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Isidore Isou's spirited letters

It is paradoxical to consider that today Isidore Isou, probably one of the least known Romanian-born French writers and philosophers could be the most famous and the best considered Romanian intellectual of the twentieth century. It is probably his insatiable desire for public fame and recognition that prevented him from achieving such a possible destiny at least at par with Tristan Tzara or Eugène Ionesco.

An extremely well-read intellectual, an indefatigable writer and thinker, there are very few aspects of human knowledge, be they letters, arts or sciences that, at one point or another in his life, did not attract his intellectual attention and his knowledgeable study. Totally convinced of his own worth and of his own exceptional nature, in several essays he compares his nature and intellectual status to that of Leonardo da Vinci, estimating even that his own capacity to construct a unified system of organization of human knowledge placed him above da Vinci who could only systematize and understand fragmentary aspects of human knowledge.<sup>1</sup> For many of his contemporaries, it is this hubris (megalomania) coupled with a sharp and relentless criticism of the mediocrity of the other intellectuals, writers and thinkers of the immediate post WWII period in France that explains Isou's paradoxical status as a marginal intellectual generally at odds with different intellectual and literary movements that span the 1945-1970 period in France. Two terms are directly related to his early literary accomplishments and innovations: *Letterism* [lettrisme] and *metagraphy* [métagraphie].

Isou was born Ioan-Isidor Goldstein on January 31, 1925, into a Jewish family in Botosani, the main capital of the Botosani county of the current Bucovina region, the north-eastern part of Romania, near the border with the Ukraine. As a city, Botosani was an important Jewish center as, according to the 1930 statistics, half the population of 32,000 was of the Jewish faith. Ioan-Isidor was the only son of an upper middle-class family which owned several grocery stores in town; he had an older and a younger sister. The complicated history of the Bucovina region during WWII and the fact that this was the Romanian geographic area in which the Jewish deportation was the most important during the dictatorship of Ion Antonescu (1940-1944), explains why little is known of the actual circumstances of the Goldstein family during the war years and it is only clear that Ioan-Isidor was able to study assiduously and to acquire an excellent education at school and with the help of independent tutors. Botosani, the largest center of trade of Moldavia, always had a rich international cultural life with a multitude of theaters, libraries and art centers. It is in this context that Ioan-Isidor was able to read Mallarmé, Baudelaire, Balzac, Flaubert and, under the guidance of an academic friend of the family, he acquired his first exposure to French theater, French novels and French poetry. As he narrated in the "Introduction en forme de système autonome" of *Fondements pour la transformation intégrale du théâtre*<sup>2</sup> Ioan-Isidor wrote and produced several plays while in high school. According to his recollections, he was working feverishly on a new major play when, in 1944, the police of the Antonescu regime became suspicious of his membership in the Zionist movement "Haschoner Hatzairö" that was considered a cover for the underground young communist group. As it was believed that Ioan-Isidor was going to be questioned and eventually arrested, his family asked him to give all his papers to a neighbor in case a

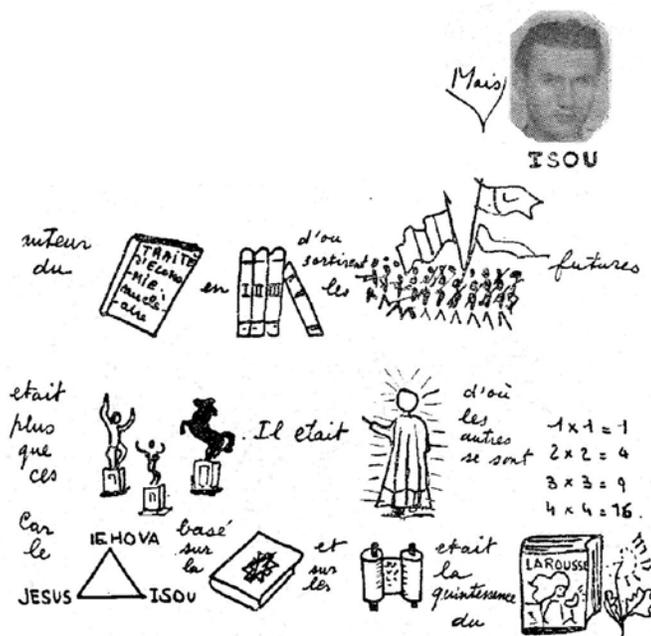
few of his notes would contain suspicious political writings. Ioan-Isidor's mother, however, asked the neighbor to discretely simply destroy the papers. At the end of the episode, Ioan-Isidor broke violently with his family because of the destruction of his work and, according to his memoirs, became the leader of the Zionist group right after King Michael's coup on August 23, 1944, that put an end to the Antonescu's dictatorship and hastened the entry of the Red Army into Romania. Because by then the victory of the Allied Forces was a certainty, Ioan-Isidor, by personal ambition, in order to be able to come to France, became a member of the "Young Communists." Through his relationship with the members of the then still illegal Romanian Communist Party, at the end of 1944 he met with Paul Herescu (Serge Moscovici) who would also later immigrate to France and become a famed French social psychologist and director of the European Laboratory of Social Psychology. Together they founded an artistic and literary review *Da* which was almost immediately censored by the police of King Michael's new soviet regime. Ioan-Isidor was able to immigrate to France during the summer of 1945 at age twenty through an international Zionist organization. By then he had collected a large number of papers and documents and, after publishing in 1946 a text entitled "Appendice à la dictature lettriste" in which his newly (1942) coined term "Letterism" appears, through his Zionist network he was able to meet with Jean Paulhan who by then had returned to Gallimard as the head of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, a position of intellectual preeminence that he had left in 1940 at the beginning of WWII. It was nevertheless not with a book on theater that Ioan-Isidor started his French career in 1947 but with a book on poetry: *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*, a collection of notes dated February 1941-March 1944. From then on he designated himself as a *Letterist* [lettriste] and created a

literary movement around this poetic scheme of sound poems based on a rhythmic and tonic system of combined phonemes represented by a transcription of Letterist graphics.

For this first Parisian publication Ioan-Isidor had already adopted his newly French naturalized literary pseudonym: Isidore Isou. While during his later years he would reinstall Ioan as "Jean" and sign as *Jean Isidore Isou*, at this early stage of his French career he only kept Isidore as a reference, in the French literary field, to the by then still not yet well known writer Isidore Ducasse, who, under the *nom de plume*, Comte de Lautréamont, was the author of the sulfurous *Les Chants de Maldoror* and who, prior to WWII, had been idolized by the Surrealist group.

