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“Burn, Baby! Burn!”:

Paris, Watts, Brussels, Berlin and Vietnam in the Work of Kommune I, 1967

ABSTRACT

This study explores through close reading the best-known works of West Berlin’s subversive group Kommune I (KI), four flyers which triggered a prosecution for incitement to arson in 1967. These flyers allude to a recent, catastrophic fire in a department store in Brussels in order to comment satirically on the Vietnam conflict. This reading refers to the work of the Situationist International (SI) and Guy Debord, highlighting correspondences between the thought and practice of the SI and KI’s flyers. Mobilising some of the SI’s key concepts, like the spectacle and *détournement*, this study considers how KI’s flyers exploit and challenge some of the era’s most significant discourses about Vietnam, from both the political mainstream and the anti-war movement, at times moving them onto new, unsettling ground. The essay thus contributes to an analysis of the ways in which KI achieved its profoundly disturbing effects.

KEYWORDS

West Germany – anti-authoritarianism – Vietnam War – Kommune I (KI) – Situationist International (SI) – flyers – representation – *détournement* – spectacle – fire

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Introduction

For some two years in the late 1960s, the West Berlin collective Kommune I (KI) in many respects defined perceptions of the anti-authoritarian movement in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) – while remaining even for many protesters beyond the pale.¹ KI’s impact is reflected, too, by the ways in which German culture continued to engage with it over decades, as illustrated for instance by the citation of its work in Sophie Dannenberg’s critical novel of 2004, *Das bleiche Herz der Revolution*.² Moreover, it has been argued that work like KI’s triggered major shifts in culture, public discourse and communication in the West Germany.³ For such reasons, and more, exploration of KI’s extraordinary *oeuvre* is central for a cultural history of the Extra-Parliamentary Opposition, and indeed of the post-war Federal Republic itself. Consequently, this essay offers close readings of KI’s most iconic works, a set of controversial flyers which were issued in May 1967, and thus contributed to the escalation of the protest movements into a major phenomenon in that year. These flyers are important too because they comment on the Vietnam conflict, a major catalyst of protest for West Germans.⁴ They deploy a sequence of images of fires burning, from Vietnam to the Watts district of Los Angeles, and hence to Brussels and West Berlin. In so doing, they characterize some of the complexity of the FRG’s responses to Vietnam, as well as of anti-authoritarian textuality. This discussion begins with a commentary on the flyers’ key features and why many readers in West Berlin, including some anti-war protesters, found them controversial. It is then suggested that these texts may be read productively with reference to the work of the Situationist International (SI), and its leading light, the philosopher Guy Debord. By mobilising some of the SI’s key concepts, like the spectacle and *détournement*, it considers how KI’s flyers exploit and challenge some of the era’s most significant discourses about Vietnam, from both the social mainstream and the anti-war movement.

Research for this article was supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the Leverhulme Trust.

¹ References to the FRG or West Germany include West Berlin unless otherwise indicated.

² Sophie Dannenberg, *Das bleiche Herz der Revolution* (Munich: DVA, 2004).

³ Martin Klimke, “‘We Are Not Going to Defend Ourselves Before Such a Justice System!’ – 1968 and the Courts”, *German Law Journal* 10, no 3 (2009), pp. 261-74. To support this argument, Klimke references Kathrin Fahlenbrach, *Protest-Inszenierungen: Visuelle Kommunikation und kollektive Identitäten in Protestbewegungen* (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2002); see also Fahlenbrach, ‘Protestinszenierungen: Die Studentenbewegung im Spannungsfeld von Kulturrevolution und Medien-Evolution’, in *1968: Handbuch zur Kultur- und Mediengeschichte der Studentenbewegung*, ed. by Klimke and Joachim Scharloth (Stuttgart and Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 2007), pp. 11-21.

⁴ See e.g. Gerhard Bauß, *Die Studentenbewegung der sechziger Jahre in der Bundesrepublik und Westberlin* (Cologne: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1977), pp. 167-220; Siegwald Lönnendonker, Bernd Rabehl and Jochen Staadt, *Die antiautoritäre Revolte: Der Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund nach der Trennung von der SPD. Band 1: 1960-1967* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2002), pp. 195-303; Wilfried Mausbach, ‘Auschwitz und Vietnam: West German Protest Against America’s War During the 1960s’, in *America, the Vietnam War, and the World: Comparative and International Perspectives*, ed. by Andreas W. Daum, Lloyd C. Gardner and Mausbach (Washington DC and Cambridge: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 279-98; Karl A. Otto, *APO: Die außerparlamentarische Opposition in Quellen und Dokumenten (1960-1970)* (Cologne: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1989), pp. 206-230; Nick Thomas, *Protest Movements in 1960s West Germany: A Social History of Dissent and Democracy* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), pp. 69-86 and pp. 147-64.

NEU ! UNKONVENTIONELL ! NEU ! UNKONVENTIONELL ! NEU ! UNK KI's Flyers

KI was founded in early 1967 in order, it claimed, to explore new political methods and subjectivities.⁵ Put briefly, it was an informal, changeable group of anti-authoritarians who elected to live and work together as a political and psychological collective. By late May 1967, KI was a household name in West Germany due to its creation of high-profile scandals, as well as its own interest in appearing in the media. However, its dissemination of four flyers on 24 May catapulted it to new levels of disrepute.⁶ These works were prompted by the sensational reporting of a fire in a department store in Brussels called A l'Innovation, on 22 May. This tragedy claimed over 200 lives, and on some initial reports, later discredited, was the result of arson by anti-war protesters, a possibility apparently supported by the fact that the store had been showcasing US goods at the time of the fire. The flyers make insistent use of the topos of fire also because it was indelibly associated with contemporary images of warfare in Vietnam.

KI's flyers prompted the prosecution in 1967-68 of two communards, Rainer Langhans and Fritz Teufel, for incitement to arson liable to endanger life. Their dramatic trial attracted huge media attention, due equally to the issues involved, and the defendants' antics in court.⁷ Langhans and Teufel claimed the flyers were satire highlighting the hypocrisy of a society which responded to Brussels as a sentimentalised sensation, but was indifferent to the daily deaths by fire of countless Vietnamese civilians in air-raids. The communards were acquitted, and so considered their trial not only a vindication of their innocence, but a strategic victory

⁵ On KI in general, see Mererid Puw Davies, *Writing and the West German Protest Movements: The Textual Revolution* (London: imlr books, 2016), pp. 105-38; Siegwald Lönnendonker, Bernd Rabehl and Jochen Staadt, *Die antiautoritäre Revolte: Der Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund nach der Trennung von der SPD, I* (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2002), pp. 304-30; pp. 400-60; Alexander Holmig, 'Die aktionistischen Wurzeln der Studentenbewegung: Subversive Aktion, Kommune I und die Neudefinition des Politischen' in Klimke and Scharloth, pp. 107-118 and "'Wenn's der Wahrheits(er)findung dient...': Wirken und Wirkung der Kommune I (1967-1969)', unpublished master's thesis (Humboldt University, Berlin, 2004).

⁶ The flyers are reproduced in facsimile, e.g. in KI's rare home-made compilation, *Quellen zur Kommune-Forschung*, no pag.; or the widely available Rainer Langhans and Fritz Teufel, *Klau mich: StPO der Kommune I* (1968) (facsimile reprint: Munich: Trikont, 1977), no pag.. Further references are taken from Langhans and Teufel, and do not include page numbers, for that volume is unpaginated. Non-facsimile reproductions include anon., 'Flugblätter, Gutachten, Epiloge oder Wie weit sind Stilprobleme – Stilprobleme?', *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter 27* (July-September 1968), pp. 316-43, pp. 318-20; *Das Leben ändern, die Welt verändern! 1968. Dokumente und Berichte*, ed. by Lutz Schulenburg (Hamburg: Nautilus, 1998), pp. 39-43. Later critical analyses include Klaus Briegleb, *1968: Literatur in der antiautoritären Bewegung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), pp. 61-112; Sara Hakemi, *Anschlag und Spektakel: Flugblätter der Kommune I, Erklärungen von Ensslin / Baader und der frühen RAF* (Bochum: Posth, 2008), pp. 32-58; Martin Huber, *Politisierung der Literatur: Ästhetisierung der Politik: Eine Studie zur literaturgeschichtlichen Bedeutung der 68-er Bewegung in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main, Bern etc: Peter Lang, 1992), pp. 137-55; Susanne Komfort-Hein, 'Flaschenposten und kein Ende des Endes'. *1968: Kritische Korrespondenzen um den Nullpunkt von Geschichte und Literatur* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 2001), pp. 265-71; Werner Leise, *Die Literatur und Ästhetik der Studentenbewegung (1967-73)* (Berlin: Papyrus-Druck, 1979), pp. 138-44.

