

Beyond the Black Box: The Lettrist Cinema of Disjunction

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*I was not, in my youth, particularly affected by cinema's "Europeans" . . . perhaps because I, early on, developed an aversion to Surrealism—finding it an altogether inadequate (highly symbolic) envisionment of dreaming. What did rivet my attention (and must be particularly distinguished) was Jean-Isidore Isou's *Treatise*: as a creative polemic it has no peer in the history of cinema.*

—Stan Brakhage¹

As Caroline Jones has demonstrated, midcentury aesthetics was dominated by a rhetoric of isolated and purified opticality.² But another aesthetics, one dramatically opposed to it, was in motion at the time. Operating at a subterranean level, it began, as early as 1951, to articulate a vision of intermedia assemblage. Rather than cohering into the synaesthetic unity of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, works in this vein sought to juxtapose multiple registers of sensory experience—the spatial and the temporal, the textual and the imagistic—into pieces that were intentionally disjunctive and lacking in unity. Within them, we can already observe questions that would come to haunt the topos of avant-garde film and performance in the coming decades: questions regarding the nature and specificity of cinema, its place within artistic modernism and mass culture, the institutions through which it is presented, and the possible modes of its spectatorial engagement. Crucially associated with

1. "Inspirations," in *The Essential Brakhage*, ed. Bruce McPherson (New York: McPherson & Co., 2001), pp. 208–9. Mentioned briefly across his various writings, Isou's *Treatise* was the subject of a 1993 letter from Brakhage to Frédérique Devaux on the occasion of her research for *Traité de base et d'éternité de Isidore Isou* (Paris: Editions Yellow Now, 1994). Brakhage describes his memory of the original screening at Frank Stauffacher's *Art in Cinema* series at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in the 1950s, undertakes a strange and spectacular reading of the work, and describes its manifest importance for his work and his teaching. The letter is unpublished in English, but it is held at the Brakhage archive at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

2. Caroline Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).



Jean-Isidore Isou. Treatise on Slobber and Eternity. 1951.

histories of film, performance, and the visual arts, these works were nevertheless unjustifiably neglected because they could not readily be seen as fitting within the province of any single medium or discipline. Yet both aesthetically and conceptually, they established an early foundation for the whole postwar tradition of expanded cinema and intermedia performance that would emerge and develop internationally over the quarter century to come.³

As a group, the Parisian Lettrists had no prior experience in film, yet during a brief, frenetic period around 1951, they suddenly, audaciously committed themselves to the production and theorization of the medium. The films, performances, and manifestos of Isidore Isou and Maurice Lemaître, and later Gil J. Wolman, Marc'O, and Guy Debord, amounted to a postwar rehabilitation of the Dada legacy, in opposition to the rather diluted Surrealism into which that legacy had descended.⁴ Their works were not “films” so much as self-conscious groupings toward some wholly new art they simply called *un cinéma ailleurs*. Their privileging of text over image was not an indication of absolute value, merely a

3. There is no mention of either Isou or Lemaître within any of the canonical histories of experimental film: whether Sheldon Renan's *Introduction* (1966), Parker Tyler's *Underground Film* (1967), Gene Youngblood's *Expanded Cinema* (1970), David Curtis's *Experimental Cinema* (1970), P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film* (1974), Amos Vogel's *Film as a Subversive Art*, Stephen Dworkin's *Film Is* (1975), or Malcolm LeGrice's *Abstract Film and Beyond* (1977). One finally finds a passing reference to both in A.L. Rees, *A History of Artists Film and Video* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), where Rees cites them as an indication of the postwar resurgence of the avant-garde in Europe and a source for the American underground cinema. Stan Brakhage is the major exception to this rule—he has repeatedly remarked upon the vitality and importance of Isou's *Treatise* over the years. For a rare American review of the film, see Guy Coté, “Cinema Sans Sense,” *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television* 7, no. 4 (Summer 1953), pp. 335–7.

4. See in particular Thomas Elsaesser's famous interrogative essay “Dada/Cinema?” in *Dada and Surrealist Film*, ed. Rudolf E. Kuenzli (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), and George Baker's recent work on Claire and Picabia's hybrid cinematic performance *Relâche/Entr'acte* (1926) in *The Artwork Caught By the Tail: Francis Picabia and Dada in Paris* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 289–338.



recognition of the comparatively weak and haphazard development of what we might call cinema's "textuality." Through the introduction of multiply disjunctive textual dimensions, they intended to reverse both the privileging of the image and the guise of narrative transparency within the integrated synthesis of commercial cinema. It was an idea whose provocative initial elaboration took place at the very site of art cinema's postwar emergence: the 1951 Film Festival in Cannes.

We should recall that the festival at Cannes, despite having been initiated before World War II, had only taken place three times prior to 1951. And while it was obviously a marker of prestige and renown for the directors in competition, it was just as much a place to debate and institutionalize the proper aesthetic trajectory for cinema as a modern art. The two big films that year, Vittorio De Sica's *Miracle in Milan* and Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *All About Eve*, were polar opposites in terms of form. *All About Eve* represented the height of the polished American studio picture, while *Miracle in Milan* deployed the gritty, naturalistic aesthetic of Italian Neorealism. Presenting these two films, the jury at Cannes likely thought itself quite catholic in its taste, not insisting on a particular formal program, able to celebrate heterogeneous forms and traditions within its conception of film art.

It was into this atmosphere of cultured sophistication that a young Jewish Romanian expatriate, Isou, brought a half-completed, rather incongruously titled work, *Treatise on Slobber and Eternity* (*Traité de bave et d'éternité*—hereafter, *Treatise*), that entirely confounded this emphasis on cinematic realism.⁵ Possessed of a boldness and egotism rare even for a twenty-five year old, this

5. I will simply refer to the film as the *Treatise*—both in the interest in economy, and to counter the unfortunate series of (mis)translations to which the film has been subjected. The French word *bave* can signify the liquid dripping from the mouth of an infant or a dog, hence the



Isou. Treatise on Slobber and Eternity. 1951.

self-proclaimed revolutionary went door to door, harassing the administrators of the festival until they agreed to grant him a small, peripheral exhibition. It would be a considerable understatement to say that the jury did not like what they saw. Almost immediately, the room was filled with boos and hisses, and after the first section was completed and the screen went completely blank, the audience became apoplectic; the screening was unable to continue.⁶ Isou took their disdain as a badge of honor—and as copy fodder for his future posters. He also took comfort in the fact that the one member of the jury aligned with the avant-garde, the seminal Surrealist Jean Cocteau, bestowed upon him a hastily concocted “*Prix de spectateurs d’avant-garde*” so that he would not go away completely empty-handed.

Although young, Isou was not unknown to the Parisian artistic milieu. Quitting Romania and traveling to post-*Libération* Paris at the age of twenty, Isou had quickly built a reputation for himself as a language poet in the tradition of Tristan Tzara, fellow countryman and co-founder of the Zurich Dada’s legendary Cabaret Voltaire. Penning manifestos on everything from political economy and history to aesthetics and erotics, he created a small circle of devoted followers for himself and his self-proclaimed movement of *Lettrisme*.

frequent choice of “slobber.” Within the film, however, Isou uses the term only once, and he expressly draws upon its connection with the base, material body of *human* speech. Thus “drool” or “saliva” might be more appropriate. Additionally, the term can carry the connotations of contamination, as in the expression *baver sur*, roughly “soiled by scandalous speech.” When Raymond Rohauer imported the film to America and it was screened at the San Francisco Film Society and at Cinema 16, the crucial word “Treatise” was left out entirely, and the film was titled simply “Venom and Eternity.” In *Lipstick Traces*, Greil Marcus uses “slime” for no discernible reason whatsoever.

