
"A New Historic Youth": Lettrism, Delinquency, and the *Fait Divers* in Postwar France

© Ian Williams Curtis

Kenyon College

Abstract: This essay seeks to historicize Lettrist activity in France and to situate Lettrist aesthetic productions and destructions in relation to the memory of German Occupation of France during World War II, and to the violent outbursts and acting out of the Lettrists' contemporaries. Isidore Isou and others belonged to a rather unique generation in the history of France—a generation that caused adults a great deal of concern as young men and women committed crimes and acts of violence at unprecedented rates. Attending to the cultural historical specificities of the Lettrists and other young troublemakers in postwar France, I argue that Lettrism, as an aesthetic idea, could never have gained or sustained momentum without the mid-century *fait divers*, a specific genre of miscellaneous news story. In the years immediately following the end of World War II, the *raison d'être* of the young Lettrists in France could perhaps be defined as the construction of situations that would generate banal news items of a very specific nature. Reframing Lettrist activity as essentially compatible with the raw material for *faits divers*, as defined by Roland Barthes, helps us to appreciate the somewhat-surprising interest the group generated at a historic moment when France had never been more concerned with the gratuitous misdeeds of young men.

Keywords: Popular press, juvenile delinquency, Lettrism, Isidore Isou, Guy Debord

CLC: I565 **Document Code:** A **Article ID:** 2096-4374(2021)01-0143-12

"I want to be a Name, not a Master."

—Isidore Isou (*Agrégation* 202)

In 1951, Isidore Isou went to Cannes. His first film, *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, had been granted a screening as a fringe event, complementary to the festival proper, only after Isou's friends had advocated—or perhaps simply made trouble—on his behalf (Cabañas 22; Marcus 300). Although the film was not yet finished, the trip south from Paris proved to be a momentous one both for Isou's career as a filmmaker and for the future of Lettrism, the intellectual, aesthetic, and cultural movement established by Isou in 1945: at Cannes, Isou impressed Jean Cocteau, who would be instrumental in the promotion of Isou's work in Paris and beyond, and he met Guy Debord, who would become Isou's most important acolyte and, later, apostate.¹

Isou's début film caused a scandal, frustrating nearly everyone's expectations of what cinema

was supposed to be. “Isou projected two-thirds of *Traité* without images,” writes Kaira M. Cabañas, “thereby failing to provide viewers with the purportedly most basic and constitutive element of a film: the image track. Only chapter 1 of the image track was completed at the time of the film’s premier; for chapters 2 and 3, the Vox was plunged into darkness, as the sound track voices were emitted from loudspeakers and acoustically filled the room” (25). The episode sounds like a fiasco. In her retelling, however, Cabañas ends the anecdote with a quote from Cocteau (dubiously related by Isou himself, Cabañas notes), who supposedly called the event “the most beautiful scandal of the entire festival” (25). Whether Cocteau said these words to Isou, or whether the young filmmaker made them up, Isou’s relating them tells us something about how he understood his film’s value.

A promotional brochure for one of the first American screenings of Isou’s film, presented by Raymond Rohauer at the Society of Cinema Arts in Los Angeles, bragged that the screening of the *Traité* had caused riots at Cannes—riots that “had to be quelled with fire hoses” (“Isou’s Venom” n. pag.): clearly Isou and his promoters were interested in foregrounding controversy. It’s tempting to imagine that it might have been the controversy that carried Isou’s film across the Atlantic.²

At Cannes, the scandal was aesthetic, but this hadn’t always been the case. In 1946, Isou had named his avant-garde review *La dictature lettriste: Cahiers d’un nouveau régime artistique*. The title of the publication announced “a new artistic regime” (Lettrism, for Isou, initially meant the end of the history of poetry and a new poetics of the letter itself³); first and foremost, however, it evoked fascism and the recent war to cause a scandal, épater la bourgeoisie. A few years later, when they broke off from Isou, Guy Debord and a few colleagues announced their new Lettrist faction to the world by crashing a reception for Charlie Chaplin at a fancy hotel and calling the actor a fascist, simply for being old and outdated.⁴ They were also using loaded, historically specific language, not for political purposes, but simply to cause a scandal.⁵

In fact, even the promotion of the *Traité*, whose radical aesthetics should have sufficed to cause a “beautiful scandal,” was not entirely devoid of fraught historical references. The Rohauer manual presents an obviously fictional dialogue between Isou and a group of journalists that devolves into political paranoia. The interview is punctuated with the heckling of agitated bystanders, who, as they eavesdrop, become more and more outraged. They call Isou an “anarchist,” compare his work to “an imperialist conquest,” and, by the end, once Isou has praised the Marquis de Sade⁶ and the French Revolution, have accused him of being a “fascist” and told him to “go back to Stalin.” Finally, a “foreigner” tells him to “go back to Truman.” Isou, it seems, has become every recent historical enemy conceivable, and has been linked, notably, to every force that, in the early 1950s, was thought to be a potential threat to postwar stability in France. He has become every potential antagonist in a new war that may leave France occupied once again.⁷ All in the interest of promotion.

