

SONIC YOUTH, SONIC SPACE

Isidore Isou and the Lettrist Acoustics
of Deterritorialization

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The change undergone by the concept of literature—which those attempts marked by the names “the New Novel,” “New Criticism,” “Structuralism” have helped to render spectacular in France—is not in immediate relation to the “Second World War,” having been in the process of becoming long before; however, it found the accelerated confirmation of the fundamental crisis in the war, the change of an era that we do not yet know how to measure for lack of a language. Which amounts to saying, in the crisis that keeps getting deeper and that literature also conveys according to its mode, war is always present and, in some ways, pursued. Which amounts to saying that the war (the Second World War) was not only a war, a historical event like any other, circumscribed and limited with its causes, its turns, and its results. It was an *absolute*. This absolute is named when one utters the names of Auschwitz, Warsaw (the ghetto and the struggle for liberation of the city), Treblinka, Dachau, Büchenwald, Neuengamme, Oranienburg, Belsen, Mathausen, Ravensbrück, and so many others. What happened there—the holocaust of the Jews, the genocide against Poland, and the formation of a concentration camp universe—is, whether one speaks of it or whether one does not speak of it, the depths of memory in the privacy of which, henceforth, each one of us, the youngest as well as the most mature, learns to remember and to forget.—Maurice Blanchot, “War and Literature,” 1971

In 1950 Maurice Jarnoux photographed André Malraux at work in his office studiously contemplating the photographic fragments that had allowed him to re-imagine the cultures of the world as if a museum without walls (see chapter 1, Figure 1.1), and which would eventually inform his revisioning of the French capital as a city of nothing but. By the same year, Isidore Isou’s Lettrism had already become a well-known fixture in an emergent Parisian art scene intent on rejuvenating avant-garde tactics in studied refusal of both the cultural dominants

from which Malraux's aesthetics had derived and the establishment to which they would subsequently contribute. Illusory as it turned out to be, Isou's mid-twentieth-century celebrity was achieved through careful manipulation of both high and low ends of this cultural spectrum, much as Malraux's had been achieved through careful suspension of both the left and right polarities of the political one.

Whereas, however, Malraux had aspired to offer the nation an image of itself built on the illusion of spatial coherence and historical continuity, Isou—a Romanian Jew, born Ioan-Isidor Goldstein in Botosani, Moldavia, in 1925 and self-exiled to Paris twenty years later—aspired to *de-territorialize* exactly such spatial suppositions and the false presumptions of semiotic correspondence upon which they were based. The Lettrist platform he modeled proposed an artistic critique aimed at both the ascendancy of print and photographic media over direct experience, which he took to be most immediately available vis-à-vis manipulations to the sonic register or its representation. Dependent as much on dogged persistence as on the occasional media scandal, Isou's critique was especially notable in that it was first articulated from within the very same literary and visual parameters it set out to destabilize.

Joined at first by two equally young French Jews, also newly arrived in the capital, Gabriel Pomerand (born Pomerans) and Maurice Lemaître (born Bismuth)—whom Isou would call his “disciples,”¹—Isou aimed to use sound and the graphic notations meant to communicate it as the basis for a differently “spatialized” language, one that did not correspond to the strict parameters of national boundaries and was neither exclusively visual nor textual. He hoped that such a language would also circumvent the embeddedness of traditional language in everyday routines of perception, be they spatial or visual. It was imperative that this language find an aural realization, as it was through sound and its manipulations that the Lettrists hoped the experience of urban and national space could be reinvented. From this reinvention, the Lettrists planned to engender new tools of discourse that would enable communication and community beyond the limitations of territoriality, especially as the latter had come to be inscribed in literary language. In this expectation, however, Isou's avant-gardist stance met its limitations when it pitted itself against an institutional culture embodied by such figures as Malraux. Like Malraux's *pas de deux* between the aesthetics of an imminent globalization wrought by colonial conquest and a hegemonic French cultural nationalism, the deterritorialized language that Isou's Lettrism imagined could exceed neither the institutional contexts of the artistic and literary world of Paris nor the imperial constructs that bolstered their presumed authority, even as these were both being challenged by anti-colonial conflicts. As such, Isou was subject to and would eventually perpetuate the same bait-and-switch that, since the advent of modern aesthetics, has taken French traditions as the source for impossible universalisms.

As I will demonstrate, Lettrism was unable to exceed the limitations of a colonially circumscribed France as a container for the aurally-defined community it imagined, and ultimately failed to make good on the more utopian aspects of Isou's proposals. This failure was explicitly enmeshed in the movement's simultaneous in-

vestment in communicating the particularities of a specific subaltern experience and in the hope that such a recuperative identitarian politics could successfully reintegrate excluded bodies into national ideals. In Isou's case, and indeed in that of the other young artists with whom he worked most seriously in the late 1940s, this subaltern identity aligned with that of the (almost exclusively male) Ashkenazi Jew and was understood as synonymous with the experiences of European Jewry during not only the Second World War but also throughout its immediate aftermath in both Europe and, in Isou's writings, in the newly established Jewish state of Israel. As such, Lettrism provides an object lesson about how avant-gardist attempts to speak for and in the voice of difference can and often do perform the same insistence on aesthetic dogmas—here, as rooted in colonial universalisms—that permeate the very cultural and national institutions they hope to undermine. The abstractions, ideals, and disjunctures in which Isou took refuge in order to avoid such misappropriations did not prevent him or those with whom he worked from ultimately recapitulating this error in the quest for a new means of cultural belonging that would accommodate the model of their and others' cultural-linguistic difference.

Within a now-standardized history of visual and cultural production in France during the 1950s and 1960s, Isou and the youthful energy that the young exile generated when he arrived in Paris are most frequently invoked in reference to the splinter constellations of the Lettrist International (LI) and the Situationist International (SI), which Guy Debord founded in 1952 and 1957 respectively, joined in the latter effort by other defectors from the LI.² Certainly, much scholarship has detailed the SI's significance for cultural histories of the period, so it need not be reiterated here. In fact, one might go so far as to suggest that the sheer volume of near-hagiographic attention Debord has received since Elizabeth Sussman's important exhibition on the SI (at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, 1989) has worked to distort our understanding of Lettrist production proper.³ But the movement deserves to be evaluated on its own terms rather than on those that Debord established when he broke from Isou's group. This is especially true of the early work that Isou and his followers produced between 1946 and 1951. These years mark the two media scandals that Isou orchestrated in order to introduce himself to lettered elites: the first was staged in Paris in 1946, where Isou presented himself as a performer, poet, and eventually as a theorist; the second event involved a more international audience in Cannes, in 1951, when Isou made his debut as a filmmaker.

During these five eventful years, Isou pointedly honed his aesthetic doctrine around what he proposed was the ostensible semiotic purity of the individual letter as a vehicle of unmediated articulation. The possibility that such discrete units of aural expression could exist outside of the conventional purposes to which they had been put found echo in the corresponding privilege that Isou ascribed to the category of "youth" in an economic model based on what he explained was a presumed externality to the regular demands of capitalist production and consumption.⁴ On the basis of such suppositions about purity and externality, he elaborated a multi-

media platform aimed at rejuvenating not only artistic production but also the conventional forms of signification and representation on which it relied, and by which it was experienced. These platforms are perhaps most productively demonstrated by his first book, *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et une nouvelle musique* (Introduction to a New Poetry and a New Music, 1947) and his first film, *Traité de bave et d'éternité* (Treatise on Drool and Eternity, 1951), each of which corresponds to one of the two staged media scandals.

Isou's focus on purifying language by stripping it of customary semiotic association was certainly not unique in the period. Following the rise and spread of Fascism in Europe and of totalitarianism in the Soviet Union, language and other means of representation had come to be mistrusted by leftist artists and producers, who saw them as inseparable from the instrumentalization to which such means of communication had been put, especially by the administrative gymnastics of state-generated propaganda. It was, therefore, through a reconfiguration of language's function itself that many formulated their ideas of what a revolutionary art would have to look like and, especially in Isou's case, how a revolutionary art would sound. The triangulated relationship that Lettrism subsequently forged between linguistic signification, image-making, and the concept of audience provide important texture and dimension to the cultural landscape of Paris during the late 1940s and early 1950s, which is to say precisely the same decades when André Malraux's *musée imaginaire* entered the public sphere, when his urban façadism would begin to remake public space, and when photography as Malraux had imagined it would continue to remake the image of the world.

At the same time, efforts to renew language were also impacted during these years by the transnationalisms emerging from the model of a European community that sought to cohere beyond the differences of language and culture against the economic and political superpowers of the Soviet Union and the United States. It is equally important to remember that these decades also saw the fruition of decolonization as a historical process. Nationalist sentiment, of course, was on the rise in much of the colonized world, including in Africa and Indochina, areas of special import for the French. In Indochina, for instance, it was precisely on the heels of the Second World War that France re-occupied Indochinese territory, setting off the Viet Minh rebellion that would eventually lead to the First Indochinese War (or French-Vietnamese War), fought primarily in what is now Northern Vietnam from 1946 to 1954. While a good deal has been written about efforts to re-create language "after World War II" according to what was then perceived as the inherent inadequacy of language to communicate the scale of the devastation inflicted during the Second World War, less has been said about how such efforts themselves factored into the subsequent crises of language during decolonization, when language would become an essential ground on which the battle for self-determination would be fought, and through which it would be both refused and defended in the metropole.

In this context, Isou's model—and that of other self-designated Ultra-Lettrists, including François Dufrêne and Gil J. Wolman, early members of Isou's entourage

before becoming involved in *décollage*, the LI, and SI respectively—takes primary value as a transitional model through which artists labored to generate new conditions of a public communicability based on interrupting the normative conjunction between signifier and signified, or what Maurice Blanchot upheld as “the space of literature,” wherein meaning is made according to convention.⁵ The risk for the Lettrists would be that the experiences communicated by these new means were rarely, if ever, able to transcend the spatial parameters of the very languages that shaped them. And so, despite efforts to deterritorialize the conditions of everyday and traumatic experience, these interventions—moored in the aftermath of a politics of engagement that had fed into and was subsequently reinforced by the same models of artistic resistance that were once so central to efforts to oppose the rise of European Fascism—often ended by bolstering the linguistic priority upon which the colonial apparatus depended in its efforts to naturalize its ubiquity and to legitimize its claims to cultural superiority.

The media scandals that frame the period under consideration in this chapter exemplify a number of Lettrism’s preoccupations with the techniques and tactics of the historical avant-garde, even as they demonstrate Isou’s willingness to exploit the institutionalized publicity mechanisms of what Jürgen Habermas would define as the “bourgeois public sphere.”⁶ Isou garnered much media attention after his boisterous interruption of Michel Leiris’s prefatory remarks to a performance of Tristan Tzara’s *La fuite: poème dramatique en quatre actes et un épilogue* (Escape: Dramatic Poem in Four Acts and an Epilogue) at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier in January 1946 (at which Tzara was present), by announcing: “Enough of this old stuff. Dada is dead!” Indeed, it was only as a result of the public attention he gained from this calculated disruption that the aspiring author was able to persuade the literary giants Jean Paulhan and Gaston Gallimard to publish his first and most important book, *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*.⁷ Having upstaged the most venerable of old-guard Dadaists to unleash his own variety of poetic performance, the young provocateur conferred upon himself both the audacity and the seriousness needed to rouse the attention of the intellectual and leftist media, and thereby to penetrate the French literary elite.

At the same time, Isou also courted a more popular audience among those he identified as “youth” and who frequented the underground cafés and cabarets of the Latin Quarter. He plastered the streets surrounding the boulevards Saint-Michel and Saint-Germain to announce his upcoming readings at such popular café-night spots as the *Salle des sociétés savantes* and *Le Tabou*,⁸ boasting that in conjunction with these events, “twelve thousand youth will charge the streets to make the Lettrist revolution.”⁹ His engagement with both audiences would be held in careful dialectic, even as his work grew increasingly removed from the tradition of specifically French poetics with which he had so pointedly aligned himself in celebrating the history of modern poetry, which he modestly defined in the subtitle of his *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie*, as extending “from Baudelaire to Isou.”

