

## May 1968 and the Question of the Image

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Fig. 1 André Sas, photograph. This image, which appeared in the May 11 edition of the French illustrated weekly *Paris-Match*, was one of the first widely disseminated representations of the events. Notably, it became available almost a week after the first skirmishes with the police had taken place.

In her book *May '68 and its Afterlives* (2002) Kristin Ross claimed that a cultural reading of the events of May 1968 in France has erased the political nature and foundation of the revolutionary situation. As she explains, “May ’68 itself was not an artistic moment. It was an event that transpired among very few images; French television, after all, was on strike.”<sup>1</sup> Despite the surprising logic of this thesis that links together art, images and television, whether or not the events were cultural or political, the uprising in Paris took place during a period of intense change *vis-à-vis* visual information: one that connected these usually separate categories.

In May and June of 1968 a protest by students over visiting rights in college dormitories in the suburbs of Paris evolved into the largest general strike in French history. Not only did it constitute the first major insurrection in the West since the Second World War, it threatened to permanently undermine the French state. At its peak, out of a population of fifty million, ten million workers went on strike for four straight weeks. Like other revolutions that preceded it, the May uprising fired up the press and written comment proliferated, but efforts to report on what was widely considered to be the most dramatic event in France since Liberation in 1944 were extremely patchy and often censored. The resultant coverage was neither objective nor consistent. The political

intensity and uncertainty of the moment exposed the definitive characteristics and very different political dispositions and audiences of the four sectors of the French media: newspaper, radio, the illustrated press, and the relatively new television.<sup>2</sup>

Incidents in Germany that April, involving Rudi Dutschke and the Springer Press, had increased the French public's sensitivity to issues regarding freedom of the press.<sup>3</sup> As the events unfolded in Paris it became clear that this grave concern was not unwarranted. While momentum was building in the Parisian streets two issues were occupying the chamber of deputies in the *Assemblée Nationale*: first, whether or not the arms-length policy of the government toward the central telecommunications agency, the *L'Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française* (O.R.T.F.) should be changed, and second, if and when advertisements should be introduced to French national television. In fact this controversial issue was the last subject debated in the National Assembly of France on April 23 before the events broke out.<sup>4</sup>

Television caught on late in France, television advertisements even later. Whereas advertisements had been a part of American television since the forties, *les pubs*, as the French refer to them, did not appear on French television until 1969. France was, in fact, the last country in the industrialized West to introduce commercials and this legislation marked an important turn in French visual culture. Up until that point, the more politically independent and contrary illustrated press, which included magazines such as *Paris-Match*, had been both the chief forum for advertising and the prime source of what Europeans call visual information, in the form of high-quality black-and-white or color photographic essays.<sup>5</sup> Subsequent to the spring of 1968, however, television would assume this lucrative and powerful position.

The introduction of commercials to television was critical to the fortunes of the illustrated press as revenues from advertisers were the industry's biggest source of income.<sup>6</sup> While on the surface this change would appear to be an inevitable historical development brought about for economic reasons, the rise of television in France was part of a bitter struggle for control over the French mass media. Income from advertisements had been the key source of revenue for the illustrated press and therefore constituted the fountainhead of their political independence. Without that income the illustrated press could not afford freedom of expression. Or to put it another way, advertisements on French television deprived the illustrated press of the source of their independence, while simultaneously increasing the French government's control over television, thereby weakening an important venue of independent political debate.

The French public had no illusions about the consequences this legislation would have for the popular illustrated press, which included weekly magazines such as *Noir et Blanc*, *Détective*, and *Paris-Match*, and in angry opposition to the government's plans to introduce commercials to television, deputies of the *Fédération de la gauche*, an alliance of leftist groups, introduced a counter-motion "on the anti-democratic politics of the government in the domain of information, and notably the abusive utilization of audio-visual media, put at the disposition of the state, by the nation."<sup>7</sup> However, the ultimate decision about the introduction of advertisements would not be finalized until later that summer after the uprising was over.

In the following pages, I argue that this important shift in the transmission of visual information was connected to a growing interest in the influence of the image, as it took shape throughout the sixties in texts on the Left and Right. By focusing on the illustrated press and television and comparing their coverage to the way other important media reported on the strike, I establish the degree to which the question of the image shaped, and was in turn shaped by, the revolutionary situation, thereby demonstrating the extent of the exchange, overlap, and mutual determination between the production of images and history at this moment.<sup>8</sup> My argument is that the rise of the new medium of television in France was accompanied by what Roland Barthes identified early on as a veritable "panic," and that this panic crystallized in the events of 1968.

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Anticipation and concern about the role the increasingly pervasive “image” was playing in society had been a persistent feature of intellectual discourse since before World War II and questions about the image, in relationship to advertisements, film, and television continued to be a recurrent theme in the work of a large cross-section of European and North American intellectuals after 1945.<sup>9</sup> The Italian scholar Galvano Della Volpe’s essay *Estetica del Carro Armato*, which appeared in the journal *Il Primato* (1941), was one of the first attempts to discuss the power of images, but this thread was later taken up famously in Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1957), the anthology *Civilisation de l’image* (1960), and finally Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967).<sup>10</sup> Although they do not constitute a debate as such, these texts define key positions in the discourse and demonstrate the increasing importance of this issue to writers and thinkers across the political spectrum during the sixties.

Historically, the English and American reception of this body of writing has represented Debord as the leading, or at least the most radical, theorist of the relationship between the image and consumer society in the postwar period. The Situationists and Debord are regularly credited with sparking off the events of 1968 and are widely considered to be responsible for the much celebrated playful atmosphere of the uprising. Debord’s theoretical authority has also been increased through the repeated characterization of his work as drawing from “the deep past” of Marxism, i.e. from German philosophy, and French classical literature, rather than, for example, from the work of his immediate peers.<sup>11</sup> However, as former Situationist Donald Nicholson-Smith has pointed out, *The Society of the Spectacle* only came to prominence *as a result of* the events.<sup>12</sup> It cannot be emphasized enough that up until 1968 the book was of little importance and very few people had actually read it. Furthermore, while in hindsight it may seem obvious that *The Society of the Spectacle* owes a great debt to Barthes’ *Mythologies* this fact is rarely acknowledged in even the best historical treatments of the literature.