6. Isou’s supporters were shouted down in their attempts to explain the film, and Jean Cocteau—whom Isou felt supported the film in secret—said nothing at the time, though he would publicly defend the film later, as I recount below. The most complete account of the affair is in Frédérique Devaux, *Le Cinéma Lettriste* (Paris: Editions Paris Experimental, 1992), pp. 55–61.

Isou had come to Paris with impeccable revolutionary credentials, having been the leader of a youth organization in Romania devoted to the Communist Party. Yet his youthful dedication to the Party had soured, and upon arriving in Paris, he distanced himself from the French Communists. Yet Isou *was* convinced of the rising power and importance of youth culture for the future transformation of society, and this idea would remain a defining feature of the Lettrist, and later, Situationist programs. The roots of the latter date from this first screening at Cannes, where a young philosophy student by the name of Guy-Ernest Debord had been impressed by Isou's ideas on social and political transformation and had taken up with the group upon their return to Paris.

Isou had laid out the basic tenets of his aesthetic in a 1947 volume, *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique* (Introduction to a new poetry and a new music).⁷ Much of this early manifesto rests on a fundamental distinction between two successive phases in the development of the artistic medium. The *phase amplique*—the “amplifying” or “growth” phase—comes at a medium's beginning and is characterized by the elaboration of basic formal conventions and vocabularies and the giving of expressive form to various thematic concerns. The *phase ciselante*—“chiseling” or “deconstructive” phase—occurs when exhaustion with the terms of this “expressivity” have set in and routine and formal stagnation are judged to have taken over. At this point, an advanced art practice ceases to employ the medium as a means to represent external subjects and themes, taking up instead the very conventions and vocabularies of the medium itself as its subject.

In the abstract, Isou's theory seemed little more than an idiosyncratic articulation of some of the broader principles of aesthetic modernism. Yet it provided a revolutionary spark to film and cinematic culture, establishing an avant-garde cinema in Paris practically *ex nihilo* and intuiting a range of formal and conceptual issues that would prove central to experimental film and media artists for decades to come. Isou's first contention was that cinema, precisely *because* it was already being considered, seen, and discussed in the ciné-clubs of Paris as an art, had already reached its first death. A superficial level of quality could be maintained simply through the mining of past innovations and the reshuffling of various forms and themes, but it was precisely the ease of such formulae that heralded the close of a certain era of wide-open possibility.

Describing Isou's motivation in a rare American review, Guy Coté writes, “the motion picture had, until this new movement appeared, been the only valid art form on which a concentrated destructive attack had not been launched within the last hundred years. . . . *Pour un cinéma ailleurs!* is today the message of St-Germain-des-Prés.”⁸ Lettrist films were indeed an attack and a provocation, but they have too often been understood as purely anarchic negations without structure or

7. Isou, *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).

8. Coté, “Cinema Sans Sense,” p. 335–7.

meaning, deliberately enraging their audiences in a jejune allegory of political revolution, as if saying, “As I rebel against cinematic decorum, so you should rebel against the decorum of an unjust society!” Hence the countless, and mainly apocryphal, stories of rioting audiences and police arriving with fire hoses. Yet as Greil Marcus and others have noted, these “events” were almost all exaggerated—if not concocted—for the sake of publicity.⁹ Rather than empty provocations, Lettrist cinema is better understood as a series of complex constructions: admixtures of proposition and cancellation and recombinations of preexisting audiovisual material into new assemblages for thought and experience.

Isou had quite a profound respect for the history and evolution of cinema. Unlike many future practitioners of experimental film and video, he clearly saw himself as the descendent of a half-century of aesthetic development within the culture of the moving image. Yet for Isou, this development had become stalled by the very success of the studio system. It had reached such a peak of technical competence—it had so mastered the seamless conjunction of cinematography, acting, dialogue, and sound—that the creation of perfectly autonomous cinematic worlds took place automatically. While he did not put it in these terms, Isou seemed to evoke the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* in his condemnation, arguing that individual elements in the film, such as the soundtrack, were inevitably subordinated and thus invisible in the course of their synthesis. For Isou, both studios and audiences had become resigned to this model of immersivity, whether in the sophisticated manner of Robert Bresson or William Wyler or in the tawdry antics of the *Cinerama* or 3-D cinema. The art of film thus no longer questioned its basic structures of representation.

Against this synthetic vision, Isou argued for the independence of multiple textual and discursive levels, moving in and out of synthesis and generating a multiplicity or disruption within the heart of the work itself. Rejecting the realist aesthetics of André Bazin, then dominant within film criticism, Isou’s *cinéma discrepant* hearkened back to the proposals of Dziga Vertov and films like his *Enthusiasm, or the Symphony of the Dombas* (1930). Coming from the Latin verb *discrepare* (from *crepare*: “to make noise” and *-dis*: “to split off”), *discrepant* connoted not only the idea of atonality but the purposeful *disjunction* of different modalities as well. Reversing the traditional privileging of images over words, this cinema would incorporate long passages of spoken literary and philosophical text into the space of the theatrical presentation, allowing cinematic spectators to become readers and listeners in addition to viewers. By deliberately unlinking the sound from the picture, Isou sought to create a textual level that could float free of narrative cinema’s diegetic world. Autonomous, yet constantly creating new kinds of association through its interaction with the image, this new textual level would transform the synthetic coherence of the immersive narrative film into an audiovisual constellation composed out of multiple and divergent modalities of experience.

9. Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), p. 335.



Isou. Treatise on Slobber and Eternity. 1951.

While Isou's principal *written* treatise would be articulated the next year in his *Aesthetics of Cinema*, his first, and arguably most powerful, articulation of these ideas was presented through the very medium he set out to critique.¹⁰ Audiences in 1951 were right to question whether what they were seeing was even a film—it certainly bore no relation to any known work past or present. Indeed, when Stan Brakhage came to describe it as “one of the most powerful films I’ve ever seen,” he tellingly added, “I am not sure it is a work of art so much as it is a powerful film essay.”¹¹ Yet the *Treatise* begins neither with language nor with image but with sound—an endlessly repeating, incomprehensible yet distinctly human chant. The darkness of the theater and the anticipation of the opening image obliges us to attend to the specificities of these sounds even more acutely than we might in a concert hall. Unable to translate it into language and hence signification, we perceive the sound obdurately as sound, human sound—curiously physical and substantial for all its immateriality. For almost four minutes, we are left in the dark with this looped, two-second repetition. Absent any other stimuli, the chant (which we can never be certain is *not* a language) acquires a mesmerizing rhythm and sonority. Its hybrid human-mechanical force propels the film, underlying the images as well as the other soundtracks, for the first thirty-five minutes of the work.

The initial image is of text—a poster on the outside of a cinematheque announcing Charlie Chaplin in “L’opinion Générale” (presumably a play on *L’opinion publique*, originally, *A Woman of Paris*, 1923). As the protagonist Daniel—played by Isou, but voiced by Albert LeGros—leaves the hall and his eyes strain against the mid-day sun, a voiceover tells us that Daniel feels as if his head has been used as a

10. Jean-Isidore Isou, “Esthétique du cinéma,” in *Ion*, ed. Marc-Gilbert Guillaumin (Paris: Centre de création, 1952), pp. 7–154.