Although *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie* was published in 1947, Isou claims to

have written the text while he was still living in his native Romania, and before he decided to travel to Paris, declining the offer of paid passage to Palestine from the World Jewish Congress in Geneva.¹⁰ The book charts the specific development of modern poetics that had led to Isou's preoccupation with letters. In the text, Isou explains that, while some of the burden for what he takes to be the death knell of language is attributable to contemporaneous events—including, for instance, the realities of war and exile that dominated other accounts of those eager to discern how to write “after Auschwitz,”—he finds more specific fault in the realm of cultural innovation. It is, in particular, on poetic innovation that he lays the greatest blame, claiming that poets continue to “élargissent les mots chaque année” (enlarge words each year) even though “les mots ont déjà tant de ravaudages qu'on les porte en loques” (words are now so bandaged that we wear them like rags).¹¹ Tattered and bandaged as a result of having been stretched beyond their normal limits to accommodate new experiences and new representation tropes, words are simply no longer capable of adapting to new uses. In order for culture to advance, Isou insists, they must instead be replaced. As with the Surrealist and Dadaist artists before him, Isou believed that the experiments he proposed in form, if pushed far enough, would eventually and necessarily undermine the very structures on which society was based, thereby leading to an affirmative rebuilding of that society and a correspondingly complete social revolution.¹² Before such revolution could be achieved, all “enemies of creation” must be destroyed. Chief among these were not only the Dadaist practices he had decried during the Tzara performance as so much “old stuff,” but also the Surrealist and Socialist Realist work then championed by the established avant-garde as the competing, but equally legitimate, heirs to the Resistance and to the political aspirations of the French Communist Party (CPF).¹³ Each of these was accordingly positioned as a dominant model of engaged or committed practice and thus available to assault by younger “revolutionaries” like the one Isou imagined himself to be.

Isou's understanding of poetic production corresponds to the model he outlines for cinema and all the other arts, and which he understands as operating through oscillating periods of generation and destruction. He names these periods *amplique* (amplic or expansive) to designate how aesthetic practices absorb external influences; and *ciselant* (chiseling or reductive) to describe efforts to purify the form by paring away the excesses of prior innovation. While poetry is the first form that Isou analyzes in his effort to draft the Lettrist model, this is not because he, like Jean-Paul Sartre, wants to emphasize the separation between artistic forms and media as the literary luminary and leftist leader had done in his *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (What Is Literature? 1947). In this book, Sartre makes a seminal case for the inherent politics of non-abstract poetic writing, asserting it as the primary means toward an engaged practice. To the contrary, Isou's theory of chiseling as a reduction to pure form upholds the integration of not only of other genres of writing, but also of other media. In fact, part of his aesthetic platform involves rebuilding culture based on the interrelatedness of all expressive forms.¹⁴ In these forms he locates the possibility for abstraction to generate meaning on precisely the same order as that of Sartre's preferred realism.

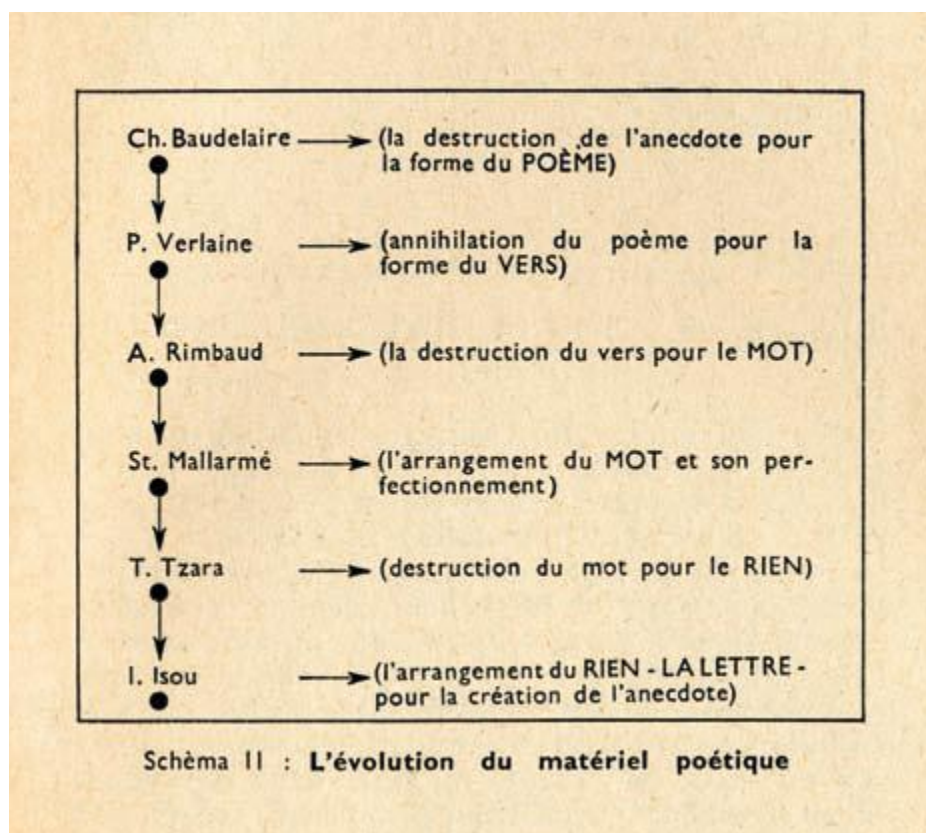


Figure 3.1. Isidore Isou, flow chart, “Schéma II: L'évolution du matériel poétique,” *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947). Image courtesy Catherine Goldstein.

By the late 1940s, Isou was confident that the only means to initiate a new ampic phase in poetic, and hence all communicative artistic production, was to complete what had already been almost a century's worth of avant-gardist experimentation. In Isou's model, which he charts as the diagrammatic “Schéma II: L'évolution du matériel poétique” (Scheme II: The Evolution of Poetic Material), such experimentation had succeeded in purifying poetic language somewhat but had failed to dismantle it fully so that it might be rebuilt anew, no matter if in poetic experimentation or in its filmic equivalent (see Figure 3.1). The chiseling phase of modern poetry, Isou explains, began after Victor Hugo had taken off with Charles Baudelaire's refusal of the “anecdote” (as Isou refers to content) in favor of the poem's form. Such chiseling had continued apace through Paul Verlaine's “annihilation” of the form of the poem in favor of that of the line, and Arthur Rimbaud's subsequent “destruction” of the verse for the word. Parallel efforts to purge poetic form of external influence are manifest in what Isou considers to be Stéphane Mallarmé's preference for the word's visual qualities over its linguistic ones and Tristan Tzara's disaggregation of meaning and language in favor of what he understood as a profoundly abrupt chaos.¹⁵ It bears

noting at this juncture that the lineage on which Isou draws is written in French, even when, as with Tzara, it is not written by French authors. Indeed, in his *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie*, Isou asserts the priority of French letters and French culture, almost in spite of himself.¹⁶

Having traced the teleological evolution of poetic form through the historical avant-garde, Isou positions his own practice as ready to exceed what he more explicitly names in his *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie* as the Dada artists' erroneous pursuit of verbal nonsense when formal attributes of linguistic form were still left to refine. Seizing upon the last of these, Isou isolates the single typographic mark of the letter as the first element to be expanded in the initiation of a new amplic phase, one that would be based on something other than the preponderance of the printed text's reliance on the word—*le mot*—as the building block of meaning. Whereas the printed form of words had come to encapsulate and dominate the arc of literary history, the poetics of the future as Isou envisioned them would need to take a different form. At the core of this new form, Isou's Lettrism proposed the signifying capacity of the letter—*la lettre*—as the most basic unit upon which meaning could be rebuilt. As such, the letter would take priority over the word as the "degree zero" of communicative action, rooted in an acoustic space shaped by publicity instead of privacy, experience instead of representation, and distracted confusion rather than contemplative or focused absorption.

Isou grounds his distinction regarding these terms in an understanding of the word as overwhelmingly and terminally graphic. Thus the word has become fixed in the explicitly plastic representation of concepts already designated by linguistic convention and continually perpetuated as such. The word is therefore a limiting and experience-diminishing vehicle, incapable of accommodating change or evolution. It is, he asserts in the manifesto that precedes the main exposition of his *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie*, "the first stereotype."¹⁷ Operating from the perverse principle that argues if a tree falls in the forest and is not seen or heard, it did not fall, he builds on this assessment to lament that, without linguistic representation, things and the relationships they engender would cease to exist. "Sensations without words in the dictionary," he suggests, "disappear."¹⁸ In this model, conventional language—at least in its printed form and the codifications that have ensued—assumes the function of determining and limiting reality instead of re-presenting it.

Isou's consideration of the word's graphic fixity is rooted in what he understands as the longer arc of printing's technological advance. He bemoans this history (and the rise of the media culture it has produced) for having deprived the word of its function by removing it from the public realm of speech and relegating it to the private realm of the book.¹⁹ For Isou, the printed word—nothing more than an accumulation of letters—should never have been understood as signifying anything more real than the sound elements for which it serves as a notation. Maintaining that the word has instead absorbed the impoverishing conditions that wed it to the printed page, Isou argues that any quest for a new public language must be built from pure pho-

nemes and so must be spoken. This judgment echoes Isou's assessment that language need not bolster visual meaning, anticipating the experiments by later avant-gardists who considered the printed text as little more than an event score for potential performance and action. To re-obtain value as a means of communication, the printed representation of language must be sounded out, so that it may be heard. As such, it must be based on non-significant emblems, such as letters. Isou proposes that sounding this new language would assure the binding of self and other in a dialogic relationship defined by presence and immediacy.

For Isou, such sounding would cancel the deadened reach and the totalizing facticity of the word by evoking articulations of sound more in sync with the immediacy of sensation. Letters are cues and not signs; unlike words, they operate only in combinatory relationship with other letters in order to produce sounds and, often, the movement of the body parts necessary to make them. If the word, as the emblem of normative or traditional poetic meaning, had become incapable of expanding any further in order to adapt to the changes of modern life, the letter had not, in Isou's eyes, achieved the same kind of fixity. Elsewhere, for example, Isou asserts that one pathetically stammers the word "airplane" in a feeble attempt to name the formidable significance of the transformations enacted in the field of transportation.²⁰ On the other hand and most simply put, letters were still dynamic in their association because they had never meant anything other than the sounds they were meant to evoke. Whereas the letter's own inherent reliance on its graphic form could not be refused—a fact that figured as the subject of much of the Lettrist painterly production during the 1950s—Isou was content this that graphic mark fixed nothing.²¹ Malleable according to invention rather than fixed according to convention, graphic symbols, letters and the sounds they evoke thus pervade and animate Isou's aesthetic principles, and in particular his hope that expression might exceed the cultural boundaries of conventional language.

Deeply committed to the notion of a recuperable, originary purity that is implicit in such a model of signification, Isou's preoccupations with the technologies of reproduction and communication were not restricted to print. In 1951, on the occasion of the Cannes International Film Festival, he launched his attack on the specific "enemy of creation" that he understood to be cinema in all its permutations. It was here that he debuted at least certain aspects of his unfinished film, *Traité de bave et d'éternité* (Treatise on Drool and Eternity). While the Cannes Film Festival was not yet the high-glamour, red-carpet phenomenon it is today, at the time of this—only its fourth official—iteration, the festival already marked the importance of cinema in the mid-twentieth century, and did so in a way that underscored what was just then emerging as an important form of transnational cultural exchange. Originally launched in 1939 as a counter to the Fascist ambitions manifest in the contemporaneous iteration of the Venice Film Festival, which was launched in 1932, the French festival was officially inaugurated in 1946. The burgeoning internationalist pretensions of the festival at Cannes can be traced even in the posters advertising the event: Georges C.

Chavannes's design for the 1949 festival features the ecstatic dance of a dark-haired woman dressed in a twisted cavalcade of national flags and colors beneath a similarly hued strip of 35mm celluloid, while Jean Don's composition for 1952 brandishes an even greater variety of national flags, now reimagined in the form of twisted film stock rising forth from a Grecian urn. Such international expansions make sense in light of international arrangements such as the Blum-Byrnes agreement, by which the United States forgave some French war debt in return for opening French cinema houses to American movies.²² In 1951, when Isou's *Traité* was screened outside of the principal competitions, the international roster included Vittorio De Sica's *Miracolo a Milano* (Miracle in Milan), which shared the Grand Prix with the Dutch film *Spiegel Van Holland* (Mirror of Holland, directed by Bert Haanstra), and the Swedish film *Fröken Julie* (Miss Julie, directed by Alf Sjöberg). Joseph Mankiewicz's Hollywood extravaganza *All About Eve* took home a Special Jury Prize, and Bette Davis earned the Best Actress award, thereby marking one end of what art historian Andrew Uroskie has invoked as the festival's imperative to negotiate the proper aesthetic trajectory of twentieth-century cinema between popular features like this and those pictures he classifies as "film art."²³

Members of the media who flocked to the festival in Cannes in 1951 were fascinated by the figure of outlier that Isou cast there. They could not resist, however, joining general audiences in publicly and vehemently excoriating Isou's efforts.²⁴ Such media attention only augmented Isou's celebrity as an iconoclast and, accordingly, heightened the curiosity of the intellectual classes, a fact he would instrumentalize in future advertisements for the film. A bemused Jean Cocteau, for example, though not officially a member of the jury, awarded Isou a specially created *Prix des spectateurs d'avant-garde* for the film and, a year later, a complete but abbreviated version of the film enjoyed a three-week run in Paris at the famous Studio de l'Étoile on the rue Troyon in the wealthy and well-trafficked area of the seventeenth arrondissement. Cocteau himself designed the poster for this high-profile event, thereby associating the film aesthetically and creatively with his own, far more successful ventures.²⁵

According to media scholar Vincent Kaufman, it was only the soundtrack of *Traité de bave et d'éternité* that had been "screened" at Cannes, and this only for a few minutes before audiences began to boo and otherwise indicate their displeasure.²⁶ Whether this is true or whether the audience simply did not have the patience to wait for the delayed image-track remains somewhat immaterial, because the isolated soundtrack, which begins with the rhythmic chanting of a Lettrist symphony, is in and of itself independent of the film's imagerial content. Much as he'd hoped to divorce spoken sound from its printed referent through the reliance on individual letters as opposed to complete words, here Isou aimed to develop what he referred to as a "*cinéma discrepant*" in the separation of the aural and visual components of cinematic representation. Such a discrepant cinema was meant to exploit the corresponding discordance between sound and image to interrupt the kind of syntagmatic meaning that normally structures cinematic narrative, and which, in Isou's eyes, had

rendered it no more an effective tool for social advancement than the more aesthetically celebrated works by other “enemies of creation.” For Isou, such discrepancy, which he championed as nothing short of a military-inspired tactic of dividing and conquering, was meant to unhinge the sound and image tracks—which he names the “two wings of cinema”—such that no logical or necessary relationship could rejoin the two and no hierarchy could be established between textual and visual registers.²⁷ Seeing would be as important as reading, and both were to be given equally to the ulterior projects of listening and hearing. Such effects, of course, parallel Isou’s ongoing attempts to disconnect signs and their signification in written and spoken language.