⁷ The trial is documented thoroughly in Langhans and Teufel; analyses are Gerrit-Jan Berendse, *Schreiben im Terrordrom: Gewaltcodierung, kulturalle Erinnerung und das Bedingungsverhältnis zwischen Literatur und RAF-Terrorismus* (Munich: edition text + kritik, 2005), pp.114-123; Davies, *Writing and the West German Protest Movements* pp. 105-38; Hakemi; Klimke, "'We Are Not Going to Defend Ourselves Before Such a Justice System!'", pp. 265-69.

in their aim of unmasking what the philosopher Herbert Marcuse had recently and influentially termed the repressive tolerance of the capitalist state.⁸

The flyers are numbered from 6 through to 9, since they form part of a longer, numbered series of flyers issued by KI over time. Flyer 6 is a densely typewritten page under the heading “Neue Demonstrationsformen in Brüssel erstmals erprobt”. The main text is a fictional newspaper report on the department store fire, including an interview with an equally fictional “Maurice L. (21)”, from a pro-Chinese group called “Aktion für Frieden und Völkerfreundschaft”. Maurice claims he started the fire to illustrate the realities of the Vietnam war, normally hidden in Europe by manipulative media. He explains in detail too how his group prepared the attack to ensure maximum effect; as Sara Hakemi has observed, his account can be read as a thinly-veiled set of instructions for West Berliners considering copycat actions.⁹ Finally, the report states that although all indications point to arson, the police is refusing to comment for fear that this new protest method may be adopted elsewhere.

Flyer 7 bears a banner which evokes the endless repetition of advertising slogans:

NEU ! UNKONVENTIONELL ! NEU ! UNKONVENTIONELL ! NEU ! UNK
Warum brennst Du, Konsument?
NEU ! ATEMBERAUBEND ! NEU ! ATEMBERAUBEND ! NEU ! ATEMBER

The text enthusiastically praises US industry for inventing products like “Coca Cola und Hiroshima, das deutsche Wirtschaftswunder und der vietnamesische Krieg, die Freie Universität und die Universität von Teheran”.¹⁰ Simultaneously, techniques which promote such US enterprises are lauded. In particular, one “neue[r] gag in der vielseitigen Geschichte amerikanischer Werbemethoden” is stressed:

Ein brennendes Kaufhaus mit brennenden Menschen vermittelte zum erstenmal in einer europäischen Grossstadt jenes knisternde Vietnamgefühl (dabeizusein und mitzubrennen), das wir in Berlin bislang noch missen müssten.

Because US foreign interventions are imagined here as consumer products like Coca Cola, the flyer describes the Vietnam war as the ultimate exciting US commodity, and the Brussels fire as a particularly vivid advertisement for it. It concludes by refuting the idea that anti-war demonstrators were involved, for they are “weltfremde junge Leute” who fail to grasp “unsere dynamisch-amerikanische Wirklichkeit”. Thus, for anyone reading the flyers in numeric sequence, flyer 7 creates dissonance with flyer 6 and its supposed account of just such an anti-war action. Simultaneously, in the apparent dismissal of protesters like KI itself, there is an irony for readers who know the flyer’s origins.

West Germany’s Economic Miracle and West Berlin’s Freie Universität (FU) are mentioned because they exemplify US support of the FRG during the Cold War. Yet according to KI, such support is not motivated by ethical imperatives like a commitment to liberty, but by the

⁸ Herbert Marcuse, ‘Repressive Tolerance’, in Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore Jnr and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), pp. 93-137.

⁹ Hakemi, pp. 63-74.

¹⁰ Cf Bahman Nirumand’s *Persien, Modell eines Entwicklungslandes oder Die Diktatur der Freien Welt* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1967), and the Shah of Iran’s West Berlin visit, during which the peaceful protester Benno Ohnesorg was shot dead by police on June 2 1967, the protest movements’ defining moment.

market. In addition, US backing for the FRG appears in a negative light by being equated with other actions and policies of which KI disapproved, like the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima in 1945, and contemporary support for what were said to be corrupt, anti-democratic regimes in Iran and South Vietnam. Thus, by analogy, US interest in West Germany amounts to shoring up an illegitimate regime. This kind of open anti-American sentiment was calculated to provoke anxiety, for Cold War West Berlin was acutely aware of its sense of reliance on the US for its continued survival. Moreover, attacks on the culture of shopping and commerce had an added edge in that city, where the purchase of consumer goods could appear as a powerful political, even moral statement which underlined West Berlin's difference from the Communist East all around it.

Flyer 8 is entitled "Wann brennen die Berliner Kaufhäuser?". An unidentified first-person narrator explicitly rejects as ineffectual the methods used by West Berlin's anti-war demonstrators to date, like marches, throwing eggs at the Amerikahaus (a major, if isolated scandal at a demonstration in 1966) and even KI's recent success of Easter 1967, the so-called "Pudding-Attentat", a planned custard-pie assault on the motorcade of US Vice-President Humphrey as he toured West Berlin. That slapstick action was foiled by the police, but made welcome headlines for KI. Instead, the narrator commends the Belgian arsonists for bringing the war home:

Unsere belgischen Freunde haben endlich den Dreh heraus, die Bevölkerung am lustigen Treiben in Vietnam wirklich zu beteiligen: sie zünden ein Kaufhaus an, dreihundert saturierte Bürger beenden ihr aufregendes Leben und Brüssel wird Hanoi.

On this account, real experience of fire breaks through the mystifications of newspaper discourse in order to reveal the truth about the war. As a consequence: "Keiner von uns braucht mehr Tränen über das arme vietnamesische Volk bei der Frühstückzeitung zu vergießen". That is, West Berliners need no longer indulge in the emotionally gratifying, morally dubious catharsis available from reading the news, since anyone can now go and burn down a shop and so share Vietnam's experience directly.

It is perhaps this passage which, above all, gave offence in 1967, because it appears to accept and praise many violent deaths in Brussels as the price for experiencing the alleged excitement of Vietnam. It also seems to trivialise those deaths as a mere source of excitement analogous to shopping, and the formulation "saturierte Bürger" suggests that the Belgian victims' supposed prosperity makes their suffering less regrettable, even deserved. Moreover, this passage appears to disregard the human cost of the Vietnam conflict itself, in its apparently sarcastic references to "das arme vietnamesische Volk", and US personnel as "arme Schweine" shedding their "Cocacolablut" in the Vietnamese jungle.

The narrator of flyer 8 then threatens actions in West Berlin in answer to US transgressions in Asia, in the form of arson attacks in department stores:

Wenn es irgendwo brennt in der nächsten Zeit [...] seid bitte nicht überrascht. Genausowenig wie beim Überschreiten der Demarkationslinie durch die Amis, der Bombardierung des Stadtzentrums von Hanoi, dem Einmarsch der Marines nach China

Brüssel hat uns die einzige Antwort darauf gegeben:

Burn, ware-house, burn !

