

## 1 Rage Against the Machine

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#### Rage Against the Machine: *L'Opération robot* and May '68

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On 26 January 1968, at the Université Paris-Nanterre, a series of minor disturbances allegedly caused by ‘activists, situationists and revolutionaries’ turned into a ‘veritable riot’.<sup>1</sup> The riot erupted from a student protest that unexpectedly found itself face-to-face with the forces of authority, summoned by the university dean, Pierre Grappin, to crack down on troublemakers and restore order.<sup>2</sup>

Calling the cops, however, contravened centuries of French custom demarcating the university as politically neutral ground: with the arrival of armed police on campus – as one participant later remarked – the situation turned violent and abruptly transitioned ‘from the Middle Ages to the Industrial Era’.<sup>3</sup> Some of the more radicalized students belonging to the para-situationist group the Enragés – which would soon ‘officially’ join ranks with the SI – improvised a shower of projectiles and effectively forced the cops to retreat. In celebration of their victory, the students triumphantly set several vehicles ablaze in the surrounding parking lot.<sup>4</sup> Little could they have known that they had just ignited a fire that would ‘set all French universities aflame and shake up the entirety of French society’.<sup>5</sup>

One of the few remainders of this riot that so clearly prefigures May '68 is a poster picturing the dean, Grappin, encircled by cops holding up their *matraques* for his protection. Above the picture, a caption set in bold type and capital letters: ‘EN ATTENDANT LA CYBERNETIQUE, LES FLICS’ (Waiting for cybernetics, the cops).

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Figure 4.1. Poster on the wall of Université Paris-Nanterre, 1968.

In this atmosphere of post-riot urgency, three members of the Enragés – René Riesel, Patrick Cheval, and Gérard Birgogne – had swiftly designed and printed this poster

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over the weekend. On the morning of 30 January, the students at Nanterre walked into hallways plastered over with freshly minted posters that greatly ‘impressed everyone’.<sup>6</sup> The poster apparently captured the radical mood at Nanterre while aesthetically assuming the situationist portrait of power that was arguably a determining factor in the build-up to and unfolding of May–June 1968.<sup>7</sup>

The depiction of Grappin, while specifically levelled against a ‘university ghetto on the brink to cybernetization’, was also, in a broader sense, a representation of a capitalist character mask equally fit to all of society’s ‘cops, priests, cyberneticians, professors, and sociologists’ (to use the terms of an Enragés tract of the time).<sup>8</sup> From this perspective, the poster’s aesthetic equation of the term ‘cybernetics’ with a broader nexus of social domination, violence, and control aligns it with the situationist critical analysis of late capitalist society: an analysis spelled out in two pivotal SI publications of 1967, the *Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations* by Raoul Vaneigem and *The Society of the Spectacle* by Guy Debord.<sup>9</sup>

Echoing these key situationist works, the poster draws attention to cybernetics as a new form of post-sovereign, impersonal, and abstract social domination. One cannot help but notice, for instance, how Grappin, the patriarchal figure at the centre of attention, seems to be dissolving – quite literally – in the mechanisms churning beneath him, and supporting, if only for a little longer, his sovereign stance. In the broader visual economy of the poster, the term ‘cybernetics’, then, clearly functions as shorthand for a more elaborate diagnosis of capital’s extended sway over social life under changed – or changing – historical circumstances: what Debord and Vaneigem would analyse under the respective rubrics of *le spectacle* and *le pouvoir*, spectacle and power. Notice also how the chair under Grappin is suspended in mid-air, creating the impression that the seat of his power, his professorial chair in this case, is being kicked away from underneath him and whirled into the maelstrom. But is it a crisis of power? Grappin appears remarkably stoic: his chin is held up, gaze firmly fixed on the horizon of the future. Is he blissfully ignorant, the poster seems to ask, of the fact that the era of personal authority is coming to an end, or is he calmly awaiting his cybernetic redemption, the point when society will be, to borrow from Richard Brautigan’s famous contemporaneous poem, ‘all watched over by machines of loving grace’: when power will no longer have to resort to overt, corporeal violence to maintain a fragile social equilibrium but can instead rely on the cybernetically potentiated ‘mute compulsion’ of capital?<sup>10</sup>

In this chapter, I historically and conceptually develop the situationist critique of cybernetics while analysing the role that this conceptual trope played in the build-up to May ’68 – as emblemized by the Nanterre poster. The purpose of this chapter is thus twofold. On one level, it completes the survey of the situationist movement’s mixed engagements with the cybernetic hypothesis; on another, it contributes to an

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understanding of what Fredric Jameson, in his attempt to periodize the 1960s, calls the ‘general mutation in culture’ that foreshadowed postmodernism.<sup>11</sup>

### The Police

The text on the Nanterre poster, hardly legible in the photo, gives us an idea of how high the stakes were at Nanterre by this point. An English approximation of the somewhat convoluted French would read something like this:

Comrades! Grappin-the-truncheon, shoulder to shoulder with his [François] Bouricaud, supported by the arguments of [Edgar] Morin and [Alain] Touraine, has shown the extent of what he would like to ‘deny’ by placing his ghetto and their *rackets* under police protection. The Lateran Treaty that still governs this old world and its modernist university has proven its last resort and *raison d’état*: the recourse to police violence clarifies what is meant by ‘dialogue’ on campus. Abuse of confidence to the Left, abuse of power to the Right.

So that spirit be wrested from its cell  
Let us fan the forge’s flames ourselves  
And strike while the iron is hot

(The Internationale),  
Nanterre, 29 January 1968.<sup>12</sup>

The text itself requires some discursive unpacking, but one thing that stands out on the original poster is that the text’s punctuation consists of swastikas; a not-so-subtle reference to insults of ‘Nazi’ that students had hurled at Grappin during the protests.<sup>13</sup> The motivation for such insults was the rumour that Grappin had asked members of his teaching staff to draft a blacklist with the names of particularly unruly students. With Daniel Cohn-Bendit, son of German Jews who had fled to Paris during the Second World War, repeatedly singled out as a troublemaker, it was a short step to assume anti-Semitic motives on behalf of the administration. But this provocative typographical innovation on behalf of the Enragés’ design committee did not land well with all students. Grappin, after all, was publicly known as an *ancien Résistant* (the French honorary term for a former resistance fighter) and a fellow traveller of the French Communist Party.<sup>14</sup>

The date on the poster, 29 January, suggests that the text responded to Grappin’s official disavowal of what he considered ‘gratuitous accusations’ in an open letter addressed to the students at Nanterre.<sup>15</sup> According to Grappin, there never was a blacklist of any kind. Grappin’s denial, to which the poster’s text refers, was ‘unanimously’ supported by his trusted staff in the Assemblée: a printed circular affirmed ‘categorically’ that ‘there is not and has never been any “blacklist”’.<sup>16</sup> Historically, however, this affair has been complicated by the comments of Henri Lefebvre, who, like other prominent French intellectuals at the time (notably Edgar

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Morin and Alain Touraine, both mentioned on the poster) was a professor at Nanterre at the time:

The stimulus [for the March 22 movement] was this business about the blacklist, and I was the one who concocted the blacklist. What actually happened was that the administration phoned my office and asked for a list of the most politically disruptive students. I told them to get lost; I frequently had to say to the dean in those days, 'Sir, I am not a cop.' So the blacklist never existed, in black and white. But they were trying to do it, and I told the students to defend themselves; I stirred things up a bit. One has one's little perversities, after all.<sup>17</sup>