Revised over the course of the year after Cannes, the final version of Isou’s *Traité* takes form as three “chapters”—“Le principe (The idea),” “Le développement (The development),” and “La preuve” (The proof)—meant to articulate, defend, and enact Isou’s model of discrepant cinema. Across the span of these three chapters, *Traité* oscillates between a self-professed manifesto on cinematic form, issued as a three-way voice-over meant to simultaneously narrate and present the internal monologue of the protagonist Daniel (played by Isou) and the construction of a unique aesthetic object in its own right. Cut into all this are the sounds of a “public debate” or open-lecture at a ciné-club (clearly a recording of a lecture Isou had given or hoped to give), recitations of Lettrist poetry—including the aforementioned Lettrist symphony, which resurfaces at various moments in the film as if to underscore the sonic immediacy that underlies Lettrist aesthetics—performances by individual poets, including François Dufrêne (later a *décollagiste*), and a detailed, if not anodyne and inconsequential, narration describing the protagonist Daniel’s various romantic adventures. For the most part, the images on screen do little to situate or explain the sonic dimensions of the film, nor do they advance a conventional narrative, Daniel’s romantic adventures notwithstanding. Instead, they tend to fixate on banal sequences, like the long takes of Isou (as Daniel) walking along the boulevard Saint-Germain, and are stitched together in flagrant refusal of the standard codes of cinematic diegesis—establishing shot, detail; shot, counter-shot; action, reaction—or continuity and narrative development (see Figure 3.2). Now and again, the image sequences are interrupted by extensive expository intertitles, which again remind the viewer that language takes a visible, material form when it is read, and is, in this way, also staked within the hierarchical order that normally privileges sound and image.

Isou’s original 35mm footage is also frequently interrupted by bits of found film stock, including clips of literary celebrities and a good deal of excerpted rushes he had allegedly gleaned from the trash bins of the *Services cinématographique des Armées* (Cinematic Section of the Armies, *sca*), which had recently relocated to Fort d’Ivry in Ivry-sur-Seine.²⁸ Produced by the Army for popular consumption in the form of newsreels, such sequences were intended for propagandistic efforts, to communicate the mounting tensions in Indochina in terms controlled by the French Army. So, here, for example, in excerpted clips that Isou weaves into his montage, we are made privy to scenes depicting the pomp and circumstance of an imperial political cere-



Figure 3.2. Isidore Isou, film still, *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, 1951, showing Isou walking along a boulevard in Paris.

Figure 3.3. Isidore Isou, film still, *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, 1951, showing Isou's manipulation of found footage of a political ceremony.

Figure 3.4. Isidore Isou, film still, *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, 1951, showing a ruined village in Indochina.

mony and the mechanistic movement of French troops marching through rural areas (see Figure 3.3).²⁹ We are also introduced to local Vietnamese culture, in the form of fishermen at work and fragments of temples and villages in ruins (see Figures 3.4 and 3.5). Intercut with the footage from the boulevard Saint-Germain, these images from a site of war have the uncanny effect of destabilizing both the temporal and spatial particularity of Paris, which otherwise appears uniformly grey, abandoned, and near lifeless.

Exactly unlike the pageantry of the ceremonies, be they military or political, that Isou weaves into his film, his wanderings along the Boulevard Saint-Germain take no specific direction or focus (see Figure 3.2). We might read the effect of splicing these banal wanderings into the propaganda segments as also disruptive to the presumptive order of the Indo-chinese sequences, rendering them as futile as Isou's wanderings, or as inexplicable as the other montaged sequences, which are just as likely to vacillate between oppositional pairs—the heights of residential buildings and the irregular paving stones on the ground, for example, or the church of Saint Germain-des-Prés and a Vietnamese temple—as to repeat some sequences at random. In some instances, the same clips are repeated upside down and in reverse. Most importantly, they are often scratched through in what remains the most literal demonstration of Isou's theorization of the “ciselant,” or chiseling phase of aesthetic development, wherein an artistic genre is reduced to its most essential qualities. Here, we see such chiseling put into effect by Isou literally carving into the celluloid of the 35mm film itself, deliberately scratching out faces and also gouging links between frames such that the “absent” image renders itself just as positively as the one otherwise captured in the film medium. So, too, does this image move and vibrate as the film sequences are projected.

Within the terms of Isou's prognoses, such chiseling marks the penultimate stage of a creative cycle built on destruction and re-creation, to which, he argues, that all art forms and the societies from which



Figure 3.5. Isidore Isou, film still, *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, 1951, showing the effects of Isou's "ciselant" technique and scratched celluloid.

they are generated must conform. The images in this part of the film are not placed so as to be logically related, and they are ultimately written over by Isou's marks and so undone by this violence to the film stock itself. This is not to say that the image is not important in Isou's work. In fact, whereas critics have traditionally seized upon the mechanics of the voice-over as the central component of the film, it is instead the images that set up the most important demonstration of Isou's Lettrist principles.³⁰

As explained by the mechanics of the "chiseling" phase of Isou's aesthetic model and as demonstrated in the first instance of Isou's deliberate and dramatic scratching of the film stock, the marks made on the film's celluloid reduce its capacity to capture and register an image in its most primary quality as material ground to an imposed figure. The scratched frames that punctuate the film's visual component are first seen at the beginning of the film's second chapter, "The development." As the commentator embarks on a tale of Daniel's sexual pursuits, the images on screen diverge even more markedly from the soundtrack than they had in chapter one: here, the stock footage is introduced, spliced among more and repeated scenes of the protagonist's wanderings in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, which are increasingly disrupted by flipping, reversing, and scratching. Suddenly, a lightning-like coil of white strikes through what appears to be stock footage of a carpenter filing a small block of wood clenched in a vice (see Figure 3.5). Only cracked fragments of the image remain in the path cut by Isou's effacing scratch, which splits the image in nearly equal halves.

The implications of this and the multitude of marred frames that follow are crucial. First, the scratching undermines the representational function of the original image. Instead of an image of a carpenter at work, we are presented with the fragments of what had been that image. These fragments can only begin to suggest what they had stood to signify before. Indeed, the image is quite literally defaced, as the visage of the carpenter falls victim to Isou's violent scrapes. It bears repeating here that most of the scratches in *Traité de bave et d'éternité* are made over the faces of individuals, usually hovering over single faces or leaping across the countenances of multiple figures in groups. En masse, these faceless armies lend a ghostly quality to the film, all the while reiterating, again and again, that the images flashing before the audience

are just that: images, not the figures they were once intended to represent. They are—much like the letters Isou privileges as the foundation of his aesthetic platform—the raw material of an artist, in this case, the director, Isidore Isou, and therefore available to material manipulation and transformation.

As suggested by the diatribe that the film's protagonist, Daniel [Isou], rendered at the ciné-club in the moment leading up to the film's presentation of *Le manifeste du cinéma discrepant* (Manifesto of Discrepant Cinema) Isou's intention is to "sculpt flowers on film," so that "a new order will emerge from the disorder." Indeed, in the second chapter of the film, Isou does just that, scraping simplistic flower-like drawings into the film stock, obscuring the faces of his would-be subjects, and subjecting his film to manipulations that reveal the materiality of the celluloid itself. Despite Isou's insistence on the necessary discordance of image and sound, we should remember that it is not insignificant that the first instance of scratched film depicts a craftsman at work filing away, which is to say shaping form by means of subtraction (see Figure 3.5).³¹ This oft-repeated sequence underscores Isou's process of distressing his film stock with abrasive materials to destroy the quality and integrity of the images contained therein. In rendering these images non-representational, he further disrupts the audience's urge to passively identify, or name, that which these images would otherwise depict. The film stock and the photographic apparatus upon which it is built are thus revealed in their eminent superficiality, as silent and impenetrable, for example, as the faces of the photographed statues in Malraux's musée imaginaire. In this way, we might also see Isou's efforts as meant to undo precisely that kind of spatial certainty or "surface coherence" that Siegfried Kracauer had lamented as key to the duplicitous relationship of the photographic image to knowledge and experience, as discussed in chapter 1.

Such efforts to disrupt the space of the image—both its depth as a medium and its temporal cohesion—take additional meaning in light of the film's sustained focus on disrupting the spatial coherence of the city of Paris with scenes from Indochina and through Isou's peripatetic wanderings. These disruptions constitute a crucial component of the film's strategy of deterritorialization, both as this term would come to be defined, for example, by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and as the more traditional sense of the term would suggest. For Deleuze and Guattari, deterritorialization involves the general process of decontextualizing a set of relations—especially of labor and production, as Isou's own models of youth-based externalism would also do—in order to make them newly available for more flexible applications and associations. In more traditional uses of the term, these relations are more explicitly ascribed in relation to a specific place; deterritorializing this place implies removing it from the authority that had already ascribed it as belonging to a specific territory. In Isou's film, while the backdrop of Saint-Germain-des-Prés remains banal and unmotivated, it is nonetheless extremely specific. Not only does the voiceover name several bars and cafés that the protagonist Daniel [Isou] frequents, but the camera also lingers on the famous awnings and façades of Saint-Germain-

des-Prés, as if to reinforce Daniel/Isou's perpetual exteriority as *himself* a foreigner, intersplined into the fabric of the film. Significantly, these urban spaces are populated by association with the men and women of letters who might normally inhabit them, who are introduced here only through found footage depicting the actors, dramatists, and filmmakers who not only featured prominently in the intellectual culture of the time—Jean Cocteau, Blaise Cendrars, Marcel Achard, Jean-Louis Barrault, Blanche Brunoy, Danièle Delorme, Edouard Dhermitte, Danile Gélín, André Maurois, and Armand Salacrou—but who are also now associated with the scenes from the war in Indochina that have been spliced into the film's second chapter.

