

The Return of the Durutti Column

THE RETURN OF THE DURUTTI COLUMN

by André Bertrand

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DÉTOURNEMENT:
SUBVERSIVE VISUAL COMMUNICATION

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Introduction

The Return of the Durutti Column (*Le Retour de la Colonne Durutti*) was a four—page comic by the student André Bertrand that was handed out at Strasbourg University in October 1966 during a student protest at the opening of the school year. This provocative piece of anarchic propaganda was published and distributed with the help of a number of students sympathetic to Situationist ideas who had joined a local chapter of the student organization AFGES (Association Fédérative Générale des Etudiants de Strasbourg). The students illegally used 5,000 francs of the organization's money to print numerous copies of the comic along with 10,000 copies of the pamphlet *The Poverty of Student Life* written by the Situationist Mustapha Khayati. This action along with their protests across campus prompted a court order to close AFGES. The judge's ruling concluded:

One has only to read what the accused have written, that these five students, scarcely more than adolescents, lacking all experience of real life, their minds confused by ill-digested philosophical, social, political and economic theories, and perplexed by the drab monotony of their everyday life, make the empty, arrogant, and pathetic claim to pass definitive judgments, sinking to outright abuse, on their fellow students, their teachers, God, religion, the clergy, the governments and political systems of the whole world. Rejecting all morality and restraint, these cynics do not hesitate to commend theft, the destruction of scholarship, the abolition of work, total subversion and a world-wide proletarian revolution with “unlicensed pleasure” as its goal.

The actions taken by the university and the police to suppress the student protests in Strasbourg backfired and soon protests by students sympathetic to the ideas of the Situationists began to crop up in Jussieu (near Lyon), Nanterre, and in the massive protests that shut down Paris in May 1968. Up until this time the Situationists, led by Guy Debord, consisted of only a small loyal following of like-minded intellectuals, but the media attention from the protest in Strasbourg launched the group into international notoriety as several disconnected student protests became synonymous in the imagination of the general public as “Situationist.”

Unlike the long convoluted arguments put forward in their political manifestos, Situationist inspired comics, such as *The Return of the Durutti Column*,

had an irreverent style that visually encapsulated the ideas of the group in an accessible manner. The comics conveyed the Situationist strategy of *détournement*, which was a means to deviate or redirect official, normative communication from its intended path. In practice *détournement* was a way of quoting or “plagiarizing” existing images and text so that the original material was subverted into something quite different. The idea owed much to the Dada movement’s use of collage in the 1920s as well as a growing cynicism toward the hyperbole of the contemporary mass media (as found in *MAD* magazine). The use of *détournement* within a comic strip format was exceptionally effective in the French context since virtually everyone exposed to this strip would have grown up reading *Astérix le Gaulois*, *Tintin*, *Lucky Luc*, *Spirou* and a host of others. As with many comic books of the era, these texts validated essentially safe, bourgeois values while at the same time exhibiting a certain gallic sense of humor.

The idea of *détournement* had been first discussed by Debord in 1956 and altered comics had been published in Situationist journals for many years prior to the Strasbourg protests. What distinguished *The Return of the Durutti Column* from these earlier altered comics was its irreverent humor and ironic sophistication. The wide dissemination and imitation by other student protests in France was key to establishing *The Return of the Durutti Column’s* legacy as one of the seminal publications of the student protests of the 1960s.

Reading the comic today is difficult because much of the meaning is framed by the specific events surrounding the Strasbourg protests. One suspects that many of the images used in the comic had special meaning to the Strasbourg students and have ceased to resonate with readers today. In this translation, wherever possible footnotes have been attached to the lower right corner of panels for which the meaning requires further elaboration. These notes can be found at the end of the comic.

WHAT HAD SHOCKED THEM THE MOST WHILE GROWING UP WAS NOT SO MUCH THE FEELING THAT THINGS WERE WHAT THEY WERE, WITH A TENDENCY TO PETRIFY, BUT THAT OTHER PEOPLE WERE THOUGHTLESS ENOUGH TO SUPPOSE THAT THEY WOULD ABSTAIN FROM REACTING WITH VIOLENCE

THAT DAY THEY WERE ONCE AGAIN IN THE PROCESS OF PLAYING OUT THEIR LIVES ACCORDING TO THE CHANCE OF CIRCUMSTANCES

WHAT IF WE WERE GETTING OLD?

IF IT WERE FUNNY, YEAH, BUT REALLY ARE WE GOING TO KEEP SCREWING AROUND WITH THIS UNION SCUM?

MIGHT AS WELL TAKE ABRAHAM MOLE'S COURSES SERIOUSLY!

