

---

# WHAT THE SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL COULD HAVE BEEN

Peter Laugesen

**"Jamais je ne travaillerai"**  
Rimbaud

**1**

The very fact that Rimbaud said what Debord, far later, boasted so much about having said...

**2**

I've never understood that much of the book, his big bestseller... obviously that it should be so, or would be so if the proletariat and the working class... but wasn't Aimé Césaire right when he said in the nineteen forties that myth is the only truth, and today it only exists in poetry?

**3**

There were many of us who greatly appreciated Gilles Ivain's "Formulary for a New Urbanism", even though we didn't quite grasp what urbanism is, but wasn't it because we had read Rimbaud, and the text was the same, the same mood of hopeless melancholy, the same gentle mist of possible change?

**4**

Why was it reactionary crap when Françoise Hardy or The Beatles found ways of living with the society of the spectacle, ways that at least made sense as long as a single lasted?

**5**

I'm sitting on a tired afternoon in the middle of Paris, not far from where Guy Debord and Michèle Bernstein lived then on a fifth floor in Impasse Clairvaux... Arab toilet stalls on the landings and were there any windows at all...? Was it all red and black?

**6**

Now the cul-de-sac has been bulldozed away there, north of the Centre Pompidou. It's the response of the age to rebellion that they've put the temple of art right where it should be thrown into the street and realized.

**7**

Ivan Chtcheglov might have said something about it, but he is dead, and I've only met him on a strange Youtube clip where, deeply melancholy and inebriated, he reads something or other very sad, and no one has said where the clip is from.

**8**

It's as if he's talking to somebody about that hacienda that was never built anyway, and this someone or other just films him mercilessly.

**9**

It was a proclamation excommunicating Chaplin that split the group of Lettristes... everyone's beloved Charlot... Debord — says Jean-Michel Mension, one of the drunken petty-criminal existentialists who gathered then at Saint-Germain-des-Près and whom he called “the tribe” — was a sad guy with a dark view of the world.

**10**

The upshot then was that international, the Lettriste one, with Debord on the bridge, and in its periodical, which was called Potlatch, because it was for free like the elements in the Indian exchange of gifts whose system was described by the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, he instantly said goodbye not only to the old crowd, but also to his own comrades.

**11**

Isidore Goldstein alias Jean-Isidore Isou — morally retrograde individual with limited ambitions (Isou was the founder of Lettrisme). Moise Bismuth alias Maurice Lemaitre — extended infantilism, premature senility. Pomerans alias Gabriel Pomerand — a forger, a zero. Serge Berna — lack of intellectual consistency. Mension — pure decoration. Jean-Louis Brau — militaristic deviant. Ivan Chtcheglov — mythomania, interpretation mania, lack of revolutionary consciousness.

**12**

Salut les copains...

**13**

Rimbaud was real... Kerouac was real... but one was too real, because he had said it all before and better... The other was a direct competitor... who wanted to do the same with his endless mind movie... like Hausmann... the old Dada... no light on him... and luckily Schwitters had been forgotten over in England...

**14**

They were French, and they didn't see the rest of the world properly, but the radicality of their statements, also due to their Frenchness... the fact that the language had been primed for it... by Rimbaud, by Lautréamont, by Breton, by Artaud, by Céline... but forget them, nobody reads them, we've never heard of them... we come straight out of the black holes of film... its white noise... for me that was a revelation, even though I didn't grasp the deep seriousness behind the exclusion... and that it was a matter of course... and that I hadn't known it from the first day... hadn't read it in *Potlatch*...

## 15

In the publisher Allia's series of books about the Situationist International and especially its history, both Jean-Michel Mension and Ralph Rumney, the native and the foreigner, have had their say. So has the Belgian air force general Piet de Groof, who under the code name Walter Korun ran the Galerie Taptoe in Brussels, where strange things happened of the kind the central committee didn't quite control, as when Asger Jorn, Yves Klein and Ralph Rumney painted a picture together on a bender.

## 16

Everything they say gets narrowed down more and more around Debord... he's the one they're asked about in the ongoing trial that still hasn't culminated and in which there will presumably never be a judgement, because it's in fact already inherent in the beginning of the case... we're all sentenced to non-being in the spectacular-entertainment and mindless-consumer society, and Debord is guilty because he made himself a seer on the model of Rimbaud and saw it. After the obligatory long-lasting and thoroughly deliberate derangement of all the senses with drink and drugs and all sorts of *dérive* in the Everglades of the most wonderful of all cities, whose memories pale in Debord's film and on the pages of his books, which are all transcripts of the film.

**17**

And the marvelous Italian visual clown Pinot-Gallizio was involved at an early stage as a manufacturer of paintings cut off by the metre like ribbons and rugs in the fantastic primal department store Le Bon Marché, which is just around the corner from Debord's last Parisian dwelling in the Rue du Bac... and when he had been useful long enough he was given the sack with a treatise that was at the same time the catalogue text for the exhibition for which the Situationists could now take the credit and at the same time dismiss...