The effect is twofold. On a thematic level, Isou might be seen as making a point about the rift between contemporary speech and political action. While many of the “talking heads” he imports into his montage were known precisely for their *words* (either their own or those of the authors whose lines they performed), in Isou's appropriation they are rendered incapable of generating their own speech. Their silence, and indeed what is more acutely represented as their muteness, assumes weight in juxtaposition with the shots from the site of war with which they are intercut, and about which they can say absolutely and literally nothing. Much more significantly in relationship to the project of deterritorialization described above, the montage has the effect of reintroducing aspects of another culture, rooted in another location but presented in a state of ruin, into the heart of the architecture and urban form of the French capital city. Unlike the juxtapositions that Malraux privileged in the photographic pairings of *Les voix du silence*, Isou's end in stitching what has been discarded or disallowed as war into a site of peace. That this is achieved through the idiom of a purportedly narrative film becomes especially important, in that the stock narrative that unfolds in the second chapter turns on the sexual conquest of several women, including one “Eve,” whom the commentator describes as being “like the sculptural image of war.”³² Indeed, while sexual and romantic relations have often fed into and been appropriated by the metaphoric language of imperialism, they reappear here in the commentator's description of his (as a stand-in for Isou) own aesthetic agenda as aiming to “conquer” the medium at hand, precisely by dividing it into its constituent parts. At the end of this film segment, the voice of the commentator tells us that the film's author, “Jean-Isidore Isou,” finds the romantic story insipid, but nevertheless understands that film audiences come to the cinema for their “*petite dose de tendresse dominicale et hebdomadaire*” (little dose of weekly, Sunday tenderness).³³ We might understand this as parallel to how audiences might also have seen footage like that from Indochina, when they ventured to the state-controlled Sunday newsreels that dominated the diffusion of world news before the advent of televisual reporting.³⁴

In order to counter this specific variety of banality, Isou concludes the second chapter by proposing Lettrist poetry as a means to resist narrative metaphor through the experience of spontaneous sensation.³⁵ To this end, he edits into his montage a clip of François Dufrêne reciting two early examples of what Dufrêne would later



Figure 3.6. Isidore Isou, film still, *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, 1951, showing the effects of Isou's "ciselant" technique and scratched celluloid.

name *crirhythmes*, nonsensical poems based on a marriage of the human voice as a cry and Lettrist principles of sound-based signification. The poems, an effort to express the body through the means of its immediate capacity for communication, corresponded to Isou and other Lettrists' belief that the avenue to achieving the kinds of sonorous amplitude they hoped would redefine the conditions of communicating experience in the present involved not only undoing the kinds of narrative emplotments performed in the second chapter of *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, but also involved reconsidering the technological apparatus that had contributed to their dissemination and evolution.³⁶

Thus, in *Traité*, Isou's emphasis on "chiseling" the form to its material base meant stripping the medium to a point where it could be redeveloped, with a very different eye to the technological process of cinematic montage and its efforts to adhere sound and image. Indeed, in the film's first chapter, Daniel is "heard" ruminating—or, rather, the commentator reports that he is ruminating—on the original split of so-called silent cinema into separate tracks, one sonic and one visual. It is in the subsequent fusion of these two elements that Isou locates the origins of what he describes as cinema's "false perfection," which has limited the medium and turned it into what he considers to be a "bloated" version of itself. Appropriately then, it is only during the Lettrist recitations that the film's image track gives way completely to an entirely imageless and uninterrupted flow of scratches, thumbprints, fragments of countdown sequences, and other detritus of ruined film stock, as if to demonstrate visually what is occurring at the same moment in the soundtrack, namely, the complete and chaotic annihilation of speech as language (see Figure 3.6). By pairing Dufrêne's *crirhythmes*, for example, with the most pronounced visualizations of chaos the film has to offer, these moments are, perhaps ironically, the most discordant and yet also the ones in which the film's image and the soundtrack are most in sync. This occurs thematically—in the simultaneous realization of both visual and aural manifestations of non-meaning—but also sensorially, as the rapid, inconsistent spattering of the white scratches pulse quite deliberately with the rhythm of the poet's sound-making. From chiseled image and chiseled sound, the film hereby reinitiates an ample phase based on a new vocabulary of reconstructed sound and image.

Isou's desire to thus generate a dissonant or discrepant cinema in order to reprioritize the parameters of the medium corroborates the hypothesis developed by the art historian and theorist of visuality, Jonathan Crary, regarding the historical parameters of what Guy Debord would claim as "the spectacle," and the subject that the

“society of the spectacle” produces through various mechanisms of attention and distraction. Arguing against the kind of dehistoricized leveling of Debord’s analytic—which some might find, for example, in art historian T. J. Clark’s use of the term to interpret Manet’s paintings from the 1860s in relationship to contemporaneous developments in photography and Haussmannian urbanism—Crary draws on Debord’s suggestion in his *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle* (1987) that, when he wrote *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967, the spectacle itself was barely forty years old.³⁷ Working from this date, Crary proposes that the spectacle might well trace its origins to 1927, when the release of the feature-length film *The Jazz Singer* marked the emergence of synchronized sound in film. In that capacity, the film inaugurated what Crary calls “a transformation in the nature of subjective experience,” and initiated “the complete vertical integration of production, distribution, and exhibition within the film industry and its amalgamation with the corporate conglomerates that owned the sound patents and provided the capital for the costly move to the new technology.”³⁸

Crary’s location of the spectacle within this historical trajectory is significant in that it complicates the reception of the term as an exclusively optical constellation, while also historicizing the conditions, both cultural and political, of its hegemony. Dislodged from a purely visual register, the spectacle emerges as both a part and a condition of a larger organization of perceptual consumption, which, Crary observes, is more akin in its structure to architecture than the photographic apparatus with which it is usually associated. In what remains the most illuminating text on Debord’s model, Crary writes that “the full coincidence of sound with image, of voice with figure, not only was a crucial new way of organizing space, time, and narrative, but it instituted a more commanding authority over the observer, enforcing a new kind of attention,” a model of subjectivity that he will develop to great benefit in subsequent analyses of art-historical looking.³⁹ For the purpose of the materials at hand, it is important to emphasize that it was exactly such attention that made the observer newly available to the manipulation of propaganda, especially the televisual variety that would develop with increasing vigor over the course of the twentieth century.

Such insight helps make sense of Isou’s suggestion that instead of creating a television of cinema, it would be better to create a radio of the same. In *Traité de bave et d’éternité*, when Isou has the commentator ask: “Because of television, radio has become a type of cinema. Why shouldn’t cinema in turn become a type of *radio*?” he is not just prioritizing one representational medium over another.⁴⁰ Rather, by nodding to an emphatically visual practice that would nonetheless hinge on the auralization of moving words as sound, he means to inaugurate a new era of attention and experience. Such would be based not on absorption but on rupture and on a creative re-engagement, precisely the kind of verbal reshuffling that, by schooling audiences in the discrepant but simultaneous practices of seeing, reading, and hearing differentially, might condition those same audiences to see, or better, to imagine the space behind a representation or a façade rather than just its surface coherence. It is

perhaps the voice identified only as “the voice of the stranger,” who explains the significance of this best in *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, when he pronounces enthusiastically, if also somewhat enigmatically, in the film's third chapter: “It is fantastic all the same, Mr. Daniel, you will be the first to pose the problem of sentences in the cinema, where, up to now, there has been only the problem of images.”⁴¹ Far from undoing the place that the image has in securing the viewer's attention or suggesting that Isou's film means to replace images with sound or with language, whether written or spoken, such tautological affirmation underscores Isou's investment in the flow of images themselves as phrases, susceptible to the same dislocations and disruptions as their textual coordinates.

Indeed, Isou's film *Traité de bave et d'éternité* is as much a treatise on a revolution in—and of—filmmaking as it is one on the failures of language, written and spoken. At the end of the film, Daniel pronounces that contemporary speech has lost its power: “*Mon film*,” the antagonistic protagonist announces—thereby securing the *mise-en-abyme* that identifies him as Isou and his film as Isou's: “I will call my film *Drool and Eternity* or *Drool and Marble* or *Drool and Steel* to mark the distance between the dust of our speech and the height of its power.”⁴² As discussed above, reconstituting this power was the first item on Isou's agenda for articulating the terms of a new society. And, as proposed in both the final chapter of the film, “Le preuve” and in *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique* discussed earlier, the letter was the tool that Isou chose to build a new language. Anchoring himself in a tradition dating to the Symbolist poets who employed letters for their associative connotations, Isou believed the emotive power of the letter finds resonance not only in European cultures but also in the entirety of humanity. Single letters, he was convinced, could bear the weight of entire civilizations.⁴³

It is precisely this faith that must be historicized and carefully considered. The end of the Second World War and the beginning of a global decolonization mark two processes that, perhaps more than any others in the twentieth century, would radically reorient the ways in which language was thought and used to delimit specific territories and how it would also come to be used in efforts to exceed exactly these same demarcations. It was in Romania between 1942 and 1944, which is to say on the heels of the alliance between Romanian prime minister Ion Antonescu and the Axis and the subsequent German occupation of Romania, that Isou first began to develop the central tenets of Lettrism. Such origins help explain, perhaps, the violent rhetoric that infuses both *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie* and *Traité de bave et d'éternité* in a manner consistent with the events of the period. Indeed, Isou's reliance on words like “détruire,” “témoigner,” “torturer,” “tuer,” (destroy, witness, torture, kill) affiliate the text with efforts to “écrire le rien” and “concrétiser le silence” (write the nothingness and concretize the silence) that such literary figures as Maurice Blanchot would describe as marking the attempt to come to terms with the “catastrophe” or “désastre,” of the Second World War and the impact of industrialized death on poetic, indeed all cultural, production.⁴⁴ To these conditions we should add the exclusion of

populations from their place of birth, a phenomenon unique neither to the Fascist expulsion and murder of Europe's Jews or colonization's similar appropriations and population decimations. Isou's own reliance on military metaphor and such imagery as the depiction of a French military general constituted entirely of medals and pins—as if made of so many Lettrist ideograms—remind us that such a vocabulary did not remain contained within the register of exclusive references to “The war,” as Blanchot's phrasing (and capitalization) would have us remember the Second World War (see Figure 3.7 and the epigraph cited on page 77). Instead, in *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, such images are explicitly connected to the decolonial conflict unfolding in Southeast Asia.

“Cris pour 5,000,000 de juifs égorgés” (Cries for 5,000,000 Slaughtered Jews) is one of twenty *Récitations graves et joyeuses* (Serious and Joyful Recitations) that Isou claims he appended to the *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie* after he moved to France. He added the text in order to cede to “the necessity of an integration in the contemporary,” by which he perhaps meant to allude to the French problem of remembering the recent past after the end of the Second World War.⁴⁵ Whether it was written at the same time as the rest of the text or afterward is of less import than the ways in which this poem further evidences the relationship between the poetic formulation Isou articulates and his efforts to address the historical present, and thereby to address the problem of engaged communication suggested by Sartre as the exclusive domain of non-abstract literature. A hybrid poem that he identifies as a “*lettrise*”—part event score, part musical score, part poem—“Cris” relies heavily on sounds evocative of mass religion to analogize war and its experience. Such usage is even more pronounced in the monumental sonic symphony “La guerre,” which attempts to tell the history of the Second World War through nothing more than the repetition of sounds generated by the chiseling of proper nouns into constituent letters,⁴⁶ and is also published in the same volume as an illustration of Isou's Lettrist theories. While it is true that the excess of such representations might have led some audiences then (but more likely since) to receive these poems as kitsch, a historicized reception must attend to the ways in which their reference to the topic of the slaughter of European Jewry would have been received in 1946 and 1947. As discussed elsewhere in this book, it was at this time that the newly emergent (and short-lived) Fourth Republic found itself divided between the *épuration* or purge and the trials meant to tease out the matter and manner of French complicity in the extermination of Europe's Jewry.⁴⁷ The question of what had happened at the detention centers and work camps in France and farther east was thus unlikely fodder for humor or lightheartedness.

“Cris pour 5,000,000 de juifs égorgés” demonstrates well Isou's engagement in the project of rendering a new language in time with its history. The “*récitation*” also



Figure 3.7. Isidore Isou, film still, *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, 1951, showing Lettrist-style poster of a “General.”

alogy they have generated, the visible appearance of Isou's early *lettries* on the page is central to their meaning.

In the case of the *lettrie*, this meaning depends upon the hand-set typography and the handwritten phonetic notations for such sounds as whispers, sighs, exhalations, hiccups, inhalations, and clicks of the tongue that annotate and clutter the page. Unlike, then, Mallarmé's famous utilization of the white space of the page's margins, Isou's attention to the graphic qualities of his poetry has very little to do with its visual impact per se (conditions that only secure and fix meaning in Isou's model), and everything to do with how the text should be verbally articulated. Isou even states that future generations will have to codify the formal typographical devices necessary to communicate his instructions, which in the *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie* he renders provisional. Whereas Mallarmé and the modernist formalism he would inspire was concerned with the time and space that frame the individual reader's experience, Isou's focus on the visual appearance of his *lettries* indicates his conception of his public as something other than a reading audience, that is to say one formed from beyond the realm of language, strictly speaking.

"Cris" begins with a handwritten notation instructing that it is to be read "raucque," or "hoarse."⁴⁸ The following line includes a single nonsense series of letters, "oiveiguéivéinai," which, when recited aloud as per the notational instructions printed on the same page, echo the Yiddish expression "oy vey" that traditionally indicates dismay or distress. The next line includes the first graphic symbol, a small triangle, which hand-printed notes at the bottom of the page indicate should be read in a "râle," a deep-throated rattle. Employing a simple rhyme scheme throughout the first lines of this first four-line stanza, but without turning to a single known word, Isou manages to evoke not only the tone of speaking about the Holocaust—hushed, painful—but begins to allude to its subject. The written instructions for the hoarse tone of voice and the symbols that indicate such extra-linguistic sounds as the rattle in the third line remind us that although the poem appears printed on the page of a book, it is intended as an oral recitation. On the page, the poem makes little sense. Confusing the distinct notions of public and private, graphic and uttered, its significance depends instead on a communal public dimension and on the audience who hears it.

