

Whatever happened to the Situationists?

Review article:

Public Secrets by Ken Knabb

Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1997.

What is Situationism? A Reader edited by Stewart Home

Edinburgh: AK Press, 1996.

The Situationist International (SI) was one of the most important revolutionary groups in the last 30 years. As many of our readers will know, the SI developed revolutionary theory to explain the misery and hence revolutionary potential that exists even in supposedly affluent modern capitalist societies. Their analysis predicted the character of the May 1968 almost-revolution in France, and members of the SI participated enthusiastically in the events of that period.¹ We could pick out any number of their arguments to illustrate the SI's vital contributions to revolutionary theory. Their most famous contribution is the concept of the spectacle, of course, an account of the contemporary form of alienation: 'The spectacle is not an aggregate of images but a social relation among people, mediated by images'.² The SI are also known for their sharp analysis of the revolutionary movement itself. Perhaps no other revolutionary group has subjected the idea of what it means to be a revolutionary to such searching self-criticism.

The critique of 'the militant'

The SI's critique of 'the militant' is a key example of their self-questioning and self-criticism, which at its best can re-invigorate revolutionary struggle - both by helping comrades to re-evaluate their own practice, and by identifying what is wrong with those who call themselves revolutionaries but who are not.

The argument is that the way of life of 'the militant' is a role just as much as that of the 'cop, executive or rabbi'.³ 'The militant's' supposedly revolutionary practices are in fact hackneyed and sterile, a set of

compulsive duties and rituals. Against the dull compulsion of duty, sacrifice and routine, the writings of the SI offered a vision of revolutionary practice as involving risk-taking, spontaneity, pleasure etc.: roles should be restored 'to the realm of play'.⁴

The role of 'the militant' can make 'politics' appear boring and unattractive to the outsider. But more importantly, the demands of the role are contradictory to the needs of the subject inhabiting that role. In the world of 'the militant', 'politics' is a separate realm from that of pleasure, adventure and self-expression. The role, as a form of alienated activity, feeds vampire-like on real life; it represents a disjunction between ends (communism as free creativity and love etc.) and means (stereotyped, constrained and ritualized methods). Hence the SI slogan 'boredom is always counter-revolutionary'.

Why does 'the militant' role occur? The answer of the SI and their followers was that the role of 'the militant' had a certain psychological appeal. It offers certainty and safety to 'the militant' herself. Most of us will have experienced how, when a struggle suddenly takes an unexpected turn (for example, the opportunity to occupy a building or get past the cops), the leftist 'militant' will hesitate or actively try to limit the situation. The role of 'the militant' creates a way of life, a routine, a structured mindset (guilt, duty etc.) such that change - including revolution itself - would be experienced as a threat to 'the militant's' sense of herself and her relation to the world.

Although we might perhaps sometimes recognize features of 'the militant' in ourselves and our comrades, those of us in the non-Leninist revolutionary milieu will characteristically share certain basic assumptions which distinguish us from the leftist 'militant'. We are not engaged in struggles to overthrow capitalism out of a sense of altruism, charity or self-sacrifice, but for ourselves as alienated proletarian beings, interdependent

¹ See R. Vienét (1968). *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May '68*. Autonomedia, New York/Rebel Press, London, 1992.

² Guy Debord (1967) *The Society of the Spectacle*, thesis 4. Black and Red, 1983

³ Raoul Vaneigem (1967) *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, p. 139. London: Rebel Press/Left Bank Books, 1994.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

with others in our class for our liberation. As Vaneigem puts it, 'I want to exchange nothing - not for a thing, not for the past, not for the future. I want to live intensely, for myself, grasping every pleasure firm in the knowledge that what is radically good for me will be good for everyone'.⁵ Those on the left whose support for struggles elsewhere (whether in the 'Third World' or just for a group of local workers materially worse off than themselves) takes the place of their acknowledgement of and resistance to their own alienation might be said to not understand the nature of their own anti-capitalist impulses.

The historical vagaries of pleasure-seeking

The name of Ken Knabb will be known to many readers as the translator and editor of the most comprehensive collection of SI writings published in English, the *Situationist International Anthology*.⁶ *Public Secrets* comprises for the most part a collection of nearly all Knabb's writings and leaflets, going back to 1970. It therefore expresses the flavour of the self-analysing post-SI situationist scene in the 1970s.

