*, does not offer this separation of power as an ideological formula which will ensure that the proletariat remains victorious in the class struggles. A proletarian state does not need recognition outside itself only to itself because it is only once the totality of a unity of time and history becomes proletarian is it that the victory of proletarian, historical struggle, realises itself. Thus, the distinction has to be made clear in SOTS or one risks missing this relation and therefore miss the historical analysis that Debord was developing.

In SOTS, Debord, as he did with his critique of Marx, shows his developing, historical differences of emphasis by context and by capitalisation and it is this, I want to argue, that most often obscures his understanding of the state from making its appearance. This is all the more puzzling, of course, when it is a means of emphasis that has been established for some time now, yet, especially in light of Debord's own morphological analysis of language, one that receives little or no attention in critical analysis of SOTS. Why this relation to differences in context and capitalisation has not been previously properly explained is unclear.

I want to suggest that Knabb's deliberate choice to lower case all use of the term state and upper case all use of Marx, not only contradicts Debord's own confidence within his text but it also surrenders Debord's historical analysis to a misrepresentation. It is not making the reading clearer, as Knabb believes, but is rather confusing the intricate analysis in which Debord presents his historical critique. Not only this, by removing the upper case use of State and therefore not forcing the reader into these analytic exercises within Debord's structure in SOTS means that Debord's understanding of situational practice can also be missed.

In an attempt to corroborate my position further, and address Knabb's concerns, I contacted Reuban Keehan, who maintains a Situationist web site that translates and prints situationist and Debordian texts in English and French. He has also explained the distinction I have made as "The lower case noun "état" is only used in Debord's original version in the sense of a "state of mind" or "state of emergency" (Keehan).

I would agree by showing it is a grammatical shift but it is not insignificant but fundamental to understanding Debord's concept of the S/state as a relation. The reference to the *means of the state* above is remarkably similar to a political or organisational state but one premised on the working class movements who can actively and creatively, define their historical epoch but on the premise of their own ideas and thoughts of historical action.

Debord is not attempting to analyze the State and the failed revolutionary attempts to takeover State machinery because this would be no more than Debord acting as a theorist of revolutions. Nor is he attempting to critique the State by claims of its over arching superiority, as Knabb claims some anarchists do. The State is not capitalised in order to draw attention to its domination and its exploitation of material life. Nor is there any attempt to pick out any other separation. He is attempting something far simpler and less controversial than this.

It is instead an attempt to show that *meaning*, which is never precise or exact, is itself at stake while it remains uncontested within the context of the epoch of technological ability. While the State exists and remains as the locus for *official* concepts of meaning, a supposed 'totality' of meaning, then so too does the State exist to subvert the technical and conceptual tools with which to experience the totality of creative practice. This is because its official meaning subverts "whatever real experience the individual manages to achieve in his daily life" because these concepts of experiences remain "alien to official time and remains unintelligible to him" (Jappe 1999, p34). This same process of State meaning creates the official language that ensures the individual "lacks the tools to relate

his own lived experience to the lived experience of society at large and thus invest it with greater meaning” (Jappe 1999, p34). These tools remain concealed and hidden for as long as the commodity relation keeps individuals from realising their historical role in the creation of time and history.

The problems for humanity’s development are profoundly increased with the spectacle because this *organisational* form conceals the technical abilities in the production of commodities but remains technically advanced beyond anything this epoch is able to use. The commodified concept of time and the corresponding meaning this gives to history governs, dominates and thus recuperates all possible forms of use of either time or a commodified history. Therefore, the reason why history remains central to SOTS is because it shows *how* the spectacle absorbs the surplus of technical accumulation and how it redistributes this surplus in terms of a plenitude of illusions and falsehoods (ibid). SOTS achieves this by developing the centrality of history and then, in the four chapters that precede chapter V and those that follow, directly contrasts these against what Debord regards as truthful history. While these illusions are adequate in conveying a concept or ideology of a use of time and a form of history within which this time realises itself, as illusions they nonetheless refuse to acknowledge any time that is not already encountered within its relation. As a result, and this underpins all situationist searches for social history, history remains ever more reliant on the commodity relation. While this technical society develops at the expense of experience, then meaning and the truth to epochal history remain elusive but fundamentally alienating in terms of experience (Debord 1988, *Comments*).

I believe that this is enough to warrant further examination of the ways that the term S/state has been used, because it is this that allows the reader to move on and understand precisely how, why and when the spectacle arose in the ways that it has above and beyond the state relation as it is historically understood. That is, as an arbiter of meanings related to time and history, the spectacle's role in the arbitration of meaning consistently redirects the individual to the world of the abstract commodity and in this sense, to an ever increasing margin of illusionary needs and wants. Time remains organised but only ever in relation to its role in developing the commodity relation. SOTS remains committed to showing that the historical aesthetic and sensual use of time and its role in defining the reality of the human relation to its world, its being, is on the ebb that drains ever more intensely the more commodified this relation becomes. Therefore, understanding how history plays its part in Debord's text and the way in which this develops an understanding of situationist practice is crucial and explains why Debord refused to alter *any* aspect of his text (Debord 1979, *Preface*).

There may well be other routes to understanding this relation of course but I believe these other routes will not be the ones Debord intended because they run the risk of missing the concrete and unmolested practical element Debord left to be discovered. Without this practical element that attempts to identify the movements of historical situations, from metaphysical to the material explanations, then the defining concepts and practices that can represent the real, conscious unity of time and history, struggle significantly to emerge. The movement the text

requires to aid this understanding is caught up in its' use of the situationists practical understanding of historical conditions and this has to remain within the concepts I have described. It is then that Debord would witness what he claimed was "The fusion of knowledge and action [which] must be realized in the historical struggle itself, in such a way that each of these terms guarantees the truth of the other" (SS# 90).

By showing the routes to the development of the state and the relations this has engendered, we have been able to witness also the ways in which Debord attempted to place the state, historically, as the developing administration of organisation of the technical means of social activity. Therefore, the technical development of the state also indicated the historical expansion of production and survival. However, it is clear that the spectacle has emerged out of this relation, this state relation and it is for this reason that I have charted the historical route of the state. That is, because it is seldom acknowledged that the spectacle has a quite distinct development (Crary, 2002), I want to argue this is precisely because the historical nature of the state has not been adequately explained. By entering Debord's text from the position that I have, a position that is not reliant on the processes that define conventional texts, such as linear readings and taken for granted uses of grammar, I have been able to demonstrate the possibilities for an interpretation of SOTS that takes into account the historical developments of material history, the role of the state and the transitional points that mark epochal change. This, I have argued, is a process that Debord develops in order that the

reader can realise an alternative but historical understanding of time and history and finally reveal the nature of spectacular organisation.

This has brought my thesis to its final area of analysis then and this will be centred on the genealogy of the spectacle. My reading of SOTS has been instrumental in developing this genealogy and it is by understanding situationist practice and the processes this involves that we will now find ourselves in a better position to not only study the spectacle in its historical relation to the domination of labour and commodity relations. We will also be able to understand the process behind which the spectacle remains concealed. More accurately, by developing not only the history that Debord contained in SOTS, but also the context within which it is contained, we can now discover where, how and why the spectacle emerges, from what Debord argued as the collapse of Marxist analysis. We will in due course discover why I believe this is important for Debord's SOTS but also for situationist theory as a whole. For the moment, however, I want to suggest that my structural and analytical reading of SOTS will open a more adequate route through which to understand the critical concept of the spectacle and by implication, the origins of the spectacle.