The aural dimension was not the only path to this new public, which Isou referred to as grounded in "*un nouveau communisme de la poésie*" (a new communism of poetry).⁴⁹ As his initial interruption of Tzara's play suggests, Isou was certainly aware of, and self-consciously positioned Lettrism in a corrective relationship to, earlier, similar avant-garde "innovations." The sound poems that Isou belted out at the Vieux-Colombier certainly recall—and in a way not at all lost on his original 1946 audience—the anarchist sensationalism and poetic experimentation of the historical avant-garde: the onomatopoetic tendencies of the Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and the Surrealist Guillaume Apollinaire; the *zaum* experiments of the Russian Futurists Velimir Khlebnikov and Alexei Kruchenykh; the Dada antics of Hugo Ball,

Raoul Hausmann, and Kurt Schwitters; not to mention such nineteenth-century poets and linguists as Christian Morgenstern, who had explored the onomatopoeic relationship between words and their signifiers. It is no wonder, then, that Isou's extended reflections regarding his sometimes laudatory, at other times disdainful, relationship to these forerunners (with the exception of the Russians, whom he ignores for several more years) constitute the bulk of the lengthy *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie* in which "Cris" is published.

Beyond using sound to form a community around the commonality of listening, Isou's lettries attempted to make available an experience of the present otherwise denied a public audience through an assumed direct referentiality of the spoken letter. Here, the phonetic transcription provided by the nonsensical letters that were meant to be voiced attempts to form a new means of signification based on an emphatic transnationalism that was or might have been grounded in multilingualism. Again, as was the case with Lettrism's similarly trans-media aspirations, guidelines as to how this particular polyglossia should be approached are suggested by the technique of the discrepant montage introduced in *Traité de bave et d'éternité*. Just as the film weaves footage of Paris with that of marching troops in Indochina, "Cris" marries Yiddish and Hebrew to French and German, as if to forge a pairing that produces language dialogically, across linguistic boundaries. Following the hoarse allusion to Yiddish lament in the first lines, the poem rises to a rapid crescendo, "*jusqu'à hurlement*" or just to screaming, and begins to incorporate the sounds of German "words," such as those in the fifth line of the poem, which reads: "VEINEN boudn loudn KLEINEN meinen." This pattern continues such that by the end of the third stanza, and after several pauses indicated by repeated black dots, sounds evocative of both French and German alternate in the rhyme scheme. Lines eighteen and nineteen read:

lebanne—letrain; le train lebanne
le vanne—leganne—lemaïns lélan

This is followed by a series of alternating "tffff" and footnoted annotations indicating more rattles thereby concretizing the allusions of this translingual gibberish by including both the actual sound made by a train, and, at the same time, the rattle which, at the beginning of the poem, is indubitably associated with the slaughtered Jews referenced in the title.

When performed in the specific temporospatial coordinates of reconstruction Paris, the shock value of not only these repetitive sounds of a faux German but also the screams and moans that Isou incorporates through notation into the body of the poem—"cri égorgé" and "*hurlement*," to name but two—would certainly have imparted a jarring directness to the experience. Such an effect needs to be differentiated from such recitations, for instance, as the famous performance by Hugo Ball of his poem "Karawane" at the Cabaret Voltaire nightclub in Zurich, in 1916. In this instance, Ball's outlandish Bishop-lobster costume worked to secure the meaning of the sounds Ball emitted within the specific instance of his body and its material pres-

ence. As such, the appropriated polyglossia of “Karawane” could assume meaning only through distinct reference to the individuality of the human form and the subject it embodied.⁵⁰

Isou’s poem works differently, creating meaning through the activation of the erosive conjunction formed by what we will have to call his invented word-sounds. Here, it is the jarring contrast of sound itself that creates meaning, not the absurdity of the reference nor the physical presence of the speaker. Such was, in fact, the point of the literal scratching-out of the faces of the Lettrists in *Traité de bave et d’éternité*. In “Cris” this contrast is enhanced by the repetition of certain word-sounds that are, significantly, evocative of the same ones that Blanchot names as “absolutes” in the passage that serves as an epigraph to this chapter: Auschwitz, Dachau, Büchenwald. That these words were perceived to be final and full repositories of meaning is precisely what Isou’s “chiseling” aims to undo. In 1946 and 1947, this effect would have been in direct countermeasure to the typical presentation of historical experience in Reconstruction Paris, split as it was into “a dialectic of silence and exposure,” to use Benjamin Buchloh’s phrase for the opposing tensions created by France’s firm commitment to the repression of catastrophic historical experience on the one hand and the rapid development of a new culture of consumption on the other.⁵¹ This dialectic fed the articulation of such aesthetics as Andre Malraux’s, marking them as fertile ground for critiques poised by the subaltern experiences they rendered “silent.”

Other Lettrist works from the period similarly focus on the subaltern experience of being Jewish in Paris during the Second World War and just after. Here, I refer to Maurice Lemaître’s *Canailles* (Riff-Raff, 1951) and to Gabriel Pomerand’s *Saint ghetto des prêtres* (Saint Ghetto of the Loans), two examples of what the Lettrists called “*métagraphies*,” traditional narratives told by an invented system of “neo-hieroglyphics where sentences were interrupted or completed by pictures and vice versa, ‘thus introducing into alphabetic writing not only the art of painting, but the graphics of all peoples or social categories past and present.’”⁵² Often entirely pictographic, the *métagraphies* invoke a new way of learning to read, imposing the role of detective upon the reader, who must struggle to interpret the written page (see Figures 3.9 and 3.10).⁵³ As such, the genre might be construed as a commentary on the hermetic system of writing and its privileged space in the printed page, or it might be positioned as an attempt to initiate a more interactive, “readerly” text—in a Barthesian sense—despite arguments voiced by such critics as Johanna Drucker that these novels epitomize the spectacle of modernist impenetrability and the fetishization of a private, writerly project.⁵⁴ In the *métagraphies*, the narratorial impact follows from the elusive form of its presentation, which eschews any singular mode of sense-making, either textual or pictorial.⁵⁵

This emphasis in early Lettrism on the experience of being subaltern (here part of the minor culture that grew from the experience of being a Jew from “elsewhere”) returns us to the importance of the German sounds, especially the “-ein” suffix, in “Cris.”⁵⁶ In this context, as well as in Isou’s hijacking of a Dada event or interrupting the normal sequence of events at a jazz-filled café, these sounds must be under-

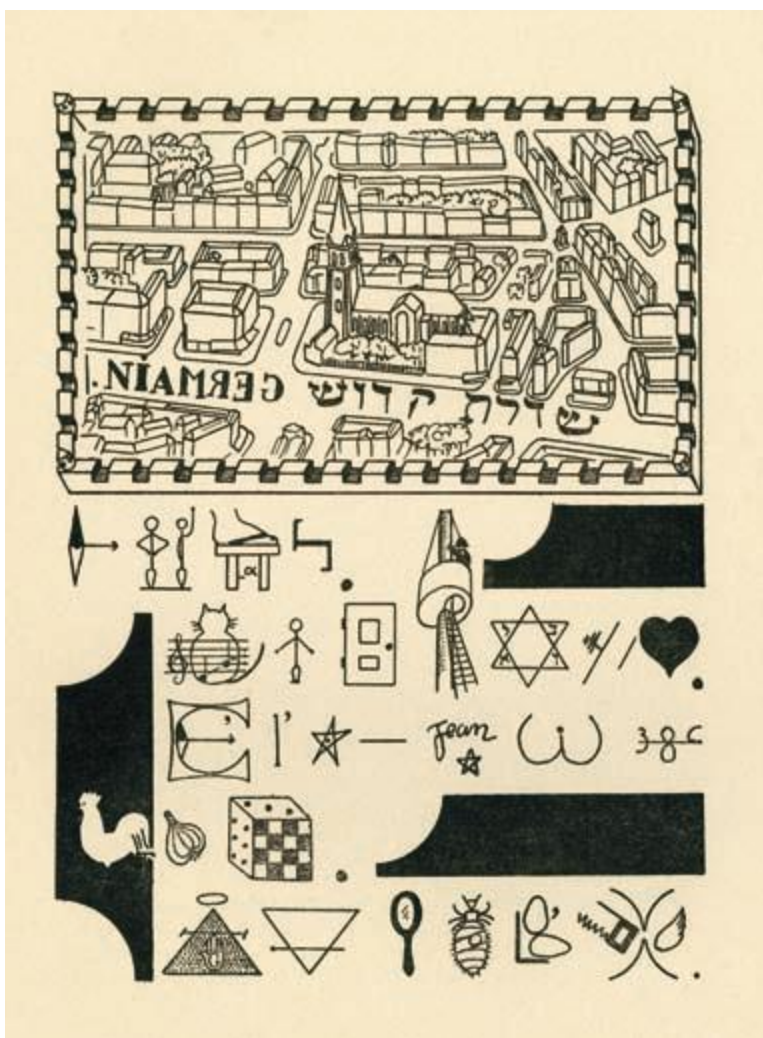


Figure 3.9. Gabriel Pomerand, page from the artist's book *Saint ghetto des prêtres: grimoire* (Paris: O.L.B., 1950).

stood as an attempt to introduce a refusal to forget what had been a specifically local complicity under four years of German occupation. Through such an attempt, Isou aspired to write his presence, and the presence of so many absent Jews, into the city's fabric, again attempting to literally deterritorialize language in order to question the naturalness with which it maps actual space, thereby limiting and circumscribing the experiences and memories that are possible there.

It is instructive to compare Isou's evocation of Germanic sounds with the writings of his much more famous and widely celebrated contemporary, Paul Celan, who insisted in writing in German, despite also being a Romanian Jew. As Celan explained in his important "Bremen Speech" (1958), his decision to write in the language of his



Figure 3.10. Maurice Lemaître, page from *Canailles*, 1950. © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

aggressors was motivated by a desire to “bring closer” the “sound of the unreachable.”⁵⁷ He explains that, throughout the Second World War and after, when actual distance could not be broached, “Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss.” Throughout the experience of his own internment in a Romanian labor camp and in all the accounts he collected from the survivors of the extermination camps to the west, Celan acknowledges this language had gone “through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech. It went through.” He continues by noting that “It gave me no words for what was happening.” Instead, it merely “went through it. Went through

and could resurface, ‘enriched’ by it all.” He concludes the speech by suggesting that poems, as instances of language, are dialogues that reach across time, and so explains that it was in the same language that had “gone through,” and that “could resurface” that he tried “during those years and the years after, to write poems: in order to speak, to orient myself, to find out where I was, where I was going, to chart my reality.”⁵⁸

Isou’s interest in language, and indeed in poetry, is different. In the idealized realm that he imagines, language is not rooted in any given place. The distance it travels is not across time, but across space, both that of the page and that of the physical world. Similarly, its temporality is of the present, not of the future. His model is far less optimistic than Celan’s regarding the possibility that what had become conventional tropes of poetic usage, derived from conventional language, particularly national language, could be revived. In his *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie*, for example, Isou instructs that Lettrist poetry must draw from an explicitly international register of linguistic conventions so that it never privileges one national language over another. He is careful to distinguish such internationalism from what he understands to be the appropriative usurpations of “American” poetry based on “*le dos des dialectes trouvés (indien, nègre, espagnol)*” (the backs of found dialects: Indian, Black, Spanish) or “Russian” poetic language, which similarly leans on the backs of Ukrainian, Armenian, and Kirgizien dialects.⁵⁹ Instead of restoring such colonialist appropriations (which would only reinscribe a “*langue coloniale*”), he wishes to find a way by which a Lettrist alphabet might create a new universality, subsequent to which “poetry would become the true and concrete communion between the races.”⁶⁰ For Isou, such internationalisms—codified as an “International Phonetic Code”⁶¹—respond to what he sees as a necessary move toward the new, integrated society to which he wants to belong. It is not unimaginable to think that, for Isou, such a universally rendered phonetics could eradicate the exclusivity of the priority placed on the very national and ethnic belonging that had deprived him, along with so many other Romanian Jews, of their civil rights in the late 1930s and through the early 1940s under the Romanian prime minister Ion Antonescu.⁶² The specifics of the Romanian experience notwithstanding, nothing spoke to the exclusivity of national and ethnic belonging in the period more fulsomely than the German language.

It is in this context, therefore, that we must understand Isou’s discrepant use of sounds that evoke German in “Cris.” In one of the appendices to his *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie*, written as an “Épître aux Lettristes” (A Letter to Lettrists), Isou acknowledges that, despite his protests to the contrary, there remain “*puissances souterraines*” or “hidden powers” to words, powers communicated by their “sonorous” qualities.⁶³ In “Cris” he attempts to harness such power by deploying and *détourning* words stemming from two principal domains: proper names of concentration camps and phoneticized spellings of Hebrew prayers. The first category necessarily continues the German theme, this time replacing the tonal aspects of the repeated “*einin*” sounds with the actual German names of concentration camps. In what might be called the refrain of the poem, meant to be repeated twice, Isou writes:

Auschwitz—schwitz—schwitz
 Buchenwald!
 Bouh~~n~~wald!
 ADONOOOI! ADONOI!