11. Stan Brakhage, *Film at Wit’s End* (New York: MacPherson & Co., 1989), p. 115.

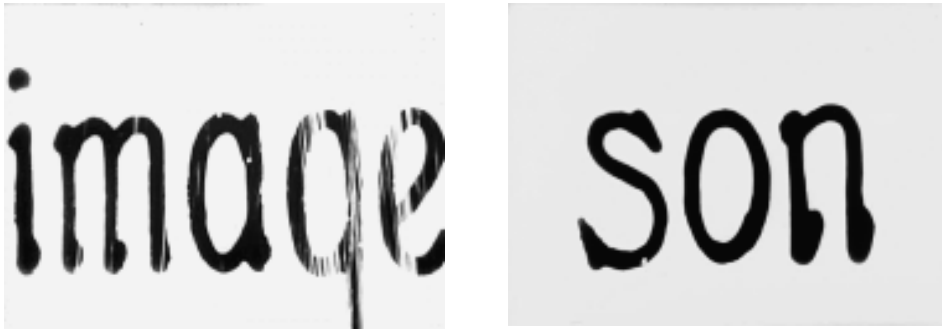


Isou. Treatise on Slobber and Eternity. 1951.

drinking vessel by savages. We are told “the characters and setting of this story are—of course—imaginary,” yet Daniel is clearly Isou, and the lecture on film aesthetics we hear is quite evidently a lecture from Isou, even though the lips of the character onscreen never mouth a single word. This textual splitting and overlap—of actor and director, of fictional character and flesh-and-blood person, and of non-diegetic and quasi-diegetic monologue—are all elements Godard would employ throughout the next decade.

This complex narrator heralds the dawning for cinema of what had by then become an axiom of modern art: the notion that a world already bloated with images can suffer no more. Under this view, true aesthetic innovation can only come from reworking and transforming preexisting imagery, ripping it from its original context and feeding it into new circuits of analogy. “The creators of old had an empty space in front of them in which they could move,” the narrator will later state, “but we, the Epigones, the late-comers, all we have to work with for material are historical memories.” Throughout the lecture, ostensibly given in a film screening and repeatedly interrupted by boos, catcalls, and various other forms of ridicule, we are given impossibly “blank” shots of Daniel wandering the streets of Paris. In a technique evocative of the “stalled action” that Deleuze said characterized the postwar “crisis of the movement-image,” Daniel is presented in perpetual motion, seen from constantly changing perspectives. Yet all this movement, of the character and of the camera, is emphatically superfluous, for neither can be understood as purposeful or directive. Rather, both are self-consciously futile and incoherent—as disjunctive as the sounds we hear.¹² Their movement is not the movement of a diegetic narrative being developed so much as the barren,

12. I describe Deleuze’s conception of the crisis of the action image and its importance for moving image art of this period in “*La Jetée en Spirale: Smithson’s Stratigraphic Cinema*,” *Grey Room* 19 (Spring 2005), pp. 54–79.

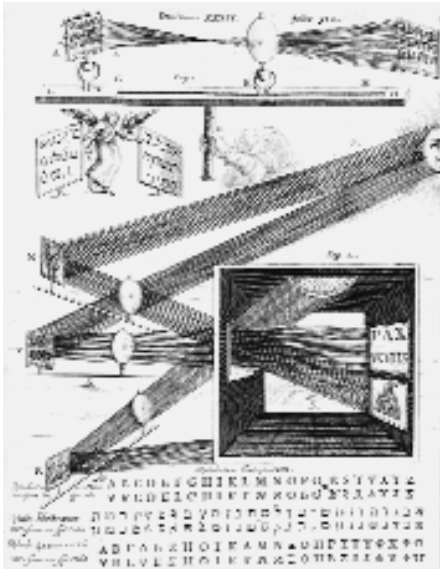


incidental movement of the film as it runs through the projector gate. Serving to mark the mere passing of time, neither movement nor chant affords us information through which we can “enter” the story. To the contrary, they are designed to keep us, like Daniel, outside the space of the cinema.

In his public defense of Isou after the debacle at Cannes, Cocteau contended that what the audience could not see was the very lack Isou had intended to show. His own *Orpheus* (1949) had begun on a strikingly similar note, with an image of the journal *Nudism* containing nothing but blank pages. “This is ridiculous,” says Orpheus, to which the head of the Poets’ Café responds, “Less ridiculous than if those pages were covered with ridiculous texts.” Forcing his audience to attend to these prosaic images—not without beauty so much as without coherence or purpose—Isou forces us to privilege the spoken text and the sounds we hear. He allows the sound—the younger and less developed of the sound/image pair—to become unchained from the image. For since the origin of the sound film, sound has principally served narrative continuity by smoothing over the juxtaposition of images. Yet it is the natural ease of this unification that Isou contests.

Against this unity of sound and image, with the sound always in thrall to the image, the narrator contends that “to conquer, one must divide,” and goes on to offer a range of ways of conceptualizing this new endeavor. The text should not simply remain “internal and necessary to the image” but occasionally “come from completely outside, from beyond, a kind of prophecy.” This sound would function as an extra dimension to the image, “as a *surplus*, unconnected with the organism.” Finally, he contends that “words, through their shadings and definitions,” can be strategically employed to “reveal the limitations of the image.”

The disjunction of word and image was actually an early feature of cinema,



Athanasius Kircher. *Room for Simultaneous Projection*. “*Ars Magna*.” 1646.

but it was chiefly understood as a technological limitation. Because the earliest cinematographs did not have the ability to record sound alongside their images, the medium was felt to be at a competitive disadvantage to theater. Using title cards to indicate those key moments of dialogue that could not be adequately expressed through pantomime, the “silent” cinema unintentionally offered a hybrid experience in which audiences were forced to shift from being viewers of images to being readers of text and back again. One way around this dilemma was to have a live announcer—such as the Japanese *Benshi*—describe the unfolding of the narrative and the dialogue for the audience as the images flickered on the screen.¹³ Together with the live music that was almost always a feature of “silent” films, these announcers added an additional level of hybridity to what was already more of a “mixed-media practice” than the singular technology the industrial cinema would come to be.

Charles Musser has even shown that one of the earliest precursors to industrial cinema contained just such a multiple conjunction of voice, text, and

13. The *Benshi* history reveals an amazingly regionalized and performative practice whereby particular “voice actors” would become much more popular and celebrated than the movies for which they performed. Some of these *Benshi* took great liberties with the film text, turning a drama into comedy, for instance, or even adding pornographic scenes to a classic romance. This compels us to rethink the cultural inflections of a subgenre of deliberate mistranslation in films such as Woody Allen’s *What’s Up, Tiger Lily?* (1966) or René Viénet’s *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* (1973).

image.¹⁴ In his 1646 treatise “Ars Magna,” the Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher described his Room for Simultaneous Projection, in which spectators within a darkened room would be subjected to radically different orders of representation. Multiple screens would simultaneously present iconic imagery, diagrammatic representation, and written text, while a spoken commentary would provide an additional textual level beyond the visible. Kircher’s mid-seventeenth-century spectators were thus expected to contend not only with multiple images, but with wholly distinct orders of perceptual information at the same time.

Musser does not ascribe the terms *early-* or *proto-cinema* to these practices, as we might expect within a teleological model of development. Rather, he usefully situates industrial cinema itself within a much larger and more diverse history of “screen practices.” And once we begin to consider the diversity of early cinema on the one hand, and the radical transformations of contemporary televisual practice, on the other, the specific norms of Hollywood’s “classical cinema” appear less like the natural endpoint in a teleological development of the medium, and more like a single, somewhat idiosyncratic moment within a vast and constantly changing history of multimodal screen practices.

