"THE SPECTACLE IS EVERYWHERE": TRACING THE SITUATIONIST LEGACY IN BRITISH PLAYWRITING SINCE 1968

In 2002, there was a landmark opportunity for the British public to revaluate the artwork produced in Paris during the late 1960s and to meditate on its legacy across visual cultures. The "Paris: Capital of the Arts (1900-1968)" exhibition at London's Royal Academy presented the found objects, torn posters and "readymade" compositions that characterized politically-engaged interventions before and during les événements *of May 1968.[1] In this motley collection, the ephemera and detritus of the everyday are recontextualized for the viewer in order to dislocate conventional ways of seeing. Although the exhibition made scant reference to them, it is the ideas of the Situationists that help explain how such art generates its effect. Stimulated in part by this exhibition and in part by the repeated references in British theatre historiography to 1968 as a "watershed" year, the first section of this article considers the legacy of the Situationist Guy Debord in relation to the British playwriting that emerged after 1968; it also identifies the fundamental tenets of Debord's critique. The latter section demonstrates that the specific frames of reference set out in Debord's* The Society of the Spectacle *can help illuminate aspects of so-called "In-Yer-Face" theatricality that came to prominence in the 1990s.*

Iain Duncan Smith yesterday accused the Prime Minister [Tony Blair] *of cowardice over his stance on the Euro. [. . .] Interviewed for* The Spectator *magazine, Mr Duncan Smith defended his own leadership style: "If what you want is charisma, go and find an actor."[2]*

I did a production of The Crucible *in Edinburgh in 1969. It was seen by a party of schoolboys whose class I later visited to discuss the play. About 25 years later, I met one of the boys who had been present, who talked of the impression that the play had made on him. He said it had woken him up to the latent tyranny of a repressive society and the dangers incurred in dissent, and it made him want to become an actor. Instead he became a politician: his name was Tony Blair. (Richard Eyre)[3]*

Introduction

It is curious to think of the sixteen-year-old Tony Blair having his social conscience stirred while watching the travails of John Proctor in his local repertory theatre. With the benefit of hindsight, it is even more curious that this modest epiphany triggered in the future architect of New Labour a fleeting aspiration to devote his life to acting. But it is altogether appropriate, and not a little ironic, that the young Blair's apparent equivocation about his career should transpire in the context of the late 1960s, when

analyses of political culture were attending incisively to its performative aspects. Predominant amongst these was the influential manifesto by the Situationist Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle* (*The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967), which, as part of its provocative dissection of consumer society, lambasted modern politicians as "stars of decision" – pseudo-celebrity by-products of an ascendant capitalist technocracy.[4] Indeed, as the adolescent Blair was undertaking his first formative musings on the seductive political potential of performance in the Autumn of 1969, a young and radical tranche of practitioners, Eyre included, was colonizing the structures of British theatre, having been inspired by the revolutionary activities in France the year before – and by Situationist strategies of dissent, in particular.

This article considers the impact of Debord's critique on British theatre practice in the aftermath of *les événements* of May 1968. It has been argued convincingly that Situationist-inspired playwriting emerged as a discrete theatrical methodology, especially in the work of Howard Brenton and Portable Theatre.[5] Yet the legacy of Situationism is at once more diffuse and arresting, and the revitalized scholarly interest in Debord's work is driven in part by an awareness of the veracity of his theoretical analysis in the context of a contemporary political *milieu* "obsessed," according to one theatre critic, "by spin doctors and the role of the media".[6] Brenton himself has argued recently that *The Society of the Spectacle* offers:

a very brilliant analysis, and it has a certain truth, particularly in the spin-doctored world of this tiny island. The spin-doctors are managing the spectacle very

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[4] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, translated by David Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Press, 1994). All subsequent page references included in parentheses refer to this edition. The focus on Debord's writing in this article inevitably marginalizes other Situationist activist-theoreticians but their contributions have been documented in detail in other recent critical studies. See Sadie Plant's *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge, 1992) which offers a history of the *International Situationniste* and an analysis of other Situationist writings; Graham White, "Direct Action, Dramatic Action: Theatre and Situationist Theory," *New Theatre Quarterly*, IX, 36 (November 1993), pp. 329-340, whose article focuses on the work of the Situationist Raoul Vaneigem, and Anthony William Mitchell, *Spectacles and Counter-Spectacles: A Study of the Search for Alternatives to Mass Communication in Contemporary British Theatre Since 1968* (unpublished PhD thesis: University of Bristol, 1976), which places Situationism in a broad historical frame.

[5] See, for example, D. Keith Peacock, *Radical Stages: Alternative History in Modern British Drama* (London: Greenwood Press, 1991), pp. 64-65; Anthony William Mitchell, *op.cit.*, p. 147.

