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‘They were jokes’: The Situationist fiction of Michèle Bernstein

ABSTRACT

In 1960, Paris-based Situationist Michèle Bernstein published the first instalment in a pair of novels that playfully ‘knocked-off’ the popular literary genres of the post-war era and which the author has subsequently dismissed as jokes. Principally concerned with Bernstein’s first book released through Buchet/Chastel in 1960, Tous les chevaux du roi (2004)/All the King’s Horses (2008), this article explores how this fake romance novel heavily laden with irony provides a front for a deeper level cultural critique. While previous responses to Bernstein’s novel treat it as either an eye-witness account of the everyday life of the Situationist International (1957–1972), or as propagandizing for a libertine revolution of the passions, a focus on the insincerity and ‘joking’ of the author highlights the novel’s more pressing concern for performing a Situationist critique of reification. At the same time, Bernstein’s ambivalent treatment of the popular genre of the teen romance novel raises complex questions about some of the gendered aspects of the Situationist critique. For this reason, this article also explores how the performative rehearsal of boredom, banality and cliché in All the King’s Horses (2008) calls into question the radical potential attributed to desire in the avant-garde’s project to enact a revolution of everyday life under commodity capitalism.

KEYWORDS

Michèle Bernstein
Situationist
International
avant-garde
novel
reification
détournement

First published in France in 1960 and 1961 respectively, *Tous les chevaux du roi/All the King's Horses* and *La Nuit/The Night* are a pair of novels by the Situationist Michèle Bernstein that were all but erased from the history of the Situationist International (1957–1972) until their recovery by the American author Greil Marcus in his 1989 book, *Lipstick Traces*. Written under the sign of commerce, apparently as minor commercial ventures aimed at garnering cash for the European cultural revolutionary avant-garde movement known in English as the 'SI', Bernstein has repeatedly dismissed her two books as 'jokes' (Marcus 1993: 423). This off-hand assertion has complicated their reception by scholars of the movement whilst pre-emptively striking against any attempts to read the novels as serious literary works. Out of print for over four decades, since 2004 Bernstein's books have steadily reappeared in mass-printed French editions and English language translations that have significantly transformed the conditions of their reception, complicating in particular the ambiguous relationship of her joke novels to the tropes of popular and high literary 1950s French fiction appropriated in her texts. No longer simply clandestine, avant-garde artefacts buried in the depths of the Situationist archives, Bernstein's novels (and indeed the author herself) are now exposed to the prying eyes of Situationist aficionados, cultural historians, literary scholars and general readers alike.

In a photograph accompanying an interview with Bernstein published on the occasion of the first translation of *The Night* into English in 2013 (Figure 1) the author, now in her early 80s (Bernstein was born in 1932), challenges her English editor to a game of chess. It is an artfully staged image that not only encapsulates the themes of play and strategy embodied in Bernstein's novels but



Figure 1: A lesson in strategy – Michèle Bernstein, London 2013, playing chess with *Everyone Agrees*, English editors of *The Night*, photo courtesy of *Everyone Agrees and Book Works*.

demonstrates also the extent to which Bernstein herself has become implicated in a strategic game of coy disavowal surrounding her Situationist fictions. Principally concerned with Bernstein's first book, *All the King's Horses* (2008) (hereafter *Horses*) as a cynical 'knock-off' of the popular young women's fiction of the post-war era, this article argues against the tendency to treat Bernstein's fiction as a mere document or eye-witness account of the SI in order to consider, rather, the extent to which the author's fake romance novel, heavily laden with irony, might in fact provide a front for a deeper level cultural critique.

In this way, I am concerned to reposition Bernstein's *Horses* as a ready-made fiction that on the one hand conforms to the Situationist critique of the reification of everyday life under capitalist modernity. On the other hand, the ambivalent treatment of the popular genre of the teen romance novel by one of the few female members of the Situationist avant-garde raises complex questions about some of the gendered aspects of the SI's methods of critique. Indeed the very existence of Bernstein's novels points to the unevenness of the SI's avant-garde tactics and strategies when applied from the perspective of gender insofar as the novel form, and a popular genre no less, was available to Bernstein to subvert precisely because she was a woman. Whereas for the male protagonists of the SI, and perhaps most especially for the group's theoretical figurehead, Guy Debord, the writing of fiction – whether in earnest or otherwise – represented an unthinkable undertaking. With this ambiguous authorial posture in view, I am concerned to explore, then, how Bernstein's performative rehearsals of boredom, banality and cliché call into question, and complicate, the radical potential attributed to desire in the avant-garde's project to enact a revolution of everyday life at the level of 'the passions'.