Beyond the elementary idea that there was a need, in the immediate post WWII world, to tone down the Jewish affiliation of the name, Goldstein, there is no direct explanation for the choice of the pseudonym "Isou." There is a constellation of connotations that all point to the same attachment to the idea of centrality or preeminence. "Iso" designates the first element and through its Greek etymology it refers to a broad concept of equilibrium, equality and similarity, all classical qualities related to a vision or order (of the world, of a hierarchy, etc.). The name may also have been chosen because, through its Hebraic associations, it refers to a mystic paradigm of Biblical rulers or prophets. The explanation is not too farfetched for a reader familiar with Isou's constant proclamation of self-worth and affirmation of the exceptional quality of his creative powers: « Isidore Isou, with his mastery of the method of discovery, was becoming the master of novators, and my system should have gained authority over all other forms of authority, as a never before seen agency of control and domination, justifying the reorganization of all rules of causes and effects.»<sup>3</sup> In chapter II of the *La Créatique ou la*

*novatique* devoted to a study of hyper-theology, Isou, often speaking of himself in the third person, elevates himself and his demiurgic work onto a mystic level: « Isou believes that his writings will bring forth the reality of a felicitous world; they will transform the world into a state of ultimate happiness. They will reveal the meaning of the reigning Jew. They will help the realization of the Judaic messianic word. If Isou believes himself to be the Messiah, it is because in his Name by his work he will bring about in the human order the values that necessitate the third and last apparition. The most fundamental change in human prospective will lead to that universal divinity.»<sup>4</sup> This prophetic and pathetic rhetoric through which Isou elevates his literary pseudonym to a mystic and Biblical level was already present in the fiction of his first *hyper-graphic* novel published in 1950 entitled *Les Journaux des Dieux*.<sup>5</sup> The book is, in fact, a rewriting of the Bible by Isou and, while the original structure of the Old Testament is respected, the story is an epic chronicle, often burlesque, or trivial, or critical, of events that affected Isou's life or Paris literary life in these years. The word 'journal' (newspaper) plays on the ambiguity, being at the same time a 'diary' (a daily biography) as well as a daily paper, on the tabloid side, including nudity and sexuality. Nevertheless, the mystical dimension of the main characters is respected. In chapter 13 (13?), entitled 'La postérité de Terochö [ The posterity of Thare ]' one can find an actual picture of Isou in the hyper-graphic text and he becomes himself part of a holy divine trinity:



If one remembers that Romania takes its name from the strong historical attachment to the Roman Empire and to the Latin language, it is philologically elementary to see the paradigm that unites the name *ōJesusō* to *ōIsouō*. In addition, Isou being a Letterist and thus using phonemes as the materials for his sound poetry, the connection between the two names Jesus and Isou must have been easy to decipher. Since the Latin alphabet does not have the letter *ōJō*, it always appears under the form *ōIō*; the sound [y] that exists in French and other contemporary languages, did not exist in Latin since it is a remnant of the Celtic linguistic sub-stratum, thus the letter *ōuō* would have been pronounced [u] so as to give the compound phonemic unit [izu] (Isou). While this is just an hypothesis, the presence in many parts of Isou's writing of an explicit mantic dimension attached to the name is, in my view, a clear indication of the mystagogic dimension that Isou wanted to give to his writing project. His writings are Holy Scriptures in the order of human knowledge; it is no leisurely activity. Writing has a purpose and a serious social and spiritual mission. In an interview with Roland Sabatier in 1999<sup>6</sup> Isou confides that *ōIsouō* was the (nick)name that his

mother had given him and thus he adopted it as his name; it is possible that his mother used "Isou" as a term of endearment based on "Isidore"; however this does not explain how it became the "Name" that will become the crucial object of the aggregation with the "Messiah."<sup>7</sup>

When Isou arrived in France in August 1945, in the immediate post-war period, the intellectual life in Paris was in turmoil. The intellectual powers that had survived during the German occupation of France were disconsidered and accused of "collaboration." Popular newspapers, publishers, singers, actors, etc. that had maintained a public presence under the Vichy regime were either put on trial, condemned to a self-imposed exile or simply decided to abandon any form of public life. The Paris intellectual landscape appeared ready for a clean slate and certainly the intellectual and media movements issued from the Resistance (Gaullist or Communist) decidedly seized the day and with new newspapers such as *Combat*, new journals such as *Les Temps Modernes*, *Les Lettres Françaises*, etc., the time was favorable for a total renewal of the intellectual hierarchy that would dominate the Parisian intellectual world. Even the pre-war intellectual movements such as Surrealism, whose principal members had been able to select exile (mostly in the US), were slow to reestablish themselves after four or five years of absence from Paris. The intellectuals *issus de la Résistance* progressively dominated on two fronts. The previously underground poetry of Résistance (such as René Char and Aragon) and the *Existentialist* philosophical group (around Sartre and Beauvoir) rapidly saturated the Paris landscape and established their new area of influence around the Saint-Germain-des-prés neighborhood since the two main cafés, Le Flore and Les Deux Magots were the main public places where, during the Occupation years, Sartre and de Beauvoir spent the day writing and meeting with their

followers. While these two groups were the central movers of the intellectual renaissance of post war Paris, because of the brutal and systematic elimination of any past establishment, there was a large part of the intellectual Parisian universe open for newcomers as long as they were untainted in their participation in the intellectual scene of occupied Paris. With his credentials, his Zionist network, and his direct connection to a reinvigorated Gallimard publishing house, Isou was immediately accepted as a new figure of the intellectual Paris scene and, given his natural taste for showmanship and intellectualism as performance, he was able to maintain his position as a key figure of the Paris new intellectual scene from 1946 to 1952. It is during this period that he established himself as the founder of Letterism, recruited disciples and found the resources to develop theoretical interventions in the domain of poetry, novel, theater and cinema. If one can consider that his indisputable influence declined after 1953, it is because of his monomaniac desire to be recognized as the sole and uncontested leader of the intellectual true vanguard and his theoretical argumentative method that was almost exclusively polemical in nature. Once he had early assured his solid status as the founder of Letterism, it became a crusading mission for him to convince everyone that he was the only ñnovator,ñ the only one capable of proposing and formulating new and unexplored directions for the development of the contemporary intellectual life. This insatiable desire to be recognized as the sole agent of intellectual permanent invention led him to issue challenges to the two main groups, first the Résistance poets and then the Existentialist group.

Encouraged by the immediate success of his *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et une nouvelle musique* and the popularity of his Letterist Manifesto (a strategy of occupation

of the prime intellectual local territory directly borrowed from the similar campaigns conducted by Breton and his Surrealist group in the early 20s), Isou insisted that in this era of new intellectual beginnings, the main project for poetry and arts and letters in general was to conceive a new understanding of literary form; thus he was abrupt in rejecting what he perceived as a misguided modish interest for the poetry elaborated by writers of the nationalist underground during the German occupation. For him this interest for a theme and its denotative connotations (to resist the enemy, freedom, democracy, human dignity, justice, etc.) was too often presented as the heavy content of a poetry that was archaic in its poetic versification, poorly written stylistically, embedded in the most traditional poetic fixed forms, and, worse, totally devoid of any attempt to even consider that there was the need to investigate new formalist solutions that would echo the semantic content calling for a change in the political status of a subjugated France. While these texts as content were clamoring for change, formally they were prototypical of the less desirable formal continuation of stale metrics and antiquated poetic models. Attacking the flag literature of the (by now sacred) Résistance years, almost automatically created trouble for Isou with the Existentialist group with which many of the Résistance intellectuals were associated. According to his writings, Isou understood immediately how his status as an immigrant placed him in a position of inferiority in this debate with a group that had a special "untouchable" status in the post war society of France. On one hand, as a Jewish war refugee he appeared ungrateful to his benefactor country of asylum and now as his country of origin, Romania, was perceived as a Communist satellite country of the Soviet Union, he was perceived in certain circles of the former French Résistance as a subversive element with a political allegiance to the Communist wing of French Resistance, when, in fact, as a

refugee who had actually to live under a communist regime which had been badly bruised by the brutality of its Soviet protector, he already had ambiguous feelings vis-à-vis the soviet Russian communist regime while the position of the French Communist party and his leader, Maurice Thorez, were still following a strict Stalinian line.

