

## Approaching Letterist Cinema

Frederique Devaux

Translated by David W. Seaman

### I

Like Romanticism and Surrealism, Letterism is an innovative school which brought unexpected gains of primordial importance, overthrowing all fields of art, philosophy, and science. The cinematic works of this movement are quite numerous and many of these creations have been repeated or dissolved into works of lesser importance by later imitators.

For the first time in cultural history, the Letterist movement distinguishes two distinct phases in the evolution of art: An initial moment of construction, edification, growth and expansion in its form and content. This phase, during which an art defines itself and spreads out, is called the *amplific* (amplique). Then the art in question enters the *chiseling* phase (ciselante), which is a time of concentration, deconstruction, withdrawal and disorganization to the point of its complete destructuration, destruction and death.

Like all other arts, film grew, tried out all its possibilities, and exhausted its forms and content thanks to the creations of innovators such as Lumière, Méliès, Griffith, Linder, Chaplin, Gance, Dulac, Buñuel, and so forth. In 1951, date of Isou's *Treatise on Slobber and Eternity* (Traité de bave et d'éternité), film first entered its chiseling phase. The contributions of this film are in four fundamental areas:

1) *In the editing* The author breaks once and for all with the traditions of synchronization (where the sound track has a specific relationship with the picture) and a-synchronization (where the sound has no direct connection with the picture but the meaning of what is said supports the picture in some other way), by creating what he calls *disjunctive editing* (montage discrèpant) by which the sound track runs completely independently from the picture, having no relationship to it and demanding to be considered as a thing in itself.

2) *In the picture* For the first time in the history of the seventh art, Isou presents planes that are intentionally devoid of interest, usually filmed from still photos. The author invades these planes with lines, scratches, and tears, all forms of intervention which are called *chiseling*. Thus, the chiseled picture is a photograph destroyed or attacked in its essence, its reproduction being impoverished or enriched by intervention directly on the celluloid.

3) *In the sound* The elements traditionally constituting the sound track — namely the ensemble of words, sounds and music — constituting henceforth a

thing in itself, has to justify itself by its own creativity, by stylistic research that can run from the grand, complex metaphoric and Proustian sentence to the Letterist poem composed of phonemes. It is *chiseled sound*, that is, a sound track developed on its own and benefiting from the contributions of prose and lyric poetry.

4) *In the story or subject* It is the first time that an author introduces into the film a new cinema manifesto and the reflection of the film on itself. Another innovation is that he includes in the film the main ideas of a revolutionary theory he has created: the revolt of the young, which unlike previous conceptions is concerned not only with the study of individuals who occupy a stable and secure function in society, but is also interested in the mass of *outsiders*, the "electrons" who represent the dynamic force of history.

In the chiseling period (characterized by disjunction and chiseling) Isou defines a certain number of esthetic stages: hermeticism, instinctivism, polythanasia, and polyautomatism.

### II

The same year, 1951, Maurice Lemaître, who had been Isou's assistant for the *Treatise on Slobber and Eternity*, created the first syncinema show with a work *Is the Feature on Yet?* (Le Film est déjà commencé?) in which he extends certain of Isou's ideas, deepens others, and creates a new system of cinema made up of a new screen, audience participation and a crowd swirling around the auditorium.

Thus in *Is the Feature on Yet?* Lemaître increases Isou's chiseling with drawings, letters, numbers, representational or abstract signs which give a new concentration to the original image, saturating it and bringing to it an anecdotic dimension which goes beyond the simple narrative challenge printed on the film. This author also experiments with the audience's threshold of perception of the image by the spectator, introducing motionless sequences and quick clips into a chiseled picture which accelerates the sequence of pictures to its upper limits. And as with Isou, Lemaître's image is unsynchronized with the sound and follows a percussive editing that frees the sound from the picture.

This second film in the chiseling stage prolongs the philosophical self-reflection of cinema and continues the philosophical reflection on creation and its application to cinematic art; this reflection is introduced here as an existence in itself and is not as in Isou's work dissolved into the surrounding story. The emphasis is put on the importance, even the necessity of creative evolution. The work of art no longer is evaluated in relation to the psychology of its author; its value exists in the context of the development of the ideas.