[6] Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 236. For a recent revaluation of Debord's life, see Jappe, Anselm. *Guy Debord*. Translated by David Nicholson-Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

consciously these days, saying "There are certain cultural things you can think, and certain things you can't."[7]

Debord's manifesto amounts to a rapacious critique of performance as an element in the discourse of power but his theoretical framework is marshalled at every juncture to inform a template for the *praxis* of artistic dissent. Rather than focusing singularly on a historically-specific creed of British "Situationist playwriting", I emphasize, instead, that the ideas and practices outlined by Debord can be usefully mapped in relation to certain contemporary plays which have endeavoured to stage the "unthinkable" – the so-called "In-Yer-Face" dramas of the 1990s. Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* affords insights into how these plays function theatrically and how they arbitrate a concern about the intensification of capitalist commodification at the turn of the millennium.

"Watershed year"

The director of *The Crucible* remarked, many years after his Edinburgh production, that "the events of 1968 galvanized my generation" and this notion has been widely articulated.[8] In a similar but more expansive formulation, Bull asserts that, in the late 1960s, "[a] new generation of young radicals were [*sic*] 'kicked awake', made to see behind the broken screen of the grotesque spectacle that is public life," while Boon notes that Brenton "visited Paris in 1969, and, in common with a whole generation of young British playwrights (including David Hare, Trevor Griffiths and David Edgar), was politically energised by what he saw there."[9]

If the historiography of British theatrical culture in the aftermath of 1968 posits the emergence of a radical "family" of practitioners, then the mobilization of identical metaphorical formulations within these writings signifies an apparent moment of violent rupture that effected cataclysmic changes in British theatrical culture and

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[7] Quoted in Duncan Wu, *Making Plays: Interviews with Contemporary British Dramatists and Their Directors* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 23.

[8] Richard Eyre, *Changing Stages*, BBC 2 (broadcast: 3 December 2000). Produced and directed by Jamie Muir.

[9] John Bull, *New British Political Dramatists* (London: Macmillan Modern Dramatists, 1984), p. 14; Richard Boon, "Politics and Terror in the Plays of Howard Brenton," in *Terrorism and Modern Drama*, edited by John Orr and Dragan Klaić (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), p. 139. See also Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama 1890-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 179.

promulgated distinctive approaches to performance-making: Chambers and Prior account for the impact of 1968 in terms of seismic geological activity - "conventional practices have given way under great strain to new ones" - and Craig, too, compares 1968 to an earthquake.[10] Itzin, meanwhile, reports that "[1968] clearly marked the end of an era in a [*sic*] historically unprecedented fashion, and the beginning of a period of equally unprecedented political consciousness and activism".[11] Wandor, too, regards "the plays from 1956 onwards as a continuum, with a watershed in the middle".[12] This "watershed" is constituted by 1968, the year that divides her two perceived "phases" of post-war British playwriting. It is a term that figures repeatedly in frontline contemporaneous reports: in his 1975 retrospective on this new "generation", Ansorge comments that "1968 can be marked out as a watershed in our recent theatrical, if not political history"; Khan labels 1968 a "theatrical watershed", while Craig heralds it a "watershed year".[13]

It is important to demystify the metaphors that attend these endeavours to originate, in 1968, a turning point in British theatre. In fact, three influential phenomena helped constitute this perceived "watershed": the emergence of fringe theatre (and mass subsidy for it); the impact of Situationist and revolutionary critiques on the new "generation", and the abolition of the Lord Chamberlain's jurisdiction on the licensing and censoring of plays. One notable symptom of this historical conjunction is the startling number of political plays in the early 1970s that feature scurrilous and satirical portrayals of living politicians, coupled with the attendant use of stridently referential systems of theatrical signification in these works (David Edgar's pantomimic *Tedderella* (1971, revised in 1973), for example, casts Edward Heath as a winsome fairytale heroine desperate to attend the Common Market Ball). If we

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[10] Colin Chambers and Mike Prior, *Playwrights' Progress: Patterns of Postwar British Drama* (Oxford: Amber Lane Press, 1987), p.9; Sandy Craig, ed., *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain* (Ambergate: Amber Lane Press, 1980), p. 18.

[11] Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), p. 1.

[12] Michelene Wandor, *Look Back in Gender: Sexuality and the Family in Post-War British Drama* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 162.

[13] Peter Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle: Five Years of Experimental and Fringe Theatre in Britain* (London: Pitman Publishing, 1975), p. 1. See also: "It is impossible to deny [. . .] a link between the most publicized political events of 1968 and the creation, in practical terms, of the new 'alternative' theatre circuit [. . .] which played such a dominant rôle in the life of our theatres during the period under consideration. Unquestionably, 1968 was the watershed" (p. 56). Naseem Khan, "The Public-going Theatre: Community and 'ethnic' theatre," in Sandy Craig, ed., *op.cit.*, p. 59; Sandy Craig, "Unmasking the Lie: Political Theatre," *ibid.*, p. 32.

consider that Situationists such as Debord vilified politicians, in particular, for their tacit participation in the spectacle then - crucially - the Theatres Act (passed by Parliament in September 1968) enabled this new "generation" to incriminate *specific* politicians by incarnating them onstage in an attempted theatricalized disruption of the parliamentary spectacle.[14]