This passage seems to constitute the flyers' most unequivocal threat. The parting shot "Burn, ware-house, burn !", in which "ware-house" may be a clumsy translation of the German term "Warenhaus", recalls the seven-day-long turmoil of August 1965 in and around the Watts district of LA. These events came to be known as the Watts riots, rebellion or uprising, in which, according to Jeanne Theoharis:

[t]hirty-four people died, and hundreds were injured, many at the hands of the police; 14,000 National Guardsmen had been called out and 4000 black people had been arrested. Forty-five million dollars' worth of property had been damaged.¹¹

People on the street cheered blazing shops with the call "Burn, baby! Burn!", a slogan derived from the radio catchphrase of a local African-American soul/R&B DJ, Magnificent Montague.¹² Montague wrote later that he used these words as "a way of signifying that rare, glorious, sanctified moment in which a record or anything else had taken its art to a new level." (pp. 4-5). They were soon taken up in a similar way by his listeners when they saw or heard something they admired. In Watts however, the slogan suddenly came to refer literally to burning buildings. As Montague put it, "when Watts went up in flames [...] when people started setting buildings and cars afire [...] they triumphantly screamed the most evident and analogous and hip thing at hand: 'Burn, baby!'" (p. 5). Montague's response was "they've got it all wrong", for he "wanted [his] listeners' hearts to burn, not their homes" (p. 2). He expresses "horror" (p. 5) both at this new usage and the wilful miscomprehension and instrumentalisation of his catchphrase by the authorities and others, all factors which contributed to the end of his DJ career. The allusion is likely to have been recognised in West Berlin in May 1967, for events in Watts, including the slogan "Burn, baby! Burn!" had been reported critically in the West German press fewer than two years previously, and the near-contemporaneity of this reference would no doubt have made the apparent threat of arson even more alarming.¹³

¹¹ Jeanne Theoharis, "Alabama on Avalon": Rethinking the Watts Uprising and the Character of Black Protest in Los Angeles', in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil-Rights – Black Power Era*, ed. by Peniel E. Joseph (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 27-53, p. 49. While different commentators give varying figures, Gerald Horne in *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville, VA and London: University Press of Virginia, 1995), notes at least thirty-four deaths, a thousand injuries, 4,000 arrests and damage to the estimated value of \$200 million over a 46.5 square-mile area, p. 3. See also Jerry Cohen and William S. Murphy, *Burn, baby, burn! The Los Angeles Race Riot, August, 1965* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1966); Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 197-225.

¹² Magnificent Montague with Bob Baker, *Burn, Baby! BURN! The Autobiography of Magnificent Montague* (Chicago, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 2003), e.g. pp. 1-11. Further page references appear in the main body of the text. According to this autobiography, Montague chooses not to use his given name Nathaniel.

¹³ Anon., 'Nationalgarde dringt in das Negerviertel von Los Angeles ein', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 16.08.65, p. 1; anon., 'Die Rassen-Unruhen in Kalifornien breiten sich aus', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 17.08.65, p. 1; anon., 'Rassenkrawalle: Der häßliche Neger', *Der Spiegel* no 35, 1965 (23.08.65), pp. 68-69; anon., 'Los Angeles kehrt zum normalen Leben zurück', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 18.08.65, p. 4; Jan Reifenberg, 'Die Flammen von Los Angeles', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 17.08.65, p. 2; Joachim Schwelzen, 'Explosion im Palmenghetto', *Die Zeit* 20.08.65, p. 3; Jürgen Tern, 'Die Schraube der Armut', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 19.08.65, p. 1. Reifenberg and the report in *Der Spiegel* cite, respectively, "Burn, Baby, Burn!" (p. 68), and "Brenne Baby, Brenne".

Flyer 9 presents a handwritten text in circular form which might suggest a visual rendering of the idea of (permanent) revolution, although the former communist Ulrich Enzensberger later described it as a “Rauchwirbel”.¹⁴ The flyer’s individual phrases are separated by five-pointed stars, represented in the quotations given here by asterisks; at the end of the text, there is an amorphous shape which may be an exclamation mark.

The loosely associative, impressionistic text describes a “REVOLUTION IN ROSE
REVOLUTION IN ROT * DURCH FLAMMENDES ROT FLIEGEN PELZE AUF DIE
STRASSE * FÜR JEDE HAUSFRAU BRÜSSELS EINEN NERZ”. This scenario evokes the way Brussels firefighters reportedly threw furs out of a vulnerable shop next to the one burning, in order to preserve them. The flyer rewrites this act as a free distribution of all the fur coats to the public, and praises the fire as “DAS VÖLLIG NEUE
REVOLUTIONIERENDE GEFÜHL”, as well as “DIE HÖCHSTENTWICKELTE
PROPAGANDA FÜR JOHNSON [sic] VIETNAM-POLITIK”. Finally, the flyer suggests that this experience is available to anyone “DURCH REVOLUTION IN ROSE *
PROPANGAS IN ROT * BEI KEPA UND KA-DE-WEH”.

Repeated reference to the colour red recalls on one hand the imagery of communist revolution, and on the other, red containers used to store the flammable domestic gas propane.¹⁵ “Revolution in rosé” is a slogan from a contemporary advertisement for Pril washing-up liquid, no doubt for sale in department stores like those mentioned at the end of the flyer, the luxurious Kaufhaus des Westens (KaDeWe), and Kepa, a low-cost arm of the chain Karstadt.¹⁶ Given this flyer’s relatively conspicuous resemblance to such Modernist poetic forms as concrete poetry, the choice to name these two stores in particular may have been made to generate alliteration, and an euphonious sense of iambic metre, broken up by a dactyl. But this expression also indicates that the potential experience of fire could be available at both ends of the retail scale: that is, all-encompassing.

In this rhapsodic representation of the burning department store as a thrilling free-for-all (as Watts could be imagined by some), the language of advertising promotes the fire as an exciting experience which West Berliners may access simply with the help of a bottle of propane gas. However, unlike the apparently uncompromisingly positive descriptions of the fire in flyers 7 or 8, such praise is shot through with ambivalence in flyer 9. It is unclear for example whether the addressees are ordinary shoppers for whom the fire is supposed to be a desirable consumer experience, or protesters who will see it as an opportunity to loot or a chance at “REVOLUTION”. Moreover, pleasure, excitement and harm are linked in unsettling ways. The colour red suggests bloodshed, and the text ends with a play on the name KaDeWe, in which the homonym “Weh” suggests not only warning, like that in flyer 8, but also pain or sorrow. While Ulrich Enzensberger later interpreted the final exclamation mark in the text as a teardrop, during his trial, Teufel refused to specify whether it

¹⁴ Ulrich Enzensberger, *Die Jahre der Kommune I: Berlin 1967-1969* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2004), p. 142.

¹⁵ Ulrich Enzensberger, p. 137.

¹⁶ Two expert witnesses commissioned by KI’s defence, Klaus Reimers and Irmela Reimers-Tovote, note on p. 7 of their report: “dieser Slogan [schmückt] in großer Aufmachung die ganze Rückseite der Zeitschrift ‘BRIGITTE’, [...] Heft 11, vom 23.7.1967: ‘Revolution in rosé ... man sieht Ihren Händen das Spülen nicht mehr an’”, Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung (HIS), Sammlung ‘Sozialistisches Anwaltskollektiv Berlin’ (03.13 (Kommune I Iib Brandstiftung Gutachten)). Cf also the expert report by Peter Szondi, ‘Aufforderung zur Brandstiftung? Ein Gutachten im Prozeß Langhans/Teufel’, *Der Monat* 19, no. 227, August 1967, pp. 24-29, p. 29; Ulrich Enzensberger, p. 142.

represented a tear or a drop of blood.¹⁷ The possibility that it could be read as either brings the idea of human suffering to the fore.