Consistent with the rejection of the role of 'the militant' and compulsive hack-like activism, the Knabb book, as an account of the 'second wave' of situationists in the United States, is notable for its lack of references to the routine meetings and ongoing activism familiar to many of us. For example, when he had finished editing the *Situationist International Anthology*, instead of involving himself in another struggle, Knabb took up rock-climbing.⁷

This puts us in mind of a common criticism of Vaneigem's account of radical subjectivity: that it risks degenerating into bourgeois individualism. While it was a necessary attack on the sterility of the typical leftist approach during a period of upturn in interest in revolutionary ideas, how is it applied during times when the movement and its ideas are in retreat? Was Knabb burnt out after editing the *Anthology*, or were there really no struggles going on around him at that time in which he could usefully participate?

The revolutionary movement is so small today, and the threat of leftism so diminished, that it is easy to feel that pendulum of 'pleasure' versus commitment should swing the other way. To get even the most modest of activities going, it is sometimes all hands to the pump!

⁵ Ibid., p. 116.

⁶ Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981.

⁷ (*Public Secrets* p. 142) One sees in Knabb's life-story a tendency to rationalize and politically justify his own personal interests. His own attraction to 'neo-religious trips', in particular Zen Buddhist practices, is turned into a question for all situationists and revolutionaries in his article 'The Realization and Suppression of Religion'. Luckily, this urge to politicize his hobbies didn't result in a text calling for the 'Realization and Suppression of Outdoor Pursuits'!

Those comrades who don't turn up to meetings, pickets and demonstrations aren't for the most part inventing new, more creative, consistent and pleasurable forms of resistance. Instead, they are expressing their critique of routine and mundane activism merely by staying in bed or going to the pub.

Of course, there have been some relatively effective struggles in recent years which have come to characterize themselves in many ways as the very antithesis of the mode of 'the militant'. For example, recall the defence of Claremont Road in the No M11 Link Road Campaign, when 'activism' for most people consisted for a large part in simply occupying the street and so presented the opportunity for regular parties and other forms of hedonism. However, the anti-work 'strategy' of lying in bed till late in the morning despite all the barricading etc. that some people argued needed to be done led to some embarrassment when bailiffs and hundreds of riot police turned up to evict three houses and just walked in to find the occupants still asleep. Another example is the street party associated with Reclaim the Streets (RTS) groups. It seems undeniable that RTS get loads of people to mass actions against capital's beloved car-culture by billing such events as a 'party'. But, as has been noted elsewhere, a tension exists in such street parties in that some participants are satisfied with just the party aspect rather than the 'political' point of the action.⁸ In the Claremont Road case, many of us agreed that we needed to get beyond the guilt-tripping work ethic proposed by some of the hard-core barricaders. But its simple inverse was not a practical solution.

One of the sources for the situationists' rejection of compulsive 'militant' activism is thesis 220 of *The Society of Spectacle* where Debord contends that 'the critique which goes beyond the spectacle must know how to wait'. The SI's rejection of the 'compromises of reformism' or 'pseudo-revolutionary common actions' seemed justified only months later when a near-revolutionary situation developed apparently from nowhere. But May '68 and its aftermath both confirmed the SI's analysis and pointed to its limits. If the situationists were waiting for another '68-type explosion, what they got instead was the retreat of radical subjectivity in the face of the re-assertion of capital's dead objectivity. We may prefer 'life' to 'survival', but in the face of capital's current counter-attack - unforeseen by the SI - even the most radical subjects must sometimes orient their activity around surviving.

⁸ For a critical appraisal of the London RTS/ 'Social Justice' event on 12 April this year, see the spoof news-sheet *Schnooze*, available from Brighton Autonomists, c/o Prior House, 6 Tilbury Place, Brighton BN2 2GY.

Reduction of the political to the personal

The second wave of situationists, in particular, held that in the same way that we should give expression to our desires rather than suppress them - since it is our desires that are the motor of our struggle against alienation - so it is necessary to realize the political in the personal. This wasn't simply an attack on inconsistency in one's personal relations, but an argument that sorting yourself out could help you in your quest to sort out the world. The argument went: how can one criticize workers for not breaking with capital if not questioning one's own collusion in alienated personal relations?