Nevertheless, true to what he perceived as his mission of intellectual truth as the only way to contribute to creation and the furthering of human knowledge, Isou found himself more and more involved in attacks against Sartre's Existentialism. During Isou's formative years in Romania, under the dictatorship of Antonescu, the philosophical teaching of Nietzsche and Heidegger (for Isou, unequivocally a "Nazi" philosopher) were encouraged; thus Isou was able to define Sartre as an "ersatz" of Heidegger and his Existentialism as a pale hybrid recombination of previously well established philosophical theories : « The person whose main intellectual interest is in general existential metaphysics, can only consider the French group that was formed after this war (Wahl, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, etc.) as a mere secondary extension of the great German philosophical movement, as an effort of general vulgarization and an attempt to simply explore in detail limited aspects of the system whose masters and first class creators were, in Germany, Husserl, Heidegger, Jaspers. »<sup>8</sup> Isou also came to attack Sartre's views on poetry and literature as misguided and elementary. His strongest criticism focused on Sartre's "neo-naturalist" prescription that any novel be first and foremost a commitment to an "engagé" plot involving the place of man in his current social environment ("For the existentialist critic, the author is celebrated only if he is immersed up to his neck in his contemporaneity."<sup>9</sup>) Isou concluded his utter rejection of Sartre by indicating how

irrelevant his views were in relation to Isou's own intellectual passions: "Sartre only pursues and talks about matters for which I do not give a damn."<sup>10</sup>

The attacks against Existentialism whose influence in arts, philosophy and politics was becoming an overwhelming force in France and in the post-war world was certainly damaging to Isou's own public and preeminent status. Almost immediately his critical proclamations generated questions from these groups and their followers on the true "newness" of his invention of Letterism. It was suggested that movements such as Futurism with the typographic work of Iliazde and mostly early Dada, through the "phonetic" poems of Hausmann, Schwitters' "Ur Sonata," and the "poems to sing and dance" of Albert-Birot, had in fact "invented" what Isou had (falsely) presented as his innovative Letterism. To defend the integrity of his discovery, Isou had to show how Letterism was different from Dada's phonetism; he had to directly attack older, still respected figures of the Dada/Surrealist period, in particular André Breton who still maintained a certain influence on the Paris intellectual scene even if his movement was no longer in a vanguard position. Several of Isou's texts of the late 40s and early 50s were thus "distractions" not really devoted to the presentation of new developments but as documents defending his invention and, often in a more detrimental nature to his reputation, describing the degradation of his relationship with previous supporters who then were attacking him. His *Réflexions sur M. André Breton* is certainly an example of this type of appalling polemic literature (« I know that all this is very petty, very low, but I had warned the reader that I would not elevate the debate higher than the level of the interlocutor, and that is very low »).<sup>11</sup>

Isou's fall from Parisian grace and (according to his own metaphor in *Les Journaux des Dieux*) expulsion from the Latin Quarter intellectual paradise came in

1952 when Paulhan refused publication of several of his writings in the NRF where he had been previously welcome. Following the rupture, an acerbic polemic followed. Paulhan went directly for the jugular indicating that he had ñever learned anything new from Isouö. Because Isou felt that any intellectual legitimacy he had was the result of his own exceptional capacity to invent new models of human knowledge and understanding in a world replete with copyists, followers and epigones, he lashed back and presented Paulhan as the ultimate ñgrammarian,ö the one who can only repeat existing rules and principles and could not recognize newness even if it were to hit him in the face: ñ Paulhan has never learned anything and he wants to offer the key of everything [í ]. The Rimbauds always terrorize the Paulhans. »<sup>12</sup>

The final marginalization of Isou can be considered the result of his Romanian origin and the specific political perspective that his historical background had given him. As indicated, at the fall of the Andreescu regime, Isou confessed that his desire for expatriation and travel to Paris led him to become politically involved with the Young Communist movement as a way to be part of the new political order and to place himself in a position to be able to court political favors, including, eventually, the authorization to leave Romania. His departure for France did not happen under these political circumstances, but nevertheless, his probable political zeal, as the rest of his life demonstrates, facilitated his reading of the necessary political literature required to excel in the highly ideological regime newly established with the entrance of the USSR troops into Romania. Isou claims that, as a result, he familiarized himself with the political,

economical and social writings of Smith, Ricardo, Rodbertus, Menger, Engels, Marx, etc. This fast education as a social scientist led him to become an active member of the National Democratic Front (FND) a political party formed in October 1944 and regrouping the Communist party and a few secondary "democratic" parties favorable to the Communists and the Soviet Administrators; the appointment of Petru Groza as Prime Minister in February 1945 signaled the triumph of the FND and the de facto Communist takeover of Romania. By then, according to Isou's own writings, he had become singularly disenchanted with the Marxist mentality and its limitation of "dialectical reasoning": "My friend [í ] who had been incarcerated was only liberated when the Red Army arrived. Indoctrinated by his fellow prisoners he had become a *real* communist. When he was liberated we worked together for a few days at the FND. I did not want to stay in Romania and I was highly disgusted by the formulaic manner in which the "dialecticians" were operating. My friend had become cynical and busy with menial daily activities like a grocer [Isou's family trade n.a.]. Nothing looks more like a grocery clerk than a member of the Communist party."<sup>13</sup>