Whether this anecdote is unfounded, as Kristin Ross, who conducted the interview, soundly speculates, it appears that there might have been some not entirely 'gratuitous' reason for the students to protest the blacklist, even in the face of its apparent non-existence.<sup>18</sup> What aggravated the students even further in the days before the riot broke out were sightings of plainclothes police officers on campus. On 26 January, students carried enlarged cop portraits attached to sticks with them in the procession. Conveniently, these sticks doubled as weapons when the cops arrived later that day in full riot gear to shut down the protests with their truncheons. From that point on, the dean who called the cops would be known, according to the poster, as *Grappin-lamatraque* (Grappin-the-truncheon).<sup>19</sup>

To many radical students, the police intervention on 26 January confirmed a sneaking suspicion that the supposed political neutrality of the university was an illusion that veiled its real function: to help the capitalist state maintain its social rule. Behind the neutral functionalist façades, the partisans of the state and *les forces de l'ordre* were apparently at work. As the text on the poster states, the rhetoric of *dialogue* is always on the tip of the tongue, spelling out police violence. The police, in this context, was a concept refracting a more complex social dynamics of power. The figure of the police, as Ross reminds us by way of Jacques Rancière, is 'a kind of logic of the social: the logic that assigns people to their places and their social identities, that makes them identical to their functions'. This has developed into a steady trope of French post-'68 critical theory:

In the wake of '68, a period of massive concern with public order and its breakdown, when the government's tangible fear of the population taking to the streets again had manifested itself in a dramatic increase of police presence everywhere – in cafés, museums, on street corners, wherever more than two or three people gather – philosophy and theory begin to bear the trace of that presence.<sup>20</sup>

The police as metonym for power was, as the Nanterre poster suggests, already familiar in situationist-inflected critical discourse. The situationists came up with one of the earliest and most original analyses of the police as a social logic extending its reach from the depths of the factory to the peculiar décor of modern urban existence, and further on into the most intimate fabric of everyday life. The Nanterre poster's association of cybernetics with cops points to a nucleus of French intellectual history, a

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particular historical conjuncture somewhat abbreviatedly chronicled as ‘May ’68’.<sup>21</sup> In the following, I wish to broaden the scope of May ’68 by focusing on the cultural and intellectual mutations that prefigured it by a decade or so.<sup>22</sup> I do this by tracking the situationist critique of cybernetics and examining how this particular theoretical concern evolved in tandem with a series of strategic attacks on the representatives of a perceived nexus of cybernetic power.

### The Spirit of the Age

In their May ’68 balance sheet, the situationists highlighted an event at the University of Strasbourg in 1966 as ‘evidently a prelude to the activities of the Enragés in Nanterre’.<sup>23</sup> The so-called prelude was a rather carefully orchestrated attack on one of the leading French cyberneticians of the time, Abraham Moles, who, on 26 October 1966, was about to take up the position of departmental chair as a newly promoted full professor in social psychology at the University of Strasbourg. A few minutes into his inaugural lecture, Moles began to receive a shower of overripe tomatoes, forcing him to retreat from the lecture to seek cover. According to the historical record, several ‘incredulous and confused’ students came to the professor’s aid.<sup>24</sup> While some followed Moles, offering him towels and convincing him to return to finish his lecture, other more vigilant students tried to apprehend the situationist troublemakers.<sup>25</sup> In the midst of the confusion, the situationists hurled a flurry of paper sheets through the air which, in a font that unmistakably mimics that of an early IBM computer, were printed with the text: ‘MOLES: Programme les Futurs Cadres’ (Moles, programming the future cadres).<sup>26</sup>

Zooming out, this incident belongs to the expanded historical anatomy of the ‘Strasbourg scandal’, a now well-chronicled chapter in the history of the SI.<sup>27</sup> The Strasbourg scandal took place in late November 1966, a few weeks after the Moles incident, and turned on the fact that some students, apparently acting in accord with situationist directives, had succeeded in getting themselves elected into the AFGES (Association fédérative générale des étudiants de Strasbourg) – the local chapter of the French national student union, UNEF (Union nationale des étudiants de France) – only to declare its self-dissolution. The historical centrepiece of the scandal was a now-infamous pamphlet, which carried the (self-explanatory) title: *De la Misère en milieu étudiant, considérée sous ses aspects économique, politique, psychologique, sexuel et notamment intellectuel et de quelques moyens pour y remédier* (on the poverty of student life: a consideration of its economic, political, sexual, psychological and notably intellectual aspects and of a few ways to cure it).

A group of student partisans of the SI distributed the pamphlet at an official ceremony at the Palais universitaire de Strasbourg, where all the most important figures

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of Strasbourg's elite and representatives of the local press were gathered in formal dress to take part in the annual alma mater celebration.<sup>28</sup> Apart from the explicit content of the pamphlet itself, which certainly must have caused some of the *haute bourgeoisie* to choke while singing the Marseillaise, part of the reason this pamphlet became the main-spring of the scandal was that the press revealed that it had been funded in part by the AFGES – an extremely costly affair, considering that it was printed in a first edition of no fewer than 10,000 copies(!).<sup>29</sup> While the circumstances of the funding, printing, distribution, and reception of this pamphlet belongs, by now, to the official prehistory of May '68, scholars have paid less attention to the seemingly more marginal events that, as the SI stated, 'announced' the pamphlet: *in casu* the attack on Moles.

Union Nationale des Etudiants de France  
Association Fédérative Générale des Etudiants  
de Strasbourg

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# DE LA MISERE EN MILIEU ETUDIANT

*considérée  
sous ses aspects économique, politique,  
psychologique, sexuel et notamment  
intellectuel  
et de quelques moyens pour y remédier.*

1966

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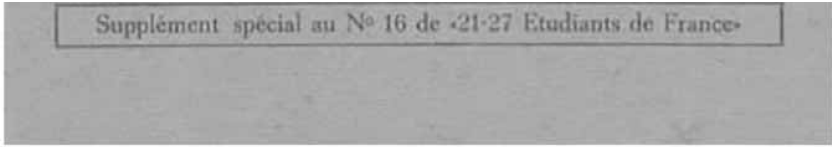


Figure 4.2. Situationist pamphlet, Strasbourg 1966.

As two of the Strasbourg protagonists, André Bertrand and André Schneider, recall in their revisionist account of what is now publicly commemorated as part of France's 'immaterial patrimony', the Moles affair constituted a crucial backdrop for the unfolding of events.<sup>30</sup> A letter from Debord to Mustapha Khayati, one of the principal authors of the pamphlet and a leading situationist instigator at Strasbourg, corroborates the claim. Referring to the attack on Moles as 'L'Opération robot', Debord describes the attack on the cybernetician as nothing less than a historical achievement in the history of the situationist movement:

Dear Mustapha,

Bravo for the Robot operation (Useful detail for history: was it yesterday or Tuesday?) We hope that the operation will become widely known – even without official reaction ... The *post festum* reaction of Moles is quite sublime. Secure in his robotized world ... [his] ideas are, now, flung back into his face in a precisely befitting historical figure. One can say that he has finally seen the Spirit of the Age [*L'Esprit du Temps*] appear in a tomato!<sup>31</sup>

The term 'Spirit of the Age', while it invokes Hegel's World Spirit or the notion of a *Zeitgeist*, appears more specifically to be a reference to Edgar Morin's book *L'Esprit du temps: essai sur la culture de masse*, which theorized the effects of the so called Second Industrial Revolution on everyday life.<sup>32</sup> When *L'Esprit du temps* was first published in 1962, it was considered, as one reviewer noted, 'the first in-depth study of mass culture ever published in France'.<sup>33</sup> Considering the situationists' (and particularly Debord's) animosity towards anything associated with Morin (the journal *Arguments* that he co-founded in 1956 was a favourite target of abuse for Debord and the situationists), the reference to Morin's book was hardly meant as praise.<sup>34</sup> The implication in Debord's use of the term 'Spirit of the Age', considering the context, is clear enough: a society of capitalist mass culture – for which Moles was considered a first-rank apologist – would inevitably turn against itself in an autoimmune response or cybernetic feedback loop. The story of the overripe tomato, in other words, becomes a parable of nature's vengeance against civilization. In a diagnosis akin to that of Adorno and Horkheimer in their famous book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Debord suggests that the Moles affair points to a dialectic inversion where scientific rationalization and cybernetic mass control turns into its opposite: riots, mass spontaneity, and, potentially, revolution.<sup>35</sup>

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‘In hindsight’, as Anselm Jappe notes, the attack on Moles might ‘seem a little tame, and it would doubtless have aroused but scant attention had it occurred two years later than it did’.<sup>36</sup> But, in France, at this point, it was unheard of to defy the authority of an honoured professor such as Moles. The fact that within only a few years from this incident, the university walls would cry out to the professors the crudest insults, like *crève salope*, testifies to the turbulent pace with which students challenged existing norms in the run-up to May ’68 (see [Figure 4.3](#)).



