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Détournement - premise of the Remix from a political, aesthetic and technical perspective?

In the late 1950s the French revolutionary artists' group the Situationist International (SI) decided to fight against, and destabilize, capitalist society by creating visual representations, objects and situations that would question the spectators, invite them to reconsider their own position towards society, and increase their internationalist consciousness.

*'THE SITUATIONISTS must take every opportunity to oppose retrograde forces and ideologies, in the culture and wherever the question of the meaning of life arises.'*¹

As an example of their different actions and modalities, we can use their attack during the 'International Assembly Of Art Critics' in Belgium. They disrupted the press conference, handed out abusive flyers, a tactic that had served them well as the Lettrist International when they disrupted a Charlie Chaplin press conference, and also when one member, dressed as a priest, denounced God and the church from the pulpit of Notre Dame cathedral.

On an international level, they supported acts of defiance such as the Los Angeles Watts race riots of 1965. They wrote and asked for support from artists and intellectuals in Europe to sign the *Declaration on the Right to Insubordination in the Algerian War* and published it in September 1960. On a national level, they made assaults on French cyberneticians at Strasbourg University in 1966 and against sociologists at Nanterre University. These violent actions were a prelude to the events of May 68, the first wildcat strike in history and the largest general strike to stop the economic functioning of an industrial capitalist society. In a speech about the aftermath in June 1968, Charles De Galle declared that 'this explosion was provoked by groups rebelling against modern consumer and technical society, whether it be the communism of the East or the capitalism of the West.'²

The ramifications of this movement in different cultural contexts are interesting enough to warrant a specific study of its history, its goals and different means of expression.

As the transmission of these powerful political and aesthetic moments, rooted in the dynamic of *détournement*, were part of my training with Jean Rouch, I proposed a feedback 40 years ago after Rouch had described all these ideas. Jean Rouch, ethnologist, engineer and internationally famous film maker, questioned our relationship to the so called 'real', our ways of perceiving differences in cultural expression, and also our means of understanding phenomena classified as invisible.

After a brief historical overview of the SI and their political agenda based on *détournement*, I will explore some of the work produced by Jean Rouch as a connecting factor between the SI and the Remix movement, to see the different forms taken by the Remix in the visual arts or in music production, and underline their similarities or differences from political, aesthetic and technical perspectives.

History

To fully understand the dynamic and theoretical position of the SI, we should keep in mind that since 1940, aesthetic production was fully transformed into a commodity, as Walter Benjamin outlined in *The work of Art in the Age of Mechanical reproduction* in 1936.

In 1952, on July 27th in Italy, a collective of avant garde artists, members of several movements and associations such as COBRA, Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam, the Lettrist movement, the International Movement for an *imaginiste* Bauhaus of Asger Jorn and the London Committee, founded the Situationist International. One of its prominent thinkers and most powerful personalities was Guy Debord.

We can detect three main periods in the development of the Situationists:

The Lettrist moment, with the experimental avant-garde movement, which became emblematic through a text by Ivan Chatcheglov, *Formulation for a New Urbanism*³, which became part of the new direction of the International Lettrists and also part of the archives of the SI. The text exemplifies the position of the Surrealists who focused on 'forgotten desires'

in the city. The act of *déambulation* in the city, without self-consciousness, echoing the ‘cadavre exquis’ technique based on the random juxtaposition of words - these personal meanderings were part of a process to rediscover visual meanings inscribed in the city which conveyed negation, rebellion and eccentricity.

The second period from 1958-1962 gave rise to an experimental form of expression: the imposition of additional or altered speech, bubbles on pre-existing photocomics, promotion of guerilla tactics in the mass media, production of situationist films and comic strips.

Later on, from 1963 to 1968, the SI developed the theory and practice of the Exemplary Act. We can read in *Our goals and Methods in the Strasbourg Scandal*⁴ :

‘In fact, we want ideas to become dangerous again. We cannot be accepted with the spinelessness of a false eclectic interest, as if we were Sartre’s, Althusser’s, Aragon’s or Godard’s’.

They developed an incisive and coherent critique of Western capitalism and Eastern bureaucratic capitalism. Their singular position towards political classification took them to the edge, navigating between socially or morally unacceptable positions, revolutionary discourse and exhortations to protest.

“The SITUATIONIST MOVEMENT can be seen as an artistic avant-garde, as an experimental investigation of possible ways to freely construct everyday life, and as a contribution to the theoretical and practical development of a new revolutionary protest”.⁵

In 1956 Guy Debord and Gil J Wolman published a User’s Guide to *détournement* in *Les Lèvres Nues* #6, defining the different kinds of *détournement*: the minor one based on “an element which has no importance in itself... a press clipping, a commonplace photograph...” and “the deceptive one, based on an intrinsically significant element, which derives a different scope from the new context”.

