

Contributors

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Guy Debord, Filmmaker

JASON E. SMITH

Guy Debord. Se disant cinéaste.

—Guy Debord

“The cinema is the central art of our time.” This is the opening phrase of a short, programmatic, unsigned article published in the first issue of the journal of the Situationist International (SI) in June 1958.¹ This statement may come as a surprise to those who identify the early, artistic vanguard phase of the organization with, on the one hand, the presence of two painters who were founding members, Asger Jorn and Pinot Gallizio, and, on the other hand, the Dutch architect (among other things) Constant Nieuwenhuys. Though for a time the SI began to think of the totality of their practices through the concept of “unitary urbanism” and the “construction of situations,” the role cinema would play in this project was rarely made clear. And yet the unsigned article goes on to make its case for the centrality of the cinema by arguing that its development is, to a great extent, dependent on technological innovations (stereo sound, 3-D projection, Cinerama, and Circarama) and on the “material infrastructure” of capitalist society in general. This immediate relation between the cinema and the material infrastructure explains why the dominant classes must maintain a tight grip over this particular art. The proximity of the material infrastructure to the cinema also accounts for the curiously archaic nature of the contemporary cinema, for the way in which the “formally destructive” procedures we have come to associate with other media—in particular, painting—are completely rejected even in avant-garde milieus. Making oblique reference to the reception Guy Debord’s early film *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* (Howls for Sade) (1952)—with its reduction of the field of the image to the alternation of black-and-white screens—received in Parisian film clubs, “With and Against Cinema” argues for a paradoxical centrality of the cinema: its formal conservatism is a direct effect of its status as the most advanced artistic practice of the post-World War II period. This uneven development between technological transformation and formal backwardness reproduces the fundamental contradiction—which the SI, following a certain Karl Marx, never ceased to underline—structuring the capitalist mode of production: the conflict between the revolutionary expansion of the forces of production and the fabled “fetters” of the relations of production. The strategy proposed

is clear from the title of the text. The solution is not in rejecting these new technologies altogether but in appropriating them in view of other uses: first as “propaganda” in a transitional, pre-situationist period, then as a component in the direct construction of “situations”—or what the script for *Critique de la séparation* (Critique of separation, 1961) calls the “collective domination of the environment.”²

This early text—“With and Against Cinema” is published for the first time in English in this special issue of *Grey Room* devoted to Debord’s films—compels us to consider this particular riddle: the theoretical *centrality* of the place of cinema in the situationist project, as well as its relative *marginality* in the actual practice of the SI. It must be underlined, in a first pass at this riddle, that there is no such thing as “situationist film.”³ Debord is the only member of the SI to have made films during the actual existence of the organization. He made two short, twenty-minute films during the decade-and-a-half of the SI’s existence—*Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps* (On the passage of a few persons through a rather brief unity of time) was made in 1959; *Critique de la séparation* in 1961—and he did so in a brief, three-year period during the organization’s initial, avant-gardist phase. Nevertheless, throughout the existence of the group’s journal, and as late as 1969, a virulent critique of existing forms of advanced cinema (such as Godard’s 1968 film *Le gai savoir*) was coupled with a demand for a situationist cinema that might properly articulate the joint between “Cinema and Revolution.”⁴ Although received accounts of the SI divide the group’s activity into artistic and politico-theoretical phases, the invariant centrality of cinema—given its assigned importance—scrambles the story. Debord’s politico-theoretical films potentially obviate or “sublate” the very distinction between “political writing” of the sort Debord is identified with and the artistic practices normally assigned to the SI’s first phase (up to 1962).

This special issue of *Grey Room* is therefore concerned not with “situationist film” but with reconsidering the filmic oeuvre of Guy Debord. If this issue considers the central place a certain conception of the cinema held for the SI program, it also emphasizes the fact that the vast majority of Debord’s cinematic production took place before and after the group’s existence. His three feature-length films were made during the early phase of his Lettrist period and in the 1970s, a decade in which his most significant theoretical productions were his films. To embed this cinematic production within a general field of situationist practice might be tempting; however, the purpose of the essays published in this issue is less to situate Debord’s films in the already articulated field of situationist artistic practice than to reconsider the meaning,

importance, and (perhaps) contemporary relevance of these practices and their accompanying conceptual elaborations from the point of view of the films themselves. After all, we are familiar with the set of concepts and practices associated with the SI, particularly those from its earliest phase (all originating, in fact, in the pre-SI Lettrist period): *dérive*, psycho-geography, *détournement*. I contend we are a bit *too* familiar with this period and these terms: they are used commonly, and casually, by all manner of artist, critic, and historian. The decision to include in this issue texts that are analyses primarily of individual films (Kaira Cabañas on *Hurlements*, Soyoungh Yoon on *Sur le passage*, Jason E. Smith on *Critique de la séparation*, McKenzie Wark on *La société du spectacle*, Benjamin Noys on *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*) is motivated in part by the sense that the literature on Debord already includes many, and perhaps enough, narrative accounts, some excellent, of his cinematic production. We know the various milieus and scenes he moved in, the circumstances of his films' production and projection, and we are familiar with some of the fundamental patterns and concerns of his work. What we have few of are exacting analyses of what Debord's films actually do, how they are constructed, and the operations they perform. We have few diagrams of their technical and plastic arrangement. This issue is meant, in part, to correct for this paucity.

In a 1971 bibliographical notice published by the Éditions Champ Libre, the press founded in 1969 by Debord's soon-to-be patron, Gérard Lebovici, Debord is described in the following terms: "Guy Debord. Se disant cinéaste."⁵ Published just months before the effective dissolution of the SI in April 1972, this description is notable for the fact that Debord identifies himself first and foremost as a "filmmaker"—not as a founder of the SI or as the author of *La société du spectacle* (*The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967). He does so at a point in time when he had made only three films: one feature-length film and two shorts, all made more than a decade earlier and one made *twenty* years earlier. Debord is aware of this irony. Hence the "se disant": he "claims to be a filmmaker." That the announcement comes at the tail end of the SI project, which had bloated and stalled after its intervention in the events of May 1968, and a couple of years before the eventual release of a film version of *La société du spectacle* in October 1973 may account for this cavalier self-description. And yet: for an elusive figure who spent his life spelling out his contempt for institutions, disciplines, professions, and "specializations"—who identified with Doctor Omar of *The Shanghai Gesture*, who in the subtitled French calls himself a *docteur en rien*, a doctor of or expert in nothing—for this figure to condescend to calling himself a maker of films remains jarring.

This special issue of *Grey Room* devoted to the films of Debord was originally conceived on the basis of a series of hypotheses, hypotheses tested if not always confirmed in many of the essays included in this issue. The starting point was to conceive of Debord not as a writer—a political writer, say, as T.J. Clark describes him—but as a filmmaker.⁶ As a writer, Debord, with the exception of *La société du spectacle*, has no oeuvre.⁷ As a filmmaker, however, he has an oeuvre. The films, consequently, should be placed at the center of his work. They are not illustrations of his theoretical writings; they are the putting into sensible or material form his otherwise abstract theoretical formulations. An argument can even be made—at some risk and requiring much justification—that nothing of value in Debord’s theoretical writings does not appear or rather reappear in his films: they are a form of filtration, selection, and expansion. Debord felt compelled to make a film version of his only written work, *La société du spectacle*. The scripts of *Sur le passage* and *Critique de la séparation* mine, cannibalize, and transform texts originally published in the SI’s journal. By the mid-to-late 1970s, when Debord made *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978), his theoretical work had largely been absorbed into his films. His most important theoretical insights from this period are embedded directly in his cinematic work.

The question must nevertheless be posed: why Debord’s films, today? What can close, demanding scrutiny of the operations deployed by these films—their often relentless articulation and unhinging of theoretical proposition, memoir, confiscated or found film or print images—offer us in the way of new understandings of the SI as a historically important and aesthetic-theoretical formation whose work still has an uncertain but undeniable impact on contemporary artistic practices and on contemporary political thought? Before Gaumont issued an authorized DVD box set in 2005 (a project directed by filmmaker Olivier Assayas), Debord’s work in the cinema was not well-known, being largely restricted to the screening of a few films on European television and the uncertain circulation of nth-generation videotapes of these screenings. The history of the films’ distribution and screenings, including Debord’s refusal to let them be shown in the period after the 1984 murder of Lebovici, is convoluted. The responsibility both for the widespread conviction that Debord’s films represent a kind of “side project” and for the scarce critical and scholarly reception his films have been given lies largely with the near total inaccessibility of the films before the issuing of the box set.⁸ The exact relationship between Debord’s cinematic oeuvre and the sequence of activities, both theoretical and political, Debord undertook both during and after the existence of the SI remains to be established. We can now emphasize not only the fact that the most consistent activity Debord

undertook over the course of his life—from his early Lettrist film, *Hurléments*, to his late television documentary, *Guy Debord, son art et son temps* (Guy Debord: His art and his time, 1995)—was the making of films but that the sole art form that survived the purging or resignation of the artists in the SI up to 1962 is the cinema. After the events of May 1968, the urgency to produce a “situationist” cinema was renewed, which is remarkable because the only two films now associated with the SI were made by Debord, under his own name, almost ten years earlier.⁹ More important, however, is the fact that if one is inclined to marginalize Debord’s cinematic production, Debord remains largely a writer with a single work in the strong sense of the term: *La société du spectacle*. A careful examination of the other film scripts reveals, however, that the texts for the films’ voice-overs actively recycle largely unsigned articles published in the *Internationale situationniste*, often crucial passages that seem to have been isolated and subsequently reembedded within a more dynamic framework involving the use of images. Equally important, if one contends that the 1967 book of revolutionary theory remains Debord’s sole work, one must nevertheless account for *why* Debord felt the need to make a film “version” of this book some six years later and analyze the exact nature of the pressures the film’s form and recent history—much happened from 1967 to 1973—had on the book’s shape and the nature of its intervention.

Even a cursory comparison of the book and film versions of *La société du spectacle* reveals substantial differences. In his 1992 foreword to the third French edition of the book, Debord states that the third edition is rigorously identical to the 1967 original: “I am not someone who corrects himself.”¹⁰ And yet this is the same author who concludes *In girum*, his final film, with the phrase or command “to be taken up again from the beginning,” addressed to the reader or to Debord himself and referring as much to the film itself as to the narrated content (the history Debord recounts) of the film. The voice-over for the film version of *La société du spectacle* is composed entirely of material from the book, but in transposing book to screen Debord eliminated well over half of the original. Such cuts often involved truncating individual theses, omitting large numbers of theses from certain chapters, or, in one case, suppressing an entire chapter. More telling, however, is the way the script alters the *order* of the chapters as they appear in the book: the long chapter on the proletariat as subject and as representation is no longer fourth in a series of nine chapters but concludes the film. The reason for this “correction” is clear. Debord wants both to underline the events that have occurred since the publication of the book, the most important being the unpredictable sequence of events (student revolt, worker insurrection) in May

and June 1968, and to confirm the book's anticipations and emphasize his and the SI's role in these events. As a result, the entire final section of the film is devoted to May 1968 and the larger rebellion taking place across Europe in the late 1960s (in particular, Italy's "Hot Autumn"). Although Debord does not "update" his script by introducing new theses, he does use subtitles and intertitles to comment on and analyze these events and the images used to evoke them. The May 1968 sequence is edited in such a way that the documentary footage from that month cuts back and forth with parallel scenes from Eisenstein's *October*, offering a reading of the relationship between 1917 and 1968 that is only anticipated in the book. And yet, if one obvious effort of the film is to demonstrate the way in which the 1967 book anticipated the rebellions to come, the film seems *incapable* of anticipating the process that was already underway on a global scale by the time of the film's release in 1973: the global capitalist counterattack and restructuration. This capitalist response, while not addressed, is nevertheless a part of the film, a necessary historical frame of reference for those who, like us, look back at this film that was made at the very moment our own present and horizon was beginning to form.

But this is not all. For among the events that occurred in the period between book and film are two more "private" incidents: the death of Debord's friend Asger Jorn in 1973 and Debord's marriage to Alice Becker-Ho a year before that. These two events are treated in the opening dedication of the film to Becker-Ho and in the final scene of the film, which uses a monologue on friendship from Orson Welles's *Mr. Arkadin* as a form of homage to Jorn. The two framing sequences are symmetrical both structurally and thematically. The final eulogy describes a relation between male friends occasioned by the inevitable death of one; the opening dedication is, to the contrary, accompanied by in some cases seemingly personal photographs of a naked Alice Becker-Ho, an affirmation of life and a reflection on love. Thematically, the framing sequences introduce two "affective" elements completely absent from the book. What is more, these affects are given a privileged status. In the case of love, this is clear enough. Citing an early Hegel fragment on love, one of Debord's subtitles reads: "In love, the separate still exists but no longer as separate: as a unity, and the living encounters the living." If the most general condensation of the spectacle's operations is found in *La société du spectacle's* assertion that "the spectacle reunites what is separate, but it reunites them *as separate*," then the film version begins with this astonishing proposition: love, the encounter of the living with itself, is the logical if not necessarily effective overturning of the spectacle.

This brief allusion to the book and film versions of *La société du*

spectacle—with reference solely to the textual modifications, and without recourse to the images the film deploys—should not distract us from the fact that Debord’s film scripts mine his earlier writings and often represent the most synthetic presentation of his theoretical work.¹¹ The films themselves, with their use of print sources, newsreel footage, iconic films from the history of cinema, adulterated personal photographs, and film sequences shot by Debord himself, at once complicate and complete the still-too-theoretical framework of these writings. At once their recapitulation and supplementation, the films are Debord’s theory both distilled and raised to a higher power. They are the sublation of Debord’s merely theoretical writings, their *Aufhebung*.

To speak, however, of the contemporary relevance of Debord’s films—the question is simple: why “Debord, filmmaker” today?—is to assume in advance that one has at hand a usable definition of the contemporary. Art-historical debates often cast about for defining dates or events, some opting for the global student and worker revolts of 1968, others the 1989 collapse of the Soviet bloc. One might also speak of 1973 as a pivotal hinge, dating as it does both the point when the energies summoned in the struggles and revolts of the late 1960s began to burn out and the first signs of a capitalist restructuring—call it what you will, neoliberalism, post-Fordism, real subsumption, even a fully realized spectacle—emerged to define our own present up to and beyond the global crisis of 2007–2008. For this reason, a new reading of Debord’s later films becomes important for defining, in a new way, our own historical moment. That the book version of *La société du spectacle* dates from the moment just before the revolts of 1968 is not irrelevant. Nor is the fact that the film of the same name, which is at once a contraction and expansion of the book version, dates from 1973, at the cusp of our present. Much happened in the years between book and film, and the film, though it cannot quite grasp the way it backs up against a new historical phase, is nevertheless “about” this threshold. In what sense can an analysis of these two versions of the same “object” tell us about our own historical moment? Such would be one possible approach, but only one, to the question of why “Debord, filmmaker,” today?

