# A User's Guide to Détournement

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Every reasonably aware person of our time is aware of the obvious fact that art can no longer be justified as a superior activity, or even as a compensatory activity to which one might honorably devote oneself. The reason for this deterioration is clearly the emergence of productive forces that necessitate other production relations and a new practice of life. In the civil-war phase we are engaged in, and in close connection with the orientation we are discovering for certain superior activities to come, we believe that all known means of expression are going to converge in a general movement of propaganda that must encompass all the perpetually interacting aspects of social reality.

There are several conflicting opinions about the forms and even the very nature of educative propaganda, opinions that generally reflect one or another currently fashionable variety of reformist politics. Suffice it to say that in our view the premises for revolution, on the cultural as well as the strictly political level, are not only ripe, they have begun to rot. It is not just returning to the past which is reactionary; even "modern" cultural objectives are ultimately reactionary since they depend on ideological formulations of a past society that has prolonged its death agony to the present. The only historically justified tactic is extremist innovation.

The literary and artistic heritage of humanity should be used for partisan propaganda purposes. It is, of course, necessary to go beyond any idea of mere scandal. Since opposition to the bourgeois notion of art and artistic genius has become pretty much old hat, [Marcel Duchamp's] drawing of a mustache on the *Mona Lisa* is no more interesting than the original version of that painting. We must now push this process to the point of negating the negation. Bertolt Brecht, revealing in a recent interview in *France-Observateur* that he makes cuts in the classics of the theater in order to make the performances more educative, is much closer than Duchamp to the revolutionary orientation we are calling for. We must note, however, that in Brecht's case these salutary alterations are narrowly limited by his unfortunate respect for culture as defined by the ruling class — that same respect, taught in the newspapers of the workers parties as well as in the primary schools of the bourgeoisie, which leads even the reddest worker districts of Paris always to prefer *The Cid* over [Brecht's] *Mother Courage*.

It is in fact necessary to eliminate all remnants of the notion of personal property in this area. The appearance of new necessities outmodes previous "inspired" works. They become obstacles, dangerous habits. The point is not whether we like them or not. We have to go beyond them.

Any elements, no matter where they are taken from, can be used to make new combinations. The discoveries of modern poetry regarding the analogical structure of images demonstrate that when two objects are brought together, no matter how far apart their original contexts may be, a relationship is always formed. Restricting oneself to a personal arrangement of words is mere convention. The mutual interference of two worlds of feeling, or the juxtaposition of two independent expressions, supersedes the original elements and produces a synthetic organization of greater efficacy. Anything can be used.

It goes without saying that one is not limited to correcting a work or to integrating diverse fragments of out-of-date works into a new one; one can also alter the meaning of those fragments in any appropriate way, leaving the imbeciles to their slavish reference to "citations."

Such parodistic methods have often been used to obtain comical effects. But such humor is the result of contradictions within a condition whose existence is taken for granted. Since the world of literature seems to us almost as distant as the Stone Age, such contradictions don't make us laugh. It is thus necessary to envisage a parodic-serious stage where the accumulation of detourned elements, far from aiming to arouse indignation or laughter by alluding to some original work, will express our indifference toward a meaningless and forgotten original, and concern itself with rendering a certain sublimity.

Lautréamont advanced so far in this direction that he is still partially misunderstood even by his most ostentatious admirers. In spite of his obvious application of this method to theoretical language in *Poésies* — where Lautréamont (drawing particularly on the maxims of Pascal and Vauvenargues) strives to reduce the argument, through successive concentrations, to maxims alone — a certain Viroux caused considerable astonishment three or four years ago by conclusively demonstrating that *Maldoror* is one vast détournement[1] of Buffon and other works of natural history, among other things. The fact that the prosaists of *Figaro,* like Viroux himself, were able to see this as a justification for disparaging Lautréamont, and that others believed they had to defend him by praising his insolence, only testifies to the senility of these two camps of dotards in courtly combat with each other. A slogan like "Plagiarism is necessary, progress implies it" is still as poorly understood, and for the same reasons, as the famous phrase about the poetry that "must be made by all."[2]

Apart from Lautréamont's work — whose appearance so far ahead of its time has to a great extent preserved it from a detailed examination — the tendencies toward détournement that can be observed in contemporary expression are for the most part unconscious or accidental. It is in the advertising industry, more than in the domain of decaying aesthetic production, that one can find the best examples.

