Sex and the City: A Situationist Reading of Jens Jorgen Thorsen's Film Adaptation of Henry Miller's *Quiet Days in Clichy*

Jennifer Cowe

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11624>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.11624

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Jennifer Cowe, "Sex and the City: A Situationist Reading of Jens Jorgen Thorsen's Film Adaptation of Henry Miller's *Quiet Days in Clichy*", *European journal of American studies* [Online], 11-2 | 2016, document 12, Online since 11 August 2016, connection on 08 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11624> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.11624>

This text was automatically generated on 8 July 2021.

Creative Commons License

Sex and the City: A Situationist Reading of Jens Jorgen Thorsen's Film Adaptation of Henry Miller's *Quiet Days in Clichy*

Jennifer Cowe

¹ If ever a film maker and writer were made to collaborate on a project, it was Jens Jorgen Thorsen and Henry Miller. Despite using different mediums, both men's work expressed their ambivalence towards the role of the state, capitalism and sexuality. Each saw himself as fundamentally at odds with the cultural norms of his respective country: Miller the countercultural sexual iconoclast, experimenting with language and narrative structure to produce novels and pamphlets that demanded a re-evaluation of how the individual lived within capitalism; Thorsen the product of hippy communes and art collectives, determined to expose the sexual hypocrisy of Danish society. By the time they met each other in the late sixties, Miller had long established his counter cultural credentials through works like *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939), *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945) and *Quiet Days in Clichy* (1956). Miller's work often took on the guise of autobiographyⁱ, although it is debatable whether he meant his novels to be read as such, and they included scenes of an extreme sexual nature. Miller's initial aim in writing was to write in a language that was recognizable to the man on the street. He wrote about his own life (as he saw it) and the lives of those around him, often the destitute, sex workers, criminals and fellow artists down on their luck. Miller's reputation is sadly still that of a writer of dirty books, who at best can be seen as a forerunner of the more sexual permissive society to come. I would argue that this ignores the inherent complexity of Miller's work, especially early novels like *Tropic of Cancer*, *Tropic of Capricorn* and *Black Spring* (1936). His novels deal with complex philosophical and psychological issues, specifically through utilizing the theories of Henri Bergson and Otto Rankⁱⁱ. Miller plays with concepts of time and time interpenetration, the nature of memory and reality and the role of the artist. Miller's joyful acceptance of sex, his hatred of advanced capitalism

and his unswerving belief in his own creative journey must surely have attracted Thorsen to filming *Quiet Days in Clichy*. Miller liked to cause trouble just as much as Thorsen, and both believed that the artist's role was to shake things up and expose double standards.

²Thorsen has been described as “the rowdiest gate-crasher and general shit-stirrer” (Stevenson 157) of Danish cinema; however, it is important to consider the cultural climate that Thorsen came of age in. Born in Copenhagen in 1932, Thorsen had clear memories of the Nazi occupation and unsurprisingly developed a hatred of authority and state control. Thorsen studied architecture and art history after high school leading to jobs as varied as brick layer, jazz musician and museum assistant. By the time the more culturally liberal climate of the 1960s and 70s came around, Thorsen was already an established member of the Danish avant-garde. He was close friends with both Asger Jorn and his brother Jorn Nash. By the early 1960s Jorn and Nash were, openly for the latter and clandestinely for the former, in revolt against the restrictions they saw within the Situationist International (SI) and were busy creating their own faction named CO-RITUS in 1962.ⁱⁱⁱ It is important to fully understand what the SI was and why it had such a profound effect upon Thorsen's creativity and way of life. The SI provided Thorsen with a philosophical foundation in which to experiment with both his filmmaking and how he conceived of everyday life around him.

³For many the Situationist International is remembered as a group of artists, writers and activists indelibly linked in the imagination to Paris, understandably so, as the group truly came to international prominence during May 1968. Founded in 1957 by Guy Debord, the group emerged out of the Letterist International's attempt to make contact with various international artistic collectives who were thought to share similar political and philosophical traits.^{iv} The SI was primarily made up of anti-authoritarian Marxists who acknowledged that capitalism had changed since Marx's formative writings, but that several of his theories remained pertinent, specifically his theory of alienation. They examined the misery of modern social alienation and commodity fetishism, whilst rejecting advanced capitalism's palliatives of technology and increased leisure time:

The misery of material poverty may have diminished, but life in capitalist society was still made miserable by the extension of alienated social relations from the workplace to every area of lived experience. The leisures and luxuries gained from capitalism can only be consumed: there is more free time, choice, and opportunity, but the commodity form in which everything appears serves only to reproduce the alienated relations of capitalist production. (Plant 2-3)

- ⁴Crucial to their theories was the concept of the spectacle; the idea that social relations were conducted through objects rather than lived experiences. In advanced capitalist societies, individuals no longer directly fulfilled their individual, authentic desires, but rather by proxy through commodities and consumption. Ideas of value and worth are dictated by capital, leading to passive alienation. When Debord writes of “the spectacle” what he really means is modern mass media. Debord believed that the age of the spectacle began in the 1920's with the advent of a more sophisticated approach to advertising and public relations. In its simple form the notion of the spectacle continues on from Marx's theory of reification, the course through which objects become separated from the process of their production. “The Spectacle” involves an ever-increasing barrage of images and places values upon them. Over time the individual becomes nothing more than a passive consumer, with his experiences and

feelings as commodified as any object. Debord would enlarge upon his initial theory in *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988) to break down “the spectacle” into three different categories: The Concentrated Spectacle, The Diffuse Spectacle and The Integrated Spectacle.^v To counteract the society of the spectacle, Situationists tried to create events that aimed to reinvigorate and liberate the individual. This can be as simple as *Détournement*, the concept of reappropriating the signs and symbols of capitalism and subverting the message. The publication of Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and Raoul Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (1968) cemented the Situationists as the leading anti-capitalist artistic collective in this period. It is important to acknowledge the international aspect to the SI's membership and leadership and not see it purely as a French movement. Due to the fact that it drew its membership from various earlier associations, including the aforementioned Letterist International, but also the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, the London Psychogeographical Association and COBRA (an anagram of the founders home cities; Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam), it is not surprising that many of the founding members of the SI were not French. Of the founding members Raoul Vaneigem was Belgian, Constant Nieuwenhuys was Dutch, Alexander Trocchi was Scottish, Attila Kotanyi was Hungarian and Asger Jorn was Danish.

