# 1 Aural Cinema: Isidore Isou's *Traité de bave et d'éternité*

PART I EXPLORES the iconoclastic criticism of the cinematic *eidōlon* – namely, a film image understood as deceptive and illusory – in Marxist-inflected works within which mainstream narrative cinema would reiterate capitalist ideology's perspective via highly mimetic images. Leftist film theorists, theoretically, and film-makers such as Isidore Isou, Guy Debord, Carmelo Bene and Jean-Luc Godard, practically, develop a criticism of the cinematic *eidōlon* which bespeaks a fundamentally iconoclastic understanding of the relationship between the film image and phenomenal reality. Echoing Plato's worries about the perceptual power of artworks and the Byzantine iconoclasts' refusal of potentially idolatrous images of God, these iconoclastic directors fiercely reject cinema's impression of reality because of the film image's inability to reproduce the model and its connivance with capitalist ideology. When the model is deceptive in itself (as in Isou's, Debord's and Bene's films), or is far too complex (as in Godard's oeuvre), iconoclastic gestures become a way to challenge habitual forms of film-making and film-viewing.

This chapter focuses on Isidore Isou, the founder of the French avant-garde movement of Lettrism, who is a neglected yet essential figure for theorising cinematic iconoclasm because of his explicit programme to destroy cinema, both literally and metaphorically. In his cinematic project, Isou grants sound a fundamental role while undermining the image as a mimetic copy. His critique of mimesis stems from the consideration that the film image has exhausted its imitative value, namely that there already exist films which have shown an effective use of mimetic images; it is now time for cinema to become something else. Accordingly, Isou proposes a cinema where sound becomes the constructive principle of the film and images acquire significance only from their opposition

to the sound track. The privileging of the sonorous grounds much of Lettrist artistic practices, in which the political critique of words and images is part of a more widespread scepticism about language and representation and their ability to express reality. Thus, the criticism of artistic mimesis encompasses the aural, visual and linguistic dimensions, in an overall rejection of the sounds and images that had accompanied fascist propaganda before and during World War II. Lettrist cinema becomes one of the diverse ways through which this avant-garde expresses its attempts at overcoming the limitations imposed by figurative representation and logocentric speech.

The chapter first locates Lettrism within the broader context of twentieth-century Europe, with particular attention to the crisis of language and representation in philosophy, literature and the arts. It then delineates Isou's cinematic project, known as 'discrepant cinema' (*cinéma discrépant*), which aims at dismantling cinema as spectacle by way of breaking with mimesis and granting a privileged role to sound. Such an undermining of the visual image is also discussed through a detailed analysis of Isou's only film, *Traité de bave et d'éternité* (*Treatise on Venom and Eternity*, 1951).[1] The film's iconoclastic quality emerges from an account of the disruptive devices of discrepant editing (*montage discrépant*), which destroys synchronous sound, and the chiseled image (*image ciselante*),[2] which results from the literal scraping of and aggressions against the filmstrip.

## Lettrism, or the Struggle of Ordinary Language

Lettrism is the cultural avant-garde founded in 1946 by Isou, a Romanian communist Jew who had moved to Paris a year earlier. The context is post-World War II France, a country exhausted by the Nazi invasion and the Vichy regime during the war. A general sense of meaninglessness spreads from this post-war situation through diverse areas of life and especially the arts. Isou founded Lettrism as a reaction to the existential and identity crisis that the war had provoked. The feeling of powerlessness and overall senselessness in the face of war and the Shoah manifests itself in the Lettrists' rejection of words in favour of the letter. In their view, words are always already imbued with, and thus convey, a meaning. But in a world that has lost any meaning and where language itself is found guilty of having colluded with fascist propaganda, Isou and the Lettrists rejected words and articulated speech to return to the pure aural dimension of the letter.

As the name suggests, Lettrism excludes words in favour of the letter (*lettre*) as the basis for a type of poetry founded on sounds able to transcend the limits of national boundaries (Feldman 2014, 78, 85). That is, while words are always

in a specific language, letters maintain a much wider inclusive power, thereby contrasting the exclusionary quality of words. Abandoning the semantic constraints of language, the Lettrists explore the possibilities of single letters by recovering their aural dimension, creating poems made up of human noises. In such an anti-realist approach, Sami Sjöberg (2014) observes that 'language no longer names nor objectifies, neither does it separate or mediate' (222). Lettrism thus opposes the abstract sonic quality of letters to the meaning that words always bear. Immanent anti-language, Lettrist poetry allows for conveying individual experience in a manner appropriate to its fragmented and utterly subjective nature.