We can first of all define two main categories of detourned elements, without considering whether or not their being brought together is accompanied by corrections introduced in the originals. These are *minor détournements* and *deceptive détournements*.

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[1] The French word *détournement* means deflection, diversion, rerouting, distortion, misuse, misappropriation, hijacking, or otherwise turning something aside from its normal course or purpose. It has sometimes been translated as "diversion," but this word is confusing because of its more common meaning of idle entertainment. Like most other English-speaking people who have actually practiced *détournement,* I have chosen simply to anglicize the French word.

For more on détournement, see theses 204–209 of *The Society of the Spectacle*.

[2] The two quoted phrases are from Isidore Ducasse's *Poésies*. Lautréamont was the pseudonym used by Ducasse for his other work, *Maldoror*. The "Plagiarism is necessary" passage was later plagiarized by Debord in thesis #207 of *The Society of the Spectacle*.

Minor détournement is the détournement of an element which has no importance in itself and which thus draws all its meaning from the new context in which it has been placed. For example, a press clipping, a neutral phrase, a commonplace photograph.

Deceptive détournement, also termed premonitory-proposition détournement, is in contrast the détournement of an intrinsically significant element, which derives a different scope from the new context. A slogan of Saint-Just, for example, or a film sequence from Eisenstein.

Extensive detourned works will thus usually be composed of one or more series of deceptive and minor détournements.

Several laws on the use of détournement can now be formulated.

*It is the most distant detourned element which contributes most sharply to the overall impression, and not the elements that directly determine the nature of this impression.* For example, in a metagraph relating to the Spanish Civil War the phrase with the most distinctly revolutionary sense is a fragment from a lipstick ad: "Pretty lips are red." In another metagraph (*The Death of J.H.*) 125 classified ads of bars for sale express a suicide more strikingly than the newspaper articles that recount it.[3]

*The distortions introduced in the detourned elements must be as simplified as possible, since the main impact of a détournement is directly related to the conscious or semiconscious recollection of the original contexts of the elements.* This is well known. Let us simply note that if this dependence on memory implies that one must determine one's public before devising a détournement, this is only a particular case of a general law that governs not only détournement but also any other form of action on the world. The idea of pure, absolute expression is dead; it only temporarily survives in parodic form as long as our other enemies survive.

*Détournement is less effective the more it approaches a rational reply.* This is the case with a rather large number of Lautréamont's altered maxims. The more the rational character of the reply is apparent, the more indistinguishable it becomes from the ordinary spirit of repartee, which similarly uses the opponent's words against him. This is naturally not limited to spoken language. It was in this connection that we objected to the project of some of our comrades who proposed to detourn an anti-Soviet poster of the fascist organization "Peace and Liberty" — which proclaimed, amid images of overlapping flags of the Western powers, "Union makes strength" — by adding onto it a smaller sheet with the phrase "and coalitions make war."

*Détournement by simple reversal is always the most direct and the least effective.* Thus, the Black Mass reacts against the construction of an ambience based on a given metaphysics by constructing an ambience within the same framework that merely reverses — and thus simultaneously conserves — the values of that metaphysics. Such reversals may nevertheless have a certain progressive aspect. For example, Clemenceau [nicknamed "The Tiger"] could be referred to as "The Tiger Named Clemenceau."

Of the four laws that have just been set forth, the first is essential and applies universally. The other three are practically applicable only to deceptive detourned elements.

The first visible consequences of a widespread use of détournement, apart from its intrinsic propaganda powers, will be the revival of a multitude of bad books, and thus the extensive (unintended) participation of their unknown authors; an increasingly extensive transformation of phrases or plastic works that happen to be in fashion; and above all an ease of production far surpassing in quantity, variety and quality the automatic writing that has bored us for so long.