AND BESIDES WE DON'T HAVE UNEF CARDS

①

AND WHAT IF WE STOLE SOME CARDS?

BY STEALING ARTICLES OF MERCHANDISE IN ORDER TO GIVE THEM AWAY, CERTAIN GREASERS REPRODUCE TO A HIGH DEGREE THE PRACTICE OF GIFT GIVING THAT DOMINATED PRIMITIVE SOCIETIES AND THAT TRADE IN SO FAR AS IT IS A FORMALIZATION OF SOCIAL RELATIONS BASED ON A WEAK DEVELOPMENT OF PRODUCTIVE FORCES, HAS COME TO RUIN. THUS ONE FINDS CONDUCT STILL BETTER SUITED TO A SOCIETY THAT DEFINES ITSELF AS A SOCIETY OF ABUNDANCE AND BEGINS IN A PRACTICAL FASHION TO OVER SHOOT ITSELF

IN SUCH A SOCIETY THE SIMPLE PASSION FOR STEALING ALWAYS PUSHES THE MOST INDECISIVE OF PEOPLE TO DO THE MOST A PRIORI UNTHINKABLE AND IMPOSSIBLE THINGS. LIFE CATCHES UP WITH THE GAME OF LIFE AND THE GAME CATCHES UP WITH LIFE. IT WAS ALL THE SAME NECESSARY TO EXTEND THE RANGE OF THEIR EXPERIMENTATION TO GRASP NEW POWERS IN ORDER TO STRUGGLE AGAINST THIS POWER BASED SOCIETY

HOW CAN WE GO ABOUT LAUGHING WITH-OUT BEING TOO LOUD?

AS A PRECAUTION WE HAVE ASSURED OURSELVES OF BEING HATED EXCLUSIVELY BY PARISH PRIESTS, MILITANTS, AND ALL THE OLD POLITICAL FORCES...

AND TWO THOUSAND YEARS OF CHRISTIANITY HAVE MANAGED TO INSTILL MASOCHISM IN ALL OF THESE INTELLECTUALS: HOW LUCKY FOR US, AND NOT JUST HERE.

②

THE RETURN OF THE DURUTTI COLUMN ③

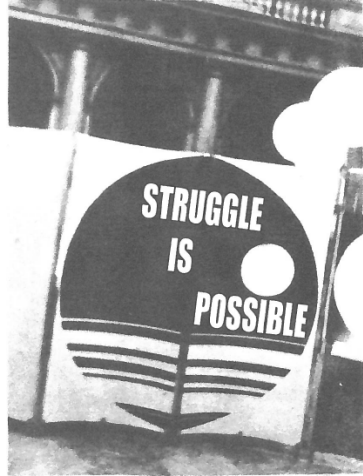
PERPETUAL REVELRY AND ITS DIONYSIAC EXCESSES FOLLOWED THEM EVERYWHERE AND RUINED WHAT LITTLE ESTEEM THAT OUGHT TO HAVE BEEN ACCORDED TO THEM BY A RATHER SMALL NUMBER OF PEOPLE . . .

Dear sir.

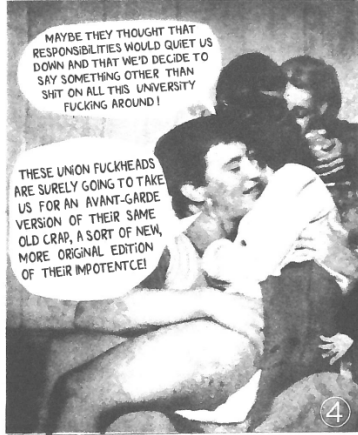
Once again you have conducted yourself in such a way as to render your presence undesirable and to justify those who refuse lodging to students. Wednesday evening after hours and hours of racket that indisposed the entire building and a good part of the surrounding neighborhood and that I had to put a stop to at around 11pm. you along with several others like you thought it witty to line up on the balcony of the third floor and urinate into the courtyard. Although several people heard and confirmed the results of this glorious operation, I alone was unfortunate enough to admire this edifying spectacle, an experience not worth having to endure your vulgar buffoonery and insults. It is true that there is not much that can be added to the reputation you've made for yourself since we so imprudently accepted you among our renters.