These short lines are followed by a second grouping that is also meant to be repeated and in which the catalogue of concentration camps expands to include the infamous camps at Bergen-Belsen and Mauthausen. Intriguingly, Isou prints the name of the Mauthausen camp, first in all capital letters, followed by an exclamation point; then in the next line he rewrites it all lower-case, in a phonetically French version, “mauthausenne,” as if to underscore that the French have a complicity in this language of destruction while also undoing the national priority of any one naming system.

The naming of the concentration camps, words that certainly any French person in the late 1940s would have known all too well, words that would have shaped their very capacity to remember or forget—as Blanchot would suggest in his essay “War and Literature”—helps Isou avoid the abstracting capacities of language that he wants most to resist, even if, as whole words, they do not strictly adhere to the letter of his Lettrist law. Precisely by avoiding such metaphorical poetics as the famous “black milk” image from Celan’s poem “Todesfuge” (Death Fugue),⁶⁴ Isou hopes to let reality enter untransformed into his poetry, to allow the sound of “*Auschwitz*” simply to signify itself as an absolute, as something that no poetic language can grasp, and which is therefore not available to the same displacements as those Blanchot would elsewhere generalize as “the space of literature” in order to name the distance that separates the word from its referent. In this naïve but still earnest poetics, Isou insists upon what he hopes to inscribe as the ability of language reproduced as sound to reference traumatic experience and to resist the kind of written poetic language that refers to nothing more than words *themselves* even as it tries to distill the mechanisms by which such words might refer to the real.

Nevertheless, these German words are not stranded within the poem as utterances to be left unchanged. Rather, they are subject to an active disintegration toward the unit of the letter as the poem performs the “chiseling” technique that Isou upholds in his film and in his formulations of modern artistic development more broadly put. “Auschwitz,” for example, becomes through repetition merely “schwitz,” suggesting therefore the superfluity of even the most direct language. More than a unit of proper linguistic signification (such as a word), “schwitz” connotes, on the one hand, a Yiddish term meaning sweating or cooling off, and on the other, through onomatopoeic association, an entirely sonic intonation. Such disintegration is repeated and augmented throughout the lettries appended to the *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie*, so that even the monosyllabic sounds articulated in “Cris” end as aspirations pure and simple in his multivoiced “La guerre.” In both instances, by containing these sounds within a strictly traditional rhyme scheme that lends itself to a relentless rhythmic progression, Isou mimics what he called the “universal” language of music,

the pleasures of which he assumed were not culturally specific but rather phenomenological and primal.

In borrowing selected sounds from German, Hebrew, and Yiddish, Isou relies on the recognition of these sounds as components of traditionally constituted identities based on separation according to national or cultural divisions, only to transform them immediately into a universal language that communicates sensation. Thus out of the destruction of a language that affirms identity according to division an ecumenical one is born. It was Isou's hope that these sounds, completely absorbed in the physical quality of their medium—the tonal aspect of the human voice but not the physical identity of the speaker—would be “incapable, objectively, of communicating anything else than a sensation,” in a manner precisely parallel to Clement Greenberg's description of music's capacity to enter “the listener's consciousness,” through the “sensuous terms of (its) physical properties.”⁶⁵

This disintegration of the word into vocally articulated sound elements, meant to be *experienced* as opposed to understood, refused the kind of impenetrability that Isou associated with the word's incapacity to accommodate change. Moreover, it attempted to model how language rendered as sound could do so. In what may have been his most utopian gesture, Isou diminishes the name of Auschwitz not to indicate that it can be erased from history, but to suggest that its referent—the lamentable world to which it refers—is neither timeless nor, in fact, as “absolute” as Blanchot would have had it, or even as Isou himself had first introduced it in the poem. Instead, the chiseling of language here demonstrates that history itself can progress and that sound is part of that progress. Isou only destroys, in other words, in order to prepare the ground for a rebuilding. This decomposition not only speaks to Isou's convictions regarding the word's inadequacy to name history, but also corrects it. At the same time, it suggests that, in order for history to progress, such naming must still happen. Otherwise, like the Jews whose experience Isou hopes to suture into the city's fabric or the memory of the War in Indochina that he attempts to inscribe within the metropolitan capital, the event itself will disappear from collective memory. It is precisely to such an effect that Isou's “Cris” borrows from the language of Hebrew prayer, using phoneticized translations of existing words for the second time in the poem that reads:

WOI zennenne FANNY moisché rachelle
OI! CHEMA ISRAELE!
élohénou lad!
élohénou

Having linked three traditional Jewish names, “Fanny,” “Moisché,” and “Rachelle” with “Israele,” Isou connects the people thus named abstractly to the Hebrew connotations of the call to prayer, “Chema Israelle,” which invites a community to form across space and time through the address: “Hear ye, Israelites.” What follows in the poem is the dwindling “s'étouffant” sighs and invocations of “élohénou” or supreme God, a lengthy pause, and then the final stanza.

This last stanza is introduced not by an instruction, as we saw in the earlier stanzas’ “rauque” or “crescendo,” but rather begins with the descriptive nomination, “prière.” And indeed, what follows is:

chema israëlle barouh adonai
 israëlle Kidischanou
 israëlle barouch mitzwotai
 wetziwanou . . . wetziwanou . . . wetziwanou . . .

This stanza echoes more precisely the *Shema Yisrael* that, derived from verses in the book of Deuteronomy, constitutes the highest prayer in the Jewish faith, meant to be intoned upon rising and retiring, but also to be uttered by the dying as a means to affirm faith in God’s power. Here, the phrasing comes together like the murmured cries of Jews in distress, asking God and holy Israel to command them and, in turn, invoking the idea of obligations (“mitzwotai”). It is this incitement to command us that completes the poem, trailing off into repetition only at the very end: “wetziwanou . . . wetziwanou . . . wetziwanou.” At the very least, such a usage works to inscribe these sounds in what might be called the “aural landscape” of Paris in the late 1940s, to memorialize the disappearance of an actual language from a city whose Jewish population had been all but annihilated. At best, however, in reinstating this oral tradition—which would have important echoes in contemporary debates about public places available to Koranic recitation and prayer in Paris⁶⁶—these sounds, which epitomize for Isou the most fundamental component of recited language, the prayer, conclude the poem with the feeling of regeneration and rebirth, the very aspects with which Isou wanted to ascribe his new poetics as a vehicle toward a new society. He also alludes to this in his film *Traité de bave et d’éternité*, when the protagonist intones that, as a child, he had always wanted *other* prayers since the too-frequent assertion of dogma ceased to amuse him. These thoughts are paired with the image of the geometric form of a Star of David, which Isou has inscribed over the footage of someone praying in a synagogue, and which he follows with the Indochinese footage described above.

To a certain degree, then, we might understand the dialectic between German and Hebrew that Isou structures in “Cris” as indicative of the rebirth that he hopes to generate from the destruction of both a people and their language. It is, in fact, a deeply optimistic gesture that has him position a silent language at the forefront of a public avant-garde. At the same time, however, we also see his readiness to generalize one condition of repression with another, subtracting from the very specificity of site that his film otherwise earnestly produces. And so it is not surprising that only a year after the publication of his book *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie*, and with it the “Vingt ré citations graves,” of which “Cris” is but one, Isou’s *L’Agrégation d’un nom et d’un messie* will give a name and a more particular aspect to this interest of reintegration. In the section “Notes pour Judaïser la France,” Isou responds explicitly to his experiences of French anti-Semitism and, abandoning both his refusal of linguistic

absolutes—as well as what a figure like Giorgio Agamben might retrospectively read as the more ethical imperatives of his attempts to have witnessed the essential nature of trauma in his efforts to memorialize an absence—issues a charge for Jewish intellectuals to name themselves as such.⁶⁷ Identifying themselves in such a way would, Isou reasoned, necessarily challenge the discrimination directed toward the larger ethno-religious group to which they belonged, even if invisibly. The subtitle of the section “Affiches pour les rues de Paris 1947” (Posters for the Streets of Paris, 1947) anticipates the spatial significance of the following passages, which retrospectively shed new light on the significance of the “Lettrist revolution” posters that Isou actually did paste on the streets of Paris in 1946.⁶⁸

Here, the text does not take the form of a poster at all, but rather a lengthy diatribe that complicates Isou’s ambitions to otherwise refuse language’s claims to physical as opposed to sonic space. Having begun with the explanation “I write because Paris frightens me,” Isou elaborates on the anti-Semitic graffiti he reads on the city’s walls, where he repeatedly confronts such denunciations as “Down with Jews” a slur that is also pictured in Lemaître’s *Canailles*. It is against such propositions that he explains his hopes to “*agiter les hommes*,” or incite them to action.⁶⁹ Advocating a “*Judaïsme d’attaque*” (Judaism of attack), he links the situation in France to that in Palestine, where newly arriving Jews were already arguing their right to protect themselves physically against the very populations they displaced. Forgetting perhaps his own experience of dispossession and fully in support of such offensives, he encourages Jews everywhere to assert themselves everywhere by “Learn(ing) to circulate around the world like the sea.” He concludes that the enemies of the Jews “have destroyed us and reduced us our essential precisely that we can accomplish this essential thing: *to Judaize France*.”⁷⁰

Here, it would seem that Isou posits a model of nationalization that abandons his earlier deterritorialized models, precisely at the same time that it confers on the making of a “people” the same aesthetic procedures of chiseling and destroying in order to rebuild. In this instance, the new, internationalist society that Isou imagines is recast as an exclusively Jewish one, which is instructed “to circulate around the world like the sea” in exactly the same manner as the French, whose imperial attributes he resents for their exclusions. In this revision of a deterritorialized world—one which borrows more from the traditional sense than the one Deleuze and Guattari ascribed the term—however, Isou reduplicates the same paradigm of conquest upon which he based his models of a more properly sonic space and which, through a dissonant aural, they had meant to abnegate.

Herein lies the paradox of Isouienne Lettrism, along with its failure. For Isou, the printed letter was never meant to be an end in and of itself, but rather a means to achieve a purity of expression realizable only by returning that letter to its sonorous, and hence emotive, capacity. Although they presented their project as if polarized refusals, Isou and the Lettrists unquestionably grounded them on what they

understood to be historical truth. And yet, their efforts to disrupt normative models of sense distribution—through either the discrepant montage privileged in *Traité de bave et d'éternité* or in their similar ambition to render sound and symbol distinct in sonic articulations—cannot but reduplicate the exclusions of the then-dominant models of belonging, which were still predicated on access to pre-determined categories of being, most customarily framed by territorial boundaries and the cultures they contained.

As an example of these models, consider Maurice Halbwachs's musings on the possibility of a memory that was collective and social as opposed to individual, and so transmitted by a subconscious language spatialized beyond the metaphorical dimensions of individualized consciousness.⁷¹ Based on research conducted and published in the decades leading up to his death in Buchenwald in 1945, Halbwachs's arguments centered on the idea that even those most subjective memories formed, retained, and articulated by an individual are the function of socially constituted forms, narratives, and relations. Conversely, his thesis emphasized memory's capacity to be a constituent of the process of constructing and maintaining community. Certainly, language and the weight of a shared linguistic heritage both function as the foundation of almost all socially constituted narratives upon which all groupings—from families to nations and religions, what Halbwachs identified as *cadres sociaux*—base themselves. Without a common language, he argued, memories cannot and will not be communicable. For Halbwachs, such commonality was generated by the shared temporal and spatial confines that described the nation and the national impulse to recognize itself in instances of the same.

Ultimately, despite its attempts to exceed such parameters and the linguistic provisions they impose about national belonging, Isou's model repeats the humanist universalisms that pervade thinking like that of Halbwachs. Isou's final proposals to recast the "identity" of France, to remake it as Jewish, do so in the name of the same will to "divide and conquer" that he earlier brought to bear on his ambitions to remake cinema in defiance of the spectacular nature of its hegemonic lure. In mapping aesthetic priorities onto identitarian ones, Isou remains equally unable to see past the limits of a space prescribed by what ends as a reterritorialization of a minoritized population *and* of language. The project of "conquering France" by deploying a minoritized identity rests upon a reinscription of national divisions as ethnic divisions, which Isou had once rejected as limiting. In such a fashion, his aesthetics resurrect an imperial logic of public, national, cultural, and aesthetic institutions that they had originally hoped to abandon. As charted here, the early Lettrist enterprise thus constitutes an important bridge between the Second World War and the decades of decolonization, pointing to important continuities between the violence that underpinned both moments, and redirecting us to understand the relationship between, on the one hand, efforts to incorporate the memories of genocide into something like a national memory, and, on the other, to see how these same experiences subsequently

“fed back” into other epistemes of cultural and national hegemony. At the same time, however, Isou’s identification of the space of Paris as a fundamental site in which to think through the relationship of cultural practice to contemporary historical conflict would resonate deeply with the work of such artists as the *décollagistes*, whose attempts to eschew strategies (like Isou’s) to reinscribe minoritized subjects into dominant histories will figure as the subject of the next chapter.

read in *Journal officiel, Lois et décrets*, 7 August 1962, where it was passed as article number 62–903, “complétant la législation sur la protection du patrimoine historique et esthétique de la France et tendant à faciliter la restauration immobilière.”