In 1957, Debord and the SI adopted a strategy of expropriation toward film, situating themselves at once “with” and “against cinema.” By 1959, the *jeune fille*—a theme taken up by both Yoon and Smith in this issue of *Grey Room*—who plays one of three roles in the voice-over for *Sur le passage* intones that, like the other arts, “the cinema too must be destroyed.”¹² In 1964, a small booklet containing the scripts for Debord’s first three films and an essay by Jorn was called *Against Cinema* (without “with”). In *In girum* the cinema will be judged “outdated.”¹³ Debord’s

films were made over the course of almost three decades, often with many years separating one film from the next. We can identify different phases of his career: the Lettrist cinema of destruction, the films from the early SI period still driven by the ambition to “construct situations” and “realize art,” the properly “theoretical” film that is *La société du spectacle*, and the great synthetic work of *In girum*, thematically concentrated around questions of strategy and time but seeming to absorb all of the other films and their various generic modes (used or merely cited: essay or theory film, documentary, “city” film, memoir, narrative fiction), themes (youth, Paris, everyday life, cinema, the spectacle as achieved separation, the decomposition of the bourgeois order), and image sources (print media, advertisements, personal photographs, newsreels, the historical cinema, shot footage). The thread that ties together all of these films is, as Jacques Rancière’s contribution to this issue of *Grey Room* suggests, the relation between negativity and the cinema and the way each film poses this relation.

The essays on Debord’s cinematic production published in this issue of *Grey Room* constitute a map of intersecting themes that, taken as a whole, foreground some of the fundamental concerns considered or provoked by Debord’s films. Noys’s essay on *In girum*, Wark’s analysis of *La société du spectacle* and its appendix *Réfutation de tous les jugements, tant élogieux qu’hostiles, qui ont été jusqu’ici portés sur le film “La Société du Spectacle”* (Refutation of all the judgments, pro or con, thus far rendered on the film “The Society of the Spectacle,” 1975), and Rancière’s short piece on *La société du spectacle* and *In girum* all place particular emphasis on the way Debord’s films concern themselves with, and attempt to deploy, a properly historical, “irreversible” time. Noys and Sven Lütticken analyze the relation between Debord’s *In girum* and its claimed abandonment of the cinema in light of Debord’s turn to questions of strategy and his invention of the boardgame *Le jeu de la guerre* (*The Game of War*). Lütticken and Cabañas emphasize the “performed” dimension of Debord’s films, while Yoon and Smith analyze the way Debord’s two short SI-period films bring together the space of the city—a spectacular space founded on “circulation” and the prevention of “encounters”—and the anticolonial struggles in former French and European colonies. Perhaps the most insistent thread running through all of these accounts is, however, the relation between the cinema and the form of negation it practices.

If in 1959 Debord’s *Sur le passage* proclaims the necessity to destroy the cinema, we must not forget that this imperative is formulated not by Debord himself but by the “young girl” in the voice-over, a position (of “pure” negativity) that is played off against the two other, male, voices. The young girl’s demand—destroy, she says—is a reinscription of *Hurlements’*

own understanding of this question of negation: the total suppression of the image. But beginning with *Sur le passage* in 1959, Debord seems to show an understanding of *Hurlements* as having suffered from the weakness he later will identify with dadaism: it wanted to suppress the cinema without realizing or completing it.¹⁴ Or even, implicitly, that its cancellation and replacement of the image with alternating blank screens left *Hurlements*' gesture too close to the "exercises of the nothing" denounced in the second issue of the SI's journal ("Absence and Its Costumers"), so many "signed voids" allied as much with a nascent French fascism as they are with what the SI calls a California twist on run-of-the-mill American cretinism (Cage's *4' 33"*).¹⁵ The rest of Debord's films will use or at least cite this gesture of the blank screen but do so in such a way that these blanks function not as *voids* but as interruptions or even botched articulations or passages, a syncopation that pulses through the films. What these films attest to is an expanded conception of the image: not the simple other of sound or voice but a configuration that brings together for a brief period an image or images, subtitles, intertitles, music, and voices. Debord's is a discovery that resonates with Roland Barthes's 1953 book on literary writing, *Writing Degree Zero*.¹⁶ There will be no negation of the image.

Hurlements' most radical negation—its black screen, unaccompanied save by the sound of the projector and the hiss of recorded silence—is the zero degree of the image and therefore one image among others. The "style of negation" that Debord explicitly opposes, in *La société du spectacle*, to Barthes's "negation of style" (*écriture blanche*) will result in many styles of negation, often with more than one being deployed in a single film. The punctual blank of the empty screen, the calculated intervention in these films will leave room for another strategy in the longer films: an immense accumulation and potlatch of particular images in which, in the words of one of Debord's favorite passages from Hegel (on the "ruse of reason"), "the particular wears itself out in combat." Specific images pulverize each other into dust ("poussière d'images") or turn around one another, consumed by fire.¹⁷ This nonstrategy of letting particular images destroy themselves and each other is the final ruse of Debord's cinema.

Notes

1. See “Avec et contre le cinéma,” in *Internationale situationniste* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1997), 8–9. A translation of the text appears in this issue of *Grey Room*.

2. Guy Debord, *Critique de la séparation* [film script], in *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 544.

3. René Vienet’s films could be said to constitute one form of situationist cinema, but they are very different from the films made by Debord, and, more important, they were made after the dissolution of the SI.

4. “Cinema and Revolution” is the title given to the SI’s polemic against Godard’s *Le gai savoir*; it was published in the final issue of the group’s journal. “Le cinéma et la révolution,” *Internationale situationniste* 12 (October 1969), reprinted in *Internationale situationniste* (Fayard), 672–73.

5. Guy Debord, “Brochure éditée par Simar Films,” in *Oeuvres*, 1,279.

6. See T.J. Clark, foreword to *Guy Debord* by Anselm Jappe, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), vii–x.

7. I consider Debord’s texts published in *Internationale situationniste*, as well as his later short books (*Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, *Panegyric*), to be less “works” than essays or interventions. This distinction, however, remains a working hypothesis.

8. For example, *Critique de la séparation* was first seen in Venice in 2001. See Keith Sanborn, “The Return of the Suppressed,” *Artforum* 44, no. 6 (February 2006): 184–91. The literature on Debord does include notable exceptions that address his film work, among them Thomas Y. Levin, “Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord” (1989), in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), and McDonough’s work in general. However, Levin’s essay was produced under special circumstances made possible by his personal access to Debord. Films such as *Critique de la séparation* had, at the time Levin wrote his essay, never been screened publicly (though its script had been in circulation since 1964). Although the relative to total inaccessibility of Debord’s films—and, more generally, the conditions of their distribution—played an important role in defining the films themselves, the publication of definitive versions in 2005 occasioned a new phase of their reception, one no longer reliant solely on Levin’s meticulous account. Moreover, the sheer fact that for so long these films were difficult to see deemphasized forms of analysis that engaged the textural specificity of the films in favor of anecdotal or historical framings or restatements of Debord’s own at times unhelpful or misleading pronouncements regarding the films. Recent contributions by Kaira M. Cabañas and Andrew Uroskie have focused primarily on Debord’s Lettrist film, *Hurléments*. In this issue of *Grey Room*, Cabañas underlines the specificity of that film in relation to Debord’s larger cinematic corpus.

9. See “Le rôle de Godard,” *Internationale situationniste* 10 (March 1966); René Vienet, “Les situationnistes et les nouvelles formes d’action contre la politique et l’art,” *Internationale situationniste* 11 (October 1967); and “Le cinéma et la révolution,” *Internationale situationniste* 12 (October 1969).

10. Debord, “Avertissement pour la troisième édition française de *La Société du Spectacle*,” in *Oeuvres*, 1,792.

11. For example, the opening analysis of the new form of servitude characteristic of the modern “employé” in *In girum* is based largely on an analysis developed in Debord, “La véritable scission dans l’Internationale,” in *Oeuvres*, 1,087–1,184.

12. At other times Debord’s film scripts speak rather of the necessity to destroy

memory in art, and for an art practiced by the “partisans of forgetting.” But this might mean the same thing.

13. Debord, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* [film script], in *Oeuvres*, 1,349. In *In girum*, Debord explicitly states that the cinematic medium did not have to assume the spectacular form it eventually assumed, and that the fault for this development was not the “technology” of the cinema but the society in which it had appeared. This is a return to the argument of “With and Against Cinema”: the problem is not the technical infrastructure of cinema but the social relations of production that control this infrastructure. But in 1978 Debord speaks of this contradiction in the past tense, as if the possibility of appropriating the cinema were no longer relevant. For Debord, cinema was simply “outdated.”

14. Compare Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle*, Thesis 191, in *Oeuvres*, 848.

15. “Absence et ses habilleurs,” *Internationale situationniste* 2, reprinted in *Internationale situationniste* (Fayard), 38–40.

16. Roland Barthes, *Le degré zéro de l’écriture* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1953); available in English as Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977). This book is cited at strategic moments by Debord.

17. Debord, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* [film script], in *Oeuvres*, 1,349.

With and Against Cinema

[EDITORS, *INTERNATIONALE SITUATIONNISTE* 1]

TRANSLATED BY JASON E. SMITH

“Avec et contre le cinéma” is an unsigned “editorial note” published in the first issue of the journal Internationale situationniste in June 1958.¹

—Jason E. Smith

The cinema is the central art of our society, in particular in the way that its development is carried out through a continuous integration of new mechanical technologies. The cinema is therefore the best representation of our era of anarchic, juxtaposed (not articulated, merely added up) inventions, not only as an anecdotal or formal expression, but in its material infrastructure as well. After the wide screen, the beginnings of stereo sound, and various attempts at 3-D cinema, the United States presented a procedure called “Circarama” at the Brussels exposition, within which—as *Le Monde* on April 17 [1958] reported—“we find ourselves at the center of the spectacle and live it, since we are an integral part of it. When a car with a camera mounted on it charges through San Francisco’s Chinatown, we experience the same reflexes and sensations as the car’s passengers.”² Experiments have also been recently done with an aromatic cinema through the use of aerosols, and undeniably realistic effects are expected of them.

The cinema is in this way presented as a passive substitute for the unitary artistic activity that is now possible. It offers new, unheard-of powers for the worn-down reactionary force of the spectacle without participation. One is not afraid to say that we live in the world we know because we are without freedom at the center of the miserable spectacle, “because we are an integral part of it.” This is no life, and spectators are still not in the world. But those who want to build this world should combat the tendency in the cinema to constitute an anticonstruction of situations (the construction of a slave setting in the lineage of cathedrals) and recognize the interest and inherent value presented by new technical applications (stereo sound, smells).

The lag with which the modern symptoms of art have appeared in the cinema—for example, certain formally destructive works similar to what has been accepted for the last twenty or thirty years in visual art and writing are still rejected even in ciné-clubs—is due not only to either its directly economic fetters or those adorned with idealisms (moral censure), but to

the positive importance of the cinematographic art in modern society. This importance of the cinema stems from the superior means of influence it deploys, and this necessarily leads to increased control over it by the dominant classes. We therefore have to struggle to take hold of a truly experimental sector in the cinema.

We foresee two distinct uses for the cinema: first, its use as a form of propaganda in a presituationist transition period; then its direct use as a constitutive element of a realized situation.

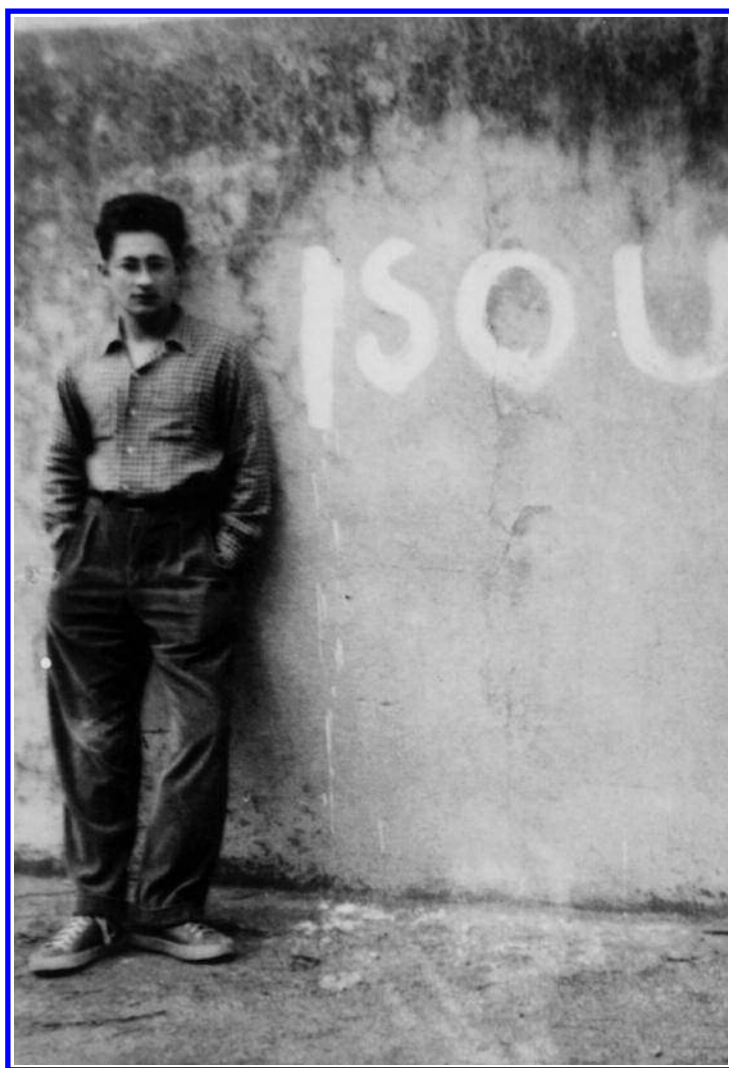
The cinema is in this way comparable to architecture in its current importance in the life of all, by the limitations that close it off to innovation, and by the immense effect the freedom of such innovations cannot fail to have. We must therefore build on the progressive aspects of the industrial cinema, just as by finding an architecture organized around the psychological function of the ambiance we can retrieve the pearl hidden in the dunghill of absolute functionalism.

Notes

1. “Avec et contre le cinéma” is republished in *Internationale situationniste* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1997), 8–9.

2. [The Brussels exposition referred to here is the 1958 World’s Fair in Brussels. The “Circarama” technology used eleven 16 mm projectors and screens that completely surrounded the viewer. The name is derived from the earlier “Cinerama” technology, which used three 35 mm projectors and a wide, curved screen. The film shown in Brussels was Disney’s *America the Beautiful*.—Trans.]

Guy Debord in front of Isidore Isou's name written on a wall, early 1950s. Photograph. Courtesy Archiv Acquaviva, Berlin.



Hurlements en faveur de vous

KAIRA M. CABAÑAS

I love the cinema when it is insolent and does what it is not supposed to do.

—Daniel in Isidore Isou, *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, 1951

Guy Debord's first public appearance in print occurred in the pages of *Ion*, a single-issue magazine dedicated exclusively to Lettrist work in cinema and published under the direction of Marc-Gilbert Guillaumin (otherwise known as Marc'O) in April 1952. *Ion* included Isidore Isou's lengthy treatise "Esthétique du cinéma" and Marc'O's "Première manifestation d'un cinéma nucléaire," as well as the scripts for Gil J Wolman's *L'anticoncept*, François Dufrêne's *Tambours du jugement premier*, and Gabriel Pomerand's *La légende cruelle*. Yet what is often forgotten is that the issue also included Debord's "Prolégomènes à tout cinéma futur" as a preface to the original script for his film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (*Howls for Sade*, 1952), which at this point also included an image track.