The flyers' numbering offers scope for identifying narrative development from one to the next. As read by the prosecution in KI's trial, flyer 6 might plant the idea of arson as a new form of protest; flyer 7 legitimises it by both glamorising and trivialising the excitement of fire in shops; as a consequence, flyer 8 directly threatens such arson in West Berlin and flyer 9 glorifies the imagined fulfilment of that threat. But even taken individually, the flyers are deceptively complex. Putting them in numeric sequence, ambiguity grows further, and prospects for competing readings are amplified; even the potential narrative sketched out here overlooks contradictions. Moreover, the very idea of reading the flyers in numeric sequence is problematic, not only because there can be no certainty as to the chronological or logical order of their conception or composition. Their public distribution means that they were likely to be read individually, piecemeal or in any number of permutations, each reading generating different associations. Therefore, any attempt at isolating a dominant argument to make definitive sense of the flyers is fraught.

“the positive supersession of the spectacle”: KI and the Situationist International

Nonetheless, the work of the SI offers one productive approach to reading these texts. There are interesting biographical and philosophical links between the SI and KI, in part because one of KI's most influential founders, Dieter Kunzelmann, was a former SI member.¹⁸ However, this analysis does not argue that KI was responding conscientiously, systematically, or even necessarily deliberately to the publications of the SI, for at least three reasons. First, there is no explicit indication in the writings that KI left to posterity that it was specifically citing these works. Second, as the historian Martin Klimke has noted, West German anti-authoritarianism inserted Situationist thinking into a distinctive “revolutionary amalgam” of various philosophical and political influences.¹⁹ And third, to seek an explicit indication of direct, conscious influence is, in many ways, to misunderstand KI's syncretic, expressly anti-theoretical and anti-scholarly *modus operandi*. Rather, the consonance between the works of the SI and KI may not (only) be the result of Kunzelmann's experience, but testifies above all to a shared, yet heterogeneous symbolic and political heritage and climate, and the extensive, if often unattributed and anonymous circulation – or, importantly, the modification – in Western Europe and West Germany of ideas directly or indirectly inspired by the SI.²⁰

Read thus, the resonance of KI's work with Situationist ideas exemplifies a central characteristic of anti-authoritarian (inter)textuality as it was identified by the then anti-

¹⁷ Ulrich Enzensberger, p. 142; Langhans and Teufel. Cf the expert report of Eberhard Lämmert, included in the dossier in *Sprache in technischen Zeitalter* cited in footnote 6 above, p. 327; Briegleb, pp. 112-113.

¹⁸ Dieter Kunzelmann, *Leisten Sie keinen Widerstand! Bilder aus meinem Leben* (Berlin: Transit, 1998); Aribert Reimann, *Dieter Kunzelmann: Avantgardist, Protestler, Radikaler* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009).

¹⁹ Klimke, “We Are Not Going to Defend Ourselves Before Such a Justice System!”, p. 270.

²⁰ *Subversive Aktion: Der Sinn der Aktion ist ihr Scheitern*, ed. by Frank Böckelmann and Herbert Nagel (Frankfurt am Main: Neue Kritik, 1976); Davies, *Writing and the West German Protest Movements*; Hakemi; Holmig; Ingo Juchler, ‘Die Avantgardegruppe “Subversive Aktion” im Kontext der sich entwickelnden Studentenbewegung der sechziger Jahre’, *Weimarer Beiträge* 40, no 1 (1994), pp. 72-88; Mia Lee, ‘Umherschweifen und Spektakel: Die situationistische Tradition’ in Klimke and Scharloth, pp. 101-06.

authoritarian writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger in an important theoretical essay of 1968, ‘Gemeinplätze, die Neueste Literatur betreffend’.²¹ This essay provides, among other things, an analysis of anti-authoritarian writing as it was practiced around 1967. The key principle of this textuality is “Gegenseitigkeit”, a dialogism or heteroglossia in which texts constantly and critically cite and communicate with one another in ways which erode the boundaries between them. This principle undermines conventional notions of authorship, genre, and the monolithic individual work which is closed off both to other texts, and to political praxis.²² Rather, such writing becomes part of a broad, shared, yet disputed textual network.

Hans Magnus Enzensberger identifies KI, although opaquely and without explanation, as the most important practitioner of this textual culture. In doing so, he may be alluding implicitly on one hand to the flyers’ ostentatious referencing and challenging of many other texts, from newspaper reports on Vietnam to the Watts slogan. On the other, Hans Magnus Enzensberger may recall that the flyers triggered in turn the creation of a further multitude of texts which took issue with them. Just one example is the body of writings produced by and around their trial, like the nineteen expert reports commissioned by KI’s defence from writers, theoreticians and academics, which give the flyers the distinction, highly unusual amongst anti-authoritarian texts, of having been subject to high critical scrutiny almost from their inception.²³ Thus, KI’s flyers are located at the very heart of a near-endless fabric of “Gegenseitigkeit”, and this idea of a dynamic, contested reciprocity is a powerful lens with which to read the possibly unconscious but nonetheless meaningful intertextual comparisons and contrasts which can be made between the works of the SI and KI.

The conclusion of flyer 8, of which Kunzelmann later claimed authorship, “burn, ware-house, burn !” can be seen as a specific example of Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s “Gegenseitigkeit”, and calls to mind not only events in Watts, but the specific interest in them which Debord shared with KI.²⁴ Debord’s essay of late 1965, ‘The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy’, explicitly identifies Watts as a crucial anti-capitalist moment.²⁵ Debord observes the extreme alienation of modern consumer capitalism which he considers to be enforced by the “spectacle”, an ubiquitous display of affluence and consumer fantasy, which both includes and transcends the realm of advertising, for the spectacle is everywhere and everything. *Inter alia*, the spectacle is avaricious in its ability to recuperate. Recuperation is a concept explored extensively by the SI, being the spectacle’s successful appropriation of everything in its path, including any moves to oppose it, which are thus neutralised; an example is the Pril campaign cited in KI’s flyer 9 which referenced the contemporary protest movements: “REVOLUTION IN ROSE”.²⁶ According to Debord, the spectacle “cannot be

²¹ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, ‘Gemeinplätze, die Neueste Literatur betreffend’, *Kursbuch* 15 (November 1968), pp. 187-97. See Davies, *Writing and the West German Protest Movements*, pp. 47-74.

²² Hans Magnus Enzensberger, ‘Gemeinplätze, die Neueste Literatur betreffend’, p. 197.

²³ On these reports, see Berendse, pp. 114-21; Hakemi, pp. 59-64; Wolfgang Kraushaar, *Die Bombe im Jüdischen Gemeindehaus* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2005), pp. 269-76. The unusual and important status of these reports is underlined for example also by the way they are thematised in Dannenberg’s novel, which this itself becomes part of the extensive textual complex initiated by KI.

²⁴ Kunzelmann claims this text triggered “besondere Empörung”, p. 78.

²⁵ Debord, ‘The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy’ (1965), in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. by Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1995), pp. 153-160. Further references appear in the main body of the text.

²⁶ Other such recuperations are recorded in Hans Magnus Enzensberger, ‘Gemeinplätze, die Neueste Literatur betreffend’, and Michael Ruetz, 1968. *Ein Zeitalter wird besichtigt* (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 1997), which includes a photograph of 1966 featuring (pretend) demonstrators holding up placards declaring “Der große Wechsel zu Persil 65”, p. 105. On such campaigns by Persil, see also *Eiffe for President. Frühling*

actualized either immediately or equally” (p. 157), but people are nonetheless mesmerised by it, and so become passive spectators in their own lives. That is, the spectacle which enforces capitalism is an extensive web of mendacious images, and hence there is a profound critique here too, as there is throughout Debord’s work, of the process of representation itself. As he puts it at the opening of his key work *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), within the spectacle and its deadening of experience: “Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation.”²⁷

In ‘The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy’, Debord argues that: “now for the first time it is not poverty but material abundance which must be dominated according to new laws. [...]. This is the first step of an immense struggle, infinite in its implications.” (p. 156). The people of Watts are undertaking that first step, for they are “daring to demand [...] the right to really *live*. In the final analysis they want nothing less than the total subversion of this society.” (p. 154). In other words, they are enacting “the positive supersession of the spectacle.” (p. 160); it seems no coincidence that Watts borders Hollywood, the ultimate source of spectacle.