⁵It is Asger Jorn that provides the link between Thorsen and the SI. Thorsen was already living on the periphery of Danish society by the time he came across the ideas of the SI, but with the creation of CO-RITUS with Nash we can begin to see these concepts explored on film. Gruppe SPUR was included in Nash's new Second Situationist International and Thorsen began his film making within the new collective. In the early years the collective moved to Jorn's farm Drakabygett in Sweden, becoming a real hippie commune with all the accompanying stereotypes. Film was an essential component in the group's aim to subvert society; they organized pop-up film festivals that showcased their experimental films. Thorsen's first film was *Pornoshop* (1965), a short film made in conjunction with two other filmmakers from the collective (Novi Maruni and Niels Holt). *Pornoshop* explores the commoditization of sex from an SI perspective. By juxtaposing outtakes from commercial pornographic films and scenes of normal couples having sex, Thorsen explored the influence of capitalism on how we imagine, consume and conceptualize sex. The film caused great controversy within Denmark and Sweden with screenings being raided by police, but it cemented Thorsen's countercultural credentials. As observed by Jack Stevenson in his examination of the Scandinavian pornography industry during this period *Scandinavian Blue* (2010), Thorsen was at the very pinnacle of the cultural agenda that was aiming to fundamentally change Danish society, yet his conceptualization of what this meant was not straightforward:

Pornography was Thorsen's weapon of choice in his ongoing crusade to provoke the authorities and unsettle the bourgeoisie, and while his use of porn in the service of such idealistic ends seems hopelessly quaint today, it must be seen in the context of the times. In Denmark censorship was predominately seen as a way to control, not to protect. It was viewed as a means of repression....Consequently the fight for sexual freedom was considered a political as well as a personal struggle. In some circles free love was even deemed to be a socialist act, a rejection of jealousy, which was a capitalist emotion—treating people like personal property, owning another person. Yet Thorsen was never so doctrinaire. He was more of a happy anarchist. To him sex was a joyous thing, an affirmation of individuality and a declaration of freedom. (Stevenson 235-236)

- 6 Thorsen was undoubtedly a part of a generation and an artistic community that sought to bring fundamental change to the society they lived in, yet intrinsic within this is the need to follow an individual path, to break away from the collective movement that provided his impetus. His creativity was nourished by his interaction with CO-RITUS and the Drakabygett collective, but I agree with Stevenson's appraisal of Thorsen as "a happy anarchist" intent on using pornography as a means by which to subvert the capitalist state's appropriation of sex. These ideas are clearly influenced by the SI, and I will examine them in closer detail in regards to Thorsen's film version of *Quiet Days in Clichy*; however, it is also important to pause and consider how these ideas link Thorsen to Miller. Stevenson is right when he describes Thorsen as non-doctrinal and as seeing sex as an affirmation of freedom and selfhood, and these observations could just as easily be applied to Miller.

7 By the 1960s Henry Miller was finally enjoying the fruits of his labor. After decades of censorship in both America and the United Kingdom, his most famous and controversial work *Tropic of Cancer* was finally published in his homeland in 1961.^{vi} Miller had endured years of financial hardship, surviving on unreliable royalties from foreign presses and by begging from patrons and friends. Hailed as a countercultural icon by many, Miller's day-to-day existence had been anything but easy since his return to America in 1940. The 1960s would be the decade in which Miller was feted around the world; he was invited to be on the jury at Cannes in 1960, he appeared at the Edinburgh World Writers Conference in 1962 and the remainder of his back catalogue had been published in America by 1965, including his novella *Quiet Days in Clichy* (1956). The question must surely be how did this world renowned writer come to collaborate with an underground, *avant-garde* film maker from Denmark? The answer must surely lie in their shared belief that sex was a joyous, free act that had become a tool by which capitalism controlled and manipulated gender relations. Rather than the reciprocal and revelatory experience that both believed it to be, sex had become commodified and commercialized into the institution of marriage and the accompanying consumerism that was a prerequisite to gaining sex. Leaving aside the admittedly problematic notion of pornography as somehow a means by which to subvert said institutions, both Thorsen and Miller sought a return to what they believed was a more natural and fair sexual arena, where men and women gave sex freely without inhibition or hope of financial or societal reward.^{vii} Miller and Thorsen also shared an innate individuality that did not necessarily trust the collective. Miller was never a joiner of political, artistic or religious groups; his belief system was fundamentally Zen Buddhist, and he placed the responsibility for change purely within the individual. Thorsen also goes his own way; he flits in and out of artistic groups as it suits him and he was hardly a doctrinal member of the SI, although I would argue that their ideological influence are clearly manifest in his work, if filtered through his own creative needs. Miller and Thorsen shared many of the same fundamental beliefs regarding sex, culture and the inhibiting role of society to control the natural evolution of the individual.^{viii}

8 The plot of *Quiet Days in Clichy* lends itself perfectly to a Situationist reading. Joey and Carl, aka Miller and best friend Alfred Perlès, are living in dire financial straits in a working class area of Paris called Clichy. They spend their days and nights searching for free meals and sex. *Quiet Days in Clichy* is a chronicle of their bizarre sexual adventures and pursuit of food. Joey and Carl walk all over Paris, with no other compass than their hard-ons and empty stomachs. Set in the 1930s by Miller, Thorsen's

film updated the action to the present day. Their lives do not resemble in any way the expatriate picture postcard image of Paris. They live a peripatetic life in a poor arrondissement rarely holding down jobs for more than a few weeks, liberated from the concerns of so-called productive members of society. Thorsen shows the viewer the importance of these meanderings through the Situationist concept of the *Dérive* or in English “Drift.”^{ix}

