

Review of *NOT BORED! Anthology 1983-2010*

“I might, it is true, have written to you something different and more agreeable than this, but nothing certainly more useful, if it is desirable for you to know the real state of things here before taking your measures.” Thucydides (back cover of the anthology)

Without much doubt, the question of situationist theory as it stands today is fraught with far too many dead ends. The multitude of academics and neo-anarchists who have since taken up the task of recuperating the situationists into a history of footnotes and ideological anecdotes are only testament to the validity present in predictions Debord and company were all too aware of in their lifetimes, and they have served primarily to make the life and times of the SI utterly incomprehensible to the newest entrants into the field of revolutionary anti-capitalist action. Keeping this in mind, Bill Brown's Not Bored! zine, the base from which he draws the content for his anthology, is an incredibly rare piece of cohesion in this confused muck of modern situationism (if not already aware, the reader should note that this term was considered by the SI to be a purely ideological understanding of their work designed to oppose its aims). Through its wide collection of articles, divided into sections on interventions, polemics, the SI, book reviews, and music, Brown weaves together a critique of the spectacle which takes on nothing short of a totalizing quality, leaving the reader with a fulfilled and robust impression of what situationist theory can amount to today in practice while also having prepared an effective outline of the state of most leading contemporary understandings of the situationists, and their understanding of revolution.

It is quite easy to read any number of the writers Brown critiques in his anthology and come out of their work no more informed of the history of the SI or their idea of social revolution than one was at the start; in some cases the opposite even becomes true. As Debord was write to point out in *Society of the Spectacle*, the term of the spectacle itself has indeed been robust fodder for careless academics only intent upon explaining the ordering of class power today without any intent to change it. And, as Brown points out, there are equally as many former situs and neo-situs who would simply paint themselves as the heirs of the grand legacy of the SI, adopting an insultingly shallow idea of the situationists acclaimed 'elitism', and without any of the practice.

Admittedly, this is not the sort of collection of work open to most any blend of review. Brown has been producing his zine since 1982, so any review of its content is necessarily, and regrettably, going to miss certain points of great significance, but the overall impression that we've taken from its content has been centered along these lines. Situationist action in the US never really managed to find the mass practice it did in May 68 in France, and most of the endless number of imitators of situationist organization in the US have never fully escaped this position of mere repetition. We've had our occupy movement, surely, wherein many participants were actively influenced by the SI, but the vast majority of said occupiers (minus Oakland and Denver, as Brown noted in correspondence with our group) never really managed to escape the ideology of reformism, of the spectacle. As Brown notes in one of his valuable introductions to the SI, the cultural history of the US is simply not the same as that of France, or most of Europe for that matter, thus, some difficulties arise when one tries to do a hack copy-paste job of situationist theory unto the American scene. We don't have the same history of avant-garde activity, nor have we confronted the same forces of spectacular power, he comments, which presents a need for certain critical approaches to the SI to be taken if their work is to be continued on our terrain.

While it is something of a limited view of a much larger body of work, we found that the ultimate value in Brown's anthology was its capacity to clearly speak to the current state of the spectacle as it pertains to the latest developments in its domination. Brown realizes that Debord himself

did indeed update his theoretical formulations when he saw it fit, and thus applies this understanding of situationist praxis in his work in a fluid manner sparsely seen in most comparable situationist style publications. He talks about the spectacle as it exists today, reverting back to a state wherein even basic labor struggles now have some restored relevance in the discourse of the spectacle while also devising a theory of the virtual spectacle¹, but this theorizing is always tied to intents in practice, which is arguably what makes his work some of the most important in the field of revolutionary praxis. This is a stance which stands in quite staunch contrast to others in the milieu such as T.J. Clark's Retort group and Knabb², who more or less consider what the SI wrote to be solid gospel, and who thus hardly see it necessary to carry on in any practice today which correlates to the revolutionary project forwarded so intently by the SI, in stark contrast to Debord's statement that "One must advance strategic theory in its moment"³