DÉTOURNEMENT AND THE NOVEL

Centred in Paris but with links throughout Europe and beyond, the Situationist International was formed in 1957 at an intimate conference at Cosio d'Arroscia in Italy, initially with just a handful of signatories. Comprising the Paris-based Debord and Bernstein, the Danish painter Asger Jorn, Dutch artist and architect Constant Nieuwenhuys, the 'Scottish Beat' Alexander Trocchi, Italian painter Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio and the English artist Ralph Rumney, the founding of the SI was in many respects a consolidation and extension of key ideas already developed under the auspices of its antecedent group, the Lettrist International (LI), active 1952 to 1957. Inheritors of the everyday Marxism of the surrealist project with its affirmation of '*la souveraineté du désir et de la surprise*' (Debord 2004: 691)/'the sovereignty of desire and surprise' (Debord 2006: 28) as a proposal for a new way of life, the SI were also concerned to go beyond what they perceived as the limitations of the surrealist preoccupation with chance, automatic writing and the unconscious. For the SI, the group's post-surrealist proposal for a new way of life centred upon what was outlined by Debord as '*la construction de situations, c'est-à-dire la construction concrète d'ambiances momentanées de la vie, et leur transformation en une qualité passionnelle supérieure*' (2004: 697)/'the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passionate quality' (2006: 38). Expressing their critique of what Debord famously termed 'the society of the spectacle' via playful urban interventions, psychogeographical researches and the subversive reuse of existing elements of culture, the anti-art activities of the SI reflected what Peter Bürger

has identified as one of the fundamental ambitions of the historical avant-garde, namely 'the abolition of autonomous art by which it means that art is to be integrated into the praxis of everyday life' (1984: 53–54).

In order to understand the context within which Bernstein's 'post-existentialist, anything but sincere youth novel' (Kelsey 2008: 9) unfolds, it is imperative to consider it in light of the Situationist practice of *détournement*, a term with an unstable meaning in English which translates variously as 'diversion' and 'rerouting' to 'hijacking' and 'turning around'. An extension of avant-garde collage methods, the Situationists deployed *détournement* as a technique of reusing and recombining existing elements of culture into a new 'milieu' such that their original meaning is turned around (détourned) to critical ends. In their 1956 manifesto, 'Mode d'emploi du détournement'/'A user's guide to *détournement*', Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman explain that '*tous les éléments, pris n'importe où, peuvent faire l'objet de rapprochements nouveaux*' (1995: 2)'any elements, no matter where they are taken from, can be used to make new combinations' (2006: 15). Conceived with pragmatic intent, the authors suggest that one of the first applications of the art of *détournement* will be '*la réapparition d'une foule de mauvais livres; la participation massive d'écrivains ignorés*' (1995: 5)'the revival of a multitude of bad books, and thus the extensive (unintended) participation of their unknown authors' (2006: 17). It is according to this logic of disruptive plagiarism that Bernstein sets out in *Horses* to pillage a number of pre-existing sources in order to fashion what the author has described, with a nod to Dada, as a ready-made novel. At its centre are a pair of avant-garde libertines named Gilles and Geneviève who happily coexist in an open relationship and therefore resemble the real-life scenario of Debord and Bernstein (who were married at the time of the novel's composition), and in this way the author's own biography forms one component of her 'found' material. For her plot, Bernstein looks to the *ménage à trois* scenario of Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's 1782 novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses*/*Dangerous Liaisons*, whilst at the level of style it is the flippant tone of Françoise Sagan that Bernstein mimics in order to retell 'a season among the free-living SI as if it were a breezy but jaded romance for teenaged girls' (Kelsey 2008: 13). In adopting the 'dry little sentences' of Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* (1954)/*Hello Sadness* Bernstein's novel has the effect of parody which, as Fredric Jameson notes, 'capitalizes on the uniqueness of [certain] styles and seizes on their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities to produce an imitation which mocks the original' (1985: 113).

At the same time, the satiric impulses at work in *Horses* are complicated by the ambiguity of the popular culture target of Bernstein's mimicry. When first published in 1954, Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* scandalized readers with its anti-sentimental and frank account of an ambivalent female sexuality as retold by an apparently amoral teen. Cynically adopted by a member of the Situationist avant-garde, however, this sexual frankness is no longer shocking but merely a formula. It is a recipe that Bernstein coolly exploits alongside the novel's predictable plot, a *ménage à trois* scenario involving a *jeune-fille*'young girl' and complicated by a revolving door of casual affairs that clearly belong within the realm of literary cliché rather than the legacy of transgressive libertine literature à la the Marquise de Sade and the fictions of the debauched aristocrats of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Indeed in a recent preface Bernstein has suggested that in fabricating a fake popular novel her strategy in *Horses* was to load the book with 'sufficient clues and irony so the moderately observant reader would realize that they were dealing with some kind of joke, the steely gaze of a true libertine, a critique of the novel itself'

(2013b: 10). This ambiguous tension between seriousness and joking, sincerity and insincerity, permeates *Horses* and it is in this sense that the novel not only anticipates strategies of postmodern fiction but also pre-emptively debunks contemporary debates concerned with the extent to which popular culture increasingly renders obsolete any clear distinction between the fake and the real, which in turn problematizes conventional notions of an authentic or unmediated identity. From the beginning of *Horses*, the reader is confronted with an ambivalent narrator in the form of Geneviève who opens the novel with her coy admission: '*Je ne sais comment j'ai compris si vite que Carole nous plaisait*' (Bernstein 2004: 11)/'I don't know how I realized so quickly that we liked Carole' (Bernstein 2008: 21). Trapped amid a tedious crowd at a boring art gallery opening, Geneviève's wry assessment of the scene quickly establishes that the narrator is not the wide-eyed ingénue one might normally expect to encounter in a teen romance:

Quand je cherchai du regard le secours de Gilles, je vis que le peintre lui parlait avec animation. Un petit groupe se formait déjà autour d'eux. C'était un mauvais peintre et un charmant vieil homme, pétri d'un modernisme désuet. Gilles lui donnait la réplique sans laisser paraître de lassitude, et j'admirai son aisance. Le vieux peintre s'était déjà perdu avec la génération d'avant la nôtre, mais il n'était pas découragé pour autant. Il nous aimait bien. Notre jeunesse lui confirmait la sienne, je crois. (Bernstein 2004: 11–12)/Desperately scanning the room for Gilles, I saw the painter talking to him animatedly. A little group was already forming around them. This was a bad painter and a charming old man, the product of an obsolete modernism. Gilles was answering him without seeming bored and I admired his ease. The old painter had already been forgotten a generation before ours, but this did not discourage him at all. He adored us. Our youth confirmed his own, I guess.

(Bernstein 2008: 21)

The tongue-in-cheek nature of Geneviève's cool dismissal of the painter's 'obsolete modernism' works to differentiate *Horses* from the racy and light-hearted popular fiction of Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse*, which Bernstein so readily cannibalizes. In this way, it becomes evident that Bernstein's joke novel operates in an ironical mode that provides a front for a deeper-level cultural critique. When the exhibition opening draws to a close Gilles and Geneviève attend a party hosted by the 'bad painter', François-Joseph, where they meet the stepdaughter of the 'charming old man', a kitten-like 20-year-old girl named Carole, whom Geneviève casually sets out to seduce in the manner of a conquest for both herself and Gilles. While the sexual ethics of the scenario are deeply problematic, Bernstein knowingly engages in a critical manner the trope of the *jeune-fille*, or the young girl. As an embodiment of a mythologized representation of sexualized girlhood, portrayals of the *jeune-fille* reached a threshold of intensity or mass saturation in the marketing and cultural productions of France's post-war consumer boom of the 1950s. As such, the phenomenon of the *jeune-fille* fuelled a nascent publishing industry that Susan Weiner points out saw the publication of 'an unprecedented number of young women writers' (2001: 71). In the cinema this preoccupation with the sexualized young girl witnessed the rise of the 'nymphet', a cultural phenomenon exemplified by the eroticized cuteness of Brigitte Bardot and dubbed the 'Lolita Syndrome' in a 1959 article that Simone de Beauvoir penned for *Esquire*

1. Bernstein has actively encouraged this comparison. In her preface to *The Night* she writes: 'So: to kidnap a plot. *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, that book cherished by all good minds and so scandalous in its time, immediately came to mind' (2013b: 10). Laclos's novel was very much in the cultural Zeitgeist following the 1959 film remake by Roger Vadim and starring Jeanne Moreau.

magazine. According to Weiner, 'Beauvoir saw the invention of the nymphet as the expression of an ideological struggle: a means for post-war culture to maintain the "feminine mystique", despite the demystification of femininity that was underway' (2001: 103). Bernstein's novel thus makes apparent the malleability of the sign of the *jeune-fille* in the cultural context of the period as both Gilles and Geneviève derive pleasure in treating Carole as a 'thing', a toy-like object to be played with and manipulated at whim. While Geneviève's descriptions of the young girl lack empathy, her assessments of Carole's situation nevertheless register a degree of pathos insofar as she recognizes the reified entrapment of the young girl in a passive conformity to the mystique of sexualized girlhood criticized by Beauvoir:

L'alcool la rendait triste. Elle nous parla du temps qui s'en va. Comme tous les adolescents quittant cet âge, quand ils en ont compris ou lu les charmes, elle ressentait amèrement son vieillissement, son changement d'état. Quoique très jeune, autrefois elle était plus jeune encore. (Bernstein 2004: 26)/The alcohol was making her sad. She talked about time passing. Like all teenagers who aren't teenagers anymore, when they've read about and finally understood what being desirable is, she bitterly resented getting old, her changing state. She was young now, but before she was even younger.

(Bernstein 2008: 33)

Geneviève observes with derision Carole's self-conscious performance of the predictable formula of the *jeune-fille*. Yet Gilles nonetheless develops an interest of unusual intensity in Carole that eventually comes to disrupt the equilibrium of Gilles and Geneviève's relationship and it is precisely this disruption that motorizes the novel's plot. In an attempt to outwit Gilles at his own game, Geneviève responds with a series of tactical manoeuvres aimed at regaining her central position in Gilles's affections without resorting to the bad faith of jealousy or a bourgeois sense of entitlement. First taking up with a younger lover of her own named Bertrand, she soon discards him in favour of an affair with a same sex mistress, Hélène. In light of the candid and detached manner in which she recounts her romantic strategizing, Geneviève invites comparison with the Marquise de Merteuil, the calculating accomplice to Laclos's *lothario*, Valmont, in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782).¹ The intertextual relationship of *Horses* to Laclos's novel thus establishes a certain framework for a reading of the novel as an example of libertine fiction and indeed a number of critics identify the primary goal of Bernstein's novel as a propagandizing one, a proposal in fiction for a Situationist revolution of everyday life at the level of the 'passions'.