Based on his own experience as a youth in Romania and his reading of Carl Menger's theory on "marginal utility," Isou proposed a system of early liberation of the youth in *Le soulèvement de la jeunesse*,<sup>14</sup> a study already written, apparently in a rudimentary form, while he was fifteen and sixteen in Romania. According to him, the young people are outside of the market system, but nevertheless reduced in slavery through the work conducted within the family economy and rejected outside of the creative sphere since young people are forced to produce efforts through a hierarchical frame (school, family) that has no direct impact on the whole society but simply in relation to their own

chance to ðadvance,ö ðevolve,ö and ðbecome.ö It is remarkable that in the 50ø, a period prior to the baby boom that will establish an economical status to youth, and prepare the societal change of the 60ø, Isou had theorized the emancipation of a social category that, contrary to prior social analyses, was not (yet) fully recognized as an economical segment of production and consumption in the Marx and Manger models. Isou sent an *Open letter* to Jacques Duclos (then Secretary General of the French Communist Party) and Florimond Bonté (a pro-soviet Communist representative at the French National Assembly, mostly known for his opposition to the European construction which was debated at the time). The general topic of the letter was Isouø criticism of the lack of creativity, on many issues, including the question of the status of youth, of the French intellectuals belonging to the French Communist Party. At the time when Isou was being rejected from the dominating intellectual Parisian ðbourgeoisö intelligentsia, he could have chosen to progressively move towards the Communist party which, until the late 60ø, had real power within the intellectual institutions such as the printed media and the university. Isou certainly had the intellectual knowledge and the political experience that could have helped him achieve a position of power within the cultural apparatus of the Communist Party. There again, his passion for creation and his disdain for intellectuals who had simply the rhetoric and the grammar of the accepted discourse, prevented him from joining with the Communist group to maintain a certain power and preserve his intellectual status. Isou, in fact, did proclaim his contempt for Aragon (« I cannot be accused of liking Aragon very much»<sup>15</sup>), certainly the most well-known and respected Communist intellectual of the period; for Isou Aragon was a ðreactionary estheteö who published surrealist poetry and hid it under realistic

declarations<sup>16</sup>. In the late 50s, Isou's social, economic and political views attracted new disciples to his seminars and meetings of the Letterist group.

It is always indicated in relation to Isou's biography and the history of Letterism that Guy Debord, who was one of the founders of the International Situationist Movement and wrote *La Société du spectacle*,<sup>17</sup> began his political and intellectual career within Isou's Letterist group of the early 50s («The Internationale Situationniste was a small transnational group of artist-revolutionaries that came out of the neo-Dadaist Lettriste movement »<sup>18</sup>). If I have indicated that in the early 50s Isou was indeed developing a social, political and economical doctrine (« the future will recognize Isou as an economist even greater than Marx<sup>19</sup>»), it is however not the radical social aspect (which will become central for the Situationist Movement under the direct leadership of Debord during the 1962-1967 period) that brings Debord to Isou's Letterist movement, but a common interest in experimental cinema. In April 1951 Isou presented his film *Traité de bave et d'éternité* and his film theory at the French Cannes film festival ( where Debord was then living) and on this occasion Isou and Debord met. In October 1951 Debord officially became a member of the Letterist group and at the 1952 Cannes film festival, all the Letterists including Debord and Isou signed the anti commercial pamphlet entitled *Fini le cinéma français* [No more French cinema ]. Later that year Debord and several other members of the group secretly decided that Letterism should have a more international ambition than simply limiting itself to Paris and French intellectualism, thus a sub-group called 'the International Letterism' was created within the main group and without the knowledge of Isou. Following the production and diffusion of Debord's first film, *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* in June 1952, Debord met with the Belgian group of Revolutionary Surrealism in

Brussels and with the members of the sub-group International Letterism perturbed the Paris press conference of Chaplin presenting his new film, *Limelight*. The historical Letterists, Isou, Pomerand and Lemaitre who were not aware of this action before it was conducted, publicly dissociated themselves from the public disturbance of the sub-group and, as a result, in a paradoxical reversal, the members of the sub-group "excluded" them from Letterism and proclaimed their own legitimacy as the main Letterist movement under the title "International Letterism." A mission document appeared in December 1952 ("Position de l'Internationale lettriste") in the first issue of the newly created journal *L'Internationale Lettriste*. A founding conference for the movement took place in December in Aubervilliers near Paris and, in January 1953, a Manifesto signed by twelve members appeared in the second issue of *L'Internationale Lettriste*. Thus a more international and more politically revolutionary leftist Letterism started to exist in 1953 under the leadership of Guy Debord, but none of the "historical" founders of Letterism were part of it. In 1957, through the regrouping of three different European radical groups, *L'Internationale Lettriste* officially became *L'Internationale situationniste*, a move that would favor the ascendancy within the movement of the experimental social theorists to the detriment of the radical experimental artists; as a result, most of them left or were excluded from the new organization in the early 60s. The social and economic activism of *L'Internationale Situationniste* is widely credited as the intellectual force that made the radical social upheaval of the student movement of May 68 in France and in Europe possible.

As can be deduced from this brief and somewhat reductive presentation, for a few years, just after his arrival in Paris, Isou was able to reach a stardom status in the literary Parisian world of the then Saint-Germain-des-prés. He was known and accepted as the

founder of a new literary movement, Letterism. After the first five years his social and intellectual status were considerably devalued and, in extreme humiliation, in 1953, the movement that he had created was taken away from him and his movement became something that he could only condemn (*Contre l'Internationale Situationniste*, 2001). It is ironic to consider that his fate is strangely similar in its itinerary to that of Tzara, another Romanian-born French intellectual who came to Paris in 1921. Tzara came to Paris as the celebrated creator of Dada and then, three years later, was upstaged by Breton, who had joined him as a Dada convert. The poetic similarity in destiny is even more striking if one considers that the first victim of Isou's desire for Parisian fame was Tzara himself. Right after his arrival in Paris, as Pomerand narrates the story, on January 21, 1946, Isou went to the Vieux-Colombier theater where the première of Tzara's play *La Fuite*, directed by Lupovici, was being presented in the presence of Tzara himself and preceded with a presentation by Michel Leiris. In the purest Dada provocative fashion, the Letterists that were there interrupted Leiris by shouting "We know about Dada, M. Leiris! tell us about something new! For example! letterism! Dada is dead! Letterism has taken its place! Let's hear the Letterists!" Paradoxically Tzara's lyrical play is about two themes that could not leave Isou indifferent: exile, as it is a departure, a severing of old ties and, second, the passing of generations, a new one always replacing the previous one. Since Leiris did not know anything about "Letterism" he finished his presentation<sup>20</sup> and, after the play, Isou was able to jump on stage and present his ideas and to read a few Letterist poems. The next day *Combat* ran a story about the Letterist public disruption of the previous night and so, in early 1946, Letterism was taking center stage in Paris.

Even after his eclipse from the public eye after 1953, Isou continued to work and to pursue his innovative (*novatique*) and creative (*créatique*) work, investigating newness in many branches of knowledge all at once. During the fifty-four years until his death (2007) Isou endlessly tried to complete his goal of covering all the branches of human knowledge so as to discover the unique principle that governed the general rules of the universe.