That Situationist ideas were quickly imported into left-wing British theatre practice after 1968 is unquestionable. Barber notes that the "concerns of the Situationist movement were transmitted into Britain's culture of subversion", nominating punk as the focal point for this "transmission" in the years following 1968.[15] Yet there is also considerable evidence that British theatre practitioners were radicalized by the events in Paris in general, and by Situationist ideas in particular. John McGrath has rhapsodized about the impact of the student uprisings on his own political trajectory.[16] Others have proclaimed the "important" or "considerable" impact on John Arden, David Hare and Snoo Wilson.[17] Edgar accounts for his political maturation in relation to the "vague 1968-axis" (as well as the perceived failure of the 1964 Labour government), implying that his ideological position was informed by Situationist critiques of consumer society.[18] Itzin quotes John Hoyland, who was active in the AgitProp Street Players:

"[People] had started looking around for something that would be more cultural, more imaginative, more rooted in the smaller details of people's lives - and more applicable to Britain." Before the formation of AgitProp there had been ad hoc

[14] The 1909 Joint Select Committee on censorship codified the grounds on which the Lord Chamberlain could refuse a licence for the theatrical performance of a play. The list of criteria included the provision that a play could be banned if it represented "'in an invidious manner a living person, or any person recently dead'". Quoted in Terry W. Browne, *Playwrights Theatre: The English Stage Company at the Royal* Court (London: Pitman, 1975), p. 56. The staging of living MPs prior to, and in the aftermath of, the termination of state censorship is explored in Chris Megson, *Martyr, Misfit, Monster: The Staging of Politicians in British Theatre Since 1968*, unpublished PhD thesis (University of London, 2001).
[15] Stephen Barber, *Weapons of Liberation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), pp. 96-97.
[16] "[I]n May 1968 things started happening in Paris. And I went over and spent some time there, until they started exporting foreigners. And the importance of the thinking around that whole time, the excitement of that whole complex set of attitudes to life which that para-revolutionary situation threw up, was incredible - the thinking about ordinary life, the freshness of the approach, the urgency and the beauty of the ideas was amazing." John McGrath, "Better a Bad Night in Bootle . . .," *Theatre Quarterly*, V, 19 (September-November 1975), pp. 39-54 (p. 48).
[17] See Catherine Itzin, *op.cit.*, p. 30, 194; C.W.E. Bigsby "The Politics of Anxiety: Contemporary Socialist Theatre in England," *Modern Drama*, XXIV, 4 (December 1981), p. 395; D. Keith Peacock, *op.cit.*, p. 64. Peacock also refers to Howard Barker as a "post-Situationist [dramatist]" (p. 66) and suggests the influence of Situationism on Edgar (p. 106) and Edward Bond (p. 145).
[18] Quoted in Catherine Itzin, *op.cit.*, p. 139.

"guerilla cultural activities" such as *"poster alteration" in the London tubes - what Chris Rawlence, a founder member of Red Ladder, described as "situationist" cultural events.*[19]

Reflecting on his work with the Bradford Regional College of Art Theatre Group in the late sixties, Albert Hunt advocates the development of interfaces between education and theatre that "assault the mystifications of a society intent on hiding its true identity behind a curtain of jargon".[20]   Such rhetoric recalls the particular anxieties expressed by Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* even if it does not afford them a precise articulation. Indeed, whether or not practitioners encountered Situationist ideas directly is, according to Plant, of minor significance since "1968 certainly came close to a vindication of the situationists' insistence that their ideas were 'in everyone's mind'".[21]   This endeavour to naturalize and historicize Situationist discourse, either as motor or symptom of a particular revolutionary moment, tends to foreclose its potential wider application as a model both of political analysis and oppositional cultural practice in the contemporary context. It is appropriate, then, to ground these ideas more substantively in a selective overview of key aspects of Debord's manifesto.

"The spectacle is everywhere"

Debord's primary contention is that direct, lived experience in contemporary society has been obliterated by its abstraction, its "representation" (12), in a dizzying proliferation of manufactured images and objects:

The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. [. . .] *The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.* (12, Debord's emphasis)

As important, Debord positions the citizen in mass society as a hapless "spectator" for whom reality itself has become a disorienting "object of contemplation" (12). Subjected to a welter of mediated images and consumable artefacts, the spectator's

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[19] Catherine Itzin, *ibid.*, p. 39.
[20] Albert Hunt, *Hopes for Great Happenings: Alternatives in Education and Theatre* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1976), p. 164.
[21] Sadie Plant, *op.cit.*, p. 94.

condition is defined by its passivity and abject alienation: it is this estrangement that registers the inexorable advance of commodification into every facet of an individual's experience of the world. Moreover, he asserts that isolation has itself become both the *leitmotif* of the spectacle (a characterizing feature of its modes of production and consumption), and the primary objective of economic organisation since the goods produced and reified by the spectacle, especially television, "[strive] to reinforce the isolation of 'the lonely crowd'" (22). Debord notes how the spectacle itself compels consumers to participate in a relentless and ostensibly meaningless competition over appearances - his model of splintered social relations is thus infused with a conception of the spectator as struggling actor:

The spectacle's externality with respect to the acting subject is demonstrated by the fact that the individual's own gestures are no longer his [sic] *own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator feels at home nowhere, for the spectacle is everywhere.* (23)

It is unsurprising, then, that, in the closing stages of his analysis, Debord espouses the condition of the beleaguered spectator in terms of pathology and exile - s/he is subjected to extreme "dissociation" which effects a state of numbed "catatonia", a "generalized autism" which, in turn, drives the spectator into a sustained delusory state, a "form of madness" (152-154).

