

## CYBERNETICS EVERYWHERE

DOMINIQUE ROUTHIER

*WITH AND AGAINST: THE SITUATIONIST  
INTERNATIONAL IN THE AGE OF AUTOMATION*

LONDON/NEW YORK: VERSO, 2023. 258 PAGES

ISBN: 978-1-80429-255-6

The XXXIII Olympiad in France was a sporting event and media blockbuster followed all over the world in the summer of 2024. It will also be remembered as the occasion for the large-scale local deployment of a technology with much more discreet images: algorithmic video surveillance in the streets of Paris, using automatic detection and real-time analysis of urban behaviour by means of artificial intelligence. In this context, which combined iconic image making and the latest cybernetic technologies, spectacle and surveillance, a critical reflection on the effects of robotics and automation on everyday life seems more important than ever.

A crucial origin of this topic in critical theory is to be found in the writings of the Situationist International (hereafter SI), founded in 1957 and dissolved in 1972. Cybernetics as a target of Guy Debord and his comrades since the early 1950s is central to Dominique Routhier's pioneering book, which focuses on post-war France but covers a wider geographical and historical territory. Routhier proceeds to unveil the background of this "cybernetic hypothesis," as he names it by quoting the title of one major essay written by the post-Situationist collective Tiquun at the turn of the 21st century.<sup>1</sup> Choosing an art historical methodology rather than the partisan perspective fostered by the SI rhetoric itself, Routhier, while remaining politically engaged, proposes a well-documented inquiry divided in four parts. Chapter 3, devoted to Guy Debord and Asger Jorn's art book project entitled *Fin de Copenhague*, has been previously published in a former issue of *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*.<sup>2</sup>

The introduction of the book presents the origins of cybernetics and the background of its importation into France by important intellectual figures of the structuralist movement, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan. Dominique Routhier is quick to point out that the “father” of this symbiotic project combining behavioural sciences and information theory, Norbert Wiener (1894-1964), experimented with his approach through military collaboration during the Second World War, especially in order to produce high-performance anti-aircraft weapons capable of anticipating the reactions of pilots under fire (p. 19-20). We also learn that “automation,” as it was then called in French, was the subject of a seminal book by Friedrich Pollock, an important thinker of the Frankfurt School, whose English and French translations both appeared in 1957.<sup>3</sup> The left-wing critique of cybernetics has therefore different birthplaces. The singularity of the SI within this intellectual movement is rooted in its specific position as an artistic avant-garde.

The introduction and the first chapter of *With and Against* then focus on a key event in the emergence of a neo-avant-garde in France during the 1950s, at the beginning of the Algerian war and at a time of political instability. In September 1956, a year before the formation of the SI, the first Festival of Avant-Garde Art was held in Marseille, in the symbolic setting of *La Cité radieuse* designed by the architect Le Corbusier. Among the artworks presented at this occasion was the cybernetic sculpture *CYSP 1* by Nicolas Schöffer. The stakes are symbolic insofar as the French state was overseeing the exhibited neo-avant-garde works as the cutting edge of both technological and architectural progress—far from the revolutionary ideals of the radical movements that emerged after the First World War, such as Dadaism and Surrealism. This is why the event became the target of an “ordre de boycott” (boycott order), a title given to a leaflet signed by members of the former collective Lettrist International (LI), a document whose intellectual, critical and aesthetic trajectory the first chapter retraces in great detail. For the Situationists, Dominique Routhier argues, *CYSP 1* signalled “a virtual premonition of the future post-organic or *inhuman* order of things” (p. 12).

The second chapter goes one step further, taking as its point of departure not the vanguard event of 1956 but its host site, Le Corbusier’s *Cité radieuse*, which was at the centre of the SI’s debates on the challenges of urbanism. The housing crisis that hit France in the mid-1950s, a consequence of the Second World War among other

things, led to a return to favour of certain architectural projects already imagined by Le Corbusier in the 1930s. In this urban planning, the Situationists saw a new form of “haussmannisation” (p. 102), named after the baron Haussmann who had transformed Paris a century before, as much to modernise the city as to repress easily any kind of street insurrection. “In this epoch more and more placed, in all domains, under the sign of repression, there is one particularly repugnant man, clearly more of a cop than the average,”<sup>4</sup> wrote the LI members with their characteristic contempt. These urban projects were also part of an ever-growing US soft power, which was wielded in France through the arts, making culture a “nouveau théâtre d’opération” (new theatre of operations), as the Situationists would put it in a leaflet in 1958. Such military metaphors help to grasp the stakes of this activism while war was simultaneously a concrete veiled fact in Algeria.