This article seeks to historicize Lettrist activity in France and to situate Lettrist aesthetic productions and destructions in relation to the memory of Occupation, and to the violent outbursts and acting out of the Lettrists’ contemporaries.⁸ Isou and others belonged to a rather unique generation in the history of France—a generation that caused adults a great deal of concern as young men and women committed crimes and acts of violence at unprecedented rates. Attending to the cultural historical specificities of the Lettrists and other young troublemakers in postwar France, I argue that Lettrism, as an aesthetic idea, could never have gained or sustained momentum without the mid-century *fait divers*, a specific genre of miscellaneous news story. If Situationism’s purpose was,

famously, the construction of situations in the interest of abolishing space and time as defined by capital and labor,⁹ the *raison d'être* of the young Lettrists in France could perhaps be defined as the construction of situations that would generate banal news items. Reframing Lettrist activity as essentially compatible with the raw material for *faits divers* helps us to appreciate the somewhat-surprising interest the group generated at a historic moment when France had never been more concerned with the gratuitous misdeeds of young men.

Isou was one such young man. As the Cannes anecdote illustrates, his Lettrist aesthetics challenged, or, at least, disappointed, conventional expectations. The Rohauer promotion of his film is one example, among many, of Isou's and his promoters' intuition that the exaggeration of scandal would serve Isou's cause. What follows is an exploration of Lettrist scandals. First, however, I briefly examine postwar French concern with juvenile crime and the rise of a new cultural category of young men and women, whom Debord, in a 1953 letter, called "happy terrorists."¹⁰ In the same letter, Debord described the criminal status of a number of his fellow young Lettrists and bragged that he and his cohorts would one day become "dangerous men." He called himself, and his contemporaries, "a new historic youth" (*Correspondance* 26).

A thirteen-year-old when World War II ended, Guy Debord belonged to a generation of young men and women who fascinated and frightened their elders. Psychologists, sociologists, educators, judges, writers, filmmakers, and journalists were all acutely interested in the fact that these adolescents had spent their formative years under German Occupation. During the war, many youths had suffered the physical effects of malnutrition and all seemed to have been psychologically and morally affected by the crimes and acts of violence they had witnessed (Chazal *L'enfance délinquante*, 3-4). More than anything, it seemed that disruptions in the home were to blame for increases in youth misbehavior—after all, hadn't many French fathers been interned in POW camps or deported to Germany and forced to participate in Compulsory Work Service (*Service de travail obligatoire*)? Surely their absence must explain the recent spike in cases of delinquency. In his 1953 book on juvenile delinquency, Jean Chazal, a prominent juvenile court judge, declared that "[a]ll the statistics agree, and show that 70 to 80 percent of delinquent minors are from separated families" (*L'enfance délinquante* 23). A different study from around the same time claimed the number was 80 to 90 percent.¹¹ Facts like these explained, according to conventional wisdom, a sharp increase in juvenile crime in the 40s and early fifties.

But facts like these were made up. The historian Sarah Fishman has shown that postwar French studies of juvenile delinquency uncritically attributed the rise in youth crime to the absence of fathers during the war.¹² The myth of a lack of paternal authority¹³ was not only accepted as truth in the postwar moment, but it also impacted policy decisions. Influential thinkers like Chazal believed that the moral well-being of French youths (and, by extension, the well-being of the nation) depended on middle class, nuclear families, and on clearly-delineated gender roles in the family;¹⁴ the newly-formed Department of Supervised Education began carrying out a mission to surveil and regulate family life, to intervene in cases where parents failed to create wholesome conditions for children (Jobs, *Riding the New Wave* 155-165). Jean Genet, for one, accused reformers like Chazal and new government departments and programs of trying to homogenize youths by imposing, through reeducation and psychiatry, a bourgeois normativity, an "ordinary" or "normal morality" (*la morale courante*; Genet 37).

Delinquency was not, in fact, specific to separated families; nor was it unique to “unwholesome” households. No incident in postwar Paris better confirmed this fact than the J3 Affair, in which two boys and a girl planned and executed the assassination of one of their classmates for no clear reason. Commenting on the scandal, the psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto summed up the public outcry: “Everyone [involved] is very nice, very decent, very well-mannered [...]. Everyone has a good reputation and high moral values.” She concluded, ironically, that “truly, these are people like us, entirely average French men and women, so what a red flag!” (678-679). What was so shocking about the case was that its actors were kids from middle-class families who had even attended a private school. Their parents resembled Dolto’s audience, readers of the Catholic magazine, *Esprit*, in which Dolto’s piece appeared. They were “normal,” “moral,” bourgeois.

Commentary on the moral well-being of French youths, such as Dolto’s, often centered on scandals covered in the press, which reflected and perpetuated the public’s intense preoccupation with youth crime. The authors of a book on the state of the French youth in 1951 began their conclusions by alluding obliquely to the J3 Affair: “As we finish our investigation,” they wrote, “the only topic of discussion in the papers and in everyone’s conversations is about two young twenty-year-old men, because they killed another young man who was the same age” (Kanters and Sigaux 163-164). Stories about youth murders sold papers; they were particularly shocking when they hit close to home, when the families concerned were “people like us,” “average French men and women.”