As both sound and visual poetry, Lettrism from its inception participated in the broader distrust of artistic mimesis which further intensified following World War II. The close bond between reality and its representation broken, post-war twentieth-century arts resorted to destructive, anti-mimetic gestures to express the inarticulated, new perception of the real. The arts withdrew into an inner dimension, where the Platonic tradition of the work of art as mimesis of the sensible world was replaced by the arbitrariness of the image/sound-model relationship as a means for expressing the intelligible, the unrepresentable and the ineffable. Although the divorce between reality and its mimetic representation had already begun at the end of the nineteenth century, World War II and the Shoah represent an essential caesura. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh (2016) discusses how certain artistic practices partially lost their *raison d'être* following

> the trauma of World War II and the Holocaust. That is one rift, a major chasm, whether explicitly or only latently expressed. Another is the realization that this historical situation needed redefinition, not only in geopolitical terms or in terms of a new national identity, but also in terms that were specifically *tragic*. [. . .] There was a sense of loss, of destruction, of utter inaccessibility to prewar culture [. . .]. (376)

Accordingly, in the aftermath of the war, visual arts further exacerbated the 'ontology of absence and lack' (Wajcman 1998, 109), as inaugurated by Wassily Kandinsky's and Kazimir Malevich's iconoclastic paintings in the first half of the century.[3] In the first decades of the twentieth century, Russian abstract art was concerned with the representation of the super-sensible (whether religious or secularised) and, in an approach reminiscent of Byzantine iconoclasm, opted for anti-mimesis to express that which is beyond the visible realm, making absence itself the subject of painting. After World War II, however, artists were not so much interested in the Spiritual/God/the Absolute but rather in the ways in

which an ineffable and unrepresentable human experience could be the subject of artistic expression. The crisis of representation – namely, the loss of faith in the human ability to reproduce something audio-visually or verbally of the real in recognisable forms – involves questions regarding the spectacularisation of the model. The experience of the war and the news about the concentration camps led to enquire 'how can one, in art, respond to the Nazi reign of terror without spectacularizing it?' (Foster et al. 2016, 397). Visual arts, having lost trust in artistic mimesis, retreated into the realm of the unfigurable, the ugly and the extremely material (for example, informal art in France and Italy; the Cobra group in Denmark, Belgium and the Netherlands; Brutalism in Britain). Jean Fautrier's series of paintings *Otages* (1944–46), for instance, is paradigmatic of post-war art: inspired by the aural (the sound of bombs, rifles, cries) rather than visual dimension of the war, the paintings undermine sight to the point that only the title remains to guide the viewer to the formless lump on the canvases. 'This dichotomy between alleged theme and frustration of vision' (Foster et al. 2016, 397) would become a common trait of post-war visual and sound arts, including the Lettrist avant-garde.

The mistrust of visual representation is accompanied by a mistrust of language (Sjöberg 2013b; Weller 2018) in an understanding of the experiential as that which lies beyond the domains of the representable and the utterable. In contextualising Lettrist poetry within the broader criticism of language, Sjöberg (2013b) defines early-twentieth-century language crisis in literature and philosophy as 'in essence a crisis of representation', which was 'characterized by a distrust of language in general and skepticism about the correspondence between language and the world in particular' (53). Visual arts' slow abandonment of mimesis is matched by ordinary language's failure to express the complexity of experience in literature and philosophy. Shane Weller (2018) contends that

> The history of the West has been marked by a recurrent sense that, in the face of certain thoughts, feelings, objects, or experiences, words fail us. For Plato, the Ideas that constitute the real (of which human beings can capture only the shadows on the cave wall) may be described, but they remain in a more profound sense beyond the grasp of language, even the Greek language, considered by its possessors to be superior to all others, with non-Greek speakers falling into the category of the barbarian. Similarly, the long tradition of negative theology is shaped by a profound sense of the limited power of language, insisting, as it does, that God can be expressed linguistically only in terms of what he is not, any positive articulation of the divine essence being at best a reduction, if not an outright distortion, of that essence. [. . .] This skepticism

> toward language becomes particularly acute, however, in the modern period, casting its long shadow over European literature and philosophy. (15)

There is a loss of faith in the ability to 'utter the world' which is at the centre of, among others, Fritz Mauthner's[4] iconoclastic critique of language.[5] Mauthner exacerbates the philosophical stance on the identity of language and thought, proposing an impossible critique of language via its own self-destruction (Pisano 2016, 95–122; Sjöberg 2013b; Weiler 1970, 269–306; Weller 2018, 23–29). Language, which is our only way to order experience, is purely metaphorical or suggestive, thereby imprisoning us in an unescapable missaying. It follows that knowledge is impossible since language is incapable of describing (our experience of) reality. Hence, as Weller (2018) remarks, 'liberation from the tyranny of language can be achieved, according to Mauthner, only through an *annihilation of language*' (27). Such a critique of language is ultimately unattainable because its goal is to utter the unsayable. Mauthner's radical approach culminates, rather logically, in a praise of mystical silence (Weiler 1970, 274, 291–96). Mysticism, in both theistic and non-theistic tradition, designates an experience characterised by an ineffable and unrepresentable component, because both language and image fail to adequately express it. Drawing from negative theology, which postulates that God can be known only negatively, by means of what God is not because of his ultimate ineffability, Mauthner adopts a secularised approach to mysticism – what he describes as '*godless mysticism*' (quoted in Weiler 1970, 294). God, like any other word, is only a metaphor (an image of), a verbal and therefore destroyable god. The outcome of Mauthner's philosophy is a mysticism without language and God: to destroy language as metaphor is also to destroy God.

Mauthner's philosophical project is thus based on an iconoclastic understanding of the world-word relationship in which language is inadequate for the expression of reality. As Libera Pisano (2016) notes, 'the main feature of Mauthner's critique of language is the unbridgeable gap between word and object' (104). Words are, at best, an approximation of reality and 'the only two available modes of language use, then, become missaying [. . .] and unsaying' (Weller 2018, 29). Accordingly, Mauthner proposes a dismantling of language through and within language itself, which is tantamount to visual and sound arts' efforts to destroy their own illusionism from within. Like visual images, words are an epistemological failure in the face of reality.