Chapter Thirteen; The Genealogy of the

Spectacle

Critically understanding the origins of the spectacle may appear to pose few problems and even less in terms of a contribution to social understanding. However, I want to argue against this because for too long now the situationists have languished in a shaded world of possibility. While there is a growing number of articles and publications that present theory after theory of situationist ideas and practice, these rarely contain issues such as those given above. It is for this reason that I have argued for more attention to Debord because such attention will reveal that there is a theoretical and practical path, a situationist structure to his text.

One important aspect of this analysis has centred on discussions of the state and its historic relation to social organisation and the developing administration of social needs and technology. I suggested then that this has an impact to the meaning of what the situationists term the spectacle. That is, by taking the time that I have, to re-construct situationist practice and theory, including Debord's contribution to this in his SOTS, I am now in a position to show how this analysis significantly underpins an understanding of the spectacle and its role in modern social organisation. I have no hesitation, at present, to accept that more analysis is needed on this subject. That is, as I have already suggested, more work must be done on both the situationists and Debord in order to open to critical scrutiny the practical possibilities of their theory towards understanding social organisation.

It is for very good reason, then, that I have taken the time to establish situationist theory and practice and what I have argued is a particular structure to Debord's SOTS. I have attempted to show how, as a reading, SOTS travels a distinct line through a developed history. Also, I have shown how this reading relies on Debord's analysis of processes of separation not only within history itself, through time and space, Being and being but how this separation also emerges within the words of the text as a contestation of the officialdom of spectacular society. The analysis that I have given to these concepts has suggested that Debord's structure and his use of certain processes through which to relay his intended meaning has a particular impact on a wider understanding of the concept of the spectacle. The spectacle, the ways this has emerged as the organising

principle of modern technology and material development and its role as a mediation between the riches of time and space, can now be contextualised within the reading I am proposing.

All these aspects, if combined, certainly do form the foundation from which to demonstrate that despite what is often claimed and argued as a system without a genealogy, Debord shows that the spectacle as an entity, a unique and mysterious development, while alien in its appearance, truly does have a developmental process and a historical one at that. Again, we find ourselves and indeed Debord, within a realm of interpretation and hence understanding that seems to suggest that the origins of the spectacle relation and the processes that social organisation have encountered to get to a spectacle relation, are not historical but are instead a manifestation of Debord's own mind which he has very little authority to maintain.

This is of course true, to a certain extent, but while leaving it at that, while leaving the spectacle open to the simplified analysis that the above suggests can only result in a misrepresentation of the wider, critical analysis that Debord and the situationists had intended of the spectacle relation. This misrepresentation appears to be evident when Crary (2002) claims that "a striking feature of Debord's book [SOTS] was the absence of any kind of historical genealogy of the spectacle" (Crary 2002, p.455). While initially correct, that there does appear to be a lack of attention in Debord's SOTS to the genealogical aspect to the spectacle, I would argue, on the basis of the analysis of Debord's text that I have presented, that there is more to this than Crary suggests.

I intend to address some of the difficulties with Debord's genealogy of the spectacle and in the process, this chapter will enable me to set the foundation for what will be the last necessary development of Debord's historical analysis contained within SOTS. This will not only demonstrate that some form of process or genealogy of the spectacle does seem to exist. I will also show that this process, if understood within the historical and practical reading I have suggested, if it is understood as a separation from the realities of revolutionary reflection, then so too will it emerge that the spectacle arbitrates between the true, historical meanings between State and state. This differs from current understanding of Debord's SOTS because it is, until now, the s/State relation that has remained beyond critical analysis.

There are, however, numerous difficulties that exist with unearthing the origins of the spectacle and to some extent, I have addressed some of these difficulties above. Equally, these same difficulties seem to inhibit unearthing the anachronistic origins of the relations between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat that Debord places at the heart of the struggle for the technological and material developments of history. However, by determining the historical nature of these relations and by demonstrating the processes through which the proletariat find themselves, I will be able to show how Debord had intended his analysis to reveal the true nature of the externalised forms of spectacle relations. That is, by the proletariat maintaining the historical relation that saw their ideas, their revolutionary ideas remain as a form represented back to them via specialists and revolutionaries, these same ideas remain as "graveyards of good intention" (SS# 84).

Debord and the spectacle

There are a number of reasons that may explain why Debord's concept of the spectacle remains shrouded in any number of misconceptions. There are claims, for instance, that the concept originated from Henri Lefebvre's *Critique de la vie quotidienne*. However, what is clear is that the spectacle emerged within the activities of revolutionaries, including the situationists in the 1950's and 1960's (Crary, 2002). The term arose from the anti-art practice of the radical critiques of the letterists, the politics of everyday life "and an analysis of contemporary capitalism" (Crary, 2002 p.455). Not only this, what probably helped to cement the term to situationist activity alone, is the publication of Debord's SOTS in 1967.

Obviously, after nearly four decades since Debord's work was first published, the concept of the spectacle still maintains a certain critical and, as it is, not so critical currency in discourse concerning modern social relations. (Ibid). Often given as an explanation of the differences in the contemporary divisions of power, the spectacle exists as a critical explanation of the contemporary ways that the functioning of power appears as a "new opiate-of-the-masses" (Crary 2002, p.455). For others, it is "a totalizing and monolithic concept that inadequately represents a plurality of incommensurable institutions and events" (ibid, p.455). There are a number of other, equally varied, ways in which to understand a contemporary analysis of the term the spectacle. Whether this devalues the term or not, each

attempts to represent a particular meaning or understanding to the situationists as a whole.

To some extent this multi-descriptive approach to the spectacle is given by Debord's use of the term itself, which quite often seems over indulgent and arbitrary. Debord sometimes uses the term in its representative form and others that include its concrete manifestation in human relations. He also expresses the spectacle in material form and in its critical affront to the variety of ways in which the spectacle has emerged as the only material translation to the epoch. The spectacle appears as the "concrete inversion of life" and as "the bad dream of modern society in chains" (Bracken 1997, p.129). With this diversity in mind, it is hardly surprising that no singular definition exists.

There are, as a result, other problems to understanding the genealogy of the spectacle and these are equally in Debord's own making. These problems exist in his assurances that the spectacle appeared at a precise moment within the twentieth century. He claims that the spectacle, as it continues to advance, "moves quickly for in 1967 it had barely forty years behind it, though it used them to the full" (Debord 1988, *Comments*). This is quite a precise date and corresponds with detailed analysis in SOTS, which he claims that;

The spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible. It says nothing more than "that which appears is good, that which is good appears. The attitude, which it demands in principle is passive acceptance, which in fact it already obtained by its manner of appearing without reply, by its monopoly of appearance (*SS# 12*).

Giving the date of 1927 or at least the late twenties, offers no more than a series of speculations that Debord himself was quite happy to accept by applying to these dates. Indeed, at face value, there is little in SOTS that is obvious, which seems to confirm this categorically and without question. However, if the spectacle is the historical manifestation of abstract relations, then to some extent, the genealogy of the spectacle has to have a historical foundation. In other words, for Debord to simply invent the spectacle would be of little use given his strong historical analysis. This is precisely the reason why I want to suggest that a search for the origins and therefore the truth of the specific nature of the organising principles of the spectacle, as Debord had originally intended, must not rely on anything other than an historical analysis. Hence, we must compare the dates Debord seems happy to accept with the spectacle's appearance with history itself, we must contextualise it.