Within the *Treatise*, the narrator states,

if what I produce can be called “cinema,” then I deserve no merit, for it already exists. We must find out how the cinema can go beyond itself. It’s not only a matter of bringing something new into the cinema, but to open up a new road for the cinema as such.

So far, I have discussed Isou’s subordination of the image to a complex and multi-valent textuality, deliberately ignoring the vast range of visual innovations for which the *Treatise* became known. For in the second section of the film, Isou begins to incorporate a range of “found footage” that seems to diverge, quite inexplicably, from the love story he had begun to tell, even as the romantic narrative seems increasingly to be diverging from itself. While framed by the encounter of a man and a woman at a bar, and the complicated series of liaisons that transpire between them, it branches off for long periods to discuss filmmaking, religion, politics, and the narrator’s childhood memories. The images often seem like they might correspond to the text, but only as illustrations, never as the basis for an immersive cinematic identification.¹⁵ More spectacularly, images soon begin to appear upside down and backwards, creating a dizzying vertigo as the camera

14. Charles Musser, “Before Cinema: Toward a History of Screen Practice,” in *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

15. It seems unnecessary to point out the obvious debt that Jean-Luc Godard’s films of the next decade—made in Paris with full consciousness of their Lettrist precedents—owe here to Isou’s *Treatise*. Yet to my knowledge, Godard has never acknowledged the Lettrists’ influence upon his work—perhaps because the later Situationists would repeatedly criticize Godard’s work in the most scathing terms. See “Le rôle de Godard,” *Internationale Situationniste* 10 (Paris, March 1966).



Isou. Treatise on Slobber and Eternity. 1951.

moves up and down the mast of a fishing boat bobbing on the sea. But most significantly, the second part of the film reveals that Isou has drawn, painted, and scratched into the very surface of the celluloid emulsion, creating a kind of cinematographic graffiti that feels quite unlike anything seen before in the history of painting or cinema. These marks, which shudder and vibrate, instantly bring a flatness to the three-dimensional depth of the cinematic image, seeming to take place both *in* and *on* the image. They counteract the persistence of vision by which cinematic technology operates, calling our attention to these moments as *constructions* made from a series of individual, still images—bringing us back to the photogrammatic basis of cinematographic movement.

And if Isou's intervention is more like graffiti than drawing, it is because his marks do not produce new and complete images so much as they deface and counteract the work of preexisting imagery. In a brief but poignant scene clearly inflected by Isou's early commitment to, but subsequent disillusionment with, the Hungarian Communist party, the narrator recounts an adolescent's coming-of-age struggle with religion and politics. We see an image of three men working at a tooling machine. It has the absolutely generic, prototypical visual construction that has come to signify "worker" in all its class-based anonymity. We hear someone say, "politics, perhaps because it lives upon a singular doctrine, always rehashes the same formulations as if it took men for new-born babies." As if to underline the violent reduction Isou finds in the image, he has painted over the men's faces individually and connected them with a single flickering strand. "Do I become bored more quickly than others?," we hear, as we see a brief image of students walking to school. But the scene quickly shifts to a Jewish temple, where we can make out (just barely) an individual concealed by a dark metal gate. "When I was a kid, each night I'd invent a new prayer. I always wanted *other* prayers. Truths repeated too often cease to amuse me." And over the darkness of the gate, Isou has scrawled a brilliantly white Star of David. Yet because Isou drew each star differently while maintaining a certain uniformity of

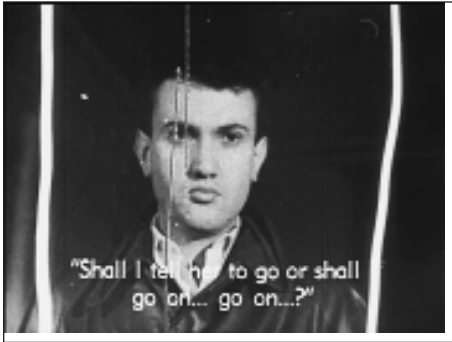


placement, the effect is of a hauntingly transitory yet bright and powerful icon, shimmering with an adolescent energy born of anger, frustration, and longing. The star frames the figure alternately like a halo and a prison cage.

The voice continues: “And a truth that has stopped amusing me is a lie, because it has exhausted the warmth that made it new.” On the screen, we witness a French political ceremony with the last emperor of Vietnam, Boi, likely just after his abdication before Ho Chi Minh. With the country teetering between French control, Japanese control, and independence, between Empire, Communist Republic, and puppet regime, the superficial dignity of such a ceremony must have seemed the very embodiment of political sophistry to Isou. Using black rather than white, Isou next begins scrawling over the faces of the principal actors, leaving us to see only the universal *form* of pageantry involved. Now showing the faces of the young children being made to stand at attention, Isou bookends his experience of religious intimacy and exclusion with the kinds of rehashed political spectacles produced for men taken “as new-born babies.” He does not film his own story; he uses images already in circulation within the wider visual culture, surgically intervening in their operation at specific moments, for specific purposes. His “writing” over the image serves to conceal, distort, accent, and focus our attention. In so doing it provides a model for artistic practices based on the intervention into preexisting image repertoires, utilizing the affective charge from recognizable imagery as the basis for a creative and critical practice.¹⁶

The third section of the film is perhaps the most incongruous. It bequeaths an

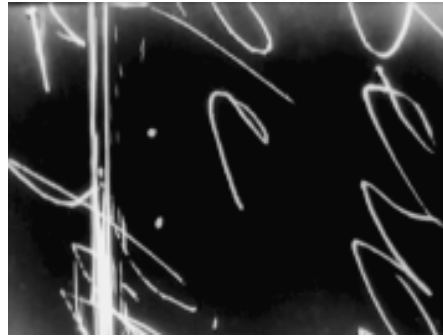
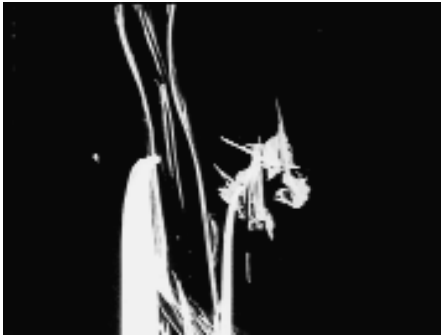
16. In a psychoanalytically sophisticated account of his interest in this manner of cinematic intervention, Isou’s narrator claims to want to “make a film that hurts your eyes, like during the projection of those very old films in which you can see the numbers flashing by—1, 3, 5, 7—so quickly! I’ve always loved these flashing numbers. Perhaps because I always connected them with the beautiful classic films of old and my taste transposed itself from what I had loved to what went with that love.” Here, as elsewhere, we see an obvious premonition of the issues that will be taken up in the so-called structuralist filmmaking of the late 1960s and ’70s.