Barthes and Debord were part of a European movement that sought to reinvent Marxism in the wake of the brutal suppression of the revolt against the Stalinist government in Hungary in 1956. While Barthes was the leading light of the Paris-based academic journal *Arguments* (1956-1962), Debord was involved in the more anarchist-oriented *Potlatch* (1954-1957) in Belgium, before going on to found the group known as the Situationist International in Cosio di Arroscia, Italy, the same year that Barthes’ *Mythologies* was first published, in 1957.<sup>13</sup> Though both of their theoretical frameworks turned on the question of ideology, the philosopher and the younger activist filmmaker challenged Stalinism in very different ways.

Barthes defined myth as an incessant game of hide-and-seek between meaning and form.<sup>14</sup> According to Barthes, images were presented as innocent rather than motivated constructions and operated by locking consumers into an all-embracing ideological order or myth.<sup>15</sup> For Barthes however, the image was only a secondary concern. The images cited—which were almost exclusively photographs, many of which were culled from France’s favorite illustrated weekly *Paris-Match*—though essential to the argument as evidence, were not central to the theoretical armature. That is to say, in *Mythologies* the question of the image was always secondary to the question of how *ideology* functioned in society.

In contrast to *Mythologies*, the collection *Civilisation de l’image* (1960), which was published by the *Centre catholique des intellectuels français*, focused solely on the image and new technologies, and comprised a series of essays representing several disciplines from sociology to theology, with no explicit political agenda. This book is important because it was, as Barthes later pointed out, one of the first texts to recognize that the surfeit of images that characterized this era constituted a new and privileged form of propaganda.<sup>16</sup> Practical rather than theoretical, addressing film, photography, and television, this study was more of a status report on the role of the image in society and a

guide for implementing governmental and ecclesiastical policy rather than a critical assessment *à la* Barthes. Above all it was focused on the opportunities presented by this new situation and argued that there was a pressing need to develop an understanding of the government of the imagination now that state governments were faced with a society and culture defined by the exploitation of images.<sup>17</sup> Barthes wrote a lukewarm review of *Civilisation* for the first edition of the new journal *Communications* in 1961. In 1964, to mark the publication of the Italian translation, he observed that the continuing popularity of this book suggested that a kind of panic about images had taken hold of society.<sup>18</sup> Still, Barthes did not see images, or the relationships that they fostered, as the emblem of capitalism or the source of society's problems. As Barthes stated, to condemn the image was to condemn modernity.<sup>19</sup>

Where as *Civilisation de l'image* welcomed this new regime of visual information and sought to control it, in 1967 Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* aimed to orchestrate its imminent and permanent downfall. Taking for his subject the role of visual representation in postwar consumer society, Debord scorned the spectacle as a totalizing regime that controlled social relationships through images.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to Barthes, the image was the keystone of this theoretical complex, but echoing Barthes' notion of myth, Debord's theory of the spectacle claimed that images established a set of relations that fixed consumers into what he called the spectacular-merchandise society:

The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship mediated by images. It cannot be understood as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the technology of the mass dissemination of images. It is far better understood as a *Weltanschauung* that has been actualized, translated into the material realm—a worldview translated into an objective force.<sup>21</sup>

Debord understood better than most the significance of the image in relation to the government, the government of the public's imagination, and mass communication. However, the claim that the spectacle cannot be reduced to the mass dissemination of images, which has since been reiterated by many of Debord's readers, does not withstand scrutiny, especially when the historical context of this theory is taken into consideration.<sup>22</sup> In this sense the theory of the spectacle is both less and more than Debord claims: less because despite Debord's trademark bombast there is absolutely nothing metaphysical about the spectacle, as is implied by the use of the word *Weltanschauung*, and more because the spectacle *is* exactly a terribly mundane product of the mass dissemination of images and a deliberate distortion of the visual world, as the example of 1968 demonstrates.

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In 1968 the French government recognized very early on that there was a powerful rapport between the information diffused by the media and the collective imagination of the public, and right from the very beginning took every measure to control, and in some cases suppress, all communication about the general strike.<sup>24</sup> Certain key moments shed light on the difficulties the media encountered when attempting to report on the crisis. The example of the *Panorama* episode stands out in this respect. Although there had already been significant street-fighting beginning on May 6, the first television program about the events was not scheduled to air until May 10. *Panorama*, a popular weekly news journal, was preparing a documentary which was to be broadcast at 5:30 but the show was pre-empted by censors representing both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Information.<sup>25</sup>

Their timing could not have been worse. Later that night violent confrontations between students and police increased dramatically. Barricades made of paving stones and burning cars

multiplied in the Latin Quarter. Radio, particularly international radio, which had largely been ignored by the French public since World War II, was the only media technically able and willing to report on the events as they occurred from a variety of locations.<sup>26</sup> One observer described the scene like this:

On the night of May 10 and 11 barricades were built up and down rue Gay Lussac. Transistor radios, at full volume, were positioned on balconies, on the sills of open windows, or on piles of paving stones. It was total stereo. From all corners, everywhere in the streets, we bathed in the sounds of the events; there was total instantaneity between the event and the information, between the information and its reception. Information was integrated with the events as they unfolded.<sup>27</sup>

The next morning, the “total instantaneity” turned into absolute outrage over what was widely perceived to be unnecessary and over-zealous police brutality. The failure of television to cover the events the day before was seen as a betrayal of public trust and provoked an intense desire that “everything be seen and said.”<sup>28</sup> By limiting the available information the government had only increased the public’s desire to know, generating a widespread demand for what was variously referred to as “raw information,” “direct information,” and “total information.”<sup>29</sup> The French newspaper *Le Monde* was scandalized by “*La Grande Muette*” (the great silence) and reported on it in a special weekend edition.<sup>30</sup>