In his reading of the mobility of desire in *Horses* as 'permanent play', McKenzie Wark, for instance, suggests that Bernstein 'borrows from socialist, bohemian and aristocratic writings to create an alternative to the middle-class ideal of the married couple' (2011: 76). For Wark, the novel presents a radical model of desire insofar as libertine love negates the subordination of romantic love to the ideology of private property rights. In this way, Bernstein's novels might be viewed as positing free-love and an uninhibited sexuality as a project that 'can be shaped aesthetically, in pursuit of adventures, in the creation of situations, in the river of time' (Wark 2011: 81). In an unsigned review of Bernstein's second book posted on the French website [Le blog de zones subversives](#), it is similarly suggested that Bernstein '*manifeste surtout son humour mais évoque aussi la critique situationniste*' (2013, par. 14) 'shows her sense of humour whilst also evoking the Situationist critique'

such that the libertine novel is détourned by Bernstein at the service of illustrating Situationist theory: 'L'esprit libertin correspond bien à la démarche libertaire des situationnistes [...] Contre les normes et les contraintes sociales, le jeu et le plaisir deviennent des armes révolutionnaires' (2013, par. 19) 'The libertine spirit corresponds to the libertarian approach of the Situationists [...] Against social norms and constraints, games and pleasure become revolutionary weapons'.

Yet the extent to which the presentation of the open-relationship of Gilles and Geneviève resembles anything like a 'revolutionary weapon' in either *Horses* or its sequel is deeply questionable. In the first instance, to read *Horses* primarily through the lens of the libertine fiction of the eighteenth-century is to neglect another important touchstone for the novel, that is the preceding generation of Existentialist literature, in particular the novels of Simone de Beauvoir. There is a striking similarity, for example, between the plot of *Horses* and Beauvoir's 1943 novel *L'Invitée* (English title: *She Came to Stay*) which also deals with the scenario of two Parisian intellectuals, modelled upon Sartre and Beauvoir, whose moral commitment to liberty within their relationship is destabilized by the arrival of a contrarian young woman named Xavière. Both novels are concerned with the negotiation of one's most intimate

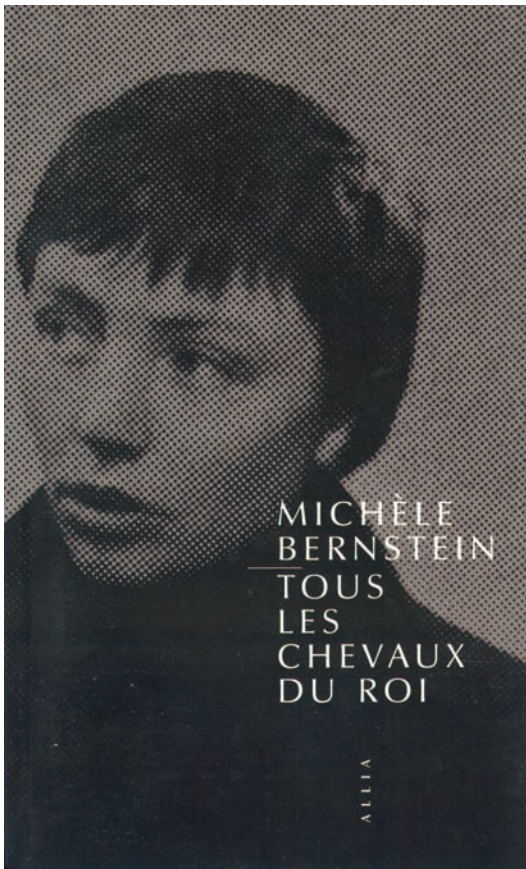


Figure 2: Michèle Bernstein (2004), cover artwork © Éditions Allia, 2004.

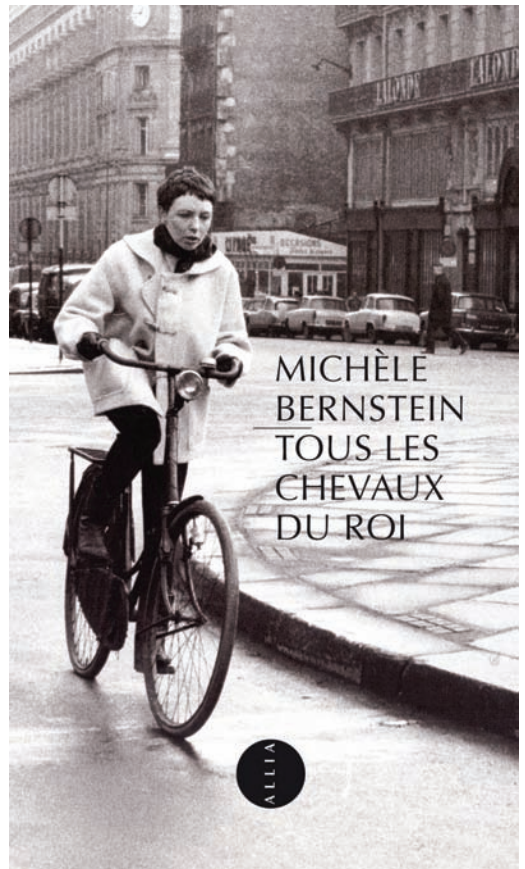


Figure 3: Michèle Bernstein (2004), cover artwork © Éditions Allia, 2014.