[3] The "metagraph," a genre developed by the lettrists, is a sort of collage with largely textual elements. The two

Détournement not only leads to the discovery of new aspects of talent; in addition, clashing head-on with all social and legal conventions, it cannot fail to be a powerful cultural weapon in the service of a real class struggle. The cheapness of its products is the heavy artillery that breaks through all the Chinese walls of understanding.[4] It is a real means of proletarian artistic education, the first step toward a *literary communism.*

Ideas and creations in the realm of détournement can be multiplied at will. For the moment we will limit ourselves to showing a few concrete possibilities in various current sectors of communication — it being understood that these separate sectors are significant only in relation to present-day technologies, and are all tending to merge into superior syntheses with the advance of these technologies.

Apart from the various direct uses of detourned phrases in posters, records and radio broadcasts, the two main applications of detourned prose are metagraphic writings and, to a lesser degree, the adroit perversion of the classical novel form.

There is not much future in the détournement of complete novels, but during the transitional phase there might be a certain number of undertakings of this sort. Such a détournement gains by being accompanied by illustrations whose relationships to the text are not immediately obvious. In spite of undeniable difficulties, we believe it would be possible to produce an instructive psychogeographical détournement of George Sand's *Consuelo,* which thus decked out could be relaunched on the literary market disguised under some innocuous title like "Life in the Suburbs," or even under a title itself detourned, such as "The Lost Patrol." (It would be a good idea to reuse in this way many titles of deteriorated old films of which nothing else remains, or of the films that continue to deaden the minds of young people in the cinema clubs.)

Metagraphic writing, no matter how outdated its plastic framework may be, presents far richer opportunities for detourning prose, as well as other appropriate objects or images. One can get some idea of this from the project, conceived in 1951 but eventually abandoned for lack of sufficient financial means, which envisaged a pinball machine arranged in such a way that the play of the lights and the more or less predictable trajectories of the balls would form a metagraphic-spatial composition entitled *Thermal Sensations and Desires of People Passing by the Gates of the Cluny Museum Around an Hour after Sunset in November.* We have since come to realize that a situationist-analytic enterprise cannot scientifically advance by way of such works. The means nevertheless remain suitable for less ambitious goals.

It is obviously in the realm of the cinema that détournement can attain its greatest effectiveness and, for those concerned with this aspect, its greatest beauty.

The powers of film are so extensive, and the absence of coordination of those powers is so glaring, that virtually any film that is above the miserable average can provide matter for endless polemics among spectators or professional critics. Only the conformism of those people prevents them from discovering equally appealing charms and equally glaring faults even in the worst films. To cut through this absurd confusion of values, we can observe that Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* is one of the most important films in the history of the cinema because of its wealth of innovations. On the other hand, it is a racist film and therefore absolutely does not merit being shown in its present form. But its total prohibition could be seen as regrettable from the point

metagraphs mentioned here are both by Debord, and can be found in his *Oeuvres* (p. 127).

[4] The authors are detourning a sentence from the *Communist Manifesto*: "The cheapness of the bourgeoisie's commodities is the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate."

of view of the secondary, but potentially worthier, domain of the cinema. It would be better to detourn it as a whole, without necessarily even altering the montage, by adding a soundtrack that made a powerful denunciation of the horrors of imperialist war and of the activities of the Ku Klux Klan, which are continuing in the United States even now.