Isou. Treatise on Slobber and Eternity. 1951.

entirely different legacy to the art of the moving image then emerging in the 1960s and '70s: the documentation of performance. The Lettrists were then known, first and foremost, for a model of performance that reached back past the Surrealists (still dominant in the Parisian aesthetic milieu) to the Dadaist poetics of Tristan Tzara and Richard Huelsenbeck. Like the artists Susan Sontag describes in her famous essay “Against Interpretation” a decade later, the Lettrist poets sought to evacuate signification from their work in order to invent an aesthetics of pure sound. Yet while individual works may have been devoid of meaning, Lettrist poetics was collectively grounded on the idea that art had become too tame and civilized. Under this view, what was needed was to fashion the brute cry of the animality underlying man’s refined exterior. In practice, this meant that while Lettrist poems could be given a kind of notation, they principally existed only for the duration of their performance. Rather than crafting his own vision, Isou effectively dedicated the final section of his film to a collective documentation of these sound performances. Each individual is announced in turn, shown standing against a blank wall, while a scrawl of paint crosses over them, symbolically cancelling their image while insisting on the materiality of the celluloid medium. As each poem begins, the screen goes black while this material trace remains—its brilliant, chaotic variations marking a pure flow of time, coextensive yet distinct from the poetic noises we attend.

Near the conclusion, we are presented with a portrait of Daniel that effectively summarizes multiple dimensions of the work. Rather than a properly cinematic image, it is a repeated still frame: an unmoving moving image. And this very immobility is framed both inside and outside of the image. Outside, we hear the narrator’s voice, continuing to speak. This narrator—who is and is not Daniel, just as Daniel is and is not Isou—highlights the lack of connection between sound and image, subject and voice. And within the frame, a disjunction between the forward march of time and the paradoxical stillness of this image is articulated by the continuous undulations of three thin lines. On either



side of Daniel's face, a trail of paint rests above the photographic surface, while in the center, a furrow trawled into the emulsion cuts directly across. Though the images are formally similar, we innately grasp their distinct materiality. Raising us simultaneously above and below the surface of the film, we are here granted a dimensionality wholly at odds with the "realistic" depth of the photographic image. Seen both still and moving, as material surface and with photographic depth, Daniel is narratively presented in a moment of indecision and radical questioning, just as the spectator is presented with a radically unresolved and irresolvable portrait of the artist.

When Raymond Roder screened Isou's work at Frank Stauffacher's Art in Cinema series at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, a number of artists were in attendance, including an aspiring filmmaker by the name of Stan Brakhage. And while Isou's *Treatise* was received in San Francisco as poorly as it had been in Paris, Brakhage left the event profoundly affected. He would later claim that seeing Isou's work was a seminal event in the development of his aesthetic, and he has described how he regularly screened and analyzed the film during his experimental film classes over the next four decades of his teaching.¹⁷ In fact, the moving signature Brakhage would append to nearly every one of his films—often taken as iconic of Brakhage's cinematic ethos and even of the artisanal film per se—clearly seems to have originated from his encounter with Isou's cinematic *Treatise*.

Treatise did not remain an isolated work. Maurice Lemaître, Isou's disciple and collaborator, had already begun the process of expanding upon the ideas in *Treatise* before the final version of the work had even been exhibited. This second Lettrist work, together with its accompanying theorization, would attempt to

17. See Brakhage's letter to Devaux in the Brakhage archives at University of Colorado, Boulder. At the San Francisco screening, a Roman Catholic priest was reportedly brought in to warn the audience of French decadence.



*Stan Brakhage. Window
Water Baby Moving. 1959.*

move beyond “film” entirely, and in so doing, would provide the aesthetic and conceptual foundation for the heterogeneous practice of expanded cinema and intermedia that would emerge over the next two decades.¹⁸

The Cinematic Situation: Has the Film Begun? (1951)

Lemaître’s work of 1951, *Has the Film Begun? (Le film est déjà commencé?)*, confronts its viewer with pyrotechnics of formalism. As within *Treatise*, Lemaître paints, scratches, and draws over the surface of the film emulsion in ways that seem sometimes connected with the underlying photographic images and sometimes completely independent of them. Additionally, abstract and representational imagery has been multiply superimposed on the images. Splashes of color have been selectively added to the black and white footage. Images are regularly under- or overexposed. They are wildly misregistered, reversed, placed upside-down, and deliberately scarred by light leaks, dust, debris, and holes punched through the surface of the celluloid. The film has been soaked in soapy water so that the gelatin structure of its base runs and reticulates, disintegrating before our eyes. Old scraps of film taken from a processing laboratory have been intercut into the work, as well as pieces of film leader, and negative film in its unprocessed state. There are sections that produce a stroboscopic or “flicker” effect through the alternation of pure black and white, with the occasional pure color frame thrown in. Words, numbers, and other kinds of symbols are presented in such short durations as to strain the viewer’s cognitive abilities.

18. Lemaître had joined the Lettrist group in 1950 and was, like Isou, taken with the idea of the youth as a revolutionary cultural and political force. Starting two journals at that time, Lemaître used *Youth Front* as a vehicle for social and political thought, while developing *Ur* as a more literary, visual, and philosophical vehicle for the movement.

Finally, elements of text are split and recombined in such a way as to create novel syntactic connections. During an audible discussion of D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance*, for instance, "IN TO LER" appears on the screen as if to suggest the emergence of a cinematic grammar on the model of a musical scale.¹⁹

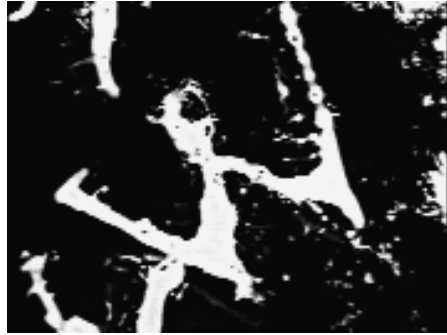
The spectacular audacity of what Lemaître terms his "image-track" is worthy of a much more detailed investigation than I can here provide. It prefigures much of the formal development of the "materialist" film practices of the later 1960s and '70s, as well as the deliberate intertextuality and semantic deconstruction Jean-Luc Godard would develop throughout his career. But it is important not to allow the formal experimentation *within* the film itself to distract us from Lemaître's more encompassing investigation into the properly performative qualities inherent in the event of cinematic exhibition.

Lemaître was adamant that his work not be described as a "film," but rather as a "*séance du cinéma*"—roughly, a "film screening." Rather than stress the complementarity and interdependence of *séance* and *cinéma*, however, Lemaître insisted on stressing their difference. In so doing, he highlighted some of the subterranean linguistic properties concealed within the term *séance*. For if the English terms for the presentation of a film tend to suggest spectacles that are produced *for*, and directed *toward*, an observing audience, the relevant term in French, *séance*, is generally used to denote assemblies or meetings—activities in which a public is constituted and a variety of interactions take place. It is a term that carries with it the strong, democratic connotations of the French Revolution. One speaks of the right of *séance*, or assembly. Bridging these different meanings, one might describe a *séance* as a period of time consecrated to an activity during which the rules and conventions adopted by the assembled group are dictated by that activity. It is a delimited and demarcated space and time for a particular mode of being, a particular *habitus*, in Pierre Bourdieu's sense of the term. For Lemaître, thinking of his production in terms of a *séance du cinéma* is meant to underline a radically new emphasis on the idea of *film as event*. Rather than a material object, each film is a performance that occupies a particular place over a particular period of time. Lemaître wants to focus our attention upon this expanded cinematic situation, this performative, exhibitionary frame.²⁰

The question of framing permeates every aspect of Lemaître's creation, confronting us even before we undertake to describe it. The work's title is itself a question, almost as a kind of introjection, as one might say in shock or disbelief, "the film has begun?!?" Yet the work further disperses as we attempt to fix it in time and place. For *Has the Film Begun?* was not simply the name reserved for a reel of

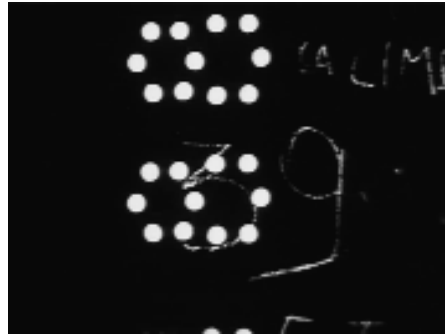
19. This is another of the many Lettrist devices Godard would develop throughout his career.