Looting has particular significance here, for it is “the *natural* response to the society of abundance – the society not of natural and human abundance, but of abundance of commodities” (p. 155). Looters, according to Debord:

want to possess *immediately* all the objects shown and abstractly accessible because they want to *use* them. That is why they reject their exchange-value, [...] Through theft and gift they rediscover a use that immediately refutes the oppressive rationality of the commodity [...] real desires begin to be expressed in festival, in playful self-assertion, in the *potlatch* of destruction. People who destroy commodities show their human superiority over commodities. (p. 155)

The term “*potlatch*” denotes a potentially ruinous ceremony at which excessively precious gifts are given or destroyed, such that conventional notions of value are lost.²⁸ Watts becomes just such a celebration of giving in which people intend to use, or even trash, consumer treasures rather than profit from them. These items become what Situationists recognised as true gifts, because they transcend the system of exchange which in bourgeois society usually, if implicitly, underpins the giving of presents, in essence modelling the capitalist economy.

While KI might have put its thoughts about consumer capitalism differently from Debord, their ideas are cognate. First, Debord’s analysis of a society which is simultaneously affluent and impoverished, irrationally and unjustly hierarchical, fixated on commodities and disenfranchised is echoed in KI’s flyers. Their presentation of a world where (false) emotional experience can seemingly only be derived from advertising, consumption and shopping tallies with Debord’s account of the spectacle. Indeed, Langhans described his trial as a “Spektakel”, and Kunzelmann’s memoir calls KI’s work itself around this time a “Spektakel”.²⁹

für Europa: Surrealisten zum Mai 68, ed. by Uwe Wandrey with commentary by Peter Schütt (Hamburg: Quer-Verlag, 1968), p. 9.

²⁷ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), trans. by Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, no d.), p. 7.

²⁸ The idea of the “potlatch” is derived from an interpretation of Native American practices, though the European appropriations and understandings of this term are removed from its originary meanings.

²⁹ Langhans and Teufel; Kunzelmann, p. 29.

Second, Debord writes of the co-existence and shared goals of theory and practice; KI too valorises such interaction, as epitomised by the flyers which themselves form part of a larger complex of text and action. For both Debord and KI, speed is of the essence in the exchange between text and action, for Debord stresses the short temporal gap between events in Watts and a different, very recent essay of his which he claims prefigured them precisely. Likewise, no doubt mindful that its own successful “Pudding-Attentat” of just a few weeks previously had already been recuperated, albeit with its own enthusiastic approval, by press reports, KI warns in flyer 8 that that action is already obsolete. Third, Debord’s idea of the subversive gift is present in flyer 9’s image of fur coats flying; on a more self-reflexive note, just like the furs in Brussels, the very medium of the KI flyers, circulated as they were apparently for nothing, echoes the SI’s idea of giving as a subversive practice.³⁰

Fourth, KI shares Debord’s mistrust of representation. In flyer 6, Maurice complains that the media’s depiction of the war makes it impossible for anyone truly to resist it:

Wir vermochten uns bisher mit unseren Protesten gegen die amerikanische Vietnampolitik nicht durchzusetzen, da die hiesige Presse durch ihre Berichterstattung systematisch den Menschen hier den Eindruck vermittelt, daß ein Krieg dort unten notwendig und zudem gar nicht so schlimm sei.

This account sums up that recession of lived experience (here, the horrors of Vietnam) into meaningless representation in the service of capitalism which Debord laments in *Society of the Spectacle*. Correspondingly, while Maurice describes much of his thinking and action in detail, at a crucial point in the narrative, which is visually at the centre of the flyer, he withdraws his representation, saying: “Sie werden verstehen, daß ich keine weiteren Angaben über die Auslösung des Brandes machen möchte”. Maurice no doubt remains discreet so as to avoid self-incrimination, and to hold open the possibility of similar, future actions. But he may also be shielding his work from the very effects of representation, which would render it banal and open to recuperation. Likewise, flyer 7 comments critically on the press’s reduction of the war to hypocritical images; indeed, the flyers’ central topos of fire itself forms part of their critique of representation, for fire destroys paper, the era’s most privileged medium for representation.

“Burn baby! Burn!”: *Dérive* and *Détournement*

KI’s flyers echo other hallmark ideas of the SI too, calling to mind not only the subversive gift, but the Situationist practice of *dérive* or drift.³¹ *Dérive* is the aimless exploration of a city, normally on foot, which opens up participants to its symbolic possibilities, and induces new states of mind. Flyers resonate with such a practice, for they are designed to circulate within an urban environment in highly individualised, often haphazard ways, depending on the person who holds them, and creating opportunities for subversive thinking along the way.

³⁰ KI’s publications and correspondence demonstrate that later, at least, it charged high prices for its productions.

³¹ Debord, ‘Theory of the *Dérive*’ (1958), in Knabb, pp. 50-54.

But most importantly, the Situationist idea of *détournement* can also be mobilised for a reading of the flyers.³² This is a signifying strategy which takes the representations of the spectacle and reuses them in startling ways in order to undermine it, as in the case of “Burn baby! Burn!”. Debord would doubtless have dismissed that slogan as part of what he criticised as a specifically African-American spectacle. On this analysis, Watts’s unauthorised, shocking adoption of Montague’s catchphrase is a *détournement*. In turn, KI changes the meaning of Watts’s use of Montague’s words yet again for West Berlin, in newly scandalous ways. KI’s flyers use *détournement* extensively in further ways too to undermine the language of authority, for instance that of the press, advertising and the Bible. These instances will now be discussed here in turn; subsequently, it will be argued that, perhaps more surprisingly, KI used *détournement* to challenge more mainstream protest discourse too.

While flyer 6’s Maurice complains of the popular press, the text itself adopts its discourse seamlessly to promote his ideas, and so creates a powerful sense of dissonance, for in many West Berlin newspapers, even peaceful activism was demonised. Putting Maurice’s inflammatory words into the socially acceptable diction of the newspapers might on the one hand open up a less condemnatory reading. But on the other, this *détournement* unmasks the very contingency of mainstream journalistic discourse which supports and naturalises the spectacle. Likewise, flyer 8’s highly schematic representation of Vietnamese people and American troops can be read as heartless. But as Gerrit-Jan Berendse for example notes too, the flyers parody press coverage, which anti-authoritarians held to be profoundly cynical, and in taking it to an extreme, arguably expose its true nature.³³

Flyer 7’s breathless application of the language of marketing to inappropriate objects, the Brussels fire, Vietnam and other supposed examples of US genius, appears offensive. Yet this move may arguably show readers how the spectacle blinds people to their real needs, conditioning them instead to desire consumer goods, because the fact that the war and the fire are undesirable shows the language of advertising to be duplicitous and absurd. Simultaneously, this distancing effect resonates with anti-authoritarian arguments that the Vietnam war was fuelled by capitalism’s insatiable need to create new goods and markets, even at the expense of human lives. On that logic, all advertising supports the war, for all advertising supports capitalism. Thus, on such arguments, KI’s *détournement* of the language of advertising to describe warfare is, like its appropriation of journalistic idiom, shocking in its very truthfulness.

Another way of reading the flyers in numeric sequence therefore is to see them as imagining a high-speed recuperation by the press and advertising of the supposed protest by arson in Brussels. While flyer 6’s reportage allows Maurice to communicate his ideas, as a mocked-up newspaper it simultaneously appears to commodify them, and this process is followed in flyer 7 by their further recuperation in advertising. At first sight then, flyer 6 seems to predict that arson as a mode of protest will spread across Europe; yet read in this light, the texts reveal that it is in fact the reach of capitalism which is spreading like wildfire. So, while the flyers offended by seeming to exploit the Brussels victims, equally, it can be argued that they thematise how the usually invisible, commodifying discourses of journalism and advertising do precisely the same.

³² Debord and Gil J. Wolman, ‘Methods of *Détournement*’ (1956), in Knabb, pp. 8-14; cf Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 86-87.

³³ Berendse, p. 120.