Stories like these challenged the notion, perpetuated by thinkers like Chazal, that a “healthy” (i.e., middle-class, nuclear) family produced healthy kids. It challenged the notion that adults like Chazal could ever understand youths: the famous novelist Joseph Kessel, for one, did not believe that the judges and jurors present at the J3 Trial would ever be able to understand “the extraordinary facts of this drama of adolescence” (21-22). One newspaper story called the protagonists of the J3 Affair stand-ins for “an unknown generation” who lived “a double life” (Laforêt): they were uncanny figures, shadowy doppelgängers of everyone’s children.

Invariably, such children reminded their parents of the bleak realities of Occupation and war. The term “J3” referred to the ration tickets that teenagers carried during and after the war and was used metonymically to refer to adolescents of Debord’s generation. The name “the J3 Affair” was a reminder of the harsh conditions that the young men and women involved had experienced as children.

The J3 Affair was the first *grande affaire* of the postwar period that concerned the question of French youth, but it was not the last.¹⁵ The scandal, and others like it, gave birth in the public consciousness to a new type of young wrongdoer—the J3. J3s did not constitute a recognizable, cohesive subcultural group, as the zazous had, for instance;¹⁶ this lack of cohesion, however, did not prevent them from serving as folk devils or leading to moral panic in the way, for Stanley Cohen, the mods and rockers did in London in the 1960s: the deviant behaviors of J3s were mobilized and amplified by the mass media and used to define the boundaries of what was morally acceptable in postwar French society. As a cultural category, they were defined by the scandals they generated. They were both prime material for, and, because word of their sensational actions only reached the public through the papers, a *product* of the miscellaneous news stories known in France as *faits divers*.

Faits divers translates literally to “miscellaneous facts”; they are short news stories that have no obvious political or economic import, but which, according to historian Michèle Perrot, appeal to the public’s fascination with secrets, and intimate details (911-919). There is no exact equivalent in

English, although English-speaking audiences are also fascinated by the genre: Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* is a book about a *fait divers*, for example.

The *fait divers* was not a new phenomenon in post-World War II France. Neither was a fascination with antisocial delinquents. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault discussed Pierre François Lacenaire, a famous poet-bandit of the 1830s, and the object of more than one *fait divers*, which inspired Balzac among other prominent nineteenth-century novelists. Foucault called the criminal "the typical 'delinquent,'" and linked Lacenaire—a man of bourgeois origin, who received a good education—to an "aesthetics of crime," "an art of the privileged classes" (331).

Lacenaire happens to have been one of the myths Debord drew on and "détourned." In his film, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978), Debord excerpted scenes from Marcel Carné's Occupation-era *Les enfants du paradis*. In one fragment, we see Marcel Herrand, playing Lacenaire, reflecting on his childhood: "When I was a child," he muses, "I was already more lucid, more intelligent than the others. They never forgave me for it. A lovely childhood, truly."

Lacenaire, as portrayed by Herrand, and Debord shared a preoccupation with the formative years of childhood. One important difference between Lacenaire and Debord, however, was that Lacenaire, at the height of his fame, was in his early thirties, while Debord, when he joined the Lettrists, was only eighteen. And what had changed between the 1830s, when Lacenaire was in the news, and the early 1950s, when Debord was fantasizing about "happy terrorism," was the way in which childhood was understood, and the role that youths played in public discourse. Debord, and many of his cohorts belonged to that generation of young men and women who, when they misbehaved, supplied mid-century French readers of the popular press with sensationalist reading material. They themselves appeared rather regularly in *faits divers*, and these appearances constituted significant moments in Lettrist history—moments of such significance, in fact, that it is doubtful that Lettrism could have made its mark without the help of the popular press and a readership hungry for youth scandals. Without the midcentury *fait divers*, Lettrism probably could not have existed as anything other than a fantasy.

Isou's theory of poetry was in fact a theory of the end of poetry, and Lettrism was to be the end of history where poetry was concerned. The radical acts of his cadre of fanatics, committed often in the name of some nebulous cause, had in fact less to do with politics, or even art, and more to do with an ill-defined utopic desire. In this way, Isou's project was, from the very beginning, typical of twentieth-century avant-gardes as described by Vincent Kaufmann: "On the horizon of [the avant-garde's] project of overtaking or realizing art," he writes, "at the origin and the end of the communitarian or 'communist' dream that animated it through [the twentieth] century, there is not political action, in the traditional sense of the term, but rather the Book. There is the will for an end of art in a totality where art would be done not only once and for all, but by all[...]" (12). It may be objected at this stage that, whatever the specificities of Lettrism, the ideas and practices it generated bear similarities to pre-war avant-garde movements. It is tempting to read Lettrist poems, or even news items about Lettrism, in terms of a tradition of radical avant-garde poets.¹⁷