According to him, the governing principle is that the universe does not like stagnation and thus the only responsibility of special beings is to invent and create. In 2003, the publishing house of Al Dante (Paris), a publishing house known for its support of the most extreme contemporary vanguard publications, released Isou's *La Créatique, ou la novatique: 1941-1976*, a 1390 page book that could be considered the sum of his reflections on the question of the creation. The endeavor is exceptional as publishers usually consider the publication of a book longer than five hundred pages a dangerous project. The situation was even more astonishing at the time because, on this very question, a serious quarrel between the publishing house Le Seuil and one of its most well-known writers, Jacques Roubaud, had become public. Roubaud had proposed a six hundred page manuscript as the fifth installment of his autofiction *Le grand incendie de Londres* and it had been refused with recommendation that the published final text (the *version mixte*) be around three hundred pages. The contrast between the two situations, especially considering the difference in social capital carried by the two writers in Parisian circles at the time, demonstrates Al Dante's confidence in Isou's book and its capacity to find a proper readership despite its complexity of the idiosyncratic vocabulary and the lofty conceptualization of its author. The magnitude of the publishing project revealed a high degree of respect for the integrity of his work and treats *La Créatique, ou la novatique* as

an important intellectual contribution to human knowledge at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when certain intellectuals of the preceding century, Schwitters, Hausmann, Etiemble, to cite only a few, with whom Isou had acrimonious polemical battles early in his career were almost completely forgotten.

To conclude, it seems thus fitting, notwithstanding the totalizing scope of Isou's project and without necessarily accepting his positional principle that human knowledge should always be envisioned with a view on the globalism of its branches (kladology), to consider in a few well selected domains, that Isou's work has proven helpful, visionary and is still highly contemporary.

Three domains of art, literature and society were directly and durably explored by Isou and his ideas prove useful to the general contemporary understanding of the intellectual issues involved: sound poetry (öLetterismö proper), experimental cinema, and the discourse of reality. This enumerative distinction between three domains exists only to facilitate the presentation of the arguments; in fact, today, in a theoretical prospective there is a need to engage these questions in a unified way. Isou himself would have considered that the unified way is the only way to approach any question of human knowledge, since none of the aspect of human knowledge is an öorganismö in itself but simply a öbranchö of a global system.

While I have no position vis-à-vis Isou's central totalitarist kladological doctrine, I am convinced that, even if these three domains constitute separate intellectual entities, they should be looked at, *in fine*, as fields related by an underlying common problematic about twenty-first century collective expressiveness. Isou's views in the early 50's anticipated this contemporary discussion because he was notably the first intellectual to insist on their

connection and to argue that all three have something to do with what could be called "expression as plasticity." In his approach to each of these three domains Isou attempted to modify the established linguistic frame of the common communication and to invent new ways by which human communication could go beyond words, beyond established conventional signs and construct a highly creative interpersonal understanding based on the de-semantization of human language and its functional transformation into an uncanny configuration of material shapes immediately capable of conveying the necessary significance in a non-verbal way.

### *Letterism*

During their first year in Zürich the members of the newly created Dada group had to find acts for their daily show at the Cabaret Voltaire.<sup>21</sup> Early on they resorted to the diction of phonetic poems as the Futurists had started to do before WWI ("motlibristö by Marinetti, etc.). Dada systematized the principle and invented at least four recognized ways to perform a sound poem (non-semantic): bruitist poem, phonic poem, simultan poem and exotic poem. For this performed non-sensical poetry the minimal unit was the phoneme. Several of these poems have been transcribed and several are well-known such as "Karawane" (1920), "Poem without a title" (1919) by Raoul Hausmann, "L'amiral cherche une maison à louer" (1916) by Huelsenbeck and Tzara, "Ursonate" (1926) by Schwitters, etc. Any transcription of these "sound poems" would deliver an apparently haphazard collection of *letters*, seemingly distributed at random since the sound poem (it is by principle an asemantic construct) cannot be based on accepted well constructed words:

Lanke trr gll  
p p p p p  
oka oka oka oka  
Lanke trr gll  
pi pi pi pi pi  
züka züka züka züka  
Lanke trr gll  
rmp  
rnf  
Lanke trr gll

Figure 1. Schwitters, « Poem without a title », 1923.

Isouø 1942 Letterism certainly built on that existing legacy in order to establish his own theory and literary movement. As final printed products Isouø letterist poems may appear, at first glance, very similar to the õsound poemsö of the Dadaists that had done similar language exploration twenty years earlier; letters left at random to produce a phonic ensemble that is not part of the graphic compound recognized by any given dictionary as an established õwordö immediately interpretable by a linguistic community:

9. — LARMES DE JEUNE FILLE  
— POÈME CLOS —

M dngoun, m diahl  $\Theta$ hna iou  
hsn ioun inhlianhl  $\mu$ na iou  
vgain set i ouf! sai iaf  
fln plt i clouf! mglaf vaf  
 $\Lambda$ o là ihf cmm vii  
snoubidi i pnn mii  
 $\Lambda$ gohà ihfhf gnn gi  
klnbidi  $\Delta$ bliglhlf  
 $H$ mami chou a sprl  
scami Bgou cla ctrl  
gué el inhf ni K<sup>u</sup>grin  
Khlogbidi  $\Sigma$ vi bincf crin-  
cncn ff vsch gln ié  
gué rgn ss ouch clen dé  
chaig gna pca hi  
 $\Theta$ snca grd kr di

Figure 2. Isou, «Larmes de jeune fille ó poème clos» *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*, 1947, 323.

Looking uncritically at this graphic ensemble (a *öbagö* of letters), it is thus easy to understand the severe criticism that Isou encountered in the early 50s and the accusation of plagiarism that was voiced vis-à-vis his main poetic early work by former Dadaists and contemporary critics familiar with Dada phonetic production of the 20s. This graphic ensemble is nevertheless not the only *ötextö* that is printed. Secondary symbols appear in the text and a code is given that regulates other aspects of the phonic performance: tone, accentuation, speed, pitch, vital sounds (*öemoticonö?*), etc.

1) $\Theta, \vartheta, \theta$ = soupir	5) $\Delta, \delta$ = râle
2) $M, \mu$ = gémissement	6) $H, h$ = ahannement
3) $\Lambda, \lambda$ = gargarisme	7) $K, k$ = ronflement
4) $A, a$ = aspiration	8) $\Sigma, \varsigma$ = grognement

Figure 3. Isou, «Larmes de jeune fille ó poème clos». Critical apparatus. 323.

Also, while for comparison purpose I chose a model of Isou's poem that was very similar in its free flow to the typography and *dispositio* of the Dada model provided by the Schwitters's poem, other letterist poems by Isou and the other Letterists show a constricted

systemization based on paradigmatic repetitive patterns and highly constructed phonetic combinatorics:

B.I	SCRIBILISSE	SCRIBILISSE	•	•	•	•
B.ch	SCRIBILISSE	SCRIBILISSE	•	•	•	•
B.p	SCRIBILISSE	SCRIBILISSE	•	•	•	•
B.s	SCRIBILISSE	SCRIBILISSE	•	•	•	•
T.	SCRIBILISSE	SCRIBILISSE	hicitia	•	•	•
Al	SCRIBILISSE	SCRIBILISSE	•	tibitici	•	hibitici
S.	SCRIBILISSE	SCRIBILISSE	•	•	hicitie?	•

B.I	flou	ibou	•	•	•	•
B.ch	flou	ibou	•	•	•	•
B.p	flou	ibou	•	•	•	•
B.s	flou	ibou	•	•	•	•
T.	flou	ibou	cribitia	•	•	•
Al	flou	ibou	•	blibitici	•	•
S.	flou	ibou	•	•	cribitia	hibitici

B.I	pschou	pschou	Δ) δ	ff	M) u	ll
B.ch	pschou	pschou	Δ) δ	ff	M) u	ll
B.p	pschou	pschou	Δ) δ	ff	M) u	ll
B.s	pschou	pschou	Δ) δ	ff	M) u	ll
T.	pschou	pschou	Δ) δ	ff	M) u	ll
Al	pschou	pschou	Δ) δ	ff	M) u	ll
S.	pschou	pschou	Δ) δ	ff	M) u	ll

1) Δ, δ = râle  
 2) ff, ff = sifflement  
 3) M, u = gemissement  
 4) T, y = zézaiement

Figure 4. Isidore Isou, « 1ere symphonie : la guerre » *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique* 1947, 371.