Literature similarly participates in the language crisis: Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *The Lord Chandos Letter* (1902), which Mauthner suggested was influenced by his critique of language (Nordmann 2005, 117–18),[6] attests

to language's incapacity to grasp experiential reality and otherness. Symbolist poetry, in particular Stéphane Mallarmé's, rejects ordinary language to express the mystery beyond the surface of known reality by severing the relationship between the world and words' capacity to describe it; and various avant-gardes explore the limits of language and the potential of sounded words.[7] It is in this context that Lettrism originates, drawing inspiration from Dadaism's disruption between words and meaning, Surrealism's creative anarchism, Futurist poetry's use of onomatopoeia and Symbolist poetry's attention to silence and the visual arrangement of words on the page. Lettrism thus participates in the period's visual and verbal distrust, adopting a marked iconoclastic approach to reality and the arts: language first and visual images later are conceived as inadequate for conveying the experience of reality. In the impossibility to verbally, or visually, render individual experience, the Lettrists turned to iconoclastic gestures as the only way to communicate the inherent incommunicability of experience.

According to Isou (1947), Lettrism 'initiates the destruction of words through the letters' (15), finding one of its major influences in Mallarmé's negative aesthetics composed of silences, empty spaces, the arbitrariness of words and their musicality. Lettrist sound poetry further exacerbates Mallarmé's approach, destroying ordinary as well as poetic language's ability to signify, while spatialising emptiness and gaps of meaning on the page. Moreover, Lettrist poetry, because of its being an aural performance, emphasises the musical quality of letters and of bodily noises such as hiccups and deep breaths. Several Lettrist sound poems are a rewriting (that is, a destruction) of Symbolist verses by the likes of Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine, in which only the rhythm and richness in auditory sensations of the original are preserved, while words as intelligible units are destroyed.

Lettrism revolves around the aural dimension of poetry (and later cinema), placing emphasis on single letters, guttural sounds and bodily noises. But despite the focus on the sonorous quality of letters, Isou (1947) identifies art's ultimate goal as to 'concretise the silence; write the nothingness' (17). In such a mystical, iconoclastic understanding of art, which places at its core silence (ineffability) and blankness (unrepresentability), Isou was also influenced by Judaism and the Kabbalah. Sjöberg (2013a), who has extensively written on Isou's Jewish mysticism,[8] argues:

> The interdependence of divinity and unknowing is derived from Kabbalah and is crucial for the Isouian world-making, the means of which is language. Isou adopts a kabbalistic definition of God as the unknown (*l'Inconnu*), which asserts God beyond rational inquiry [. . .] Firstly, the Jewish God is invisible

> and conceptually unattainable. Secondly, due to God's hidden nature, culminated in the second commandment, the role of language in Jewish exegesis, both rabbinic and mystical, is emphasised. These factors are favourable for the avant-gardist desire to 'transgress' language. (371)

Because of the strict Biblical ban on images, language is invested with a remarkable power to sustain and reinforce the relationship between God and his people. Such relationship finds its privileged means in the sense of hearing rather than sight, since God is a *Deus absconditus* [hidden God] (Isaiah 45:15) and seeing him corresponds to a death sentence (Exodus 33:20). The God of the Old Testament is not only unknowable and hidden but also jealous and vengeful. As a precaution against idolatry, the ban on sacred images (Exodus 20:4–6) was interpreted to include all images: 'Every image of a living being, even a mere ornamental motif, was strictly banned. It was prohibited to bow before a pagan statue even to drink, to pick up a fallen object, or to pull a thorn from one's foot' (Besançon 2000, 67). It is thus necessary to maintain a clear separation between the hidden God and sensible reality; the divine can never be visually represented because representation always carries the risk of idolatry. To this visual ban corresponds a verbal one; that is, 'the Jewish prohibition and grammatical impossibility to pronounce God's Name' (Bettetini 2006, 64).[9] While the spoken word is a privileged means in the relationship between God and his people (God intelligibly speaks to his people, who then take care of translating the spoken into the written word of the law), in Jewish mysticism, God's name progressively became unpronounceable, thereby sonorously matching his visual unrepresentability.

Lettrism, particularly through Isou, inherits the iconoclastic tendencies of Jewish mysticism: the Biblical ban on images and the importance of aurality in the God-man relationship, on the one hand, and mystical silence, on the other hand. While initially focused on sound poems, Lettrism turned to visual poetry (hypergraphics) in the 1950s. Here, silence progressively substituted the broken sounds of the early poems, while emptiness acquired growing importance as material visualisation of silence. The poems 'Lettrie Blanche' and 'Lettrie Vide' (Isou 1958, reproduced in Curtay 1974, 190), for instance, reject the seductive power of both figurative representation and language – something which will be present also in Lettrist cinema in the frequent use of the blank screen. The empty page and the blank page at once configure themselves as spaces of pure imaginative potentiality and attest to a total refusal of mimesis. Reduced to minimal elements, Lettrist visual poetry stresses the materiality of the text. The tension – and impossible encounter – between knowledge and expression is

rendered either through blankness or excessive presence. In both cases, image and word are emptied of their capacity to provide a picture of reality and the experience thereof. This practice, based on void and extreme fullness, becomes a key feature of Lettrism, one which characterises the variety of Lettrist gestures in diverse artistic contexts, including cinema: from the empty page to the blank screen, from the letter-filled pages to aural verbosity.