The avant-garde project, as Kaufmann understands it, and as his invocation of the Book suggests, can be traced back at least to Mallarmé (13-17). Rimbaud, the delinquent teenaged poet who abandoned poetry, might also be suggested as a model for the Lettrists as I understand them.¹⁸ The Lettrists themselves saw Dada and Surrealism as artistic forefathers. Greil Marcus playfully sums

up the debt owed and tribute paid by Isou—born Jean-Isidore Goldstein—to his favorite Dadaist: “awarding himself a name almost as alliteratively memorable, Isou played Chubby Checker to [Tristan] Tzara’s Fats Domino” (232). In Debord’s letters from the Lettrist period (1951-1957), references to André Breton feature prominently.¹⁹ One missive from February, addressed to Hervé Faclou, and dated simply “Monday morning,” provides a sense of Surrealism’s influence, but also Lettrism’s departure from the aesthetic principals of Surrealism, particularly where violent and scandalous acts are concerned. This was the letter in which Debord called his generation a new historic youth. It was where he called himself and his cronies “happy terrorists,” which was a reference to Breton, who used the term to refer to Jacques Vaché, the soldier-dandy he met in Nantes who, in 1917, began waving his gun around during a performance of Guillaume Apollinaire’s “sur-realist” drama *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*.

The terrorism that Breton was referring to—a man threatening to fire into a crowd, at random—was a kind of aesthetic terrorism, at least for Breton. (Later he used the event to define what he called the essential surrealist gesture.) But it was also a historically specific kind of terrorism. Vaché was a soldier, and he was reacting to a play that was interpreted at the time as an allegory for World War I—it takes place in a country where there are hardly any young men and women. Vaché bore the trauma of his military service: when he died of an opium overdose, the press remembered him as a brave soldier who had been injured during the war. It was a sad accident (Polizzotti 100). The “terrorism” Debord was referring to was also aesthetic, and it was also of its time. In his letter to Falcou, terrorism meant scandal: “a Lettrist expedition,” Debord explained, had recently taken hostage the director of a film that Debord called “*illettriste*”²⁰ at the “Amis du Cinéma” film society in the Latin Quarter. “The hullabaloo was really funny,” wrote Debord.²¹

Lettrism owed its success—such as it was—to the ability of young men like Isou and Debord to cause a scene. For their generation, it wasn’t too difficult to get the attention of the newspapers. Having arrived in Paris from Romania in August of 1945, Isou didn’t make much of a splash until January of the following year, when he crashed a premier of a play by Tzara, his literary hero (Wark 12-17). The event, during which Lettrists interrupted introductory remarks made by Michel Leiris, is referenced in *Visages de l’avant-garde*, a collection of Lettrist writings from 1945 to 1953, in a passage that celebrates “[the] scandals” caused by the Lettrist movement early on, which “embellished intellectual life of Paris from 1945 to 1947” (*Visages* 27). An article by Maurice Nadeau, who was present at the Vieux-Colombier where the heckling occurred, made the incident known to Paris:

Hardly had [Leiris] said that M. Tzara made stones speak than one heard a vehement voice in the audience: “We know Tzara, M. Leiris, tell us rather about Lettrism!” Commotion, whistles, applause. One could hear people yelling: “Dada is dead! Make way for Lettrism! To the toilets with Lettrism!” and so on. M. Leiris finished, his voice muffled. Too bad—what he was saying was beautiful (qtd. in *Visages* 43, n. 14).

The event marked the official date of the difficult birth of Lettrism. Having failed to gain news coverage two weeks earlier at a literary event he had organized, Isou now commanded the attention of Nadeau and others. His poetry had interested almost no one, but his antics made for a good story.

The plot had less to do with taking advantage of a platform and more to do with silencing Dada

and Surrealism, the twin predecessors to Isou's Lettrist fantasy. After all, the Lettrists had nothing to say. When Leiris finally left the stage, and a good part of the audience had departed, Isou took the microphone; he addressed the remaining audience members: "Vagn bagadou kri kuss balala chimorabisssss" (*Visages* 43, n. 14). This was Lettrist poetry; it was nonsense. More importantly, it was unoriginal: the Cabaret Voltaire had put on such shows decades earlier. The difference was that Hugo Ball hadn't had to upstage anyone in order to recite his sound poems in Zurich.

A short news item in a weekly socialist rag related the story with excellent economy: "The other evening, during a Dadaist event at the Vieux-Colombier, some young people engaged in a bit of feeble heckling and then demanded the floor, hoping thereby to enter into literary history" (qtd. in *Visages* 43, n. 14). The journalist went on to characterize the Lettrists, sarcastically, as a band of "good children" who made poems out of orgasmic moans and who hoped for the death of government. Isou's acting out made for a perfect *fait divers*. His artistic antics fit with the formula for a very specific news rubric.