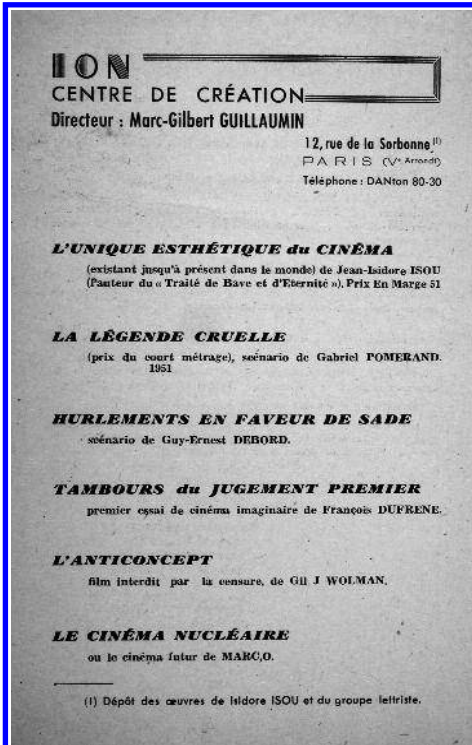
The half-page "Prolégomènes" situates *Hurlements* within the Lettrist aesthetic in cinema as elaborated primarily by Isou. Debord writes, "My film will remain among the most important in the history of the reductive hypostasis of cinema through a terrorist disorganization of the discrepant."¹ With the invocation of *discrepant* Debord confesses his film's recourse to *montage discrédant* (discrepant editing), or what Isou first theorized in the pages of "Esthétique du cinéma" as the purposeful non-synchronization of sound and image in film.² Debord's affiliation with Isou and the Lettrists remains little more than a passing reference in the critical literature on Debord. Yet a photograph from the time makes the identification explicit: a young Debord stands in front of a wall on which "ISOU" has been written in white paint.³

Hurlements' original script, which was elaborated in the winter of 1951–1952, further demonstrates Debord's indebtedness to a Lettrist film aesthetic. The image track lists shots of military troops, erotic scenes, scenes of riot, a boxing match, views of St. Germain-des-Prés, and the clientele at Mabillon café. Debord includes six images of himself, images of Isou and Marc'O, sequences of painted filmstrip (*pellicule bossée*), and the black sequences that would come to define the completed film. The mixing of original shots with preexisting footage, as well as painted filmstrips and sequences of pure color, explicitly recalls the visual aspects

of both Isou's *Traité de bave et d'éternité* (On venom and eternity, 1951) and Maurice Lemaître's *Le film est déjà commencé?* (Has the film already started? 1951). At this juncture, the script's sound track traced a poetic of refusal from the dadaists to the surrealists and was interspersed with Lettrist sounds: Dufrené's poems "Marche" and "J'interroge et j'invective" (also featured in *Traité*); a Lettrist chorus with background cries and whistles (similar sounds are heard in earlier Lettrist films); glossolalia-graphic transcriptions such as "KWORXKE KOWONGUE KKH"; and "violent screams in the darkness" during the final black sequence.⁴

Between the publication of *Ion* in April and the debut of *Hurlements* two months later in June, Debord's film was transformed: it was neither shot nor printed. Its alternating black-and-white rhythm recalls Wolman's film *L'anticoncept* (1951), even when at the level of film material *Hurlements* was constructed exclusively from clear and opaque leader, thereby totally negating the filmed image.⁵ When someone on the sound track speaks, the screen remains white and filled with light; otherwise the screen is dark. For the final twenty-four minutes, the viewer sits in darkness and silence. Of the total running time of seventy-five minutes, only twenty minutes contain light and speech. As a result, the realized film preserves only approximately half of the original script's text.⁶ The five voices one hears in the sound track utter citations from letters, books, and newspapers and include everyday conversations that are at times punctuated by Debord's observations (e.g., "I made this film while there was still time to talk about it"). The voices deliver their texts with minimal tonal variation.⁷ Other than the snippets of original and appropriated language and the initial twenty-five seconds of Wolman's physical poetry (or *mégapneumie*), *Hurlements'* sound track contains no other sound or aural accompaniment; that is, no Lettrist poetry or chorus, no cries, whistles, or screams.

While Debord's specific deployment of appropriated language in the final version of *Hurlements* begins to differentiate the work from prior Lettrist films, the various scripted and impromptu actions that occurred on account of the film's first full



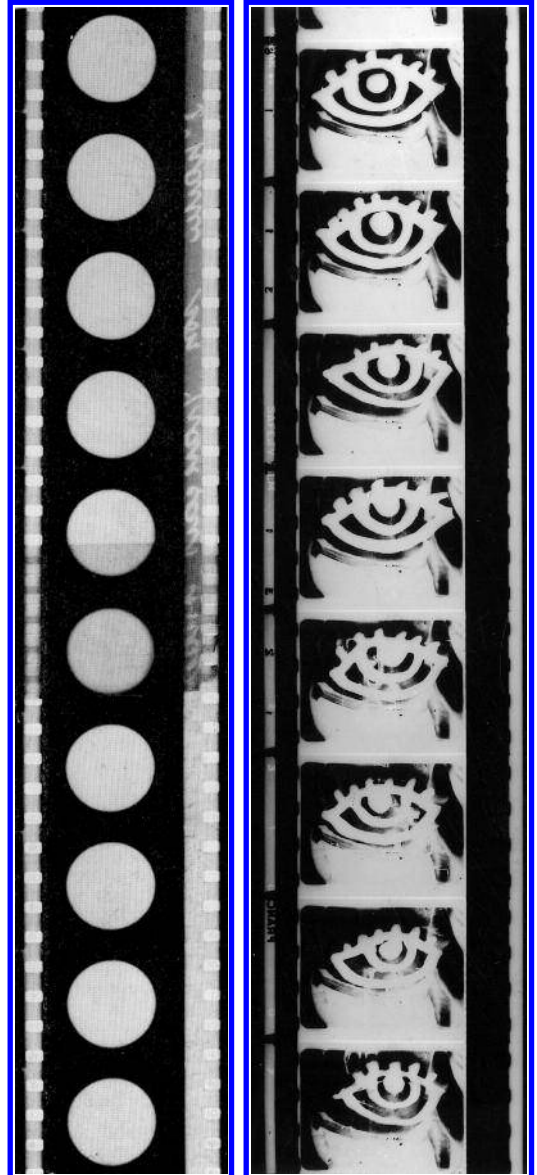
Top: Flyer for the first issue of the magazine *Ion*, April 1952. Courtesy Archiv Acquaviva, Berlin.

Bottom: Opening page of the script for *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* published in *Ion*, April 1952.

screening—largely unaddressed in the critical literature on Debord’s films—keep *Hurlements* firmly within the purview of Lettrist experiments in cinema. What is more, these live elements articulate the work’s historical specificity, just as the film’s structure, together with the legacy of such actions, persistently enables active participation, albeit in different form, during contemporary screenings.

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The first screening of *Hurlements* took place on June 30, 1952, at the Ciné-club d’Avant-Garde 52 in the Musée de l’Homme in Paris. From the outset, audience members disrupted the screening by audibly expressing their discontent. The film club management ultimately stopped the film shortly after it began. According to Debord, “Several lettrists then dissociated themselves from such a crudely extremist film.”⁸ But at the time of *Hurlements*’ first screening, the schism between Debord and Isou had not yet been formalized. (In Brussels in May and June of 1952, Debord and Wolman conceived of a dissident group—the Lettrist International [LI]—and in the course of the year they broke with Isou, most notably on account of what is known as the “Chaplin affair.”)⁹ Although the completed version of *Hurlements* negated filmed images, thereby rejecting the lingering illusionism in Isou’s and Lemaître’s films, “*Hurlements*,” as Tom Levin notes, “remains a decidedly Lettrist work.”¹⁰ In his 1989 essay, Levin speaks to Debord’s reduction of cinema to the filmstrip, projector, light, and screen, upon which the actual mechanics of a screening depend. He was also among the first scholars to introduce Debord’s debt to Isou’s concept of *montage dis-crépant*. Yet in addition to experimentation with the materials of film and the nonsynchronization of image and sound, Lettrist cinema in these years was also characterized by the nonsynchronization of what happens on and off the screen. Such an activation of off-screen space is perhaps nowhere more explicit than in Lemaître’s designation of his work in film as a “*séance de cinéma*,” a kind of film performance or what Lemaître



Left: Gil J Wolman. *L’anticconcept*, 1951. Filmstrip detail.

Right: Maurice Lemaître. *Le film est déjà commencé?* 1951. Filmstrip detail.

translates as “session” that moved Lettrist film beyond the image and sound track toward experimentation with the space of the screen as well as the space of theater.

With *Le film est déjà commencé?* Lemaître challenged the integrity of the conventional screen, expanding it to include draperies, objects waved in front of it, and the bodies of spectators who stood, both provoked and unprovoked, to speak. For its official premiere on December 7, 1951, at the Cluny Palace film club in the Quartier Latin, the entire theater staff, from managers to ushers, became part of the work.¹¹ Enlisting precisely those elements that are usually considered extrinsic to the cinematic viewing experience, the film’s script is tellingly divided into three parts: sound, image, and “salle” (auditorium).¹² If Lemaître openly outlined the live elements that were to accompany his film, what remains outside the purview of *Hurlements*’ final script, and by extension the cinematic apparatus within which the film was screened, are the various actions that were designed to occur before, during, and after the film’s projection. These live elements are constitutive of, rather than peripheral to, *Hurlements*’ critical stakes and are key to the film’s actual production and reception.

On October 13, 1952, almost four months after the screening at the Musée de l’Homme, *Hurlements* was first shown in full at the Ciné-club du Quartier Latin in the context of the club’s program on avant-garde film. The few published eyewitness accounts reveal the various extra-filmic elements designed for the occasion. Jean-Michel Mension (who was briefly an LI member) and Maurice Rajsfus (historian and French militant) offer the most detailed observations.¹³ Mension recounts how the LI and its supporters sat in the balcony, while affiliates of Soulèvement de la Jeunesse, including Dufrière, Marc’O, and Yolande du Luart, were seated in the orchestra below. Prior to the screening and in true film club format, a professor from the “Cinémathèque of Lausanne” introduced the film. But the “professor” was a fake film club lecturer. Using a thick Belgian-German accent, Serge Berna gave a lengthy speech describing the film’s “erotic tension,” which he claimed would become “all-consuming.”¹⁴ According to Rajsfus, one Lettrist cheekily proclaimed, “The eroticism should occur in the audience.”¹⁵

Mension’s account further details other staged disturbances and how the Lettrists “started shouting, crying scandal, insulting us. . . . We [the LI] responded in kind from the balcony.”¹⁶ Michèle Bernstein recalls that within this seemingly contentious context the exchanges were “tout à fait joyeux” (quite joyous) and that a scandal among “*complices*” (accomplices) has nothing “*méchant*” (mean) about it.¹⁷ Moreover, Bernstein remembers a series of “Hurlements en faveur de vous,” whereby Debord would

make a sign to prompt someone to scream. Bernstein responded to the prompt with her own “Hurlements en faveur de Guy.”¹⁸

Of the notorious twenty-four minutes of darkness with which the film concludes, Rajsfus recalls,

No one had walked out. The show had begun about nine, and at ten-thirty the lights went up definitively to the cat-calls of a frenzied public. The master of ceremonies seized on a brief moment of respite to announce question-and-answer time [i.e., the time of debate]. Ever serious, Serge Berna spoke, developing a few complimentary thoughts concerning Guy-Ernest Debord and his oeuvre. One spectator, trembling with rage, demanded an explanation of the filmmaker’s reasons for entitling his film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*. Completely straight-faced, Berna responded that there was a misunderstanding and that the film was really dedicated to a friend of Debord’s, one Ernest Sade, currently engaged in the worthy trade of procurer in Rue Nicolas-Flamel.¹⁹

Such proceedings—the tripartite structure of lecture, screening, and debate—mine film club conventions consolidated in the 1920s.²⁰ Beyond the cantankerous reception *Hurlements’* first screening provoked, existing scholarship often fails to mention the second screening’s film club-related events and the particular modality of discussion that it entails, which reveal the specificity of *Hurlements* and thus its difference from Debord’s later work in film. While the public’s participation situates *Hurlements* within the realm of Lettrist cinematic experimentation, especially that of Lemaître, Debord’s specific deployment of appropriated language—to the exclusion of howls, whistles, and screams—aligns *Hurlements’* sound track with his later work.



Like *Hurlements*, all of Debord’s later films privilege the sound track over the image track. More specifically, they privilege *speech*—be it through voice-over or as manifest graphically through subtitles and intertitles. Yet with both *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps* (On the passage of a few persons through a rather brief unity of time, 1959) and *Critique de la séparation* (Critique of separation, 1961) Debord reintroduces the filmed image, combining appropriated shots with shots taken by his cameraman. Debord thus radicalizes the *détournement* already present in *Hurlements’* sound track in order to insist on the critical refunctioning of language, both visual and verbal. Applied as much to texts and words as to images, *détournement*

is a procedure of quotation and reuse whereby “any elements, no matter where they are taken from, can serve in making new combinations” so as to reclaim a different and noncommodified meaning.²¹ After 1962 *détournement* became a primary technique for contesting spectacle, a strategy more present in the Situationist International’s (SI) discourse at this time than the more spatialized and aleatory *dérive*.²² In these later films, Debord also deploys other strategies to interrupt visual illusionism, narrative continuity, and spectatorial absorption, such as refilming still images (e.g., photographs, comics, newspaper clippings) and including shots of the film crew and clapper, thereby avowing his films’ constructed status.

Each of Debord’s films after *Hurlements* harnesses the power of communicative speech to repurpose photographic meaning toward alterative ends. *Critique de la séparation*, for example, abandons what is often considered the more nostalgic tone of *Sur le passage*, offering a sustained critique of everyday life and the historical context of the Cold War. Approximately nine minutes into the film, one sees a sequence that includes shots of the United Nations Security Council; Nikita Khrushchev with Charles de Gaulle; Dwight Eisenhower welcoming de Gaulle; a patriotic ceremony at the Arc de Triomphe; de Gaulle and Khrushchev standing at attention; Eisenhower with the pope; and a filmed photograph of Eisenhower being embraced by Francisco Franco. The voice-over (here Debord’s) explains:

Official news is elsewhere. Society broadcasts to itself its own image of its own history, a history reduced to a superficial and static pageant of its rulers—the persons who embody the apparent inevitability of whatever happens. The world of the rulers is the world of the spectacle. The cinema suits them well. Regardless of its subject matter, the cinema presents heroes and exemplary conduct modeled on the same old pattern as the rulers.