Chapter 3 focuses on another aspect of the problem of cybernetics and the attempt to find the appropriate aesthetic form to denounce it. It considers the book *Fin de Copenhague* by Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, which, more precisely, should be seen as an “anti-book,” as Debord himself identified it (p. 130). Routhier’s analysis is largely based on a comparison between Asger Jorn’s plastic and critical thinking and the aesthetics of Russian Constructivism from the 1920s. A compared analysis of past and present workers’ bodies offers a striking illustration of the future augured by the rise of cybernetics, making the worker no longer the heroic embodiment of production in the years following the October Revolution, but “an overseer or manager who has only temporarily stepped into the sphere of the self-acting (automatic) machinery” (p. 149). Therefore, what Dominique Routhier sums up a few pages later as “The Ideology of ‘Full Automation’” (p. 154-159) is also the new prospects of management, which is part of the same government of behaviour and affects right to the heart of everyday life, with the results we are all experiencing today.

Finally, following the chronological narrative adopted by *With and Against*, Chapter 4 focuses more specifically on the critique of cybernetics during “May 1968” in France. In the case of the Situationists, an episode of this stretched sequence, much longer than a month, already occurred in January of the same year. At that time, a poster entitled “En attendant la cybernétique, les flics” (Waiting for cybernetics, the cops) was put up at the University of Nanterre near Paris, following a police intervention on the campus

# EN ATTENDANT LA CYBERNETIQUE LES FLICS



*Camarades!*

*Grappin-la-matraque* « épaulé par son Bouricaud » soutenu par les arguments des Morin & Touraine « a donné la mesure de ce qu'il veut bien « désavouer » en plaçant son gbetto et leurs rackets sous la protection de la gendarmerie »

*Les Accords du Latran* qui régissent ce vieux monde et son univoque moderniste avouent leur ultima ratio « leur raison d'état: le recours à la

*violence policière* éclaire les conditions réelles du « dialogue » sur le campus « Abus de confiance à gauche » « Abus de pouvoir à droite »

*« Pour tirer l'esprit du cacbot  
« Soufflons nous mêmes notre forge,  
« Battons le fer quand il est chaud  
(L'Internationale)*

*Nanterre » le 29 Janvier 1968.*

Fig. 1

“En attendant la cybernétique, les flics” (Waiting for cybernetics, the cops)

Poster, Nanterre, January 1968. Dimensions 46,5 × 32,4 cm.

Ref: AFF35112. Coll. La Contemporaine, Nanterre.

<https://argonaute.parisnanterre.fr/ark:/14707/v3kphzrj1mc0>

authorised by the rector Pierre Grappin, soon nicknamed “Grappin-la-matraque” (Grappin-the-truncheon; see Figure 1). Cybernetics “as a new form of post-sovereign, impersonal, and abstract social domination” (p. 181) is all the more evocative here through the large body of Grappin overhanging tiny figures, which has been a classic motif and arrangement in the political iconography of power in the West since the Middle Ages.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter, Routhier also considers a longer genealogy. He goes back to what has been called the “Strasbourg scandal” of 1966, a well-known episode in which local Situationists distributed a huge number of copies of a critical pamphlet titled *De la misère en milieu étudiant* (*On the Poverty of Student Life*), printed with funds from a student association.<sup>6</sup> Routhier situates this event in the context of another, less well-known action, the disruption by means of rotten tomatoes of a public speech by Abraham Moles, then a teacher at the University of Strasbourg and a major French proponent of cybernetics. Moles is an objective enemy of the critics of automation because of his academic career, which includes the promotion of this paradigm from across the Atlantic, always with American soft power in action. He is an adversary all the more hated by the Situationists because he addressed them directly in a letter mocking their revolutionary project.<sup>7</sup> This is the background of this ambush called “Operation Robot,” prepared with almost military care.