Obviously, even in *öUr Sonateö* by Schwitters, incontestably the most complex and sophisticated sound poem of the Dada period, one cannot find this degree of systematization (lasting many pages for each poem) and this type of multileveled composition that develops an expressive construct for the whole performance.

It is precisely these two characteristics, systematized organization of the sound variations and complexity of the expressive composition, that allow Isou to make his case for originality. His argument is that when Dada was creating its sound poems based on the

sound of the poem, the activity was its own end: for Dada the goal was to assure the collapse of any national communication as this capacity to communicate was precisely what led to the very destruction of the societal world during WWI. To reduce signs to their meaningless and empty sounds was akin to bringing back humanity at the level of the primal cry since arts and techniques were responsible for the never been seen before intensity of the carnage. Destroying language was used as the allegory for the collapse of the modern world of the new century. The production of sound poems outside of any context of interpersonal communication was fundamentally a nihilistic gesture. On the contrary, for Isou, Letterism is a positive and optimistic endeavor, in the sense that it is an innovative process by which mankind can develop new means of communicating not necessarily based on the structure of the linguistic sign. Certainly letters are used as units of sound production but they are no more than the musical notes on a music score. The second argument used by Isou to insure his originality is the thinking rigor of the intellectual conception of the Letterist principle of systematization. While chance encounter was the principle mostly invoked by the Dadaists to validate their composition, Isou bases his Letterist composition on number and rhythm. Letterist poems become akin to composing music and this is the reason why Isou's first book is entitled *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*. For Isou Letterism requires a fundamental competence to read expressively out loud: "Between the man that does not know how to vocalize correctly and the letterist poem there is an impassable obstacle akin to a concrete wall!"<sup>22</sup>

Performing a Letterist poem is not amateur night as many of these Dada evenings at the Cabaret Voltaire seem to have been.

Because Letterist poetry accepts the principle of "free verse", the poetic music of the Letterist poetry is atonal in nature. The melodic aspect of traditional and well established poetry ("amplic" in Isou's vocabulary) is replaced by an emphasis on the rhythm that is articulated on the distribution of internal sound blocks akin to what the rhyme was in the old system (this reuse under a different compositional principle of a component of "amplic" poetry outside of its original context is recognized by Isou as a "chiseling" principle of the new Letterist composition -- in terms of contemporary theory that would be a case of "deconstruction"/"reconstruction"). In order to elaborate the system of sound repetition in a way that will nevertheless favor diversity, variety and originality of the selected modes of expressivity, Isou proposed a set of constraining "rules" that would achieve the best possible composition ("Rules about internal rhymes," "Rules about rhythmic groups," "Rules regarding consonants and vowels," etc.).

Because the final production of a Letterist poem is always a collection of "letters" organized in a certain order on a page, the "text" can be "read" in a simple graphic manner and thus certain Letterist poems have achieved notoriety, not because they actually have been vocally performed, but because of the recognized quality of their graphic design:

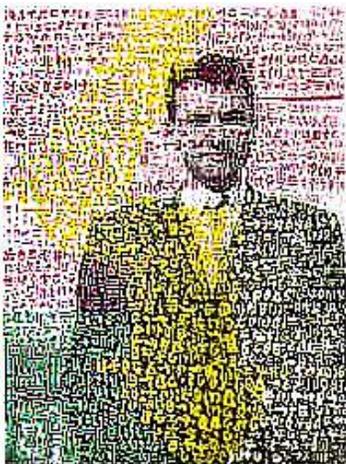


Figure 5. Isidore Isou, «Self-portrait », 1952.

In recent years, urban graffiti has often been considered as a dominating form of social and collective Letterist expression and more and more the graphic aspect of Letterism is used as a stylistic system of abstract representation; also, through the New Lettrist International movement, «Hurufismö (the graphic art related to the Arabic alphabet) has been associated with contemporary Letterism.

### *Experimental cinema*

It is often considered that the Nouvelle Vague directors such as Godard, Truffaut and Rohmer invented modern French cinema in the late 50s and early 60s. It is thus astonishing, now that these «experimentalö and confidential films by Isou and Debord are becoming more accessible, to see that in the early 50s the revolution and experimentation had already started in French film. In *A bout de souffle*<sup>23</sup> by Goddard, the walking of Belmondo in the street of Paris, alone or with Jean Seberg, is a moment of film anthology as it shows the commitment of the French New Wave to shoot outside of the studio setting and its indisputable eagerness for capturing the outside world (sounds and sights) in a light style that represents the wandering in the city and the participation in the city life as a daily cinematographic event. It is thus stunning to discover that during the entire first part of Isou's first long-length film, *Traité de bave et d'éternité* (1951), the camera follows Isou as he wanders through the familiar streets of the Parisian Latin Quarter and in particular the Bonaparte street part of the Saint-Germain-des-prés area that was precisely, during these early years of the 50s, the nervous system of the post war Parisian intellectualism.



Figure 6. Isou wandering at Saint-Germain-des-prés in *Traité de bave et d'éternité*. 1951.

In the first part of the movie, Isou exposes several of his innovative and creative ideas about cinema, photography, movement, images and the development of a visual culture that he hopes to harness through his *oméca*-aestheticism to give his contemporaries *ōheadachesö* for thinking rather than simply fall victims of casual eye fatigue. And certainly Isou's first film is the antinomy of an escapist movie. The film constantly challenges the spectator and through theory and practice imposes a frustrating evaluation of what film and cinema could be as instruments of discovery, as means that would allow access to expressive newness since Isou insists that cinema is there to challenge our passivism, our complacency.