I ask you for neither hypocritical promises nor useless excuses, and anticipate nothing short of your swift departure. I think it right that I express to you my disgust and surprise that you would claim to defend the interests and the reputation of the students and that you would think yourself worthy to speak on their behalf

CH. . . PROFESSOR AND LANDLORD



THE GENERAL CRISIS OF OLD UNION SYSTEMS AND LEFTIST BUREAUCRACIES WAS MADE APPARENT EVERYWHERE AND PARTICULARLY AMONG STUDENTS WHERE ACTIVISM HAD FOR A LONG TIME HAD NO OUTLET OTHER THAN A MOST SORDID DEVOTION TO WORN OUT IDEOLOGIES AND UNREALISTIC AMBITION. THE LAST COHORT OF PROFESSIONALS THAT ELECTED OUR HEROES DID NOT EVEN HAVE THE EXCUSE OF HAVING BEEN DUPED. THEY PLACED THEIR HOPE FOR RENEWAL IN A GROUP THAT DIDN'T EVEN HIDE THEIR INTENTIONS OF SABOTAGING AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE AND FOR THE BETTER ALL OF THIS ARCHAIC POLITICAL ACTIVISM.



HAVING HEARD ABOUT THEIR LIFESTYLE, THE WELL SEASONED LIARS DEMANDED THAT OUR FRIENDLY ADVENTURERS SUBMIT TO THE LEGAL INEQUALITY WHICH HAS FOR SO LONG VALIDATED AND PROTECTED THEIR DECEPTION . . .

- Art. 12: Members of the board must be French and enjoy full exercise of their civil and political rights. No one can be elected either to the Steering Committee or the Board while doing military service.
- Art. 18: The President is the legal representative of the association. He has the authority to make all necessary declarations to accomplish legal registration of the organization. He presides over the General Assemblies and the Meetings of the Board. His signature is valid for the disbursement of the Association's funds.
- Art. 19: The treasurer is the agent responsible for the funds. He keeps records of the receipts and expenses and deposits dues, gifts and other acquisitions of funds. He cannot without the permission of the Board authorize any new expenditures. His signature along with the signature of the President is necessary to authorize any expenditure of funds for the Society.
- Art. 20: In the event of the death, resignation or removal of the President, the Steering Committee will be required to meet at the behest of the Board within ten days of the event.





.. because it is this exclusive concentration on the real world that will produce a new life and new great men of great character and great actions

As a result of this victory you will soon be able to procure for yourself, edited by the board of the A. F. G. E. S. the most scandalous brochure of the century. On the Wretchedness of Student Life Considered from Its Economic, Psychological, Political, Sexual and Most Notably Intellectual Perspectives is a cardiogram of everyday reality that will allow you to choose for yourself, whether you are for or against the current misery, for or against the powers that by taking your own history away from you prevent you from living. 13

IT'S YOUR TURN TO PLAY

GENERAL FEDERATIVE ASSOCIATION OF STRASBOURG "STUDENTS"

Notes

- 1 A black panel with speech bubbles is labeled at the bottom with the words “Paris Match”—apparent humorous reference to the French weekly magazine founded in 1949 and immensely popular through the 1950s though in significant decline through the 1960s. The magazine’s motto was “*Lepoids des mots, le choc des photos*” and was most popular for its simultaneous coverage of world events and celebrity lifestyles. The Situationists would have considered it a quintessentially “bourgeois” publication deserving little more than ridicule, a magazine worth stealing perhaps but certainly not worth buying. One voice mentions “UNEF”—Union nationale des étudiants de France—the primary national student union in France founded in 1907 as an umbrella organization to unify the various AGES (Associations générales d’étudiants) that existed and still do in each city where there is a university. Historically the most noteworthy action of the UNEF was its annual meeting on May 27, 1968 at which nearly 40,000 students came together in the Stade Sébastien Charlety in Paris for one of the most significant and politically charged events of the May ’68 student revolt. Another voice in the dark panel mentions Abraham Moles (1920–1992) who held doctorates in physics and philosophy. He was a pioneer in the field of communication aesthetics who at the time of the publication of this comic taught sociology and psychology at the University of Strasbourg. He is perhaps best known for his work in electroacoustics in particular his invention of the “morphone,” an electronic echo chamber as well as his theories on the dynamics of “kitsch.” Moles had been singled out by the protesting students for particular scorn, on one occasion pelting him with tomatoes as he lectured.
- 2 A panel with a photo of a woman smiling while covered in soap suds. Below the panel are the words “*Positif*”—a popular monthly French film magazine founded in 1952 and still in production today. It was known in its early years primarily for its leftist political language due in part to the fact that the review was managed not by professional journalists but by university academics and students interested in film both as an art form and a medium of popular culture.
- 3 “Durutti Column”—allusion to the Durruti (note misspelling) column, the largest anarchist column formed during the Spanish Civil War. The column was led by Buenaventura Durruti and consisted of 6,000 volunteers organized into centuriae or militias many of which were composed of foreigners and often named after influential anarchist thinkers. The Centuria Sébastien Faure was composed of French and Italian volunteers including Simon Weil, the Centuria Erich Mühsam of Germans and the Centuria Sacco and Vanzetti of Americans.
- 4 A panel with a man with a woman in his lap with his hand on her thigh has the words “*Positif*” below (see Appendix 2, note 2).