Those who made this claim were adamant that it wasn't an argument for the revolutionary value of therapy, and that therapy was not some kind of solution. But they certainly made use of certain ideas from therapy by drawing on the work of Wilhelm Reich.⁹ Reich's influence is evident both in Vaneigem's work and in the practices of Knabb and his sometime cohorts. *Public Secrets* includes a piece by Voyer, 'Reich: How to Use', which argues that character (in Reich's sense) is the form taken by the individual's complicity in the spectacle. To end this complicity, Knabb and others continued the SI's practice of breaking, sometimes using an individual's character as their rationale. In circulated letters announcing breaks, they detailed each other's limitations such as superficiality and pretentiousness, both in understanding the SI and in personal relations.

Breaking has a long history in the SI. As *What is Situationism?* reiterates tediously, the SI's origins lay in an art/anti-art movement. Arguably, then, as the SI moved beyond art/anti-art to a revolutionary position, breaking was a necessary part of defining itself: arty-types were seen as involved in a completely different project and hence had to be expelled. The book also relates how, following further breaks, by the early 1970s the SI comprised just three people. The SI finally appears ludicrous in its preciousness and self-absorption.¹⁰

The same can be said of the breaks taking place amongst the second-wave situationists described and documented by Knabb. However, the history of breaks in this case seems less excusable, since Knabb and his comrades were not part of an emerging movement in the first place, but merely a minor scene. Their principled breaking appears to have been seen by them as a measure

of their radicality. But the quest for 'authenticity', openness and honesty became important in its own right, and breaking became a compulsion. Defending the practice of breaking, Knabb says that the SI and their followers were doing 'nothing more than choosing their own company' (*Public Secrets*, p. 132). Well that's very nice for them, but in many struggles you can't choose who is on your side; you may have to act alongside people you don't like personally. Breaking helps draw clear lines, as Knabb says. But it comes across to us as self-indulgent purism, and the result is smaller and smaller groupuscules. What has that got to do with a revolutionary movement? Far from overcoming the personal/political dichotomy, what these post-SI situationists showed in totally politicizing their personal relations was that they themselves were the most obsessively one-sided politics!

As illustrated in *Public Secrets*, the obsession with personal relations seems to have substituted itself for a proper concern with collective relations - how a group in struggle relates to the wider proletariat. Did all this meticulous navel-gazing at the level of personal relations really help those involved to engage more effectively in the class struggle as has been claimed? It would seem that those who indulged in this kind of self-analysis have not intervened any more effectively in the class struggle than the rest of us. It therefore comes as no surprise that SI-influence proponents of 'friendship strikes',¹¹ personal breaks and other forms of character analysis such as Knabb now look back upon this period with some regret and embarrassment (*Public Secrets*, p. 133).

Knabb as a loyal situationist

Knabb went through the pre-hippy scene and anarchism before he discovered the writings of the SI. After Knabb had - in his own words - 'become a situationist' (p. vi), he and others produced 'On the Poverty of Hip Life' (1972), an analysis of what was valid in the hippy movement as well some of its profound limitations:

'If the hippie knew anything he knew that the revolutionary vision of the politics didn't go far enough. Although the hip lifestyle was really only a reform movement of daily life, from his own vantage point the hippie could see that the politico had no

⁹ Another, and in many ways better, text that tries to use the work of Reich to aid revolutionary politics is Maurice Brinton's *The Irrational in Politics, Solidarity* (1971).

¹⁰ However, the SI's self-dissolution is not without merits. The SI resisted the 'Leninist' temptation to 'recruit and grow' as an organization on the basis of the notoriety they had won since '68. Such a quantitative expansion would have covered up the qualitative crisis in the organization. However in ending it the way they did the last members collaborated in the growth of the legend of the SI. (See *The Veritable Split in the International* (1972) by G. Debord & G. Sanguinetti. London: BM Chronos, 1985.)

¹¹ Daniel Denevert had a quite prominent role in the 1970s situationist scene, detailed by Knabb (e.g., pp. 126-7, 129-31). They carried the 'pursuit of individual autonomy' and attacks on people's 'characterological' complicity within the spectacle to an extreme point before finally sending out 'a set of "Lettres sur l'amité" in which they discussed their recent experiences on the terrain of political and personal relationships and declared a "friendship strike" of indefinite duration' (Knabb, p. 136). We hear that Daniel Denevert did eventually give himself over to an even more isolated way of resisting this world, a way that opens one to 'one of modern society's increasingly sophisticated forms of control over people's lives': psychiatrists and mental hospitals.

practical critique of daily life (that he was "straight").'
(*Public Secrets*, p. 177)

And yet, because hippies understood alienation as simply a matter of the wrong perception, their own innovations were easily recuperated as further roles, giving new life to the spectacle:

'But as culture such a critique only serves to preserve its object. The counterculture, since it fails to negate culture itself, can only substitute a new oppositional culture, a new content for the unchanging commodity form...' (Ibid., pp. 176-7).