Image 1

"The Naked City," Guy De Bord, 1957

⁹ The *Dérive* is a critical part of the wider Situationist theory of Psychogeography. Psychogeography is the “specific effects of the geographical environment (whether consciously organised or not) on the emotions and behaviour of individuals” (Maciocco 93). The *Dérive* is an unplanned walk through an urban landscape fuelled purely by the feeling induced in the walker by the landscape. Debord described the state as,

The sudden change of ambiance in a street within the space of a few meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres; the path of least resistance that is automatically followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the physical contour of the terrain); the appealing or repelling character of certain places—these phenomena all seem to be neglected. In any case they are never envisaged as depending on causes that can be uncovered by careful analysis and turned to account. (Debord 10)

- ¹⁰ The *Dérive* is a state of wandering in search of discovering the real and authentic. The city is a space of stratified hierarchies, shaped by material wealth and government control, which limits the responses of the individual:

In the *Dérive* one or more persons, during a certain period, drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find

there....But the *Dérive* includes both this letting go and its necessary contradiction: the domination of psychogeographical variations by the knowledge and calculation of their possibilities. (Knabb 50)

- 11 This will lead the individual to a freedom of experience generated only by his own authentic engagement with his surroundings.

12 Joey and Carl's psychogeographical experience of Paris is fueled by their need to eat and get laid. Thorsen shows us this in full, minute after minute of Joey walking around Paris with no destination and with no apparent progress to the plot of the film. The opening credits of the film show Joey's aimless meanderings through different arrondissements until he chooses a random cafe in which to have a beer. As the streets of Paris bustle around him, Joey seems to glide above all the meaningless activity. He does not belong with the throngs of tourists shuffling between sites of pre-determined interest, nor is he an employee governed by sequential time slots of activity. He is free to interact with the space as he wishes. The cinematography of Jesper Hom adds to the atmosphere of a city within a city, as he shot mostly around the dilapidated districts of Place de Clichy and Montmartre. As gentrified as Montmartre has become, in the 1960s it was still a working class district and we can see its roughness clearly. Place de Clichy remains rather seedy to this day, with its proximity to the sex shows and shops of Pigalle, Thorsen and Hom capture this coarseness well. This is not the beautiful Parisian street-shots of so many films; it has a griminess that hints at the daily squalor just off the main boulevards. Hom's depicts the area much as Miller had described it:

Montmartre is sluggish, lazy, indifferent, somewhat shabby and seedy-looking, not glamorous so much as seductive, not scintillating but glowing with a smouldering flame....worn, faded, derelict, nakedly vicious, mercenary, vulgar. It is, if anything, repellant rather than attractive, but insidiously repellent, like vice itself. There are little bars filled almost exclusively with whores, pimps, thugs and gamblers, which, no matter if you pass them up a thousand times, finally suck you in and claim you as a victim. (Miller 5)

- 13 In Howard Thomson's *New York Times* review of September 1970, Hom's cinematography is one of the few positives he sees in the whole film:

Twanging away in the background, like a rusty bedspring, is the guitar accompaniment of Country Joe McDonald, who strategically yodels some dirty songs during action that speaks for itself. And as the grapplings and cavortings get more playful—and downright infantile—the music gets friskier. The picture gets more redundant and even dull. However, during one sequence, when Valjean escorts a toothsome favorite to the countryside, the sound track does hold a philosophical musing on sexuality and time that is interesting, earthbound Miller. And the one really solid thing about the picture is its Parisian stamp, with the camera grainily scouring byways and burrowing deep into small cafes and shops. (Thomson 1970)

- 14 Thomson seems to prefer the film version of *Tropic of Cancer* (1970), which I find rather surprising. I would argue that the criticisms he levels at *Quiet Days in Clichy*—the mundane sex scenes, bad acting and lack of depth—could just as easily be levelled at *Tropic of Cancer*, arguably a much harder novel to do justice to on film. When Thomson writes "The film tries to zap it up with obscene words, phrases and sentences pasted against the footage, some of it economically visual...post-card-style," I cannot help but think that he has fundamentally misunderstood what Thorsen is trying to do. Thomson has failed to comprehend the film as using SI concepts to engage with the original text

in an innovative way, although it is debatable what worth Thomson sees in Miller himself:

The picture is funny—just once—when the two men have an uneasy showdown with the parents of a 15-year-girl, a dimwit of Gibraltar durability. The wise, wide-eyed and studiously stupid expression on the face of the youngster, placidly watching the encounter and gnawing a lollipop, is the best commentary on “Quiet Days in Clichy” and, for all we know, Henry Miller. (Thomson 1970)

- 15 One could also argue that this was a more sophisticated version of techniques Thorsen had employed in the past. In an article entitled “The Basic Concepts of Film,” written in the early 1960s but not published until 1980, Thorsen explained his own approach to montage and phenomenological aspects of film material such as “autokinetic effect” and “emulsion effect,” his names for the innate movement of the “grains” within still images projected in a filmic manner. Carl Norrested examines Thorsen’s early film *Vietnam* (1969) for these effects in his chapter on “The Drakabygget Films” in *Expect Anything, Fear Nothing: The Situationist Movement in Scandinavia and Elsewhere* (2011):

Vietnam...consisted of a single still of a dead Vietnamese with a crushed head held for several minutes—the soundtrack played the “Internationale” and the American national anthem. The previous year he had made the montage-orientated *Viet Nam Nam*, which starts with the initial frame countdown followed by a collage of various heads of state ending with a picture of Ho Chi Minh, exploding. Many of Thorsen’s festival films consist of reworked montages of chopped-up mainstream film material that forms fascinating, alienating aggregates. (Norrested 37)

- 16 This use of montage and “grains” is something that Thorsen will employ again in *Quiet Days in Clichy*, especially in relation to use of the SI concept of *Détournement*.

Image 2

“The Avant-Garde Doesn't Give Up,” Asger Jorn, 1962

¹⁷*Détournement* is the turning of an image against itself, or more specifically its uses by the capitalist state. This can take the form of recognizable art or advertising being remade to express views that are contrary and antagonistic to the original. The fact that such a familiar image reflects a new and subversive message shocks the viewer into a reaction. We can see the similarities between Jorn's "The Avant Garde Doesn't Give Up" and Thorsen's use of the same technique in *Quiet Days in Clichy*. Both Jorn and Thorsen take recognizably traditional images and subvert the image by defacing it; in Jorn's case, nineteenth century portraiture, in Thorsen's, places of pilgrimage for tourists in Paris.