In his 1985 essay, "Le pays des poètes," Roger Grenier explores the creative potential of the *fait divers*, giving the genre a broad definition: Freud's retelling of the story of Oedipus obeys the laws of the *fait divers* (in that it is a complex series of events reduced to its simplest, most scandalous details, and told in true journalistic fashion, beginning with a hook: a hero comes to rescue a city from a plague [12-13]); the Kennedy assassination and the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald were televised *fait divers*; the greatest modern writers, from Stendhal to Proust, were fascinated by the *fait divers*, which show up in and even structure their novels.

This article draws on a narrower, specifically post-war, specifically French understanding of the *fait divers*. The debacle at the Vieux-Colombier wasn't just a "diverse happening," as Alice Kaplan renders the term in her translation of Grenier's essay ("The Land of Poets" 7), it fit the very precise definition Roland Barthes elaborated in 1962 in "Structure du fait divers."

There, Barthes famously observed that a *fait divers* is a self-contained, self-referential story (it is "immanent," and "refers formally to nothing other than itself" [195]). It has no political or economic context or import. It is not, in other words, the story of Oedipus or the assassination of JFK, since these stories exist in relation to a great deal of external information (mythic, in the case of Oedipus, political in the case of Kennedy). These stories are what Barthes would call "partial," rather than "immanent." They cannot be read without outside information. In contrast, a story about a group of young avant-garde poets who hope to enter into literary history by baiting a former Surrealist requires little, if any, outside knowledge. Anyone can appreciate the absurdity of the situation.

Structurally, Barthes's *fait divers* is defined by two "terms" or "notations," which are characterized by a relationship of odd causality or strange coincidence: "An Englishman joined the army because he didn't want to spend Christmas with his mother-in-law" (199), or "a group of burglars were frightened off by another burglar" (201). The cause or coincidence linking the two terms of the story generally creates an effect of surprise or anti-climax. The more banal or disappointing the conclusion, the better. Once again, Barthes defines the genre more narrowly than Grenier: *Oedipus Rex*, or a political assassination, do not fit Barthes's structure.

Lettrist misdeeds respected the formula perfectly: Lettrists interrupted an avant-garde poetry reading . . . in order to read avant-garde poems. The anti-climax produced by the second term is perfect. Numerous papers reported on a separate Lettrist incident, in which a young man named Henri

de Béarn tried to buy explosives in order to blow up the Eiffel Tower, but was arrested. Michèle Bernstein, a former Situationist and Debord's first wife, told the cultural critic Greil Marcus in 1985 that de Béarn had planned the attack because the light from the monument was keeping him awake at night (Marcus 349-350).²² It was another impeccable instance of anti-climax; the plot was, once again, a *fait divers* waiting to happen. After the incident, one daily reported that, when questioned about his motives, de Béarn told the cops he'd had none. He said he'd chosen the Eiffel Tower as a target because it represented a kind of pure signifier, "[b]ecause it's not a political, religious, or social emblem... it's nothing!" The crime was meant to be "what we call in literature 'a gratuitous act'... as [André] Gide would say, but I'm not a Gidian," declared de Béarn.²³ It was an empty gesture, matter for a news story and nothing more. The article concluded that de Béarn's plot had, in fact, succeeded, although the Eiffel Tower was still standing: "he'll be talked about in the papers" (qtd. in *Visages* 50).

The most memorable events in Lettrist history—from the Vieux-Colombier reading to the Chaplin letter, to the Eiffel Tower attack and beyond—were entirely compatible with the neatest postwar definitions of the *fait divers* as a genre. If Lettrist plots could ever be considered terrorism, they were also whimsical and self-contained enough to be recounted as *fait divers*.

The Lettrists commanded attention in the same way so many young men and women of their generation did: by acting out in ways that called into question the judicial reforms of the postwar period, many of which sought to impose a bourgeois homogeneity on households through government oversight and intervention. When youths from respectable families like Debord, Isou, or de Béarn (who, as the particule in his name suggests, was from aristocratic stock [Marcus 349]) acted like delinquents, they challenged the conventional wisdom according to which delinquency was the product of broken, impoverished families.

Like the J3 Affair, whose name metonymically recalled the war, the Lettrists can only have reminded their parents' generation of the Dark Years. Isou's *Dictature lettriste* was, of course, named to shock the adults in a specifically historical way. When Gabriel Pomerand, a Lettrist, wrote *Saint ghetto des prêtres (Saint Ghetto of the Loans)* in 1950, he was aiming to exacerbate adult anxieties, putting his finger in an open wound: "Saint Germain des Prés is a ghetto," he wrote. "Everyone there wears a yellow star over his heart" (n. p.). The metaphor equated zazous, jazz artists, existentialists, party-goers, and, of course, Lettrists, with the victims of a genocide in which France would not begin to acknowledge its participation for at least a couple decades.²⁴

The most famous Lettrist scandal of the postwar period took place in 1950, when twenty-one-year-old Michel Mourre pronounced an anti-sermon in front of thousands of worshippers at the Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris. *Visages de l'avant-garde* describes how he "interrupted Easter mass in order to express the will of an entire generation to cast out dead ideas" (*Visages* 27).²⁵ Mourre, reading a text written by a Lettrist co-conspirator, Serge Berna, declared that "God is dead": "We vomit the agonizing insipidness of your prayers because your prayers have thickly fertilized [*ont grassement fumé*] the battlefields of our Europe" (qtd. in *Visages de l'avant-garde* 46). Moore had an interesting relationship to the recent war: he'd been arrested in 1944 for collaboration. He had been a Nazi sympathizer during World War II, and, after the liberation, saw Charles Maurras—a father, or at least ancestor of French fascism²⁶—as a hero and a father (Marcus, 259-299).