92 Malraux, “23 juillet 1962 présentation du projet du loi complétant la législation sur la protection du patrimoine historique et esthétique de la France et tendant à faciliter la restauration,” *Discours prononcés à l’Assemblée nationale*, 52–55.

93 Prost, “L’urbanisme au Maroc,” 36–37.

94 Stungo, “The Malraux Act 1962–72,” 361.

95 Bouguignon, “Les secteurs sauvegardés.”

96 Forster, “Monument/Memory and the Mortality of Architecture,” 2.

CHAPTER 3: SONIC YOUTH, SONIC SPACE

1 The term “disciple” corresponds to Isou’s Messianic self-perception and is perpetuated by such figures as Roland Sabatier, who use it to name the larger flock of young poets and artists who surrounded Isou in the 1940s and early 1950s. See Sabatier, *Le Lettrisme, les Créations et les Créateurs*, 55. Pomerand was born in Paris in 1926, but grew up in Alsace and Marseille. During the war, his mother was deported to Auschwitz. He met Isou in a soup kitchen for orphaned Jews in Paris, just after each of them had arrived there.

2 Along with Serge Berna, Jean-Louis Brau, and Gil J. Wolman, Debord parted ways with Isou after Isou publicly denounced their protest of Charlie Chaplin as “Fascist” at a press conference for Chaplin’s film, *Limelight*, at the Ritz Hotel, Paris, on 29 October 1952. The content of their protest was detailed in the form of a mimeographed broadside, “Finis les pieds plats” (No More Flat Feet), signed “l’Internationale lettriste”: Serge Berna, Guy-Ernest Debord, Jean-Louis Brau, and Gil J. Wolman, and was dated 29 October 1952. Led by Debord, the splinter group re-formed itself as the Lettrist International on 7 December 1952 at the Aubervilliers Conference and developed many of the practices, including the *dérive* and psychogeography, for which the Situationists, as they would come to be known, are best remembered. Following the split with Isou, Debord was characteristically vehement in his excoriation of the Lettrist project, despite having first come to Paris to join the group after the Cannes Film Festival in 1950 and despite the debt his early film projects owe to Isou’s *Traité de bave et d’éternité*.

3 Sussman’s exhibition was accompanied by an important catalogue that set the tone for early research into both the Lettrist and Situationist Internationals. See Sussman, *On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Moment in Time*. While the present study cannot accommodate the body of well-known work that has issued since that exhibition, the privilege this material has received in art-historical circles, and the authority allowed Debord’s language, has occluded other practices and the genealogies to which they might give rise.

4 The particulars of Isou’s economic model were first published in his *Traité d’économie nucléaire: le soulèvement de la “jeunesse”* (1949) and the subsequent journal, *Front de la jeunesse*, which he began in 1950. He also printed multiple versions of a “Manifesto” detailing the revolution of the young. In Isou’s customary refusal to cede the standardized understanding of terms, he specified that “jeune” need not be associated only with the young, as did Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in his famous claims about the age of the Futurists in

his *Futurist Manifesto* (1909). Instead, Isou explains that he means the term as a marker of those whose existence had not yet become (or had refused to become) equivalent to their economic function. Richard Ivan Jobs notes how confused Isou's economics were, and how marginal their effects. See Jobs, *Riding the New Wave*, 45.

5 See in particular Blanchot's analysis of the linguistic category of the word, which for him evokes, in its very distance from what it means to describe, "the absence of everything." For Blanchot, "This language of the unreal, this fictive language which delivers us to fiction, comes from silence and returns to silence." Blanchot, "Mallarmé's Experience," 39.

6 The phrase is central to the arguments Habermas mounts in *The Structural Transformation of the Bourgeois Public Sphere*.

7 According to a widely repeated anecdote, Isou's visit to the editorial offices of the French literary magazine *Nouvelle revue française* in the summer of 1945 was one of the first callings the young exile made upon his arrival in Paris. Hoping for an audience with the magazine's director, Jean Paulhan, but finding him absent, Isou made do with presenting himself and his "revolutionary" manuscript instead to the editor, Gaston Gallimard. When even this direct approach failed to garner Isou the approval he desired, he took a page from the avant-garde he hoped both to emulate and undermine, and staged the interruption at the Théâtre du vieux-colombier. It was on the heels of the press attention resulting from this enterprise that Gallimard agreed to publish Isou's book, which was released in 1947 and included not only Isou's lengthy analysis, but also "Le manifeste de la poésie lettriste" and several examples of the Lettrist poems, including "Vingt récitation graves et joyeuses" that Isou had recited at the Vieux-Colombier.

8 Although the event received no media attention, Isou had first performed his poetry at the Salle des Sociétés Savantes, weeks before his disruption at the Vieux-Colombier.

9 Isou's original words were: "Douze millions de jeunes vont descendre dans la rue pour faire la révolution Lettriste." See the preface by Mark Partouche to Isou, *Contre l'internationale situationniste 1960–2000*, 14.

10 See Isou's autobiographical account, *L'agrégation d'un nom et d'un messie* (The Aggregation of a Name and the Making of a Messiah).

11 Isou, "Le manifeste de la poésie lettriste," in *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*, 14.

12 While Isou made this claim in many different publications, he perhaps stated it most succinctly with the advantage of hindsight in his 1964 tract, "Tour de feu," where he asserts explicitly that "when the crisis of language and poetry is pushed beyond certain limits, it ends up placing the very structure of society in question." See Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*, 266.

13 In a 1948 tract published in the short-lived journal *Hikma*, which issued from Tunis, Isou specifically denounces Surrealism's failures as having prepared for Lettrism's success. See Isou, "Lettrisme et révolution de la jeunesse," *Hikma* 1, no. 2 (1948): n.p.

14 Originally located somewhere between music and poetry, Lettrist production eventually expanded to a totalizing aesthetic principle that included all the arts under the domain of an integrated practice. As such, Isou's production and theorization encompass work not only in the traditional literary and visual arts, including the novel and paint-

ing, but also in performance, photography, dance, theater, and even theoretical musings in such seemingly unaesthetic realms as “erotology,” psychology, and economics. His bibliography, for instance, includes both *La mécanique des femmes* (1949), a rather provocative defense of a woman’s rights to sexual pleasure (including some tips on how to achieve it); and *Traité d’économie nucléaire: Le soulèvement de la “jeunesse”* (1949), in which Isou attempts to assemble a revolutionary class based not on traditional economic disparities but on the economic function of varying age groups.

15 As if following Isou’s lead, Seaman organizes his *Concrete Poetry in France* more or less according to the same schema.

16 Consider, for instance, Isou’s declaration that “*la Lettrise ne devait apparaître qu’en France, parce que ce pays est la source du langage clair et aussi la terre de la plus belle poésie et musique contemporaine . . . la Lettrise est française, premièrement parce qu’elle est une oeuvre consciente (c’est-à-dire que par ses possibilités mêmes, conserve tout ce qu’on veut faire voir).*” (The *lettrise* could only have appeared in France because this country is the source of clear language and also the land of the most beautiful poetry and contemporary music. . . . The *lettrise* is French, primarily, because it is a *conscious* work [which is to say that by its own possibilities, it preserves everything you want to see]). Isou, *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie*, 280. These words come in an appendix, the fifth, that Isou writes to the section “Explications aux critiques” (Explanations to Critics), which concerns “La *lettrise* comme oeuvre française” (The *Lettrise* as a French Work of Art).

17 Isou, “Le manifeste de la poésie lettriste,” 12.

18 Isou, “Le manifeste de la poésie lettriste,” 14.

19 Repeated frequently in Isou’s writing, this claim is perhaps best articulated in *Les journaux de dieux, précédés d’un essai sur la définition, l’évolution et le bouleversement total de la prose et du roman*, 41. The lengthy introduction to *Les journaux de dieux* articulates Isou’s theory in relation to the ampic and chiseling phases of the novel, which almost exactly parallel those of poetry.

20 Isou, *Les journaux de dieux*, 140.

21 In Lettrist paintings, the letter’s graphicality is emphasized for its strictly visual capacity, thereby reminding us that the history of painting is also one in which meaning is construed by the reading of signs and the organizing of texts. In this way, Isou’s art-making practice anticipates the linguistic turn that would mark advanced production in the later parts of the century. See *Between Poetry and Painting*, the catalogue published in conjunction with the exhibition of Isou’s work in 1965. See also Isou, *Le lettrisme et l’hypergraphie dans la peinture et la sculpture contemporaines*, in which Isou traces a genealogy of painterly practice that closely echoes that of his account of modern poetry.

22 The Cannes Film Festival was planned to open for the first time in 1939, but was forced to close after only one day in the wake of the 1939 German invasion of France. The festival was reinitiated in 1946, when twenty-one different nations submitted films for competition. The festival saw only three editions before fall 1950, when it was rescheduled for April of 1951, a change of date that was meant to allow for a better integration with the Venice Film Festival. Such measures indicate the degree of international cooperation that slowly developed in the cultural arena after the end of the Second World War. For more about the history of the festival, see de Valck, *Film Festivals*.

23 “Film art” is a category that Uroskie understands as epitomized by De Sica’s “gritty,” Neorealist, *Miracle in Milan*, but which also includes, for example, Luis Buñuel’s *Los olvidados*, which, mixing Surrealism and Socialist Realism, won the Cannes film award for Best Director. See Uroskie, “Beyond the Black Box,” 23. Uroskie’s article is one of the first English-language efforts to argue the significance of Isou’s film in relationship to the development of a “postwar tradition of expanded cinema.” I am grateful to the author for his astute comments about the frequent mistranslation of Isou’s title and for reminding us that the “bave” of the title might be better translated as “drool” instead of as “slime” in order to emphasize Isou’s connection of this kind of “slobber”—which the French “bave” imputes as either canine or infantile—to the body as the specific vessel from which speech is uttered. See esp. 24–25n5.

24 The unfinished film (which was already over four hours long) created a scandal before it even premiered; columnists cited it in a range of French newspapers, including *Combat*, *Nice-Matin*, and *L’Humanité*.

25 In regard to Cocteau’s prize, Frédérique Devaux notes that at this point in the festival’s history, impromptu prize-naming was not uncommon. For more on the Cannes event, see Devaux, *Le cinéma lettriste*, esp. 55–62. Devaux also discusses the premiere of Isou’s film at the Studio de l’Étoile in Paris, 62–77. For its part, the Studio de l’Étoile had gained a venerable reputation for having housed the post-liberation revival of Henri Langlois’s Cercle du Cinéma long before Malraux supported its move to the Palais de Chaillot. See Mannoni, “Henri Langlois and the Musée du Cinéma.”

26 Kauffman, *Guy Debord*, 17.

27 Isou, “Traité de bave et d’éternité,” in Isou, *œuvres de spectacle*, 15. The screenplay corresponds with Isou’s intended, four-hour film and so not necessarily with the realized and distributed two-hour version of the film, although all citations provided here are included in both versions of the film. A DVD re-issue of the 1951 film, as restored by the French National Film Archive, was released by Re:Voir Video in 2008, with a soundtrack remastered by Frédéric Acquaviva.

28 See Devaux, *Le Cinéma Lettriste*, 63. The *Section cinématographique des Armées* was founded in 1915 to complement the *Section photographique de l’Armée Française*, which was created by the joint ministries of the Army, Public Instruction, Beaux-Arts, and Foreign Affairs. From 1917 to 1919 the sections were joined as the SPCA, but later disbanded. The charge of these organizations was three-fold: 1) take images that would “be interesting” from a historical point of view, i.e., images documenting ruins, destructions, etc; 2) take images that would aid in developing propaganda to send abroad; and 3) take images with an eye to developing comprehensive governmental archives for the future. The collections were also enriched with camera shots of works of art, monuments, and museums. See Guillot, “La section photographique de l’armée et la Grande Guerre.” During the Algerian War of Independence, the SCA and the SPA would be responsible for the vast outpouring of still and moving images documenting the French military experience in Algeria. These are now collected in the archives of *L’établissement de communication et de production audiovisuelle de la défense* (ECPAD).