Debord challenges the idea that such footage should be understood as an image of reality, just as the newsreel version of history constitutes both a



material and object of critique in the film. Isou similarly used newsreel footage in his *Traité*, but with his theorization of *montage décripant* he primarily upheld the independence of image and sound track, claiming that “discrepant montage . . . diverts the [sound and image] tracks and makes them indifferent to one another.”²³ Debord, as Tom McDonough notes, readily affirms the two tracks’ relation.²⁴ Debord writes, “The relation between the images, the spoken commentary and the subtitles is neither complementary nor indifferent, but is intended to itself be critical.”²⁵ What this statement points to, in no uncertain terms, is Debord’s investment in language, both written and spoken, as a method by which to critique the visuality of spectacle. Such a strategy, while it does not account for all the relations between speech and image in Debord’s films, is representative of his approach: Debord uses language to counter the purported truth of an image.

As is well rehearsed in the literature on the situationists, their work with the means of artistic production and representation gave way over the course of the late 1950s and 1960s to a more active political engagement that also included a trenchant critique of language and its alienating effects. Published in the eighth issue of the *Internationale situationniste*, “Editorial Notes: All the King’s Men” argues, “[Power] creates nothing; it recuperates. If it created the meaning of words, there would be no poetry, but solely useful ‘information.’ We could never confront one another *within* language, and *every refusal would be outside it, would be purely lettrist.*”²⁶ For Debord and the SI, the Lettrists created nonmeaning as meaning, noncommunication as communication.²⁷ A politics of refusal was no longer to take place outside of language, a position first articulated in 1952 when Debord wrote that his film *Hurlements* was a “*dépassement du cri*” (surpassing of the scream).²⁸ Similarly, with regard to his film practice, Debord critiques the structure of representation and offers a trenchant critique of capitalism, but in the wake of *Hurlements* he does so *within* the technical mechanisms and support of cinema. Within the functioning of the apparatus Debord’s films efface the relations for illusion in order to combat what the situationists describe as the “reactionary power of non-participatory *spectacle*.”²⁹

Opposite: Guy Debord.
Critique de la séparation, 1961.
Frame enlargement.

Right: Isidore Isou.
Traité de bave et d'éternité, 1951.
Frame enlargement.



The situationists' critique of "nonparticipation" under a spectacular regime brings me to Jacques Rancière's recent discussion of Debord's film adaptation of *La société du spectacle* (*The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967). Both the book and the film open with the lines "The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation."³⁰ As with Debord's two earlier films, *La société du spectacle* (1973) reveals spectacle as the inversion of life through the use of appropriated film sequences that include everything from political rulers to cinema stars, from fashion models to ordinary commodities. With the exception of the opening images of Alice Becker-Ho, the film bespeaks the same reality: "our existence separated from ourselves, transformed by the machine of the spectacle into dead images before us, against us."³¹ Rancière situates Debord's diagnosis of spectacle within his own assessment of what he calls the "intolerable image regime": a historical impasse in which the intolerable *in* the image has become the intolerable *of* the image—and thus the complicity of all images in the system they denounce.³²

Because of *La société du spectacle*'s unrelenting display of the spectacle's exteriority, Rancière maintains that "it now seemed impossible to confer on any image whatsoever the power of exhibiting the intolerable and prompting us to struggle against it. The only thing to do seemed to be to counter-pose the passivity of the image, to its alienated existence, *living action*."³³ Rancière analyzes the strategic game between images, action, and speech played out in *La société du spectacle*, concluding that "[a]ction is presented as the only answer to the evil of the image."³⁴ He also turns to the voice-over's speech, which reveals to the spectator the state of passivity with which he or she consumes images, while the film's actual images—from Hollywood Westerns to war films—allegorize a call to action. Fittingly, in light of how the sound track is privileged in all of Debord's films, Rancière homes in on Debord's voice, which is imbued



Guy Debord.
La société du spectacle, 1973.
Frame enlargement.

with personal reflection but also theoretical reflexivity. Yet in *La société du spectacle*, Rancière characterizes the “authority of [Debord’s] sovereign voice” as one that explains the truth of social relations in an act of unidirectional communication.³⁵

Debord’s use of voice-over aligns his work with the conventions of the essay film: from the use of verbal language to draw attention to an issue to the fact that the language is persuasive and well-written.³⁶ But earlier films such as *Critique* also insist on the limits of communication, whereby Debord places his authority in doubt through statements such as “we don’t know what to say.”³⁷ In each film he also uses *détournement* as a consistent linguistic strategy, often through subtitles and intertitles that refer to the authors of other historical and political works, including Mikhail Bakunin, Carl von Clausewitz, Karl Marx, Alexis de Tocqueville, and the Sorbonne Occupation Committee.³⁸ Thus, unlike the essay film and Rancière’s assessment of the voice-over, Debord’s work does not represent a single authorial voice nor is it necessarily sovereign—even when it hews close to didacticism.

On the one hand, in Debord’s films language serves as a means of dialectical *negation* when the voice-over unveils an image’s ideological meaning, as in the newsreel sequence that concludes with Eisenhower embraced by Franco. On the other hand, quoted speech, rather than serve exclusively as the means by which to negate the negation, is dialectically *intensified* in relation to images of recent history, whereby Marx’s analysis of capitalism, for example, is extended to have critical purchase on advertising images in the present. Rather than secure his position as the sovereign subject of speech, in his films Debord actively situates his voice within collective history and a specifically Marxist genealogy. This, however, is not to imply that his use of language is polyvocal. Rather, he draws upon fragments from Marxist works so as to redeem and thus remotivate their meaning in relation to the present, an operation that could more properly be considered allegorical.³⁹ In this way, Debord’s voice resists becoming an instrument of the self or the positive sign of presence even when he consistently maintains language’s conceptual content intact—that is, for *La société du spectacle* there are no scripted cries, whistles, or screams.⁴⁰



Debord’s *Hurlements* is undeniably different from his other work in film, a difference that does not rest on the absence of iconic images alone. Rancière inveighs against the purely allegorical call to action in *La société du spectacle*: “But for that [i.e., living action], was it not necessary to

abolish images, to plunge the screen into darkness so as to summon people to the action that was alone capable of opposing the lie of the spectacle? In the event, Guy Debord did not install darkness on the screen.”⁴¹ Rancière does not dwell on or invoke *Hurlements*, other than in a cursory footnote in which he reveals, “On the other hand, we might recall that he had done so [i.e., installed darkness on the screen] in a previous film, *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*.”⁴² As a result of the film’s repression within the structure of his text (after all, Rancière confesses knowledge of *Hurlements* only in a footnote), the philosopher does not engage *how* and *when* Debord plunged the screen into darkness, thereby failing to address *Hurlements*’ potential purchase on a reconsideration of aesthetics and politics in the present, just as he holds at bay the institutional context and conventions of the film clubs in which *Hurlements* was originally shown by focusing on the sovereign effect of Debord’s voice-over.⁴³

Within Debord’s cinematic production, *Hurlements* remains singular: it continues to engender an active reception. About six weeks after a contentious screening of *Hurlements* at Lincoln Center’s Walter Reade Theater, the film was presented as part of the series “VØID for FILM: Imageless Cinema.”⁴⁴ Curated by Bradley Eros within the context of the first Migrating Forms Film Festival at Anthology Film Archives in New York, “VØID for FILM” presented a seven-hour marathon of imageless cinema on Friday, April 17, 2009. Unlike the screening at the Walter Reade, Eros’s version of *Hurlements* took some creative license. (1) No print of *Hurlements* was used. Rather, the projector was turned on and off, while on occasion a loop of clear leader was used. (2) The sound track was read by members of the audience, and certain lines were uttered simultaneously by multiple individuals. (3) The timing of the light and dark sequences was decidedly off. (4) The sound track’s delivery continued during the dark sequences.

(5) The entire “screening” lasted only twenty-nine minutes. As the performed version of the film increasingly unraveled in the final five minutes, the script’s remaining lines were interspersed with the audience’s verbal interventions: “Play the Sharits film”; “We had a narrow escape”; “This is a real human moment”; “You drink far too much”; and “We’re so De-bored,” which, I admit, is my favorite line.

The “screening” at Anthology further demonstrates the extent to which the

VØID for FILM : *imageless cinema*

Program sequence:

Yoko Ono, *Film Script 0* : ‘Stare...’ (1964, instruction text.)
 Luis Recoder, *Untitled Projection* (2009, 5 min, 35mm projector, no film or light, sound (of the projector from the booth), microphone)
 Nam June Paik, *Zen for Film* (1962-64, 8 min, 16mm clear leader, dust & scratches, actions & shadows, silent)
 Ken Jacobs, *Constellation* (early 1970s, approx. 20 min, projectorless, darkness, camera flash, live instructions, actions)
 Peter Kubelka, *Arnulf Rainer* (1960, 7 min, 35mm, b&w, sound)
 Andrew Lampert, *Head/Tail* (1970/2004, 3 min, 35mm optical soundtrack)
 Bradley Eros, *mercury* (1999, 7 min, 16mm black leader loop, scissors, projector light, mylar screen, cassette tape sound)
 Keith Sanborn, *For the Birds* (2000, 8 min, DVD, b&w, stereo HiFi sound)
 Jeff Perkins, *Movies for the Blind* (1990s-ongoing, 10 min excerpt, projectorless, flashlights, cassette tape sound)
 Sandra Gibson, *Blue Light* (2005, 10 min, 35mm, color, silent)
 Walter Ruttmann, *Weekend* (1928, 12 min, radiophonic montage, sound “film without images”, CD version)
 Bradley Eros, *Colour Theory (light on light)* (2008-9, 7 min, for multiple filmless projectors: 8mm, 16mm, 35mm; colored gels, room & screen light, sound on CD & live from machines)
 Bill Brand, *Rate of Change: Acts of Light, Part 1* (1972, 17 min, 16mm, color, sound)
 David Baker, *Ten Tha (Like Clouds)* (2009, 15 min, DVD, white, sound)
 Lary Seven, *Keystone (Kops)* (2009, approx. 10 min, two 35mm projectors, no film, projector sound, actions)
 Takehisa Kozugi, *Film & Film No.4* (1965, approx. 10 min, no film, 16mm projector light, paper screen, knife or scissors, live action)
 Greg Sharits, *Transfer* (c. 1978-80, 12 min, 16mm, colored leader, silent)
 Taka Imura, *Dead Movie* (1968, installation, approx. 10 min, two 16mm projectors, two screens; one with projector light / no film, one with black leader loop & perforation sound)
 Paul Sharits, *Apparent Motion* (1975, 30 min, 16mm, color, silent)
 Coleen Fitzgibbon, *Internal Systems* (1974-75, 45 min, 16mm, color, sound)
 Derek Jarman, *Blue* (1993, 75 min, 35mm on DVD, color, sound)
 Guy Debord, *Howls for Sade (Hurlements en faveur de Sade)* (1952, 70 min, 35mm on DVD, b&w, sound; [if live: clear leader, microphone, spoken text, darkness, alcohol...])
 Tony Conrad, *The Flicker* (1966, 30 min, 16mm, b&w, sound)

TOTAL program length: *Approximately 7 hours*

Q: “Is it real?” A: “It’s an image. A picture made of light.” -Jan Vermeer, 1666



Program for “VØID for FILM: Imageless Cinema,” 17 April 2009. Curated by Bradley Eros in the context of the first Migrating Forms film festival, Anthology Film Archives, New York.

meaning of the film does not reside a priori within the final script or within the technological mechanisms of film's support. *Hurlements'* appropriated language demonstrates an early instance of *détournement*. But the black sequences' refusal of images—both visual and verbal—presents neither Rancière's "intolerable image regime" nor the communicative conceit of spoken language. Rather than a top-down model of communication in which we see our alienation put on display at the same time that we are told about it, *Hurlements* alters the relations between seeing, speaking, and doing in the cinema and for its spectators. The film's structure allows for multiple subject positions to be voiced: from the literary to the sentimental, the revolutionary to the banal. Indeed, the film enables moments whose precise meaning and effects cannot be wholly anticipated. Insofar as visual and verbal images are negated, spectators answer *Hurlements* in different ways (at times, contrary to Debord's intentions, they even revel in the aesthetic contemplation of darkness). Rather than legislate what and how one must see, *Hurlements* engenders a different public with each new instance of the film's projection. In short, *Hurlements* implicates the spectator's actual participation in a way that Debord's other films fail to do. Perhaps this is what Debord was suggesting when he wrote, "What has caused most displeasure in the long term is what I did in 1952."⁴⁵

Notes

For meeting with me to discuss the initial screenings of *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*, I express my gratitude to Marc’O, Maurice Rajsfus, and especially Michèle Bernstein. I also owe a special debt to Bradley Eros for sharing with me the video of the screening-performance of *Hurlements* at Anthology Film Archives in 2009. Finally, I am thankful to research assistant Rachel Silveri for her generous assistance as I was preparing this text. This essay draws in part upon my work presented in “Ce qu’il a fait en 1952: *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*,” in *Consumato dal fuoco: Il cinema di Guy Debord*, ed. Monica Dall’Asta and Marco Grosoli (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2011), and informs the final chapter of my book manuscript “Off-Screen Cinema: Isidore Isou and the Lettrist Avant-Garde.” Unless otherwise noted, all translations from French sources are mine.

1. Guy Debord, “Prolégomènes à tout cinéma futur,” in *Ion* (Paris: Jean-Paul Rocher, 1999), 217. (The Rocher volume presents a facsimile of the original *Ion* published in 1952 by the Centre de Création.)

2. See the discussion in Jean Isidore Isou, “Esthétique du cinéma,” in *Ion*, 7–153. For a comprehensive overview of the history of Lettrist cinema, see Frédérique Devaux, *Le cinéma lettriste: 1951–1991* (Paris: Paris Expérimental, 1992).

3. Debord’s text continues by announcing a shift from a concern with “création” to the “conditionnement du spectateur” (conditioning of the spectator) and ends by asserting, “The arts of the future can be nothing less than disruptions of situations,” thereby suggesting in inchoate form what he and the situationists will develop as “situations” over the course of the 1950s. Guy Debord, “Prolégomènes à tout cinéma futur,” 217.

4. Guy Debord, script for *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*, in *Ion*, 230.

5. Debord alternated clear leader, which floods the screen with light, and opaque leader. The opaque leader, which Keith Sanborn explains creates a “palpable, eerie void,” is materially different. Debord apparently used magnetic tape (used at the time for sound editing) for the opaque leader. When magnetic tape passes through the gate of a film projector, it is utterly opaque and is able to erase the borders of the frame. Moreover, when passing through the optical sound head of a film projector, magnetic tape is silent (thus differing from the film’s optical sound track). See the technical specifications described by Sanborn in “Return of the Suppressed,” *Artforum* 44, no. 6 (February 2006): esp. 188–189. I note how Wolman may have suggested to Debord the use of clear and opaque leader and briefly consider the differences between Wolman’s and Debord’s imageless films in my “How to Do Things without Words,” *Grey Room* 42 (Winter 2010): 46–59.

6. With regard to the sound track, the introduction of “diverse articles from the Civil Code” was announced as a possibility in the original script but regularly punctuates the realized version. Also, two phrases from the “Prolégomènes” make their way to the sound track. These include the twice-repeated “L’amour n’est valable que dans une période prérévolutionnaire” (Love is valid only in a prerevolutionary period) and “Les arts futurs seront des bouleversements de situations, ou rien” (The arts of the future will be nothing less than disruptions of situations). For an excellent account of the changes in the sound track, please see Guy Claude Marie, *Guy Debord: De son cinéma en son art et en son temps* (Paris: Éditions Vrin, 2009), ch. 1.