Lemaître continues articulation of the theory, the revolt of the young, which borrows its creative foundation from Isou. Furthermore he introduces for the first time the infinite possibilities of scenarios and thereby destroys the unidimensionality of the customary scenario. And, as Pirandello had done for theatre, Lemaître introduces into the sound of the the film the movements of the audience (provoked or spontaneous), the thoughts of the spectators (imagined or real), and all the possible criticisms of the movie itself which are no

longer there as stories but on the contrary attack the story itself. The creator introduces interior monologue, fragmented sentences, puns, destruction of words, Joycean figures of speech (and beyond). Lemaître also inverts the sound track of *Treatise on Slobber and Eternity* and obtains a series of inarticulate sounds (mechanical sound esthetics).

With Lemaître there are also creations of which he is the sole inventor: the conventional screen, heretofore simply a mechanism, is elevated to the rank of a star. It is not a matter of perfecting the screen but of making it the frame for the new esthetics. "The screen appears, draped in colored tapestries and hung with objects that stage hands will move around all during the film. At various moments heads, hands, and hats will be placed in front of the movie projector to veil the images."<sup>1</sup> In addition, Lemaître introduces for the first time in the history of cinema actors in flesh and blood in the movie theatre for a complete spectacle which inaugurates the syncinema show. From this point on spectators will be yanked out of their passivity, forced to act, no longer submitting to the hordes of images that conventional movies overwhelm them with. The role of the ticket seller is no longer just to sell admissions, he will now have the impromptu function of handing out our stupefaction; usherettes and sweepers have their lines too, as does the producer who used to stand out by his absence, and the director or film maker himself from now on is present on stage for his show.

Another innovation not lacking interest is that Lemaîtrean syncinema can use the whole universe in putting together the cinematic spectacle that is renewed in this manner, as was already instituted latently in Jean-Isidore Isou's *Journals of the Gods* (Les Journaux des Dieux): "The scale of pictoprose rising to cosmography, passing by way of collaprose, architectoprose and perhaps cineprose is up to you, metaprose writers."<sup>2</sup>

Finally, and above all, *Is the Feature on Yet?* is also a film to read, a "take out" film, since it was published in the spring of 1952 by André Bonne, finally allowing purses to open up to the renewed art of the screen.

### III

In 1952 in the magazine *Ur*, Isou proposed an "Esthetics of Cinema" (Esthétique du cinéma) in which he outlines for the first time in the history of cinema the exact frameworks of the seventh art. Let us quickly recall them:

The "economic field" of the "environmental square" which is the area of exchange between the artist and the consumer, specifically in this case the movie theatre.

The "mechanical square" which is the material base on which an art is founded and constructed; in the cinema the camera and the film, for example.

The "esthetic square" defines the privileged moments, the quintessential characteristics of an art; the foreground and/or the Futurist or Surrealist school, and so forth. These are unique moments which preside over what could be called with a capital letter the mainstream of *Creation*, without which the world would be doomed to death.

The "story square" which is the material belonging to each author, the narrative content, what is said in a work.

Thus, any work which can properly and unequivocally be called creative is one which innovates in a new form. The mechano-esthetics makes it possible to recognize (and to record so one can avoid plagiarism) the creative evolution of innovative formal structures in any art.

This first part alone is enough to indicate the importance of this work written in a period which no longer knows what cinema idol to worship, which no longer really has an avant-garde and which had no other course than to depend nostalgically on the past, superbly illustrated by the creations of the 1920s and 1930s.

Chapter II of the *Esthetics of Cinema* opens on a new definition of cinema: Cinema is the art of "marketing reproductions" (emphasis added). The word reproduction must be noted here; cinema is distinguished neatly from painting in that it is not a representation but a reproduction (this step following the construction). The term reproduction implies the term *copy*, the idea that transforms representation into reproduction. Previously no one was concerned with the specific particle of cinematic art which is reproduction, while it is representation in the other arts. Thus there is a shift of disciplines between painting and cinema because of the difference in molecules. However, it is proper to associate film and photography because the differences between their molecules are minimal, photography being in fact "the first element of a collection of reproductions to which cinema offers its rhythms and ample periods."