Crary (1989) attempts to do just this. He develops a complex network ranging from the development of television, to the movie *The Jazz singer*, which offered movie sound and pictures, to the rise in the 1920's of fascism and Stalinism. In addition, this is, an adequate development of Debord's understanding because he certainly did cite these developments as significant factors towards the development of the spectacle. What is important for the likes of Crary to indicate though is how these relations to the spectacle developed, the infancy of a series of abstractions from 'real life', without attracting any form of critical attention as to both its origins as a relation and the long-term implications of this relation. Equally, this has to be explained in both historical and theoretical terms in

relation to Debord's historical analysis contained in SOTS. That is to say, while all these events do have a bearing on the spectacle, these events are the general recognition of processes and actions, creative replacements of universal activity that describes elements of the spectacle. These do not indicate irrefutable evidence of the *historical* origins of the spectacle only contemporary parts of the general spectacle built on history. That is, individual acts, moments of change and revolution are only aspects of the developing spectacle relation because they remain separate of the historical and collective call. A call that Debord identifies to universally unite both time and space, technically and materially.

What Crary is offering as evidence of the origins of the spectacle, while indicating some of the forms this manifestation was to take, is instead the *content* of the changing relations of the epoch, contained in spectacular *form* and are hence still the material reasons why this may be the case. If my analysis of Debord's history is correct and if the bourgeoisie, whose revolutionary epoch had given way to the new epoch that Debord had concluded existed, then at some point, the collapse of the bourgeoisie into the totality of history had been misrepresented and offered as *the* universal, revolutionary moment. Therefore, the "signs which are misunderstood and falsified by spectacular arrangement" (SS# 115), these same signs that had taken Debord to the conclusion of a new epoch found that it is no longer scarcity or the lack of the materials to survive that hampers total history. It is instead the fact that the bourgeoisies' *interpretation* of the epoch, "*capitalist abundance*" in terms of both material and technology, "*which has failed (ibid)* to maintain a partial and restricted understanding of the

epoch. The route to maintaining a partial view of the abilities of the epoch could no longer rely on anything other than a newer translation that reflected both the materials and technologies of modern social organisation. This, however, emerges in the spectacle.

Understanding this must indicate that it was from a certain point in history that a new and more abstract externalisation of thought existed because the spectacle can only emerge from within an existing form of social organisation, from within the developing epoch. And it is, according to Debord, “these questions [which] are of great interest, for it is under such conditions that the next stage of social conflict will necessarily be played out” (Debord 1988, *Comments*) and this is fundamentally important. The spectacle represents the developing conditions from which to launch the next offensive, the next form of social conflict but only once the spectacle is apprehended, actualised and understood.

This type of reasoning concerning spectacle relations is relatively un-contested within analysis of situationist thought and in particular ways, Cray is maintaining this. However, there are other points here because we also have the situationists attempting something rather peculiar. While they claim that a new epoch exists, the epoch that is represented by the spectacle, they are also claiming, by implication, that the proletariat’s position has also changed to that indicated within ‘traditional’ theories of materialist history such as Marxism. It is this that the situationists sought to develop into forms of historical consciousness.

This ‘enlightened’ understanding revealed that the spectacle had succeeded in masking the developing, new relations that emerge within a new epoch and it is

this that led Debord to try and show that this new epoch had developed a subsequent need to redefine the period from within the radical definitions of social organisation. Definitions, that is, as understood within the newly formed proletariat. Towards this new definition, Debord noted that the developing relations of the spectacle still relied on the creative interpretations of external thought as a reflection of the truth to historical action. That is, the developing spectacle still relied on forms of exploitation that existed within the redirection, the recuperation of innovative and creative ideas that had, effectively, turned around somewhat the critical reflection of this relation. However, the historical difference is that this spectacle relation created a fundamental schism *within* the proletariat because they no longer saw their historical relation as existing between two significant cultural translations of the epoch, bourgeois and proletariat in practice. The proletariat no longer struggled to realise the abilities of the epoch, the struggle between time and space. Instead, the new form of struggle facing the proletariat emerged in the contestation of the commodity relation and the survival of commodity exchange.

These developing, commodified definitions are carried out on the plain of an already abstract system, in which the dominant forces of the commodity redirect critical and creative activity towards the translation found within the commodity itself. Significantly, the commodity is represented as the arbiter of freedom and survival and hence, is directed back to the revolutionary class, the origins of true revolutionary activity but at the expense of the originality of revolutionary thought and action. For this reason alone Debord is asking for another interpretation, another art to resurrect itself and counter the translation of the epoch that had

asserted itself within capital abundance. Debord's, though, is centred within the knowledge of the proletarian ability to organise itself on the principle of the technical reflection or possibilities of civil society. Therefore, the developing system of social possibilities remains potentially defined and co-ordinated within the abilities of the epoch, revolutionary practice included (Debord 1988, *Comments*).

Thus, the issues that Crary indicated above, while they refer to particular aspects of the spectacle, they do not apprehend the total historical processes that underpinned these historical movements in the first place. Relations that are themselves becoming spectacular the more human creative potential is directed to an abstract relation. The evidence Crary gives is not the origins of the Debordian spectacle, how could it be, for Debord had not analytically developed the spectacle until after he had attended to history. This is itself enough to warrant a suspicion as to the spectacle's realisation and origin.

An adequate analysis of the spectacle cannot develop, even though it is a material manifestation, no matter how Debord's SOTS is read, until after history itself is understood and it is this understanding which reveals the nature of the State relation. Thus, to search for the origins of the spectacle and leave it at that, in SOTS that is, is also to miss the historical analysis that brought Debord to his understanding of spectacular relations. SOTS, by its use of the structure I have outlined, can only lead to a misrepresentation if a reader's understanding of the history it contains, does not take account of the practical process Debord had intended. The truth of history will itself demonstrate the development of the

spectacle and at the same time, the tools for its actualisation and thus, its historical negation. Once the spectacle relation and the spectacle is apprehended as an *insufficient explanation* of social relations and the material world that informs these relations, then so too its seeds for its own downfall. In other words, the full and total aesthetic and technical possibilities of the epoch have to be understood in ways that shows the spectacle as an inadequate form of the official Word, and in such a relation, a still critical apprehension of social relations. By not developing its critical, historical movements, the spectacle, while it remains profoundly un-historical, then its meaning is all the more mystified.

The spectacle is not an invention, a single idea or image. It is instead an analysis of real historical relations that Debord claims he understood, that certainly did not rely on him inventing the spectacle “out of thin air” (Debord 1988, *comments*), as he acknowledges because it was a real set of relations and moments that were occurring. Not a series of invented ideas or processes but real moments, real processes that were becoming mediated at the same time they were becoming abstracted by the commodity relation.

This resulted in the proletariat being moved away from any historical path. Debord developed his analysis in order that he could get to the concept of the spectacle, the meaning to the epoch, from the understanding of both the separations and the unity of history. In doing this, he attempted to show that the spectacle’s unity relied not on the validity or supposed validity of any unity of subject and object but instead an interpretation of the *historical relation* in its totality that assumed a particular form. The spectacle relation emerged as a

represented relation as a unity but only ever by maintaining a masked separation. Therefore, while Debord was “always [being] accused of indulging [him]self to excess in [his] evaluation of its [the spectacle’s] depth and unity, and its real workings” (Debord 1988, *comments*) it merely confirmed his own position.

There are other, equally interesting areas to Debord’s text that need illustrating and these we will find within an understanding of the role that Debord has given to writing and its historical significance. That is, Debord attempted to solidify writing, the critical and chronological possibilities of historical writing within his text and it is this that remains fundamentally significant.