Within his analysis, Debord designates politicians as "stars of decision" in the spectacle. In spite of their perceived, or "official", ideological differences, "stars of decision" are marked by a certain "*similarity* which is an inescapable implication of their supposed excellence in every sphere" (39, Debord's emphasis). In this respect, "stars of decision" embody particular performative attitudes - modes of behaviour and registers of speech - that transcend geographical contexts, partisan divisions and the vagaries of individuated personality. Debord reinforces this point with a reference to President Kennedy:

Kennedy the orator survived himself, so to speak, and even delivered his own funeral oration, in the sense that Theodore Sorenson still wrote speeches for Kennedy's successor in the very style that had done so much to create the dead man's persona. The admirable people who personify the system are indeed well known for not being what they seem to be . . . (40)

Importantly, Debord separates the public "persona" of Kennedy - which is resuscitated in rhetorical apparatus, even after his assassination - from "another" Kennedy that lurks, presumably, "within" or "beneath" the spectacular construct. The implicit suggestion is that politicians are expert dissemblers, complicit in promulgating the "never-ending succession of paltry contests - from competitive sports to elections - that are utterly incapable of arousing any truly *playful* feelings" (40, Debord's emphasis). Debord counterpoints the playful and the political in order to designate the latter as a deracinated narrative of pseudo-events, devoid of imagination and spontaneity, that conceals the true nature of conflict in spectacular society and the actual locus of power in rapacious economic competition.

For Peacock, a key discovery of Situationism was that "any revolutionary activity must not only attack economic or social structures but must also subvert all manifestations of establishment culture."[22] Yet Debord treats with caution the extent to which cultural formations - including, by implication, theatre - are able to disrupt the spectacle: "wherever representation takes on an independent existence, the spectacle reestablishes its rule" (17). Debord's conception of an art which is politically efficacious, questioning rather than conclusive, immediate rather than retrospective in content, which engages its audience in dialogue, scorns the "inevitable" and is, intriguingly, "unmediated" is one of the key and unresolved challenges set out for readers of *The Society of the Spectacle*. He does not affirm how art itself might "take effective possession" of these new imperatives, except to suggest that to do so will involve both demolition of pre-existing forms and, by definition, the realization of a new kind of interventionist *praxis* (133). His rhetoric implies that such art will restore a semblance of a critical consciousness to the spectator:

Imprisoned in a flat universe bounded on all sides by the spectacle's screen*, the consciousness of the spectator has only figmentary interlocutors which subject it to a one-way discourse on their commodities and the politics of those commodities.* (153, Debord's emphasis)

This amounts to a wider challenge to radical artists in all disciplines: namely, to empower spectators to, in effect, shatter the spectacular screen and thus access a

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[22] D. Keith Peacock, *op.cit.*, p. 65.

forbidden realm of "authentic" experience. As put by Boon: "smashing the screen of *public* life would expose the realities of *private* and *daily* life beneath" (Boon's emphasis).[23] Debord's implied suggestion, determinedly modernist and Marxist in orientation, is that an efficacious art in the society of the spectacle is one that catalyses a profound unification in a fragmented "consciousness" already susceptible to catatonia.

Debord's promulgation of *détournement* - the "turning around" of perceptions of a phenomenon through the strategic, but often playfully irreverent, reconstitution of its familiar elements - offers one theoretical basis for exploring how this exposure might actually be achieved:

[T]*he reversal of established relationships between concepts and by the diversion (or* détournement*) of all the attainments of earlier critical efforts* [. . .] *The device of* détournement *restores all* [the] *subversive qualities to past critical judgements that have congealed into respectable lies - or, in other words, that have been transformed into lies.* (144-145, Debord's emphasis)

As critical practice, *détournement* enacts an affront to expectations, a "diversion" from orthodox ways of seeing, a "restoration" of those contradictory qualities in ideas which may have been effaced and assimilated - it is a "style" which seeks subversively to precipitate the unexpected (144*ff*). Together, these dialectical aspects of *détournement* are manifested most explicitly in the work of "the young Marx" who – in Debord's view – achieved "the most cogent use of this *insurrectional style*: thus the philosophy of poverty became the poverty of philosophy" (144, Debord's emphasis).