In 1968 ten million households, or two-thirds of French households, owned a radio while approximately one million owned a television.<sup>31</sup> Thanks to the portable tape recorder, *le Nagra*, on-the-spot radio transmission was possible. In contrast to the newspapers, the illustrated press and television, radio was the only medium capable of reporting on events as they were happening on location. The transistor radio has been singled out because it allowed every individual the opportunity to plan his or her own personal strategy during the insurrection in 1968.<sup>32</sup> However, after May 11, international radio stations were also put under pressure to conform to government edicts. We can speculate that newspapers were also coerced by the government at this time, as was the case with the illustrated press, a medium that historically had defined political independence.

Picture magazines date back to the nineteenth century, but developments in photographic printing techniques combined with the liberal opening up of the Weimar Republic, made the 1920s in Germany a particularly rich era. Illustrated magazines on every topic, representing a wide variety of political positions, appeared at this time. *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (1924-1938) and *Münchener illustrierte Presse* (1923-1945) were the most famous, but journals sprung up all over, on every imaginable topic from politics to home decorating. French examples include *Détective* (1928), *Photo-Monde* (1932-1934), *Voilà* (1931-1939), *Regards* (1931-1939), and *Match* (1937-1939), just to name a few.<sup>33</sup> An important predecessor to *Paris-Match* which dates from this period was *VU magazine* (1928-1940). Established by Lucien Vogel, the Paris-based *VU* was forced to shut down in 1940 after advertisers withdrew *en masse* because of Vogel’s unwavering support for the Popular Front Government and the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. As it turned out, 1968 would have similar consequences for *Paris-Match*.

The illustrated weeklies returned after the Second World War but without the same diversity, and by the beginning of the sixties their fortunes were in decline all over Europe. France was no exception. In 1956 *Paris-Match* was printing 1.8 million copies a week, but by 1967 its circulation had dropped to 1.4 million.<sup>34</sup> Still, despite the decrease in sales, the journal maintained its position as the primary source for high quality color photographs for the sole reason that no other media was, as yet, consistently providing this important service.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, regardless of its shrinking numbers, *Paris-Match* remained France’s largest selling illustrated weekly and literally dominated the field of visual information during the Sixties, which put it in direct competition with television.<sup>36</sup>

The newspapers covered the events of 1968 fairly consistently, and new journals and special

editions appeared almost on a daily basis. However, as we have already seen, the nature of the print medium prevented the simultaneous transmission of information, which meant that there was always a delay between the events and the appearance of the newspapers.<sup>37</sup> Also, images of the events were few and far between. Only a handful of photographs appeared in the newspapers, and those that illustrated the front pages of *Le Figaro*, *Paris-Soir*, or *L'Humanité* were in black-and-white. Although *Le Monde* was happy to print half page photographs in the form of advertisements, they seldom printed photographs in conjunction with news stories, and almost never on the front page. This is because their readership had traditionally disapproved of the combination of news and images. Strictly speaking, in 1968 photographs of current events were perceived to be the exclusive domain of the more common, more “popular,” illustrated press.

The Sixties are notable historically for the sheer density of dramatic news stories and before 1968 *Paris-Match* covered all of them in vivid color: from the atrocities of the Vietnam War to the Civil War in Biafra. In total five issues of *Paris-Match* were devoted to the events in Paris: two in May, two more at the end of June, and one in July; but during the critical four weeks between May 18 and June 15 it was conspicuously unavailable. The two issues of *Paris-Match* published in May that addressed the events appeared on May 11 and May 18. The first issue acknowledged the events peripherally and included five pages of photographs that displayed the students posing cheerfully behind unconvincing barricades under a predictably overcast Parisian sky (fig.1). However, production time did not allow the weekly to include any images of the violent street-fighting that had taken place the night before (fig. 2).

The disparity between the playful images that appeared in this issue and the still smoldering wrecks of over 160 overturned burnt out cars that littered the Latin Quarter must have been



Fig. 2 Bruno Barbey, photograph. The aftermath of the street-fighting on May 10, as it appeared the morning of May 11, 1968.



national television went off the air on May 17 and *Paris-Match* disappeared following May 18. On May 15, as institutions and factories all over France were being occupied, artists and others took over the art and professional schools and turned them into makeshift propaganda centers, printing the first of the thousands of posters that would eventually cover the walls of the Latin Quarter. The most famous poster workshops were set up at the *École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts* (fig. 3), and the more technically design-oriented *École nationale des arts décoratifs*. Others included: the *Comité d'action des étudiants en médecine*, the *Faculté des sciences*, the *Institut d'art et d'archéologie*, the *Atelier populaire Marseille* and *Montpellier*.<sup>40</sup>

Lithography was used for the first posters, but the students quickly moved on to serigraphy or silk screen printing because it was faster. Though technique and politics varied, these workshops were nominally non-specialist: propositions for posters were drawn up and then debated by a General Assembly before being collectively printed in runs of up to 3000 for the more popular compositions. Eventually 500,000 posters were produced in this manner, with over 600 different designs. In 1990 Adam Gopnik and Kirk Varnedoe celebrated the phenomenon with these words:

Graffiti in Asger Jorn's sense would become the grounding for a counter-cultural scheme in May 1968 when students from the *École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts* and elsewhere waged an intensive campaign of postering and sloganeering on walls throughout Paris. With simply conceived silk-screen images and painted aphorisms such as "Sous les pavés la plage" (Under the paving stones the beach) these students tried to reawaken the power of writing on public walls as something *immediate and instrumental*, rather than immemorial and self-indulgent—to construct on the model of graffiti a renewed public art that with a knowing eye to the power of advertising's catch phrases, would define a binding anti-authoritarian language of the oppressed. For at this moment, it seemed that a true civic art form, politically effective yet consecrated to the expanded reign of play and imagination, had come alive through a new merger between the art studio and the street.<sup>41</sup> (Italics mine)

Michel de Certeau wrote that the events in Paris in 1968 were characterized above all by *la prise de parole*, a phrase which translates imperfectly as the capture of speech or the right to speak in your own voice.<sup>42</sup> In a context where questions regarding the integrity of the media dominated, it is unsurprising that the graffiti and the posters were celebrated for their immediacy and widely vaunted as the most democratic form of political expression.