## Lettrist Cinema: Glory of Sound and Martyrdom of the Image

The exploration of the possibilities of sound and image continues in Lettrist cinema, although language as a constructor of meaning is reinstated as an element of the sound track. First theorised by Isou in his film and then developed more coherently in *Esthétique du cinéma* [*Aesthetics of Cinema*] ([1952] 1953), Lettrist cinema refers to a cluster of films realised in Paris in the Lettrist ambit during 1951–52. Isou's *Traité de bave et d'éternité* inaugurated it in 1951 and was followed by Maurice Lemaître's *Le Film est déjà commencé?* (*Has the Film Already Started?* 1951), Gil J. Wolman's *L'Anticoncept* (*The Anti-Concept*, 1951), François Dufrêne's *Tambours du jugement premier* (*Drums of the First Judgement*, 1952) and Guy Debord's *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (*Howls for Sade*, 1952). The defining feature of Lettrist cinema consists of the privileged role assigned to sound and an overall depreciation of the image, which can go from Isou's physical scraping of the film celluloid to Dufrêne's complete forsaking of the film strip.

Like its poetry, Lettrist cinema grants a significant role to the sonic dimension of film. Sound ceases to be a supplement to the visual component and becomes, instead, the primary, organising element of the film. By contrast, images, condemned for their deceptive character, are physically attacked: the filmstrip is soaked in water, scratched, over- or under-exposed to light, or simply abandoned. The Lettrists thus problematise the relationship between sound and image to counter previous forms of cinema, in particular the illusionism of narrative cinema and immersive modes of film viewing. Kaira M. Cabañas (2014) observes: '[E]ach Lettrist film defie[s] cinema's established conventions (e.g., continuity editing, synchronized sound, screen), and sometimes the necessity of its image support (i.e., film), in order to generate new conditions and communities of viewing' (3). Lettrist cinema, therefore, pursues the twofold aim of destroying cinema as it had been conceived until then and promoting more critically active ways to experience film. To this end, theoretically in *Esthétique du cinéma* and practically in *Traité*, Isou formulates the notions of discrepant editing and chiseled image.

Discrepant editing is the main and most innovative feature of Isou's film and his cinematic project, and it consists of the disjunction between the sound track and the image track which are treated as independent from each other. Marion Poirson-Dechonne (2016, 181) goes over the Latin origin of the term 'discrepant' and its kinship with music vocabulary to emphasise the centrality of sound in Isou's montage. Composed of *dis-*, which indicates separation, and *crepāre*, which translates as 'to make something sound', discrepant editing points to a cinema that emits a deviant sound; namely, a sound which does not adhere to the norm. Theoretically, it invokes the breaking apart of any logical relationship between what is heard and what is seen; practically, there is a disjunction between the sound track and the image track which, however, does not always exclude a possible relation between the two. Undoubtedly, the then traditional status of sound in cinema as an addition to the image no longer exists in Lettrist films. Sound acquires an unprecedented autonomy, becoming the most significant element in Lettrist cinema and the primary tool to criticise the privileged status of the film image and the spectator's (supposed) passivity.

Isou and the Lettrists are vehemently critical of narrative cinema, for it promotes immersive spectatorship and a certain fascination with the images on screen. Accordingly, Lettrist sound does not correspond to the clearly articulated speech of narrative cinema but is built up from disjointed voices and bodily noises that do not necessarily bear any specific meaning. Moreover, Lettrist poetic practices such as '*mégapneumie*' (Cabañas 2014, 80) and '*crirhythmes*' (Feldman 2014, 92) – types of physical poetry which use breathing and cries, respectively, as their constitutive elements – are integrated in the sound tracks alongside spoken, intelligible speech. Together with the concept of discrepant editing, Isou proposes the production of a chiseled image, which results from a series of aggressive manipulations of the filmstrip. The film celluloid is, among other things, scratched, written on, immersed in water and over- or under-exposed. Consequently, it is often difficult to discern what the images represent because of the tampering that they have undergone. Hanna Feldman (2014) explains the significance of such damages and their role in disrupting immersive spectatorship, contending that 'the marks made on the film's celluloid reduce its capacity to capture and register an image in its most primary quality as material ground to an imposed figure' (89). That is, the chiseling process mars the image as a reproduction or visual copy of a referent. Because of the disfigurements, the image's content becomes difficult to distinguish, and the image loses the relationship with the referent that has produced it in the first place. The chiseled image thus causes a rupture with mimesis and the idea of the image as a faithful copy of a model. It does so by exhibiting the film image in its materiality, since

it is cinema's corporeality that allows the scratches and other physical manipulations to occur.

The word 'chiseled', used to define the marred images in Lettrist cinema, is reminiscent of Isou's partition of poetry first and cinema later into two phases, the *amplique* (amplifying) and the *ciselante* (chiseling), which he outlines in *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique* [*Introduction to a New Poetry and a New Music*] (1947, 83–148). Applied to cinema, the *amplique* phase denotes the beginning of cinema and the development of stylistic conventions, whereas the *ciselante* phase designates Lettrist cinema and its employing of the film medium to destroy cinema as it had been conceived until then. Both discrepant editing and the chiseled image are the products of a radicalisation of non-mimetic approaches to cinema and are directed towards a reconfiguration of the relationship between sound and image, in an overall assault on cinematic transparency. The Lettrist problematising of such relation also aims at disrupting any possible immersive experience of the film. These ideas about cinema assume a visible and audible form in the first Lettrist film, Isou's *Traité*.