Figure 4.3. French graffiti, Nanterre University, 1968.

In that light, the toppled chair underneath Grappin on the Nanterre poster acquires a special historical significance. Whether or not the attack on Moles in 1966 was ‘the first time’ that a ‘university professor was chased from his chair’, as the situationists would claim, the so-called Robot Operation set in motion a series of violent disruptions that contributed to growing disrespect for the academic establishment as May ’68 approached.<sup>37</sup>

The situationists later noted with apparent content that their guerrilla tactics resonated with the spirit of the times, since soon after the attack Moles was:

given the same treatment in March [1967] at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs de Paris, where this certified robot was to lecture on urbanistic methods for controlling the masses; this latter refutation being carried out by

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about thirty young anarchists, belonging to groups that want to bring revolutionary criticism to bear on all modern issues.<sup>38</sup>

However, these two consecutive attacks, in October 1966 at Strasbourg and in March 1967 in Paris, were merely the culmination of a more protracted campaign against Moles.

### Correspondence with a Cybernetician

In August 1964, when the ninth issue of *internationale situationniste* was published, a correspondence with Moles appeared as ‘Correspondance avec un cybernéticien’ (‘Correspondence with a Cybernetician’).<sup>39</sup> Moles’s open letter to the situationists begins, apparently politely:

*Monsieur,*

I learned about the Situationist Group through my friend and colleague Henri Lefebvre. The significance of the term ‘Situationist’ therefore comes largely from what Lefebvre has told me and from reading a number of your bulletins, to which I kindly ask you subscribe me.<sup>40</sup>

At first glance, Moles seems genuinely interested in the perspectives the situationist analysis of society opened up. Moles grants the SI that within the ‘drama of technological alienation’, the remaining ‘interstitial liberty is being reduced, little by little, to zero’.<sup>41</sup> But in the next breath Moles notes that the margin of freedom diminishes all the more quickly ‘as the technocratic cyberneticians, to which I myself belong, succeed in progressively recording the three billion insects in existence’.<sup>42</sup> This kind of tongue-in-cheek discourse makes reading Moles’s letter a strangely schizophrenic experience. The tone constantly oscillates between an apparent sincerity and a thinly veiled irony bordering on satire:

I certainly would like to see in your publications a study on what you call a ‘situation’: an individual who, for some reason, walks upside down on the ceiling rather than the floor, would he be in a new situation? A tightrope walker, is he in a rare situation?<sup>43</sup>

Moles’s point is that, instead of aligning the term ‘situation’ with anything out of the ordinary, or with whatever might be considered ‘slightly queer’, it would be preferable to reconceptualize this ill-defined notion in a strict information-theoretical framework. ‘Novelty’ or ‘rarity’, Moles argues, could then be accurately measured against the average performance of a given system, pointing out that ‘the theoreticians of Information are capable (in pure theory) of measuring the quantity of novelty that a given system brings’.<sup>44</sup> At this point in the letter, Moles lets his true motives shine through as he slyly drives the situationist notion of a *situation ad absurdum*. ‘Sexuality is most obviously’, Moles muses, ‘open to a great number of new situations’:

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The manufacture, biologically conceivable, of women with two pairs of breasts is, without any doubt, a proposition from biology to tradition. The invention, in addition to the two traditional sexes, of one, two, three,  $n$  different sexes, offers a sexual combination which follows the theory of permutations and suggests rapidly an immense number of amorous situations ( $n$  factorial).<sup>45</sup>

Moles implies here that the situationist conception of a situation is so vague and general that it dissolves in the  $n$  factorial. He enumerates a dozen or so (perceived) morally transgressive acts, criminal activities, or types of deviant behaviour that would all qualify as situations if one followed the situationist logic to its own – to Moles's eye absurd – conclusion. Moreover, each of these 'slightly queer' situations could potentially be varied *infinitely* with the aid of new cybernetically potentiated technology, Moles argues. On this basis, he concludes (on a more serious note) that it is therefore '*on the axis of technology*' that one must begin the search for new situations.<sup>46</sup> Having brought the discussion onto his favoured terrain, Moles turns to discuss the implications of the notion of a situation in art:

In the artistic domain, a very large number of other situations will follow in the near future from technical capacities – and if American film directors only know how to make Cinerama (even more so Circlorama), perhaps it is legitimate to hope here for a source of new arts. The dream of Total Art is conditioned by the poverty of the artistic imagination.<sup>47</sup>

Moles knew how to press all the right buttons in his open letter to the situationists. Hardly anything could be more out of tune with the situationist notion of a situation than the idea that novelty, in and of itself (and, to make matters worse, mathematically reconfigured in an information theoretical scheme), would constitute progress: not, at least, progress that would be acceptable to an avant-garde movement whose ultimate aim in 'constructing situations' was to bring about a *revolution* and put an end to the capitalist system in its entirety. Not only had Debord the avant-garde filmmaker already both theoretically and practically denounced American cinematic innovations for being capitalist recuperations of potentially liberating technologies, a 'passive substitute for the unitary artistic activity that is now possible'.<sup>48</sup> He had also made it clear on several occasions – including in one of the founding documents of the SI, the 1957 *Rapport sur la construction des situations* ... – that the term *situation* was itself incompatible with the 'debased forms of novelty' through which cultural expression passed under capitalist relations of production.<sup>49</sup>

If Moles had any prior knowledge about the situationists, he could hardly have believed in earnest that his rapprochement would lead to any constructive dialogue. Considering the fundamental differences in the conception of a situation, with the SI aiming to overthrow capitalism and Moles hoping to expand its field of operations, it is difficult to sustain the idea that the letter was anything like a 'hopeful enquiry'.<sup>50</sup> In any case, Debord's response is particularly rude, even for him:

Tiny brain,

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It was useless to write to us ... the capacity to think of anything else does not enter into your programming. Scarcely is it necessary, therefore, to point out that you have understood nothing in any of the situationist materials you have read (in which, evidently, you missed all the basics). Tilt. Redo your calculations, Moles, redo your calculations: here is a satisfaction that no positive result will ever rob you of. If we looked for your 'open letter' – which was lost to us, but which various people have read – it is because we thought that, coming from a being of your type and addressed to us, it could only be a letter of insults. Not even! We have no need of knowing if your letter truly reflects the average level of your clumsiness, or if you aimed sometimes at a joke. False problem, because all that you can ever do, in our eyes, is contained in the redundant and coarse joke that constitutes your existence. Knowing the human appearance which your programmers have cloaked you in, one can appreciate that you dream of the production of women with  $n$  series of breasts. One supposes that you have difficulty having sex with less. Your personal circumstances aside, your pornographic dreams seem as ill-informed as your philosophical and artistic pretensions ...<sup>51</sup>

Debord adds to this tirade some capricious accusations that Moles had unfairly flunked a situationist comrade at an exam due to 'extracurricular grievances' of some sort.<sup>52</sup> Although Debord's vindictiveness gives his response a slightly pathetic air, it is clear that Moles's 'philosophical and artistic pretensions' are at the heart of this feud. As one of the most fervent French popularizers of cybernetics in the field of aesthetics, Moles was the perfect target for the situationists.