The spectacle and the chronology of historical, critical writing

The spectacle is a critical concept and as such sought to develop its critique in a strategical anonymity in which the supporters of the spectacle had difficulties in absorbing. The very fact that writing was making way for the image of the screen is one factor that brought Debord to realise that writing itself was making way for a different form of chronological understanding of productive history. The development of screen images of human life could conceal separations by nature of its language performing representations, externalisations of human action and thought and the re-enactment of human life at a distance but without ever having to bother itself with any true, historical reference points.

However, it is the contrasting date of 1967, a reference point in history, that seems to coincide with SOTS’s appearance and one that seems to hold onto the

ability of writing to develop and maintain the historical chronologies of proletarian history. SOTS, in doing so, cemented and turned the term spectacle into a critique of capitalism and capitalist accumulation that relied on an interpretation that could once and for all understand the epoch but universally. This date solidified the language of revolution and returned the chronologies of history, once more, into a realm of reference, a mode of historical understanding that continues to remain. This, and in no clear way, is indicated when Debord claims that:

As long as certain pages are interpolated here and there, the overall meaning may appear just as secret clauses have very often been added to whatever treaties may openly stipulate; just as some chemical agents only reveal their hidden properties when they are combined with others (Debord 1988, *Comments*).

Pages interpolated here and there, books even. Interpolate? Meaning to insert words, especially to give false impressions as to its date. Debord is not simply claiming the spectacle started in any set period. He is casting a doubt, a negative doubt that seems to have diverted attention away from Debord's *ideas*. While the search continues for the spectacle, its origins, the relation the spectacle generates remains mythical and abstract because this search fails to understand the historical process I have indicated. The reality of the spectacle is given over to all those who prefer to describe and mythologize it instead and in doing so miss its revolutionary, critical language. The very fact that, according to Hussey (2002) Debord "was...obsessed with the notion of the 'mass secret', a piece of falsified information whose patent falsity was no bar to its effectiveness" (Hussey 2002, p195) is further testament to the codes, the hidden properties, in SOTS. Whether SOTS is right or not, there are codes and not only are these contained within the

structure but also, these very same codes lead the reader to precisely the point expected if this book is not historically understood. This point is no more than a partial and non-historical understanding of human history and, in this case, remains profoundly spectacular.

Debord is not attempting to find a new and more perversely organised mode of exploitation, the spectacle, as a twentieth century experiment or an exhibit with which to present his own analysis. SOTS is not simply a “playbook in the power struggles in the Sorbonne in May 1968” (Bracken 1997, p.156). This would have been far too easy to interpret and thus recuperate by those whom Debord was most scornful of. Reasoning about history was equally reasoning about power (SS # 134). For SOTS to openly contest such power is blatantly not the case. That is, those who seek spectacle recognition to join the cause and rid Debord of his potency; those who seek the attention of the spectacle, those ‘theorists’, ‘sociologists’, and other ‘specialists’ who have failed to take account of the *true* development of the spectacle also remain tied to a profoundly unhistorical analysis. While they remain tied to understanding the content, the mystical materiality of the commodity spectacle they exist only to confirm the only official means of critique in the first place.

In the same turn however, this same process, this redirection of historical critique, forces these thinkers to lose the language with which to understand the epoch, which has been rendered impotent and descriptive while it remains commodity driven. Hence, not only have these theorists lost the critical language of historical struggle, they have also lost the historical critique contained within

SOTS. The concepts contained within it, time and space, never stop to locate solid facts or moments but instead maintain its material movement regardless of interpretation. More accurately, time and space have not failed to apprehend the material developments of the world. Instead, it is revolutionary theory and practice, which has failed to apprehend universal, epochal possibility.

There is one clear aim that appears within SOTS that also signals its power. Its aim is to relay its meaning whereby its *potential* power is to be found in its historical analysis of social relations, its developing language of historical change that challenges the power of the spectacle and not from the spectacles' own concepts and ideas. SOTS challenges the spectacle from the core of its origin, from social contestation and the struggles of history. Debord was attempting to capture and re-invigorate the historical importance that the chronological medium of writing had as a vehicle for social critique in a period of time when writing, film and the advent of 'mass' communication was signalling a particular reduction of real communication. This has direct implications for understanding SOTS because he was directing SOTS historically in order to capture the essence of revolutionary practice. Furthermore, due to the art of writing becoming subject to the slow dismantling of the developing forms of media communication, the same that Crary pointed toward, Debord was using this form to conceal his structure of SOTS as a situationist practice. This can only be critically experienced, critically understood, once practiced and found within the constructed situation and the *Dérive*. Once understood in this way, Debord feels that the reader will, at the

same time, discover the essence of the spectacular of social mediation and organisation. By doing this, he sought to avoid recuperation.

This led Debord to admit:

that others who later published new books on the same subject demonstrated that it was quite possible to say less. All they had to do was to replace the totality and its movement by a single static detail on the surface of the phenomenon, with each author demonstrating his originality by choosing a different and all the less disturbing one. No one wanted to taint the scientific modesty of his personal interpretation by interposing reckless historical judgments (Debord 1988, *Comments*).

The reason why Debord is able to assert that those who wrote after him wrote less is down to one very important factor, these all attempted to realise the spectacle from its appearance, its date, 1927 and not its history which was very quickly abstracting itself from the reality of the history of the struggle for the technological, material and human geography of history.

This is why, as a strategist, Debord indicates his use of decoys by proclaiming that “[r]eaders will encounter certain decoys, like the hallmark of the era” (Debord 1988, *Comments*). in which each decoy acts as a diversion away from the potency of the critical aspect of the spectacle whereby only those most dedicated to the spectacle’s downfall will access the truth of the spectacle which cannot be partial but has to include both the history of humanity and the pseudo history that is unfolding. It is a critical search for meaning that does not stop at what is presented but attempts to negate all that is present in order to unveil the pseudo reality of spectacular relations.

It is with this language of specialisation that we find other, more destructive processes because these specialisations have themselves emerged and found their *legitimacy* from a base of abstract and partial truths:

The society which rests on modern industry is not accidentally or superficially spectacular, it is fundamentally *specialist*. In the spectacle, which is the image of the ruling economy, the goal is nothing, development everything. The spectacle aims at nothing other than itself (*SS# 14*).

Thus, such specialisations can do no more than specialise partial truths that themselves become irrefutable epistemological truths. Debord argues it like this. The “specialization of images of the world is completed in the world of the autonomous image, where the liar has lied to himself. The spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement of the non-living” (*SS# 2*).

This is played out:

Within the specialized thought of the spectacular system, [in which] a new division of tasks takes place to the extent that the improvement of this system itself poses new problems: on one hand, modern sociology which studies separation by means of the conceptual and material instruments of separation itself, undertakes the spectacular critique of the spectacle (*SS# 196*).

Debord is in fact criticising those specialists, sociologists and scientists, who have taken the imperfect tools of the logic of confrontation and specialised these into ‘real’ ‘existing’ tools with a *specific* nature and direction. By searching for the spectacle as a thing in itself, failing to recognise its form and its content as an organisation, a historical relation, then so too the reality to the content in the forms that are specifically endorsed by the developing spectacular. These

developments are the factors inaugurated that seek to detail and rework the problems that develop within the spectacle of social development in which the specific becomes the source of an infinity of improvements based on abstractions, the ever expanding perfection of the commodity form:

The loss of quality so evident at all levels of spectacular language, from the objects it praises to the behaviour it regulates, merely translates the fundamental traits of the real production which brushes reality aside: the commodity-form is through and through equal to itself, the category of the quantitative. The quantitative is what the commodity-form develops, and it can develop only within the quantitative (*SS# 38*).