Jean Baudrillard has suggested that the only authentically revolutionary forms of communication in 1968 were the acts that bypassed the media and the official circuits of the arts. According to Baudrillard the streets were subversive because they in no way claimed objectivity as did the newspapers, radio, and television; the posters and the graffiti were the *sine qua non* of communication at this time exactly because they were *un-mediated*.<sup>43</sup> Kristin Ross likewise argued that the 1968 posters did not aim to represent the events but rather strove to "be at one with – at the same time with, contemporary with – whatever was occurring. Speed, a speedy technique was of the essence," concluding with the intriguing proposition that: "in this moment art achieved presentation, rather than representation."<sup>44</sup>

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The broad censorship of the media combined with De Gaulle's perceived indifference to the escalating national crisis aggravated the situation in the streets. On the evening of May 23 the government prohibited shortwave radio transmissions in preparation for De Gaulle's national address which was scheduled to be delivered on long wave radio the following evening. In the hopes of appeasing his



quickly growing opposition on May 24, he gave a seven-minute speech which aired on both long wave radio and television to announce that a referendum on university reform would take place on June 16. Public reaction to this event is nicely summarized by a graffiti that appeared the next day in the Grand Palais: "It took him three weeks to announce in five minutes what he would do in a month's time, what he hasn't managed to accomplish in ten years."<sup>45</sup> This miscalculation on the part of De Gaulle and his government gave the unions the upper hand in the negotiations that ensued. The Grenelle Accords, which attempted to legislate the strikers back to work with a series of new and improved benefits, were ratified on May 27, but there was still widespread dissatisfaction, and on May 28 the headline of the popular daily *L'Aurore* was: "Total Stagnation."<sup>46</sup>

Though it was widely reported in the press that De Gaulle had decided on a whim to visit his home in *Colombey-les-deux-Eglises*, on May 29 De Gaulle actually flew to Baden Baden to solicit the support of General Massu. In the case of a civil war, he needed to know whether French troops could be relied upon to fight against French citizens.<sup>47</sup> On his return supporters organized a massive march in his honor. In a last ditch effort to reassert his authority, on the night of May 30 De Gaulle made a final announcement, but this time he chose to deliver it via the radio, and *only* the radio. Interestingly short and long wave radio were both back in full working order for the occasion.<sup>48</sup> At that point televising the address was not a risk De Gaulle was willing to take. Not only was he aware that more people in France were listening to the radio than were watching television, delivering a speech over the radio also gave him an opportunity to remind the French public of his historic 1940 radio broadcast from London that launched the French Resistance.<sup>49</sup>

When *Paris-Match* finally returned two weeks later on June 15 it would outsell every previous issue ever printed despite striking vendors.<sup>50</sup> On the same day *Le Monde* ran its one and only story about the four missing editions of *Paris-Match* in a small anonymous article on page 17d under the headline: "Monsieur Prouvost appoints a director to *Paris-Match*." The newspaper attributed the absence of the popular weekly to striking printers, but the real focus of the story was the profound reorganization of the editorial team, which, they noted, coincided with the events.<sup>51</sup> The other alternative explanation for the absence of the journal was provided by a short editorial that appeared in the June 22 edition of *Paris-Match*. Apparently the magazine merely needed extra time in order to make technical improvements that would allow them to print more color photographs. However, that does not change the fact, as Myriam Akoum has noted, that while the first two May issues were clearly pro-student, when *Paris-Match* returned in June its sympathies were explicitly with the French state.<sup>52</sup>

In July, when most of the would-be revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries gave up and cleared off for their summer holidays, the government began setting up the administrative committees necessary for the implementation of the advertising legislation. The decision was made final on January 30, 1969. The advertisements would be only for consumer products deemed a priority by the government. On January 31, 1969 an industrialist from Lyon threw his television off the Eiffel tower to protest.<sup>53</sup> The first advertisement appeared on French television October 1, 1969. It was for the ever popular and ever spreadable Boursin cheese. It is tempting to surmise that advertisements were introduced to French television at this juncture simply because television was becoming an increasingly influential medium and therefore a more cost effective way of reaching the public, but despite its increasing importance, we know that in 1968 there were still more radios in France than televisions, and advertisements were not introduced to French radio until 1984.

When President Charles de Gaulle came to power with the foundation of the Fifth Republic in 1958, he was well aware of the importance of supervising public media because of his experience with radio in England during the Second World War. At that time De Gaulle had been a leading member of the Resistance and was instrumental in the liberation of Paris in 1944. As a result he was highly sensitive to questions regarding the control of the media. His government deemed

television to be the best means for disseminating policy, but also as powerful ammunition against the troublesome newspapers and illustrated press.<sup>54</sup> As early as 1961 he referred to television as “a magnificent instrument which supports the public spirit.”<sup>55</sup>

Although on paper the body which represented the industry, the *Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française*, known as the R.T.F., was supposed to be independent, in reality it was subject to daily and direct control from the French government. And despite the establishment of an apparently more independent separate *L'Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française*, known as the O.R.T.F. in 1964, the situation hardly changed.<sup>56</sup> The introduction of advertisements to French television was strategic rather than economic, in that it gave the government more control over television and simultaneously deprived the illustrated press of its principal source of revenue, thereby destroying its political independence and up until then unchallenged domination in the field of visual information; an important issue which became absolutely critical to the fortune of the French government in 1968.