relationships as a finely tuned balancing act between constraint and freedom. But the scenario that in Beauvoir's novel is treated with the gravitas of an ethical and philosophical dilemma largely devolves into something of a banality when viewed through Bernstein's laconic 'steely gaze'. Indeed, it is precisely Bernstein's treatment of love, romance and the novel as a banality that I wish to emphasize in my reading of the ambivalent portrayal of desire in *Horses*. My emphasis on banality will run somewhat counter to those responses that have predominantly focused on the machinations of the libertine plot as a transgressive proposition. Rather, in what follows I am concerned to explore how desire is treated in *Horses* as an object that assumes an exchangeable, and hence reified, quality. In this way, libertine love in Bernstein's novel emerges less as a solution to the boredom of everyday life than merely another symptom of its all-pervasive alienation.

BOREDOM, BANALITY AND SEPARATION

As I noted in my introduction, the apparent insincerity of Bernstein's fictions present the reader with a dilemma in terms of precisely how they are to be treated that is compounded by the author's dismissal of her books as jokes, a statement to which critics have repeatedly expressed intrigue. In recent scholarship, speculation concerning just precisely what it means to write a joke novel has shifted away from value-laden judgements over the literary merits of the novels to guesses as to where, or towards whom, Bernstein's humour might be directed. In her review of *Horses* Kelly Baum, for instance, asserts that 'the target of Bernstein's humor was the Situationist International itself, specifically the sexual and political pretensions of its male members, the self-styled heroes of the post-war avant-garde' (2012: 163). Yet any assertion that the target of Bernstein's humour is the Situationist International itself is complicated by the fact that she identified closely with the extremely close-knit avant-garde group that she was apparently concerned to criticize. In the English preface to her second novel, *The Night*, Bernstein stresses that she was a 'committed Situationist' at the time of composing her détourned fictions, a period during which the SI considered the novel to be 'the least revolutionary form of writing' (2013b: 11). For this reason, I argue that it is important to view the complicated role of humour, irony and the *détournement* of the teen romance novel in Bernstein's fiction through a bifocal lens that takes into consideration the author's habitus as both a woman and a 'committed Situationist'. A useful framework for assessing Bernstein's ambivalent authorial position as it manifests in *Horses* is the notion of 'posture' as theorized by the Swiss scholar Jérôme Meizoz in his 2007 study, *Postures littéraires: Mises en scène modernes de l'auteur*/'Literary postures: modern stagings of the author'. Notable is Meizoz's foregrounding of the way in which an author's position within a social and cultural field or milieu influences his or her performative staging of identity.

For Meizoz, authorial self-image is constructed as an interactive process deriving from discursive acts both within and outside the text and thus 'posture' can be understood as comprising a multifaceted performance of identity. This performance arises not only in the author's writing but also in the paratexts, speech acts and public gestures that combine to mediate the relationship between the author and his or her imagined audience. Timo Müller offers a useful account of the performative dimensions of literary posture as posited by Meizoz:

In Meizoz's conception, the posture has a foundational, if somewhat contradictory, role in literary writing [...] Every choice of genre and style can contribute to a posture as well as narrative perspective, reference to certain intertexts, etc [...] Besides the diachronic, Meizoz develops another important dimension of posturing: the performative dimension. A posture comes into existence only in its performance, which makes it 'the locus of artifice, of staging, even of ruse'...

(Müller 2010: 53–54)

An examination of the cover designs of the French editions of *Horses* (Figures 2 and 3), reissued by the publishing house Éditions Allia, points to the performative manner in which Bernstein's identity is staged in the paratexts surrounding her fiction. In comparison to the plain cover of the original 1960 Buchet/Chastel edition, the cover artwork of the contemporary reprints feature youthful images of Bernstein that embody the now iconic style of 1960s Left Bank Paris. On the one hand, such images may be read as a strategic manoeuvre to détourn the image of the ingénue romance author à la Françoise Sagan and in this way the cover designs extend the game-like nature of Bernstein's fiction beyond the narrative of the text itself. Yet it must also be acknowledged that such cover designs inevitably have the effect, at some level, of reifying the image of the Situationist author insofar as they serve specific marketing purposes for the book's publishers. In a similar vein, Michel Lacroix has applied Meizoz's conceptual framework of literary posture to his reading of the complex and contradictory authorial stance evident in the experimental auto-fictional literary manuscript composed by the Lettrist Patrick Straram during his years embedded within the Lettrist milieu, posthumously published as *Les Bouteilles se couchent* (2006) / 'The bottles lie down'.² Indeed Lacroix usefully extends Meizoz's work by arguing that the notion of posture is especially salient in the work of authors belonging to a literary collective or an avant-garde movement. For the self-identity discursively constructed in their texts and paratexts is obliged to mediate a set of values shared by a group, a process of mediation that frequently manifests with ambivalence to the extent that the values of the group may be at odds with those of the individual. In respect to the Situationists, Lacroix argues that crucial to maintaining the collective posture of the group was the knowing and active construction of fictions and legends pertaining to their self-image:

On pourrait en déduire que la posture situationniste est, en définitive, fictive, imaginaire, purement textuelle, mais une autre interprétation conduirait plutôt à examiner comment les situationnistes (se) jouent des rapports entre fiction et authenticité, textes et situations concrètes, masques et postures [...] Cependant, le primat accordé au vécu, à l'émotion ne les conduit pas, comme les surréalistes, à bannir la fiction au nom de l'authenticité, mais à cultiver le secret, à multiplier les masques, à introduire des décalages. / Thus one could suggest that the Situationist posture is ultimately fictitious, imaginary, purely textual, yet another interpretation might emphasize how the Situationists themselves play with the relationship between fiction and authenticity, texts and concrete situations, masks and postures [...] That said [for the SI], the primacy given to the *vécu* [the everyday] and to feeling does not lead, as it did for the Surrealists, to the banishment of fiction in the name of authenticity, but to cultivating secrets, multiplying masks, and the introduction of gaps.

(Lacroix 2009, par. 24)

2. Originally titled 'Bass and Co's Imperial Stout', Patrick Straram's manuscript was posthumously published in 2006 as *Les Bouteilles se couchent* / 'The bottles lie down' by the French publishing house Éditions Allia, which specializes in releasing documents of the Situationist International (they are also the French publishers of Bernstein's novels).

3. Debord and Wolman discuss the influence of Bertolt Brecht on the Situationist conception of *détournement* in 'A user's guide' when they suggest that Brecht

makes cuts in the classics of theater in order to make the performance more educative, [which] 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.

(2006: 15)

Given the SI's preoccupation with strategically blurring the lines between fiction and reality, the *détournement* of the teen romance novel by Bernstein in *Horses* is perhaps best understood, then, less as a parodic critique of the popular culture industry but rather as a playful 'turning around' of the conventions of popular genres to critical ends. In this way, the banality of the novel might also be viewed as a *ruse*, and in this vein Joshua Clover in his reading of *Horses* argues that Bernstein's book is a deliberately boring novel: 'its events are scarcely worth remembering; that's the point' (2009: 36). Just as Clover identifies an ironic and studied mobilization of boredom in *Horses*, a handful of critical responses have begun to scrutinize Bernstein's novel at the level of style, rather than plot, affording greater weight to the overriding atmosphere of alienation, dissatisfaction and ennui that the novel constructs. Jeff Kinkle, for example, is alert to the ways in which the *détournement* of popular and classic literary works in Bernstein's fiction appears to 'propagandize for adventurous love' while, at the very same time, 'its refusal to take itself too seriously – its refusal to be sincere – creates a sort of alienation effect' (Kinkle 2010: 174). Picking up a similar thread, Kelly Baum considers the influence of Bertolt Brecht, noting how the Brechtian strategy of appropriating and cutting classic dramatic works influenced the Situationists in their formulation of *détournement*.³ Baum extends this Brechtian connection by suggesting that the technique of *verfremdungseffekt* (translated as either 'distanciation' or 'alienation effect') has equal bearing on Bernstein's novel' (2012: 162). According to Baum, *Horses* is 'habitually self-reflexive: the book consistently addresses the conditions of its own production, and its protagonists repeatedly break the fourth wall and revel in their own artificiality' (2012: 162). Exemplary of this breaking of the fourth wall is the exchange between Geneviève and Gilles during which they candidly assess the merits (or lack thereof) of one of Carole's paintings. In response to Gilles's criticisms of the mediocrity of the young girl's work, Geneviève remarks:

je pris la défense de l'absente: les romans, les tableaux sont composés d'après les recettes qui conviennent. On a tout de même un certain mérite à user déceintement des poncifs de son époque. (Bernstein 2004: 20)/I rose to the absent girl's defense: novels and paintings follow whichever recipe is convenient at that moment. In any case, there's something to be said for cleverly using the clichés of one's time.