However this early 70s stuff applying situationist critique to wider movements gives way by the mid 70s to increasingly introverted 'theorizing about theorizing'.¹² Two of the more recent pieces in the Knabb collection, 'The Joy of Revolution' and his interesting autobiography 'Confessions of a Mild-Mannered Enemy of the State' place pieces like these in context. Knabb's discovery of the SI's texts provided him with the basic theory which he stuck with and applied loyally for the rest of his life. There has been little subsequent development of the pioneering SI analyses, either by Knabb or anyone else. Debord himself, post 1968, was more concerned with his reputation than with developing new theory. Loyal followers of the SI seemed to live off past glories; carrying forward the authentic SI project seemed to them to be a matter of repeating the ideas rather than superseding them where necessary, as the SI superseded previous revolutionary theory.¹³ Hence, Knabb's 'The Joy of Revolution' is not meant to be original; rather it is a somewhat didactic but readable introduction to the 'common sense' of non-hierarchical revolutionary theory, intended for readers not otherwise convinced. Although, within these terms, the article has its merits, some readers, like us, will find Knabb's

¹² This deliberate narrowing of the scope of critical inquiry marks a retreat from an historical plane of analysis... In the Knabbist cosmos, which is surprisingly impervious to historical change, the theorist becomes the "experiencing subject," who develops endlessly through a sequence of subjective "moments," arriving finally at the ultimate goal of "realization." (*At Dusk: The Situationist Movement in Historical Perspective* by D. Jacobs & C. Winks, Berkeley, 1975). Knabb quotes this critique as part of his situ honesty. He could have made a more interesting and less narcissistic book by including longer extracts from the writings of other American situationists or - as with these authors - ex-situationists. For example, *Two Local Chapters in the Spectacle of Decomposition* and *On The Poverty of Berkeley Life* by Chris Shutes are two of the most interesting products of the American situationists.

¹³ Of course, these second wave situationists thought that their focus on character etc. was indeed carrying theory and the revolution forward. This was part of their tendency to reduce revolution to essentially a problem of consciousness: their own consciousness.

treatment of democracy far too uncritical - another unchallenged inheritance of the SI.

If the ideas of the SI are more or less complete, as Knabb seems to believe, then the most important thing is to get them across. What is striking in Knabb's account of his activity is how much of it was text-centred:¹⁴ his 'interventions' were mostly writings, posters and leaflets. Within this 'pedantic precision fetishism'¹⁵ it was essential to Knabb to choose the correct words, even if this meant writing and re-writing his leaflets repeatedly till he got it right. Hence his short leaflet in response to the Gulf War took almost two months to write and wasn't distributed until the campaign against the war was almost over. Other documents in the collection express the same loyalty to the insights of the SI. Knabb's response to the LA riot of 1992 was not a fresh analysis, learning from the new expressions of anti-capitalist practice of the uprising. Instead, he issued a new translation of the classic SI text 'Watts 1965: The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy'!

The worst feature of Knabb's loyalty is his Debord-like lumping together of all the different critics of the SI. In 'The Blind Men and the Elephant', Knabb juxtaposes a number of critical quotations on the SI, not just from shallow bourgeois commentators, but also from revolutionaries. Among them is a critical comment from Barrot & Martin's *Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement*.¹⁶ The inclusion of the quote demonstrates not Barrot & Martin's dogmatic refusal to comprehend, but Knabb's. Barrot's critique, expounded at length elsewhere, is, from a revolutionary perspective, perhaps the most useful critical analysis of the SI published to date.

The critique of the SI

The Barrot article known to many readers as 'What is Situationism' is republished in *What is Situationism? A Reader* under its original title 'Critique of the Situationist International'.¹⁷ Along with the article is a useful introductory piece by the translator which critically traces the SI's influences in the form of Socialism or

¹⁴ For all the SI's interesting critique of 'roles' Knabb seems to have never broken from the role of 'the theorist'!