These specialists have succeeded in perfecting a system that, in order to change, has to remain imperfect for how can perfection be altered unless newer forms of perfection are generated. The perfection of each appearance is rendered obsolete with the appearance of the next set of technological perfections. The reflective process of technological development is an abstract realm that succeeds in defining human relations into a realm of abstract possibility. Each appearance arrives with its own 'scientific baggage' proclaiming its own social justification in its role as a living tool. This is quite important because these specialists take up a critique of this perfect system while, in the same breath, "modern sociology undertakes a spectacular critique of the spectacle, studying separation with the sole aid of separation's own conceptual and material tools" (*ibid*). According to Debord, they simply intensify separation. By becoming the very source of what they critique, these forms of critique exist only to create other perfect forms of relations premised on commodity relations, they remain descriptive alone.

The search for the irrefutable source of the spectacle is no different from those who specialise in its search with tools and spectacular direction with terms of the specialisation of perfection. This completely misses the true historical and structural form whereby;

the viewpoint of scientific observation could overlook the role of history in the economy (the global process which modifies its own basic scientific preconditions) is shown by the vanity of those socialist calculations which thought they had established the exact periodicity of crises (ibid).

There is something important here also because there is certainly at least one area that Debord has distanced himself away from Marx. This distance is to be found in the implications this type of analysis is referring to, because those who have been responsible for organising social meaning and the material development of human society have consistently and persistently maintained the mantle of control. Each and every moment of 'revolutionary' action has found itself being represented by an editorial elite who, rather than relaying revolutionary language, create an external definition outside of the very class who has the ability to understand revolution. Historically, as we have seen, the developing epoch does so from within the crisis of cyclical time. However, this time no longer exists in its reality and is, as a result, reconstructed.

Each successive stage of human development has been a movement in which those who organise equally access the pleasures and experiences of a developed form of technological, creative survival. Thus, those who are organised end up

playing catch up each time whereby their search is to realise the promises of the epoch in tune with the translations of that epoch. Religion or myth had, of course, maintained this search by explaining this in particular ways. Not certain wrongs or rights, not false or as a system of lies. Instead, these were partial truths from partial experience.

With capitalism, and this is also the development of the spectacle relation, the abilities of the epoch are directed through the abilities of the commodity relation and are therefore already subject to idealisation because these relations are premised on the abstraction of certain aspects of the process by the exchange mechanisms of profit and exchange. The search for the abilities of the epoch is therefore ever more abstracted once premised on something already abstract. The important point to raise here rests with the role that the historical classes have in uniting the separations performed between material goods and the abilities of an epoch to produce. That is, with their collapse into cyclical time, within this historical potlatch, these classes reunite history and thus, bring both technology and material to conscious awareness. The use of all power has resided outside of the producing classes and in this sense has always been separate. Thus:

All separate power has been spectacular, but the adherence of all to an immobile image only signified the common acceptance of an imaginary prolongation of the poverty of real social activity, still largely felt as a unitary condition. The modern spectacle, on the contrary, expresses what society can do, but in this expression, the *permitted* is absolutely opposed to the *possible*. The spectacle is the preservation of unconsciousness within the practical change of the conditions of existence. It is its own product, and it has made its own rules: it is a pseudo-sacred entity. It shows what it *is*: separate power developing in itself, in the growth of productivity by means of the incessant refinement of the division of labor into a

parcellization of gestures which are then dominated by the independent movement of machines; and working for an ever-expanding market. All community and all critical sense are dissolved during this movement in which the forces that could grow by separating are not yet *reunited* (SS# 25).

This is no more than a reiteration of what has proceeded. However, the difference here is in Debord's claim that "All community and all critical sense are dissolved during this movement in which the forces that could grow by separating are not yet *reunited*" (ibid). What he is to mean by this is the essence of historical separation between organised and organisers, and the locus of separate power has always been a shared illusion. The contemplation and adherence to an immobile image (God) meant that the whole were as much part of the spectacle of the separate power that existed with God that reflected the poverty of the potentials of real social life. The spectacle is the opposite because it reflects what society can do but this creative potential is strictly prohibited other than that which it sanctions via commodified relations. Thus, the forces that have separated in history, the separations that made way for the spectacle, have to reunite in order to grow, once again, in contradiction to the acclaimed hierarchy of power. It is again the science of struggle.

This is not in any way claiming that the many technological developments that now exist be destroyed. Nor is it claiming that social struggle will end in some utopian Garden of Eden. It is instead a claim that the tools of technology, their redefined abilities, and their *use* be reclaimed and united with the only base that can generate a universal, creative interpretation of its social potential to relieve total survival, the dominated classes. Their organisation, their externalisation of

power will not be premised on the historic relation between owners and owned. The mediation of social technology will be undertaken by the whole for the whole.

The forms of enslaved thought that support the spectacle are no more than an apologetic for the system that has separated itself from the realities of the historical unity of mutual survival, although shrouded in image, of thought and practice. Therefore, it would appear that while language is a significant factor in the ways the epoch is justified, it is first important to understand how the language between true and false, technology and the way in which this influences material needs, real and illusory, itself separated and became two sides to one problem, human emancipation from the rigours of material survival. Technological possibility is not reflected in its true potential but only its commodified potential and hence, maintains an illusory, universal potential because the commodity only masks and *mediates* true, revolutionary change in commodity terms alone. This leaves the:

bourgeoisie [to] renounce all historical life which is not reduced to the economic history of things, and would like to 'be condemned to the same political nothingness as other classes'. Here the socio-political foundations of the modern spectacle are already established, negatively defining the proletariat as *the only pretender to historical existence* (SS# 87).

The bourgeoisie, by renouncing the politics of survival, equally renounce the objective history of the economic development of production and in turn reduce their base of existence in the process. All this seems to suggest that Debord does

give the spectacle a history and does indeed, therefore, give it a form or genealogy. If this is the case then the spectacular critique of the spectacle:

is not only late but, even worse, seeks 'attention' on the *same level*, [which means that these same theorists] inevitably stick to vain generalities or hypocritical regrets; just as futile as the clowns who parade their well-mannered disillusion in newspapers (Debord 1988, *Comments*, emphasis added).

Crary (1989) may just well be one of those sticking to vain generalities and thus failing to take account of the development of the spectacle when he attempts to articulate, understand or worse interpret the spectacle in the ways we saw above, from the spectacle itself. Crary states that:

A striking feature of Debord's book [SOTS] was the absence of any kind of historical genealogy of the spectacle, and that absence may have contributed to the sense of the spectacle as having appeared full blown out of the blue (Crary 2002, p.456).

I believe that for Crary to claim that there is no sense of genealogy, means he has read SOTS in a way that misses its historical analysis. If he had read SOTS, structurally of course, then not only would he recognise that there cannot be a general spectacle without a general history to support it nor can there be a simple genealogy to the spectacle on its own because this would mean placing history as secondary to the spectacle and hence back into the linear scheme Debord accuses distorted marxists and hence Marxism of. The spectacle is both the reflection of its own rise and the explanation of this rise is found not by grinding its meaning in fact as seen with the economic science of marxism, in the form of spectacular preciseness, but instead in recognising its meaning as its illusion which can only ever remain general if it is to find any form of internal change. Facts do not

change only interpretations presented as the fact. By developing history, the spectacle is glaringly obvious as a generalisation of fact.

Developing a genealogy, a precise form of movement, would also mean that history was one that aspired to detail the spectacle, almost structuring this history to suit the movement and explanations of the spectacle rather than the real relations and actions that were occurring which emerged as spectacular. This would only ever remain spectacular because the whole of history would appear as the very thing that the spectacle offers, the object alone as definition and recognition of the sovereign subject.