(Bernstein 2008: 29)

This notion of 'cleverly using the clichés of one's time' (Bernstein 2008: 29) is not only an incisive piece of meta-commentary on the novel's compositional methods but also signals the distinct modality of irony within which the novel operates, a form of irony that, however, cynical and sarcastic nevertheless remains future orientated as distanciation is linked to the development of a critical consciousness. In this respect, the ironical mode of *Horses* resonates with the significance afforded to Marxist irony in the work of Henri Lefebvre for whom irony functions as 'a mode of reflective consciousness that allows us to prise open the gap between appearance and reality, ideology and actuality, falseness and authenticity' (Gardiner 2012: 63). Bernstein's proclivity for self-reflexive critique is evident throughout the novel across a plethora of remarks that rupture the illusory narrative world of her fiction. While this meta-commentary indeed works to critique the artificiality of the novel form it also speaks to the potential for irony to cultivate a critical distance between

the author and her characters that might facilitate the 'reflective consciousness' that Gardiner identifies as characteristic of Marxist irony. Consider for instance the tongue-in-cheek exchange between Gilles and Carole during the group's holiday at Saint-Paul de Vence in the south of France, a scenario that in itself presents as another example of a literary cliché. Here, the characters even go so far as to mock the predictability of the scenario within which their unimaginative author has placed them, prompting this reflection:

N'avez-vous pas remarqué, interrompit Carole, comme nous avons tous des noms de personnages de roman: Gilles et Bertrand; Renaud, Carole, Geneviève? C'est bien drôle. Les héros à la mode portent ces noms-là.

C'est ça, dit Gilles, justement nous sommes des personnages de romans, ne l'avez-vous pas remarqué? D'ailleurs, vous et moi, nous parlons par petites phrases sèches. Nous avons même quelque chose d'inachevé. Voilà comment sont les romans. On ne tient pas compte de tout. Il y a une règle du jeu. Ainsi, notre vie est aussi prévisible que dans les romans.

(Bernstein 2004: 83–84)

'Haven't you noticed', Carole interrupted, 'how we all have names like characters in a novel; Gilles and Bertrand; Renaud, Carole, Geneviève? It's really funny. Heroes have names like those'.

'That's right', said Gilles. 'We're all characters in a novel, haven't you noticed? You and I speak in dry little sentences. There's even something unfinished about us. And that's how novels are. They don't give you everything. It's the rules of the game. And our lives are as predictable as a novel, too'.

(Bernstein 2008: 80–81)

Such acts of wry self-observation are critical to the Situationist use of the novel according to which the rules of the game are détourned not as formal experimentation for its own sake but rather in an ironical manner that Michael Gardiner argues, again writing about Lefebvre, is more democratic in so far as 'irony is not only the purview of the educated and leisured classes, but available to all social strata indiscriminately' (2012: 63–64). As noted, Bernstein's deft use of irony in *Horses* as an inherently distancing and self-questioning mode implies the influence of Brecht on the novel, which is discussed by Baum in her reading of *Horses* according to the framework of distanciation. Yet it is worth extending this valuable insight to consider more specifically how alienation effects play out in the more mediated textual space of the novel compared with the live encounters of the theatre where passive audiences can be directly affronted with the spectacle of their alienation. In her treatment of the novel as a commodity, Bernstein's characters in *Horses* emerge as more explicitly *reified*, in the sense that they embody abstract ideas turned into objects. They are wooden, devoid of interiority and psychological depth as is apparent in such remarks as Geneviève's candid admission: '*Je me brosseai les cheveux avec l'héroïsme des grands combats, et la bonne technique enseignée par l'hebdomadaire que la femme lit, si elle lit*' (Bernstein 2004: 92)/'I brushed my hair like a heroine, like a woman who'd learned how to brush her hair from reading women's magazines, if she reads at all' (Bernstein 2008: 88). The false identifications apparent in her characters' modes of thinking, acting and relating to one another reflect, then, the central role afforded to the pervasive

4. This transition in social relations from *being* to *having* and finally to *appearing* is outlined by Debord in thesis 17 of *The Society of the Spectacle* (1983).

5. I deploy the term 'disalienation' in the sense intended by Henri Lefebvre as referring to the possibilities, events and moments in daily life that elude commodification, overcoding and their appropriation by capitalism.

influence of appearances in the Situationist critique of reification. For the SI, social life in the consumer society is downgraded from a concern with *being* to *having* that is further impoverished by the reduction of social relations to the level of appearances.⁴ Thus Bernstein's characters speak to the way in which the SI identify images as having colonized everyday life to such an extent that subjects now strive to adopt the models presented to them by the society of the spectacle.

In the lexicon of the Situationists, reification was more commonly referred to as 'separation' and it is a concern that permeates the work of the SI around the time of the composition of *Horses*. In Debord's 1961 détourned documentary, *Critique de la séparation/Critique of Separation*, separation describes the phenomena of individuals having become '*des ombres hantant les choses qui leur sont anarchiquement données par d'autres*' (1994: 47) 'mere specters haunting the objects anarchically presented to them by others' (2003: 32). In chance situations, Debord says, '*des gens séparés qui vont au hasard. Leurs émotions divergentes se neutralisent, et maintiennent leur solide environnement d'ennui*' (1994: 47) 'we meet separated people moving randomly. Their divergent emotions neutralize each other and reinforce their solid environment of boredom' (2003: 32). If Bernstein's *Horses* performs in its own way a 'critique of separation', which I believe that it does, then it is necessary to consider Bernstein's treatment of the novel according to the SI's conviction that the artistic work in itself can no longer perform the work of disalienation,⁵ for it too has become simply one of those 'objects anarchically presented' to others thereby reinforcing a 'solid environment of boredom'. According to this view, the work of art is unable to fulfil the promise of an authentic life beyond the separations of capitalist relations. This in turn calls into question the extent to which Bernstein's novel can in fact embody any sincere investment in the emancipatory potential attributed to the so-called libertarian spirit of the SI.