In an extended discussion of the Notre-Dame Affair and Mourre's complex backstory, Greil Marcus has argued that, contrary to popular opinion at the turn of the half-century in France (or, at

least, in *Combat*, one of the papers that covered the story extensively), there was nothing new about Mourre's speech. Marcus connects the incident to anti-clerical acts committed during the Reign of Terror and the Paris Commune, and to the antics of Johannes Baader, self-proclaimed *Oberdada*, in Berlin Cathedral in 1918 when, thirty years before Mourre's tirade at Notre-Dame, he damned Christ to hell in a church. The difference between Baader and Mourre, Marcus notes, is that Baader received little attention from journalists (296).²⁷

It's a noteworthy difference. It's meaningful that French newspapers called the Notre-Dame scandal unprecedented, when, of course, it was not. Mourre's act was not original in any way, but, in 1950, it must have seemed like evidence of a new historic youth, one damaged, like Mourre, the fan of Maurras, by memories of fascism and collaboration, by memories of the battlefields of Europe.

For all its counter-cultural impulses, Lettrism was very much of its time. It seems unlikely that a movement so obsessed with newness and yet so devoid of originality could have been meaningful at many other times or in many other places—in a context where adults were not themselves so obsessed with the potential newness of youth, and so fascinated by the memories of the past that certain youths continued to stir up.

Notes

1. See, notably, "Isou's Venom and Eternity." After the Cannes screening of Isou's incomplete film, Jean-Cocteau appeared in the finished version in a cameo role, thereby lending his name to the film.
2. For a discussion of Isou's film's success in the United States, see Cabañas, pp. 6-7.
3. The front covers also claimed that Lettrism was "the only contemporary avant-garde movement." The term "Lettrism" is defined in a remarkable collection of Lettrist writing from 1945 to 1953, in a Lettrist poem that details how Isou arrived in Paris, threatened to beat up Gaston Gallimard and his publishers, and thereby got his first book published with the prestigious Editions Gallimard. The poem goes on to summarize the history of poetry, from Victor Hugo (who seems to contain all his predecessors), to Isidore Isou himself, who proposed, with Lettrism, "the complete and practical destruction of the word [*vocable*] down to the letter" (20). For a concise explanation of Isou's theory of poetry, see Wark, p. 13.
4. The word that actually appears in the letter written to Chaplin, which was called "No More Flat Feet" ("Finis les pieds plats"), is not fascist (*fasciste*), but rather *fâscite*. This has generally been read as a typo and the letter has been reprinted with *fasciste* for *fâscite*. But the title of the letter makes one wonder if the spelling was intentional, and meant to confuse *fasciste* and *fâscite* (as in *fâscite plantaire*, plantar fasciitis). Even if this is the case, the word is clearly intended to evoke fascism.
5. Many thanks to Barrett Watten for pointing out to me that the use of politically loaded and ethically fraught language on the part of the Lettrists can be read as a refusal to engage in political position taking during the postwar purge of the mid- to late forties, when most intellectuals and public figures in France felt the need to assume a stance on the social and moral responsibility of intellectuals and artists (see Gisèle Sapiro, *La guerre des écrivains: 1940-1953*, Fayard, 1999, and, especially, Kaplan, *The Collaborator*. See also Wark, p. 164, n. 21). Watten's observations strengthen my central claim that Lettrist antics and Lettrist negativity were never merely literary or artistic, but also social and cultural.
6. It may be worth noting here that Guy Debord, Isou's future collaborator, had, by this time, shown his own first film, *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* (1952).
7. With the beginning of the Korean war, and with tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States, there was widespread anxiety in France about a potential third world war. The notion was prominent in the popular press, and featured in popular films and novels. See, for instance, André Cayatte, *Avant le déluge*, UGC, 1954, and Maurice Descotes, *L'épreuve*, Julliard, 1951.
8. I use "Lettrist" here to refer to the activities of both Isou's Lettrism and the Lettrist International, the group cofounded by former members of Isou's coterie, including Guy Debord; it is beyond the scope of the present article to discuss the important differences between the two groups. For McKenzie Wark, the break between Lettrism and the LI is fundamental: the LI (1952-1957) jettisoned Isou's grand theories and laid the foundations of Situationism (1957-1972). I am less

interested in Lettrist theories and more concerned with Lettrist pranks and antics. When it came to their relation to public scandal, Isou and Debord had a lot in common.