20. Lemaître's most self-conscious and consistent inquiry lies in an exploration of the delineation and framing of cinematic representation itself. Thus, a number of clips contain the brands of various movie companies—Paramount, RKO, MGM—as well as the language of cinematic advertising, with its insistence on the "Coming Attraction." These inquiries are at their most powerful when they propel the fiction outside of its usual frame, not only disrupting the integrity of that frame, but revealing the complex ways in which experience might be multiply or even contradictorily framed.



Maurice Lemaître.
Has the Film Begun? 1951.

celluloid film, but the name for a complete film performance for which the celluloid reel was merely a single part. Additionally, the title was used for Lemaître's "score" for this film-performance, as well as a theoretical treatise intended to provide an aesthetic and historical context for the film-performance. Within this written treatise, Lemaître describes his principal contribution to the field as the delineation of four independent areas for experimental research in the domain of film-performance: sound, image, screen, and the projection environment. Each of the four is to be considered both as an independent site for inquiry and in terms of its necessary and ongoing relation to the other three. What Lemaître seems to have understood from Isou is that the attack on the image—the act of chiseling inscriptions by hand into the smooth surface of the photomechanical reproduction—was not merely a transformation of film as a material surface. It was a transformation of the spectator's whole manner of relating to the film-event. If the film was to be both physically and metaphorically "chiseled," the audience was watching not a transparent depiction, but the exhibition of an audiovisual combine. By scratching the surface of cinema's metaphorical window, Isou was activating the larger institutional space of the cinematic encounter and the various spectatorial conventions heretofore taken for granted. If the screen was now both a window and a canvas on which to draw, it followed naturally for Lemaître that neither the physical surface of the projection screen nor any of the accepted conventions of the cinematic environment could be considered "transparent." Instead, they could and must be considered by the artist as active fundamental elements in the construction of the total audiovisual environment. Within his score, we find not only the disjunctive organization of sound and image familiar from Isou, but also a third column, one devoted to the environmental situation exterior to the filmic text. It makes clear that the chamber within which the film was being screened was not a nullity or an

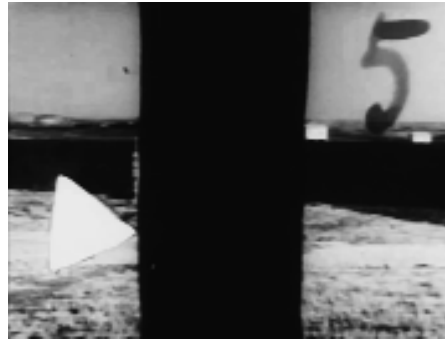
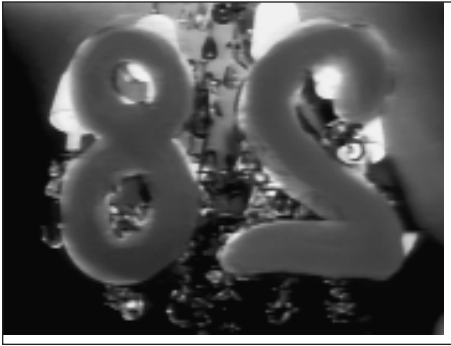


empty void (whether dark or lit), but rather an active component of the work's disjunctive orchestration.

For Lemaître, the total environment designated by the term "SynCinéma" was not a coherent *synthesis* of diverse media elements in the mode of the historical *Gesamtkunstwerk*; it was entirely opposed to the audiovisual spectacle of seamless coherence. In fact, Lemaître could be understood as *reversing* the convention of the theatrical "black box" through which Wagner had integrated the spectacle of the "total work of art." While technologies of the projected image from Kircher to Edison had necessitated a darkened space into which the faint light of the projection could be screened, the traditional theater was obviously under no such compulsion. Friedrich Kittler describes the 1876 opening of Wagner's theater in Bayreuth:

Wagner did what no dramaturg before him had dared to do (simply because certain spectators insisted on the feudal privilege of being as visible as the actors themselves): during opening night, he began *The Ring of the Nibelung* in total darkness, before gradually turning on the (as yet novel) gaslights. Not even the presence of an emperor, Wilhelm I, prevented Wagner from reducing his audience to an invisible mass sociology and the bodies of actors (such as the Rhine maidens) to visual hallucinations or afterimages against the background of darkness. The cut separating theater arts from media technologies could not be delineated more precisely. Which is why all movie theaters, at the beginning of their screenings, reproduce Wagner's cosmic sunrise emerging from primordial darkness. A 1913 movie theater in Mannheim, as we know

21. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford, 1999), p. 121.



*Lemaître. Has the
Film Begun? 1951.*

from the first sociology of cinema, used the slogan, “Come in, our movie theater is the darkest in the whole city!”²¹

Lemaître’s conception of the film *séance* within the SynCinéma can be understood as the first explicit attempt to theorize the nascent domain of expanded cinema in which the traditional delineation of film and performance is consciously undermined for the sake of an aesthetic and conceptual interrogation of film-as-event. According to Lemaître, the SynCinéma simultaneously undertakes two actions in a kind of pincer movement: it drags us out from the putative transparency of the screen-as-window metaphor toward the real social and material space of screening while simultaneously theatricalizing this space as event. Not unlike the title cards Bruce Conner would strategically deploy throughout *A Movie* (1958), Lemaître’s work is constantly beginning, and beginning again, *in medias res*. Direct appropriations of Hollywood advertising messages and industrial logos constantly seem to be announcing coming attractions, suggesting the film has already concluded, or alternatively, that it is only just about to begin.

Tom Gunning has famously described the earliest practices of film exhibition as a “cinema of attractions” organized upon a fundamentally different model of spectatorial engagement than the industrial narrative cinema that would come to replace it. Wanda Strauven has recently remarked on how the very term “attraction” functions to denaturalize our familiar idea of cinematic “monstration,” in which the spectacle is shown to the spectator, in favor of a more bi-directional encounter that acknowledges “the magnetism of the spectacle shown.”²² Thus, rather than immediately conceptualizing Lemaître’s work as a kind of theatrical spectacle, it seems more

22. Wanda Strauven, “Introduction to an Attractive Concept,” in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam, 2006), p. 17. This volume contains the original essays of Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault on the idea, as well as insightful new contributions by Charles Musser, Scott Bukatman, and others.



fitting to try to understand it as a mode of soliciting its spectatorial audience. Lemaitre's title is quite obviously a question, and as an interrogative, rather than a declarative, it queries its spectator rather than proffering a message.