In 1976 former editor of *Paris-Match* Guillaume Hanoteau claimed mysteriously and without explanation that May 68 had had grave consequences for the magazine.<sup>57</sup> Throughout May and June French television and the popular illustrated press were repeatedly prevented from broadcasting, publishing, and distributing images of the street-fighting and barricades, and many of France's best selling illustrated weeklies, such as *Paris-Match*, *Détective*, and *Noir et Blanc* were simply unavailable throughout the four crucial weeks that spanned the months of May and June, from May 14 to June 18. The diligence of the newspapers, particularly *Le Monde*, in condemning the government for its censorship of television at this time has been noted. *Le Monde* was the only media source that attempted to account for the goings and comings, not just of television and radio reports, but of other newspapers as well, both regional and local. And yet *Le Monde* failed to account for the absence of *Paris-Match* until much later, on June 18, when the events were coming to a close, and even ignored the other illustrated weeklies which also went missing during this time.

In 1972, teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, *Paris-Match* was sold and after a brief hiatus returned in its current politically unrecognizable format under new management.<sup>58</sup> Shortly thereafter in 1973, a new daily, *Libération*, was launched in Paris by a group of prominent Maoist *soixante-huitards*. *Libération*, affectionately known as *Libé* to its readers, was conceived as a leftist alternative to *Le Monde*, and one of the ways in which it strove to set itself apart was through its treatment of images. Rather than using photographs as mere illustrations, in the pages of *Libération* photographs were considered valuable in their own right and just as important as the written news stories that accompanied them.<sup>59</sup>

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Questions concerning the means of representation and visual communication were more central to the events of 1968 in France than is generally recognized. It has been observed that in the largest unpublished collection of the May posters there are more posters about the media than on the student movement itself.<sup>60</sup> However, the idea posited by Ross and others that the posters constituted an alternative media, more powerful, exactly because it was a more direct, transparent, or even democratic form of communication is problematic and raises the issue of what Hal Foster once termed “the Expressive Fallacy.”<sup>61</sup> By 1968 the idea that expression was mere convention had been current in French intellectual circles for some time, and yet during the uprising artists and others continued to produce works which endorsed this idea. Although many of the participants in the workshops were professionally trained artists and designers whose prior and later work was characterized by more sophisticated methods, they consistently rejected advanced technical means in favor of stencils and silk screens. An important example was the almost complete refusal, in all

the workshops, to use photographs as the basis for silk screen poster designs. Subsequently the idea that the posters achieved presentation rather than representation, that they were authentically spontaneous, or *un-mediated*, becomes more complicated.

The retreat into an anachronistic expressionist mode can be ascribed to the influence of the Dazibao (sometimes referred to as Tatzepao) poster campaigns in China associated with the so-called Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The influence of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution in France is well known, and the Chinese Dazibao posters from this era are often cited as an important precedent to the May '68 posters, however until now the degree of similarity between the two campaigns has remained unexplored.

In 1966, sections of the Red Guard created and posted thousands of handmade anonymous posters in China in an effort to discredit Mao's political enemies (fig. 4). By this time Mao had lost control of the official Propaganda Department, and in order to reassert his dominance, he needed to put forward a rival apparatus which appeared to be both independent and spontaneous. Handmade posters were an efficient low-tech means of disseminating his message. It has been suggested that the Dazibao were the definitive medium of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>62</sup> In this light the make-shift aesthetic of the posters of May and June in France begin to look like a deliberate and conscious pose rather than evidence of direct or spontaneous expression. Indeed in 1970 Susan Sontag compared the French posters to Cuban posters from the same era, and argued that they were less stately because they “cultivated, for reasons of practical exigency as well as ideological motives, a raw, naïve, improvised, youthful look.”<sup>63</sup> Instead of achieving, as Ross has argued, presentation, rather than representation, echoing Sontag I would argue that the posters of 1968 achieved the



Fig. 4 Photo by Solange Brand of Dazibao from the Chinese Cultural Revolution in Beijing in 1966.



Fig. 5 Asger Jorn, lithograph poster (from a series of four) created in support of the general strike in 1968.

*representation of presentation.* In this sense Ross is correct when she states that May was distinctly political rather than artistic or cultural.

Though the Situationists are often credited with instigating the insurrection of May 1968, Maoists were much more influential and much more important for the events. Discussions of 1968 tend to paint Debord as the leading theorist of the image, but the question of the image and its role in postwar society was a widespread concern, not just on the left, but also on the right, in intellectual as well as governmental and religious circles. Contemporary writing on Situationist theory often gives the impression that this body of writing appeared in 1968 as a fully formed monolithic doctrine, which makes it easy to overlook the fact that Situationist ideas were actually more heterogeneous and evolved gradually over the previous decade, starting with a generalized critique of art before moving on to attack the image more specifically. It is the heterogeneity of Situationist theory, regarding precisely this question of the image, which I would like to turn to now.

As is well known, one of the most important slogans in 1968, which was subsequently turned into a very popular graffiti, was: “L’imagination au pouvoir!” which is often translated as “All power to the imagination!” To conclude, I would like to discuss a series of posters which addressed

the relationship between the image and imagination, designed by the Danish artist and former Situationist Asger Jorn (1914–1973).

Jorn is best known as an expressionist painter but his talents and skills were applied to an enormous range of activities. For example, Jorn compiled a thirty-two volume compendium entitled *10,000 Years of Scandinavian Folk Art*, wrote extensively on science, aesthetics, and philosophy and established the Institute for Comparative Vandalism in Silkeborg, Denmark in 1961.<sup>64</sup> He was also a founding member of the Situationist International, though in 1961 he was expelled from the group when the Situationists proclaimed they were against art and artists. Nevertheless, Jorn continued to fund the group through the sale of his much sought after paintings.