Extensively *détournés* works are a composition of several deceptive and minor *détournements*. The Movement's members formulated different laws for *détournement*. Without describing all these laws, such a specific and precise classification gives us an idea of the necessity to organize their actions against the bourgeoisie and intellectuals at large by proposing a list of commitments and a clear methodology to reach their goals.

On the other hand, this precise ontology of methods and possibilities to destabilize entrenched society raises the question of exclusion. The Situationists were too often excluding themselves, to protect the SI from being bought out, exploited, weakened by any form of misinterpretation. Probably the *ultra-détournement* operating in everyday social life, the construction of situations and the nature of the ultimate goal of the SI's activities, gave rise to aggressive exclusion. In fact, over the course of its history, we can count approximately 70 members - but due to the frequent expulsions, only 10 to 20 members were part of the movement at any one time. In 1972, the SI movement had only two remaining members; Gianfranco Sanguinetti and Guy Debord.

The political situation in the aftermath of May 68 in France but also in Italy led Debord to officially dissolve the SI. This dissolution was less the consequence of its internal disputes than of its external failure.

“The political, artistic and personal position of an ‘assault on bourgeois culture’, an assault which is invariably both superficially scandalous and notoriously superficial, condemns itself to the anonymity of peripheral opposition. It was this precarious condition involving alternate forms of paralysis which the SI both described and fell victim to”.⁶

Dissemination of the *détournement*

Even if this political and artistic movement failed to reach its goals, we shouldn't underestimate the repercussions it had in different countries or in different cultural areas over a long period of time.

One of the most famous documentary filmmakers, Jean Rouch, had been influenced by the Surrealist movement and the SI and disseminated their anarchist ideas in his teaching all over the world. In the field of Visual Anthropology, he took a prominent role by questioning the relationship between fiction and documentary, by introducing a descriptive technique to convey a poetic approach - in an academic environment he introduced unclassified objects, to force students and scholars to redefine their own position toward the observed group of people filmed but also toward the discipline and its implicit rules.

In fact, as the SI would suggest - to have pleasure, to enjoy and laugh and even to turn situations into derision - were part of the everyday agenda of these practitioners. Based on these same implicit values, one of the pleasures of Jean Rouch was to transmit his knowledge and experience and to create situations where laughing was the first priority in facing a new or a complex situation. He disseminated it around the world - in the United States, in Japan, in Mexico and in France, where he created a PHD in Visual Anthropology. This courageous and quite revolutionary attempt (including filmic elements in an anthropology PHD, around 1975) was rooted in the idea of democratizing the power of creation, introducing students to sensible forms of appropriations of knowledge, to look and to discover the real by recreating it... Rouch always referred to '*détournement*' as an everyday basic activity, and as a way of seeing. Students should be aware of their capacities to produce queer objects⁷ as he did, by producing films questioning traditional academic classifications. The goal was to blur the boundaries between disciplines, subjects in order to question the act of creation and to put into circulation objects strange enough never to be truly classifiable ... We were trained within this '*détournement*' spirit and one example Rouch gave us was the scandal provoked by the screening of his film *The Crazy Masters* at the Museum of Mankind in 1955. This documentary about Hawka possession dances portrayed the undermining colonialist power, the political domination and the violence it exerted on the population. After Marcel Griaule

asked Rouch in public to destroy the film, the only one who took his defense was Luc de Heush, also named *Luc Zangrie* and who took part in Cobra activities as a writer and filmmaker. He openly defended Rouch's film for its singular vision and its powerful statement about society. It's likely that Luc de Heush had quickly understood the persuasive discourse and the necessity of really questioning the repercussions and consequences of colonialism, and to position them within an artistic answer. *The Crazy Masters* received a prize at the Mostra of Venice in 1957.

By recalling the links between activist movements and academic activities, I underline the fact that '*détournement*' became a mindset, a dynamic, a loyalty to a revolutionary dimension outside of any political movement. Rouch was an anarchist and this dimension was crucial for him, and he often told his students that he never took part in a vote. He felt this strong position was rooted not in an artistic desire or intellectual aesthetics but in his own childhood experiences, his relationship with his mother and also his experiences of the War: "He speaks of his memories in the womb using the image of a lover's separation, a carnal separation, a separation that would structure the rest of his life...24 years of heaven between two bouts of Hell"⁸. Or as he also said, "We were witnesses to the defeat, to the landslide of the French army, which was supposed to be the best in the world. At this moment, something happened in my life: I couldn't believe in anything, either in my father, or my professors, in God, in Freud, in Marx... Nothing. It was the end... I was no longer answerable to my society... that's how it all began on a beautiful day in May..."⁹

These declarations were part of our training; the spirit of our work was imbued with the values and methods of the SI.