If Isou's interrogation confined itself principally to the way we understand the sound-image relations within the film as constructed object, Lemaitre's "disjunctive cinema" expands out to incorporate the institutional framing of the cinematic situation itself. Simultaneously highlighting and disrupting our expectations of the ways in which the moving image is supposed to be encountered and understood, *Has the Film Begun?* consistently works to juxtapose the inner and outer space of the cinematic spectacle, ceaselessly modulating and confusing the very boundaries of the cinematic text:

When the audience is let in, the screening room will be dark and there will be no attendants to help people with seating. They will take their seats in an indescribable confusion. The rectangular screen will be deformed by the addition of a number of colored pieces of drapery from which objects will be hung and placed in motion. While the spectators are still being seated, the concluding scene of a Western will be shown and the lights in the room will then be turned on. An announcer will tell the audience to leave the room. Maurice Lemaitre will then begin to read a lengthy defense of his film, which will be interrupted by shouting. The projectionist, holding a bulk of celluloid film in his hands, will appear beside the director and, accusing him of making a film in contradiction to his own ideas, begin ripping the film stock apart. The "producer" of the film will intervene, attempting to save as much of the film as possible. He will chase the projectionist out of the theater while shouting at him. A title card on the screen will indicate



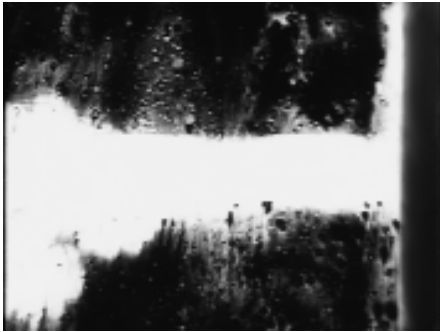
Lemaître. Has the Film Begun? 1951.

that the film is dedicated to Isidore Isou. The extras in the room will shout to turn out the lights. This occurs to a loud “ah . . .” of collective satisfaction. Footage from several random films is then projected upon the screen while the lights are again turned up. More collective shouting. After a few moments, the lights are definitively put out.²³

There is certainly here an effort to *épater le bourgeois*. But this shock or outrage has a precise purpose and directionality: it is intended both to make visible and to denaturalize the conventionality of cinematic exhibition and spectatorship. Lemaître returns to this framing of the cinematic event again and again on every level, traversing the “inner” and “outer” space of the spectacle, constantly plying the boundaries of the aesthetic experience itself. This is not a simple dissolution of “art” into “life” but a highly organized and scripted series of experiential encounters wherein the boundary or barrier between the aesthetic and the everyday can be *seen* to have been situated. Seeing these boundaries, the audience begins to experience them as such.

The point is not that anything can be art, that there are no boundaries or rules—precisely the opposite. Lemaître’s *Has the Film Begun?* makes clear that, over and above any formal grammar of the image, cinema has developed as a particular kind of art through the establishment and perpetuation of certain concrete parameters of exhibition and spectatorship. For Lemaître, *une cinéma ailleurs*, an “other” cinema that breaks radically with the nature and purpose of industrial cinema, cannot rely merely on a transformation of the cinematic image. Nor can it be content to introduce a newly heterogeneous cinematic grammar through the juxtaposition of image and text. Ultimately, such a cinematic investi-

23. Maurice Lemaître, *Le film est déjà commencé? Séance de cinéma*, preface by Jean-Isidore Isou (Paris: A. Bonne, 1952). This volume is part of the “Encyclopédie du Cinéma” collection edited by André Bonne. One edition contained a paper band with the words “Un Pirandello du Cinéma.”

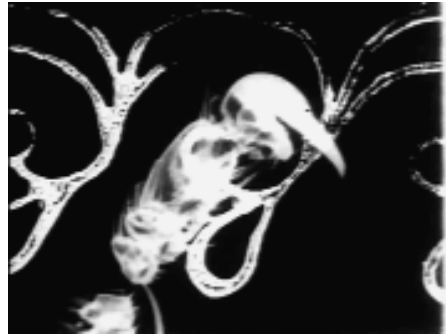
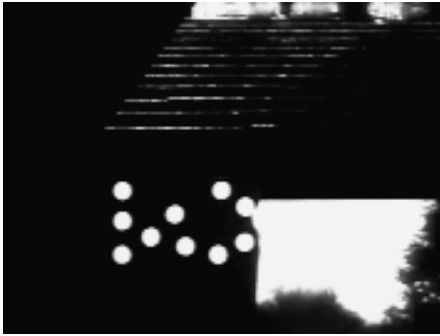


gation must confront the institutional and exhibitionary frameworks within which the projection and spectatorship of the moving image takes place: the ways in which our unconscious beliefs about the nature and purpose of cinema condition our reception of that encounter before we even enter the cinematic theater. As if to underline the point, Lemaître begins the work already before its “beginning,” relocating it from the theater’s interior to the street outside:

a portable, rose-colored screen ringed with neon is installed before the entrance of the cinema and D.W. Griffith’s *Intolerance* is projected for an hour before the film is to begin. . . . Some actors who have infiltrated the waiting crowd will begin to insult others. To stop a scandal from beginning, the doors of the theater will burst open and a group of all ages will rush *out* of the theater. They will form an excited group in front loudly exclaiming their disgust for the film they are about to see.²⁴

Inside the theater, Lemaître continues to modulate our experience of the spectacle’s boundaries, moving ceaselessly between the multiple frames of our experience. The whole theatrical preface described above is enacted, while actors playing angry spectators loudly interject their disapproval of the film and exasperation with its director. As the scripted events are being acted out in the theater, we simultaneously hear them being called out as stage directions to be acted upon. As the lights darken and the projection begins, the audience—now seated comfortably

24. He continues, “They will place themselves in front of the outdoor screen and interject their wild approval. The director will attempt to dissuade those waiting in line to see the film. He will begin to insult the couples, proposing to give them money to get a motel room instead.” Lemaître also transposes our expectations for historical punctuality: at a time in which repertory film theaters were still uncommon, and many of the early masterworks of the medium were unable to be seen, Lemaître substitutes the experience of an old-fashioned classic for the anticipated experience of the latest thing.



Lemaître. Has the Film Begun? 1951.

in their seats—hears an audience fumbling around in the dark trying to take their seats, while a voiceover describes this imaginary spectacle taking place. A title card prohibiting smoking in the theater appears on the screen, and we hear altercations breaking out within the audience—altercations that are, in fact, solely the province of the soundtrack. On the screen, the concluding scene of a Western begins and then begins again. A title card reads: “THE FILM HAS BEGUN / BY MAURICE LEMAÎTRE / COMING SOON TO THIS SCREEN / YOU’LL FIND OUT THE CULPRIT / THE END / NEXT WEEK” after which, the screen goes dark and the house lights come up while a voice simultaneously describes the screen going dark and the house lights coming up. While people are still complaining about finding their seats, we hear new people complaining about the lights going up. The lights go back down, and while a series of title cards play up the excitement of Lemaître’s film as a coming attraction, people in the audience now point out the rudeness of someone presumably smoking in defiance of the prohibition recently shown.

By this point, with at least part of the audience likely exasperated, it may very well have been impossible to determine what was part of the film and what was outside of it, what was staged and what was real. Superimposing multiple levels of representation, *Has the Film Begun?* elicits the experience of multiple temporalities running in parallel, coming together at specific moments before again breaking apart. For that potentially revolutionary audience Isou had described as “*le génération des ciné-clubs*,” Lemaître’s *Has the Film Begun?* proposed a cinematization of life, as well as its redundant theatrical orchestration, in a *mise-en-abyme*.