Within this conception of *détournement*, one of the ways in which a prerequisite critical distance might be fostered is in the ostentatious use of plagiarism: "Staying close to an author's phrasing, plagiarism exploits his [*sic*] expressions, erases his ideas, replaces them with correct ideas." (145). Yet the impact of plagiarism as a subversive critical strategy can only be properly apprehended in terms of the binary opposition that structures Debord's analysis at this point. The opposing category, in this case, is "quotation": "[Quotation is] a theoretical authority invariably tainted if

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[23] Richard Boon (1990), *op.cit.*, p. 140.

only because it has become quotable, because it is now a fragment torn away from its context, from its own movement" (145-146). For Debord, intertextuality in literary activity - conceived here as a sort of promiscuous traffic in quotations between texts - serves only to fortify the "official verity" of received truths. In contrast, the originary source of the plagiarized – as opposed to "quoted" - text is certainly recognizable but its "ideas" and "expressions" have been subjected to critical reversal and interrogation in the operation of a creative vandalism. Plant clarifies this point: "[*Détournement*] is plagiaristic, because its materials are those which already appear within the spectacle, and subversive, since its tactics are those of the 'reversal of perspective', a challenge to meaning aimed at the context in which it arises".[24]

"No bows. End play"

One of the earliest demonstrations of Situationist ideas in a British theatrical context is to be found in Brenton's early play, *Fruit* (1970). This was written for Portable Theatre, a touring company founded by Tony Bicât and David Hare in 1969, which "concentrated largely on the analysis of bourgeois spectacles of disintegration".[25] At this point, it is worth identifying briefly two sequences that give a resounding theatrical approximation of Debord's *détournement*.

At the beginning of the second scene, we hear Colin, an ascendant "star of decision" soon to be elected the new prime minister, intone a confident speech as Leader of the Conservative Party:

> *The order of the day, has for too long been "Instant Government." The people of this country, are "fed up" with "Instant Government," and gimmicks. We, in the Conservative Party, are ready for the fight. We have the policies, we are in good heart, and we shall win.* (5, punctuation as in the script)[26]

As the stage is illuminated, Paul, a self-proclaimed "Osteopath to the Great", is described as "[watching] the television set intently" as the election-night coverage gathers pace. In the ensuing dialogue, Paul's wife claims to be able to discern a

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[24] Sadie Plant, *op.cit.*, p. 86.
[25] Anthony William Mitchell, *op.cit.*, p. 128.
[26] *Fruit* is unpublished but I am indebted to Richard Boon for providing access to a manuscript copy. Subsequent page references in parentheses refer to pagination on this document.

range of distasteful personal characteristics from the images of the Home Secretary presented on screen:

> *He's got make-up on* [. . .] *His armpits smell* [. . .] *He's wearing dirty Y-Fronts* [. . .] *He's got seminal fluid drip.* (6)

Paul, "scrutinising the picture", tries hard to identify how she can possibly isolate such disconcerting information from the broadcast image (6). Later, in a paroxysm of despair on hearing of the Tory election victory, Paul destroys the television by kicking it to pieces and then stamping on it (12a). Since he is a thalidomide victim sporting a "leg iron", this action becomes even more theatrically striking. In theatrical terms, his peering at the screen comprises a visual tableau that quite clearly signals a man held in thrall to the media's manipulation of political image while his smashing of the screen offers a concrete theatrical inflection of a presiding Situationist metaphor.

The play's final sequence features a disgruntled Syndicalist who enacts the making of a Molotov cocktail before throwing it, moments before the final blackout. Brenton's stage directions attend to the precise gestuality accorded these actions in performance:

Points to his clothes, clown like [. . .] *hold the bottle up to Paul. point at it* [. . .] *He slowly swings the bottle away from his body, back and forth. Then he throws it in the air. Just before it hits the floor, blackout. a few seconds. All lights up, the actors going off. No bows. End play.* (45, punctuation as in the script)

The deictic gesturing to the clothes and the bottle, and the slow pendulum-swing of the Syndicalist's arm before the final throw, inscribes the bomb-making with a reflexive metatheatricality that challenges the audience to consider the terms of its own pleasurable engagement with spectating - in the theatre, and, *as important*, in the wider political culture. As Boon observes, "the play is not just about 'disrupting the spectacle', it seeks to disrupt its own spectacle", and this marks the complexion of its *détournement*.[27]

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[27] Richard Boon, *Brenton the Playwright* (London: Methuen, 1991), p. 58.