#### The Marshall Plan of the Spirit

Moles's itinerary as a researcher, lecturer, and popularizer of the new communication sciences spans the entirety of the post-war era.<sup>53</sup> His fervent activity to close the gap between the two cultures brought together science, culture, and art under a unifying perspective, that of cybernetics, which to Moles's mind encompassed 'virtually every realm of contemporary phenomena: art, the theory of objects, kitsch, computers, experimental music, architecture, economics, popular scientific knowledge, and so forth'.<sup>54</sup> In total, Moles managed to publish no less than '40 books and some 900 articles on these issues'.<sup>55</sup>

On several occasions, Moles travelled to the US and visited MIT, where he met, along with other prominent post-war scientists, the respective 'fathers' of cybernetics and information theory, Norbert Wiener and Claude Shannon, whose work and ideas he helped popularize in France.<sup>56</sup> As an integral part of the cybernetic matrix of post-war Europe, through his publications and teaching Moles played a crucial role in promoting a multi-disciplinary research programme in tune with the exigencies of the Marshall Plan era.

Eventually, Moles's international affiliations led him to the Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) in Ulm, Germany, where he was an associate professor between 1961 and 1966. The HfG, founded in 1953 by Inge Scholl and her husband Otl Aicher, with the Swiss functionalist architect and former Bauhaus student Max Bill as its first rector, quickly developed into a critical node for the emerging field of 'industrial design'. The

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opening of the new or ‘second Bauhaus’ was made possible by a large donation from the American fund McCloy and from matching investments from the West German state and industry.<sup>57</sup> The school relied for much of its existence on an influx of American capital (heavily subsidized by the CIA) through foundations such as the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation.<sup>58</sup> The close financial ties to the US-led world expansion of capitalist industry befitted the school’s working ethos that was, one might say, more akin to the spirit of the Marshall Plan than to the spirit of the original Bauhaus.

When the Argentinian designer Tomás Maldonado took over the leadership at HfG from Max Bill in 1957, he made his differences with the artistic tradition at the old Bauhaus abundantly clear. In his lecture for the World Fair in Brussels in 1958 and titled ‘New Developments in Industry and the Training of the Designer’ (transcribed in the *Ulm: Quarterly Bulletin of the Hochschule für Gestaltung*), Maldonado approaches the style of a manifesto:

The ideas which supply the basis for what might be called the Bauhaus ideology are today, a quarter of a century after that institution closed, difficult to translate into the language of our present-day preoccupations. Furthermore, as we shall see, some of these ideas must now be refuted with the greatest vehemence as well as with the greatest objectivity.<sup>59</sup>

The refutation of the Bauhaus arts-and-crafts ‘ideology’ was already part of Bill’s programme when he founded the school in 1953. The post-war turn in ideas about the Bauhaus exemplifies the growing schism between different conceptions of art and the historical role of the avant-garde. In this light, we might recall that a historical preamble to the Debord–Moles feud occurred as early as in 1954. At this point, Asger Jorn, on the heels of the dissolution of COBRA, approached Bill with a proposition to set up an institutionally anchored art programme that would carry on the free and experimental artistic spirit of the original Bauhaus in Weimar. As art historian Nicola Pezolet recounts, Jorn’s initial enthusiasm about the prospects of a revival of the Bauhaus was quelled by a dismissive response from Bill:

In Ulm, we consider the arts as the foundation of all the things we make here. But by ‘art’ we do not understand any kind of ‘self-expression’, but rather objective (*wirklich*) art. We do not agree with most of what the Cobra group or similar groups do, because these experiments have, in our opinion, already been done or superseded a long time ago. In Ulm, we will deal with much more extreme, new, and generally more current questions of design [*Gestaltung*].<sup>60</sup>

Shortly after this, and as a direct critical response to Bill’s notion of ‘objective art’, Jorn founded the *Mouvement international pour un Bauhaus imaginiste*, the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus. In doing so, he founded one of the three post-war avant-garde organizations that would eventually feed into and become the Situationist International from 1957 onwards; the other two were the Lettrist International and the London Psychogeographical Association (represented by its sole member Ralph

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Rumney). Jorn's trajectory between COBRA and the SI – which, importantly, includes his involvement with a nexus of Italian post-war artists such as Enrico Baj and Sergio Dangelo in the Arte Nucleare movement and the art journal *Eristica* – evolves, as Kurczynski notes, around the idea of the primacy of the artistic *imagination*, which was directly opposed to the rigidity of Bill's merely *imaginary* new Bauhaus in Ulm and its sterile conception of 'objective art'.<sup>61</sup> And, if Bill were already anathema to Jorn, his replacement with Maldonado a few years later would not be much of an improvement. For Jorn, Maldonado represented the apotheosis of the reformist usurpation of art and creativity. In an unpublished text of 1960, Jorn recalls how the conflict with Bill, to whom he refers as 'the perfect type of neutral reformism', merely 'served to assist the reaction by replacing him with that sinister imbecile Maldonado'.<sup>62</sup>

Maldonado would pursue even more fervently than his predecessor the ambition to align artistic production with the exigencies of post-war mass consumption. As part of his new vision, Maldonado advances a maximum argument for a more exact data-driven market research strategy to help bridge the gap between points of production and points of consumption. Gathering adequate information, according to Maldonado, helps to know 'objectively what a consumer is, without making abstract generalizations'.<sup>63</sup> Because, as he argues,

Although each one of us may be a consumer, or perhaps precisely because of this, the information at our disposal is insufficient. I repeat that today we have many reasons to mistrust our market and motivation research organizations. But we would like to be able to hope that empirical sociology, cultural anthropology, descriptive semiotics, hereditary psychology, the psychology of individual and social behaviour, perception theory etc., could at some time join together in a systematic study of the most subtle aspects of consumption.<sup>64</sup>

Today, research-driven market optimization is most familiar from discourses surrounding the capitalist buzz-phrase 'big data'. But the ambition to perfect market transactions through research and planning was never exclusively a capitalist enterprise. Around the same time, socialist-plan economists set forth quite similar proposals that would feed into political cybernetic experiments in, for instance, Salvador Allende's socialist Chile.<sup>65</sup> Despite the shared belief in cybernetic market-planning across the post-war ideological divide, Maldonado's brazen assertion to combine the arts and the qualitative sciences 'in a systematic study of the most subtle aspects of consumption' stood out, not least because of his affiliation to Bauhaus. Jorn, as Pezolet explains, had always associated the name Bauhaus with an international avant-garde that was naturally as 'opposed to bourgeois values' as it was to ideas of a 'market-oriented trade school'.<sup>66</sup>

However, the proponents of Bill's 'objective art' at HfG saw no such conflict whatsoever. They were clearly aiming for an art based on 'abstract-geometrical mathematical reasoning and focused on producing high-priced items for professionals and upper-middle-class clients ... thereby positioning Constructivist art in relation not

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to models of socialistic mass-production but to status symbols of an affluent class', as Pezolet explains.<sup>67</sup>

The HfG strove to realize through advanced 'industrial design' a perfect social equilibrium in which art had truly merged with life. Through carefully fitted educational programmes, the teaching staff and the plethora of guest lecturers in Ulm – which included several prominent figures in the history of cybernetics, such as Wiener and the eccentric personality Buckminster Fuller, who played a pivotal role in the cross-pollination between cybernetics and American counterculture – instructed the cadres of the future and prepared for a truly disenchanting democratic world: a world in which the notion of art (along with its metaphysical remnants) would have melted not into thin air but into the ether of *communication*.

