

TREATISE ON VENOM & ETERNITY

by ISIDORE ISOU

ANNEX PRESS 2019

Quote from the introduction by ADRIAN MARTIN :

Isou was a precocious sort. He published his first Lettrist manifesto when he was 16. By the age of 25 he had written over half a dozen books, covering an amazing diversity of fields, and all under an increasingly unified system which he did not hesitate to call 'Isouian' theory. These books include *Introduction to a New Poetry and a New Music*, *Treatise on Nuclear Economics*, *Youth Uprising* (in 3 volumes), *Aggregation of a Name and a Messiah* (the name and the Messiah both being Isou), and my favourite, *The Mechanics of Women*, which is a sort of self-help sex manual that presents itself as a learned, lived testimony to the science of 'erotology'. On the importance of his film *Treatise on Slime and Eternity*, Isou declared:

There is no work in the entire history of cinema comparable to *Treatise on Slime and Eternity*, in terms of the richness of its creations. Preceding film creations were only particular applications from more advanced aesthetic domains, while Isouian creations are the straightforward promises or presentiments of a total transformation of knowledge.

Isou's own artistic productions covered many media – and combined many media in the same gesture, as in his hypergraphic images – but a special place was reserved for his theorising, which was of a vaulting, indeed messianic ambition, because it aimed to interrelate all major areas of human and social activity: art, technology (which he called 'mechanics'), science, mathematics, economics, sex, and so on. Today, only someone such as Alain Badiou comes close to this scope. Isou wrote: "In the period circumscribed between 1931 and 1945 [basically the period since his own birth], nothing new has been

revealed in poetry, the novel, philosophy, economy or cinema”. Isou gave himself and his comrades the task of revealing this something new.

My own encounter with Isou’s work came near its end (he died in 2007). In 2001 he wrote a massive, 1400-page synthesis of his thought and method, called *The Creative and the Innovative*. There is a superb little anecdote in this book that has really stuck with me. Isou details how he invariably reads a classic work of philosophy, for instance, by Hegel: he scribbles furiously in the margins and indeed all over the pages with his critical annotations. Then, when he reaches the end, he takes apart the book’s spine, throws away any pages he has not written on, transcribes what he did write, and voila: he has written his own, new book. That is how, Isou says, one book, an inferior book by Hegel, begets a superior book by Isou: and that’s the theory of the creative and the innovative in an allegorical nutshell. Isou makes the good point in this passage that he is not really desecrating or defiling a respected work, since he is only ever attacking a relatively valueless copy, not the original – although he adds that if he could somehow access an original, the template from which all the copies of Hegel in the world had been struck, he would also defile that.¹

This attitude towards originals and copies is, as we shall see, central to Isou’s savage thinking about cinema. For he regarded the first projection of a film as the its fatal consummation, its ‘wedding night’ as he said, where its destiny is set and fixed forever more, whereas the Lettrist mission, as he described it, was to sneak in and interfere with the bride before that malign, conservative, suburban destiny could occur. Isidore Isou, needless to say, was an anarchist and a provocateur.

At the start of the 1950s, cinema as we knew it (and still pretty much know it) was quite dead for Isou, the mission or vocation of its heroic era over, finished with. In the course of “Aesthetic of Cinema”, he rails (often in a wonderfully insulting mode) against such filmmaker-theorists as Jean Epstein, Louis Delluc, Germaine Dulac, Sergei Eisenstein, and René Clair, as well as neo-realism

¹ In a similar vein, he remarked that the scandalised viewers who revolted at the premiere screenings of *Treatise on Slime and Eternity* and tore up the seats didn’t bother him, since he didn’t own the seats.

(which he viewed as a regressive movement), and the animation experiments of Walt Disney!

Such wiping-off of all previous achievements in a field is the founding *tabula rasa* gesture of many an avant-garde manifesto, but in Isou's Lettrist system, it has a particular and special coherence. In a striking move that anticipates much contemporary continental philosophy, Isou stakes the claim early on in his text that his definition of cinema "is the result of an *invention*, not a *given*". And his definition is, in the first place, that any bit of film is the *unfurling* or the *unwinding of a reproduction* – and he extends this to the soundtrack as well as the image track, which were for Isou always two different, 'discrepant' things. Cinema is thus this thing which is, above all, printed, and copied (reproduced), it is fundamentally serial in nature, and its 'original' (the film's negative, in those celluloid days) is always hidden away, occulted, secreted from the interfering hands of true subversive artists.

c. Adrian Martin 2017

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From the text of
On Venom & Eternity
by ISIDORE ISOU
annex press 2019

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Dear Viewers,

You are about to see a “Discrepant” film.

No refunds will be allowed at the exit.

*The Management*³

The Letterist chorus starts five minutes before the "CREDITS" while the house lights are on, then continues during the rolling of the text.

PRINTED TEXT

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DISTRIBUTOR⁴

² The *Robauer* version of the film begins with a preface in English, in an attempt to explain the context of Letterism to a non-French audience. It is included below, in the knowledge that it is highly unlikely that Isou had any part in its writing:

Dear Audience:-

The film you are about to see differs radically - to put it mildly - from any film ever made any time, any place. It is the work of Jean-Isidore ISOU, founder of LETTERISM.