7. *Hurlements*’ final script was first published in the pages of *Les lèvres nues*, a magazine edited by the Belgian surrealist (later situationist) Marcel Mariën, in December 1955. The various voices of the film are identified in a footnote: Wolman (Voice 1), Debord (Voice 2), Serge Berna (Voice 3), Barbara Rosenthal (Voice 4), and Isou (Voice 5). The script

also notes the lengths of the fourteen dark sequences, which vary from thirty seconds to the final twenty-four minutes of darkness. See Guy Debord, “Grande fête de nuit” (preface) and “Hurlements en faveur de Sade” (script), *Les lèvres nues* 7 (December 1955): 18–23.

8. See Guy Debord, “Technical Notes on the First Three Films,” in *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (1978; Edinburgh: AK Press, 2003), 211. Originally published as Guy Debord, “Fiches techniques,” in *Contre le cinéma* (Aarhus, Denmark: Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalism, 1964), n.p.

9. In October 1952, Charlie Chaplin arrived in Paris to promote his film *Limelight* (1952). Wolman and Jean-Louis Brau were the only Lettrists to get beyond the police roadblocks surrounding the Ritz Hotel, where they sabotaged Chaplin’s press conference by distributing leaflets that stated, “We hope that your last film really will be your last.” Signed by Berna, Brau, Debord, and Wolman, the last line of the text insisted in English, “Go home Mister Chaplin.” In response, Isou, Pomerand, and Lemaître publically distanced themselves from the dissident group and published a letter in *Combat* that stated, “We dissociate ourselves from our friends’ leaflet, and we associate ourselves with the homage paid to Chaplin by all of the population.” See “Les lettristes désavouent les insulteurs de Chaplin,” *Combat*, November 1, 1952. The members of the Lettrist International would in turn disavow Isou, Pomerand, and Lemaître in the text “Position de l’International lettriste,” which was refused by *Combat* and later published in the *Internationale lettriste*. See Serge Berna, Jean-L. Brau, Guy-Ernest Debord, and Gil J Wolman, “Position de l’International lettriste,” in *Internationale lettriste* 1 (1952), reprinted in *Documents relatifs à la fondation de l’Internationale situationniste*, ed. Gérard Berreby (Paris: Éditions Allia, 1985), 151.

10. Thomas Y. Levin, “Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord,” in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 344. Originally published in *On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International, 1957–1972* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1989), 72–123.

11. Lemaître first screened *Le film est déjà commencé?* on November 12, 1951, at the Ciné-club d’Avant-Garde 52. The official “world” premiere, with complete mise-en-scène, took place the following month, on December 7, with the disorder Lemaître desired.

12. See the film script in Maurice Lemaître, *Le film est déjà commencé?* (Paris: Éditions André Bonne, 1952). See also the discussion of Lemaître’s film-performance in Andrew V. Uroksie, “Beyond the Black Box: The Lettrist Cinema of Disjunction,” *October* 135 (Winter 2011): 21–48. My research on Lemaître’s film-performance, or séance, was presented in “Lettrist Cinema’s Public Education,” lecture presented as part of the “Sites of Cinema” faculty seminar, Columbia University, New York, 31 March 2011.

13. See the accounts by Jean-Michel Mension and Maurice Rajsfus in Jean-Michel Mension, *La tribu*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Paris: Éditions Allia, 2001), 86–91. For other accounts of the second screening, see Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 323–343; and Christophe Bourseiller, *Vie et mort de Guy Debord: 1931–1994* (Paris: Plon, 1999), 56–57. In the 1950s, in addition to the two screenings in Paris, the film was shown in 1957 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London, where its reception was equally contentious. See the review “Contemporary Arts: Anti-Art,” *The Spectator*, 12 July 1957, clipping in the ICA archive at the Research Centre for the Tate Library and Archive.

14. Mension, *La tribu*, 87.

15. See Mension, *La tribu*, 88. The original account is published in Maurice Rajsfus,

Une enfance laïque et républicaine (Paris: Manya, 1992), esp. 299–300.

16. Mension, *La tribu*, 88.

17. Michèle Bernstein, interview by author, 18 June 2010.

18. Bernstein, interview.

19. See Mension, *La Tribu*, 88, 91.

20. See Vincent Pinel, *Introduction au ciné-club: Histoire, théorie, pratique du ciné-club en France* (Paris: Éditions Ouvrières, 1964).

21. Guy Debord and Gil J Wolman, “A User’s Guide to Détournement,” in *Situationist International Anthology*, rev. and exp. ed., ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 15.

22. See Tom McDonough’s critical account of *détournement* in “*The Beautiful Language of My Century*”: *Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945–1968* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), ch. 1.

23. Isou, “Esthétique du cinéma,” 69.

24. McDonough offers an insightful analysis of *Critique de la séparation* in relation to the near contemporaneous *cinéma-vérité* film *Chronique d’un été* (Chronicle of a summer, 1960), a collaboration between Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin. See Tom McDonough, “Calling from the Inside: Filmic Topologies of the Everyday,” *Grey Room* 26 (Winter 2007): 6–29. McDonough’s analysis differs from Levin’s earlier assessment of Debord’s films. For Levin, Debord’s refusal of narrative coherence in his films matches the incoherence of a contemporary reified life, thereby producing a film whose deliberate heterogeneity results in an aesthetic strategy that Levin designates as a “mimesis of incoherence.” Levin, “Dismantling the Spectacle,” 360.

25. Debord, “Technical Notes on the First Three Films,” 213.

26. “Editorial Notes: All the King’s Men” (1963), trans. Tom McDonough, in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, 154; emphasis added.

27. As early as 1958 Debord establishes “communication” as counter to “information,” insisting that “all forms of pseudocommunication must be consigned to utter destruction, so that one day we may achieve real, direct communication.” See Guy Debord, “Theses on Cultural Revolution,” trans. John Shepley, in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, 65.

28. Debord, “Prolégomènes à tout cinéma futur,” 230.

29. “Avec et contre le cinéma,” *Internationale situationniste* 1 (1958): 9; emphasis in original.

30. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 12. For the original French, see Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1967), 9.

31. Jacques Rancière, “The Intolerable Image,” in *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), 86. For the original French version, see Jacques Rancière, “L’image intolérable,” in *Le spectateur émancipé* (Paris: Éditions La Fabrique, 2008), 93–114.

32. What Rancière calls the “intolerable image regime” is key to his reimagination of aesthetics and politics, whereby he challenges the opposition between terms such as *viewing/knowing*, *appearance/reality*, *activity/passivity*, *image/speech*. In his essay, Rancière asks us to consider the production of images that aim to expose real suffering—that is, when an image of “reality” is counterposed to the realm of “appearance.” Rancière situates political montage within this dialectic, whereby “one [image] must play the role of the reality that denounces the other’s mirage. . . . [B]y the same token, it denounces the

mirage as the reality of our existence in which the image is included.” Rancière, “The Intolerable Image,” 85.

33. Rancière, “The Intolerable Image”; emphasis added.

34. Rancière, “The Intolerable Image,” 87.

35. Rancière, “The Intolerable Image,” 88.

36. For a discussion of the essay film’s characteristics, as well as the genre’s investment in expository prose, see Philip Lopate, “In Search of the Centaur: The Essay Film,” in *Beyond Document: Essays on Non-fiction Film*, ed. Charles Warren (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996): 243–270.

37. McDonough draws attention to Debord’s avowals of confusion and the breakdown of communicative language in the voice-over to *La critique de la séparation*. See McDonough, “Calling from the Inside,” esp. 16–17.

38. Over the course of the 1960s, situationist film theory was increasingly aligned with the political stakes of writing. In 1967 René Viénet recommended that SI members be equally capable of writing an article and making a film, given the medium’s accessibility and the way film could in turn “intensify” the written articulation of the same problems. See René Viénet, “The Situationists and the New Forms of Action Against Politics and Art,” trans. Tom McDonough, in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, 184–185. For the French original, see René Viénet, “Les situationnistes et les nouvelles formes d’action contre la politique et l’art,” *Internationale situationniste* 11 (October 1967): 35.

39. As Walter Benjamin notes, the allegorist is motivated by “an appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity.” Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (ca. 1928; London: Verso, 1998), 223.

40. That said, the cumulative effect of the particular genealogy Debord mines reveals, contrary to his intention, Marxism’s discursive (and gendered) constraints: the majority of the verbal citations come from men, and these citations serve to reveal the truth of commodified images that largely include women.

41. Rancière, “The Intolerable Image,” 86.

42. Rancière, “The Intolerable Image,” 86.

43. Rancière also refers to *Hurléments* in the context of his essay “Quand nous étions sur le Shenandoah,” *Cahiers du Cinéma* 605 (Octobre 2005), 92–93; translated in this issue of *Grey Room*. Here he takes issue with the fact that Debord did not “stop the projection and declare the end of cinema,” as suggested by Voice 5 (Isou) in the sound track to *Hurléments*. I would briefly note that it was ultimately Isou who proclaimed that cinema was dead and that the debate itself constituted a film with Isou’s *Film-débat* (Film debate, 1952), which was produced at the Musée de l’Homme sometime between May and December 1952. I further explore Isou’s imageless film in relation to Debord in my manuscript “Off-Screen Cinema.”

44. For accounts of the screening at the Walter Reade Theater and the public’s response, see Zack Winestine, “Howls for Guy Debord,” *Film Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (Summer 2009): 14; and Scott Foundas, “Reflections of a Darkened Screen,” *LA Weekly*, 2 March 2009, <http://blogs.laweekly.com/foundas/uncategorized/reflections-on-a-darkened-scre/>.

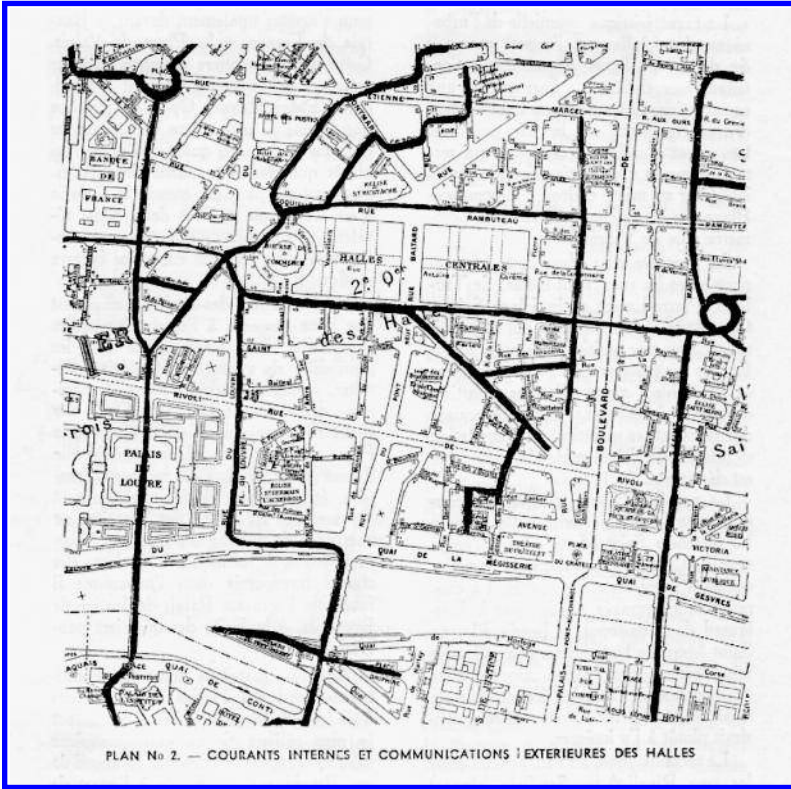
45. Guy Debord, *Panegyrique tome premier* (Paris: Éditions Gérard Lebovici, 1989), 35. The original French reads, “Je crois plutôt que ce qui, chez moi, a déplu d’une manière très durable, c’est ce que j’ai fait en 1952.”

Cinema against the Permanent Curfew of Geometry: Guy Debord's *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps* (1959)

SOYOUNG YOON

1. "All space is occupied by the enemy. We are living under the permanent curfew. Not just the cops—the geometry."¹

In the second issue of *International situationniste* (December 1958), Guy Debord's "Theory of the Dérive" is immediately preceded by Abdelhafid Khatib's psychogeographical case study of the Les Halles quarter, based on his practices of *dérive*. A form of urban drifting, which the Situationist International (SI) distinguished from the journey or the stroll, the *dérive* was defined in 1958 as "a technique of swift passage through varied environments."² A mode of knowledge and play, it would be claimed by the SI as one of their key actions on affective comportment. Through his *dérives*, Khatib focuses on the contours of the Les Halles quarter, the old market halls at the center of Paris, its four sharply distinct zones of ambiance, and "the turntable [*le plaque tournante*]" of the Place des Deux Ecus and Bourse de Commerce complex, where all the zones converge and people are pulled in and out. Emphasis is placed on the animation of the space, the variability of patterns of circulation, not only the change in socioeconomic activity from day to night but the temporary constructions, which, hour by hour, change the contour of the streets: "the logjam of lorries, the barricades of panniers, the movement of workers with their mechanical- or hand-barrows."³ These movements resist the horizontal alignment of an east-west axis: the petering out of the activity of Les Halles, along with its ambiance, as we move from east to west, toward what Khatib characterizes as the reign of extreme order of the bourgeois quarters. Against plans to displace the markets to the Paris suburbs, part of a concerted centrifugal effort at sociospatial segregation, Khatib argues for the necessity to preserve the space at the center of the city. He begins



Left: Detoured map. From *International situationniste 2* (1958).

Opposite: Editorial note. From *International situationniste 2* (1958).

with a proposal to remove the markets' famed pavilions that function not as passages but as blocks to the turntable. In place of the pavilions, Khatib proposes a perpetually moving labyrinth, akin to the aforementioned "barricades," which would preserve the four areas of ambiance and reinforce the churning effect of the turntable. In 1971, the pavilions would indeed be removed, but as part of the displacement and destruction of Les Halles. The markets were replaced by an RER station, an underground shopping mall, office blocks, and flats—as well as a "garden," not a situationist labyrinth, a place of play that aims for a liberated collective life, but, as Eric Hazan describes, a space that transforms the old passages of Paris into "assault courses."⁴

At the end of Khatib's essay, a note by the journal's editorial board tells us Khatib's case study is incomplete. His *dérives* were interrupted, repeatedly; they were cut short. A discriminatory curfew had been in place from September 1958, a few months after a military-settler coup d'état in Algiers against "the abandonment of Algeria." The coup forced the collapse of the Fourth Republic and the return of Charles de Gaulle, along with the beginning of the Front de Libération Nationale's (FLN) "second front" in Paris. The curfew prohibited all Algerians from the streets after nine thirty at night—thus the difficulty of the *dérive* or, for that matter, any other "actions on affective comportment" for the Algerian member of the SI. "After two arrests and two nights at the 'Centres de Triage,' [Khatib] renounced his efforts to continue."⁵ Nights at such "sorting centers"—along with mass roundups, daily street-level stop-and-searches, exceptional and discriminatory identification requirements, detention, and deportation—were all part of a police apparatus enforced not only to gather intelligence about FLN networks in Paris

NOTE DE LA REDACTION

Cette étude est inachevée sur plusieurs points fondamentaux, et principalement en ce qui concerne la caractérisation des ambiances dans les zones sommairement définies. C'est que notre collaborateur a été victime des règlements de police qui, depuis le mois de septembre, interdisent la rue aux nord-africains après 21 h. 30. L'essentiel du travail d'A. Khatib concernait évidemment l'ambiance des Halles la nuit. Après deux arrestations et deux séjours dans des "Centres de Triage", il a dû renoncer à le poursuivre. Ainsi le présent, pas plus que l'avenir politique, ne peuvent être abstraits des considérations portant sur la psychogéographie même.

but to control the entire Algerian immigrant community, to enforce through physical and psychological intimidation their sociospatial segregation in slums and shantytowns on the city's outskirts.