- 5 A panel with a photo of Lenin which is an excellent example of *détournement* as it is employed throughout this comic. The original photo manipulated in this image was of Lenin speaking in Red Square on November 18, 1918 to commemorate the first anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution. In particular, it should be noted how Lenin's right hand has been redrawn and extended into the previous panel for obvious effect. The speech bubble mentions the J.C.R.—Jeunesse communiste révolutionnaire—politically far left student organization with Trotskyist leanings. The group was formed from the remains of the Union des étudiants communistes when this group was excluded from the Parti Communiste Français for having refused to back François Mitterand's bid for the presidency in 1965. The JCR was closely aligned with the Ligue Communiste until the French government in June 1968 invoked the Loi du 10 janvier 1936 sur les groupes de combat et milices privées (Law of January 10, 1936 concerning armed groups and private militias) in an effort to disband both groups. This action was not without irony in that the law was originally enacted to control right—wing extremist groups.
- 6 Reproduced here is a portion of the bylaws for A.F.G.E.S. These appear to be the rules that were broken by the protesting students when they used the organization's money to produce this comic.
- 7 Francisco Goya, *Los Caprichos*, No. 49 "Duendecitos" (Hobgoblins). In this series of prints Goya intended to point out the cruel stupidity in human nature.
- 8 Another derogatory reference to the J.C.R. Appendix 2, note 5.
- 9 The photograph of two cowboys on horseback is George Hamilton and Arthur O'Connell in the movie *A Thunder of Drums* (1961). The dialogue between the two cowboys is actually a quote from the Situationist Michèle Bernstein's novel *All the King's Horses* (1960). Bernstein was married for a while to the Situationist leader Guy Debord and her novel is one of very few contributions by a woman to the Situationist's literary output. This image is perhaps the most famous of the entire comic in that it seems to appear in every discussion of both situationist thought and the use of *détournement* as a visual device. In 1978 an English Punk band named themselves *The Durutti Column* and used this image for the cover of their first album released in 1980.
- 10 The photograph of Jules Ravachol (1859–1892) makes him appear like a respectable academic when in fact he was a French anarchist implicated in numerous bombing attacks aimed at the government, the police and the courts. Arrested in Paris in April 1892, he was tried and executed by guillotine on July 11 of the same year. Witnesses reported that he refused the services of a priest and walked to the guillotine singing a popular anarchist song. As he shouted, "Vive la re..." the blade came down and his head rolled into the basket. Unconfirmed reports say that half of his head that had been preserved in formaldehyde at the École de médecine de Paris was stolen and later found nestled against the foundation of the Panthéon.

- 11 This image is drawn originally from the tapisserie de Bayeux. The panel depicts a banquet held by William (the not quite yet conqueror) surrounded by his barons and the Bishop Odon who is blessing the wine and food. The banquet takes place after William has arrived in England, constructed an armed fortress but prior to the fateful battle with Harold. Within the context of the comic the image is one of extreme, smug confidence on the part of the ruling classes represented here by members of the royal class, high ranking clergy and the military—all members of the “international occult” referenced in the text and suggesting through *détournement* elements of excessive wealthy, political ambition and military power combined with church sanctioned authority.
- 12 The painting by Eugène Delacroix, *The Death of Sardanapoulos* (1827), is a classic example of orientalist decadence. Here is shown Sardanapoulos, the last king of Assyria, as he calmly looks on while all of his wealth is destroyed and his concubines murdered. The ironic reference to Marxist thought as a “critique of everyday life” is intended to underscore the disparity between theory and action. This comic is essentially a call to action especially with the final underlined text, “It’s your turn to play.”
- 13 *On the Wretchedness of Student Life ... (De la misère en milieu étudiant considérée sous ses aspects économique, politique, psychologique, sexuel et notamment intellectuel et de quelques moyens pour y remédié)*, was a 29 page political brochure written primarily by Mustapha Omar Khayati, a militant Tunisian member of the Situationist International and close associate of Guy Debord. He left the organization in 1969 for Jordan where he joined the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. One year after the original French publication an English translation was published in London entitled, *Ten Days That Shook the University—The Situationists at Strasbourg*. This publication included the complete text of the pamphlet and selected panels from the comic with translation. In 1976 Khayati contested the commercial publication of the pamphlet by Éditions Champ Libre claiming that such publication was a violation of the original intent of the work which was published, as were most Situationist texts, without copyright.