Such a détournement — a very moderate one — is in the final analysis nothing more than the moral equivalent of the restoration of old paintings in museums. But most films only merit being cut up to compose other works. This reconversion of preexisting sequences will obviously be accompanied by other elements, musical or pictorial as well as historical. While the cinematic rewriting of history has until now been largely along the lines of Sacha Guitry's burlesque recreations, one could have Robespierre say, before his execution: "In spite of so many trials, my experience and the grandeur of my task convinces me that all is well." If in this case an appropriate reuse of a Greek tragedy enables us to exalt Robespierre, we can conversely imagine a neorealist-type sequence, at the counter of a truck stop bar, for example, with one of the truck drivers saying seriously to another: "Ethics was formerly confined to the books of the philosophers; we have introduced it into the governing of nations." One can see that this juxtaposition illuminates Maximilien's idea, the idea of a dictatorship of the proletariat.[5]

The light of détournement is propagated in a straight line. To the extent that new architecture seems to have to begin with an experimental baroque stage, the *architectural complex* — which we conceive as the construction of a dynamic environment related to styles of behavior — will probably detourn existing architectural forms, and in any case will make plastic and emotional use of all sorts of detourned objects: careful arrangements of such things as cranes or metal scaffolding replacing a defunct sculptural tradition. This is shocking only to the most fanatical admirers of French-style gardens. It is said that in his old age D'Annunzio, that pro-fascist swine, had the prow of a torpedo boat in his park. Leaving aside his patriotic motives, the idea of such a monument is not without a certain charm.

If détournement were extended to urbanistic realizations, not many people would remain unaffected by an exact reconstruction in one city of an entire neighborhood of another. Life can never be too disorienting: détournement on this level would really spice it up.

Titles themselves, as we have already seen, are a basic element of détournement. This follows from two general observations: that all titles are interchangeable and that they have a decisive importance in several genres. The detective stories in the "Série Noir" are all extremely similar, yet merely continually changing the titles suffices to hold a considerable audience. In music a title always exerts a great influence, yet the choice of one is quite arbitrary. Thus it wouldn't be a bad idea to make a final correction to the title of the "Eroica Symphony" by changing it, for example, to "Lenin Symphony."[6]

The title contributes strongly to the détournement of a work, but there is an inevitable counteraction of the work on the title. Thus one can make extensive use of specific titles taken from

[5] In the first imagined scene a phrase from a Greek tragedy (Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*) is put in the mouth of French Revolution leader Maximilien Robespierre. In the second, a phrase from Robespierre is put in the mouth of a truck driver.

[6] Beethoven originally named his third symphony after Napoleon (seen as a defender of the French Revolution), but when Napoleon crowned himself emperor he angrily tore up the dedication to him and renamed it "Eroica."

The implied respect in this passage for Lenin (like the passing references to "workers states" in Debord's "Report on the Construction of Situations") is a vestige of the lettrists' early, less politically sophisticated period, when they seem to have been sort of anarcho-Trotskyist.

scientific publications ("Coastal Biology of Temperate Seas") or military ones ("Night Combat of Small Infantry Units"), or even of many phrases found in illustrated children's books ("Marvelous Landscapes Greet the Voyagers").

In closing, we should briefly mention some aspects of what we call ultra-détournement, that is, the tendencies for détournement to operate in everyday social life. Gestures and words can be given other meanings, and have been throughout history for various practical reasons. The secret societies of ancient China made use of quite subtle recognition signals encompassing the greater part of social behavior (the manner of arranging cups; of drinking; quotations of poems interrupted at agreed-on points). The need for a secret language, for passwords, is inseparable from a tendency toward play. Ultimately, any sign or word is susceptible to being converted into something else, even into its opposite. The royalist insurgents of the Vendée,[7] because they bore the disgusting image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, were called the Red Army. In the limited domain of political war vocabulary this expression was completely detourned within a century.

Outside of language, it is possible to use the same methods to detourn clothing, with all its strong emotional connotations. Here again we find the notion of disguise closely linked to play. Finally, when we have got to the stage of constructing situations — the ultimate goal of all our activity — everyone will be free to detourn entire situations by deliberately changing this or that determinant condition of them.

The methods that we have briefly examined here are presented not as our own invention, but as a generally widespread practice which we propose to systematize.

In itself, the theory of détournement scarcely interests us. But we find it linked to almost all the constructive aspects of the presituationist period of transition. Thus its enrichment, through practice, seems necessary.

We will postpone the development of these theses until later.

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[7] *The Vendée*: region in southwestern France, locale of a pro-monarchist revolt against the Revolutionary government (1793–1796).

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