### *Announcing the Destruction of Cinema*

Isou's *Traité* inaugurated Lettrist cinema in 1951 and configured itself as an experimental essay-film theorising the destruction of cinema. The film explicitly aims to counter the illusionistic image of narrative cinema and the pleasure it arouses in the audience; but it also wishes to break with all previous forms of cinema, promoting a new way of making and viewing films. Accordingly, Isou employed discrepant editing and chiseled images as the constructive principles of the film. By rejecting the referentiality of images and sounds, Isou explored cinema's possibilities beyond the illusionism of mimetic reproduction.

*Traité* is a 120-minute film divided into three sections labelled as chapters, whose unifying thread consists of Isou's reflections about cinema. The first chapter, titled 'The Principle', is a manifesto of discrepant cinema; the second chapter, 'The Development', follows the love story between a girl named Ève (Blanchette Brunoy) and the protagonist Daniel, played by Isou himself, which leads to a reminiscence of the past love story between Daniel and another woman, Denise (Danièle Delorme); the third chapter, 'The Proof', framed by the love story with Ève, focuses on Lettrism and Isou's ideas on cinema. At the film's premiere as a fringe event of the Cannes Film Festival in 1951, the image track of the second and third chapters, which in the final version contain figurative images, consisted of a black screen. However, as Cabañas (2014, 25)

explains, the absence of images in the Cannes version did not correspond to an aesthetic choice but was more simply due to Isou's running out of time to complete it.[10]

The film's most striking feature is the disjunction between image track and sound track, which not only audio-visually develops Isou's theories on cinema, but also prevents any immersive experience of the film because of the lack of connections between what is heard and what is seen. This is evident from the opening, where spectators are faced with a black screen and hear an unintelligible bodily sound, similar to a rasp intertwined with guttural choral noises, which Feldman (2014, 86) identifies as a Lettrist symphony. While the black screen lasts twenty-four seconds, the Lettrist symphony continues, like a tormenting spell, through the opening credits, the intertitles and the beginning of the first chapter, for a total duration of four minutes and thirty-four seconds. This symphony returns in intervals throughout *Traité*, punctuating the whole film obsessively. Alongside this Lettrist motif, the sound track is an intertwining of human voices and bodily noises that include the protagonist Daniel's diatribe about cinema,[11] a narrator's (Bernard Blin) monotonal voice-over commenting on Daniel's thoughts, the shouting and whistling of the audience at a ciné-club, now insulting Isou's film, now praising it, and recitals of Lettrist poems. The image track consists of a similar layering structure, composed of shots of Daniel/Isou's slow wandering in the streets of Paris, building facades, boulevards congested with traffic, texts, found footage images of soldiers, military marches in Southeast Asia, Vietnamese fishermen and temples, photographs of Ève and Denise, black screens and shots of Lettrists reciting poems.

These extremely diverse images are intentionally indifferent to both each other and the sound track. That is, almost every image is not causally or logically related to the ones preceding or following it, and images are disjointed from what is heard, according to Daniel/Isou's intention 'to make the flow of images indifferent to the sound story'. In Daniel/Isou's view, by disconnecting the image track from the sound track, words could 'reveal the limitations and the possibilities of the image'. Moreover, from the second chapter of the film onwards, the chiseled image makes its appearance. The filmstrip has been physically manipulated and defaced by literal attacks, thereby presenting deleted faces, painted figures, scraped blank screens and deformed images (Figures 1.1–3).

Isou's iconoclasm resides in the physical and metaphorical attack against images, in an 'attempt to destroy the false transparency of its [the cinema's] images' (Dottorini 2013, 54). Feldman's (2014) insightful reading of *Traité*'s chiseled images brings forth the iconoclastic quality of the film:

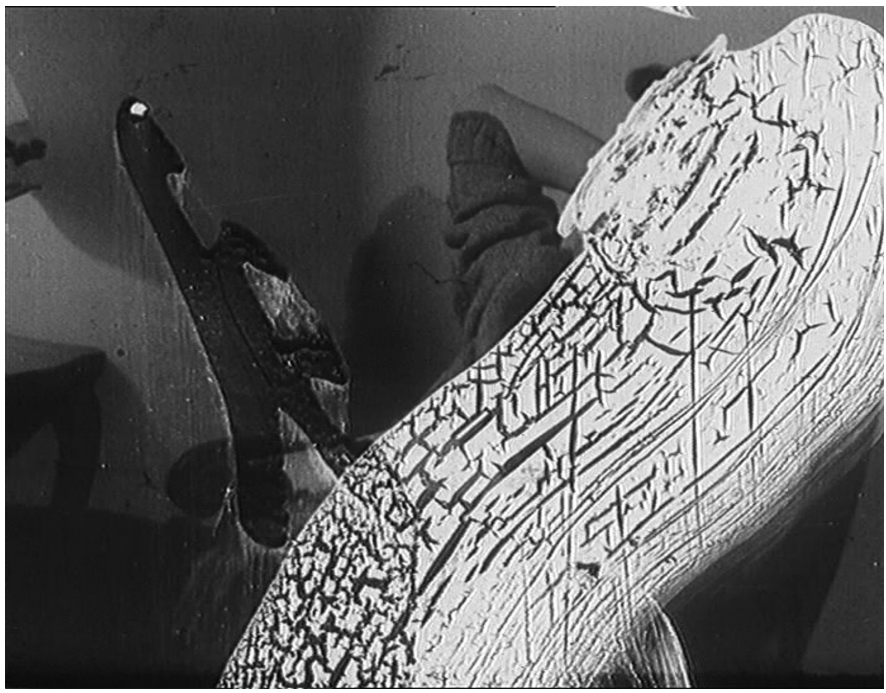

**Figure 1.1** Chiseled image of Isidore Isou

> The implications of this [the chiseling process] and the multitude of marred frames that follow are crucial. First, the scratching undermines the representational function of the original image. Instead of an image of a carpenter at work, we are presented with the fragments of what had been that image. These fragments can only begin to suggest what they had stood to signify before. Indeed, the image is quite literally defaced, as the visage of the carpenter falls victim to Isou's violent scrapes. It bears repeating here that most of the scratches in *Traité de bave et d'éternité* are made over the faces of individuals. (89)

Faces of carpenters, fishermen, soldiers and officers, as well as those of some Lettrists including Isou himself, have been scratched. In a sort of democratic destruction, no face is immune from the chiseling process. These defaced images posit themselves as a both literal and metaphorical attack against the mimetic image, against its being a faithful reproduction of a phenomenal referent. But they also constitute a further impediment to an immersive engagement with the film because spectators are often deprived of the most evocative and emotionally charged image, that of the human face. In this way, Isou 'provok[es] a dismantling of realist expectations with regard to the images one sees' (Cabañas

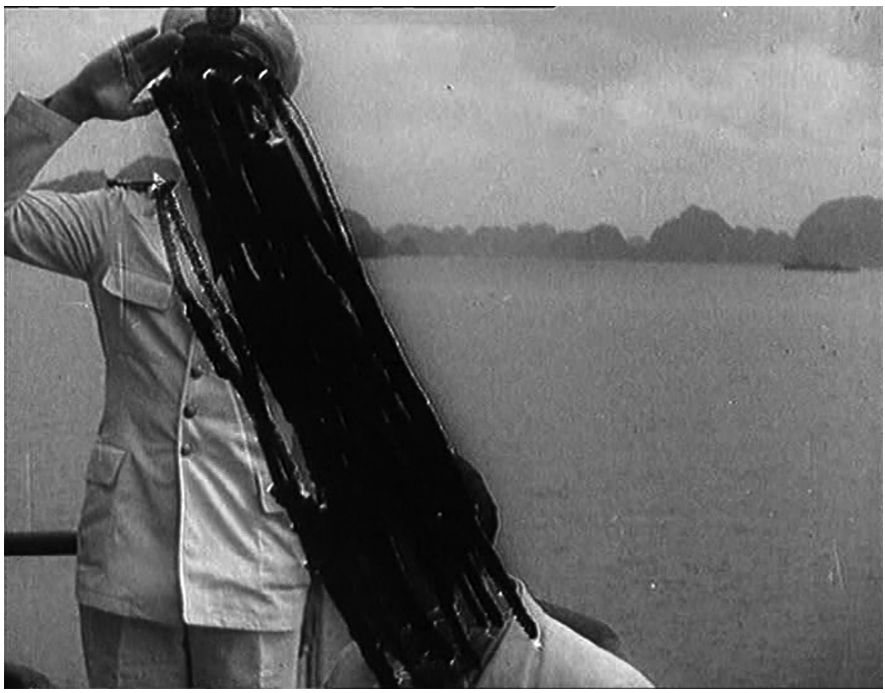

**Figure 1.2** Chiseled image of military personnel

2014, 31). Furthermore, the dismantling of faces carries out Isou's critique of French foreign policy and the First Indochina War (1946–54), which Feldman (2014, 80–108) likens to the Lettrist overall condemnation of war. The weaving of shots of Paris with that of Vietnamese temples and fishermen establishes a political link between two geographically distant places, a link which is further emphasised via the scratching of armed forces' faces. In this way, the critique of the war unfolds as a violent attack against the images of those who are responsible for political violence, who are de-individualised through the chiseling process.

Discrepant editing and chiseled images are therefore the two fundamentals of Isou's cinematic project, which he addresses throughout the film and most clearly in the first chapter. The programmatic exposition of Isou's ideas about cinema is realised, visually, via shots of Daniel/Isou's slow wandering in the streets interspersed with shots of building facades and Parisian boulevards and, aurally, through Daniel/Isou's intelligible speech, which alternates with the nervously excited outcries of the audience of the ciné-club and the monotony of the narrator's voice-over. Here Daniel/Isou condemns cinema, for it keeps repeating the same story instead of exploring new possibilities for images and