Isou and the Letterists responsible for this film are a group of artists working in Paris. After World War I, a great deal of ‘avant-garde’ artistic innovation took place in that city, led by such new blood as Jean Cocteau, Ernest Hemmingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and James Joyce. During the same period Paris became host to *Dadaism*, a doctrine of utter formlessness and a philosophy in part similar to LETTERISM. Following the end of World War II, Paris saw the birth of Jean-Paul Sartre’s Existentialism. Later, and again in Paris, a new philosophy was born: LETTERISM.

The ideas which make up LETTERISM differ radically from the past. Perhaps the artistic activity it generates will match in magnitude the influence of Dadaism and Existentialism, its predecessors.

This film will attempt to demonstrate that the future of Cinema will be affected by the ideas of the Letterists. We consider it only fair to warn you that when this film was shown at Cannes’ Film Festival it caused riots that had to be quelled with fire hoses.

SOCIETY OF CINEMA ARTS

³ *Oeuvres* omits this message from “The Management”.

ASTORIA FILMS, visa de censure no. 11882.

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MARC GILBERT GUILLAUMIN FILMS⁵ presents:

TREATISE ON DROOL⁶

AND ETERNITY

by JEAN ISIDORE ISOU

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This film is dedicated to:

GRIFFITH

GANCE

CHAPLIN

CLAIR

EISENSTEIN

Von STROHEIM

FLAHERTY

BUÑUEL

COCTEAU⁷

and to all those who have contributed something novel or⁸ personal to the art of cinema.

⁴ *Oeuvres* omits this word.

⁵ *Oeuvres* omits this word.

⁶ *Bave*: Although the literal translation of this word is "drool", "slobber", or "spit" there has been a historic tendency for the English title of "Traité de bave et d'éternité" to be rendered as "Treatise on Venom and Eternity". Colloquially, bave can also be translated as "insults," so perhaps the original translation of "Venom" is related to the English phrase, "to spit venom," meaning "to insult."

⁷ *Oeuvres* omits Gance and Eisenstein from this list.

With the hope that one day, the author will be judged⁹ worthy of them.

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This film is part of a complete oeuvre that at the very most thirty "youths" believe in today.

Leon Bloy once said that you cannot be someone¹⁰ before the age of fifty. The economist Keynes wrote that a system of ideas requires at least twenty-five years to reach the "public"

But the author is still¹¹ too young, so his work is fragmentary and the published parts of it are either ridiculed or ignored.

ISOU¹²

By the same author:

Photographs of books

1947 Introduction to a New Poetry and a New Music (*Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*)

1947 Aggregation of a Name and a Messiah (*Agrégation d'un Nom et d'un Messie*)

1948 Reflections on André Breton (*Réflexions sur André Breton*)

1949 Isou or the Mechanic of Women (*Isou ou la Mécanique des Femmes*)

1949 Treatise on Nuclear Economy - T.1 (*Traité d'Économie Nucléaire - T.I.*)

1950 Clarifications on my Poetry and Me (*Précisions sur ma poésie et moi*)

1950 Diaries of the Gods (*Journaux des Dieux*)

1951¹³ Dissertation on the Coming Powers of the Plastic Arts and their Death (*Mémoires sur les Forces futures des arts plastiques et leur mort*)¹⁴

⁸ In *Oeuvres* this word is: "and".

⁹ In *Oeuvres* this sentence is: "With the hope that they will, one day, judge the author worthy of them".

¹⁰ In *Oeuvres* this word is: "well-known".

¹¹ *Oeuvres* omits this word.

¹² In *Oeuvres* the text is not signed.

¹³ In *Oeuvres* this date is: "1950".

¹⁴ This title is shown in the film in a Gallimard cover. However it was never published by Gallimard, so this cover is presumably a “mock-up”. The text was published in UR #1 Dec 1950.

CHAPTER 1¹⁵*The Principle*¹⁶

Photography

Nat. Sauffer

The sound was first recorded on vinyl discs¹⁷, thanks to the kindness of:

Robert Beauvais

Gisèle Parry

and Caron

under the supervision of M. Farge.

The transfer of the discs to the film's* "soundtrack" filtered in some noises or "crackling", these have been kept because they contribute to the (involuntary) revolutionary nature of film.

The first image shows the sign of Rue *Danton*. The second image, the poster of the *Ciné-Club of Saint-Germain*¹⁸, announcing Chaplin's "*L'Opinion Générale*"¹⁹, with a *Debate* after the screening.

The Voices

¹⁵ In *Oeuvres* this is: "First Chapter".

¹⁶ As Isou follows the chapter sequence "*Principe*" / "*Développement*" / "*Preuve*" referencing the structure of an academic treatise - it makes sense to translate the sequence as "The Principle" / "The Exposition" / "The Evidence".

¹⁷ *disques*: although not specified in the original text this has been translated as "vinyl discs" for clarity.

¹⁸ In *Oeuvres* this poster is described as being for the "*Ciné-Club de Saint-Germain-des-Prés*".