¹⁸It is perhaps the SI concept that Thorsen employs most in his films. Again we can see an early example of it in Thorsen's *Do You Want Success?* (1963) using an old Brylcreem advertisement to question the validity of capitalist notions masculinity and success. He repeats the scene with a speedboat, employed clumsily with all the stereotypes of male virility and financial success, until the sheer brainless monotony of the advertiser's message is swept away to reveal an "absurd minimalism" (Norrested 38). This is a classic example of *Détournement*, taking an image that is supposed to elicit feelings of envy, aspiration and power in the audience and subverting it to show its authentic message, one of blind greed and impotence.

¹⁹Thorsen would use *Détournement* repeatedly in other works, including *Fotorama* (1964) *Herning 65* (1965), *Tom, Empty, Vide, Leer* (1966) and *Kaptajn Karlsens flammer* (1984). Thorsen also disrupted chronological order as a form of *Détournement*; viewers were used to films following a linear plot with actions and consequence following an understandable time frame, but Thorsen was uninterested in such conventional plot devices as he explained in an interview with Carl Norrested and Helge Krarup:

In fact I've worked with film since I was in the fourth grade. At that time I was given a table projector, so I sat editing together clips from the cinema—and whatever else I could get my hands on. At a place called Fagfoto you could actually buy old film clips. That's probably why I never took an interest in plot in film, only in the visual and rhythmic. Most of my experimental films are based on pre-existing material. Production of that kind of film really picked up when we began mounting film festivals....We really wanted to make something that was outside the frame, but in fact it intensified our interest in the popular, something everyone could use, some material known to everyone—archetypal....I've always preferred to work with 35mm film, 16mm is too small. I'm fascinated with the leap from clip to clip...a leap that is often more radical and faster than those you can make in your imagination. (Krarup and Norrested 38-39)

²⁰ Thus by the time Thorsen came to make *Quiet Days in Clichy* he was well versed both in the philosophical and technical processes he wished to use.

²¹Miller would have appreciated Thorsen's non-linear approach as this is something that Miller had employed in his earlier works, specifically *Tropic of Cancer*. In *Tropic of Cancer*, *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939) and *Black Spring* (1936) Miller played with Bergsonian notions of the interpenetration of time, utilizing Bergson's theories on time, timelessness and memory play with plot, narrative, but most importantly, the freedom that comes to the individual when he refuses the constricting nature of advanced capitalist society. We see Thorsen use both *Dérive* and *Détournement* to great effect in the opening credits. Thorsen takes what looks like holiday photos featuring famous Parisian landmarks and incorporates the word "cunt" repeatedly, whilst alternating the photos with footage of Joey's *Dérive*-driven wanderings.

Image 3

Quiet Days in Clichy (Film Still), Jens Jorgen Thorsen, 1970

²²These are techniques that Thorsen has perfected over numerous previous films, and they are used with a certain knowing sophistication and humor in *Quiet Days in Clichy*.

²³It is impossible to discuss Thorsen's adaptation without acknowledging the strongly pornographic nature of the work and its arguably misogynistic representation of women, consistent with Miller's text. The main female characters in the novel are prostitutes, a nymphomaniac who happens to be a somnambulist and Carl's underage lover, Colette. Thorsen revels in the coarse sexuality of Miller's work and the women truly are nothing more than "cunts," again showing a Situationist detachment and acceptance of "fucking for fuck's sake." There is no moral judgement here, just blissful enjoyment of what is. The role of Colette is especially problematic as there is something very distasteful about watching a balding, middle-aged man using an apparently underage girl (she is 14 years old in the novel) as a sexual plaything. Colette is not a fully fleshed out character in either the novel or the film, in fact none of the female characters are. She is represented as only good for sex and housework, the latter of which she is mocked for as being too stupid to do effectively. Thorsen has no problem showing an actress who looks like a young teenager engaged in a sexual relationship with a much older man. Sex has become a commodity like any other object within advanced capitalism; it has to be classified and approved by society before it can be deemed acceptable. Colette chooses to live with and engage in sexual relations with both Carl and Joey; the fact that she is a minor in the eyes of the law has no relevance to the men. The film refuses to disguise the nature of the sexual relationship,^x rejecting the right of advanced capitalist society to commodify and delegitimize sex which is given and enjoyed freely. Free will triumphs over legally mandated constructs regarding sexuality. This is life lived authentically and pleasure taken at first hand rather than through the prism of capitalist sanctioned enjoyment. As problematic as this may seem to a contemporary audience, and I would imagine it was challenging in

1970 too; it demands that viewers ask themselves questions regarding their preconceived ideas of the fetishization of female sexuality and childhood in general.

Image 4

Quiet Days in Clichy (Film Still), Jens Jorgen Thorsen, 1970

Likewise the unnamed Surrealist's mistress and the situation she finds herself in are troubling in the extreme. The reader never learns her name and it is debatable if Joey and Carl ever take the trouble to find out. This character is clearly in a vulnerable position and Joey and Carl take full advantage whilst acknowledging the crossing of ethical, if not criminal, boundaries:

She returned our greeting as if in a trance. She seemed to remember our faces but had obviously forgotten where or when we had met....She accepted our company as she would have accepted the company of anyone who happened along. (Miller 31)

- 25 The woman is clearly not of sound mind with both men at different times calling her schizophrenic, a goofy, out of her mind, in a trance and sleepwalking. She accompanies them to their apartment without ever asking where they are taking her and upon arrival announces that she needs 200 Francs for rent and will have sex with both men to get it. In the novel she writes poetry as she has sex with both men, never acknowledging in any way what is being done to her. In the film she disappears into the bathroom to write her poetry on the walls whilst naked and seems to be having some kind of violent fit as Carl has sex with her, only for Joey to pour water over her. This act seems to return her to reality and she excuses herself and leaves. In the next frame "Yes, it was a period when cunt was in the air" is blazoned across the screen.