The flyers also explore *détournement* as a counter-move to recuperation. Flyers 7 and 9 take back the language of protest from advertising, and fantasise about a revolutionary, post-consumer euphoria. Flyer 8, in the supposed voice of West Berlin's protesters, might also be attempting to wrest back Maurice's ideas from the spectacle; certainly the prosecution in KI's trial read flyer 8 in this way as a genuine threat of violence. But equally, in the present argument, flyer 8 might be an obviously inauthentic attempt at replicating a once-radical protest which has already been recuperated. In this sense, the flyers cannot be advocating arson, but on the contrary, knowingly show that it is already a thing of the past and that West Berliners must invent their own actions, not copy Maurice's. By contrast, flyer 9, with its more evidently poetic form and comparative lack of clear argument or narrative, may represent the start of a more genuinely new, if enigmatic, train of thought, and break out, at least temporarily, from the processes of appropriation described above.

The flyers also use Biblical language, which KI would no doubt have held to support the Establishment. They recall the destruction of the Cities of the Plain, by "brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven" (Genesis 19, 24). Flyer 6's descriptions of Brussels as "ein Bild der Apokalypse", and in flyer 9 of "DIE APOKALYPSE VON BRÜSSEL" also recall the end of the world in the Book of Revelation.³⁴ There, wicked Babylon burns, and all its wealth, trade and luxury goods "come to nought" (Revelation 18, 17-18). The righteous are exempt from such punishments, for in Genesis, Lot and his family escape destruction and form a new society; in Revelation, once all are called to account by God, everlasting life follows for the virtuous. In other words, the evil cities are irredeemable, and must make way for a radically new world, populated only by the good. Such imagery dovetails with the SI's view of capitalism as a completely corrupt system which cannot be reformed or, in Biblical terms, redeemed. Likewise, it fits with the idea of a capitalist Brussels or West Berlin celebrating US consumer goods, invoking divine punishment. In this scenario, arsonists align with the wrath and authority of a vengeful God; yet KI's texts focus not on a post-revolutionary utopia, but on sensational topoi of destruction. In these respects, the flyers evince a complex intertextual relationship with scripture, relying on it for authority, yet ironising it through a possibly blasphemous *détournement*.

Biblical tropes about the end of one world and the start of another resonate with some anti-authoritarian discourse around 1967 which envisages its revolt as just such a significant caesura in history.³⁵ Nonetheless, by stressing fire so strongly, KI throws down an implicit challenge not only to the paper-based press, but to a pro-scholarly protest culture. On one hand, anti-authoritarians like KI often rejected mainstream, more liberal and sometimes pacifist anti-war movements and their methods. On the other, the flyers' account of recuperation suggests that all protest, however effective initially, is quickly superseded, and so KI seeks constantly to distance itself from everything that has come before. Thus, KI uses *détournement* to mark off its differences from not only the establishment, but much contemporary anti-war protest as well.

Indeed, the schematic representation of the Vietnam conflict in flyer 8 discussed above as a derailing of news reports is just as likely to refer to a protest discourse which relied on them, for instance the era's prolific anti-war poetry, like Erich Fried's influential volume *und VIETNAM und* (1966). Fried's poems, and many others, make central use of the trope of the

³⁴ Reimers and Reimers-Tovote, p. 7.

³⁵ Cf Gerd Koenen, 'Wahn und Zeit: Rudi Dutschke am Kairós der Weltrevolution 1967/68', in Koenen, *Das rote Jahrzehnt: Unsere kleine deutsche Kulturrevolution 1967-1977* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2001), pp. 35- 65.

horrified European newspaper reader, reflecting the impact of the media on the anti-war movement. Likewise, many poems feature helpless Vietnamese war victims, imagery which originates in such coverage.³⁶ They also commonly cast US personnel as unfeeling brutes, and tend to avoid representation of direct engagement between the war's protagonists. Instead, hostilities appear mainly as alienated, hi-tech attacks which allow US assailants to maximise the damage caused without being plagued by conscience. Thus, air raids and fire are dominant, often inter-related topoi, which, taken together, seem to limit severely the representation of human agency in the poems; indeed, in some cases, fire is their only agent.

Flyer 8 echoes such imagery, with its description of newspaper readers' tears, pitiful Vietnamese victims and generic US personnel. But this flyer takes such representation far further, for the Vietnamese civilians are dismissed almost entirely, and the US soldiers dehumanised to the extent that their very lifeblood is just a commodity, "Cocacola". That is, the US servicemen are not only alienated, but reified; tellingly, Coca-Cola was a key Situationist signifier for the spectacle.³⁷ In flyer 8, the war is less a dynamic situation than a frozen tableau in which the protagonists are entirely separated from one another, and cannot act at all. Moreover, in the flyers the topos of fire proliferates even further than in the poems, but instead of being condemned as it is there, it is glorified. The representations of flyer 8 thus seem on one hand to echo those in many anti-war poems; but on the other, by pushing those images to extremes, challenge them.

The flyers may also offer an even more shocking challenge to anti-war thinking and protest. On 24 May 1967, *Bild* reported of the Belgian fire:

Mehrere Zeugen sagten übereinstimmend vor der Polizei aus: 'Wir sahen einen jungen Mann in dem Kaufhaus, der sich nicht wie wir ins Freie stürzte. Der Unbekannte rannte schreiend in die Glut: "ich will für Vietnam sterben."'”³⁸

This unconfirmed report recalls the way in Saigon in 1963, the Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc burned himself to death in protest at the suppression of Buddhism by the pro-US regime.³⁹ A photograph of this act was published worldwide.⁴⁰ Later, other Buddhists did the same; in America at least seven people burned themselves as an anti-war statement.⁴¹

³⁶ See e.g. Davies, 'The Price of an Image: Poetry, Photography and the Vietnam War in West Germany', *Modern Language Review* 106, no 1 (2011), pp. 164-78; Davies, *Writing and the West German Protest Movements*, pp. 75-104; Davies, "'Viet Nam wird zur Hure gemacht": Women, Victimhood and the Vietnam Conflict in West German Writing', *German Life and Letters* 64, no 1 (2011), pp. 95-107.

³⁷ E.g. Raoul Vaneigem, 'Comments Against Urbanism' (1961), in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. by Tom McDonough (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 119-128, p. 121.

³⁸ Quoted in Ulrich Enzensberger, p. 142.

³⁹ 'Thich Quang Duc', in *Webster's New World Dictionary of the Vietnam War*, ed. Marc Leepson with Helen Hannaford (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1999), pp. 395-396.

⁴⁰ Reproduced e.g. in George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 3rd edn (New York etc: McGraw-Hill, 1996), p. 80; Felix Greene, *Vietnam! Vietnam!* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 30.

⁴¹ Herring, p. 189; David McReynolds, 'Pacifists and the Vietnam Antiwar Movement', in *Give Peace a Chance: Exploring the Vietnam Antiwar Movement*, ed. by Melvin Small and William D. Hoover (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1993), pp. 53-70, p. 55; Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle over Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA, Los Angeles, CA and London: University of California Press, 1994), p. 48, p. 58, p. 72, p. 506.

The first such self-immolation in the US was carried out in March 1965 by a Quaker pacifist of Jewish heritage, eighty-two-year-old Alice Herz, who had fled Germany in 1933 and been imprisoned in France before reaching the US. Herz wrote: “I ask what remains of America to distinguish this country from Germany, as I knew it in the first terrible months of the Third Reich?”⁴² She is said to have stated: “I’ve written everything I can; I’ve spoken everywhere; what can I do?”⁴³ Herz hoped that to emulate what she called “the flaming death of the Buddhists” would constitute a radical step forward from what she had come to believe was the ineffectuality of traditional protest about Vietnam.⁴⁴

The tragic actions of Herz and others anticipate in some senses the later anti-authoritarian rejection of conventional protest in the FRG, and KI’s idealisation of lived experience as protest. But by May 1967, just over two years after Herz’s death, the Vietnam war was still raging. Consequently, KI’s image of mass deaths by fire as a mode of protest could be an aggressive *détournement* of an act of self-sacrifice which seemed to have lost any radical edge. That is to say, KI’s flyers raise the ethical stakes yet further, by proposing as protest, albeit apparently satirically, fatal violence against others, rather than the self.