The positive acceptance of prevailing concepts and images that is termed the spectacle, rather than the negative confrontation called for, in fact echoes the very fluidity of the laws and rules that are explicitly entangled within modes of social change. Spectacular concepts and images, the relations that reveal themselves as human relations but understood through the commodity relation, results in the commodity emerging as the *specific* realm of social interaction, and are *given* as the only necessary positive outcomes of human relations, of human activity, they are given a positive light. The revolution in the commodity relation is the pseudo *sceptical* search or the pseudo negative anxiety, that questions the meanings and images that are given but only from a platform that is already steeped in image and metaphysics, the commodity as both form and content. It is pure survival reflecting both the bourgeoisies and proletariats anxieties both in terms of accumulative and qualitative experiences. Thus, the stage of complete abstraction is set where the three dimensional history, the combined struggle to realise human

anxieties, falls into a world in which the machinery of the commodity spectacle maintains a strict conflict between its worldview and its audience who contest this worldview armed with the tools provided by the spectacle. It is two-dimensional at best.

The platform that avoids this image still remains historical and this we find when in thesis 87 of SOTS, which details the manner in which Debord believed Marx had been *reduced* to an economic science that allowed the bourgeoisie to “renounce all historical life which is not reduced to the economic history of things” (SS# 87). Debord also signalled that this was equally the “*socio-political* foundations of the modern spectacle [which] are *already* (my emphasis) established, negatively defining the proletariat as *the only pretender to historical life* (ibid).

The foundation to the spectacular was already in its development well before the turn of the twentieth century and this may be enough to convince those who are still searching for a genealogy, that one does not simply exist in specific form.

Crary is right when he points out that “For the term [the spectacle] to have any critical or practical efficacy depends, in part, on how one periodizes it---that is the spectacle will assume quite different meanings depending on how it is situated historically” (Crary 2002, p.456). Crary seems to allude to the relative, historical importance of the spectacle, and he does seem to suggest the need for historical analysis but only within the twentieth century. This we need to put right because analysis from the twentieth century alone can only remain within *the*

content and equally the *form* as we have seen, which simply speaks the language of the domination and slavery imposed by spectacular capitalism. To recover the thought of history, which is itself the movement of the whole social mass, to even remotely understand the spectacle, there is a need to recognise the totality of both the thought and the *practice of* history up to and including the conclusion, Marx. The spectacle is an additional aspect to this conclusion taken not only from Marx but also from the spectacle itself. It is only this process that will allow the spectacle to be realised in its own totality in which:

The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as all of society, as part of society, and as *instrument of unification*. As a part of society it is specifically the sector, which concentrates all gazing and all consciousness. Due to the very fact that this sector is *separate*, it is the common ground of the deceived gaze and of false consciousness, and the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of generalized separation (SS# 3).

I would contend then that a genealogy of the spectacle does exist but that it is in the general conclusion that has been taken from Debord's development of time and history. His, however, is a general unity that is not the spectacle as it may seem because this, as a critique, lies elsewhere. And this we will find in his negative anxiety which has been reproduced in the struggle for survival not for materials to live, but instead a life that searches for the materials already given as life. The proletariat who have been negatively defined as the only pretenders to history, find this negative search, this continual search for meaning that constantly reproduces higher forms of pseudo rationality, the search for knowledge, is the spectacle's own life line.

Throughout, Debord is attempting to recreate not the spectacle as a critique on its own but instead the spectacle as a philosophical and conceptual understanding that can lead, as a tool, to the sceptical individual who refuses to take the knowledge given by the spectacle, including the concept itself, the content as form, as the truth of history and human relations. A complete and utter refusal to accept any part of spectacular development in order to re-ignite the truth of the historical struggle between the specific and the general, activity and the manifestation this develops into a generalised economic sector for the whole.

The spectacle's Genealogy in fact *starts* with history as the locus of spectacle power, spectacle religion and the spectacle of separation. If this is not enough then it can be no clearer than when Debord claims that "all separate power has been spectacular (*SS# 25*) and history is none other than a history of separate power. Of course, this being the very first chapter of *SOTS*, can equally mean that he is directing the reader to the modern spectacle. But this has to be refuted because "by its own [spectacle] development, which *no one* took the trouble to investigate, it has since shown with some astonishing achievements that it was effectively just what I said it was" (Debord 1988, *Comments* emphasis added). Even in 1988, Debord was complaining that no-one had spent the time to investigate the origins of the spectacle, and knowing that the pages of comments were another means through which to lay some direction, he is hardly likely to detail its origin there, which is where we find his reference to 1927.

Furthermore, and this is crucial, if no one has investigated the spectacle since *SOTS*, then the only one form of investigation that still exists must still be in

SOTS itself. In other words, if Debord, as late as the 1980's and early 90's, felt that *no-one* had taken the time to reveal the origins of the spectacle, this leaves only one question; has anyone since. I believe not because the spectacle still encourages an almost mystical and metaphysical quality that while this remains a part of the spectacle, its concrete assimilation of social relations as a commodity relation is still being missed historically. In other words, while the spectacle remains shrouded in a form of religious worship, the very real human relationship is itself being subverted.

This discussion of the spectacle and its origins remain important even if only to show the way in which Debord developed this in his SOTS. There are important clues that direct each reader into a contextual world whereby, these findings, these discoveries of social organisation remain Debord's goal. In this respect, his text offers a platform from which to start a critical analysis of history, of the commodity relation and equally, the role of the spectacle in its organising principles. Debord's analysis of the spectacle, then, was never one that aspired to a completed work. His text does not allow for this because, as his theory suggests, his aim was to develop an endless critique, and endless struggle that had to be worked upon, developed, criticised in which meaning could be struggled and fought for. No longer descriptive but a critical perspective that seeks to enliven social existence in order to live the epoch. It is for this reason that I have chosen to present an understanding of Debord's spectacle but from within SOTS itself and therefore, with the context of SOTS in mind. That is, its history

and its contemporary analysis of modern social organisation. This then that now leads me to conclude my thesis.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I hope to have demonstrated that for all the attention that Debord and the situationists variously achieve, there is little doubt that there are a number of interesting areas of their work that still remain open to careful but critical analysis. While their avant-garde subversion and their playful refusal to participate in 'mainstream' society seems to remain the significant focal point from which to understand their practical activities, there is still, nonetheless, a significant role for situationist theory in the political and philosophical realms of modern critical theory. However, as we have seen, most of what the situationists can achieve in the theoretical and practical realms of social agitation, rather than gaining the momentum that they believed their theories were capable of, has instead been dissipated and consigned to a realm in which its playfulness, its

categorical refusal to accept the spectacle of modern social relations, still remains the only reflection of their social agitation.

A major consequence of the lack of critical attention that this encourages is the maintenance of a separation between theory and practice that the situationists had always attempted to avoid. The distance between their ideas of social change and the practices this inspired move ever further into a realm of evangelical post-situationism who, as a fragmented and self proclaimed revolutionary movement, premised on the originality of a programme of complete social change, struggle to recognise not only their own critical theory as situationist. They seem to struggle too with the reality and intricacies of Debord's text. More often, SOTS is left to the sidelines of critical debate in favour of the more grandiose and thus recognisable forms of spectacular situationist activity. So long as this separation between Debord's SOTS and situationist practice continues to advance, then so too will the collective situationists remain as mystical, even mythical icons of the avant-garde world.