Image 5

Quiet Days in Clichy (Film Still), Jens Jorgen Thorsen, 1970

²⁶ Both Miller and Thorsen play this scene for laughs, creating a comic character who the men take advantage of in bawdy, good humoured fashion:

You can watch us—she doesn't give a damn. She'd fuck a dog if we asked her to. She's a somnambulist....In an instant I had a tremendous erection. I got up and shoved my prick inside her. I turned her around, got it in front wise and, lifting her off her feet, I dragged her over to the bed. Carl pounced on her immediately, grunting like a wild boar. I let him have his fill, and then I let her have it again from the rear. When it was over she asked for some wine, and while I was filling her glass she began to laugh. It was a weird laugh, like nothing I had ever heard before. (Miller 33-36)

- ²⁷ The men then proceed to cheat the woman out of her 200 Francs before putting her in a taxi whilst congratulating each other on keeping their money and having “fucked her good and proper” (31). The frat boy attitude and the obvious vulnerability of this woman are extremely distasteful to modern audiences, but in the time before the awareness of date rape, both Miller and Thorsen represent its comic value, with Thorsen's dialogue sticking very close to the original.

²⁸ As I have already noted Miller's reputation as a misogynist remains strong to this day and from the above passage it is not hard to see why. In her review of Frederick Turner's *Renegade: Henry Miller and the Making of Tropic of Cancer* (2012), Jeannette Winterson forcefully took Miller to task for his hypocrisy and I think it is as applicable to Thorsen's adaptation as it is to Miller's original work. Winterson exposes Miller's treatment of women in his own life and how his freedom was often at the cost of theirs, but also how ethically dubious his conception of capitalism is in regards to gender:

When Miller sailed for Paris he had a copy of “Leaves of Grass” in his luggage....He left behind him an ex-wife and small daughter for whom he had made no provision, and a current wife, June, who was his lover, muse and banker, until Anaïs Nin in Paris was able to take over those essential roles....Turner never troubles himself or the reader with questions about Miller's emotional and financial dependency on women. Miller was obsessed with masculinity but felt no need to support himself or the women in his life.... It never occurred to him that no matter how poor a man is,

he can always buy a poorer woman for sex. It does not occur to Frederick Turner either, who calls Miller throughout a “sexual adventurer.” This sounds randy and swashbuckling and hides the economic reality of prostitution. Miller the renegade wanted his body slaves like any other capitalist—and as cheaply as possible. When he could not pay, Miller the man and Miller the fictional creation work out how to cheat women with romance. What they cannot buy they steal. No connection is made between woman as commodity and the “slaughterhouse” (p. 84) of capitalism that Miller hates....(Winterson 2012)

- 29 Thorsen and Miller aim to expose the duplicity and emptiness of life in capitalist societies, exploring how something as natural as sex has become commodified, yet as Winterson shows this really only applied to men. Women remained a commodity to be bought, sold, cajoled and sometimes abused. These are issues that are impossible to ignore, although one would hope that gender analyses of Miller's work does not overshadow or exclude other analyses, as they have done for the last forty years.

30Thorsen seems to have been well aware of the controversy surrounding the making of the film and I would argue was not above using the tools of “the spectacle” for his own ends. Several Danish pornographic movies were doing well in America during this time, taking advantage of the contrived idea of Scandinavian lasciviousness. Thorsen let it be known that he was trying to hire Lena Nyman as one of the female characters in *Quiet Days in Clichy*. Nyman was at the pinnacle of her rather dubious fame during this period as the star of *I am Curious (Yellow)* (1967), a pornographic film that was making tremendous money in the States. Nyman did not sign on, but the rumor kept the movie at the forefront of people's minds. As Jack Stevenson suggests, Thorsen could be a cynical operator to say the least and the controversy regarding the treatment of the female actors during and after filming shows him in a less than flattering light. Thorsen let it be known that the film would feature real sex scenes with full penetration. After all the publicity regarding casting, in the end the female performers were all mostly unknowns. Crucially they were not professional actors and thus were not unionized. Thorsen used this to his advantage in that he did not have to let them see how he was editing the film as it went along, although it is debatable how much control pornographic actors have over their work then or now.

31After the film's official opening at Cannes in 1970 (outside competition), some of the female actors questioned the validity of the hard core cut being shown, ridiculing Thorsen's claims of no “cock-tease” fakery (Stevenson, 149). In the end it would appear that Thorsen added two scenes of full penetration in post-production without the knowledge or permission of the female actors. This led to one actress Louise White (the Surrealist's mistress) filing a lawsuit against Thorsen. The technique of combining outtakes and real footage was not new to Thorsen; he had used it in many of his earlier films, specifically *Pornoshop*. With *Pornoshop* Thorsen used the insertion of real sex scenes into commercialized romantic love scenes to draw attention to the commodification of sex and stunted gender relation, I am not so sure his reasoning on *Quiet Days in Clichy* is quite so intellectual. The treatment of the female actors does have more than a hint of exploitation attached to it. They were denied any right to see how the film as it was being edited or to see the final cut before its screening in Cannes. It could be argued that Thorsen, much like Miller before him, only sees women as “cunts” to be made use of. Sexual equality for women seems to mean being sexually available and uncomplaining with their male partners, in film and in life, rather than an equal participant with a voice and sole control of their bodies. It could be argued that

Thorsen uses women in a ruthless, capitalistic manner reminiscent of criticism leveled at Miller.