Historians Jim House and Neil MacMaster draw attention to the attempt to engineer a climate of insecurity and fear, of powerlessness and resignation, by techniques such as the *Osmose* operation, first developed in Algeria and then administered in Paris beginning in 1959. In these nighttime raids, police seized men from their beds and dumped them among strangers in distant locations. The police then arrested those who sought to return to their original location, claiming the very act of return was evidence of "attachment" to a clandestine organization.⁶ If the SI described the technique of the *dérive* as "a passionate uprooting [*dépaysement passionnel*]," the *Osmose* operation was its violent and intolerable reversal.⁷ The aim of the former was to construct new situations for a liberated collective life. The latter sought to shatter ensembles of social relations.⁸ To isolate, to individuate, to terrorize: a most violent "osmosis."

"*Dérive's* difficulties are those of freedom," Debord declared in 1958.⁹ He calls for a radical transformation of society's comportment, its habits, behaviors, passions, and desires, a future where cities will be built for the *dérive*. The cutting short of Khatib's *dérives* underscores a certain lack of freedom that is critical for the SI's theorization of the spectacle and its critique of the "colonization" of everyday life. The scene in which Khatib is brought to a halt is not a ritualized instance of interpellation and subjectivation, as theorized in Louis Althusser's model of "the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing," the "hey, you there!" that recruits *all* individuals as much as the one hailed automatically (unconsciously) recognizes him- or herself in the call.¹⁰ Rather, the cutting short here is a violent scene of selection, separation, and hierarchization, of a subject "over-determined"—a scene that brings to the fore the lived experience of alienation in the capitalist organization of society, particularly in the policing of time and space, the curfew, the curtailing of action from the police to urban planning.¹¹

In this essay I foreground the politics of the *dérive*, especially as the technique is redefined with the founding of the SI in the late 1950s. I also address the temporality of the *derive* and how it affects Debord's filmmaking, in particular, his first situationist film, *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps* (On the passage of few persons through a rather brief unity of time, 1959)—a film about a *dérive* that is also structured by the technique of the *dérive*.

2. “Our camera has captured for you a few aspects of a provisional micro-society.”¹²

At one level, Debord’s *Sur le passage* functions as an attempt at a documentary about the Lettrist International (LI), an accounting of the LI from the perspective of the SI, newly founded in July 1957. The film reflects a step back, a change of tactic, as Debord would say, from the LI’s intransigency, its members’ uncompromising commitment to a radical refusal of the existent social order by committing themselves to exist outside, in the margins, of Left Bank bohemia—a radical but precarious position of opposition.¹³ Voice 1 of the film’s voice-over reports on the LI’s aims, aspirations, actions, and limitations—especially the significance of the group’s radical refusal to work, its refusal of the discipline of the timetable for “the free consumption of its own time.”¹⁴ However, this refusal also limited the influence of the LI’s critique, as Voice 1 states, to the problem of a freedom practiced within “a closed circle.”¹⁵

As the film cuts to pans of the Les Halles quarter, by night and at dawn, the narration relates this socioeconomic restriction of the group to a temporal-spatial delimitation, “the same times brought them back to the same places,” following the temporality of neither work *nor* rest from work but that of the *dérive*.¹⁶ The *dérive* offers a different timetable of sorts, according to which the old market halls are claimed as one of the centers of situationist Paris. In 1873, Émile Zola described Les Halles as the belly of Paris, a quintessential site of Haussmanization and the figure of the Second Empire’s rapacious consumer society:

They seemed like some satiated beast, embodying Paris itself, grown enormously fat, and silently supporting the Empire . . . Les Halles were the shopkeeper’s belly, the belly of respectable petit-bourgeois people, bursting with contentment and well-being, shining in the sun, and declaring that everything was for the best, since respectable people had never before grown so wonderfully fat.¹⁷

“Respectable people . . . What bastards!” is the last line of Zola’s novel.¹⁸ As Zola’s protagonist passes from the start to the end of the novel, the markets metamorphose into “a huge ossuary, a place of death, littered with the remains of things that had once been alive, a charnel house reeking with foul smells and putrefaction.”¹⁹ In Debord’s film of 1959, with its own denunciation of the price of petit-bourgeois respectability, the landscape of Les Halles also speaks of the relentlessness of capital’s reach, hinting at its metamorphosis, another Haussmanization. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the old market halls were threatened with gentrification and were at last torn down in 1971. Part and parcel of “the fall of Paris,” the destruction of Les Halles would be one of the themes of

Right: Guy Debord. *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps*, 1959. Frame enlargements.



Debord's more elegiac retrospection, his 1978 film *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*.

Tom McDonough points out how the period of the late 1950s and early 1960s is characterized by a fundamental shift in situationist approaches to the city, both a shift and a breaking away from the influence of surrealism (“an oedipal struggle to at once honor and annihilate its Bretonian father-figure”) toward a more “objective,” larger context of sociology or social geography; in particular, under the influence of Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe’s *Paris et l’agglomération parisienne* (Paris and the Parisian region, 1952).²⁰ The previous techniques of the *dérive* and psychogeography continued to be central to this “new theater of operations in culture,” but now they were resituated and redefined under the term *unitary urbanism*.²¹ A recording of a discussion about the new platform from the third conference of the SI in Munich in April 1959 serves as a background to the opening credits of *Sur le passage*. Alongside the republication of essays written during the Lettrist period in the initial issues of *International situationniste*—notably, Ivan Chtcheglov’s “Formulary for a New Urbanism” (1953) and Debord’s “Theory of the Dérive” (1956)—

the film also attempts to account for the SI's past, its origin, from the perspective of the group's new platform.

The republication in 1958 of Debord's theory of the *dérive* followed Khatib's theory-in-practice—a practice that in its very curtailing explicates the political stakes of the redefined *dérive*. Through recent access to the archive of the Prefecture of the Police for the Algerian War Period (1954–1962), House and MacMaster have delineated the intimate ties between techniques of urban warfare in Algeria and the policing in metropolitan France. The events they detail provide further historical context for the SI's critique of the colonization of everyday life. The use of the term *colonization* in this oft-cited phrase marks a direct relation between the metropolis and the colonies, not only through the importation of techniques but also a division of labor that is disavowed through naturalizing the exploitation of the colonies, racisms deployed and exacerbated “to invest vulgar rankings in the hierarchies of consumption with a magical ontological superiority.”²² The phrase also stains the supposed freedoms of everyday life, the passivity, the enforced docility of the day-to-day, with the persistence of a domination that is disavowed.

The September 1958 curfew fell into abeyance, but in October 1961 the Parisian police would again implement the practice of discriminatory curfew for all Algerians, in addition to accelerated arrests, detentions, and deportations.²³ The curfew would be a trigger for the demonstration on October 17, 1961, by tens of thousands within the Parisian Algerian immigrant community, a protest against the escalating violence in the policing of their time and space, a protest that would end in massacre when the unarmed demonstrators were confronted by the armed police. The violence of the policing that enforced the sociospatial segregation of the Algerian immigrant community in the Paris region during the height of the Algerian War points to an extreme pole of what the SI would argue as the problem of urbanism or “the capitalist training of space”: a post-war transformation of the city for the flow of commodities, cars, and isolated, individuated, documented bodies.²⁴ The mobility and speed of bodies became new insignias of class, and “at the summit of this hierarchy, the ranks may be calculated by the degree of circulation.”²⁵ “Urbanism,” Raoul Vaneigem declared in 1961, “is all that will be needed to preserve the established order without recourse to the indelicacy of machine guns.”²⁶

Michel Foucault would later characterize the political technology of disciplinary power with the figure of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. This different mode of enclosure possesses not the darkness of the dungeon but acts as a “trap” of visibility in which the prisoner is seen, numbered, supervised, but does not see: one is but “the object of information, never

a subject of communication.”²⁷ For the SI, the figure of the city itself, the postwar transformations of the city, sought to repress what Foucault would describe as “the haunting memory of ‘contagions,’ of the plague, of rebellions, crimes, vagabondage, desertions, people who appear and disappear, live and die in disorder.”²⁸ The city had become a trap of visibility. Urbanism represented an image of social cohesion, an ideal of order that normalized and naturalized the existent hierarchy; it was a spectacularization that enforced a strategy of sociospatial segregation, a new Haussmanization: “One does not reside in a quarter of the city but in power. One resides somewhere in the hierarchy.”²⁹ In contrast to the mainstream Left at this moment, the prescience of the SI was to recognize the full implications of the importance of urbanism as a political problem, shifting the site of political and social conflict from the factory to the city or the metropolis, which was understood by the situationists as an ever-more-embattled terrain for the reproduction of capitalist social relations. In particular, the SI argued for a redistribution of the experience of alienation from “bestial suffering” to “the blind suffering of things,” from hunger to a certain blindness, “to feel by groping.”³⁰ There was the barren time-space of isolation, the solitude of abortive, futile noncommunication, which were compensated for in the form of participation by consumption: buying a house or car or sitting in the self-enclosed glow of one’s television as the new ideals of happiness, the invisible threads, the new chains.³¹

For the SI, the question of circulation, of communication, was particularly problematic. “Circulation is the organization of the isolation of all,” Attila Kotányi and Vaneigem state. “It is the opposite of the encounter, the incorporation of energies available for encounters or for any sort of participation.” The practices of *dérive* and psychogeography would be precisely an action within and against “the permanent curfew of geometry.”³²

All space is already occupied by the enemy, who has domesticated it for its own use down to the elementary rules of this space (beyond legal authority to geometry itself). The moment of authentic urbanism’s appearance will be the creation, in certain areas, of the absence of this occupation. What we call construction starts there. It can be understood with the help of the concept of the “positive hole” [*trou positif*] invented by modern physics. Materializing liberty means first shielding from a domesticated planet a few small fragments of its surface.³³

The destruction of the current organization of time-space is also the *construction* of a new situation—an emptying out with a positive force, a “positive hole.” Kotányi and Vaneigem’s statement would be repeated a year later, incorporated by Debord, Kotányi, and Vaneigem into their

theses on the Paris Commune of 1871.³⁴ Within the context of what the SI perceived as the failure of the classical workers' movement, especially its dependency upon the political representation of the party and the state, the "festival" of the commune would be claimed as "the one realization of a revolutionary urbanism" (that is, "until us," the SI added with characteristic flair). From this perspective, the destructive side of the commune demonstrated a radical recognition of the political aspects of social space, a refusal to believe "that a monument could be innocent."³⁵ Rather than a nihilistic acting out of *ressentiment*, it was an act of freedom. Precisely when the Communards abstained from destruction, they proved themselves still beholden to the "old world," its "ideology, language, customs, and tastes." The *nondestruction* of the Bank of France or the Notre Dame cathedral was a symptom of the continued grip of "the myth of property and theft": "The Paris Commune was defeated less by force of arms than by force of habit."³⁶

The destruction of alienated forms of circulation, of communication, would also entail a project for the destruction of cinema as such, its dominant mode of organization, its ordering of time and space. Indeed, in Debord's 1952 Lettrist film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (Howls for Sade), the screen is emptied out: seventy-five minutes devoid of visual representation, the film has a mere twenty minutes of dialogue, shifting back and forth from white screen to black screen, until the final twenty-four minutes of total darkness and silence. If at first blush this description of alternating black-and-white screens suggests the American avant-garde's purging of the cinema, *Hurlements* is *not* an experience of what Annette Michelson describes as the American avant-garde's iconoclastic cinephilia, a desire for cinema in "the guise of metacinema."³⁷ *Hurlements* is an anticinema, one that forcefully refracts attention from the film to the institutionalized space of cinema in order to, as Keith Sanborn writes, "utterly annihilate the cinema as we know it," especially in its use of magnetic tape in place of black leader, the former totally dark and silent as it passes through the projector, thereby creating "a palpable, eerie void." Compared to Debord's antifilm, Sanborn observes, Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer* (1958–1960) and Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* (1966) are "orgiastic feast[s] for the senses."³⁸

However, according to Debord in 1957, *Hurlements* was a transitional film.³⁹ Of the various possibilities of film, a temporal medium particularly privy to discontinuities and rupture in its representation of reality, the SI would speak especially of its capacity for dereifying the experience of the present, for studying the present as "a historical problem."⁴⁰ Arguing for the necessity of adopting technologies of reproduction, Debord proposed "a new documentary school": "The systematic con-

Guy Debord. *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps*, 1959. Frame enlargement.



struction of situations having to generate previously nonexistent feelings, the cinema will discover its greatest pedagogical role in the diffusion of these new passions.”⁴¹ Thus, in his first situationist film, Debord returns to visual representation after its radical annihilation—a step back, a change of tactic,

from anticinema to countercinema, in sum, a different modality of negation.⁴² The question was how to make negation register and resonate.