While this is so, that is, while the situationists are maintained within this mystical aura, then their critical perspectives remain imbued within the entire complex of language, tactics and style that is part of and significantly makes up, the equally mystical spectacle relation. This failure to actualise the meaning to spectacular relations remains as a significant yet ongoing failure to recognise the historical mechanisms that Debord left within his work to critically apprehend the language, tactics and the historical role of commodity mediation. This being the case, Debord's assertion that his analysis of the spectacle represented the

culmination of historical situations and the totality of situationist theory and practice can only remain misunderstood.

Towards recognising this misunderstanding, there is little doubt that the recuperation of the critical aspect of the concept of the spectacle is far more advanced than either Debord or the situationists had anticipated. However, Debord's writing is not only purposeful towards recognising that this was always a possibility. It is also very deliberate whereby he expresses clearly the intensity he holds, with the situationists, against this spectacle relation. His text, therefore, while espousing possibilities of social change, means also that the concept of the spectacle has to remain critical and it is to this aim that I have directed this thesis. SOTS does not explain how to develop the revolutionary potential of the proletariat but instead brings the reader to the recognition that this revolutionary insurrection is possible. Without the intensity of this critical aspect of the spectacle that the situationists develop, any analysis of Debord's SOTS, any development of a concept of the spectacle, can only maintain a negation of its originality which loses its historical reference point.

It is clear from what I argue, that the situationists did claim to foresee some of these forms of recuperation and in this sense, they were quick to form practices and theories through which to slow or control this process. They argued consistently that recuperation was not simply a contemporary process that evolved within spectacular relations. Recuperation has a historic role in the diversion of innovative and revolutionary consciousness but never has history witnessed forms of recuperation that have almost negated the total, true possibilities of human life

that has rendered social change to the whims of the corporate commodity. The movement of the commodity as the only technological process has taken the process of the recuperation of human social action beyond all previous boundaries.

With the advanced spectacularisation of situationist ideas and theories, the recuperating forces of the spectacle has also played its part in the spectacularisation of Debord's SOTS. However, my thesis, by demonstrating both a structure and historical, practical meaning to Debord's SOTS, goes some way towards recapturing some of the critical essence of situationist theory and practice. While it still remains the case that there are few areas within situationist works that remain through which a complete and untainted account of situationist practice and theory is *allowed* to emerge, I am claiming that an exception is due for the situationist text. It is for this reason that Debord's text remains a significant point of reference because it remains as one way within which to rediscover the revolutionary content that the situationists developed and this can be achieved through the reading I have suggested. It is then that such a reading can be seen as a means through which to move away from the all-enveloping spectacle, to develop and re-introduce Debord's text to critical analysis and in the process, develop a critical position against all that exists as spectacular.

I have identified a number of authors who have genuinely attempted to maintain and enliven situationist theory with the essence of its original project, that of an all-encompassing critical theory. This, I have shown, with the numerous similarities and significant differences between what Knabb understands of concepts of the state. The significant weakness in the proposals that the likes of

Knabb offers on situationist theory, however, remains with the reluctance to study Debord's SOTS in the way I have suggested. While Debord's text continues to attract attention as some innocuous little text that is considered to be quite dry, initially uninspiring but in any case quite easy to read, then the culmination of situationist theory and practice that SOTS contains will only ever remain tied to non historical and fundamentally uncritical misconceptions. This only steeps the effort that Debord demanded of the reader into translations that are more mediocre rather than the theoretical and practical complexity of the text itself.

I have argued against misconceiving Debord's text in this way and in doing so, I have made a number of what will prove to be significant claims. This is evident within the centrality of my thesis, which shows that the fundamental difference between my analysis and that which exists generally, is that I have attempted to contextualise the situationist project, that of practical and theoretical agitation within capitalist society, by placing this within an intricate contextual and historical analysis of human relations contained in SOTS. By approaching Debord's text in this way, I would suggest that I have benefited and therefore been able to articulate situationist theory in ways that avoids certain aspects of recuperation. This reading has emerged from the heart of a text that inherited the historical culmination of both situationist theory *and* practice.

We are still left with important questions though. Primarily, this centres on the question of where does my analysis of SOTS leave us in terms of contextualising Debord and the critical concept of the spectacle? How, for instance, does my analysis move Debord beyond that of the situationists and, as a result, their

understanding of the processes of social, revolutionary change? Furthermore, to what extent can my thesis maintain the strong links that Debord maintained with theory, practice and ultimately, how these can stay with the situationists as the highest point of resistance to forms of recuperation? And probably the more fundamental question; can Debord's text resist the recuperating forces of the spectacle and if so, can it, in its turn, indicate the possibilities for a practical, situationist analysis of both theory and practice?

I have argued that SOTS is able to achieve this and it does so by detailing the historical justification to processes such as recuperation, in recognising and addressing separation as the means with which to transgress the separating forces of the spectacle relation. SOTS places us in a better position to understand the essence and the reasons for the existence of these practices and how they may be adapted in a post-situationist analysis of the spectacle. That is, I would suggest that my thesis has succeeded in bringing Debord into a realm that is rarely approached in as much as the influences to his theory and his understanding of practice remain as one and the same. They remain to be *discovered* within his text but only as a unity of both whereby its historical analysis is pivotal to all this.

All discussions or analysis of the situationists and in particular Debord, of theory and of practice, must remain, then, committed to this interrelated approach and in doing so, remain tied to a fuller understanding of what Debord really attempted with his text. Despite the fact that Debord has found himself being represented in forms that have almost rendered him to the idle role of cultural

icon or as a writer of elegance, it is still his theory of history, of social change and the manner in which practice can be apprehended in this that should remain of interest, because it may be the only aspect of his theory that remains beyond recuperation. History is central to this and to SOTS.

From History to Revolution

Evidently, Debord had a firm but straightforward understanding of the need for both individuals and the collective group of learning the lessons from the past. Debord did not make the mistake of maintaining a romantic, nostalgic understanding of the historical path of human development and in this sense, Debord realised that historical activity had always been subject to mediated, recuperated actions. Debord was undoubtedly aware that social history had been subjected to the constructive processes of relations between owners and owned and in this sense, history was itself some way towards being constructed. However, this construction relied on the intricate, but as Debord claims, truthful reflections of the relation between owner, owned and the technological processes that *objectively defined both*.

An analysis of history remains a fundamental feature of Debord's text, then, because it is by understanding history that allows readers to find the means through which Debord structures and details what remains to be done with his text. By locating history in this way, the reader can actively and analytically achieve an understanding of the spectacle but from the foundations of a history of struggle. In his committed approach to understanding the constituent factors of

historical social change, we have been able to evidence the ways in which Debord detailed history and how historical processes formed the irreducible impetus for social change for both the owned and owners of history. The actions of the situationists, as they claim, were irrevocably tied to this historical analysis and for this reason, indeed, this reason alone, Debord centred history both theoretically and practically within SOTS.

By placing history at the exact centre of his text, and by claiming it is the starting point for understanding and contextualising the spectacle of the modern world, Debord fully intends that the reader encompass and retrace the historical steps of theory and practice. Once this is understood, once the route of history and the practices that characterise history are unmasked, the practice of the constructed situation reveals its historical authority by placing itself as a development that is completely reliant on the unity of the technological, environmental and material developments of history. It is a situationist attempt to contest the possible against the allowed and thus, reflect the true nature of technological and material history. It is a definition in which the contestation between two rival classes of history once again contest their respective meanings until the meaning of the epoch is itself surrendered to the only reality of its era, translations of technological and material development.