Two concepts deserve particular attention because they are presented here for the first time but they will become ordinary components of the vulgate of experimental films. First, Isou demands the realization of *ōdiscrepantö* films, i.e. films in which there is a disconnect between the sound and the image. In this way we will not simply follow the image but we will have to pay (separate *ó* and he hopes more intense) attention to the discourse present on the sound track. In fact, the first sequence of the movie is a direct implementation of that principle: while we follow Isou wandering the Paris streets, the

sound track transports us to an unruly public meeting of the Letterist group during which Isou exposes his cinematographic ideas to a resisting audience that disrupts his speech, challenge his propositions, insults him, turns his remarks on the vanguard of film and cinema to ridicule. The contrast is powerful because, within the constructionist discrepancy between sound and image, the film is actually performing what the speaker is advocating. The "discrepant" technique will appear in many variations in "vanguard" films of the period including the beginning of *A bout de souffle* when Belmondo is seen driving his "belle américaine" on the N6 road and abruptly stops watching the road and turns sideways ninety degrees toward the (not existing in the film) camera and addresses a few comments directly to the spectators about the necessity of selecting between sea, countryside and mountains, as the best place to take a vacation. In this case, the dialogue has absolutely nothing to do with the action depicted by the images of the film. The second concept proposed by Isou is the necessity to include pre-existing materials in the film (clips of other films, images, etc.) and to simply offer them visually as gratuitous images totally decontextualized from their original source and integrated in an awkward fashion into the new film. This technique will be known as "détournement." As in the case of discrepancy, this second recommendation is widely included in the second part of the film which contains sequences borrowed mostly from newsreels: workers in factories, school, sport events, and several sequences about the French occupation of Indochina. In addition to these two techniques, throughout the film, Isou imposes Letterist recitation (accompanied by a white or black screen and the spectator can see the letters related to the poem appear in a fashion today reminiscent of texts readable on a large screen during public sessions of karaoke). Also, often, the images that come from a "détournement" effect have been

physically modified as the film or the still images have been scratched or etched so that letters, numbers and other symbols can appear as moving signs on the screen as the film is presented. These alterations are part of the necessary elevation to newness recommended by Isou as a *öchiselingö* of the old to create the new.<sup>24</sup> At the same time these are experiments in visual graphics through which the conventional design of the socially accepted letters becomes something else, a sign in evolution, in transformation.



Figure 7. *öDetournementö* of a military ceremony in French Indochina and *öchiselingö* of the film stock in *Traité de bave et d'éternité*. 1951.

Many of these cinematographic effects were copied by the other Letterists involved with cinema, in particular, after he joined the Letterist movement, Debord experimented with them in his first film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (1952) which exaggerated the black screen of the twelve first minutes of Isou's *Traité de bave et d'éternité* (it will be extended to most of the duration of his own film with the exception of a burst of light). Debord also uses the principle of the *ödetournementö* technique (as his next films included clips borrowed from films made by other directors), but, while Isou gives an esthetic dimension to the process (he uses the existing *öamplicö* film copia, and deconstructs -- *öchiselsö* ó it to produce something new), Debord is giving the process a *örevolutionaryö* economic and social dimension by *örecyclingö* what exists without acknowledging

previous ownership and rights; things are there to be used, copied, and integrated at will in new constructions without consideration for a possible capitalistic conflict of interest.

*Plasticity and vision of the upcoming visual turn*

Very early in his Parisian career Isou proclaimed: « In order to create, one has to be situated at the very vanguard of the vanguard of research and of the modern works. »<sup>25</sup> As an illustration of his own exceptional intellectual advanced position in the domain of poetry, he proposed this schema of the evolution of French poetry (and thus of the world – poetry as Isou totally shared the view that Paris was the intellectual capital of the world) for what was then for him the last century (Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du mal* were first published in 1857) :

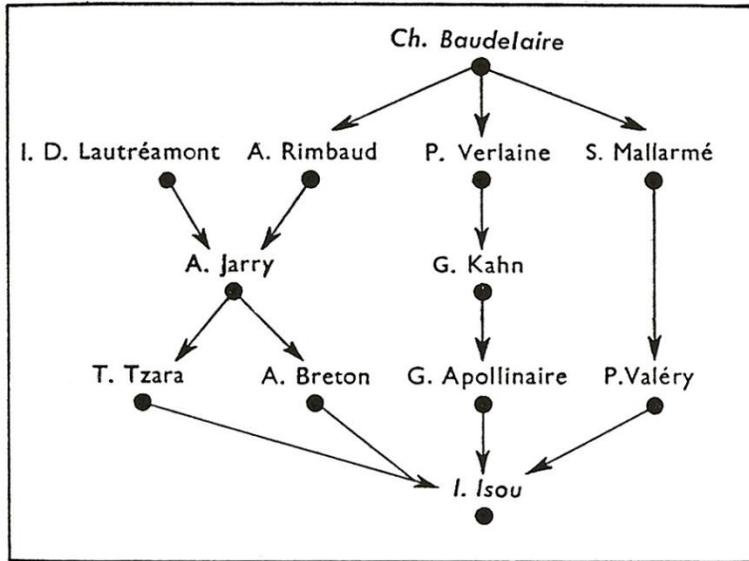


Schéma I : L'évolution spirituelle de la poésie.

Figure 8. French poetic evolution since Baudelaire according to Isou.

In this schema one can recognize Isou’s view that literary movements during the history of humanity start with a novator (here Baudelaire is credited with that status) and

then go through a phase of development (the "amplification" period) during which the ideas put forth by the novator are exploited differently and amplified by followers, until the movement has exhausted its capacity to expand and it is necessary for a new novator to intervene and to create the means of the development of a new "amplification" phase. In this case, Isou designates himself as the novator acting in his capacity as the one placed by nature, fate and destiny at "the vanguard of the vanguard." With the benefit of fifty more years to look at the subsequent evolution of the French poetry and the evolution of the theory that has developed, it is appropriate to admit that Isou, in his theoretical writings and in a few of his actual poetic works, had offered certain propositions that are in line with the current reflections of the extreme contemporary creative movement. It is also necessary to acknowledge that this convergence of views exists mostly with no direct influence of Isou on the field and in total ignorance of Isou's theories given his marginal status vis-à-vis French intelligentsia and his lack of recognition by the majority of influential intellectual institutions such as the publishing houses, the media and the university.

Isou was working and living in a very different world than ours and if, today, there is the possibility to recognize a visionary dimension to his ideas and writings, it is entirely due to his analytical skills and his own individual capacity of understanding. Thus, while it is difficult to consider him as the prophetic novator of things to come in the formulation of poetry, it is not farfetched to include his vision as part of the collection of pertinent ideas that have led to the current thinking of the vanguard (under its present label of "extreme contemporary") about the status of poetry and its necessary reformulation in this age of the "visual turn."

Today with images as the ever present representational surroundings of our everyday life, social and esthetical theoreticians consider that our contemporaneity can be defined as a mostly visual symbolic space. While articulated language is still present as a major source of information and knowledge, it is replaced more and more by plastic representations attached to realist or abstract images that become the primary blocks of our memory and that complement each other in a somewhat warehouse system of simple organizational jumble. To shape our perception of the world and its hierarchy of values we no longer rely on the assimilation of discourses or on verbal definitions that included their own rhetorical and argumentative structures of understanding and ethical, social and esthetic commandments. Plasticity is becoming the ephemeral organizational order of our understanding. With the pun intended, it should be recognized that Isou had long perceived the *letter* of that type of future, if not its spirit. The limited universe in which he lived with its daily restrictions on even essential goods imposed by the scarcity of commercial commodities at the end of WWII did not allow him to remotely imagine the state of our daily environment in which the image technology multiplies our sense of plenty. Also, while he was very much a man of the book, we live now, according to contemporary philosophers such as Derrida, in an era that can be defined as the "end of the book."