¹⁹ Refers to Charlie Chaplin's *L'Opinion Publique*, or *A Woman of Paris*, 1923.

Daniel: Albert J. Legros.

Narrator: Bernard Blin.

Various: Serge, Colette, Wolman, Marco, Jean-L. Brau, Maurice²⁰.

Editor: Suzanne Cabon.

Sound Engineers: Marcel Ormancey, Jacques Boutiron.

CTM Laboratories²¹: Gennevilliers

Assistant Director: Maurice Lemaître

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The people, the story, and the settings are (of course) imaginary. Any similarity to known people or events is purely coincidental.

Even Saint-Germain-des-Prés has been invented by the author to represent the protagonist's²² simple *Stations of the Cross*.

²⁰ In *Oeuvres* this list gives Maurice Lemaître's name in full.

²¹ In *Oeuvres* this is incorrectly referred to as "Laboratoires CIMP" - CTM is the correct shortening for "Laboratoires Cinéma Tirage L. Maurice"

²² *héros*: literally "hero", but in the context of cinema it has been translated as "protagonist".

[A voiceover plays while the images show the protagonist walking on the Boulevard Saint Germain des Prés]

The Narrator

... Daniel left the Ciné-club, his head shattered by the cacophony, as if his skull had been used as a cup by the cannibals of the Solomon Islands, as if his head²³ had been bashed in some barbaric toasts.

After the screenings at the Ciné-club, amidst the incoherence of the debates which usually follow, he tried for the first time²⁴ to propose his new and original ideas on the *Art of film*, and the words he'd thrown into the room now returned to him alcoholic and intoxicating.²⁵

The voice of Daniel

Film interests me because it contains potential for discovery, for ongoing progress. I like cinema when it is insolent and does what it shouldn't do.

Today a film can be introduced into the *History of Cinema* because guys like Griffith - instead of parking the camera in one place and having actors move around it, as they did in the early days - dared to introduce *foreground*, showing nothing but the heroine's face in tears, a part of the entire scene, evolving monstrously on screen, to the detriment of everything else.

I don't like imitators!

I like the new depravity of Eric von Stroheim's cinema: when he bursts a white pimple on his terrifying face with sadistic fingernails! When we see the disdainful, arrogant²⁶ officer drop a lady's bag without bending to retrieve it, so that a moment later, the screen shows us his two horribly mutilated arms. But I don't like imitators!

²³ *caboché*: an informal word for head, similar to "noggin" or "noodle" in English. It can take on more negative connotations when used in the context of the phrases *avoir la caboche dure* (to be pigheaded) and *ça dans la caboche* (get it into your thick head).

²⁴ *Oeuvres* omits the phrase: "for the first time".

²⁵ A variant of this text is proposed in *Oeuvres* as a footnote, it reads: "...the words he'd thrown into the alembic of the room, now returned to him like the trade secrets of a stranger."

²⁶ *Oeuvres* omits "arrogant".

I like cinema when Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* introduces the first instance of the *social symbol*: a scattering crowd crushing itself on the steps shot at by an advancing army, as unyielding as the inhuman tank of Greek fatalism.

The contrast between a baby carriage emerging on it's own from the catastrophe with the rhythm of the soldiers' boots heralds the revelation of *revolutionary history*.

I don't like Eisenstein's imitators!

We know Chaplin's discovery of the first indirect allusion, introduced in *A Woman of Paris*²⁷: instead of showing the train leave, we see the light from the train windows running across a woman's face.

Cinema interests me because of the surrealist imagery of Bunuel's *Un Chien Andalou*: the moon cut by a cloud is compared to an eye sliced by a razor. The nauseating iris spews out of the socket like a drop of rain.

Various voices

But we know all that! — Get to the point...! — Bravo! — Get it off!²⁸ — Spit it out!²⁹

The voice of Daniel

Oh, you gawkers³⁰: shut up, won't you! I am simply trying to say that I don't want to make films that *take advantage of other people's mistakes*. For the sake of my soul, I choose to run my own risks. I want a heaven or hell of my very own.

Various voices

Egoist! — Petit-bourgeois!

²⁷ In *Oeuvres* the reference is to “*L'Opinion Générale*”, while in the filmed script it is “*L'Opinion Publique*”.

²⁸ *A poil!*: literally “Get Naked!”. Quite a common heckle in French - the closest English equivalent has been used.

²⁹ *Mets-toi à table*: this is a French colloquialism meaning to “tell everything” or “confess”. It is related to police interrogations where the interviewee wouldn't be allowed to eat until they had complied with the interrogators demands.

³⁰ *badands*: literally “onlookers?”. When used informally as it is here it has a negative connotation - other possible translations are “rubbernecks” and “oglers”.

The voice of Daniel

First and foremost, I believe that cinema is too rich. It's obese. It has reached its boundaries, its maximum. At the first attempt to expand itself the cinema will explode! This congested *over-fattened pig* will burst into a thousand pieces. I declare the *destruction of cinema*, the first apocalyptic sign of the disjunction and rupture of this *bloated and bulging organism* called film.

Whistling and various voices

Anarchist!

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