3. “We can never really challenge any form of social organization without challenging all of that organization’s forms of language.”⁴³

Debord’s film *Sur le passage* is a detoured documentary about the LI. Not merely an accounting for the SI’s past, its origin, it is also an accounting for the language of documentary, its form, as part of a critique of the current state of communication. The film begins as one might expect: an establishing shot of the neighborhood of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, a photograph of the subjects of the film. However, as Debord points out in a letter to André Frankin, the film becomes increasingly unclear, disappointing.⁴⁴ The narration of the three voices seems ever more excessive and inadequate in relation to the images. The use of detoured phrases is predominant in the first half of the film’s narration, as is the commentary of Voice 1 and its dry, monotonous sociological analyses about the group, about “them” (rather than “we,” as in the case of Voice 2 and Voice 3). As the spectator struggles through the narration, we also sense the distance between text and image, between what we are told and what we see, which gives the image a blunt, obtuse silence. “Our camera has captured for you a few aspects of a provisional micro-society,” we are told, but the visual representations of the group throughout the film remain mute. The film presents no recordings of interviews or dialogues; persons pass by unnamed and unheard. For instance, in the case of the oft-reproduced still photograph that introduces the subjects of the film (Michèle Bernstein, Asger Jorn, Colette Gaillard, and Debord), the camera attempts to animate the static image with close-ups and pans from one detail to another, framing and reframing: from the wine spilled on the table to the faces of the individuals to their hands to a still-held cigarette stub to their eyes and back to the glass of wine. The movement of the camera effects an awkward, anxious study of the surface of the still photograph. But the static image of the group retains its relative indifference to such attempts at animation, its distance toward voices that



attempt to speak about them. The initial scene of the group photograph is itself one of slight disturbance, as if the photographer had happened on the group by chance. The camera movements then speak *not* of the erotics of filmic framing, of seeing and not-seeing, which

Christian Metz compares to that of the striptease, “wandering framings (wandering like the look, like the caress).”⁴⁵ Rather, the affect is one of confusion, a blind fumbling about on the surface, or, as Voice 2 intones, “groping in the dark”: “Human beings are not fully conscious of their real lives.”⁴⁶

The imbalance of text and image increases until the first break to a blank white screen at the midpoint of the film, as if the image has finally fallen apart underneath the unwieldy weight of a text that attempts to speak for it. Indeed, the narration is but an attempt: it is broken up into the incoherence of “somewhat apathetic and tired-sounding voices.”⁴⁷ The narration splits into three modalities, shifting back and forth from “they” to “we”: the monotone of sociological analysis; the more subdued tone of retrospection; and the clear, stern, but fragile tone of negation. Voice 1 is that of the announcer (Jean Harnoi), Voice 2 of Debord, and Voice 3 of the “*fille très jeune*” or very young girl (Claude Brabant).⁴⁸ This exhaustion of narration is characteristic of Debord’s films. For example, in *Hurléments*, five voices speak in fits and starts in a loosely structured discussion, randomly careening from one theme to another, disrupted by ever-more-extended periods of silence. *Critique de la séparation* (Critique of Separation, 1961) includes a “drunken monologue,” “with its incomprehensible allusions and tiresome delivery. With its vain phrases that do not await response and its overbearing explanations. And its silences.”

The interruption of the first break to a blank white screen coincides with Debord’s claim that if we are to challenge a social order, its form of organization, we must also challenge all of its forms of language. In particular, the problem of documentaries is “the arbitrary limitation of their subject,” how they frame and circumscribe their subject, how they isolate it from the complexity of its moment.⁴⁹ They thereby reify the “passage” of the group into the “past,” the “memory” of a subject; this detachment from the passage of time allows one to render it past, to recall it as if it is dead and done, to substitute for it a spectacle—the spectacle as a “paralysis” of history, of memory.⁵⁰

Take, for instance, the spectacle of official history, that of “the men of order,” “embellishing their system with funereal ceremonies of the past.”⁵¹ *Sur le passage* cuts to a stream of detoured footage of the settler

Opposite and right:
Guy Debord. *Sur le passage de
quelques personnes à travers
une assez courte unité de temps*,
1959. Frame enlargements.



demonstrations in Algiers, May 1958, the generals of the coup d'état (Jacques Massu, Raoul Salan), white-gloved paratroopers, then de Gaulle speaking at a podium emblazoned with the emblem of the republic, pounding it with his fist. In addition to such “stars of decision,” the film also shows the “stars of consumption.”⁵² A Monsavon soap advertisement features the actress Anna Karina as the new *jeune fille*, her hands turning over each other in white foam. The advertisement returns repeatedly in the final part of the film, hampering and weighing down the film’s montage, dominating it.⁵³ “The advertisements during intermission,” Voice 2 states, “are the truest reflection of an intermission from life.”⁵⁴ Or, there is also the spectacle of the city. Through a succession of jump cuts, the film presents the pedestrian traffic on Boulevard Saint Michel as the resignation of the people on the streets, those heedless to the policing of their time and space, for whom “duty had already become a habit, and habit a duty,” following the selfsame paths to work, to home, “to their predictable future.”⁵⁵ Cut, cut, cut: the suggestion is of being stuck in time, incapable of moving forward or backward, forced to walk the same, short path, over and over again, as in some Sisyphian torture.



The jump cuts are juxtaposed to the length and scale—the sweep—of the detoured footage of protestors in Japan struggling with the police in the streets, and footage of such struggles from elsewhere become more numer-

ous in the second half of the film. As Debord states in his subsequent film, *Critique de la séparation*,

This dominant equilibrium [of the spectacle] is brought back into question each time unknown people try to live differently. But it was always far away. We learn of it through the papers and newscasts. We remain outside it, relating to it as just another spectacle. We are separated from it by our own nonintervention. And end up being rather disappointed in ourselves. At what moment was choice postponed? When did we miss our chance?⁵⁶

For the SI, the problem of circulation was linked to a decomposition of communication, a collapse in the back and forth of exchange, a division of labor in the form of a unidirectional imposition, “which in the end confirms the more general division in industrial society . . . between those who organize time and those who consume it.”⁵⁷ As a significant example of such noncommunication, the SI points to the inability of the French mainstream Left to see or hear the relation between the workers of France and of Algeria, between *potential* revolt in the metropolis and *current* revolt in the colony. As violence escalated in the Algerian war, Roland Barthes also underscored the axiomatic character of French discourse regarding its “African affairs,” emphasizing a decomposition, an exhaustion of language, a discourse that no longer functioned as communication but as intimidation. He cites, for example, the excessive use of the word *destiny* to relate France to Algeria, to sanctify the relation as both necessary and self-evident, “a conjunction performed by Providence”—precisely at the moment when that relation is being radically contested.⁵⁸ This exhaustion of language, Barthes points out, has peculiar characteristics: “It destroys the verb and inflates the noun. Here moral inflation bears on neither objects nor actions, but always on ideas, ‘notions,’ whose assemblage obeys less a communication purpose than the necessity of a petrified code.”⁵⁹ For the SI, noncommunication is specifically aligned with the absence of action, with the destruction of verbs and inflation of nouns: “Communication is only ever found in action taken in common. And the most striking cases of massive misunderstanding are thus linked to massive nonintervention.”⁶⁰ The

Opposite and right:
Guy Debord. *Sur le passage de
quelques personnes à travers
une assez courte unité de temps*,
1959. Frame enlargements.



SI's privileged example of such massive noncommunication is the French mainstream Left's general lack of engagement with Algeria, any limited engagement itself being circumscribed by myths of past political struggle (for instance, the Popular Front) and the displacement of the *specificity* of Algerian independence with the morality, the generality of antifascism, humanitarianism, "peace." In particular, the SI points to the significant difference in the Left's responses to the massacre of the Algerian demonstrators on October 17, 1961, and the deaths of the nine French antifascist protestors on February 8, 1962, in Charonne: the former were erased, the latter mythologized.⁶¹ Absence of action, inflation of nouns, destruction of verbs—these are reflected in the paratactic structure of Debord's film, its seeming lack or looseness of relations between the detourned images, sounds, and texts.

4. "The cinema, too, must be destroyed."⁶²

Voice 2: Once again, morning in the same streets. Once again the fatigue of so many similarly passed nights. It is a walk that has lasted a long time.

Voice 1: Really hard to drink more.

THE SCREEN BECOMES BLANK WHITE.⁶³

As part of "the withering away of all the alienated forms of communication," Voice 3 declares, "the cinema, too, must be destroyed."⁶⁴ After the break to the first blank white screen, *Sur le passage* dissolves into ever-increasing complexity, with eight more breaks, intertitles, and references to the activities of the LI dispersed amid a variety of detourned footage. In the letter to Frankin, Debord explains, "The question is, then: so what's the subject? Which is, I think, a break in the routine of the spectacle, an irritating and disconcerting break."⁶⁵ The break dissociates our habituated modes of perception and experience, action and reaction, of relating to the world and to oneself—especially those modes through which one constitutes and recognizes oneself as a subject. Such dissociations have an affective force through which one is confronted by a scene that one cannot recognize, that cannot be acculturated into one's order of things, that is seemingly not meaningful—and thereby brings forth the question, What does it mean? What is it trying to tell me? What is it asking of me? Instead of a documentary centered on the subject of the LI, with the LI as subject, *Sur le passage* presents a "confused totality":

“imagine the full complexity of a moment that is not resolved into a work, a moment whose development contains interrelated facts and values and whose meaning is not yet apparent.”⁶⁶ The movement of the film, then, is not toward the resolution of a work but is a decentering that moves the spectator beyond itself. As Debord explains, “It is this rather slow movement of unveiling, of negation that I attempted as a plan for *On the Passage*.”⁶⁷ However, he adds, the shortness of the film is a limitation—the inadequacy of the one-reeler and its predilection for “a perfectly measured expression”—when the aim of the film is to withstand such measurement and endure, discharge, then expire. The film ends or rather expires with yet another break to a blank white screen that persists for twenty seconds after the last word.

To discharge then to expire: we could claim that this film *about* a *dérive* of the LI, “the passage of a few persons through a rather brief unity of time,” also refers to the *temporality* of the *dérive*. Here the *dérive* is understood also as a method by which to systematize a different temporality, not that of mobility and speed of circulation but that of the encounter. The *dérive* is here also a different mode of remembering, neither represented by an image of collective memory nor even by the ideal of a common time.⁶⁸ As in Khatib’s case study of the Les Halles quarter, if the SI’s techniques of *dérive* and psychogeography are in part influenced by the vocabulary of Chombart de Lauwe’s social geography, they diverge from the sociologist’s emphasis on the importance that monuments, representations of collective memory, hold for social cohesion. For the SI, the aim would not have been for social cohesion as such. In technical notes to *Sur le passage*, Debord claims his refusal to shoot a monument, thus the necessity to shoot from the monument’s point of view in order to avoid its appearance in the frame. He also speaks approvingly of his Belgian colleague Marcel Mariën’s plans to mislay or multiply statues with a bid to their irrelevance and disappearance, particularly of the proposal to disarray all statues of emperors, kings, and princes in the middle of a desert and there compose “a rather amusing cavalry of ghosts.” Mariën declares, “To hell with history and dates, with their useless lessons! No need, then, to arrange them chronologically or even in alphabetical order, as in dictionaries. Helter-skelter, any which way would be all the better—like on the battlefield—and let the wolves finally devour each other.”⁶⁹ Debord adds that this cavalry could even serve a pedagogical purpose as a “monument” to “the greatest slaughterers of history.”⁷⁰ Monuments will be avoided, detoured, or devoured.

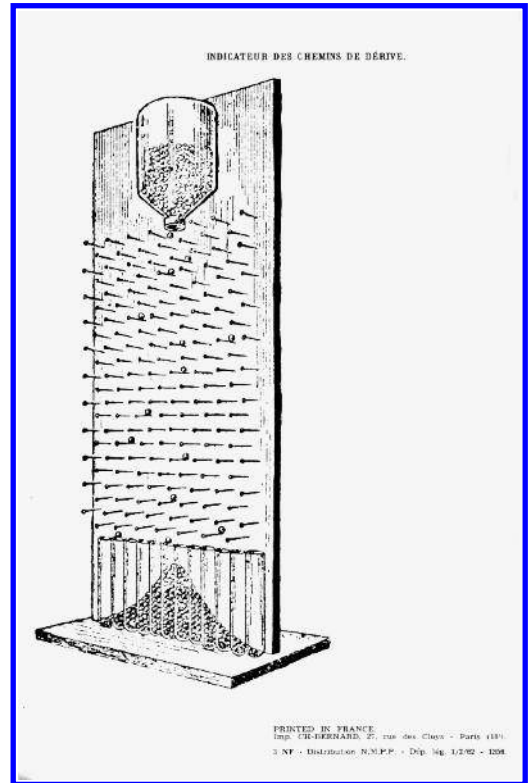
In place of monuments or any other spectacles of history, memory, or time, the SI underscores the churning force of the turntable (*la plaque tournante*), its force of attraction, its effects of seduction and diversion,

Detoured illustration. From *International situationniste 7* (1962).

as well as its collective effect, drawing in the crowd, a locus of multiple and diverse exchanges. Pointing to the various connotations of the term *la plaque tournante*—the circular revolving platform of a railway turntable, but also a pivot, a place of exchange—Simon Sadler describes how the psychogeographical maps present zones such as Les Halles and the neighboring Plateau Beaubourg as a literal turntable for the *dérive*, “arrows fanning out in seven directions,” while arrows recoil from the Pantheon or the Val de Grâce. “If some unities were turntables, the others were termini.”⁷¹ The *dérive* is not simply an experience of release; it is also shaped by psychogeographical variations, “with constant currents, fixed points,

and vortexes that make approaching or exiting certain zones very difficult.”⁷² Chance, Debord insists, has but a minor role, a heuristic function that will disappear with the advance of the technique of *dérive* and psychogeography. What will be outlined is an “objective field of passion” with its breaks, microclimates, quarters, and centers of attraction. One of the metaphors of the *dérive*—reprinted twice in the SI’s journal, *International situationniste 1* (1958) and *International situationniste 7* (1962)—is the Galton apparatus, or pinball machine, a device developed by Francis Galton in the early 1870s for the demonstration of the formation of Gaussian distribution or the bell curve. However, for the SI, its significance was not the figure of the final distribution of the balls but the field of passage within the grid of the apparatus. As Jorn writes, “What is the longest path between two specific points? What is the maximum amount of play or deviation in a movement?”⁷³ What is important is the time-space between positions, the in-between, no longer simply a *ground* to be traversed from one position to another but a *field*, a “force-field” activated by bodies in *dérive*, the turntable less as destination than as inducer of movement, of attraction or repulsion.⁷⁴

The *dérive* focuses on the variation and duration of movement, on forms of play, particularly the process in which play emerges within and against the rules of the grid, adding, accumulating contingencies of play until the rules buckle. That is, *before* the *dérive* is cut short by a discriminatory curfew that prohibits movement from nine o’clock in the evening until six in the morning, as in the case of Khatib’s *dérives*, or by the jump cuts of the Parisian streets, the “permanent curfew of geometry.” If the temporal-spatial continuum of the *dérive* is stopped short by a cut, it also *provokes* the cut, brings forth the force-field, the time-space of the body



that is fitfully captured and contained by the grid. The *dérive* and its arrest, to paraphrase Frantz Fanon, *bodies forth* the muscular dreams of the colonial subject, of “the man penned in.”⁷⁵ Referring to the colonial situation in Algeria, Fanon describes the colonial world as compartmentalized, a world divided in two—not two halves of complementary coexistence but of “mutual exclusion.” In the colonies, the dividing line is immediate, rendered palpably, viscerally apparent through violence, “the proximity and frequent, direct intervention of the police and the military.”⁷⁶ In the metropolis, the line is mediated, displaced, and dispersed; it is, as the SI would argue, the colonization of everyday life. The division is not only spatial but also temporal. According to Fanon, if the colonist’s sector is characterized by solidity, “all stone and steel,” it is also dynamic, full of narrative agency: “the colonist makes history.” However, the temporality of the colonized, “the man penned in,” is that of an eternal present, of “nature.” The colonized is condemned to immobility:

Hence the dreams of the colonial subject are muscular dreams. . . . I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, and climbing. I dream I burst out laughing, I am leaping across a river and chased by a pack of cars that never catches up with me. During colonization the colonized subject frees himself night after night between nine in the evening and six in the morning.⁷⁷

In “Theory of the *Dérive*,” Debord dwells on the duration of the *dérive*, drawing attention to how its average duration is one day, “the interval of time contained between two periods of sleep.”⁷⁸ This day does not conform to the time of the clock, however, but to that of the body, its vitality, the capacity of bodies to persist together, the persistence of the body until the hoped-for encounter—or the body’s collapse. The *dérive* ends with the fatigue of the body, when the need for sleep or bad weather—say, a prolonged rainfall—leaves one incapable of being attuned to the affective responses of one’s body to the variations of psychogeography.