**18**

The star witness Michèle Bernstein has not yet been on the stand, although her testimony exists in the form of two novels, one in the manner of Robbe-Grillet, the other in that of Françoise Sagan, both of which describe the nightlife and wanderings through the urban landscape before everything was created. The judges are nobody and the jurors everybody... the defenders are idiots and the prosecutors are the yes-men of fake history.

**19**

You're older and everything has changed. You can write a song about it — or not. There's no plan to it, and the Situationists do actually exist. Not everyone has forgotten everything that happened yesterday.

**20**

Debord's "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency' Conditions of Organization and Action", suffers from grave deficiencies. It was a draft for the formation of the Situationist International in 1957, and in fact the document that gathered together the Lettristes, the old COBRA people and the lone English psychogeographer as well as a couple of Jorn's Italian friends. But Debord knew no other language than French, so, especially when it came to poetry, he was unable to take a stand. Poetry is unassailable, it can't be assaulted with spectacular weapons, because, low-key and high-frequency as it is, it cannot interest anyone in that field, since it is not entertaining, is only to a limited extent a commodity and does not pass the time but is it. And it speaks all languages, not just French.

**21**

But the workers, then, the working class? Actually the phenomenon was already then, around 1960, passé. Think about what the 16-year-old Rimbaud wrote about the blacksmith and the Sun King. But Debord also forgot, or never knew, that the worker, even in the industrial production of the everyday, which despite everything, is still that of most people, is not necessarily a slave. There is an aesthetic and an ethic of work that make it possible to feel delight and pride in a piece of work that is well done.

**22**

1957: Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*.  
1956: Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*.

**23**

September 2009 at the Jeu de Paume: The English photographer Martin Parr and other English photographers from the fifties in black and white and later in colour about what they are best at and about which Debord knew nothing: the loneliness of the long-distance runner on Saturday night and Sunday morning in a room at the top in this sporting life around the mineshaft, the small houses and proud hard poverty with black dust on their gums and bandy-legged children on their shoulders... I thought I saw Liz Taylor ...

**24**

Tous les garçons et les filles sing  
yé yé yé...

**25**

Rimbaud describes himself through Verlaine's eyes: "Je reconnaissais — sans craindre pour lui, — qu'il pouvait être un sérieux danger dans la société. — Il a peut-être des secrets pour changer la vie?"

The street child and urchin Rimbaud was quite clearly the model, and on the whole is central to later generations, although he himself apparently forgot what he had done; but anyway didn't they say — the Situationists — that they wanted to be partisans of oblivion?

**26**

The future was already the past, TV was already a baby crawling down death row, and Debord didn't know it, nor did Jorn... the mists over Indian country that Levi-Strauss stared into and saw the animals punching a hole in the sky and setting the rain free... lynx, coyote, bear ...

**27**

And Céline out in Meudon careering around in his furious subway train with no other stations than death, which had already happened before anything began, and Debord in those years when Paris was still Paris... when he was young, when we were young, when I was young and dammit old fool, Paris was Paris for me and Paris is still Paris and we were the new, rucksack-toting Dharma bums and Paris was our encounter with Africa, the other country ...

**28**

“Je serai un travailleur: c'est l'idée qui me retient, quand les colères folles me poussent vers la bataille de Paris, — ou tant de travailleurs meurent pourtant encore tandis que je vous écris! Travailler maintenant, jamais, je suis en grève,” says Rimbaud of the Paris Commune and goes on: “Il arrive à l'inconnu, puisqu'il a cultivé son ame, déjà riche, plus qu'aucun. Il arrive à l'inconnu, at quand, affolé, il finirait par perdre l'intelligence de ses visions, il les a vues. Qu'il crève dans son bondissement par les choses inouïes et innombrables: Viendront d'autres horribles travailleurs. Ils commenceront par les horizons ou l'autre s'est effasé.”



## 29

*In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, that is Debord's answer to everything, from start to finish. The avant-gardes have their time, and the luckiest thing that can happen to them is to have done what they were supposed to in a time that could have been theirs. "Too often have we seen such elite troops, after they have accomplished some valiant exploit, remain on hand to parade with their medals, and then turn against the cause they previously supported."

## 30

Just behind Rue du Bac 109 lies the Square des Missions Etrangères, a lovely garden with a rough, weathered bust of Chateaubriand in the middle of the flower bed in the entranceway. He died in the house on the other side of the street. I like to imagine Debord and Chateaubriand sitting on a bench there watching the children playing, and the medieval masonry that gnarls its way in ingenious, masterly fashion up what must have been Debord's back wall. They say nothing, for they have already said far too much, and soon the park will be closing for the night.

## 31

The night watchmen, one black and the other white, like the world-picture of the Situationists, turn the key in the lock.

## 32

Césaire: Mes mains en flammes!  
Filliou: Why not work?

September — October 2009