³²The furore around the film meant good box office returns, selling 100,000 tickets in Denmark in the first three weeks of circulation. Its reception within Europe varied; it was wildly successful in Sweden and Germany, initially banned in Scotland and France. It was a film that seemed to reflect, and at times magnify, the complex cultural changes within a country at the time of viewing, leading to debate regarding censorship, feminism and sexuality. Sales in Europe, however, were nothing compared to what Thorsen and the studio expected in America. Miller's public visibility and viability were at their peak; the publication of his entire back catalogue, the respect he received from contemporary American writers like Kerouac, Burroughs and Ginsberg all led to a certain name recognition and cachet amongst the general public and cognoscenti alike. Large Hollywood studios wanted to adapt Miller's novels for the screen; with Paramount buying the rights to make *Tropic of Cancer* (1970) around the same time that Miller gave Thorsen the rights to *Quiet Days in Clichy* for a fraction of the price.^{xi}

³³Thorsen had the backing of SBA Agency, the large Scandinavian company which specialized in booking music acts. Grove Publishing, the American publisher of Miller's novels, paid Thorsen 100,000 dollars for the American rights and it is safe to say that everyone thought they had a hit on their hands. Several factors combined to prove everyone wrong, any one of them would have been unfortunate individually but not lethal; however in combination they meant that no one was going to make a penny from the film after release. The first problem related to Grove Publishing, which simply did not have the money, clout or experience to turn a sinking ship around; secondly the fascination with Scandinavian pornography in America had reached saturation point; thirdly the legal difficulties of trying to show the film country wide led to lawsuits from more conservative states; and finally the nature of the sexuality in the film itself was controversial. In relation to this paper the most important of these is without doubt the final point. Arguably *Quiet Days in Clichy* is not expressly pornography, either in book or film form. Thorsen fully brought to life the anarchic, joyful nature of Miller's prose. Sex within the film is not there to titillate, although as I have shown Thorsen was happy to exploit certain hard core tropes to gain publicity; rather the foundation of the film is one of carefree living and personal fulfilment. There are deeper messages at play within the film than the average pornographic filmgoer may have anticipated or wanted, and this may in part explain its low returns: the film just was not pornographic enough. Thorsen's representation of Miller's congenial milieu combined with his exploration of SI theories was not your normal cinematic fare, especially if you were turning up expecting something more akin to *I am Curious (Yellow)*. Much like Michael Thomson some viewers must surely have been bored and puzzled by the episodes in which Thorsen used *Dérive* and *Détournement* to tell the story. It is one thing to visit the cinema to watch an exercise in European debauchery, but quite another to watch an exercise in European intellectualism.

³⁴Thorsen's adaptation of *Quiet Days in Clichy* may not have been the massive financial success that everyone involved expected, yet I would argue that it is the most successful film adaptation of any of Henry Miller's novels to date. Despite moving the story to the present day, Thorsen maintains Miller's raucous sexual humour and the general rowdiness of the novel. Using SI theories as a new way to unpack and engage

with Miller's text provided it with a seriousness that it had not been approached with previously. They bestow the novel, which has mainly been read as nothing more than dirty stories, with a timeless quality, but also show that even at his most entertaining, Miller is occupied by his quest for individual autonomy. Thorsen would continue to shock with his proposed next project *The Sex Life of Jesus*,^{xii} a hard-core pornographic film that would show Jesus engaged in a variety of homosexual and heterosexual sex acts. Miller and Thorsen both sought to expose the hypocritical, authoritarian control that the advanced capitalist state imposed upon the individual; they wanted to draw attention to these iniquities and wake their readers and viewers from their collective, state sponsored inertia.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cohn, Dorrit. *The Distinction of Fiction*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000. Print.
- Cowe, Jennifer. *Killing the Buddha: Henry Miller's Long Journey to Satori*. PhD Thesis. University of Glasgow, 2016.
- Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit, MI: Black & Red, 2010. Print.
- Debord, Guy. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. London: Verso, 1990. Print.
- Do You Want Success?* Dir. Jens Jorgen Thorsen. Denmark. 1964. Film.
- Fotorama*. Dir. Jens Jorgen Thorsen. Denmark. 1960. Film.
- Herning 1965*. Dir. Jens Jorgen Thorsen. Denmark. 1966. Film.
- Hutchison, Earl R., and Elmer Gertz. *Tropic of Cancer on Trial: A Case History of Censorship*. New York: Grove, 1968. Print.
- Iustinus, T. A., ed. *Letterist International*. Maryland Heights: Cel, 2011. Print.
- Jesus Vender Tilbage*. (The Return of Jesus). Dir. Jens Jorgen Thorsen. Denmark. 1992. Film.
- Kael, Pauline. "Tropic of Cancer." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 1970. Web. 22 June 2016. < <http://cosmotc.blogspot.ca/2008/05/filming-tropic-of-cancer> >
- Kaptajn Karlsens flammer*. (Captain Karlsen's Flames). Dir. Jens Jorgen Thorsen. Denmark. 1984. Film.
- Knabb, Ken. *Situationist International Anthology*. Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981. Print.
- Lillios, Anna. "Henry Miller's Tropic of Cancer and the Feminist Backlash'." Ed. James M. Decker and Indrek Manniste. *Henry Miller: New Perspectives*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. 85-95. Print.
- Maciucci, Giovanni. *The Territorial Future of the City*. New York: Springer, 2008. Print.
- Miller, Henry. *The Air-conditioned Nightmare*. New York: New Directions, 1945. Print.
- Miller, Henry. *Black Spring*. New York: Grove, 1963. Print.
- Miller, Henry. *Quiet Days in Clichy*. New York: Grove, 1987. Print.