¹⁵ *Re-Fuse: Further Dialectical Adventures into the Unknown* London: Combustion, 1978, p. 36 This is an interesting British situationist text but it should be noted the author stopped distributing this text in 1980 and does not necessarily hold to every opinion expressed within it.

¹⁶ Detroit: Black & Red, 1974. A new edition of this important book is to be published soon.

¹⁷ The title of the earlier pamphlet version of Barrot's article was in fact given to it by the publisher, though nowhere in it does Barrot use the term 'situationism' (see below).

Barbarism (*S ou B*),¹⁸ as well as the currents which the SI neglected to its detriment - notably the Italian left.

The key point made by Barrot is that the analysis of the SI, as exemplified in Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, remains at the level of circulation, 'lacking the necessary moment of production, of productive labour' (*What is Situationism? A Reader*, p. 28). The great strength of the SI was to show how alienation existed not just in production but in 'everyday life', and hence in consumption. But, as Barrot suggests, the works of the SI leave the impression that a further analysis of production is unnecessary. In doing so, Debord 'reduces capitalism to its spectacular dimension alone' (*Ibid.*, p., 28). The spectacle is a sort of shorthand for all the social relations of contemporary capital. But it is not obvious from reading Debord's pithy exegesis quite how 'the spectacle' can cover and distinguish as many forms of production and circulation relations as does 'capital'. Hence, though it is sometimes presented as the modern *Capital*, *The Society of the Spectacle* falls short of this ambition.

However, if *The Society of the Spectacle* is not the modern *Capital*, let's admit that it is one of the few books that could make that claim with any expectation of it being believed. As Barrot puts it, the SI analysed the revolutionary problem

'starting out from a reflection on the surface of society. This is not to say that *The Society of the Spectacle* is superficial. Its contradiction and, ultimately, its theoretical and practical dead-end, is to have made a study of the profound, through and by means of superficial appearance. The SI had no analysis of capital: it understood it, but through its effects. It criticized the commodity, not capital - or rather, it criticized capital as commodity, and not as a system of valuation which includes production as well as exchange.' (*What is Situationism? A Reader*, p. 28.)

But there are other merits to *The Society of the Spectacle* - for example, its treatment of the historical workers' movement in 'The Proletariat as Subject and as Representation' is exceptional and its analysis of time and space adds to Marx. Barrot's overall critique is perhaps just a little too dismissive, but is possibly an understandable and necessary moment of reaction to the way *The Society of the Spectacle* has been treated by others.

Barrot notes that the SI's background in art/anti-art leaves its mark in their theory. They generalize from the anti-capitalist strengths of non-wage-earning social layers to labour in general, for example. He also observes that they borrowed *S ou B*'s councilism and democracy far too

uncritically. They were ignorant of the Italian left and hence of Bordiga's critique of councilism. As Bordiga argued, with its emphasis on forms of revolutionary organization and on workers' control, councilism neglects that the content can still be capitalist. Workers in control of their own work-place are still workers - are still alienated - if the work-place remains an enterprise and there is a separation between the work-place and the community.¹⁹

Finally we would agree with the translator that Barrot underestimates Vaneigem. For Barrot, 'Vaneigem was the weakest side of the SI, the one which reveals all its weaknesses. The positive utopia [which Vaneigem describes in *The Revolution of Everyday Life*] is revolutionary as demand, as tension, because it cannot be realized within this society: it becomes derisory when one tries to live it today'.²⁰ But that is exactly the point; *The Revolution of Everyday Life* is a revolutionary book because it connects to a tension between what one desires and knows as possible, but what cannot fully exist short of insurrection. That Vaneigem totally 'lost it' after the SI and that 'Vaneigemism' became more and more preposterous as capital responded to the upsurge in class struggle of the 60s and 70s with crisis and mass unemployment does not deny that there are still important insights in his book. There is also an irony in Barrot's critical attitude here. As mentioned above, it was Vaneigem who most cogently developed the critique of 'the militant'. The original foreword to *Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement* opens with a critique of 'the militant attitude' which echoes Vaneigem's argument almost exactly:

'The militant attitude is indeed counter-revolutionary, in so far as it splits the individual into two, separating his needs, his real individual and social needs, the reasons why he cannot stand the present world, from his action, his attempt to change this world. The militant refuses to admit that he is in fact revolutionary because he needs to change his own life as well as society in general. He represses the impulse which made him turn against society. He submits to revolutionary action as if it were external to him...' (p. 7)²¹

The criticism of -isms

It is not incidental to understanding what the SI were about that they rejected the term 'situationism' and all who used it. The critique of '-isms' is well expressed by Vaneigem: 'The world of -isms ... is never anything but a world drained of reality, a terribly real seduction by

¹⁸ For more on *S ou B* and indeed on the SI, see the article on 'Decadence' in *Aufheben* 3, Summer 1994.