On one level, then, the Brechtian framework helps to elucidate the role of distanciation in Bernstein's novel, however, it alone is not sufficient to account for the novel's preoccupation with separation and the reification of desire. In this context, the work of two thinkers in particular can aid in understanding the relationship between reification and the novel as it is conceived in Bernstein's fiction. First, there is the work of the Hungarian intellectual Georg Lukács, the translation of three of his most important works into French: *History and Class Consciousness*, *The Present Meaning of Critical Realism* and *Critical Realism*, in 1960 and 1961 respectively, having effectively placed the thinker at the forefront of the revision of Marxism in France in the post-war era. The revival of the work of Lukács in France at this time also led to a reassessment of the form of the novel from a Marxist perspective, most notably in the scholarship of Lucien Goldmann. For Goldmann, the insights into alienation elaborated in Marx's theory of commodity fetishism 'affirms in effect that in market societies [...] the collective consciousness gradually loses all active reality and tends to become a mere reflection of the economic life and ultimately, to disappear' (1975: 11). In his study *Towards a Sociology of the Novel*, Goldmann sought to formulate a Marxist sociological method for the study of literature that might account for how literary forms are related to the broader processes of reification in capitalist society. For Goldmann, there is 'a *rigorous homology* between the literary form of the novel [...] and the everyday relation between man and commodities in general, and by extension, between men and other men, in a market society' (1975: 7, original emphasis).

In this way, the processes of reification that underpin the exchange logic of a market economy, and which manifest in that market's cultural products, posit an uncritical relationship to experience as a fundamental characteristic of everyday life under advanced western economies. As such, the revival of the concept of reification in post-war France amidst a period of rapid technocratic modernization, urban gentrification and a boom in consumerism provides an important context for understanding the preoccupation with overcoming alienation at the heart of the Situationist project. Today the concept of reification and, by extension, the more general notion of alienation, occupy a somewhat paradoxical position in the analysis of everyday life and contemporary culture. Philosophically, the ontological problems involved in the project of recovering an authentic or humanist subjectivity and a level of immediate experience somehow prior to reification has contributed to the overall decline of reification as a concern in the increasingly post-humanist landscape of critical theory. However, the empirically discernible effects of alienation that arise from an inherently mediated existence in the technocratic and consumption-driven Internet age nevertheless remains a central object of anxiety and cultural critique. Thus in a scholarly context one finds a few notable examples of studies concerned to reassess the critical relevance of reification,⁶ albeit in a manner somewhat divorced from its original Marxist formulation. By contrast, the 1960s was a period during which the notion of reification became 'a powerful weapon in the struggle not only to define what capitalism did to its victims but also to explain why they were unable to resist it successfully', suggests Martin Jay. 'In particular, it could function as a way to make sense of the failure of the working class to realize the historical mission assigned to it by Marxist theory' (Jay 2008: 4).

As Joshua Clover observes, '*All the King's Horses* is absolutely modern: boring as the surface of administered life, Paris paused between Old World and New Wave, between manners and style' (2009: 36). Principally concerned with reification as a kind of social pathology, *Horses* refuses the transfiguring power of literature as compensation for the banalities of everyday life in order to make apparent, through its studied boredom, the extent to which reification 'promotes an *apolitical* orientation toward the capitalist social form' (Chari 2010: 590, original emphasis). Thus *Horses* is steeped in the thing-like nature of modern life, a fiction of surface appearances and shallow externalities that reveal the pervasiveness of commodity fetishism under which even love, desire and romance are reduced to the banality of the exchange logic. Less an endorsement of libertine love as radical freedom, Bernstein's novel performs an ironic *détournement* of libertine fiction and the popular genre of the youth novel in order to dramatize the extent to which reification trivializes desire. As Debord monotonously intones in the soundtrack to *Critique de la separation/Critique of Separation* (1961), '*La question n'est pas de constater que les gens vivent plus ou moins pauvrement; mais toujours d'une manière qui leur échappe*' (1994: 45)'the point is not to recognize that some people live more or less poorly than others but that we all live in ways that are beyond our control' (Debord 2003: 31). It is precisely this concern for the separated nature of everyday life that animates the critical impulses of *Horses*. Far too insincere to posit anything like a proposal for a revolution of the passions, Bernstein's joke novel is nevertheless a work of serious intent for in provoking the reader into recognition of one's own complicity with the banality of such fictions it too seeks the moment of rupture in which the Situationist challenge to the spectacle of modern life begins.

6. Notable examples include Honneth's *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (2008) and Bewes's *Reification: Or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (2002).

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