- Miller, Henry. *Tropic of Cancer/ Tropic of Capricorn*. New York: Grove, 2001. Print.
- Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970. Print.
- Palumbo, Allison. "Finding the Feminine: Rethinking Miller's Tropics Trilogy." *Nexus: The International Henry Miller Journal* 7 (2010): 145-77. Print.
- Plant, Sadie. *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- Pornoshop*. Dir. Jens Jorgen Thorsen. Denmark. 1965. Film.
- Jours tranquilles à Clichy (Quiet Days in Clichy)*. Dir. Claude Chabrol. France. 1990. Film.
- Rasmussen, Mikkel Bolt, and Jakob Jakobsen. *Expect Anything, Fear Nothing: The Situationist Movement in Scandinavia and Elsewhere*. Copenhagen: Nebula, 2011. Print.
- Sadler, Simon. *The Situationist City*. Cambridge Mass.: MIT, 1998. Print.
- I Am Curious (yellow)*. Dir. Vilgot Sjöman. USA. 1967. Film.
- Stevenson, Jack. *Scandinavian Blue: The Erotic Cinema of Sweden and Denmark in the 1960s and 1970s*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010. Print.
- Thomson, Howard. "The Screen: 'Quiet Days in Clichy': Henry Miller Book's ..." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 1970. Web. 22 June 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review>
- Tom, Empty, Vide, Leer*. Dir. Jens Jorgen Thorsen. Denmark. 1966. Film.
- Turner, Frederick. *Renegade: Henry Miller and the making of Tropic of Cancer*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2012. Print.
- Vaneigem, Raoul, and Donald Nicholson-Smith. *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. Oakland, CA: PM, 2012. Print.
- Vietnam*. Dir. Jens Jorgen Thorsen. Denmark. 1969. Film.
- Stille Dage I Clichy. (Quiet Days in Clichy)* Dir. Jens Jorgen Thorsen. Denmark. 1970. Film.
- Winterson, Jeanette. "The Male Mystique of Henry Miller." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 2012. Web. 22 June 2016.
- <www.nytimes.com/2012/01/29/books/review/renegade-henry-miller-and-the-making-of-tropic-of-cancer>

NOTES

i. Miller offered contradictory accounts of the autobiographical quality of his novels throughout his life. The facts are that characters from Miller's real life are easily identifiable, even when their names have been changed. Similarly it is easy to identify key periods despite Miller's changing representations of them. Early in his career, Miller was at pains to make it clear that he was the narrator in his novels. In response to Edmund White's review of *Tropic of Cancer* Miller wrote, "The theme of the book is myself, and the narrator or the hero, as your reviewer puts it, is also myself.... it is me, because I have painstakingly indicated throughout the book that the hero is myself" (Cohn 35). This notion would change as Miller wrote arguably his most autobiographical work *The Rosy Crucifixion*; he preferred to promote the three novels as examples of his spiritual journey, rather than strictly autobiographical. Miller's use of Bergsonian concepts of interpenetrating time and the re-using of certain "real life" episodes with contrasting

narratives, makes it difficult to evaluate whether Miller's novels can be read as autobiographical in the strictest sense.

ii. For an examination of the enduring influence of Bergson and Rank upon Miller see: Cowe (2016).

iii. Nash's break with the SI occurred at the fifth International Situationist Congress in 1961. His open support for SPUR, a German radical collective that the SI had decided to exclude, led to his expulsion. This allowed him to create CO-RITUS with Thorsen and gain complete freedom from the SI. Nash proclaimed the Second Situationist International in 1961 and essentially formalized the split between the "French" and Scandinavian SI movements. Thorsen would collaborate on with members of SPUR on his early films.

iv. Founded in Paris in the 1940's by the Romanian poet Isidore Isou (1925-2007), *Lettrism* has its foundations in Dada and Surrealism. Isou believed that it was no longer possible to create anything new in poetry; Homer had set the standard and everything since was purely repetition. Isou called this phase *amplique*. He believed that poetry had peaked with Victor Hugo, music with Wagner and painting with Delacroix. These standards had to be destroyed (*ciselante*) to allow for the new creativity which Isou believed was poetry refined simply to letters, with no semantic content. In time The Letterists would apply these ideas to the visual arts, film and society as a whole. For a detailed examination of the Letterist International see: Iustinus (2011).

v. "The spectacle" as a concept continued to evolve over Debord's lifetime. In its simplest form "the spectacle" is split into three: the "diffuse spectacle" which is found in the democratic West, the "concentrated spectacle" of the totalitarian East and with the approaching end of the Cold War, the "integrated spectacle," which as the name suggests incorporates both earlier definitions into one.

vi. Miller's struggle to be published in America and the personal toll it took upon him and the wider cultural and social connotations of the trial are explored by Hutchison (1968). Although it should be noted that this book was published by the very publishing house that was in court for illegally publishing Miller's work.

vii. The debate surrounding Miller's treatment of women has long influenced academic research of his work and public perceptions of his reputation and legacy. Miller was excoriated by Kate Millett in her seminal work *Sexual Politics* (1970) and this general perception of Miller as an unrepentant misogynist is still at the forefront of criticism of Miller; we need only consider Jeanette Winterson's *New York Times Review* review of Frederick Turner's *Renegade: The Making of Tropic of Cancer* (2012) to see just how little time has eroded this view. New research which seeks to re-evaluate Miller vis- à-vis gender is now taking place see: Palumbo (2010). Lillios (2015) follows on from Palumbo's recent feminist reading of Miller, charting the various generational feminist readings of Miller and giving a third-wave feminist reading of Miller that draws inspiration from Helene Cixous' concept of *écriture féminine*.

viii. Miller had long been an anti-capitalist and it is one of the main themes in his work. *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945) charts Miller's road trip across America after his decade long sojourn in Paris. He was disgusted by what advanced capitalism had done to his country and compatriots. Miller charts the alienation of people from their work and from their land; capitalism controls their every aspect of their lives from work, leisure and aspirations. It is clear to see the similarities with Thorsen and the SI.

ix. The city as part of a hostile urban landscape played a large part in Situationist theory. For an excellent examination of this see: Sadler (1999).

x. A later film version of *Quiet Days in Clichy* by Claude Chabrol (1990) completely sanitized the novella. Carl is played by a very attractive, sexually unthreatening Andrew McCarthy. McCarthy is best known as a member of the 1980s Brat Pack group of actors. McCarthy looks about 22 in the film, despite playing a 40-something Miller. The sexual relationship with Collette is mostly

glossed over and represented as a romantic relationship. The film shows Paris in all its Lost Generation glamour, more Spring Break than real life.

xi. Paramount certainly did their best to make *Tropic of Cancer* a success. With Rip Torn playing the Miller "character," Ellen Burstyn as his wife Mona and directed by Joseph Strick it was not without star power. Much like Thorsen, Strick moves the action to the present day and Pauline Kael in her review felt this may have been part of the problem: "When the story is made timeless, the characters are out of nowhere, and the author-hero is not discovering a new kind of literary freedom in self-exposure, he's just a dirty not-so-young man hanging around the tourist spots of Paris." *The New Yorker*, February 28 1970.