During my fieldwork, the media landscape changed quite quickly, and from my first Super 8mm documentary film about daily activities in Dogon country in 1977, to the film I did with Philippe Lourdou on the funerals and enthronement of the Arou Hogon broadcasted on Arte

in 1997, the challenge of keeping a singular point of view on the people you have lived with for almost 30 years was crucial. I realized progressively that my films were part of the Society of Spectacle, I was invited to fight against this from the early days of my training.

The standardization of the audiovisual forms of representation of the Dogon, the uniformization of the DVD as potential support for translating and archiving data collected during my fieldwork with the Dogon, inspired me to conceive a research project on the way digital technologies as a new tool, new equipment or new support can render the knowledge acquired in fieldwork in different ways. As Rouch might have put it, 'there is no such thing as an arbitrary objective'.

During this research, I realized how the Remix movement could refer to the SI as a source of inspiration, with its own rules, its specific political agenda and its own means of expression.

My research focused on the ways digital technologies can improve our ways of representing traditional society where time and space didn't have the same values, functions and forms of representation. The linearity of the film and the narrativity induced by the filmic structure could no longer be the solution. During my research at UCBS one of the first people I met was Lev Manovich, who had already published *The Language of New Media*.

By trying to explain and analyze the definition and function of New Media in early 2001, Manovich took his inspiration from Dziga Vertov, one of Jean Rouch's totemic ancestors, and his film *The Man with a Movie Camera*. Manovich explained the different kind of values in the editing technique: the one linked to process with a temporal aspect and the editing one with its superimposition of different images or multiple screens: Manovich theorized it by affirming that film can overcome its indexical nature, presenting the viewer with objects which never existed in reality. Manovich pursues his reasoning by presenting Vertov as the one who conceived the first database on city life in 1920, a database of film techniques and a database of new operations of visual epistemology. It is also a database of new interface

operations which together aim to go beyond simple human navigation through a physical space.

My own “meandering” attitude, trying to find means, supports and colleagues working in the same spirit spurred me to leave the Anthropology department for the Media Art building, where I found students and colleagues who introduced me to the language of programming. I realized this new language could, once we had mastered it, be a powerful *détournement* tool as well as a creative language. It was clear that the language of programming could also be the best method and the most effective system for the standardization of representations and their rapid dissemination. In my research program I followed the workshops of Marcos Novak, a digital artist creating ‘liquid architecture’ environments. He taught us how to create, to shape our reasoning as Da Vinci might have done. He would say, ‘if your reasoning is right then you can shape it’. He was inspired by Garcia Lorca’s concept of the ‘duende’, and he invited us to create and to put into circulation what I called “queer objects”.... Within this programming language class, far away from the French Surrealist movement, far away from any documentary film questions, I found the same spirit, the same motivation as I had found with Rouch almost 20 years before.

Novak quickly concluded that creation was not the main purpose or even the goal of our training and production. The dynamic was to prolong what had been done: the focus was on the action not the author, we didn’t invest in posing as creators or artists with an inspirational spirit, nor to build a career as the creators of a new form - we wanted to free ourselves from being ‘the first one to...’ in order to focus on the interpretation, understanding, conception and all other elements pertaining to producing and shaping our lines of enquiry. We sought to become more conscious of the multiplicity of realities; the strength had to be in creating new forms from pre-existing elements.

In this way the students abandoned their private dream of conceiving personal creations, in favour of investing the idea of repetition, recreation and transformation. Progressively I slipped into the world of the Remix movement, on the border between the actualization of the Situationist International and the achievement of the Society of Spectacle.

These examples show how the notion of “*détournement*” linked different political situations, cultural surroundings, social productions and technical systems in a very subtle way. The idea of “*détournement*”, even without a satisfactory English translation, had played an important role since 1970/80 in music, media, arts and the creative industries overall.

To go back to the original definitions as the SI did in 1959, in the Situationist Internationale letter:¹⁰

“DÉTOURNEMENT, the re-use of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble, has been a constantly present tendency of the contemporary avant-garde, both before and since the formation of the SI. The two fundamental laws of détournement are the loss of importance of each ‘detoured’ autonomous element — which may go so far as to completely lose its original meaning — and at the same time the organization of another meaningful ensemble that confers on each element its new scope and effect. This combination of parody and seriousness reflects the contradictions of an era in which we find ourselves confronted with both the urgent necessity and the near impossibility of initiating and carrying out a totally innovative collective action.”