In June 1968 Jorn produced a series of posters for sale with all proceeds going to support the student movement. Printed by Peter Bramsen at his rue Vielle du Temple print shop in an edition of 1000 (4 in 1), two of these posters are exceptional because they are the only examples from May and June that explicitly address the question of the image.<sup>65</sup> More interestingly they make clear that Jorn harbored very different ideas than Debord about this issue. Their deliberately misspelled titles read: “Brisez le cadre quietouf limage” (Break the frame that strangles the image) and “Pas de puisance d’imagination sans images puisante” (No powerful imaginations without powerful images) (fig. 5). Asger Jorn’s 1968 posters are obscure but they mark an important crossroad in the postwar history of western art and politics.

In a lecture entitled “Depiction, Object, Event” (2006) the Vancouver artist Jeff Wall (b. 1946) described the contemporary art of the global biennials as “institutionalized neo situationism.”<sup>66</sup> Whether or not the so-called avant gardes of the last thirty years have succeeded in their stated objective of destroying the boundaries between art and life—through institutional critique, performance and installation art—certainly the Situationist attacks against art and its strange consort “the image” have become standard practice in the contemporary art world and beyond. The post-1968 campaign against the apparent tyranny of the image and art, not to mention museums, largely attributable to the Situationists, has influenced much (but not all) of the art, theory, and politics produced over the last forty years. In this sense Michael Fried’s essay “Art & Objecthood,” published in *Artforum* in 1967 the same year as *The Society of the Spectacle*, can be seen as a kind of signpost for the road not taken.

While Fried’s critique of anti-modern theatricality, on the one hand, and Debord’s critique of the spectacle, on the other, seemed to bear some intriguing resemblance, especially in terms of their dialectical proclivities, their positions were fundamentally opposed. Debord’s revolutionary theory turned on the destruction of categories, specifically the categories of art and life, while Fried’s aesthetic philosophy was driven by the conviction that what lay between the categories of the arts was mere theater.<sup>67</sup> Whereas Debord espoused the idea of the realization of art in the name of life, it could be argued that Fried championed the realization of life in the name of art. This is what I think he meant in the famous last lines of his essay: “We are all literalists most or all our lives. Presentness is grace.”<sup>68</sup> Echoing this sentiment, Penelope Fitzgerald once made the following observation about the relationship between art and life: “The world will not be right till poetry is pronounced to be life itself, our own lives but shadows and poor imitations.”<sup>69</sup>

In 1968 the Maoist paradigm of “cultural revolution” superseded the notion of classical revolution, and Situationism began to take hold in Europe and elsewhere as the leading aesthetic paradigm for those artists aspiring to enter the ranks of the avant garde. The effect this turn of events has had on art and artists, not to mention art history and the sphere of politics, has yet to be fully determined.

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## Notes

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1. Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002), 15.
2. Film might also be seen as a logical medium to discuss here but there are good reasons for leaving it out. During May commercial cinemas continued to project films without interruption. Concurrently, a revolutionary group, interested in reassessing the status quo called États Généraux du cinéma was formed, and at the two major film schools debates about the role of film and the reformation of the industry took place. During this time the famous cinétracts were also produced. These were not shown regularly, and are in no way equivalent to the more traditional sources of visual information. The cinema influenced by May mostly occurred afterwards, during the seventies. See David Faroult and Gérard Leblanc, *Mai 68 ou le cinéma en suspens* (Paris: Éditions Syllepse, 1998) and Margaret Atack's *May 68 in French Fiction and Film: Rethinking Society, Rethinking Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
3. On April 11 1968, an assassination attempt was made on the life of the German student activist Rudi Dutschke. He was shot in the head by a Joseph Bachman who had been inspired by the campaign led by the mass media owned by Axel Springer to "Stop Dutschke Now!"
4. *La grande aventure du petit écran: la télévision française 1935–1975* (Nanterre: Bibliothèque de documentation contemporaine, 1997), 93.
5. Ibid. See also Gisèle Freund, *Photography and Society* (Boston: David R. Godin, 1980), 141. It is often forgotten that Freund's book was first published in French, 1973—and in English, 1980. This makes her work an important precedent to both Sontag's *On Photography* which appeared in 1977 and Barthe's *Camera Lucida* from 1980.
6. See Freund, *Photography*.
7. André-Jean Tudesq, "La radio, les manifestations, le pouvoir in O.R.T.F.," in *Mai 68 à L'O.R.T.F. Comité d'histoire de la télévision* (Paris: La Documentation Française, 1987), 140.
8. Contemporary historian Michelle Zancarini-Fournel has noted the fundamental role images and *parole* played in the student and worker movement of 1968. See Michelle Zancarini-Fournel "1968: Histoire, mémoires et commémorations," *EspacesTemps* 59–61 (1995), 154. Two other articles that have been very important for thinking about this subject have been Jean-Marie Apostelidès, "Du Surréalisme à l'International situationniste: la question de l'image," *MLN* 105 (1990): 127–149, and Jeanne M. Przyblyski's, "Revolution at a Standstill: Photography and the Paris Commune of 1871," *Yale French Studies* 101 *Fragments of Revolution* (2001): 54–78.
9. A short list would include the writings of Sartre, Malraux, Galvano Della Volpe, André Bazin, Christian Metz, Daniel Boorstin, and Julia Kristeva. Eventually I would like to follow this idea as it evolved throughout the Seventies, in which case Umberto Eco and Baudrillard would have to be added. Also Walter Benjamin and Georges Lukàc's writings are not irrelevant here, although they were not translated into French until 1964 and 1971 respectively, and even then only in excerpts. Still their names and ideas surface repeatedly in journals from the period. The same could be said about the extensive Marxist aesthetic debates around and within the Frankfurt School about what constituted the correct 'dialectical image.' Again some cautious leeway is justified here due to the phenomenon of European intellectual osmosis. I would have included the Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964) and *The Medium is the Massage* (New York: Random House, 1967) also, but they were not translated into French until 1967 and 1968.
10. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1957), *Civilisation de l'Image. Recherches et débats, centre catholiques des intellectuels Français* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1960); Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle* (Paris: Buchat-Chastel, 1967).
11. See Michael Stone-Richards, "A Reflexion on the French and American Perception of Guy Debord," in *Parachute*

93 (1999): 56-58; Bradley J. MacDonald, "From the Spectacle to Unitary Urbanism: Reassessing Situationist Theory," *Rethinking Marxism* 8, 2 (Summer 1995): 89-111; and T.J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith, "Why Art Can't Kill the Situationist International," *October* 79 (1997): 23.