9. And, of course, abolish labor itself: “Never work,” the slogan went. See Debord, *Oeuvres*, p. 89, and McKenzie Wark’s discussion of the Lettrist International’s use of Henri Lefebvre’s work and the *dérive* (19-31). For a clear definition of the activities of the Situationist International, which grew out of Lettrism, see, for example, Debord, “Thèses sur la révolution culturelle,” p. 360.
10. See Debord, *Correspondance*, p. 26. The term is an appropriation, or détournement, perhaps, of a phrase written by André Breton in his preface to the *Lettres de Guerre de Jacques Vaché*.
11. See *La délinquance juvénile en France*, Notes et études documentaires, n. 1.423 (Jan 19, 1951), p. 5, p. 12, Centre des Archives Contemporaine à Fontainebleau, Seine-et-Marne: 910333, art. 3, (qtd. in Jobs 161).
12. See Fishman, *The Battle for Children: World War II, Youth Crime, and Juvenile Justice in Twentieth-Century France*, Harvard UP, 2002.
13. While the mother’s role was also discussed in its relation to the etiology of delinquency, theorists of all kinds tended to fixate on the figure of the father, whose absence was often understood as the cause of the delinquent family’s incompleteness or unwholesomeness. The Freudian notion of the father as law, later formalized by Jacques Lacan with the notion of a paternal metaphor (see, notably, the 1957-1958 seminar, *Les formations de l’inconscient*) is implicit in legal writings on youth in the early 1950s.
14. See Chazal, *L’enfance délinquante*, for gender roles in the family (38-39), and where the judge attributes delinquency to the alcoholism, promiscuity, and the separated families that characterize households of economically disadvantaged parents (44-45). For more on delinquency as the product of low-income families, see Chazal, *Déconcertante jeunesse*, p. 24.
15. At least one famous youth crime was even named after the J3 Affair: just a few months after the murder, another dramatic crime was committed by a gang of teenagers, whom the press dubbed The J3s of Valence. In early 1950, a Parisian daily compared a crime in a provincial town to the J3 Affair (“Gevrey-Chambertin a bien manqué”).
16. The notion of style is fundamental to Dick Hebdige’s understanding of subcultures. Hebdige’s focus is the U.K., but his ideas can be extended to the French context (and, interestingly, Hebdige relies heavily on Jean Genet). The zazous respected a stylistic code, shared a set of signifiers (clothing items, argot, musical taste, apolitical attitude...). In a sense, you only became a J3 retroactively, after you got caught stealing, acting violently or perversely, etc.
17. Across numerous books and articles, Marjorie Perloff, for one, has made a case for the notion of a tradition of modernist and avant-garde writings. In “Avant-garde Tradition and Individual Talent,” for example, she situates the Language poets in relation to “the trajectory of other avant-gardes” (131)—the Russian and the Italian avant-gardes of the early 20th century, Zurich Dada, surrealism, and so forth. She compares and contrasts the movement with the Oulipo.
18. Rimbaud seems to have played more of a minor role than might be expected for thinkers like Isou and Debord, at least compared to Tzara and Breton, who occupy a pivotal place in Isou’s theory of poetry, for example. Wark opposes the Lettrist project with Rimbaud’s “derangement of the senses”: Lettrism, rather, seeks an “*arrangement* of the sensible” (22). It is interesting to note that Rimbaud is more or less absent from Marcus’s extensive history of Lettrism.
19. One has but to peruse the index of Debord’s letters to note that Breton, far more than another other artistic antecedent, preoccupies Debord in the 1951-1957 period.
20. This is a neologism I would venture to translate as “illetterate.”
21. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Hebdige argues for a continuity between Breton’s manifestos and Punk: Surrealism’s mission of non sequitur, inspired by Lautréamont’s “chance meeting of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table” (Lautréamont 314-315), prefigures the subversive juxtaposition of the safety pin and the Union Jack. In *Lipstick Traces*, Marcus begins centuries before Surrealism and arrives at the Sex Pistols, spending most of his time along the way on Dada and Lettrism. Jonathan Eburne, in *Surrealism and the Art of Crime* explores surrealism’s obsession with violence, but makes clear that violence, for the surrealists, functioned more as an artistic metaphor than anything else (see also Marcus 185)—except perhaps for Aragon, who, explains Eburne, was expelled from the collective in part due to his promotion of terror and terrorism (74-96). The similarities among Dada, Surrealism, Lettrism, Situationism, and Punk and other late 20th-century subcultural movements are undeniable, but so are the differences in their intentions and what their acts meant within their distinct geographical and historical contexts. As Wark has shown, the *dérive* as practiced by the Lettrist International destabilizes notions of subject and object, time and space, in ways André Breton, wandering

around Paris in pursuit of Nadja, could never have imagined (19-31); see also Kaufmann, pp. 181-198. Similarly, even Lettrist pranks modeled on or related to Surrealist acts were received in historically specific ways by journalists and other commentators.