The "stars of decision" in *Fruit* are not named after living counterparts, nor do the stage directions in the script indicate mannerisms or styles of speech and dress that could help identify the portrayals as explicit caricatures of the recently-elected prime minister, Edward Heath, or his peers. What is apparent, however, is that audiences sought to identify the homosexuality of the Prime Minister with Heath's own situation. "'It was just after the General Election'," recalled Brenton in 1973, "'so all the questions were about "Is that true"?'".[28]   Billington's curiously circumspect review of *Fruit* reinforces these observations: "the Establishment figures who are [Brenton's] victims include a secretly homosexual prime minister and a drunken Socialist leader, *neither of whom is hard to identify*" (my emphasis).[29]   While the caustic title of *Fruit* alludes, if indirectly, to its preoccupation with sexual scandal, the play's opening speech cautions against overly literal interpretations of its dramatic scenario:

> *Fruit is a play of slander, lies, torture, perversions in high places, vile plans in low places, a rotting bag of half truths for an audience to throw where they will . . .* (1)

There is a wilful provisionality about the terms of reference implied in *Fruit*'s portraiture of political figures. With its screen-smashing, dramatic reversals, audience confrontation and sensational effects, the play's theatrical method is dynamically attuned to the imperatives of Debord's *détournement*; its reception, however, was marked by a preoccupation with the politics of personality - a distracting assumption that Heath's situation was being, as Debord might put it, "quoted" – which resulted in the play's relatively unproblematic critical appropriation.

In contrast, much Situationist-inspired playwriting in the 1970s – particularly the work of Brenton and the early agit-prop incursions of Edgar - plagiarized the images of well-known "stars of decision", largely through processes of satirical distortion and the embedding of topical debates within theatrical frameworks commandeered from

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[28] Howard Brenton, "Messages First: An Interview with Howard Brenton," interviewed by Jonathan Hammond, *Gambit*, 6, 23 (1973), p. 26.
[29] Michael Billington, "Portable Theatre, Royal Court Theatre Upstairs," *Plays and Players* (November 1970), p.49. See also Martin Esslin in *Inside the Royal Court Theatre, 1956-1981*, edited by Gresdna A. Doty and Billy J. Harbin (Louisiana State University Press, 1990), p. 216.

popular culture: it is the orchestration of such elements that characterizes a distinctively British accommodation of *détournement* in the immediate aftermath of the "watershed".[30] Yet, as I aim to demonstrate, Debord's critique can also be galvanized to inform readings of a distinctive type of dramatic writing that achieved notoriety in Britain in the 1990s.

"Act of revenge"

We began to be screened. Screens threaded the great skein of finance capital. [. . .] They logged our purchases, tagged our movements, fed fantasy games to our young. Screens accentuated solitude, they bore out the acid comment by a "post-Yugoslav" critic, my friend Dragan Klaic, that capitalism was a machine for engineering loneliness. But screens softened the isolation by hooking us up with each other through simulation of contact.[31]

Klaic's and Kustow's mordant reflections on contemporary culture, published in 2000, precisely duplicate Debord's conception of the alienated spectator, isolated within the "lonely crowd". Kustow's subsequent defence of the visceral theatrical potential of British new playwriting in the 1990s is realized most fully in his discussion of the plays of Mark Ravenhill which are lauded, intriguingly, for "breaking through the screens of simulation".[32] Alert to the implications of these familiar metaphors, the final section of this article focuses on Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's*

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[30] The Situationist influence is, however, discernible in a wide range of plays throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In both form and content, Brenton's landmark *Magnificence* (1973) is directly concerned with Situationist strategies of dissent in the context of the British counter-culture. The most resounding speech in the play is Jed's injunction to "Bomb 'em. Again and again. Right through their silver screen. Disrupt the spectacle." Published in Howard Brenton, *Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 96. The Situationist-influenced use of television/projection screens in theatre continues to inform Brenton's dramaturgy throughout the 1970s. For instance, in Act Two: Scene Five of *A Short Sharp Shock!* (1980), a hospitalized Arthur walks out of a projector screen which is showing a film about Conservative cuts (Howard Brenton, "Thirteenth Night" *and* "A Short Sharp Shock!" (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), p.76). The iconic television screen is used pervasively by a range of dramatists at this time. Perhaps the most compelling example is in Trevor Griffiths' *The Party* (1973). Griffiths sets his play on the night of 10 May 1968 during *les événements*. A television screen dominates the living room and, at the beginning of an early scene, a stage direction reads that "we listen to [a news bulletin] in the empty set for some moments" before any character enters onstage. See Trevor Griffiths, *The Party* (London: Faber, 1974), p.18. Finally, readers are also referred to Edgar's seminal *Maydays* (1983) which documents the co-option of Situationist critiques of the consumer spectacle by conservative critics of Thatcherism in the 1980s. It is published in David Edgar, *Plays: Three* (London: Methuen, 1991). See, particularly, p. 300.
[31] Michael Kustow, *Theatre@Risk* (London: Methuen, 2001), p. 166.
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 209.

Love (1996) and Ravenhill's *Faust (Faust Is Dead)* (1997).[33]   It was Brenton who commented assiduously that "the situationists showed how all of them, the dead greats, are corpses on our backs – Goethe, Beethoven - how gigantic the fraud is."[34] In this respect, as brazen revisions of canonical works, these examples are best apprehended as contemporary interrogations of "dead greats", closely related to early theatrical models of Situationist "anti-culturalism".