Such an evolution occurs because, like all the other arts, film has two phases which have already been named: First is the moment of enrichment of "the element and of its stylistic combinations," film having like painting or fiction its great ample names (Griffith, Lear, Eisenstein, Man Ray, etc.). This is followed by the chiseling invasion which is "the period of destruction of the assemblages or the scattering of particles existing 'for themselves' in an art" and which begins for cinema with the film by Isou discussed above.

The following is a brief list of some of the innovations discovered by Isou and used in *Treatise on Slobber and Eternity* and mentioned in "The Isouian Transformation of Cinema":

Disjunctive editing or chiseling editing which makes the sound indifferent to the picture, permitting access to the constituent particles.

Chiseled reproduction: the film is deepened and destroyed by *chiseling*, which is the intrusion of narrative anecdotes on the printed film. To chisel the particle is "to purify the art of the image of all its ample gimmicks." By this process one returns to the particle itself, strips the film of its current polish, and thus fortifies the bases of cinematic art. The chiseling will become a coherent element without reference to the coherence or incoherence of the reproductions. "They permit the juxtaposition of the forms without worrying about the juxtaposition of the narration."

Henceforth, it will be necessary to speak of a "coherent word-track" and no longer of a "sound-track" that is still incoherent when one hears it without the reinforcement of pictures because it is made up of music, noises, and sentences that make no sense by themselves. The sound should no longer be the prisoner of the picture but should *expand* by itself in *disjunctive editing*. As with the picture, one will dig out the particle of sound in itself and make out of it a "scenario in itself."

Film is a special phenomenon of general culture and it is part of the effort of the total disruption of culture. People will be just as much interested in the improvement of the seats and publicity panels as in the means of projection, and people will consider that the problems of the refreshments and lights and applause can always "be asked in the *ecoesthetic field in a new way*" (emphasis added). Eco-cinematography is defined as the "discipline that considers the art of film as a branch of economics and its products simply as goods in a complete marketing cycle."

In the cinema, as elsewhere, the true creators stay out of the cycle of economic exchange. They are outsiders considered as such by those owning the movies theatres (well-off insiders). Isou therefore proposes to "introduce the mechano- and eco-esthetics into the esthetic apprenticeship," which would permit everyone to broaden his knowledge, responsibility and immediate practical opportunities, contrary to schools which strangle and dull students by an apprenticeship that is too long and incomplete, giving them a limited view of culture. To reeducate the public in a creative sense would require new movie theatres (Isou proposes a system of funding for new outside energies). While waiting for these developments, it is necessary to act, sending out tracts and making speeches in the traditional movie houses; agitators must accomplish a constructive economic propaganda effort.

In his Appendix, the author declares that cine-club debates will be the movies of tomorrow; that is, questioning about past works, at a time when cinema-as-art is dead, becomes the new fulfilling moment of cinema.

#### IV

In 1953 *Amos or Introduction to Metagraphology* (Amos ou Introduction à la Métagraphologie) by Isou appears. It is a film, a sketch taking off from the idea that cinema no longer has to use the traditional supports or mechanisms and can use as images simple photographs whose chiselings constitute a complete text in super-writing or *hyper-graphics*. *Amos* is the first hypergraphic film in the history of cinema. This work is also original in its subject matter because all poetry or literature is banished and only the philosophical domain is explored. Isou pursues here his "Romanesque cathedral," which started in 1950 in *Journals of the Gods* (illustrated the same year by Lemaître by plates in *Canailles*). From then on, cinematic creation appear as filmic prose, where the sound and the image constitute a new form of writing, a *super-writing*. Thus in 1965 Maurice Lemaître presents *Beyond the Trigger* (*Au-delà du déclic*), a work of cine-hypergraphics which illustrates all these ideas.