The 1942 Letterist Manifesto offers as primary concept the destruction of the *word* as the main unit of the poetic piece. The poem should no longer be understood as a collection of words, but it becomes a "lettrerie," a collection of letters assembled in a certain order so as to represent the sound patterns that will be performed out loud. Because Isou was writing before the structuralist movement (he provided a few uncomplimentary comments on Barthes' *Le Degré zero de l'écriture*,<sup>26</sup> but the general movement passed him

by) he had a very non technical use of the term *õsignö* and thus he could not propose that his Letterism was displacing the question of the expression of poetry from the plane of the *õsignifiedö* to the *õsignifier,ö* be it graphic (letters) or phonic (the sound system of the performance). Today it is easy to recognize that this systematized and theorized removal of poetry from the universe of signification to the more contemporary world of significance was a decisive step into the future and into what is still our intellectual and esthetic universe. Once Isou had advocated a mode of expression not based on semantics, he understood that it was his responsibility to explore how poetic significance should be produced. His book, *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*, probably under the influence of the previous work of Mallarmé and the Symbolists, looked at solutions in the world of music. The day-to-day practice of composing Letterist poems, however, because it forced him to reflect on issues directly related to graphic expressivity, led Isou to the conviction of the importance of poetic graphic plasticity. In other terms, poetry is no longer a question of linguistic or neo-rhetorical established forms (verses, rhyme, fixed forms, word choice, syntactic arrangements, etc.) it becomes a question of physical and material shape. Once, as Isou does, letters are removed from the coercive cognitive structure of the word and from the functionality of language, they become graphical artifacts and simple iconographic *motifs* that can be shaped in many different ways and that can be organized in a multidimensional space. They become commodities of a visual system under the rules governed by esthetic plasticity. While Letterism was conceived as a new poetic movement in which poetry should be heard, its ultimate expansion, and its current contemporaneity is its ability to take place in an overwhelming visual universe that is everywhere to be seen. Isou should be fully credited for his capacity

to have understood this potential visual dimension of poetry and to have offered preliminary reflections on the nature and function of this dimension; time has proven his comments insightful and still relevant to today's poetics: "Today poetry, tired of the old format, invents new models (forms). Letterism, by creating a new plastic matter that cannot enter into the old poetic mold, will have, through trials and errors, to develop a new mold. [1 ] Like the plastician who can rely on so many materials, like the music composer who relies on so many instruments and voices, poetry will collect a new material compound available for its new composition. After the words, letters will lead to new forms. »<sup>27</sup>

Isou's early understanding of the graphic and visual dimension of future poetic expression will lead, later in his life, to propose a new graphic system that will encompass all forms of esthetic expressiveness. The "metagraphy" (métagraphie) first imagined as a phonetico-pictographic way to go beyond the original graphic system solely conceived around the physical shape of the letter as transcription of a sound, will become, for Isou, a "global system of *écriture*" destined to trace and memorize the contours of human experience and knowledge. This last claim remains to be proven, but, as the recent publication of Isou's intellectual sum by the publisher Al Dante demonstrates, fifty years later, after his first Parisian appearance, Isou's work still earns him a place at the very core of the most extreme contemporary Parisian reflections on poetry and symbolic representation.

## Notes

1. « People have described Leonardo da Vinci's work as an ideal of intellectual totality. However he only left us paintings, in which his contribution is merely a greatest figurative

capacity [í ]. It is only after the death of this famous Renaissance artist that people discovered a throve of non-authenticated notes that were considered [í ] as pertaining to medicine, physics, technology [í ]. I believe I have [í ] produced more original revelations on more fields than Leonardo da Vinci. » *La Créatique, ou la novatique: 1941-1976* (Paris: Al Dante, 2003), 1110.

2. Isidore Isou, *Fondements pour la transformation intégrale du théâtre*. (Paris : Bordas, 1953).
3. Isidore Isou, *La Créatique, ou la novatique*, op. cit., 20.
4. Isidore Isou, *ibid.*, 296.
5. Isidore Isou, *Les Journaux des Dieux*. (Paris : Aux escaliers de Lausanne, 1950) n.p.
6. Published in *La Termitière*, 8, November 15, 1999.
7. Isidore Isou, *L'Agrégation d'un nom et d'un messie* (Paris : Gallimard, 1947).
8. Isidore Isou, *Les Pompiers du Nouveau Roman (Lettrisme 17, 1971)* 17.
9. Isidore Isou, *Les Pompiers du Nouveau Roman (Lettrisme 17, 1971)* 18.
10. Isidore Isou, *La Créatique, ou la novatique*, op. cit., 209.
11. Isidore Isou, *Réflexions sur M. André Breton* (Paris: éditions lettristes, 1948) 21.
12. Isidore Isou, *Fondements pour la transformation intégrale du théâtre*, op. cit., 23.
13. Isidore Isou, *Fondements pour la transformation intégrale du théâtre*, op. cit., 11.
14. Isidore Isou, *Le Soulèvement de la jeunesse* (Paris : Aux escaliers de Lausanne, 1949).
15. Isidore Isou, *Réflexions sur M. André Breton*, op. cit., 13.
16. Isidore Isou, *Les Pompiers du Nouveau Roman*, op. cit., 34.
17. Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle* (Paris : Champ libre, 1967).
18. Hastings-King, Stephen. *L'Internationale Situationniste, Socialisme ou Barbarie, and the Crisis of the Marxist Imaginary. SubStance 90* (Volume 28, Number 3), 1999, 26-54.
19. Maurice Lemaître, « Préface-défi de l'éditeur-métagraphe », in Isidore Isou, *Les Journaux des Dieux*, op. cit., n.p.
20. Michel Leiris, *Brisées* (Paris : Gallimard, 1966) 96-100. In his personal diary, Leiris, on March 10, wrote: ò Plusieurs camouflets ces temps derniers : chahut « lettriste » au

Vieux-Colombier pendant que je lisais ma présentation de la pièce de Tzara (j'ai pu sauver la face, mais je sais bien qu'il s'en est fallu de fort peu pour que je ne tiennne pas le coup) [...]. » Michel Leiris, *Journal 1922-1989* (Paris : Gallimard, 1992) 427.

21. For details on the poetic inventiveness of Dada in Zürich, Paris, New York, Berlin, etc. see the chapter entitled *Dada means nothing* in my book *Poeticized Language* (University Park: Penn State Press, 2000) 35-63.

22 Isidore Isou, *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*, op. cit., 293.

23. Jean-Luc Godard, *A bout de souffle*, 1960.

24. Isidore Isou, *La Créatique, ou la novatique*, op. cit., 23.

25. Isidore Isou, *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*, op. cit., 32.

26. Roland Barthes, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris : Le Seuil, 1953).

27 Isidore Isou, *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*, op. cit., 192.