When a student or worker in the US comes into their first contact with a group like the SI, often times their instinct is to go to the best known names in the pro-situ community in their initial readings. So they flock to the McDonoughs, Sadlers, Knabbs, Nicholson-Smiths, T.J. Clarks, and maybe if they're particularly unfortunate, the Blacks, generally ending up at the behest of 'all that appears' without really knowing who is full of shit and who isn't. And this response is quite natural; the body of academic, and pseudo-revolutionary, excess surrounding a subject once entirely opposed to such esoteric specializations is indeed quite overwhelming, if not in perfect line with what Debord imagined would come of the history of the SI. What we found as the strongest trait in the Not Bored anthology was its capacity to put all of this into a coherent perspective, lining up where the academics and the disinterested translators stand while also outlining possibilities for authentic continuity in the revolutionary experiment initially begun by the SI.

In addition to a wide array of book reviews and writings on the SI, which serve as the heart of the anthologies theoretical base, there also exists a number of accounts of various different actions which Not Bored has been engaged with on a revolutionary basis over the past 3 decades, ranging in variety from a selection of creative graffiti campaigns to the formation of a prestigious PAC for the unibomber's strong presidential run in 1996, among numerous others. This incredibly diverse field of action thus presents the reader with the sort of vivid image of modern revolutionary action that one is presented with in reading a comparable anthology of the SI itself. Surely, it is not precise imitation, but if such were the case, this would hardly be worth reading.

Not Bored has not amounted to a carbon-copy of blindly applied situationist texts to whatever situations may arise for their application, and it does not claim to attempt as much. Therein lay the beauty to its contributions to revolutionaries today, the fact that it is capable of assessing the SI in terms of its theory seriously, but without academic fetishization, or the inverse of complete denunciation towards all things vaguely 'academic' related. It may be open to some critiques of 'in-authenticity' from

1. In the article contained in the anthology by the name, Brown refers to it as "what the global spectacle becomes as or after the integration of Communism and capitalism becomes so complete that one no longer refers to "Communism," and "capitalism" is replaced by euphemisms such "free enterprise" or "the free market." See "The Society of the Virtual Spectacle" for further detail.

2. He has in the past also told one of our members that Debord NEVER updated his theoretical formulations, a piece of evidence which falls very much in line with Brown's comments on Knabb which state his prevalent apathy towards Debord post 1971, conveniently leaving out *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, the definitive point of refutation towards this claim.

3. Cited from a letter prepared by Debord to Eduardo Rothe on 21 February 1974 (translation available via notbored.org) which is cited in Brown's response to Knabb's 2005 re-release of his Situationist International Anthology

those more zealously literal defendants of the physical word of the SI (Brown makes some critiques of the Situationists hostility towards students and of their use of the notion of workers councils, to name a few points of contestation) but it is precisely because his work has been bold enough over the years to begin these conversations that it takes on the value it has. By any measure, the Situationists themselves were constantly engaged in a collective progress of critique towards their positions, it would be quite hard to imagine a group organized against all spectacular fame lavishing in literal translations of every single stance they maintained to the contemporary backdrop of the spectacle. To quote Brown on the point, “Action gets theory dirty, and only pure, non-active theory (the passive reproduction of theory) keeps it clean.”

Brown additionally said of this theme in correspondence with our group that: “The SI no longer exists, and there has never been any need or value in pretending that it continues. But there is something larger: theory means nothing unless it is put into practice. This is, in many ways, the ultimate point of the SI itself, which existed in a time of many theorists and virtually no revolutionary agents”. It would be difficult, if not somewhat redundant, to try to reiterate this point, as there is not much to be said in summation of this theme.

Beyond these considerations, the anthology contains a wide number of original (detoured and otherwise) images as of yet not published online, as well as an expansive collection of situationist-related book review, comments on music, theory on the SI, polemic histories, and documents from campaigns/interventions/actions undertaken by Not Bored. This immense degree of content thus makes it an invaluable source to anyone seeking to decipher the labyrinth of the modern situationist milieu and its history, while also providing innumerable points of inspiration for continued struggle against the spectacle. If a piece like Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* can be said to still maintain the capacity to turn ones brain upside down, Brown's anthology can be said to make some sense of this process after the initial shock.

A wide majority of the content in the anthology is available for free at notbored.org, as is the contact information to buy a hard copy.

-Ryan Rogers

Operationist Group