Ken Knabb who translated into English most of the texts of the Situationist movement explained “The French word *détournement* means deflection, diversion, rerouting, distortion, misuse, misappropriation, hijacking, or otherwise turning something aside from its normal course or purpose.”

At the margins of ‘La Société du Spectacle’?

Plagiarism was both the source and the meaning of the original work, which was subverted to create a new work. For SI, ‘there is no Situationist art, only Situationist uses of art’. The SI used ‘*détournement*’ in films, art, graphics for their journal and in posters that ‘hijacked’ comics during the events of May ’68.

The ideas behind the concept, the methodology, the actions, which were part of the détournement, drove people to directly denounce the Society of Spectacle. Debord wrote extensively on this theme in a book published in 1967 and in a film. 'La Société du Spectacle', released in 1973. In their declarations we read:

"Spectacle is not the domination of the world by images or any other form of mind control but the domination of a social interaction mediated by images. Reification separates people from one another but the spectacle is a unifying principle of society where it 'reunites the separate, but reunites them as separate. As people consume the commodities or image-objects of the spectacle they become part of the spectacle, making rebellion against it hard. Even the most radical gesture gets recuperated into the spectacle and turned into a commodity, negating its subversive meaning – It is a question not of elaborating the spectacle of refusal, but rather of refusing the spectacle. Everything becomes a commodity in the spectacle, even TV, radio, the internet, books, ideas, thoughts and desires. Rebellion is sold back to us as an image that pacifies us."

Creating and disseminating songs, lyrics and pictures that condemn the Society of Spectacle is now very common, and the artists referring to the movement and philosophy are numerous. The complexity of the situation is not to define whether the references to the SI or 'détournement' are true, honest or accurate but to underline how the globalization process and the media industry are now exploiting all these elements, which originally came from the counter culture.

The Remix

The inspirational value, the revolutionary visual messages found everywhere from the walls of May 68 to the Internet, the personal understanding and individual actions spreading throughout the world, have become part of global culture. SI might have said, 'our ideas are now commonplace, in all our minds.' They really understood the boredom generated by

commodity capitalism. We can choose to analyze two different manners of interpreting or taking inspiration from the SI in the Remix area. One trend was the punk movement and the Sex Pistols who took advantage of the '*détournement*' methodology to reach their goals in conservative English society in the 1970s; another positioned itself at the margins of the society with the DJ movement and the transformation of artistic creation into Dub.

It's probably in the Punk movement that we find the most obvious public connection with the SI. In the aftermath of May 68, the Sex Pistols was one of the first punk groups to fully take advantage of society's political and sociological weaknesses. Looking at the lyrics of one of the songs of the Sex Pistols, '*Anarchy in the UK*', they refer explicitly to the *Mouvement Populaire de Libération de l'Angola*, the *Ulster Defence Association* and the *Irish Republican Army*. For the younger generation, these lyrics introduced revolutionary ideas as the product of revolutionary movements and by giving them a voice the group reintroduced the challenges of these struggles: leaving the peripheral to become part of the central sphere. Interesting enough was the commercial success of the songs, and the album *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's The Sex Pistols*. We should also mention Jamie Reid who was the illustrator for this famous LP; his style referred clearly to the '*détournement*' process by cutting and pasting images and letters to create the cover album, and also to use the official portrait of the Queen and to put a safety pin on her mouth, as the symbol of the Punk movement. His work was quite provocative from an aesthetic point of view in opposition to the more harmonious codes prevailing in graphic design at the time, and also from a political point of view. His work came in at number two in a Rolling Stone Magazine poll of the best rock album sleeves of all time. If for the Situationists commercialization was not part of the agenda, for this band the financial aspect and the commercialization of their work were integrally part of their goals. Even if traditional English society was heavily critical of their lyrics, the album, banned from the official distribution circuit, was widely sold in alternative distribution networks. For the

Situationists, the links between the proletariat and students were crucial to their political struggles, for the Sex Pistols their controversial positions, their public “offenses” on TV shows etc, urged the workers in the vinylpressing plant to go on strike and refuse to do it for “moral reasons”.

Anarchy in the UK opened the door to a type of protest holding radical and provocative positions in Thatcher’s Britain. They pursued their destabilization of the prevailing values of English society by asserting, in *God Save the Queen*, “that the function of sacred thought has been taken over by ideology and by challenging, in *Pretty Vacant*, the cult of the image; and finally, in *Holidays in the Sun*, by demanding the right to ‘make history now.’”¹¹

If one can believe their manager Malcolm McLaren, who once told *Melody Maker* that "it's wonderful to use situationism in rock 'n' roll", the connection between the Sex Pistols and the SI is a solid one”¹².