### The Ideology of Communication

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, intellectuals of all branches extrapolated from Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver's seminal work in *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* and, in equal measure, from Wiener's *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, to arrive at the idea of communication as a social panacea.<sup>68</sup> Whether in the decentralized theories of markets and prices developed by liberal economists such as Friedrich Hayek or in its Soviet-plan economic counterparts, the dominant conception was that communication – reconfigured as the outcome of successful exchange of systemic information (in living, organic tissue, in electronically controlled environments, or in a systemic cyb-org combination of both) – essentially kept the world spinning: not capital, not labour, not surplus value. When recoded in information-theoretical terms, communication became the "strong currency" which allowed for free conceptual trade among disciplines'.<sup>69</sup>

As cultural theorist Michael Denning notes, one of the keywords for a generation of intellectuals coming of age around the mid-1950s was precisely 'communication', a term that, to critics of a Marxist bent at least, carried with it some of the libidinal energies previously invested in the idea of communism.<sup>70</sup> Raymond Williams's classic 1962 book *Communications* is, as Denning notes, the Anglo-Saxon touchstone for a critical Marxist reinterpretation of culture in the light of post-war developments in the field of communication sciences. It is worth also remembering, however, that a year earlier,

in 1961, three of the most important French Marxist intellectuals at the time – Georges Friedmann, Roland Barthes, and Edgar Morin – had founded the journal *Communications*, which encountered a huge success (and remains in print to this day). Bringing together writings by thinkers as disparate as Theodor Adorno, Roland Barthes, and Daniel Bell, the journal seems the perfect example of that French amalgam of

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Western Marxism, emerging Structuralism, and the end-of-ideology discourse that fed into the so-called post-industrial conundrum.

While Debord indeed belongs (in terms of age at least) to the generation of critics that Denning describes as New Left, he did not share its reformist ethos, nor the (sometimes) uncritical affirmation of the idea of communication. To Debord, rather, the study of culture from the point of view of a sociology of communication was seen as insufficient and one-sided:

Sociological and cultural theories so well hide the question of power that experts can write thousands of pages about communication or the means of mass communication in modern society without ever observing that this communication they speak of is unidirectional, that the *consumers of communication* have nothing to respond to.<sup>71</sup>

Debord, to whom the text can be attributed, addresses the ballooning ideal of a frictionless, neutral, and apolitical state of perfect ‘communication’ from the point of view of an essentially Brechtian model of the critique of unidirectionality. For Debord the problem exceeded solutions in the form of participatory cultural engagement: he had little hope for models of didactic art.<sup>72</sup> Debord’s critique of the cybernetically inspired intellectual fads in the journal *Communications* (structuralism, most notably) corresponds, on another level, to his critique of how new, potentially revolutionary technologies are co-opted by counter-revolutionary forces: a prime example is ‘the way the state kept total control of French television throughout de Gaulle’s presidency from 1958 to 1969’.<sup>73</sup>

The situationist critique of *communication* – a cybernetic watchword if ever there was one – has to do, at bottom, with the dialectics of decolonization and modernization.<sup>74</sup> With the waning of the overseas colonial empire, the grip on the metropolitan population, a growing part of which consisted of immigrant workers from decolonizing countries, was tightened. The situationist catchphrase ‘the colonization of everyday life’ ultimately refers to the profound mutation in the concept of culture as French society responded to the decolonization process by introducing new forms of perceived ‘cybernetic’ control mechanisms across society.

Faced with repression and control through softened forms of cultural coercion and mute economic compulsions, the avant-garde would have to rethink its strategies of resistance by learning from the decolonization struggles abroad. The only ‘worthy sequel’ to the historical avant-garde’s affront to the capitalist order, as Debord stated, would be ‘the spontaneous revolt of a people’.<sup>75</sup> Debord was referring more specifically to the upheavals in then-newly liberated Congo, and to how the Congolese had immediately appropriated ‘the foreign language of the masters as poetry and as a form of action’:

We should respectfully study the expression of the Congolese during this period in order to recognize in it the greatness and effectiveness (cf. the role of the poet Lumumba) of the only possible communication that, in all

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cases, accompanies intervention in events and the transformation of the world.<sup>76</sup>

In an echo of Marx's eleventh Feuerbach thesis, Debord aligns the SI's programme of 'realized poetry' and the *dépassement* of art with 'intervention in events' and the 'transformation of the world'.<sup>77</sup> While this also implied supporting struggles abroad, Debord was not content with a Third Worldist perspective like many on the French left at the time. Instead, while never losing sight of liberation struggles abroad, one of the SI's guiding motives throughout the 1960s was to prepare the terrain in metropolitan France for synchronous forms of action, for 'intervention in events' within the French hexagon itself. As pointed out by cultural theorists Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, when Debord first theorized *détournement* in 1956, it was in the context of a symbolic inversion between home and abroad.<sup>78</sup> On the front cover of the issue of the post-surrealist journal *Les Lèvres nues*, in which Debord and Gil J. Wolman published their seminal text 'Mode d'emploi du détournement', the French hexagon was fittingly 'reoccupied, counter-colonised by Algerian place-names'.<sup>79</sup>

The SI's proposition to overthrow bourgeois culture in one single poetic breath, as inspired by the poet Lumumba, began from a reappropriation of the creative legacy of the historical avant-garde to counter the impoverished and mind-numbing effects of contemporaneous art and poetry by recognizing the revolutionary power inherent in language itself:

Information theory straightaway ignores the chief power of language, which lies on its poetic level: to combat and to supersede ... Despite the magnificent hypotheses of a 'poetics of information' (Abraham Moles), despite the moving confidence of their misinterpretation of [Kurt] Schwitters or [Tristan] Tzara, the technologists of language will never understand anything but the language of *technology*. They do not know who will pass judgment on all this.<sup>80</sup>

As opposed to an empty language that merely reflects the state of communication technologies, the SI saw language as charged with a revolutionary surplus: poetry as a form of *practical*, not merely theoretical, 'intervention in events'.<sup>81</sup>

Their main opponents were Moles and his close colleague at Ulm, the German philosopher Max Bense. Together, these two men spearheaded the post-war reconfiguration of art in information theoretical terms. Although disregarded in art history and in conventional histories of the avant-garde, Moles and Bense promoted from the 'command centre' in Ulm a novel art-theoretical agenda that became known as 'information aesthetics'. It was arguably one of the single most ambitious yet crucially overlooked attempts in the history of modernism to liquidate any metaphysical remnants in the work of art and redefine, from the ground up, the entire discipline of philosophical aesthetics.