¹⁹ All this is dealt with well in Barrot & Martin's *Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement*.

²⁰ *What is Situationism? A Reader*, p. 35.

²¹ Barrot acknowledges the SI here but references *The Society of the Spectacle* rather than Vaneigem's book.

falsehood'.²² To make an -ism of a set of practices and their accompanying theory is to render them as an ideology. The rejection of -isms is part of the rediscovery of the anti-ideological current in the work of Marx, which *Marxism*, in becoming an ideology, has repressed.

It therefore seems no coincidence that the edited *Reader* uses this rejected term in its title.²³ It indicates where the editor locates himself in relation to the SI - as someone making a career out of snidely attacking them. This informs the selection of articles in the rest of the book. The only worthwhile piece apart from Barrot is 'The end of music', a critique of punk and reggae, by Dave and Stuart Wise.²⁴ The book was an opportunity for the editor to present to an English-speaking audience either as yet untranslated SI texts, other critiques of the situationists from within the revolutionary movement, or some of the largely unavailable 70s Anglophone situationist texts. Instead, most of the pieces are by academics and easily available elsewhere. The articles that have been slung together here mostly concern the SI's art heritage (the editor's own obsession) and are not worth reading.

The recurring question of the reception and recuperation of the SI

The vehement attacks on the 'pro-situ' followers of the SI was part of a conscious attempt to prevent the ideas of the SI becoming an -ism: to escape the ideologization of their insights. Of course these attempts have not been completely successful; but this is only to be expected. Within academia, the hegemony of the postmodernist situ-vampires is one example of this. The fact that such recuperation has taken place should lead loyal situationists like Knabb to be a bit more critical of his beloved theory. Some pro-situ French fans of Voyer held that the economy doesn't exist - that it is all just ideology!²⁵ This very 'postmodern' and very

²² *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, p. 24.

