

Robert Estivals

“Letter to Debord on the Consequences of Megalomania” *Grammes*, #5 September 1960¹

Megalomaniac egocentrism at the plane of relationships between artists ends up in the will to surpass the others by being careful not to include yourself. I have already written so and said so. You know it.² To know how he [the Avant-Gardist] will act on the plane of critical relations, which is only one of the possible kinds of relationships among artists, it is enough to know the principles to which he attaches value, his value. Your reactions, mine beforehand and afterwards, those of others have [all] allowed me to extricate precisely three planes. The Avant-Gardist

¹ Published in Raoul Vaneigem and Gérard Berréby, *Rien n'est fini, tout commence* (Editions Allia, 2014). Translated by NOT BORED! 1 November 2014.

² Robert Estivals (born 1927) was an associate of Isidore Isou in the mid-1950s and then, after breaking with him in 1957 (five years after Debord's break with Isou and the formation of the Lettrist International), was the founder of several relatively insignificant avant-garde movements. By 1968, he'd settled into a nice position in the Information Sciences department at the Université Bordeaux-Montaigne, where remained until 1993. Back in late 1959 or early 1960, he published an article in *Grammes* #4 that was critical of the Situationist International. In response, Debord published “A propos de quelques erreurs d'interprétation” (“Concerning Several Errors of Interpretation,” available in an English translation here: <http://www.notbored.org/several-errors.html>), which was published in *Internationale Situationniste* #4 (June, 1960). In a letter to Asger Jorn dated 6 July 1960 (<http://www.notbored.org/debord-6July1960.html>), Debord reported, “I am overwhelmed by letters and texts from the lamentable Estivals: a response to my article in *I.S.* #4, in which he complains of being maliciously trampled, ridiculed for the amusement of the gallery, etc; [...] Estival's type would be the ideal target for polemic if he was Minister of Culture or even in Herbert Read's place. But I fear that one can't justify the pursuit of a dialogue with such an obscure sub-product of university-sociological silliness.” It is clear that Estivals' “Letter to Debord on the Consequences of Megalomania” was in fact conciliatory, and, in November 1960, the two men had a relatively cordial exchange of private letters: cf. Debord's letter to Estivals dated 24 November 1960: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-24November1960.html>. Three years later, the two men once again worked on their disagreements: cf. Debord's letter to Estival dated 15 March 1963: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-15March1963.html>.

can be superior on the intellectual plane through intelligence; on the creative plane through durable originality; [and/or]³ on the political-economic plane through his lack of belonging [*inappartenance*] to the bourgeoisie.

All critical argumentation thus aims at degrading its adversary by denying that he has sufficient intelligence; by reducing the significance of the adversary's entire oeuvre by paying homage to it, because *he* couldn't very well be interested in something that is mediocre; and then, finally, by treating his adversary's thought and theories as bourgeois and idealist. That's the way it's done. But egocentrism has another consequence. It renders its own argumentation mediocre. It doesn't seek truth, namely, if the [adversary's] critique is truly imbecilic, but only if it can be shown to be so. Critique isn't a means of research into the truth and progress. It is a means by which to triumph over the other. Only such a manner of seeing obligates a mediocre comportment. The methods will be irony, lying, and confusion through haste: irony that plays on the surface and hides the truth by discrediting the other; lying that isn't easy for the unwarned reader to detect; and confusion that imposes itself on the inattentive reader. I will, I hope, furnish the proof of this. But as my intention is not to critique you in the optics of egocentrism, precisely because I want it this way and have already changed my view, I place myself with you in the same basket as far as documentation will allow me.

³ Since it is not the custom of writers of French to use the conjunction "and" before the last item in an inclusive list, as it is for writers of English, it is impossible to know if "and" or "or" were intended here. It seems that, for Estivals, "or" is the more likely of the two choices. But if your "adversary" is generalized separation, as it was for Debord, an Avant-Gardist might be "superior" precisely to the extent that he/she is "superior" at all three planes, simultaneously and integrally.