Next came the discovery of an integral mechano-esthetics where all existing materials, whether they have been used or not, as well as all past, future or as yet undiscovered materials can be employed for the edification of an art work in general and specifically in the composition of a film. Thus one can choose all imaginable materials, use all existing or potential supports, and make use of all tools for a cinematic work.

#### V

In 1956 the founder of Letterism published *Introduction to Imaginary Esthetics* (Introduction à l'esthétique imaginaire) wherein he claims that the arts must go beyond their customary particles toward the creation of opposing particles and end up with transfinite elements which exist so long as they allow one to imagine other non-existing or potential elements. These particles, which no longer have their own meaning (since they refer to a cinematic reality that is always something else), are called *infinitesimal* (like the mathematics of the same name) or *esthapeirist* ("art + infinity"). Thus in 1956 the experience of the cinema as it had been customarily thought of violently exploded, exceeding the most conventional boundaries of the tradition of the seventh art as it was known.

#### VI

In 1960, starting from the idea that a completed work is the negation of works yet to be done, the Letterist school proposed the *supertemporal setting* which is a mechanism specific to infinitesimal art. It amounts to an empty stage on which spectators are invited to exercise their potential talents and create works. This supertemporal work is open in an unending, infinite manner, "in vitam eternam," to all who wish to work on it and enrich the art work thus conceived with their own contributions, erasing or extending as much as they want the additions of people before them until the end of time. In that way each of the positive and negative changes that the audience has either thought of or enacted become discrete cinematic elements.

As we stated at the outset — and this is just one of many examples — numerous contributions of Letterism have been taken up, often recuperated and far too long diluted, hence faded, in later works which have fallen into the trap of pseudo-creation. For example, "happenings" repeat the idea of spectator participation in supertemporal art which was originally discovered by Isou.

And, coming back to this particular innovation, one can say that without calling it by this name, the Lemaîtreian syncinema showing already used this idea by invoking a "cosmos of performance" into the expansion of the idea of projection. And especially, as we noted above, Isou concluded his *Esthetics of Cinema* in 1952 by proposing that film-club debates should be considered as works in themselves, higher than the run-of-the-mill commercial series of the day. Without using this term, he inaugurated infinitesimal film, where the intrusions of the audience constitute all by themselves the invitational framework of the film. This framework opened by the Letterists, which goes beyond time, leads to three observations by Jean Cathelin: "This supertemporal framework is (a) profound, based on the complete and authentic formal work of the spectators, (b) restored to its place without mechanical trickery, and finally (c) integral, which is to say systematized in all branches of esthetics."<sup>3</sup>

Two years later, in 1962, Lemaître presented a new showing of syncinema, *An Evening at the Movies* (*Un Soir au Cinéma*), a work which its author qualifies as "what will later be called *partially supertemporal* or