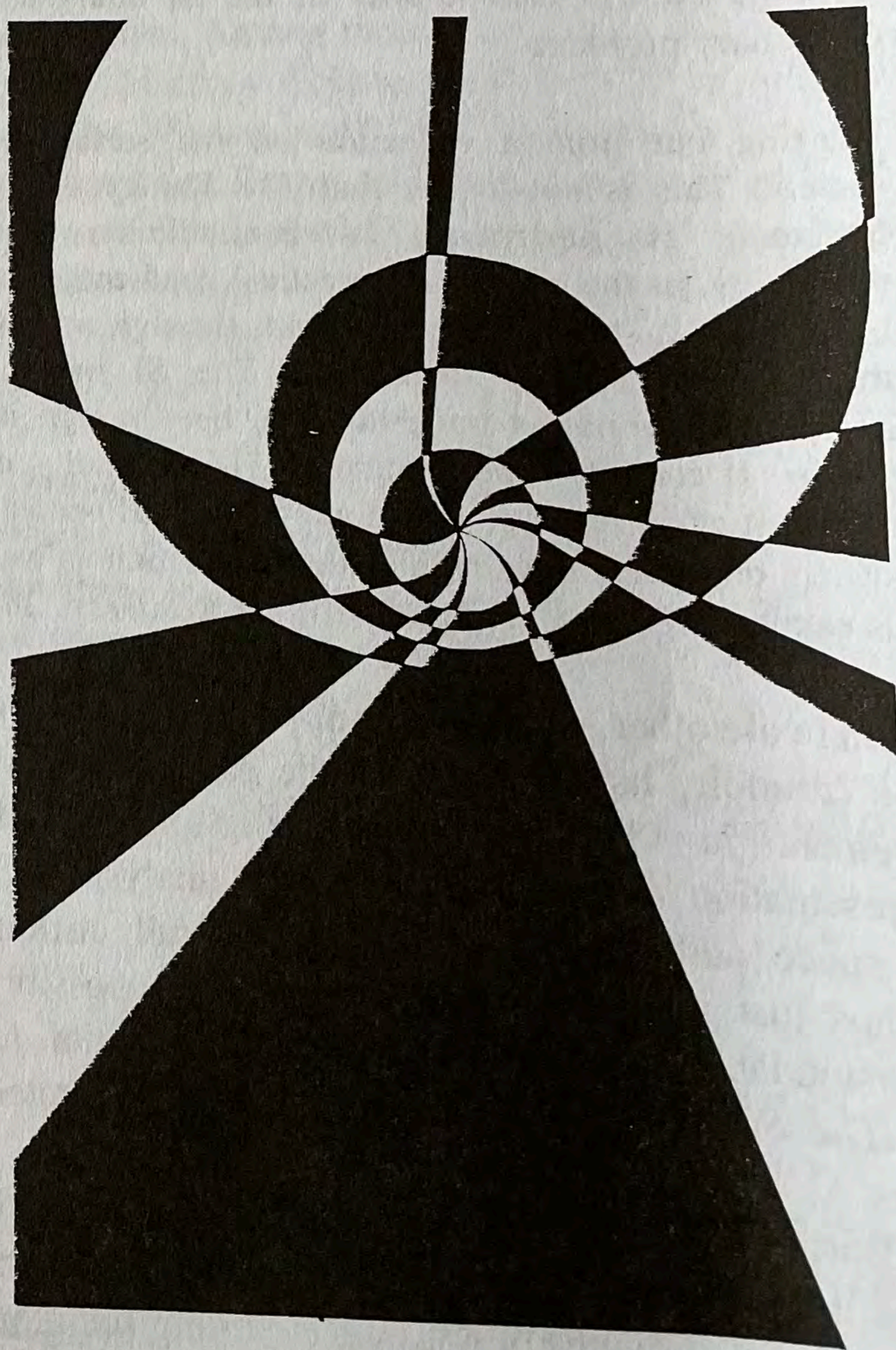
²³ It's not that the insights of the SI completely escaped being turned into an ideology (see below), nor are we accepting Debord and Sanguinetti's all too easy dismissal of such ideologization as 'pro-situ' and thus 'nothing to do with us'. On the basis of *The Veritable Split* some loyal situationists have been ideologically against 'situationism' just as some have been militantly anti-militant. The issue is not about whether one should use the term 'situationism' or not, but about whether one can use the SI's ideas for revolutionary purposes. As *The Veritable Split*, itself expresses it, 'it is not ... a question of the theory of the SI but of the theory of the proletariat' (p. 14).

²⁴ In his Introduction, the editor describes the authors as 'entrepreneurs' whose article helped make SI ideas into 'a saleable commodity' (p. 1). This claim is contradicted in the *Reader* itself by the account of how the text was never published by its authors but distributed in typescript form among a few people mainly in the Leeds area. A Glasgow group then produced it as a pamphlet and now the editor uses it alongside Barrot's piece to spice up an otherwise bankrupt product.

²⁵ See *Re-Fuse* p. 39

preposterous notion was in this case then not developed by academic recuperators like Baudrillard, but by loyal situationists. Will Knabb now make the connection between the theory and its ideologization?

Why review these books? We didn't like *What is Situationism? A Reader*. We had reservations about the Knabb book, but felt it illustrated something about the post-SI situationist scene. The books' publication is evidence of the continued interest in the SI, and the SI must be counted as a basic reference point for any future revolutionary movement. The SI's powerful critique of the revolutionary herself may have degenerated in the period of counter-revolution into a dead-end addiction to navel-gazing; but this cannot obscure the continued necessity of engaging with their arguments. Despite the attention the SI receives, and the attempts over the years by various toss-pots to claim them for modern art or cultural studies, the SI remains in some sense irrecoverable. The continued attempts by organized knowledge either to dismiss or co-opt the SI²⁶ itself provides evidence of the enduring antagonism of their ideas, as does the conscious echo of their approach in a number of contemporary struggles.



²⁶ The attempts at academic criticism and co-option following the death of Debord in 1994 are detailed by T.J. Clark & Donald Nicholson-Smith in their article 'Why art can't kill the Situationist International' in the art journal(!) *October*, 1997.