Taking Things – Literally

Read in a different way, KI’s flyers may also offer a strategy for breaking out of (or, indeed, into) the spectacle. Here too, ‘The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy’ offers a (skeleton) key to interpretation. Debord remarks that the youths of Watts “take modern capitalist propaganda, its publicity of abundance, *literally*. They want to possess *immediately* all the objects shown and *use* them.” (p. 155). This interpretive move is not a naive misunderstanding but a liberating strategy which rejects the figurative meanings – that is, the representations – on which the spectacle thrives. Debord observes:

In taking the capitalist spectacle at its face value, the blacks are already rejecting the spectacle itself. [...] It is supposed not to be taken literally, but to be followed at just a few paces’ distance; when this distance is abolished, the mystification becomes evident. (p. 157).

These subjects realise that the spectacle’s reality and images do not match up, such that taking those images literally makes it fall apart. The public character of looting shows this insight to all and so the spectacle can be replaced by action, immediacy and pleasure, for Debord describes Watts as a joyous “festival” (p. 155) as well as a “struggle” (p. 156). This reading recalls the SI’s roots in twentieth-century avant-gardes which sought to destroy divisions between art and life, divisions which are rooted in, and epitomised by the separation between the thing and its sign which Debord laments in *Society of the Spectacle*. In that programme, to destroy that separation, to bring things and signs, literal and figurative meanings back together, is to make the whole world aesthetic.

⁴² Hayes B. Jacobs, ‘The Martyrdom of Alice Herz’ (1965), in *Phoenix: Letters and Documents of Alice Herz. The Thought and Practice [sic] of a Modern-day Martyr*, ed. by Shingo Shibata (Amsterdam: B.R. Grüner B.V., 1976), pp. 151-161, p. 159. Cf Charles DeBenedetti with Charles Chatfield, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1990), p. 109.

⁴³ Quoted in Jacobs, p. 158.

⁴⁴ Quoted from the letter Herz wrote on her self-immolation: ‘TO THE NATIONS OF THE WORLD!’, in Shibata, pp. 3-4, p. 4.

Some of the expert reports on the May flyers which were commissioned by KI's defence draw attention to precisely such ideas as they comment on the avant-garde intertexts of these works. In this context, it is unsurprising that play between literal and figurative meanings is vital in KI's work too.⁴⁵ Flyer 7 promises to consumers caught up in a West Berlin fire a "knisterndes Vietnamgefühl" in which the hackneyed metaphors of advertising are suddenly taken horribly literally. In the same way, flyer 8's "Burn, ware-house! Burn!" calls to mind the chants in Watts which responded to real burning buildings and turned a conventional figurative expression, the use of the verb "to burn" to express excitement and admiration, entirely literal. Furthermore, since Montague's slogan was originally a response to artworks (songs on the radio), to apply it to a burning building is to say, by association, that the burning itself is a creative achievement in ways the avant-garde might recognise. Flyer 9's image of furs flying through the air derails the advertising gimmick of the supposedly, but in reality fraudulently, free gift, because that gift is normally given only to ensure more consumption.⁴⁶ By contrast, the idea that a gift can really be free is taken literally here, so that the furs lose their (figurative) exchange value and their more literal use value comes to the fore. Interestingly, flyer 9 has the most evidently poetic expression in this sequence of texts, so here too, a resonance with Modernist art is felt.

Hand in hand with this strategy, the flyers place emphasis on replacing representation with experience. In flyer 6, Maurice states: "Wir kamen [...] auf diese Form eines Happenings, die die Schwierigkeiten, sich die Zustände beispielweise in Hanoi während eines amerikanischen Bombenangriffs vorzustellen, beheben sollte." For Maurice, such difficulties are an inevitable part of living in the spectacle and so impede political engagement. Only lived experience of fire can transcend the impossibility of imagining Hanoi under US attack and motivate meaningful politics. The purpose of the "Happening" is therefore not to represent events in Hanoi so that people may gain a clearer picture of them, but to replicate the very experience of Hanoi in order to push them to act. Thus, the flyers favour the plenitude of experience over representation as a political strategy. Likewise, the flyers look ahead to the radical potential of action in West Berlin, culminating in flyer 9's euphoric account of experiencing a fire. Interestingly, Klaus Briegleb describes this text as spiralling out around a "Leere".⁴⁷ That void may stand for experience itself, which remains ineffable as it exists in opposition to representation and language.

Development away from representation and towards experience may be traced throughout the flyers on a rhetorical level too. Flyer 6 describes "kriegsähnliche Zustände" and "Ein Bild der Apokalypse" in Brussels, noting: "Das Kaufhaus glich einem Flammen- und Rauchmeer". It also describes the preparations made by Maurice as a "Vorspiel"; and flyer 7 calls the fire itself a "Schauspiel". That is, these flyers initially use simile and the vocabulary of similarity and performance to thematise distance between signifier and signified, saying only that one thing is like, or imitates, another. But as the flyers' attention turns to the prospect of future fires in Berlin, they replace the language of comparison and representation with metaphor, condensation and transformation: flyer 8 states that, on lighting a cigarette in a changing room, "Brüssel wird Hanoi".

⁴⁵ Cf Davies, *Writing and the West German Protest Movements*, pp. 132-43 and 179-80.

⁴⁶ Kunzelmann anticipated this idea as early as 1964: "Wir stürmen z.B. ein Kaufhaus, nehmen alle Güter und verteilen sie auf der Straße; der folgende Prozess müsste so frech-geschickt geführt werden, dass die Lüge der freien Wirtschaft selbst dem letzten Trottel bewusst wird." Letter from Kunzelmann to his then comrade in KI's predecessor Subversive Aktion, Frank Böckelmann, 04.01.1964, in Böckelmann and Nagel (Frankfurt am Main: Neue Kritik, 1976), pp. 128-129, p. 128.

⁴⁷ Briegleb, p. 71.

Despite this privileging of lived experience over representation, KI argued in court that its flyers should not be taken literally, as the prosecution seemed to think they would, thus perpetuating the flyers' constant play between figurative and literal meanings. By contrast, some later readers did choose to read its flyers literally, namely the group around Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF) founders Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin, who set department stores on fire in Frankfurt am Main just weeks after KI's 1968 acquittal. Most obviously, this action shows that thinking about Vietnam stands as a matrix of the growing attention to violence as a form of political practice in anti-authoritarianism from around 1968 onwards. But in addition, it can be related to the KI case discussed here. The Frankfurt trial "followed a performative dynamic similar to that [...] against Teufel and Langhans in Berlin", as Klimke writes.⁴⁸ Thus, it stands in the KI tradition, while, as Klimke argues further, marking a shift within it towards greater confrontation and less engagement with the court. In other ways too, the Frankfurt arson attack highlights key differences between KI and some of its successors. As Berendse notes: "In den folgenden Jahren sollten die Topoi Schock, Terror und Gewalt, die in den Flugblättern eine dominante Stellung einnehmen, ihre Umhüllung sublimierender Ästhetik verlieren und Wirklichkeit werden."⁴⁹ The present discussion permits the pinpointing of some discursive or stylistic aspects of that development. In part, the essence of KI's disturbance lies in its creation of a textuality in which distinctions between literal and figurative meanings seem uncertain and prone to sudden, disconcerting reversals. Or, put in terms of anti-authoritarian poetics, it is dialogical. By contrast, the material violence of successor activists like Baader and Ensslin is more literal-minded and monological.