12. Donald Nicholson-Smith was briefly part of the English section of the Situationist International. See Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

13. A useful discussion of *Arguments* can be found in Mark Poster's *Existential Marxism in Postwar France: from Sartre to Althusser* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 202–213.

14. Barthes, *Mythologies*, 225.

15. *Ibid.* This subject was part of a network of connected issues that interested Barthes. A short list of articles would include: "Le message photographique," *Communications* 1 (1961) (reprinted in *L'Obvie et l'obtus*, Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1982); "Civilisation de l'image," *Communications* 1 (1961); "L'information visuelle" *Communications* 1 (1961); "Le message Publicitaire" *Les cahiers de la publicité* No. 7 (July-September 1963); "La Civilisation de l'image" *Communications* 3 (1964); "The Rhetoric of the Image," *Communications* 4 (1964); *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977); "Image, raison, déraison," Preface to *L'Univers de l'Encyclopédie* (Paris: Librairies Associées, 1964); and "Société, Imagination, Publicité" *Publicità e televisione*, under the title, "Società, immaginazione, pubblicità", RAI, Rome, 1968. "L'information visuelle" was a report on the first international conference on visual information that took place in Milan in July 1961 which was organized by the *Istituto per lo studio sperimentale di problemi sociali con ricerche filmologiche ed alter tecniche*. By 1968 this view would change slightly, and Barthes would take a more Situationist position as the R.A.I. essay confirms; however, this essay, which was a commissioned piece, was originally written in French before being translated into Italian in 1968. Eric Marty has informed me that it was never published in French during the author's life time and in fact, first appeared in print in French on the occasion of the first edition of Barthes collected works in 1993.

16. Barthes, "La Civilisation de l'image," *Communications* 3 (1964): 63.

17. Henri Lemaître, "L'image et ses pouvoirs," in *Civilisation de l'image* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, December 1960), 67.

18. Barthes, "La Civilisation de l'image," 63.

19. *Ibid.*

20. In the ten years leading up to its publication Debord developed what Situationists termed a unified critique against art and architecture which they hoped would result the 'Revolution of Everyday Life.' Carried out through the convergence of the previously distinct categories of art and life, by a process variously referred to as the supersession or realization of art, it would be consummated over the condemnation of the image. In this way art could be used to invigorate everyday life, as opposed to merely offering a futile momentary escape.

21. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 12.

22. Books that have been important for establishing a more historical approach to the Situationist International include Anselme Jappe's *Guy Debord*, trans. Donald Nicholas-Smith with foreword by T.J. Clark (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), and Tom McDonough's *Guy Debord and the Situationists: Texts and Documents* (New York: MIT Press, 2002) and "The beautiful language of my century": reinventing the language of contestation in postwar France, 1945-1968 (New York: MIT Press, 2007).

23. Translations are those of the author. "Lors de la crise de mai-juin 1968, le gouvernement est très tôt sensibilisé au rapport que l'imaginaire sociale peut entretenir avec les informations diffusées par la radio et la télévision." (Archives départementales (désormais AD) des Bouches-du-Rhône, 135 W 42, circulaire du 15 mai 1968, 18 h 15; AD Bouches-du-Rhône, 135 W 350, télégramme 16 mai 16 h 40). See Marie-Françoise Lévy and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, "La légende de l'écran noir: L'information à la télévision en mai-juin 1968," *Réseaux* 90 (1998): 97–117.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Évelyne Sullerot, "Transistors et barricades" Édition spéciale, in *Ce n'est qu'un début*, ed. Philippe Labro (Paris: Éditions et publications premières, 1968), 124–140.