After all, *Phaedra's Love* commences with an image of right royal catatonia. Hippolytus (one might wryly call him the ideal spectator) is "watching television" in the dark, surrounded by expensive toys; he then proceeds to masturbate as the Hollywood film he is gazing at turns violent (61). Shortly afterwards, he dawdles with his toy car and stares at the television with the sound low, but the stage directions specify that these are mechanistic reflexes rather than pleasurable activities (69).   Reviewers of the Gate theatre production, directed by Kane, note that Hippolytus' "eyes never wander from the television screen" and that his behaviour is symptomatic of "television addiction".[35] It is the remorseless babble of the screen that punctures the silences throughout Hippolytus' first strained conversation with Phaedra (71), and he "watches the screen throughout" while receiving oral sex from her (76). Indeed, Phaedra herself discourses about her tremulous emotions as if they might be manipulated by television remote control ("Can't switch this off", she opines, 67).

The screen is also invested with a pronounced iconic function in Ravenhill's play. In the second scene, the philosopher Alain discusses his book *The Death of Man* while appearing on a banal television chat show. "Neat title," shrills David Letterman, "What exactly does it mean?" (1). It is later made clear that Alain's indubitably postmodern thesis is that Man Died "sometime after MTV" (35). An early speech by the play's garrulous Chorus bemoans the breakdown of a VCR machine, prompting the lamentation: "what is the point of food in the house when you have nothing to watch while you're eating it?" (11). During his travels with Alain, Pete can only

[33] Sarah Kane, *Blasted* and *Phaedra's Love* (London: Methuen, 1996); Mark Ravenhill, *Faust (Faust Is Dead)* (London: Methuen Random House, 1997). All subsequent page references in parentheses refer to these editions.
[34] Howard Brenton (1975), *op.cit*, p. 13.
[35] Paul Taylor, *Independent*, 23 May 1996; Michael Coveney, Observer, 26 May 1996.

assimilate the desolating magnitude of the desert by videoing it on his camcorder ("I prefer it with a frame around it, you know?", 16) and, later, he bemoans the fact that the television in their motel room broadcasts only "re-runs of re-runs" (23). The production of the play by the Actors' Touring company – "high-tech(ish)", according to the *Sunday Times* - counterpointed moveable translucent screens with videoscapes that projected "zoomorphic shapes" onto the actors.[36] The visual composition of the *mise-en-scène* thus marks the slippage between the autonomous corporeality of the body and the hyperreality of new technology.

It is not difficult to discern here the activation of Situationist tropes, particularly in the privileging of the all-pervasive screen within the visual landscapes of the plays, and the encroachment of a relentless commodification even into the vistas of intimate sexual experience. On this basis, Sierz suggests boldly that "In-Yer-Face" work can be placed in an uncomplicated "direct line with the powerful leftist tradition in British theatre" because, for the playwrights in the 1990s, "commodity capitalism [is] still Satanic".[37] It is patently apparent, however, that Kane and Ravenhill offer no theatrical equivalent to Paul's rancorous smashing of the screen in *Fruit*. The admixture of frustration and longing registered in these plays is manifest in reviews of both productions. *Time Out* dismisses Hippolytus as "fucked-up and fucked-off" while *The Guardian* notes his predilection for "women sent in on demand rather like Chinese meals".[38] The *Financial Times* notes Ravenhill's attentiveness to "junk food, junk clothes and junk values", which *The Daily Telegraph* glosses simply as "junk culture".[39] Yet, if these plays in production articulate a kind of despair, it is one closely aligned to an insistent drive for feeling and expression that precipitates engagements with pain, violence and mutilation. It is, perhaps, this struggle that marks a key thematic preoccupation within "In-Yer-Face" dramaturgy, and most closely resonates with the imperatives of the Situationists.

This issue is best focused in relation to Ravenhill's play. Sierz, in a discussion of *Faust (Faust Is Dead)*, contends that "[Ravenhill] sees postmodern theory as an 'act

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[36] John Peter, *Sunday Times*, 2 March 1997; Jeremy Kingston, *The Times*, 28 February 1997.
[37] Aleks Sierz, *op.cit.*, p. 238, 240.
[38] David Tushingham, *Time Out*, 22 May 1996; Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 21 May 1996.
[39] Sarah Hemming, *Financial Times*, 7 March 1997; Kate Bassett, *Daily Telegraph*, 6 March 1997.

of revenge' for the failure of the 1968 student movement in Paris".[40] This important remark underscores the fact that the most consistent challenges to Situationist ideas have derived from postmodern philosophers' radical reworkings of theories of structure. Indeed, in his incisive appraisal of the postmodern, Best suggests that the movement from Debord to Baudrillard, in particular, signals a paradigmatic crossing of the threshold from modernity to postmodernity.[41] On the one hand, *les événements* signalled the extent of the unease with capitalism across broad sectors of the French population yet, on the other, it demonstrated the complex recuperative powers of the state in its assimilation and neutralization of revolutionary dissent. Plant notes how, in the aftermath of 1968, postmodern thinkers such as Baudrillard and Lyotard were compelled to challenge orthodox essentialist views of the ways in which power is organised and wielded in the social structure.[42] For Baudrillard, the emergence of the postmodern is a consequence of the "real" itself having been obliterated - "liquidated" - in an intoxicating whirligig of images and commodities through which contemporary experience is mediated, dissolved, reconstituted and played out in endless chains of free-floating "circuits of signifiers without reference".[43] Alain, the Baudrillardian postmodernist *par excellence* in the play, gives concrete expression to these views when he declares that:

At some point, at a moment at the end of the twentieth century, reality ended. Reality ended and simulation began. (30).