Chapter 4 interestingly mentions other artistic and political adversaries, including two successive directors of the Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG – School of Design) in Ulm, Max Bense and Tomás Maldonado, both of whom promoted the “aesthetics of information” in the 1950s and 1960s. “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,” declared Maldonado in 1958 (quoted on p. 201). His words synthesize the academic components and political rationality of cybernetics in one single formula: the capitalist *Gesamtkunstwerk* of human sciences. This point is worth noting insofar as the human and social sciences, as well as the academy in general, increasingly became the target of the Situationist critique due to their complicity with state power and social control.<sup>8</sup>

The SI members developed their social critic and revolutionary program “with and against” the human sciences, and the same is true for cybernetics and automation. This is the reason why Routhier’s inquiry bears the right title and manages to gather all the historical elements expected, taken from personal archivist inquiry and the most recent publications (a selection of Debord’s archives published in French during the last years appears in conclusion). “With and against,” it should be underlined, is also the catchphrase summarizing at best the situation of the reader. The author of this review may well have watched the aforementioned Olympic Games on TV (basketball, why not?... ) and he may well have used some artificial intelligence tools to correct or rephrase some excerpts of his criticism. To say it clearly, our digital everyday life, our ordinary practices and behaviours, now more than ever, require a small-scale scrutiny in order to get the reality and effectivity of contemporary power relationships. Today there is no such thing as an exteriority from cybernetics. We all live in what Debord, at the end of his life, called the “integrated spectacle,” but not without weapons against it. A path-breaking study like Dominique Routhier’s book, looking differently at our history as well as that of the SI is one of them.

In this way, many historical and theoretical aspects remain open to enquiry at different levels. As is well known, the Surrealists had already shown great enthusiasm for technical automatons before the Second World War (p. 3-4). For André Breton and his group, automation was understood in a broader sense: as a *creative and liberating process* by means of writing and dreaming. It would have been interesting to look at this more dialectical notion of automatic behaviour, stretched between liberation and alienation, since the SI was highly suspicious of these surrealist techniques and hopes. “The cause of surrealism’s ideological failure was its belief that the unconscious was the finally discovered ultimate force of life,” contends Debord in his famous *Report on the Construction of Situations*, one of the founding documents of the SI published in 1957: “We now know that the unconscious imagination is poor, that automatic writing is monotonous, and that the whole ostentatious genre of would-be strange and shocking surrealist creations has ceased to be very surprising.”<sup>9</sup> In this light, automation is not only the name of a new technology and discourse of social control in the 1950’s, but also the keyword of a former “avant-garde” failure that happened at the end of the 1920s, precisely at the moment when Debord identifies the origins of the society of the spectacle.<sup>10</sup>

The later historical connections between critical theories of automation and the visual arts would be another aspect worth considering further. For example, one interesting step takes place in the US at the beginning of the 1970s, shortly after the SI choose to split. At this point artists like Ian Burn, who had been part of the collective Art & Language, developed a radical understanding of conceptual art as a “deskilling” of artistic practice by the influence of theory and abstract conceptions of art production. The diagnosis of a “deskilling” was here taken from Marxist social scientist Harry Braverman’s book *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974).<sup>11</sup> “Automation changed the forms but not the *content* of alienation”, rightly notes Dominique Routhier in *With and Against* (p. 161). Such a comment would fit perfectly with this “deskilling hypothesis,” which, like the deconstruction of automation, is rooted in the Marxist critique of alienation brought up to date. In a curious intellectual trajectory, it should be noted that two decades later it had a great influence on some critical writings Routhier mobilizes in his book (p. 94-95): the theorists of the famous art journal *October* notably adapted the “deskilling hypothesis” to the US academic field in order to think its institutional reconfigurations in the early 1990s.<sup>12</sup>