22. McKenzie Wark tells the same version of the story (16).
23. The murderer of the J3 Affair had also claimed his crime was inspired by André Gide. See Alec Favori's article in *Ici-Paris* most notably (5-11), which reprints the letter that André Gide wrote in response to these accusations.
24. See, for example, Henry Rouso, *Le syndrome de Vichy: 1944 à nos jours*, 1987, Les Editions du Seuil, 1990.
25. Actually, the text falsely attributes the episode to Serge Berna, who wrote the sermon, but did not deliver it.
26. In *Reproductions of Banality*, Alice Kaplan discusses Maurras's influence on a younger generation of fascist intellectuals, such as George Sorel, and Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, although she also notes that writers like Robert Brasillach and Céline did not think Maurras's far-right political ideology went far enough (119).
27. At the time, Sartre recognized and cried out against Lettrism's lack of originality, and saw the movement as a simple derivative of Dada (Wark 12).

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. "Structure du fait divers." *Essais critiques*, by Barthes, Les Editions du Seuil, 1964, pp. 194-204.
- Breton, André. Préface. *Lettres de guerre de Jacques Vaché*. K Editeur, 1949.
- Cabañas, Kaira M. *Off-screen Cinema: Isidore Isou and the Lettrist Avant-garde*. U of Chicago P, 2014.
- Chazal, Jean. *L'enfance délinquante*. Presses Universitaires de France, 1953.
- . *Déconcertante jeunesse*. Presses Universitaires de France, 1962.
- Debord, Guy. *Correspondance volume "O" (septembre 1951-juillet 1957)*. Fayard, 2010.
- . "Thèses sur la révolution culturelle." 1958. *Oeuvres*, edited by Jean-Louis Rançon, Gallimard, 2006, pp. 360-362.
- . *Hurllements en faveur de Sade*. Film lettristes, 1952.
- La délinquance juvénile en France*, Notes et études documentaires, n. 1.423 (19 Jan. 1951), Centre des Archives Contemporaine à Fontainebleau, Seine-et-Marne: 910333, art. 3.
- Dolto, Françoise. "Quand le bachelier moyen devient criminel: L'affaire Guyader." *Esprit*, vol. 155, no. 5, 1949, pp. 678-684.
- Ducasse, Isidore, le Comte de Lautréamont. *Les chants de Maldoror*. 1868-1869. Le Livre de Poche, 2001.
- Eburne, Jonathan P. *Surrealism and the Art of Crime*. Cornell UP, 2008.
- Favori, Alec. "D'outre tombe André Gide répond à Panconi qu'il repousse toute responsabilité morale dans l'affaire des J3." *Ici-Paris*, Mar. 1951, pp. 5-11.
- Foucault, Michel. *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. Gallimard, 1975.
- Genet, Jean. *L'enfant criminel*. 1949. Arbalète Gallimard, 2014.
- "Gevrey-Chambertin a bien manqué d'avoir ses 'J3' tragiques." *Le Parisien Libéré*. 18 Jan. 1950.
- Grenier, Roger. "The Land of Poets." 1985. *Palace of Books*, translated by Alice Kaplan, U of Chicago P, 2014, pp. 3-17.
- . "Le pays des poètes." 1985. *Le palais des livres*. Gallimard, 2011, pp. 9-28.
- Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. 1979. Routledge, 1988.
- Internationale Lettriste. *Visages de l'avant-garde*, edited by Jean-Louis Rançon, La Nerthe, 2020.
- Isou, Isidore. *L'Agrégation d'un nom et d'un messie*. Gallimard, 1947.
- "Isou's Venom and Eternity" (Raymond Rohauer Promotional Brochure). Society of Cinema Arts, Los Angeles, ca. 1953.
- Jobs, Rick. *Riding the New Wave: Youth and the Rejuvenation of France after the Second World War*. Stanford UP, 2007.
- Kanters, Robert, and Gilbert Sigaux. *Vingt ans en 1951: enquête sur la jeunesse française*. Julliard, 1951.
- Kaplan, Alice. *The Collaborator: The Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillach*. U of Chicago P, 2000.
- . *Representations of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life*. U. of Minnesota Press, 1986.

- Kaufmann, Vincent. *Poétique des groupes littéraires 1920-1970*. Presses Universitaires de France, 1997.
- Kessel, Joseph. *Le procès des enfants perdus*. Julliard, 1951.
- Laforêt, Pierre. "Nicole, qui risque de retourner en prison, a deux mères." *Samedi-Soir*, 18-24 Mar. 1950.
- Marcus, Greil. *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*. 1989. Harvard/Belknap, 2009.
- Nadeau, Maurice. "Les 'lettristes' chahutent une lecture de Tzara au Vieux-Colombier." *Combat*, 22 Jan. 1946.
- Perloff, Marjorie. "Avant-garde Tradition and Individual Talent: The Case of Language Poetry." *Revue Française d'études américaines*, no. 103, 2005, pp. 117-141.
- Pomerand, Gabriel. *Saint ghetto des prêtres, grimoire*. O.L.B., 1950.
- Polizzotti, Mark. *André Breton*. Gallimard, 1995.
- Wark, McKenzie. *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International*. Verso, 2011.