He trifles with the idea that "reality" unravelled sometime in 1987; Baudrillard, as a philosopher formerly sympathetic to the Situationist critique, may well have set the date in May 1968.[44] In his insightful discussion of the modernist credentials of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Jervis notes that "if spectacle is about the power of the image in its separation, its self-sufficiency, its alienation from – and in – experience, then [. . .] this rests on, and reproduces, characteristic distinctions between the included and

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[40] Aleks Sierz, *op.cit.*, p. 135.
[41] Steven Best, "The Commodification of Reality and the Reality of Commodification: Baudrillard, Debord and Postmodern Theory," in *Selected Writings*, edited by Mark Poster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 50.
[42] Sadie Plant, *op.cit.*, p. 182.
[43] *Ibid.*, p. 182.
[44] "I was very, very attracted by Situationism [. . .] And even if today Situationism is past, there remains a kind of radicality to which I have always been faithful. There is still a kind of obsession, a kind of counterculture which is still there." Baudrillard quoted in Sadie Plant, *op.cit.*, pp. 165-166.

the excluded, illusion and reality, even as it questions these."[45] In Baudrillard's view, however, these vestiges of modernist ontology - the notional interface between the hegemonic spectacle and "real life" that is symbolized in Situationist discourse by the motif of the screen – are no longer viable: in a simulated universe, there can be no stabilizing "real" to anchor oppositional ideology, no "authentic" hierarchies of power to legitimate subversive incursions into representation, no objective "meaning" which escapes the immanent web of discursive relations.

In this respect, there is merit in *Time Out*'s observation that "authenticity is the [. . .] big issue" in Ravenhill's play.[46] For Pete, violence establishes a portal to authentic experience because, as he states fervently, "this is supposed to be the one thing, one thing that's for real" (27). Kerstow attests to the theatrical impact of the self-mutilation enacted in the play, describing this as a "last-ditch search for something real, something irreducible".[47] In similar vein, Sierz notes that productions of "In-Yer-Face" work have attempted to "[push] theatre into being more experiential, more aggressively aimed at making audiences feel and respond".[48] It is notable that Kane staged her play at the Gate Theatre in an open-plan auditorium with the actors concealed within the audience; the *Financial Times* remarks that this gave "a feeling of immediacy" to the event, especially in the context of the irruption of mob violence that marks the conclusion of the play.[49] Hippolytus' dying gasp, of course, registers a moment of profound ecstasy, a supremely affecting breach of Debordian catatonia. Battered, dismembered but managing a wry "smile", his wistful valediction is: "If there could have been more moments like this" (97).

Conclusion

My intention is not to homogenize or reduce the range of meanings ascribable to these two plays, nor is it to project "In-Yer-Face" dramatic writing as an unproblematic theatrical distillation of Situationist metaphors and anxieties. I suggest, rather, that a revisiting of *The Society of the Spectacle* in the contemporary context illuminates the

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[45] John Jervis, *Exploring the Modern* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1998), p. 298.
[46] Kate Stratton, *Time Out*, 5 March 1997.
[47] Michael Kerstow, *op.cit.*, p. 211.
[48] Aleks Sierz, *op.cit.*, p. xiii.
[49] Sarah Hemming, *Financial Times*, 23 May 1996.

potential for a politicized reading of "In-Yer-Face" work, one that is attuned to its implied social critique as well as theatrical method. Such an approach also enables the flurry of superannuated adjectives that have tended to cloud discussion of "In-Yer-Face" theatre (pivoting around tropes of sensation and shock) to be properly grounded, and even theorized, in an historical relation to the early Situationist-inspired incursions of the 1968 "generation". Both Kane and Ravenhill offer a redoubtable theatrical inflection of some of Debord's recurrent preoccupations: the refracting of social or sexual relationships via images, networks and screens; the depiction of the condition of the alienated individual, for whom the world has become an "object of contemplation", and the profound struggle for a vector of experience that remains somehow untrammelled by commodification. I have also attached significance to these plays' interrogation of the literary canon; their structuring of a more confrontational and visceral relationship with spectators, and the strategic use of violent effects. Mindful of these observations, it would be difficult to disagree with the author of *Fruit* when he affirmed, in 1995, "re-reading [*The Society of the Spectacle*] I still find its powerful vision of the way the century works true."[50]

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[50] Howard Brenton, *Hot Irons - Diaries, Essays, Journalism* (London: Methuen, 1995), p. 42.