Coming back to the SI, there is one last aspect that Routhier’s book does not fail to highlight, without, however, drawing out all its implications. This is the military question, which, as I have already mentioned, is at the origins of Norbert Wiener’s cybernetic paradigm. Routhier notes that among the recent publications drawn from Guy Debord’s archives, donated to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France ten years ago, is an entire volume of strategic notes, extracted from numerous readings of military thinkers.<sup>13</sup> Debord also contributed a great deal to the republication of works on military theory by the publisher Champ libre, set up by his friend Gérard Lebovici, which included classic treatises by Carl von Clausewitz or Charles Ardant du Picq. If military calculation and behaviour prediction on the battlefield are at the roots of cybernetics, Debord’s interest in strategy could be seen as more than just a trivial passion. It may well be the concrete intellectual counterpart to the new hold of cybernetics, a way of countering the spectacle in terms of content and form, in support of a long-term history of extra-academic knowledge forged in the *École de guerre*, at West Point or elsewhere<sup>14</sup>. This hypothesis remains open, as does the possibility of rethinking through these lenses the entire history of the artistic “avant-garde,” a military notion if ever there was one.

— Maxime Boidy

- 1 Tiqqun, "L'Hypothèse Cybernétique," *Tiqqun 2* (2001): 40–83. For an English translation, see "The Cybernetic Hypothesis," *Anarchist Library*, <https://www.theanarchistlibrary.org/>.
- 2 Dominique Routhier, "Full Automation In Its Infancy: The Situationist Avant-Garde Book *Fin De Copenhague*," *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 29, no. 60 (2020): 48–71.
- 3 Friedrich Pollock, *Automation: A Study of Its Economic and Social Consequences*, trans. W. O. Henderson and W. H. Chaloner (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1957).
- 4 Internationale Lettriste, "Les Gratte-ciels par la racine," *Potlatch. Bulletin d'information de l'Internationale Lettriste* 5 (1954), translated by Tom McDonough as "Skyscrapers by the Roots," in *The Situationists and the City*, ed. Tom McDonough (London: Verso, 2009), 44.
- 5 Dario Gamboni, "Composing the Body Politic: Composite Images and Political Representation, 1651-2004," in *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy*, eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Karlsruhe/Cambridge: ZKM Center for Art and Media/MIT Press, 2005), 162–195.
- 6 *De la misère en milieu étudiant considérée sous ses aspects économique, politique, psychologique, sexuel et notamment intellectuel et de quelques moyens pour y remédier*, Strasbourg, Publications de l'UNEF, 1966; translated into English as "On the Poverty of Student Life," *Libcom.org* (2005) <https://libcom.org/article/poverty-student-life>.
- 7 Guy Debord, "Correspondance avec un cybernéticien," *Internationale Situationiste* 9 (August 1964): 44–48; English translation by Anthony Hayes "Correspondence with a Cybernetician," *Notes from the Sinister Quarter* (2013), <https://thesinisterquarter.wordpress.com/>. For an inquiry parallel to this fourth chapter, see Martin Nadeau, "L'IS et la critique de la cybernétique autour des événements de Mai 1968," *Inter: art actuel* 129 (2018): 44–47.
- 8 See Laurent Jeanpierre, "La 'dialectique de la raison' situationniste. Guy Debord face à l'essor des sciences de l'homme," in *Lire Debord*, eds. Emmanuel Guy and Laurence Le Bras (Montreuil: L'Échappée, 2016), 401–414. This collective book, including some of Debord's unpublished manuscripts, is the result of an international conference held in Paris in 2013 at the occasion of the transfer of Debord's archives at the Paris BNF (National Library).
- 9 Guy Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action," trans. Ken Knabb, in *Situationist International: Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 28–29.
- 10 About this periodization, see Jonathan Crary, "Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory," *October* 50 (1989): 97–107.
- 11 Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974); Ian Burn, "The 1960s: Crisis and Aftermath (Or The Memoirs of an Ex-Conceptual Artist)," *Art & Text* 1, no 1 (1981): 49–65.
- 12 For more elements about this connection, see my essay "'I hate Visual Culture.' The Controversial Rise of Visual Studies and The Disciplinary Politics of the Visible," trans. Julie Patarin-Jossec and Susan Hansen, *Visual Studies* 35, no 4 (2020): 310–318.
- 13 Guy Debord, *Stratégie* (Paris: Éditions L'Échappée, 2018). The book has been published in a specific collection entitled "La librairie de Guy Debord" (Guy Debord's Bookstore).
- 14 Emmanuel Guy, *Le Jeu de la guerre de Guy Debord. L'émancipation comme projet* (Paris: Éditions B42, 2020).