26. The two main sources of information were both international stations: Europe 1 and Radio Télé Luxembourg (RTL).
27. "Rue Gay-Lussac, la nuit du 10 au 11, des barricades étaient construites. Les transistors, ouverts à fond, étaient posés sur les balcons, sur les rebords des fenêtres ouvertes, sur les pavés entassés. Stéréophonie totale. De toutes parts, dans toute la rue, on baignait dans le son de l'événement : il y avait instantanéité totale entre l'événement et l'information, entre l'information et sa réception. L'information se confondait avec l'événement en train de se faire," cited in Sullerot, "Transistors et barricades": 128–129.
28. "*Tout soit VU et DIT*," cited in Sullerot, "Transistors et barricades," 123.
29. "*Information brute*," "*information directe*," and "*information totale*." Ibid., 133.
30. "En cette période de crise nationale ne fut-elle la grande muette?": 97.
31. Marc Martin, "Radio et TV dans la crise de mai 1968," *Espoir* 66 (March 1989): 74. In 1967 there were 167 televisions per 1000 people in France. In the United States the number was closer to 400 per 1000, while in Germany and England there were 231 and 263 per 1000 respectively (*Annuaire Statistique de Unesco* quoted in Moinard, 95).
32. Sullerot, "Transistors et barricades," 127.
33. Some of these journals published the early photomontages of the constructivists and John Heartfield. At this time photographers could not support themselves by art alone. The market for art photographs had not yet established itself, so many doubled as documentary, fashion or commercial photographers. Photographers we now consider artists, such as André Kurtész, Lucien Lorelle, Jean Moral, Lucian Aigner, Maurice Tabard, and later, Man Ray, Robert Capa, Henri Brassai, Cartier-Bresson, and Otto Wolfgang Schultz (also known as Wols), would all support themselves by working for the illustrated weeklies in Europe in these years. See the catalogue for the exhibition: *A Laboratory of Modernity: Image and Society in the Weimar Republic*, Busch-Reisinger Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 19 November 1998–10 January, 1999.
34. *Le Monde*, December 3/4, 1972; cited by Gisèle Freund in *Photography and Society* (Boston: David R. Godin, 1980), 139.
35. In *On Photography* Susan Sontag claims that *Le Monde* resisted printing photographs until 1970. See Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), 22. Certainly *Le Monde* was not enthusiastic about the prospect but they did print photographs before 1970, though rarely on the front page. Similarly images were not part of television news broadcasts until the Gulf War as discussed in Jean Baudrillard's *La Guerre de Golfe n'a pas eu lieu* (Paris: Galilée, 1991).
36. Freund, *Photography and Society*, 139.
37. Though striking vendors occasionally prevented newspapers from being distributed, and no newspapers were available on the 14, due to the general strike on May 13.
38. Mavis Gallant, "The Events in May – A Paris Notebook – II" *The New Yorker*, (September 21, 1968): 107.
39. This was an offhand remark attributed by an incognito New York Times reporter to the painter "Alain." See David Kunzle, *Eat: Posters of Protest: The Posters of Political Satire in the US, 1966–1970* (Santa Barbara: University of California Press, 1971), 71 note 5.
40. Afterwards other poster workshops sprouted up in England, the United States, Prague, Mexico and Argentina.
41. Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, "Graffiti" in *High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* (New York: MoMA, 1990), 92.
42. Michel de Certeau, *La prise de parole, pour une nouvelle culture* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1968, English trans. Tom Conley, *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
43. Jean Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 218.
44. Ross, 15.



45. "Il a mis trois semaines pour annoncer en cinq minutes qu'il entreprendre dans un mois ce qu'il n'avait pas réussi à faire en dix ans." See Julien Besançon, ed., *Les Murs ont la Parole: Journal Mural Mai '68* (Paris: Claude Tchou, 1968), 47.
46. Many workers did not return to the factories until June 17.
47. Massu agreed but only on condition that certain members of the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète (O.A.S.) who were in prison for conspiring against the government during the Algerian War, be released, which they were—in mid-July.
48. Sullerot, "Transistors et barricades," 135.
49. Lynn A. Higgins, "Signs of the Times: Fictions of May 1968," in *New Novel, New Wave, New Politics: Fiction and the Representation of History in Postwar France* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 161.
50. Editorial Note, *Paris-Match*, no. 999, June 28 1968.
51. *Le Monde*, June 18 1968, 17d.
52. *L'Image des manifestations dans Paris-Match de 1949-1968*. November 1989, 221 p (dir. A Prost, and D. Tartowsky). Université de Paris I: 87.
53. *La grande aventure du petit écran: la télévision française 1935-1975*, 124.
54. Anthony Smith, "Television as a Public Service Medium," in *Television: an International History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1998), 41–42.
55. "Instrument magnifique de soutien de l'esprit public" in De Gaulle, *Lettres, notes et carnets, janvier 1961-décembre 1963* (Paris: Plon, 1986), 369; cited in Marie Françoise-Levy "Les Femmes du temps présent à la télévision," in *Les années 68: le temps de la contestation*, edited by Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand, Robert Frank, Marie-Françoise Lévy, and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 2000), 201.
56. In fact this was the case until the election of Mitterrand in 1981. *Ibid*, 42–43.
57. Guillaume Hanoteau, *La Fabuleuse Aventure de Paris-Match* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1976), 188.
58. Olivier Gobessier, *Le Rachat de Paris-Match et son renouveau*. Mémoire DESS: Marketing/Paris I ; 1986 : sess. Déc. Bibliothèques Interuniversitaire CUJAS.
59. Richard Vinen, "Shock Tactics," in *TLS* 5271, April 9 2004, p. 36. This group included Serge July, among others.
60. Michael Seidman, "Revolutionary Collectivism: Parisian Poster Art in 1968," *Contemporary French Civilization* 1 (1996): 145–167.
61. Hal Foster, "The Expressive Fallacy," *Art in America* 71 (January 1983): 80–83, 137.
62. Barry M. Broman, "Tatzepao: Medium of Conflict in China's Cultural Revolution," *Journalism Quarterly* 46 (Spring 1969): 100–104.
63. Susan Sontag, "Posters: advertisement, art, political artifact, commodity," Dugald Stermer, *The Art of Revolution: 96 Posters from Cuba* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), xiv.
64. Only part of this project was realized as *Signes Gravés sur les églises de L'Eure et du Calvados* published in Copenhagen in 1963 and in Paris in 1964. See Niels Henriksen, "Asger Jorn and the Photographic Essay on Scandinavian Vandalism," Article 5, *Inferno* Volume VIII, 2003: 2. [http://eprints.st-andrews.ac.uk/archive/00000369/01/11\\_-\\_Article\\_5\\_-\\_%5B8%5D.pdf](http://eprints.st-andrews.ac.uk/archive/00000369/01/11_-_Article_5_-_%5B8%5D.pdf)
65. Thank you to Axel Heil for providing this information.
66. Jeff Wall, Hermes Lecture, "Depiction, Object, Event," presented on October 29, 2006 in 's-Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands. [http://www.hermeslezing.nl/hermeslezing2006\\_eng.pdf](http://www.hermeslezing.nl/hermeslezing2006_eng.pdf)
67. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: The University of Chicago

Press, 1998), 164.

68. Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 168.

69. Cited in Jeremy Adler's article "Novalis and Philo-Sophie," TLS 5481, April 16 2008, 3.