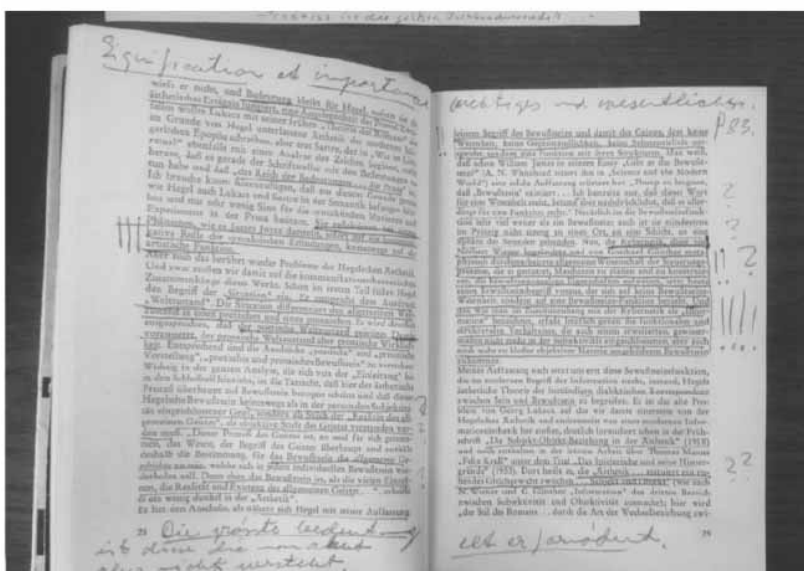
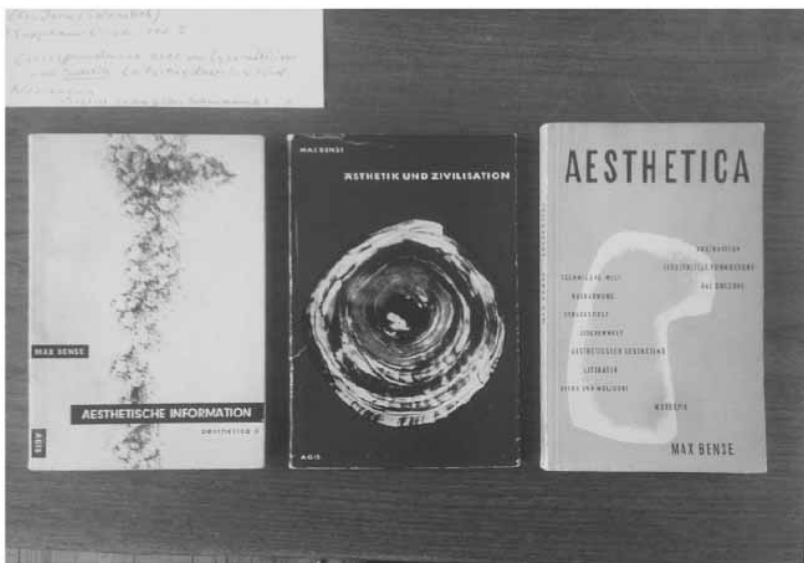
### Information Aesthetics

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Few even remember their names today, but Abraham Moles and Max Bense were arguably the two most influential thinkers of aesthetics in Western Europe in the 1950s and 1960s. Their programmes of ‘information aesthetics’ grew out of their dissatisfaction with recurrences of mysticism, mythologemes, and strands of vitalism in post-war art.<sup>82</sup> Their longstanding preoccupation at Ulm with cybernetics and its mathematical adjunct science, information theory, led them to conceive of the necessity of reconceptualizing art in altogether different terms and of wresting criticism from its philosophical stronghold in the humanities.<sup>83</sup> In Stuttgart, Bense began lecturing on information aesthetics between 1956 and 1958, and around the same time published the second book in his series on philosophical aesthetics, *Aesthetica II: Aesthetische Information*.<sup>84</sup> In France, Moles published his equally influential book on a related topic, *Théorie de l'information et perception esthétique*, in 1958.<sup>85</sup> Briefly described, information aesthetics borrows from Shannon and Weaver’s original formulation of information theory the assumption that questions of meaning are irrelevant and that tomorrow’s engineers of beauty should deal with aesthetic impressions *statistically*.<sup>86</sup>

The information aesthetic reconceptualization of art rests on the idea that a work of art is nothing more than a set of material impressions conventionally accepted as ‘good’, ‘beautiful’, or ‘interesting’. The impact of a work of art on its beholder should also, therefore, be statistically calculable. Rid of its metaphysical assumptions, the philosophical discipline of aesthetics could proceed, Bense and Moles agreed, in a manner compatible with the formalizable language of the natural sciences. Although one finds little explicit mention of Moles and Bense’s information aesthetics in the journals of the SI, it was arguably the backdrop for much of the critical discourse on cybernetics. Jorn, for instance, held copiously annotated copies of Bense’s three books on aesthetics in his personal library (see [Figure 4.4](#)).

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Figure 4.4. Books from Asger Jorn's personal library. © Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.

Theoretical matters and art-politics were inseparable for the SI, and Bense and Moles's information aesthetics was anathema. The 'futility of the theoretical knitting of Max Bense', Jorn remarked in an unpublished text from 1960, was already 'put in its place in 1958' by the Gruppe Spur.<sup>87</sup> The incident Jorn refers to may be considered the inception of the series of interventions traced in this chapter. Art historian Mia Lee provides the best available account of the hoax:

In January 1959, the Munich-based art group Spur co-organized an art exhibit titled 'Realists-Extremists' at the Museum for Ethnology. Flyers for the exhibit advertised that the highly esteemed German philosopher Max Bense would deliver the opening night lecture. On the evening of 23 January, a large, well-dressed audience congregated at the Museum for Ethnology to hear Bense. They were thus duly surprised when 23-year-old Spur artist Hans-Peter Zimmer walked to the podium and switched on a tape recorder. A voice purporting to be Bense apologized for unforeseen hindrances and proceeded to deliver a talk on a wild mix of concepts including aesthetic information, continuity, coincidence, perfection, and civilization ... After the lecture, the audience dutifully applauded. Then, over the course of the next few days, nonplussed journalists contacted Bense to ask him about the highly unorthodox presentation. Bense reacted with as much astonishment as the journalists. The professor had not actually received an invitation to the exhibit, and the talk had in fact been a textual collage of his writings cut-and-pasted and recorded by Hans-Peter Zimmer.<sup>88</sup>

The Gruppe Spur's first venture in the situationist practice of *détournement* led them to be officially welcomed into the SI.<sup>89</sup> The form and content of this intervention brings it into line with later developments in the SI. Hans-Peter Zimmer's recording consisted of extracts of Bense's aesthetic philosophy but mixed with a 'deliberately nonsensical cut-up of German, Latin and French phrases with garbled quotations from Marx and Hegel', in such a confused way that it self-declaredly amounted to a message in 'cybernetic form'.<sup>90</sup> The aversion to the apologists of 'cybernetics' evidently reaches deep into the theoretical and political texture of the SI. After the turn of the 1960s these kinds of interventions would take renewed priority, if in a less humoristic and more malign form.

The attacks against Moles in 1966–67, and the concurrent critical jabs at cybernetics found in situationist discourse more generally throughout the 1960s, appear to have developed out of these early interventions. When considered chronologically, it becomes evident that the critique of cybernetics constitutes a little-noted trajectory in the situationist movement that cuts across the supposed divide between an artistic and political phase. One last historical coordinate, maybe the most significant, needs to be added to complete the picture of this decade-long critical campaign against the 'cyberneticians'.

## The Neo-Artist and Its Model

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On 1 December 1964, Debord wrote in a letter to Khayati that he had been ‘thinking again about the ideas’ they had discussed at their last meeting. Apparently Khayati, who was part of a nexus of situationist sympathizers at Strasbourg, had suggested to Debord a retaliation against Moles for having sent the open letter to the situationists. Moles was, at this point, still teaching at Strasbourg alongside Lefebvre but had not yet attained a professorial chair to be chased away from, as would happen in 1966. Debord wrote to Khayati that, in the event of an uprising, it would be ideal to redistribute the ‘Correspondence with a Cybernetician’, unabridged and in the form of a tract. Debord and Khayati tossed ideas back and forth until March 1965, when they decided on the perfect occasion for the attack: Moles would be chairing a conference on 24 March at the University of Strasbourg together with none other than Schöffer himself – the perfect opportunity, in other words, to settle the score with not one but two of their most despised cybernetic creatures. In a letter preceding the attack, Debord wrote:

Go ahead then for the attack on Moles on the 24th! With regard to Schöffer, I do not have time to write an article about him. The best – in fact the only right way to do this – would be if you quickly composed a text by yourself, signed by you, presented as an appendix or précis of sorts [to the ‘Correspondence ...’] You could cite – or make a *détournement* of – as it seems appropriate, the texts from the SI on the general idea of this matter: Schöffer is the typical representative of *the art of integration* (of housing projects, of cybernetics, of consumption, and of the police). Take, for instance, what we said in SI # 8 in the article ‘L’avant-garde de la présence’. For one, Schöffer is the prototypical artist of the signal (with all the authoritarian connotations of that word). Secondly, even if he is not a member of the Groupe de recherche d’art visuel, he is something like their father. You could perhaps quote the praise in [the journal] *Planète* ... those who are praised by *Planète* deserve *Planète*. Have you seen that [Kostas] Axelos collaborates now with *Planète*? Logical conclusion to *Arguments*. Make sure to keep me updated,

*Amitiés,* Guy

[PS] Here’s a first stab at some possible titles for your tract:

THE PROGRAMMERS THEMSELVES MUST HAVE BEEN PROGRAMMED

THE DIALECTIC OF THE ROBOT AND THE SIGNAL

THE ROBOT AND ITS DOUBLE

THE ROBOT IS MATING

THE CREATOR (AND ITS MODEL)

THE ARTIST (AND ITS MODEL)

THE NEO-ARTIST (AND ITS MODEL)

But only this one appears any good: DIALECTIQUE DU ROBOT ET DU SIGNAL, [The Dialectic of the robot and the signal] to be used in the text itself if not for the title? Or you can perhaps come up with something better yourself, or even a *détournement* of Lautréamont:

BEAUTIFUL LIKE THE CHANCE ENCOUNTER OF A ROBOT-MOLES AND A SIGNAL-SCHÖFFER AT TABLE WITH [MAURICE] PAPON (or: OF A PREFECT OF POLICE).<sup>91</sup>

These remarks by Debord clearly show that he was closely following Schöffer’s trajectory as an artist and was keeping a vigilant eye on developments in contemporaneous art, which, as Claire Bishop has shown, stood under the sign of participation.<sup>92</sup> As Larry Busbea notes, it is important to remember that ‘though the critique of spectacle culture has come down to us as a condemnation of the popular or mass media, it was historically also addressed to participatory forms of art, with which

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the situationists were deeply involved'.<sup>93</sup> Key to understanding the origins of the SI's critique of the 'spectacle', Busbea convincingly argues, is their strong opposition to contemporaneous figures such as Schöffer and the group GRAV. It is worth recalling the relevant passage that Debord refers to from the Editorial Notes to *international situationniste* no. 8 entitled 'L'Avant-garde de la présence' (the avant-garde of presence):

Some technicians would like to reform the spectacle. [Julio] Le Parc, in a tract published in September 1962 by the 'Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel', thinks it possible for the passive spectator to evolve into a 'stimulated spectator' or even an 'interpreter-spectator', but still within the framework of specialized old-hat ideas that would provide 'some kinds of sculptures to be grappled with, dances to be painted, swordplay paintings'. At most, Le Parc reaches the point of using a few para-situationist formulas: 'In frankly admitting the reversal of the traditional situation of the passive spectator, one distorts the idea of the spectacle.' This is an idea, however, that it is better not to distort, but properly to gauge its place in society. The futility of Le Parc's hopes for his spectator who will gratify him by achieving 'real participation (the manipulation of elements)' – oh yes! and visual artists will certainly have their elements already – takes on more solidity when, at the end of his text, he extends a hand toward 'the notion of programming', i.e., to the cyberneticians of power.<sup>94</sup>

Considering the proximity between GRAV and the SI, at least in terms of rhetoric, one might mistake one for the other. But despite superficial similarities the differences were profound. As the SI stated, 'the dialectic of history is such that the victory of the Situationist International in matters of theory already obliges its adversaries to *disguise themselves* as situationists'.<sup>95</sup> The 'neo-artists' in GRAV, to whom Schöffer had given the signal (so to speak) as early as in 1956 on the rooftop of Le Corbusier's *gratte-ciel* in Marseille, were merely recuperating the situationist agenda to be able to 'speak of a new problem, so as to popularize it themselves after having rejected it as long as they could, and now extirpating only its violence, its connection with general subversion, thereby watering it down to an academic statement, or worse'.<sup>96</sup>

These considerations went into the planned attack on Moles and Schöffer on 24 March 1965. Approaching the day of the intervention, on 20 March, Debord received a copy of the reprint of 'Correspondence with a Cybernetician' from Khayati and replied approvingly that it was '*très beau!*' but that he was still struggling to come up with a good title for the appended tract:

In order to find a title for your tract, we had a quick *brainstorm* with Jean-Pierre and François George; we didn't come up with anything good in the half an hour our session lasted. But now Michèle [Bernstein] suggests 'La Tortue dans la vitrine' [The turtle in the window], the turtle being the cybernetic animal number one (and resembling Moles well enough); the window [*mur de lumière*] being the artistic ideal and the profound model of N. Schöffer; and finally, all of this evokes the 'girl in the window', the famous form of prostitution in Hamburg or Antwerp. But perhaps this title would need some explication in a few lines of text? In any case, the overall impression should be that Moles and Schöffer inevitably fit together, by virtue of their nullity as well as their function.<sup>97</sup>

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It was Michèle Bernstein, then, who eventually came up with the title for Khayati's tract. Following Debord's directives closely, the tract was composed and distributed as an appendix to a reprint of the *Correspondance* ... It was Khayati, along with Jean Garnault and the siblings Théo Frey and Édith Frey, who assured the distribution of the tract at the conference. The local press described the disturbance 'by a small Situationist commando' only in passing, noting that it did not even prevent the unfolding of the events.<sup>98</sup> In the SI's own remarks on the event in their journal *internationale situationniste*, they quipped: 'What were they expecting, a killing perhaps?'<sup>99</sup>

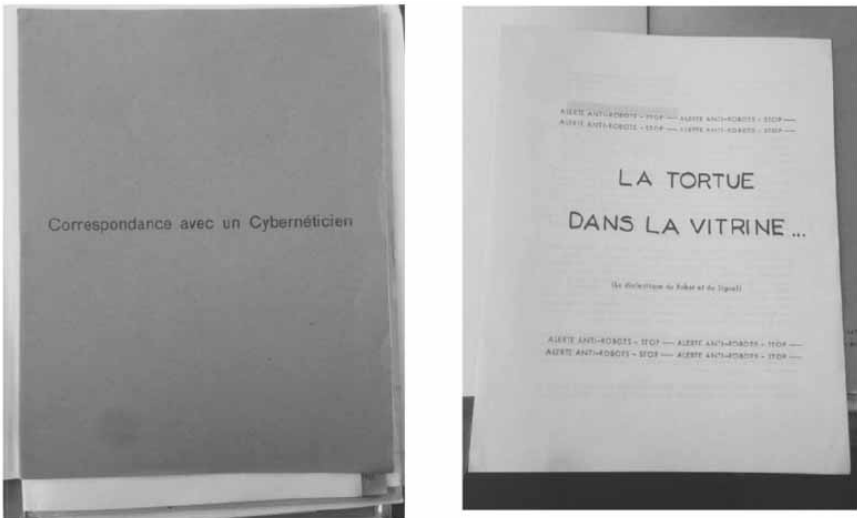


Figure 4.5. Situationist tracts. © Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.

But why was it precisely Schöffer and Moles who were targeted by the situationists and not, say, Louis Couffignal, Albert Ducrocq, or one of the countless other influential popularizers of cybernetics in France in the 1960s? Apart from the reasons already indicated, the targeting of Schöffer and Moles (the neo-artist and its model) had to do with their proximity to art. So, beyond the fact that Moles had stepped on Debord's toes by circulating an open letter to the situationists in which he more or less covertly ridiculed their programme and satirized the implications of the idea of a situation, the main reason Moles repeatedly became the prime target of the situationists was, arguably, his proximity to art and particularly his alignment with Schöffer, the GRAV and other *new tendencies* of the European neo-avant-garde.