“Großhappening”: Conclusion

This discussion highlights similarity and difference between KI, West German anti-authoritarianism and anti-war protest more broadly. It also demonstrates the importance of international contexts for KI. On one hand, it draws attention to the West German anti-authoritarian reception of US counter-cultures, especially African-American politics, as embodied by Watts.⁵⁰ On the other hand, KI's flyers exemplify the Situationist analysis of capitalist society as spectacle and echo the SI's wish to undermine it, in two principal ways. First, this study shows the usefulness of *détournement* for understanding KI's flyers. These texts mimic the discourses of the spectacle in grotesque ways which conjure up cognitive dissonance, and so unsettle the Establishment which relies on them. Moreover, for KI, the spectacle includes large parts of the anti-war movement, showing that, like other anti-

⁴⁸ Klimke, "“We Are Not Going To Defend Ourselves Against Such a Justice System!”", p. 271.

⁴⁹ Berendse, p. 123.

⁵⁰ For evidence of West German interest in African-American and counter-cultural politics, see e.g. Volkhard Brandes and Joyce Burke, *U.S.A.: Vom Rassenkampf zum Klassenkampf. Die Organisierung des schwarzen Widerstands* (1970) (Munich: dtv, 1972); *Black Power: Ursachen des Guerilla-Kampfes in den Vereinigten Staaten*, ed. by Bernward Vesper (Frankfurt am Main: Voltaire, 1967); Robert F. Williams and Robert B. Rigg, *Großstadtguerilla* (Berlin: Voltaire, 1969). This relationship is analysed e.g. in Maria Höhn and Martin Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom: The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 107-22; Ingo Juchler, *Die Studentenbewegungen in den Vereinigten Staaten und der Bundesrepublik Deutschland der sechziger Jahre. Eine Untersuchung hinsichtlich ihrer Beeinflussung durch Befreiungsbewegungen und -theorien aus der Dritten Welt* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1996); Klimke, *The Other Alliance: Student Protest in West Germany and the United States in the Global Sixties* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010); Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (Berkeley, CA, Los Angeles, CA and London: University of California Press, 2004); Klimke, 'Sit-In, Teach-In, Go-In: Die transnationale Zirkulation kultureller Praktiken in den 1960er Jahren', in Klimke and Scharloth, pp. 119-35.

authoritarian agents, it saw activism less militant than its own as supportive of capitalism, furnishing it with a veneer of political tolerance. The flyers therefore subject such protest to *détournement* in ways which resonate with the anti-authoritarian tactic of creating dissent and opposition within the protest movements. Thus, the flyers can unveil the operation and circulation of the discourses of power, as in the case of Vietnam which is constantly contested, claimed and reclaimed as a trope by opposing social agents. KI's characteristic literalisation of figurative language, reminiscent of Debord's analysis of Watts, is also a *détournement* which exposes the mechanics of the spectacle.

Inter alia, such discursive strategies allow KI to respond to a contemporary debate in the West German anti-war movement about representation. In that debate, the Marxist and avant-gardist critiques of direct representation which motivated Debord and the SI meet practical experience in the streets, traditional scepticism in high German culture *vis à vis* figurative representation in general, as well as contemporary left-wing suspicion of West Germany's media and of literary form *per se*.⁵¹ These concerns, eloquent as they are about the protest movements' essential modernity, often seem intractable, and they (help) trigger both a poetological crisis for engaged writers, and increasing disarray in anti-authoritarian politics around 1967-68. By contrast, KI's *détournements* enable it both to use and to critique contemporary discourses about Vietnam, without itself falling into the trap of attempting to represent the war itself. Put another way, *détournement* allows KI to move away from a textuality of representation, while still making a political intervention.

This move parallels anti-authoritarian politics which in 1967 was starting to argue that a preoccupation with distant Vietnam was less relevant politically than a new anti-capitalist front in the metropolis. That is, in different yet cognate ways, both KI and other anti-authoritarians were moving towards a more self-reflexive politics. Similarly too, Gerald Horne reports citizens of Watts saying they would rather fight in Watts than Vietnam (p. 59, p. 67), and even the coinage (indicating the important symbolic versatility of Vietnam) "Viet Watts" (p. 102).⁵² That is, the idea of Watts as an alternative war zone against the US government made sense to some contemporaries in Los Angeles, just as the idea of West Berlin as a second front for Vietnam appealed to the FRG's anti-authoritarians. So in this sense too, KI is taking part in a transnational circulation of ideas.

Second, the flyers tally with Debord's privileging of experience over representation. This argument is at first sight paradoxical, for the flyers are themselves of course merely textual representations of imaginary past and future experiences. But as Teufel stated at his trial: "Wir wollten den Leuten mal wieder Gelegenheit geben, die Wirtköpfe und Radikalinskis angewidert zu beobachten und nach dem Kadi zu schreien." That is, the real goal of the flyers is not to express anything significant about Vietnam or Brussels (and indeed, comparatively little was said about either by the defendants in the trial), but simply to cause trouble. That trouble may be the "neue Demonstrationsformen", the true "Großhappening" of which the flyers write; as Klimke points out, they form part of a much wider, concerted anti-authoritarian campaign of disrupting the West German courts.⁵³ In addition, read in this way, the flyers exemplify the ideal of pure sensation, for their writing, distribution and prosecution became an unmediated experience for the protagonists themselves, a baptism of fire in the criminal justice system. That experience matches up with what Debord described in a

⁵¹ Davies, 'The Price of an Image'.

⁵² Police also reported people in Watts emulating the "Viet Cong", i.e, the South Vietnamese rebels of the National Liberation Front (NLF), Horne, pp. 65-6.

⁵³ Klimke, "'We Are Not Going to Defend Ourselves Before Such a Justice System!'".

programmatic text as the Situationist goal, “the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passionate quality.”⁵⁴ Such “situations” allow glimpses of life beyond the spectacle. At the same time, the flyers recognise their own ephemerality, a character which is underlined for the perceptive reader by their very material substance, paper, so vulnerable to the fire which they seem to celebrate.

Finally, this analysis demonstrates points of difference between KI and its inter- or transnational interests, too. There is no doubt that West German anti-authoritarians were deeply interested in US counter-cultures and their methods, including the Civil Rights movement and other African-American groupings. Here however, KI’s specific citation of events in Watts is a characteristically provocative choice, for those events were not endorsed by all African-American activists. At the same time, KI’s visions of West Berlin burning are of course qualitatively quite different from the historical reality of Watts, for they are imaginary and symbolic.

While both Debord and KI are interested in revolt as “festival”, this vision is far from anodyne and exacts violence and extreme pain on many levels. Montague has written of his distress at unauthorised appropriations of “Burn baby! Burn!” which seemed to affirm the destruction and real human suffering of Watts which he laments. But Debord starts his essay by explicitly dismissing the violent death of an official, and he omits comment on the many other casualties altogether. In Debord’s view, the conventional language of humanism for sorrow or pity is itself a mystification. He writes:

The humanism that cloaks [common hierarchical consumption] is the contrary of man, the negation of his activity and his desires; it is the humanism of the commodity, the benevolence of the parasitical commodity toward the people off whom it feeds. (p. 159)

On this argument, an apparently anti-humanist stance is in fact the only human response to Watts (and Brussels, and Vietnam).

It was partly KI’s refusal to evince sympathy for the losses of Brussels, perhaps of protesters like Thich Quang Duc and Alice Herz who burned themselves in reality, and the potential loss of life in Berlin that could follow any act of arson that made their flyers seem repellent. That effect was gravely heightened by the flyers’ possible allusions, in undertone, to German wartime suffering and the Holocaust, which in themselves demand further exploration. KI might have responded to accusations of cynical inhumanity with an explicit critique of humanist discourse akin to Debord’s. But instead, its flyers refuse any such clear-cut position on the violent deaths which they reference. In general, their resistance to conventional processes of interpretation and their many contradictions, the ways in which potential meanings and interpretations seem to proliferate ambiguously within them, antagonise readers, then as now. But in particular too, the flyers disturb in the ambiguous ways in which they seem simultaneously to gloss over, and yet to reveal, even praise, violence and human pain.

⁵⁴ See e.g. Debord, ‘Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organization and Action’ (1957), Knabb, pp. 17-25.