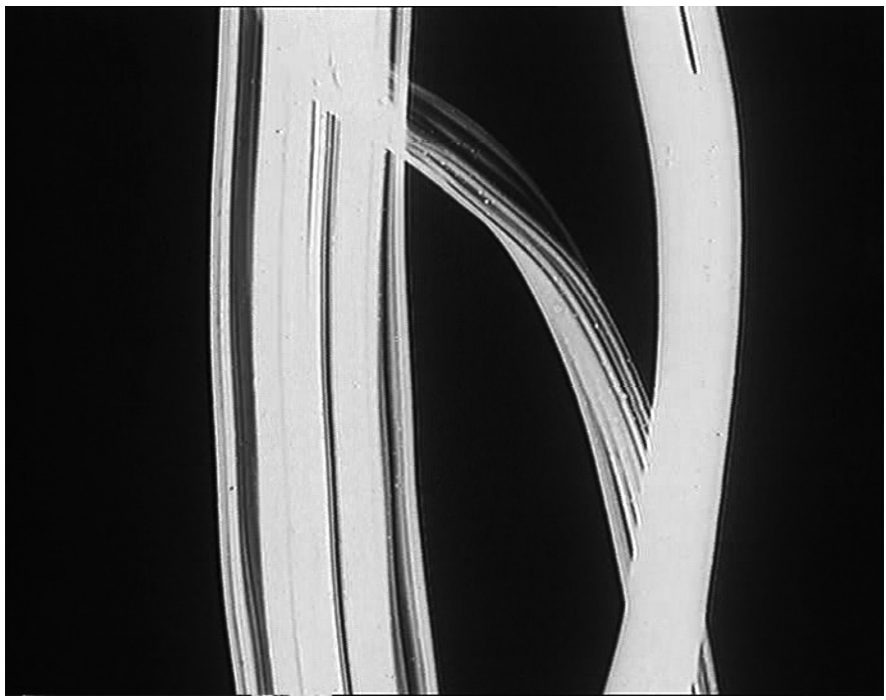

**Figure 1.3** Chiseled filmstrip

sounds. While he acknowledges some films as cinematic artworks, such as that of the directors to whom the film is dedicated (D. W. Griffith, Abel Gance, Charlie Chaplin, René Clair, Sergei Eisenstein, Erich von Stroheim, Robert J. Flaherty, Luis Buñuel and Jean Cocteau), he nonetheless provides a harsh critique of imitation – both the imitation of reality and of previous films – because it prevents cinema from evolving. This evolution passes through the destruction of the cinema that had been until then and, especially, narrative cinema which is characterised by a concord between images and sounds. The voice-over asserts:

> I'd like to separate the ear from its cinematic master, the eye. [. . .] The films they make these days have a completed, perfect and calm quality. It is a result of the harmony between the components, the classic unity between the constitutive elements: word-image.

Discrepant editing and the chiseled image are manifestly in contrast with narrative cinema where shots are linked to each other via continuity editing and coupled with sound to convey an easily comprehensible story. And, indeed, Isou deliberately dismantles narrative cinema's images and sounds because he

notes a fundamental problem with images; namely, that 'it is possible to make them say whatever one wants and that which they do not say'. To subvert this perceptual power of images, *Traité* mars not only the images themselves but also the relation they have with the sound track. It is no longer the image which originates sound, but sound which constructs the film: 'The word would no longer come from the screen, in order to coincide with its sequences, but would always come from an elsewhere, as if concretely and visibly it were an excess without any relationship with the organism'.

However, images still count since Isou does not entirely do away with them. He butchers the filmstrip, but these tortured images remain an essential component of discrepant cinema. Without images (namely, without a filmstrip), there would be no discrepant editing because it presupposes the presence of images with which sound can establish a disjunctive relation. Albeit devalued in comparison to sound, images therefore continue to retain significance in Isou's cinematic project. Daniel/Isou reels off his plan for the filmstrip on several occasions, claiming that 'I will blow up the filmstrip with rays of sun', 'I will take pieces of films, and I will scratch them so that unknown beauties will come into light', and 'I will engrave flowers on the filmstrip'. Discrepant cinema can be summarised as the disjunction of sound and image and the slaughtering of the filmstrip.

### *The Sadism of Discrepant Cinema*

Besides suggesting a new mode of film-making, discrepant cinema proposes a new way of viewing films. It presents itself as most forcefully opposed to narrative cinema, not only to its film form and content, but also to the kind of spectatorship it promotes, so much so that Allyson Field (1999, 57–58) explicitly identifies a sadistic quality in Isou's cinematic project.[12] Indeed, throughout *Traité* Isou not only literally warps the filmstrip, but also recurrently voices his intention to inflict metaphorical pain on spectators. Thus, the film, and the notion of discrepant cinema as a whole, is imbued with violence and animated by a destructive thrust, which goes from the physical aggressions against the filmstrip to the metaphorical harm to spectators. Moreover, the referentiality of the image and its relationship with the sound track destroyed, *Traité* problematises the relationship between spectators and the film, making immersive reception unachievable and the audience continuously aware of their status.

Isou himself provides references to de Sade in *Traité* and contemplates physical repercussions of his film on spectators. The voice-over associated with Isou's character on screen proclaims:

> I would like a film that could really hurt the eyes. [. . .] One has to leave the cinema with a headache. [. . .] I prefer to give you neuralgias rather than nothing. [. . .] I prefer to ruin your eyes rather than leave them indifferent. [. . .] It is necessary that the spectator leaves blind, the ears destroyed, lacerated in this disjunction of the word and the image and numb in any of these distinct zones.

Isou partially appropriates de Sade's rhetoric to articulate his destructive fury against the film medium and the experience of film-viewing. As Field (1999) points out, the character of 'Daniel remarks that he would like "a film that *hurts your eyes*", connecting sadistic pain to his manifesto for the destruction of cinema. [. . .] Indeed, the entire concept of discrepant cinema is analogous to an aesthetic sadism' (58). It is in particular by means of black screens and voice-overs that Isou's 'aesthetic sadism' exhibits itself.