Toward a New Amplification

What Lemaître described as the “transformation of cinematographic representation into a theatrical combination” would come to have great currency over



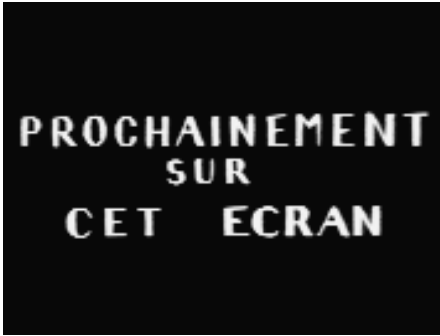
the next decade in the work of Robert Breer, Bruce Conner, and Stan VanDerBeek, among others.²⁵ This layered disjunction of space and spectatorship, of site and psyche, would emerge as a recurrent theme within the evolution of the expanded cinema in the postwar era. Lemaître's fellow Lettrist Marc'O (Marc-Gilbert Guillaumin) described Lemaître's explorations as involving the “three dimensional psychology” of the cinematic situation. In a 1952 treatise, he concluded that “what *acts*” within this new mode of aesthetic practice “is not so much the *transmitter* (producer of sensation), but the manner in which *reception* is prepared (the spectator brought to a particular state of receptivity).”²⁶ The idea that the modern artist should concern himself with psychological states of “receptivity” was almost unprecedented in the discourse of the period, yet it prefigured the later turn toward “reception aesthetics” within art and film theory decades later. In fact, it was just this shift of emphasis—from the brute materiality of artistic production toward the institutional framing of spectatorial reception—that would connect many of the diverse currents of expanded cinema and intermedia art over the next twenty years.

Since the birth of cinema, Marc'O claims, we have seen a constant transformation in the spatial framing of cinematic projection. But while cinema has always been dramatically affected by the diversity of its situations, these have been treated merely as technical problems *to be mastered* rather than *artistic elements to be explored*.²⁷ This is why, for Marc'O, the most fundamental basis for a future art of the moving image lies in the investigation and development of these kinds of framing, both in the manner in which they engender particular forms of spectatorial receptivity, and the

25. Maurice Lemaître, chapter 4, section C, *Qu'est-ce que le lettrisme?* (Paris: Éditions Fischbacher, 1954).

26. “Ce qui agit n'est plus l'émetteur (producteur de sensation), mais la réception préparée (le spectateur amené à un état précis de réceptivité).” See “Introduction au Cinéma Nucléaire” in *Ion 1*, ed. Marc-Gilbert Guillaumin (Paris: Centre de création, 1952; repr. 1999), p. 245. *Ion 1*, a “special issue on cinema,” was the first and only issue of Marc'O's Lettrist journal to be produced.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 250–51. All further quotes from Marc'O are from this section.



Lemaître. Has the Film Begun? 1951.

effects of distortion and transformation they effect upon the representation of things in the world. This new model of avant-garde practice is oriented not only toward the deconstruction of cinematic grammar, but toward a much wider deconstruction and re-articulation of the total cinematic *situation*, as understood in both material and psychological terms. Following Isou, Marc'O contends that traditional cinema—bloated and stalled due to its mastery of over-familiar conventions—must be understood as raw material for the artist to hack apart and recombine into new configurations. Yet, following Lemaître, Marc'O counsels that this “chiseling” or “deconstruction” of preexisting visual culture was but a way-point toward the positive construction of new audiovisual situations, a new “amplification” making use of precisely those framing elements previously considered marginal to the cinematographic event. Interestingly enough, he anticipates the most severe resistance to this project arising amongst the “intellectuals of the ciné-clubs” as well as the cinematic avant-garde itself. He writes: “the intellectual of the ciné-club admires the avant-garde insofar as it is safely “classical” and “past” while “the avant-garde will always be the first to believe in an immutable *essence* to cinema. It is the worst reactionary whenever faced with a new avant-garde.”

Guy Debord would explicitly credit Marc'O in his “Prolegomena to Any Future Cinema,” written for the Lettrist journal *Ion*. In words that lean heavily on Isou and Lemaître, Debord writes,

Values related to artistic creation are being displaced by a conditioning of the spectator, with what I have called *three dimensional psychology* and the nuclear cinema of Marc'O., a cinema that begins another phase of amplification. The arts of the future will be the complete overturning of situations, or nothing at all.²⁸

28. “Les arts futurs seront des bouleversements de situations, ou rien.” Guy Debord, “Prolégomènes



Gil J. Wolman, who would co-author “User’s Guide to *Détournement*” with Debord, provided a model of this in his film installation *The Anticoncept* at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris. True to the Lettrist spirit, the work’s soundtrack consisted of a wildly heterogeneous array of sonic elements, literary references, organic and mechanical sounds, and rhetorical word play. Against this sonic complexity, however, Wolman’s film was devoid of photographic imagery, representational or non-representational signs, or anything else that could possibly be “read.” It consisted merely of an alternation—not evenly spaced and monotonous, but irregularly syncopated in a complex rhythm—of white discs upon a black ground. These discs were projected not onto a traditional cinematic screen, but onto a white, helium-filled meteorological balloon leashed to the floor. The stroboscopic visuality was, in a sense, “anchored” to this concrete, three-dimensional—yet curiously weightless—object. Since the projected disc conformed to the shape of the ball upon which it was projected, the ball itself seemed to change in appearance, pulsing rhythmically with a brilliant luminosity. Despite lacking any thematic content, Wolman’s film was banned on account of its “subversive” character, and the Lettrists’ concerted effort to lift the restriction was to no avail.

Scorned by proponents of both conventional and independent cinema, the Lettrist works were similarly derided by institutions of plastic art and performance. Isou and Lemaître quickly discovered that film-making was an expensive proposition. Even using recycled film, the paltry sums raised by their screenings were unable to

à tout cinema futur,” *Ion*, p. 219, repr. in *Documents relatifs à la fondation de l’Internationale Situationniste*, ed. Gérard Berréby (Paris: Allia, 1985), p. 109. Debord’s term *situations* can signify location, context, site, as well as state of being, his term *bouleversement* additionally connotes convulsion or trembling, as it intentionally recalls André Breton’s famous Surrealist dictum from *Nadja*, “Beauty will be convulsive, or it will not be” as well as the revolutionary political syntax of Thiers before the French National Assembly in 1872, “The Republic will be conservative, or it will not be.”



*Lemaître. Has the
Film Begun? 1951.*

cover their expenses. Within a few years, they were forced to return to the more traditional, saleable forms of canvas and print. Yet despite its limited production and tenuous reception, this spectacular eruption of cinematic inquiry served to revitalize the question of an “other cinema” that had begun within Dada and Constructivist practice decades before. In questioning the most fundamental norms by which cinematic production, exhibition, and spectatorship had been imagined, the Lettrist works provided postwar artists with a powerful alternative to the model of the “art film” then becoming cemented as the epitome of the medium within the international festival circuit. Inaugurating such diverse fields as the essay film, the film-performance, and the film-installation, the aesthetic and conceptual import of these early works would become known only in retrospect, through the vast range of “other cinema” that would emerge over the course of the next two decades.²⁹

29. As has by now been well documented, Debord would eventually view the “essay film”—an extension of Isou’s foundational *Treatise*—as a vital complement to his philosophical writing throughout his later career. The written and cinematic work of Guy Debord has been addressed in a now wide-ranging literature. See Thomas Y. Levin, “Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord,” in *On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International 1957–1972*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), p. 123 fn. 181; Tom McDonough, ed., *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002); *Complete Cinematic Works: Scripts, Stills, and Documents*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Oakland, Calif.: AK Press, 2003). A collection of Debord’s cinematic work was released on DVD by Gaumont in 2005.