xii. *The Sex Life of Jesus*, *The Many Faces of Jesus* and finally *The Return of Jesus* as it was sometimes known caused no end of controversy both internationally and in Denmark. The film received funding from the Danish Film Institute and was the first film to really test the new anti-censorship laws. Thousands of Christians protested in the streets, The Vatican and various international governments and pressure groups demanded Thorsen be stopped. The funding from the DFI was rescinded then given back and the general debacle continued, much to Thorsen's pleasure:

Whether or not he's much of an artist in the traditional sense, he is absolutely top level as a stager of happenings. One man has taken on the whole cultural-political establishment here in this country. He has set in motion a cultural debate the likes of which has never been seen before, and one must hope he hasn't been driven to exhaustion....The Jesus affair will undoubtedly figure as his masterpiece. It has already had greater impact than any film will ever have, and it has given us a new and frightening insight into Danish political life. (Stevenson 242)

Works Cited

- Cohn, Dorrit. *The Distinction of Fiction*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000. Print.
- Cowe, Jennifer. *Killing the Buddha: Henry Miller's Long Journey to Satori*. PhD Thesis. University of Glasgow, 2016.
- Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit, MI: Black & Red, 2010. Print.
- Debord, Guy. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. London: Verso, 1990. Print.
- Do You Want Success?* Dir. Jens Jorgen Thorsen. Denmark. 1964. Film.
- Fotorama*. Dir. Jens Jorgen Thorsen. Denmark. 1960. Film.
- Herning 1965*. Dir. Jens Jorgen Thorsen. Denmark. 1966. Film.
- Hutchison, Earl R., and Elmer Gertz. *Tropic of Cancer on Trial: A Case History of Censorship*. New York: Grove, 1968. Print.
- Iustinus, T. A., ed. *Letterist International*. Maryland Heights: Cel, 2011. Print.
- Jesus Vender Tilbage*. (The Return of Jesus). Dir. Jens Jorgen Thorsen. Denmark. 1992. Film.
- Kael, Pauline. "Tropic of Cancer." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 1970. Web. 22 June 2016. < <http://cosmotc.blogspot.ca/2008/05/filming-tropic-of-cancer> >
- Kaptajn Karlsens flamme*. (Captain Karlsen's Flames). Dir. Jens Jorgen Thorsen. Denmark. 1984. Film.
- Knabb, Ken. *Situationist International Anthology*. Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981. Print.
- Lillios, Anna. "Henry Miller's Tropic of Cancer and the Feminist Backlash." Ed. James M. Decker and Indrek Manniste. *Henry Miller: New Perspectives*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. 85-95. Print.
- Maciocci, Giovanni. *The Territorial Future of the City*. New York: Springer, 2008. Print.
- Miller, Henry. *The Air-conditioned Nightmare*. New York: New Directions, 1945. Print.
- Miller, Henry. *Black Spring*. New York: Grove, 1963. Print.
- Miller, Henry. *Quiet Days in Clichy*. New York: Grove, 1987. Print.
- Miller, Henry. *Tropic of Cancer/ Tropic of Capricorn*. New York: Grove, 2001. Print.
- Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970. Print.
- Palumbo, Allison. "Finding the Feminine: Rethinking Miller's Tropics Trilogy." *Nexus: The International Henry Miller Journal* 7 (2010): 145-77. Print.

- Plant, Sadie. *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- Pornoshop*. Dir. Jens Jorgen Thorsen. Denmark. 1965. Film.
- Jours tranquilles à Clichy (Quiet Days in Clichy)*. Dir. Claude Chabrol. France. 1990. Film.
- Rasmussen, Mikkel Bolt, and Jakob Jakobsen. *Expect Anything, Fear Nothing: The Situationist Movement in Scandinavia and Elsewhere*. Copenhagen: Nebula, 2011. Print.
- Sadler, Simon. *The Situationist City*. Cambridge Mass.: MIT, 1998. Print.
- I Am Curious (yellow)*. Dir. Vilgot Sjöman. USA. 1967. Film.
- Stevenson, Jack. *Scandinavian Blue: The Erotic Cinema of Sweden and Denmark in the 1960s and 1970s*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010. Print.
- Thomson, Howard. "The Screen: 'Quiet Days in Clichy': Henry Miller Book's ..." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 1970. Web. 22 June 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review>
- Tom, Empty, Vide, Leer*. Dir. Jens Jorgen Thorsen. Denmark. 1966. Film.
- Turner, Frederick. *Renegade: Henry Miller and the making of Tropic of Cancer*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2012. Print.
- Vaneigem, Raoul, and Donald Nicholson-Smith. *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. Oakland, CA: PM, 2012. Print.
- Vietnam*. Dir. Jens Jorgen Thorsen. Denmark. 1969. Film.
- Stille Dage I Clichy. (Quiet Days in Clichy)* Dir. Jens Jorgen Thorsen. Denmark. 1970. Film.
- Winterson, Jeanette. "The Male Mystique of Henry Miller." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 2012. Web. 22 June 2016.
- <www.nytimes.com/2012/01/29/books/review/renegade-henry-miller-and-the-making-of-tropic-of-cancer>

ABSTRACTS

This paper will explore the influence of the Situationist International (SI) philosophy upon Jens Jorgen Thorsen's film adaptation of *Quiet Days in Clichy* (1970). Whilst acknowledging the film's place within a wider changing Danish culture, I will aim to show that the film engages with the key Situationist theories of *Dérive*, *Psychogeography* and *Détournement* and that it reflects contemporary societal issues whilst remaining true to Henry Miller's anarchic and joyful novella. Thorsen was unarguably one of Denmark's most inventive and revolutionary filmmakers and *Quiet Days in Clichy* can be viewed in relation to his engagement with the concepts of the SI.

INDEX

Keywords: Henry Miller, Jens Jorgen Thorsen, Psychogeography, Quiet Days in Clichy, the Situationist International

AUTHOR

JENNIFER COWE

University of Glasgow