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### New Tendencies

The post-war idiom New Tendencies (NT) refers, more specifically, to what art historians consider one of ‘the first major art movements to break through the stalemate in art after the Second World War’.<sup>100</sup> What that means is hard to grasp considering the proliferation of movements such as COBRA, *surréalisme révolutionnaire*, *lettrisme*, *internationale lettrisme*, and other collectivities that emerged ‘after modernism’.<sup>101</sup> More exact would be to describe NT as one of the most significant *neo-avant-garde* movements to break through on a major *commercial* scale. And this was precisely the reason why the situationists opposed these artists wholeheartedly.

Art historian Armin Medosch provides one of the fullest accounts of how the NT emerged from former Yugoslavia but developed over the course of 1960s into a loose-knit trans-European network of collaborating artists.<sup>102</sup> This quintessential *neo-avant-garde* movement shared, despite its internal differences, something like a ‘collective ethos’ that was, Medosch explains, largely inspired by the post-war ‘cybernetic matrix’ at the HfG in Ulm and the information aesthetic programme nurtured by Moles and Bense. The artists participating in this European ‘network of networks’ came from various artist groups, such as the German group ZERO, Italian groups N and T, the Spanish Equipo 57 and, most importantly, the already mentioned Paris-based *Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel* (GRAV).<sup>103</sup>

Perceiving their practice as less oriented in producing ‘works of art’ than facilitating an open-ended process of artistic research, ultimately geared towards an application of the emerging communication sciences to the production process, the NT artists’ approach (though it was by no means a unified perspective but rather precisely a *tendency*) can best be described as a cybernetically reloaded neo-constructivist approach. Consider, in this regard, Medosch’s summary of the NT’s working method:

Their way of working eliminated the subjective element of ‘creativity’. The artistic genius, who had preoccupied the bourgeois understanding of art since the days of Immanuel Kant, was put back into the bottle. The search for structures that corresponded with the psycho-physical reality of perception led to the invention of what came to be called ‘programmed art’, art based on the objectification of the production process. The research process, undertaken with a cool mindset, aimed at inventing a specific procedure for producing work. This procedure could also be carried out by a machine or by workers in a workshop without any further interference.<sup>104</sup>

The NT artists left any possible conflicting political-aesthetic perspectives by the wayside and affirmed the *neo-avant-garde*’s art-into-life programmatic head on, with little or no concern that this *life* was already premised on the existence of *capitalist* social relations of production. GRAV, the most prolific node in the network, amplified the new tendencies in post-war art, which, as Medosch explains, tended towards ‘turning the artist’s studio into a psycho-physiological research laboratory’.<sup>105</sup> In a broader historical sense, NT arguably fits the Bürgerian bill of the *neo-avant-garde*: retaining

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the historical avant-garde's radical quest for an integration of art into life, these artists nonetheless deployed various means (cross-disciplinary collaboration, creative methods aligned with the demands of mass production, a cool mindset, team research, an emphasis on technological innovation, design, market accommodation, etc.) that had in the meantime become internally accepted and encouraged procedures within the capitalist post-war economy.<sup>106</sup>

In contrast to this form of cybernetic collectivism, the SI defies assimilation to the category of the neo-avant-garde. One might say, following Jelena Stojanovic's characterization of the SI, that what makes the movement's trajectory unique to the post-war moment in art's revival of internationalism and collectivism was that they developed a 'grotesque' critique, an ironic and performative reprisal of the interwar avant-garde project aiming to:

negate the rhetoric that there were two avant-gardes – one political, the other aesthetic – that are in turn divided along imaginary lines of demarcation and positioned by mutual subordination and subservience. This same utopian drive led them to challenge both official Marxist doctrine and institutionally established, artistic avant-gardism. They strongly believed that international collectives provided, inadvertently perhaps yet uniquely, the underpinning for both the aesthetic and the political avant-garde, and that the very existence of collectivism profoundly challenged any form of specialization, spatialization, or demarcation.<sup>107</sup>

At this point, it is important to underscore that, even though the situationist movement in the period examined in this chapter, from the turn of the 1960s to May '68, is often described as leaving artistic concerns behind in favour of a purely political praxis, their distinct contribution to the radical thought of the 1960s largely developed in response to tendencies in contemporary art. The 'neo-artists', under the influence of cyberneticians like Moles, had uncritically aligned their practice with the exigencies of capital and market rather than putting themselves, as (parts of) the historical avant-garde had done, in the service of the revolution. Contrary to this, the situationists insisted on the continued relevance of the most political concept of all, that of the *revolution*. Significantly, this insistence took place at a point when this concept, like that of the avant-garde itself, was being fundamentally transformed and depoliticized. These were the stakes, in other words, of the situationist critique of capitalist society in the run-up to May '68.

In this framework, the moniker 'cybernetics', appearing here and there in the critical discourse of the situationists and on the Nanterre poster discussed at the beginning of this chapter, became a signifier for a counter-revolutionary emptying out of historical and political experience in art and politics: a secret counter-revolution that passed unnoticed by most orthodox Marxists at the time.

### Waiting for Cybernetics

## 27 Rage Against the Machine

The turn of phrase on the poster 'EN ATTENDANT LA CYBERNÉTIQUE, LES FLICS' (Waiting for cybernetics, the cops) invokes more than Samuel Beckett's famous play *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*). From within the history of the avant-garde, it inevitably also echoes the internal dispute between two factions in the surrealist movement in the late 1920s over whether to join ranks with the French Communist Party (PCF) to participate wholeheartedly in the service of the revolution. As chronicled in the earliest histories of surrealism and handed down to posterity as an episode that in many ways summed up the existential conflict between art and political engagement, André Breton famously defended his views contra Pierre Naville that, while waiting [*en attendant*] for power to be wrested from the bourgeoisie and handed over to the proletariat in an act of political revolution, it was no less important that 'the experiences of inner life were pursued, and, naturally, without any outside interference, even if it is Marxist'.<sup>108</sup>

For Breton and his faction of surrealists, in other words, the absence of revolution remained a time for the free and unrestrained pursuit of art – if only for a moment, as Breton would soon after the dispute have a change of heart and decide to join ranks with Naville in the PCF. For the situationists, in contrast, art as a supposedly revolutionary pastime was no more a viable option than the PCF or orthodox Marxism. Under changed historical circumstances, the idea of a political revolution as a transfer of power from one class to the other was being replaced by an apolitical scheme of revolution understood as the supposedly neutral progress of science and technology. This transformation in the concept of revolution, an emptying out of any political content, is perfectly captured in a speech that Moles delivered in Zagreb in August 1968:

We are currently experiencing a new revolution of much greater importance than the mechanical revolution that inspired Marx. A revolution of *automation*, of *artificial thought*, of *symbiosis with the machines*, and of *mastery of communication*: that is precisely what we have referred to, for quite a few years now, as a 'secret revolution', because those who are taking part in it, all of us, are not even conscious of it. In the age in which we find ourselves, a change is operative that will naturally impact our consciousness and determine what we become: from now on, this revolution which has been concealed, occulted, and diffused, emerges as one of the determining factors of the world of tomorrow.<sup>109</sup>

Moles – as stoically unmoved by the political turbulence of his time as dean Grappin on the *Nanterre* poster – appeals to a secret revolution of technical progress that he considers inevitable, natural, and unstoppable. By contrast, the history of the Situationist International in the age of automation reminds us that the idea of progress is a bourgeois conceit that would-be revolutionaries can, and *must*, contend with and struggle against.