In another geographical social and cultural context we can notice in the late sixties the DJ movement appearing in Jamaica and afterwards in New York City. What seems exemplary is the utilization of the dub technics, the simplicity of the technical apparatus and the outsider position of this first music play. In less than ten years the movement of the Dub spread all over the US and the world and is still a prominent phenomena with the Remix movement but also with the help of tremendous technical improvement.

As the field is quite wide and rich I decided to focus on Osbourne Ruddock alias King Tubby and U-Roy the first musician to toast over King Tubby dubbings. Their collaboration and their landmarks contribution to the field of the dub movement and by consequences to the remix is illustrating quite well the origin of the Dub, its strength as popular music and also the ways it has been interpreted, transformed and spread all over the world.

It’s by accident King Tubby discovered the pleasure of remixing a track composed by Duke Reid. As he was mixing up a version for Reid he accidentally didn’t integrate all the vocals

and when he replayed the mix he was quite impressed by the music he inadvertently created. From this wrong manipulation and the interest he found in it, he decided to pursue his experimental contribution by creating new versions of hits “by dropping the vocal track, boosting parts of the instrumental track and adding subtles effect like echo or delay to the instruments he had isolated”¹³. Within this experimental and creative arrangement King Tubby had just invented the DUB. In order to give access to the public and to promote his composition he “hijacked” one of the two radio lines available in Kingston at that time.

The composition was unique and recorded on dubplay and only available for sound system deejays. Technically, they “toast over” and the dub gives place for a new recording. From an economical point of view this new way of conceiving, composing and recording music was promoting recycled popular music and also was using quite affordable means of mixing. The interest and curiosity of the public shifted from the artist to the “dub” engineer and to his signature.

In regard to this new dynamic in the Jamaican music landscape, Tubby and U-Roy decided to team up and to offer probably the most innovative music that the island had never seen. This partnership was very successful and they said: “it takes two to dub it”¹⁴ establishing the norm for dub version.

If we look at these prolific innovative strategies to produce and recreate music, new lyrics and songs we can see how the economic factors had played an important role. These dubs were played in open air space, openly free and for a population who didn’t have a lot of money. The movement gained in popularity by giving free access to music.

If we find all the ingredients which take part in the detournement process by cutting and pasting distinct elements, recreating new forms from preexisting one and mastering technical skills in order to disseminate a creative power, the whole process of Dubing, scratching, toasting have been quickly absorbed by the music industry and lost its revolutionary aspect.

The questions we could raise after the comparison of these two distinct musical phenomena in regard to the Spectacle Society and the detournement power is: where are the margins in a times of digital globalization? If for the SI, the confrontation within society was crucial as they always reinvent new forms of contestation, what could be the characteristics and interest of a marginal opposition now? the CopyLeft movement, the Hackers strategies are, on some level, part of the global area as the Dub, the Remix are part of the media industry and the Spectacle Society ... Should we step out of the digital universe and go back to the analogue system in order to protect and to locate our creation as an outsider to prolong the detournement process ? or should we focus on our capacities to create and to produce queer objects as a way to question and to challenge the politically correct rules we are invited to follow in all our respective domains and specifically in the academic system?

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¹The Amsterdam declaration 1958, Constant and Guy Debord, Translated by Paul Hammond SI, archives N°2

²<http://fresques.ina.fr/de-gaulle/fiche-media/Gaule00143/entretien-avec-michel-droit.html> (last seen on December 2013)

³<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/formulary.html>

⁴Situationist International 1967, this translation is by Ken Knabb from the Situationist International Anthology (Revised and expanded version, 2006)

⁵Guy Debord, June 1963.

⁶At Dusk, The Situationist Movement in Historical Perspectives,
<http://libcom.org/files/At%20Dusk%20The%20Situationist%20Movement%20In%20Historical%20Perspective%201975.pdf>

⁷NW

⁸The Other and the Sacred : Sacred Play, Sacred Politics », from Christopher Thompson's collection of articles, 'The Other and the Sacred, Surrealism, Cinema, Ethnography', published by Harmattan in 1995

⁹Idem

¹⁰Translated by Ken Knabb

¹¹<http://www.notbored.org/reid.html>

From our own experience we would say it is probably impossible to demonstrate the links clearly established between the SI and the Remix.

¹²**Not Bored!: Anthology 1983-2010**

Par Bill Brown

¹³Dread library

¹⁴