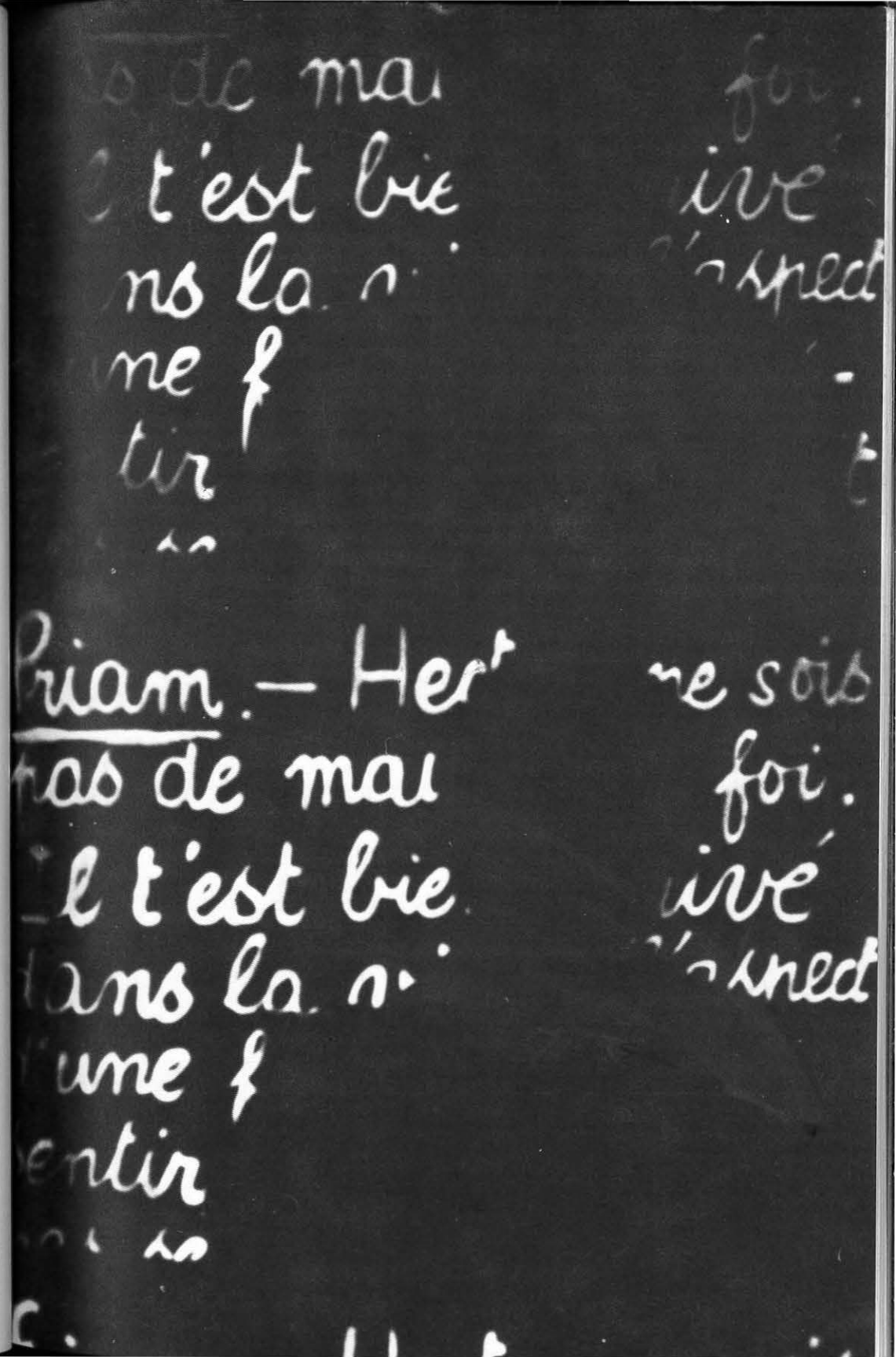
quasi-supertemporal,"<sup>4</sup> asking spectators to be the screen (Figure 29). The image is projected on the bodies of friends and other spectators who make up a living screen. In the Café-Cinéma Colbert Lemaître also used tables stacked up in front of the screen so their formica tops served as a new projection surface. In 1963 the same author presented *To Make a Movie* (Pour faire un film), a supertemporal film which invites spectators to become film-makers themselves and bring together all the elements of the movie showing themselves — the hall, the projectors, the story, the actors, etc.

It is very important to note the work of Roland Sabatier in the field of chiseled cinema. In *Cinema Works* (Oeuvres de Cinéma) he brings together all the cinematic works that he produced between 1963 and 1982, where he never ceased to push to its farthest frontiers all the previously unexplored possibilities of hypergraphics, polyautomatism, polythanasia, and all the formulas of chiseling which he innovated.