A significant instance of the film's 'aesthetic sadism' takes place in the second chapter. Unlike the first and third chapters of *Traité*, this chapter presents a loose narrative – the love story between Daniel and Ève, and the reminiscence of Daniel's past romance with Denise. However, this narrative is constantly interrupted by reflections on a variety of topics, such as politics, the communist party and religion, which prevent any immersive consumption of the love story. The sound track alone articulates this romance, which however does not find a visual correspondence in the image track, except on those rare occasions when short shots or photographs of the three characters appear on screen. The sound thus constructs a visual desire that remains unsatisfied because spectators are continuously deprived of the image that could create a harmonious unity between what is heard and what is seen.

Two black monochromatic images effectively display the sadistic quality of Isou's discrepant cinema. The frenzy of chiseled images, which have made their appearance in this chapter, comes to a halt on two occasions. The first time happens when Daniel/Isou, while recounting his romantic involvement with Ève, whom he does not love, reminisces of Denise, a woman with whom he was formerly in love. In recalling the night that he spent with Denise, the screen remains completely black, without scratches or drawings. Intimacy remains beyond the realm of visibility, and spectators are faced with blankness and the eroticism of the ear. However, this monochromatic image does not bear any ethical value, but rather consists of a direct, metaphorical attack against viewers. Unlike, for instance, Godard's use of black screens (see Chapter 4), Isou's negation of figurative images does not originate out of a respect for reality, nor a recognition of the incommensurability between an ineffable sentiment such as love and its visible reproduction on screen. Quite simply, Isou sadistically wishes

to deprive spectators of visual pleasure. It is no coincidence that the black screen occurs in this moment of the narrative: the image of the pivotal event of narrative cinema – the formation of the couple, the kiss – is entirely negated to the audience and their expectations frustrated.

The second time a monochromatic black image sadistically invades the screen happens just before the end of the second chapter, when Isou directly addresses spectators as follows:

> The author knows that spectators go to the cinema to ingest their Sunday and weekly dose of tenderness and, although he does not give a damn about this [love] story, he tells it with the hope of a well-deserved success. The author doesn't love this kind of legends because it is a personal matter of taste, and the systems and forms that go beyond these stories are the only things that matter to him.

This black screen, too, qualifies as a metaphorical assault against spectators. After having deprived viewers of figurative images of the love story, Isou mocks them by condemning their taste. His statement that he has inserted a love story to please spectators seems, at first glance, a sort of kindly concession to fulfil their appetite for narrative pleasure. However, this aural flattery is visually expressed through a completely black screen. Therefore, while sound makes itself accessible to spectators, images – the figurative impressions of reality – are once again fully negated. On both occasions, by using a black screen, Isou deliberately deprives spectators of cinematic illusion. The spectators' look is twice blocked by a complete non-chiseled (or completely chiseled) blackness, which becomes emblematic of the critique of the illusory nature of film images.

There is, however, a moment in the film wherein Isou makes some concessions to the audience. In the last chapter, he introduces the spectator as an active producer of meaning, counterbalancing the more pronounced sadism of the previous chapters. Here, Ève and Daniel's love story becomes the framework for a discussion on Lettrism and cinema. Having lovingly praised Lettrism, Isou provides a succinct summary of discrepant cinema, laying out the spectators' contribution to the film's construction:

> As of today, the character turning towards the partner was shown, his gestures were seen. From now on, [spectators] will hear: 'Daniel has turned', without seeing him turning. Imagination is incorporated in the cinema because the real, the concrete, is destroyed. The spectator will be able to invent his character like he has never been allowed to do before in the history of cinema.

Viewers are encouraged to participate actively in the film production during reception, by bringing about something very personal; namely, their capacity to imagine what is not shown on the screen. Hence, Isou is invoking a thoughtful, imaginative spectatorship in which viewers cease to be exclusively receivers of images and sounds. *Traité* stimulates spectators to more critically active modes of looking at film by destabilising the mimetic relationship between sound and images and remains a most fascinating work on the disconcerting encounter with an iconoclastic aesthetics.

## Concluding Remarks

Isou's cinematic project participates in the broader artistic scepticism which followed World War II, concretising in a literal and metaphorical iconoclasm. Not only does he physically attack the filmstrip, invoking its destruction, but he also metaphorically dismantles the image as illusory copy of a phenomenal referent. Reiterating the gesture proper to religious iconoclasm, the material breaking of images, Isou proceeds to destroy what cinema had been until then. Here the cinematic *eidōlon* corresponds to any image that has already been used in cinema, as well as most figurative images. Film images are stripped of any intermediary role – there is no place for the *eikōn* in Isou's cinema – and of any possible imitative value by means of the chiseling process. While invoking the destruction of cinema, *Traité* is also a love declaration to the cinema that can be and contains some of the most insightful claims on film images' potentialities – first and foremost, their power to liberate the spectator's creative imagination. Guy Debord and Jean-Luc Godard, among others, were particularly receptive to Isou's cinematic theory and its iconoclastic drive, albeit reaching quite divergent outcomes: whereas Debord developed an aesthetics of displeasure which negatively targets viewers, Godard demonstrated a profound belief in the spectators' ethical imagination.