This we have witnessed with my explanations of time and space and the impact this has had on concepts of the living, of time and the spatial realm within which to live the technological developments of human history. Through discovering the essence of the conflicts of these historical epochs, the differing

historical situations that emerged as a result, Debord attempts to transcend the glare of spectacular relations. He attempts this by identifying the inextricable unity of time and space that can only be fully explained and *lived* within the material and technological diversity of any one social form of organisation. Any other unity that is not premised on this total diversity, only works for that form of social organisation which seeks to describe, use and maintain a surplus of lived time.

This leads me to suggest that we must still resist idolising Debord. Furthermore, to study him seriously we must not isolate him as a theorist, or as a philosopher so that we can then, as readers of Debord's text, recognise the complexity of his work as an edification upon which to work and analyse the spectacle relation. Too often, it is Debord, the biography, or Debord the artist rather than Debord the revolutionary situationist. While it may be true that there is a developing interest in Debord's theories, with a greater influx of texts and translations of Debord's work, these we find are *reduced* to an academic mainstream whereby the history of cultural movement such as the Letterists or Surrealism ends up as an annexed form of 'situationism' and by implication an annexed Debord.

If not this, then we are left to the practices that the situationists developed in the forms of the *dérive*, *detournement* or urbanism. While these are intrinsic to the situationists and hence to Debord, these are nonetheless aspects, parts of a total theory that need to be understood as such. Debord was clearly attempting to identify processes in which the language of revolution, the act of revolution and

the understanding of the revolutionary process was not only being reduced to the systems that sought their destruction. The spectacular language of modern society was reducing the very nature of history and human unity to systems of abstract and external entities, to the commodity relation *as history*.

My thesis concludes, therefore, that SOTS is not only a book of theory, it remains also as an enduring example of the theories of history and of revolution. Thus, as we saw, when those searching for the meaning to the spectacle, indeed the spectacle's genealogy and onset of the commodity relation, this is almost always conducted from SOTS and through SOTS without realising that SOTS is no more than an indication, a conceptual platform that needs a historical and contemporary context in order to critically develop and understand the meaning to the spectacle from the spectacle itself.

What must be avoided, I want to suggest, is to equate what SOTS is claiming with some nihilistic or anarchistic revolution. This must be avoided because Debord did seriously believe that with a book of theory, SOTS, revolutionaries could understand the history of social struggle and the consequences this has towards social change and affect this against the spectacle. He was advocating the apprehension of all that existed free from ideological restraint. What he sought was a theory, which practiced by truthful readers of his text, by *situationists*, could subsequently develop a system in which the meaning, the movement and the unity of time and space, the freedom that had historically been created by this interaction, be lived by all and for all. The survival imperative in the spectacle of technology and commerce, as a world of labour, only succeeds in enforcing a

rationale that uses this survival imperative, ideologically enforced, as a justification for wage labour. It is an alibi that was forged by the only two major powers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the bourgeoisie and the representation of the proletariat and as subject, who finally found their wishes and dreams, their leaders and forces, in the spectacle. This remains the single most important factor, I have argued, for an analysis of the state because it is this, this historical distinction of separate powers, that Debord intends the reader to actualise within a development of their historical understanding of the spectacle

By analysing SOTS in its structure as well as in its language, there are now more questions that can be asked of not only Debord but of capitalist and spectacular society that may penetrate deeper than maybe first realised. Is the human race generating a system that it is also fighting against? While the spectacle maintains the abstract system of mediated living, real meaning to social existence remains a fundamental, human search. Therefore, does the impact of global capitalism represent a complete commodification of individuals and groups leaving the unity with the external and natural world ever more subject to abstract interpretations and representations? Also does this truly mean, as Debord suggested, that the more that is written the less that is said simply because each succession is the result of an abstraction because each is attempting to forge meaning as an end in itself from an abstract beginning, the commodity relation? Only time and persistent analysis may reveal this.

For this reason, Debord and the situationist are antagonistic to the label of specialisation, a label that they accused marxists of, because each specialist who

attempts to identify the *factual existence* of the spectacle from situationist theory, from meanings that are outside the words in Debord's book, miss the point that it is meaning itself within SOTS that is still moving. In other words, to use just the content, the language and the analysis and interpret it against the familiar, descriptive background of capitalism without first understanding its critical origin, means that the content of SOTS becomes yet another descriptive form of the spectacle relation because it becomes recognisable only to the spectacle. Thus, each successive attempt leads one to write from the abstraction and not the critical but concrete platform of historical relations. This is the prime reason for suggesting the genealogy of the spectacle. Not as some defined movement but instead as a relation, like the relation between survival and production, the spectacle as survival, as the totality, which is increasingly becoming edified and is moving almost beyond reproach. Recognising the genealogy of the spectacle is not so much recognising its precise movement but instead its relation to the world and the human society it is responsible for defining and organising.

While I have been concerned to develop the distinctions and contradictions within Debord's text and the situationists in general, it is, nonetheless, a re-reading of Debord's SOTS that I have undertaken. I would hope that I have been able to show clearly that Debord does offer a system of analysis that remains remarkable simply because it has avoided any clear, critical analysis. *Describing* certain aspects of Debord's text does little else than fuel an already over descriptive system of social discourse. SOTS is in need of the critical analysis that I have provided because it is only by critically analysing social organisation

is it that Debord believes that an enlargement of social existence is possible. It is not a critical description of the commodity relation but instead a critical, practical move that attempts to go beyond that relation.

I am not suggesting that I have definitively identified Debord's scheme. Nor am I claiming that this thesis is all that is needed towards a complete understanding of Debord's SOTS. Instead, I have claimed that there remains a clear need to analyse Debord in terms that he is more familiar with, situationist terms, and in doing so, there appears to be a wider possibility for understanding his text. Furthermore, I have attempted to direct the reader to an understanding of SOTS that recognises its critical mode exists in order to interpret the text while expanding knowledge of our social system. It still remains, nevertheless, for each reader to access and understand these meanings within the wider context of the spectacle whereby each reader must refuse to be directed other than with and through the text. It is a reader's own personal journey that earmarks significant chapters of social history along the way.

Debord is attempting to encourage the reader to efficaciously pick up from SOTS where he left it. That is, he is asking for his work to be used and developed critically but in a way that forces one to explore and discover its critical meaning within an understanding of situationist practice. I am not claiming some nostalgic insight here. Instead, I have shown how writers like Bracken fail to harness the practical reading of Debord's SOTS not because of any lack of interest or ability but instead a failure to truly account, for instance, why history still rests in the dead centre of SOTS. To start from this point, is equally, I have

claimed, to start from the principles of the *dérive*. That is, to embark on a stroll, a drift through the terrain of struggle that can only find its meaning once some of the key, *situational* factors within that terrain are understood. These I have identified within the principles of the constructed situations and the *dérive*.

This is why I have embarked on a critical re-reading of the situationists as a route to accessing Debord's text and therefore, I would hope that my thesis goes some way in contributing towards the tools with which to experience Debord's lessons. While SOTS remains tied to descriptions and explanations, the practical, experiential side to his historical analysis remains clouded and obscure. In this role, SOTS is experiential and therefore remains to be explored via the *dérive* and towards a recontextualised construction of situations, rather than have these activities explained. Experiences and critical apprehension of forms of social change, if not contextualised within a realm that seeks complete social change, premised on the combination of theory and practice, can only remain "like a series of instructions about swimming: interesting to the non-swimmer but unable to express the wetness of water" (Plant 1992, p.1). Debord did not give instructions, he gave instead a system of investigation with many differing opportunities to be discovered and it is this that draws my thesis to a conclusion.

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