29 The action here presumably surrounds Bao Dai, the last (and first) Emperor of Vietnam who, for a time, was also the country’s puppet leader under the Japanese occupation before he abdicated to Ho Chi Minh and eventually returned to power as the French-supported “Head of State” in South Vietnam.

30 Such a bias toward the textual or spoken components of the film may derive from the possibility that its first and most celebrated screening, at Cannes, might have presented only the soundtrack; or that audiences might have only stayed long enough to “see” that part of the film. It may also have to do with the centrality that such films as Guy Debord, *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* (1952) and Gil Wolman, *L’anticoncept* (1952)—both of which lean heavily on their soundtracks—have assumed in the now-standard narratives about the dematerialization of art and cinema in the 1960s.

31 My thanks to Elliot Reichert for sharing with me his insights regarding Isou’s scratching of the film stock. The fact that Isou chose a carpenter to embody the creativity of an action otherwise presented as destructive or, at the very least, reductive, must certainly be read with an eye to the religious implications of such an association.

32 Isou, “Traité de bave et d’éternité,” 32.

33 Isou, “Traité de bave et d’éternité,” 64.

34 This ironic juxtaposition assumes even greater significance when we remember the emphatically internationalist connotations of the film festival wherein Isou first screened *Traité de bave et d’éternité*, and there too the picture of Paris literally “invaded” by the Indochinese footage.

35 Isou, “Traité de bave et d’éternité,” 65.

36 The other Lettrists who shared Isou’s interpretation of this concept were, notably, Gabriel Pomerand, Maurice Lemaître, and Dufrêne, but also, for a short while, Guy Debord, Gil Wolman, Jean-Louis Brau, and Serge Berna (all of whom followed Isou for periods of time in the late 1940s to early 1950s, and all of whom, except for Debord, participated in “Traité,” either as participants in the chorus, as performers, or as members of the production and editing crew). In regard to the achievement of sonorous amplitude, Dufrêne’s *crirhythmes*—somatized cries of a body in performance—provide an interesting example. Eventually eschewing pure, live performance, Dufrêne would come to make these poems by exploiting the distortion produced by magnetic tape recording, as in his *Paix en Algérie* (1958). Eventually he would privilege this technological medium as a means to both the generation and the transmission of poetic form, in lieu of print media altogether. At roughly the same time, Guy Debord also developed an interest in what was then the new technology of magnetic tape recording. For Debord, however, the performative dimensions of magnetic tape allowed him to stage elaborate disruptions to otherwise sincere endeavors, which was precisely counter to Dufrêne’s investigation of the medium’s formal properties. A significant instance of this tendency is found in Debord’s staged interruption of a Surrealist meeting organized to denounce revelations regarding the French army’s use of torture and rape in Algeria. Whereas the Surrealists had hoped to articulate a formal denunciation, Debord was content to stage a disruption of their meeting, an intervention that relied on poetic allusion and reference, to make an oblique critique—not of the military practices in question, but of the tactics used to denounce it.

37 Crary, “Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory,” 100; in reference to Debord, *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle*, 13.

38 Crary, “Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory,” 101–102.

39 Crary, “Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory,” 102.

40 As spoken in the film and transcribed in the film script, “Le radio, par la télévision, est devenue une espèce de cinéma. Pourquoi le cinéma, en retour, ne deviendrait-il pas une

espèce de radio?” Isou, “Traité de bave et d’éternité,” 25. Here, it is important to note that when Isou was writing and making the film, radio in France was a state-owned enterprise, much like the state-owned television in the Soviet Union that Crary so convincingly articulates as a second originary site of the spectacle’s stronghold over modern subjectivity. Crary, “Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory,” 104.

41 As spoken in the film and written in the film script, “*le voix de l’étranger*” says: “*C’est fantastique, tout de même, monsieur Daniel, vous serez le premier à poser des problèmes de phrases dans le cinéma où il n’y a eu, jusqu’à présent, que des problèmes d’images.*” Isou, “Traité de bave et d’éternité,” 75. It is important that the one to see the ingenuity of Isou’s/ Daniel’s ideas is singled out as “l’étranger,” a foreigner, because this redoubles and thus confirms Isou’s position as an outsider who is able to see what others cannot. The fact that this is a foreigner also underscores in the film the importance of transnational relations, identities, and permutations, a thematic that is echoed in the mention of the nationalities of the various women whom Daniel pursues.

42 As spoken in the film and written in the film script: “*Je l’appellerai ‘La bave et l’éternité’ ou ‘La bave et le marbre,’ ou ‘La bave et l’acier,’ pour marquer la distance entre la poussière de notre parole et la hauteur de son pouvoir.*” Isou, “Traité de bave et d’éternité,” 85.

43 See Seaman, *Concrete Poetry in France*, 206–207.

44 Many of these phrases and the activities they describe come from Maurice Blanchot. See in particular his retrospective analyses in *The Writing of the Disaster*.

45 Isou, “Avertissement,” in *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie*, unpaginated; “Le Cris des 5,000,000 juifs égorgés,” is printed in the same volume, 326–327.

46 Isou, “La guerre,” in *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie*, 365–406.

47 On the evolution of the “memory” of Vichy collaboration and its realities, Henry Roussio’s *The Vichy Syndrome* remains an important text, even as its arguments have begun to be contested by younger generations. See also Watts, *Allegories of the Purge*; and Cone, *French Modernisms*.

48 All citations here are to the poem as printed in Isou, *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*, 326–327. Another edition of the poem exists as a broadsheet that Isou made subsequent to this first publication.

49 Isou, *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie*, 131.

50 The analysis of Ball’s performance by T. J. Demos is exemplary in its efforts to understand the political effects of Ball’s polyglossia in relationship to the historical circumstances of migration during the First World War. Demos is, however, less attentive to the implications of the inherent individualism that might have undermined such effects. See Demos, “Circulations,” 149.

51 Buchloh, “Plenty or Nothing,” 88.

52 Seaman, *Concrete Poetry in France*, 210–221.

53 I discuss several instances of “metagraphic novels” in relationship to mid-twentieth-century artistic investigations of language and Isou’s models in my essay, “New Writing Systems/Writing New Systems.”

54 Drucker, “Hypergraphy: A Note on Maurice Lemaître,” and “The Art of the Written Word,” in *Figuring the Word*, 57–75 and 90–99. Drucker interprets the larger Let-

trist project in precisely the terms of such impenetrability, which was, after all, a principal component of the ongoing privatization of language as it was being promoted by a post-Mallarmean tradition of poetry in European modernism, enacted in this case by further removing reading from the realm of the “real” and instead immersing it in the unfathomable and impenetrable reign of the author’s imagination.

55 In regard to Lemaître’s *Canailles*, Drucker’s interpretation may stem from her reading of a five-plate version of the text that Lemaître reprinted in his *La plastique lettriste et hypergraphique* (1956), as opposed to the original ten-plate version that constitutes the original (published in *Ur* no. 1, 1950), which Lemaître also reprints, with annotations and “translations,” in his self-published *Canailles: monographie supertemporelle*. Drucker therefore misses the narration’s efforts to ground its experimentations in form within representations (in the first plates) of the way in which the Second World War was communicated as it happened, principally through newspaper articles and radio broadcasts, two media explicitly conjured in the other pictographic representations in *Canailles*. Without these significant historical markers, it is difficult to imagine the contextual implications of Lemaître’s storytelling.

56 We also see this emphasis in the poetic riffs associated with the capital city’s monuments as they are filtered through the Romanian intonations and vocabularies of Isou’s “Paris vu par un étranger,” in *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie*, 346–347.

57 Within the context of the German-speaking audience in Bremen, it is especially interesting to note that Celan refers to German as “our language.” See Celan, “Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen,” in *Collected Prose*, 34.

58 Celan, “Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize,” 34.

59 As he put it, “les dos des dialectes ukrainiennes, arméniens, kirkiziens, etc.” Isou, *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie*, 179n 1.

60 In the original text: “La poésie deviendra la véritable et la concrète communion entre les races.” Isou, *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie*, 179.

61 Lemaître, *Qu’est-ce que le Lettrisme*. In this code, for example, the notation “1” would indicate that the sound in question should be emitted during aspiration; “54” while yawning.

62 These rights were first restricted in 1938, and then further limited in 1940 and 1941. On the history of Jewish civil, economic, and legal rights in Romania, see Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania*, esp. 3–38.

63 Isou, *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie*, 305. Isou’s self-presentation of his appendix as an “epistle”—an archaic word found more frequently in the Bible than in contemporary use—indicates his frequent reliance on religious and messianic references.

64 Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*, 60–63.

65 Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoön,” 31.

66 In April 2011, President Nicolas Sarkozy’s party, the Union for a Popular Movement (led by Jean-François Copé since 2012) re-initiated plans to stage a national debate about the compatibilities of Islam with the secular values of the French state, a misadventure criticized from all sides of the political spectrum. Whereas questions of visible

religious affiliation—such as Muslim women wearing the hijab—have long been the subject of debate in French society, the specifics of this most recent crisis result from the so-called “problem” of street prayer, which Marine Le Pen infamously compared to the Nazi occupation. It was in a politically motivated reply to Le Pen’s provocation that Sarkozy exclaimed that he did not want any “minarets, any calls for prayer in the public space, or street prayers.” See Steven Erlanger and Maïa de la Baume, “French Panel Debates Secularism and Islam,” *New York Times*, April 5, 2011. www.nytimes.com.

67 I am grateful to Rosalyn Deutsche for directing me to think about what Agamben’s reflection on witnessing the absence at the core of testimony might mean for Isou’s aesthetics of integration. Agamben’s model of witnessing is most clearly articulated in *Remnants of Auschwitz*.

68 See Isou, *L’Agrégation d’un nom et d’un messie*, 413–432. It would be hard to imagine that those who take Isou’s Holocaust-themed poetry as purposely humorous could continue to hold this opinion after reading these passages.

69 Isou, *L’Agrégation d’un nom et d’un messie*, 413.

70 In the original text: “ils nous ont détruit et réduits à l’essentiel justement pour accomplir cette chose essentielle: Judaïser la France.” Isou, *L’Agrégation d’un nom et d’un messie*, 423; 432.

71 See Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*.

CHAPTER 4: LA FRANCE DÉCHIRÉE

Epigraph: In English, “The people constitute their own archives.”

1 Villeglé and Hains met at the École des Beaux-Arts in Rennes in 1945. Hains was enrolled in the department of sculpture, and Villeglé was in the department of architecture, having abandoned the study of painting. In 1947, Villeglé transferred to the department of architecture at the École des Beaux-Arts in Nantes, where he stayed until 1949, when he moved to Paris.

2 In a later interview with Nicolas Bourriaud, Villeglé changed the location of this first “discovery” to an abandoned coal warehouse located between La Coupole and Le Dôme. See Bourriaud, “Interview with Jacques Villeglé,” 136.

3 Brassäi (Gyula Halasz) published some of his photographs of the near-etching-like graffiti that he observed in Paris as “Graffiti Parisiens” in *Minotaure* 3–4 (1933): 7. In fall 1956, Edward Steichen invited Brassäi to exhibit 120 of these photographs at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in the form of an exhibition titled *Language of the Wall: Parisian Graffiti Photographed by Brassäi*. Steichen, speaking in his role of curator, described Brassäi’s work as “a substitute for indiscriminate snap-shottery or inane pictorialism.” The press release in the exhibition archives suggests that the graffiti was “presumably drawn by Parisian children of various ages (graffiti are usually scrawls by boys, street idlers, the casual ‘Tripper,’ according to the Encyclopedia Britannica) [*sic*]” and promotes graffiti as “valuable for the light they throw on the everyday life of the ‘man in the street’ of the period, and for the intimate details of customs and institutions of people in a particular time and place.” See “Graffiti Photographed by Brassäi to be on View at Museum of Modern Art,” Press Release No. 100, 24 October 1956, 1–2. For his part, Wols (Alfred Otto Wolfgang Schulze) remains better known for his quasi-*tachiste* paintings and watercolors than for the often surprisingly pictorial photographs of Paris streets that he took during the 1930s.

FROM A NATION TORN

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in France, 1945–1962**

Hannah Feldman

Duke University Press Durham and London 2014

© 2014 Duke University Press
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Printed in the United States of America
Designed and typeset in Adobe Garamond and Trade Gothic
by BW&A Books, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Feldman, Hannah.

From a nation torn : decolonizing art and representation in France, 1945–1962 /

Hannah Feldman.

pages cm. — (Objects/Histories)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8223-5356-0 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8223-5371-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Art—Political aspects—France—History—20th century.

2. Art and state—France—History—20th century.

3. Decolonization—Social aspects—France—History—20th century.

I. Title. II. Series: Objects/histories.

N72.P6F45 2014

709.44'09045—dc23

2013042836



This book was made possible by a collaborative grant
from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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