These are, of course, only the main lines of the continuous creative work of a group that includes numerous filmmakers. In 1980 the Georges Pompidou Center in Paris held a Maurice Lemaître retrospective; in 1982 the same Center presented Letterist Cinema 1951-1982 with a little catalog enumerating some twenty filmmakers along with recent creations by Isidore Isou (*The Luminaries in the Darkness* [Les Illuminés des Ténèbres], 1982; *Initiation to High Voluptuousness* [Initiation à la Haute Volupté], 1982; *Jonas*, 1928); Roland Sabatier (*Let's Evolve a Little in Film and Creativity* [Evoluons un peu dans le cinéma et la création], 1972); Alain Satié (*Not That Way* [Pas Comme Ça], 1971); Gérard-Philippe Broutin (*The Koriontina*, 1979), and so forth, alongside the classics *Treatise on Slobber and Eternity* and *Is the Feature on Yet?*

In spite of a few showings in places such as the Cinémathèque Française (French National Film Archive) and the Georges Pompidou Center, very few critics have properly assessed the contributions of the Letterist movement; there are too many who still today make a mystery of these works and their copyright dates and pretend to be unaware that beyond current fads there exist quintessential movements anchored in the history of artistic (and scientific) disciplines to which the history of future artistic movements is indebted.

Figure 29. Maurice Lemaître, *Un Soir au Cinema* [still], 1962.



1. Maurice Lemaître, *Le Film est déjà commencé?* Paris: Editions André Bonne, 1952, p. 129.
2. Isidore Isou, *Les Journaux des Dieux*. Paris: Les Escaliers de Lausanne, 1950, p. 143.
3. *Why Isou Is More Important than Picasso* (Pourquoi Isou est plus important que Picasso), followed by *What Everyone Should Know about Letterist and Infinitesimal Painting* (Ce qui il faut savoir de la peinture lettriste et infinitésimale), 1962, reprinted in Isidore Isou, *From Impressionism to Letterism* (De l'impressionisme au Lettrisme). Filipacchi, 1974, p. 84.
4. Maurice Lemaître, *Super-Experimental Cinema* (Le Cinéma super-expérimental). Centre de Créativité, 1980, p. 23.

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## The Limitations of Lettrisme An Interview with Henri Chopin

Introduced and Annotated by Nicholas Zurbrugg

The following interview with the French sound poet, Henri Chopin, was recorded in English, in Brisbane, at the end of Chopin's visit to Australia as the special guest of the Sound Art Festival held as part of the ANZART exhibition in Hobart, Tasmania, in May 1983.<sup>1</sup> Chopin is best known as a pioneer of European sound poetry (or poetry composed for and by the tape-recorder); as the creator of "typewriter poems"; as the editor and publisher of the review *OU*, which first systematically published LP records by European and American sound poets; and as the author of the first comprehensive history of sound poetry, *Poésie sonore internationale*, published in Paris in 1979.<sup>2</sup>

Chopin's reflections upon Lettrisme are particularly interesting precisely because Chopin was never a member of the Lettriste movement. Indeed, as Chopin has insisted upon many occasions,<sup>3</sup> his allegiances are not so much to any one particular artistic movement, as to creativity — or movement — itself. As the Swedish composer and sound poet Sten Hanson has remarked, "Chopin is . . . a man who makes no compromise; he always speaks his opinion without any trace of diplomatic consideration,"<sup>4</sup> and although such statements wielding "always" should always be taken with a pinch of salt, Hanson judiciously points to the ironic wit informing most of Chopin's judgments. In other words, Chopin's meditations provide a useful antidote to the more partisan effusions of such Lettristes as Roland Sabatier, whose enthusiasms for Isidore Isou's achievements recently culminated in his avowal that Isou is not only "le plus grand artiste surgi dans l'art moderne" ("the greatest artist to emerge in modern art"), but also "le créateur le plus important de toute l'histoire de la plastique" ("the most important creator in the entire history of the plastic arts").<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Chopin's comments in the following interview provide an equally potent antidote to some of the excesses in Isou's own writings and observations. In the same issue of the Italian review *Berenice* in which Sabatier's eulogy of Isou appeared, Isou is quoted in an interview with Carmela Muscolo as avowing that "Le Futurisme n'a aucune importance historique" ("Futurism has no historical importance"), and that "ma création est une création internationaliste" ("my creativity is an internationalist creativity").<sup>6</sup>

As Chopin's remarks intimate, Lettrisme is perhaps itself at best a movement with a momentary historical significance, and is thus analogous in kind — if not in quality — to Futurism. And as Chopin also hints, Lettrisme never really