This temporality of the *dérive* is specifically resistant to the abstractions of capital and bodies forth what such abstraction represses. In Karl Marx’s lengthy chapter on the working day in *Capital*, volume one, class struggle is not only a struggle over the limits of the working day but over the limits of the body as such; it is a struggle in which the boundaries of the body are rendered “extremely elastic,” flexible, adaptable yet resilient: the boundary of the body as a problem of force. As Fredric Jameson notes, “‘The Working Day’ (Chapter 10) is not about work at all: it is about the impossibility of work at the extremes, and about the body at the brink of exhaustion.”⁷⁹ Thus, in this chapter, we see the sheer

weight of that system, the force of capital's voracious appetite for surplus value, which must be borne by people, by bodies—a collage of testimonies from factory inspectors about bodies at the limit. Capital's consumption of labor-power is literalized as the consumption, the wearing away of the body through the shortening and suffocation of breath. We witness, for instance, the wasting away of the milliners—their long hours, an uninterrupted stretch at an average of sixteen and a half hours to thirty hours, the stifling conditions of their place of work and sleep, “only one third of the necessary quantity of air.” There is also the blacksmith who is able “to strike so many blows per day, walk so many more steps, breathe so many breaths, produce so much work” but is compelled “to strike so many more blows, to walk so many more steps, to breathe so many more breaths per day,” and thereby dies a premature death. Marx's staggering point is that capital is seemingly capable of overcoming even this limit with the development of automation that renders the labor “abstract”: “Every boundary set by morality and nature, age and sex, day and night, was broken down. . . . Capital was celebrating its orgies.”⁸⁰

The *dérive*, then, is part and parcel of the SI's prescient recognition of “a battle over leisure,” a new battle over the length of the working day, *not* in the reduction of time of work but in the resistance to the extension of the disciplinary power of work into the realm of leisure. The SI sought a time of play that resists the discipline of the timetable; that is, a time attuned to the body, its affectivity—as opposed to the abstractions of capital. Thus, the average duration of a *dérive* is but a matter of statistics. What defines the *dérive* is its intensity: “above all *dérive* often unfolds in a few, deliberately fixed, hours, or even fortuitously during fairly brief moments, or on the contrary over several days without interruption.”⁸¹ The point is its action on comportment, the transformation of norms of behavior, its bid for a new ethics of living, for new passions: “The passions have been interpreted enough: the point is now to discover others.”⁸²

Voice 2: The point is to understand what has been done and all that remains to be done, not to add more ruins to the old world of spectacles and memories.

THE SCREEN BECOMES BLANK WHITE AND REMAINS SO UNTIL TWENTY SECONDS AFTER THE LAST WORD.⁸³

Notes

In the course of writing this essay I benefited from the support of Pavle Levi, Tom Gunning, Anne Kern, Ron Clark, Kiersten Jakobsen, Una Chung, Jeannine Tang, and Nicole Morse. I also thank the editor of this special issue, Jason Smith, for his continued encouragement. I am particularly grateful to Tom McDonough and Steven Lam for their thorough and generous readings. My especial thanks to Kenneth White.

1. Attila Kotányi and Raoul Vaneigem, "Unitary Urbanism," in *Leaving the 20th Century: The Incomplete Work of the Situationist International*, ed. and trans. Christopher Gray (London: Rebel Press, 1998), 26.

2. Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive" (1956/1958), in *The Situationists and the City*, ed. and trans. Tom McDonough (London: Verso, 2009), 78.

3. Abdelhafid Khatib, "Attempt at a Psychogeographical Description of Les Halles" (1958), trans. Paul Hammond, Situationist International Online, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/leshalles.html>. For the original French, see Abdelhafid Khatib, "Essai de description psychogéographique des Halles," *International situationniste* 2 (December 1958), 13–18.

4. "Hemmed in by mutilated streets, decked out in the worst panoply of postmodernism, these 'spaces' transform the old itineraries into assault courses, by their complex arrangement of metal barriers, ventilation columns, walkways overlooking ditches of wretched plantations, the orifices of underground roads, and fountains clogged up with empty drink cans." Eric Hazan, *The Invention of Paris: A History in Footsteps*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2010), 47.

5. Khatib, "Attempt at a Psychogeographical Description of Les Halles," 18.

6. Jim House and Neil MacMaster, *Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror, and Memory* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 72–73.

7. Guy Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the Terms of Organization and Action of the International Situationist Tendency" (1957), in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 46.

8. From the first issue of the *International situationniste* in 1958, the SI underscored the vertiginous proximity between their actions on affective comportment and that of the police. "It is the humanistic, artistic, juridical conception of the unalterable, inviolable personality that is utterly condemned here, and we watch its departure with pleasure. But it should be understood that we plan to dive headlong into the race *between free artists and the police to experiment with and develop the use of the new techniques of conditioning.*" "Editorial Notes: The Struggle for the Control of the New Techniques of Conditioning" (1958), trans. Reuben Keehan, Situationist International Online, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/struggle.html>. For the original French, see "Notes editoriales: La lutte pour la contrôle des nouvelles techniques de conditionnement," *International situationniste* 2 (June 1958), 8.

9. Debord, "Theory of the Dérive," 85.

10. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes toward an Investigation" (1970), trans. Ben Brewster, in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 118. See also Judith Butler, "Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All: Althusser's Subjection," in *The Psychic Life of Power* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 106–131. Butler, in particular, addresses the

significance of the automatic character between the call and the individual/subject's response.

11. See Pierre Macherey, "Figures of Interpellation in Althusser and Fanon," *Radical Philosophy* 173 (May/June 2012): 9–20. My essay draws on Macherey's incisive analysis of the dynamics of Althusser's model of interpellation via its contrast to the model described in Frantz Fanon's *Peau noires, masques blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*, 1952). Macherey underscores the importance of the Sartrean concept of situation for Fanon, and opposes Fanon's subject in a situation to Althusser's subject in general. "The question that must be asked, and which Althusser does not ask, is whether or not this analysis [of the overdetermination of a subject in a colonial situation] is applicable to all cases; that is, whether to be a subject is not always to be a specified subject, a normed subject, a subject for and under norms, identified from the outset according to criteria imposed by the situation . . . , criteria that simultaneously draw both their (apparent) legitimacy and their (real) efficacy from the situation" (18–19). For the SI, if the situation functions as an overdetermined scene, the aim would be to change a situation, to construct new ones. Referring to the eleventh thesis of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845)—oft appropriated in SI literature—the SI criticized Jean-Paul Sartre and "existential passivity" for keeping the concept of situation within the bounds of philosophy. "Up till now philosophers and artists have only interpreted situations, the point now is to transform them." "Questionnaire" (1964), in *Situationist International Anthology*, rev. and exp. ed., ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 178.

12. Guy Debord, *On the Passage of a Few Persons through a Rather Brief Unity of Time* [film script], trans. Ken Knabb, in *Complete Cinematic Works: Scripts, Stills, Documents*, ed. Ken Knabb (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2003), 15; translation modified.

13. "The broadening of our forces and the possibility (and necessity) of genuinely international action must lead us to profoundly change our tactics. We must no longer lead an external opposition based only on the future development of issues close to us, but seize hold of modern culture in order to use it for our own ends." Guy Debord, "One Step Back" (1957), in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, 25–27.

14. Debord, *On the Passage*, 15.

15. Debord, *On the Passage*, 17.

16. Debord, *On the Passage*, 15.

17. Émile Zola, *The Belly of Paris*, trans. Brian Nelson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 124–125. The SI's privileging of Les Halles has a more immediate precedent in surrealism than in Zola.

18. Zola, *The Belly of Paris*, 275.

19. Zola, *The Belly of Paris*, 189.

20. Tom McDonough, introduction to *The Situationists and the City*, 14–16.

21. Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations," 44.

22. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 40.

23. House and MacMaster, *Paris 1961*, 99–101. The curfew was in effect each night from half past eight to half past five.

24. Attila Kotányi and Raoul Vaneigem, "Elementary Program of the Unitary Urbanism Office" (1961), in *The Situationists and the City*, 147.

25. Kotányi and Vaneigem, "Elementary Program of the Unitary Urbanism Office," 147.

26. Raoul Vaneigem, "Comments against Urbanism" (1961), in *The Situationists and*

the City, 156.

27. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), 200.

28. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 198.

29. Kotányi and Vaneigem, “Elementary Program of the Unitary Urbanism Office,” 147.

30. Vaneigem, “Comments against Urbanism,” 158.

31. “The Roman slave was held by chains; the wage-laborer is bound to his owner by invisible threads.” Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 719.

32. “All space is occupied by the enemy. We are living under the permanent curfew. Not just the cops—the geometry.” Kotányi and Vaneigem, “Unitary Urbanism,” 26. This translation of “Elementary Program of the Unitary Urbanism Office” speaks to the spirit of the original text.

33. Kotányi and Vaneigem, “Elementary Program of the Unitary Urbanism Office,” 148. Translation of “*trou positif*” modified from “positive void” to “positive hole.” My thanks to Jason Smith for his editorial guidance.

34. Guy Debord, Attila Kotányi, and Raoul Vaneigem, “On the Commune” (1962), in *The Situationists and the City*, 170.

35. Debord, Kotányi, and Vaneigem, “On the Commune,” 170.

36. Debord, Kotányi, and Vaneigem, “On the Commune,” 170.

37. Annette Michelson, “Gnosis and Iconoclasm: A Case Study of Cinephilia,” *October* 83 (Winter 1998): 15.

38. Keith Sanborn, “Return of the Suppressed,” *Artforum* 44, no. 6 (February 2006): 188–189.

39. See Guy Debord, “One More Try if You Want to Be Situationists (The SI *in and against* Decomposition)” (1957), in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, 51–59. A year later, in an editorial note titled “L’absence et ses habilleurs” (Absence and Its Costumers) in *International Situationniste 2, Hurlements* is positioned alongside John Cage’s 4’33” and Yves Klein’s blue monochromes (particularly their recent iteration as revolving disks in *Excavatrice de l’espace*). They are examples of the “exhaustion” of the postwar avant-garde, the SI argued, the radicalism of the historical avant-garde trivialized into a repeatable template, “a hoax”: the reduction of the readymade into a simple signing of a blank, a further fortification of the myth of the artist. “Editorial Notes: Absence and Its Costumers” (1958), in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, 79.

40. René Viénet, “The Situationists and the New Forms of Action against Politics and Art,” in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, 184.

41. Debord, “Report on the Construction of Situations,” 48.

42. See Peter Wollen, “Godard and Counter-Cinema: Vent d’Est” (1972) in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), 79–91. According to this highly influential polemic for a counter-cinema, if the “seven deadly sins” of the dominant mode of cinema (“Hollywood-Mosfilm”) are “narrative transitivity-identification-transparency-single diegesis-closure-pleasure-fiction,” then their revolutionary, materialist counterpoints are the “seven cardinal virtues” of “narrative intransitivity-estrangement-foregrounding-multiple diegesis-aperture-unpleasure-reality.” See also Thomas Y. Levin, “Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord,” in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, 358.

43. Debord, *On the Passage*, 17.

44. Guy Debord to André Frankin, 26 January 1960, in *Correspondence: The Foundation of the Situationist International (June 1957–August 1960)*, trans. Stuart Kendall and John McHale (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 319–323.

45. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 77.

46. Debord, *On the Passage*, 14.

47. Guy Debord, “Technical Notes to the First Three Films,” trans. Ken Knabb, in *Complete Cinematic Works*, 212.

48. Guy Debord, “Fiche technique, Contre le cinéma, août 1964,” in *Oeuvres*, ed. Jean-Louis Rancón and Alice Debord (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 2006), 486. For a perceptive reading of the recurring figure of the new *jeune fille* in SI literature, especially as detoured images in the *Internationale situationniste*, see Jen Kennedy, “Charming Monsters: The Spectacle of Femininity in Postwar France,” *Grey Room* 49 (Fall 2012): 56–79. Kennedy contextualizes the detoured images within a widespread discourse where the predominant appearance of the new young girl in the public sphere embodies various anxieties about postwar French identity.

49. Debord, *On the Passage*, 18.

50. “The spectacle, being the reigning social organization of a paralyzed history, of a paralyzed memory, of an abandonment of any history in historical time, in effect a false consciousness of time.” Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 114. If the theory of the spectacle can be understood as an attempt to displace the traditional concept of ideology and materialize it—“ideology in material form”—it is important to temper a common interpretation of the spectacle as the saturation of mass media (or the de-realization of reality by its simulacra). For an analysis that underscores the centrality of particularly French Hegelian ideas of time, subjectivity, and history in Debord’s theory of the spectacle, see Tom Bunyard, “A Genealogy and Critique of Guy Debord’s Theory of Spectacle” (Ph.D. diss., Goldsmiths, University of London, 2011).

51. Debord, *On the Passage*, 12.

52. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 39.

53. The representation of Anna Karina’s *jeune fille* as a star of consumption is arguably to be placed side by side, say, Claude Brabant’s *jeune fille* as Voice 3—the idealization of the latter qualified by an awareness of the former as fetish. Following Jaleh Mansoor’s astute analysis of Piero Manzoni’s work of 1959–63, we could compare the SI’s ambivalent portrayal of postwar femininity with Manzoni’s *Live Sculpture* series of 1961: “[A]s she is articulated in accordance with the formal logic of classicism and bares an artist’s signature on her skin, she is a *nude*, a cultural template of sorts. Her body, in all of its potential specificity, recedes into the hardened *mold* . That language mapped onto the body, which it then internalizes as it organizes its muscles to hold the configuration, operates as an armature equivalent to this woman’s native skeletal system.” Jaleh Mansoor, “Piero Manzoni: ‘We Want to Organize Disintegration,’” *October* 95 (Winter 2001): 51. Mansoor argues that Manzoni’s *Live Sculpture* could be seen as the reversal of Yves Klein’s *Anthropometrie*, a theatrical freeing of the body that is erased (again) through its spectacularization.

54. Debord, *On the Passage*, 24.

55. Debord, *On the Passage*, 19–20.

56. Debord, *Critique of Separation*, 34.

57. “Editorial Notes: Priority Communication,” in *Guy Debord and the Situationist*

International, 129.

58. Roland Barthes, "African Grammar," in *Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Levers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 153.

59. Barthes, "African Grammar," 157–158.

60. "Editorial Notes: Priority Communication," 130.

61. See House and McMaster, *Paris 1961*, for a genealogy of the repression of the memory of October 1961 within the postwar fragmentation of the French Left.

62. Debord, *On the Passage*, 23.

63. Debord, *On the Passage*, 22.

64. Debord, *On the Passage*, 23.

65. Debord to Frankin, 321.

66. Debord, *On the Passage*, 18. In *Critique de la séparation* Debord contends, "To demystify documentary cinema it is necessary to dissolve what is called its subject [*il faut dissoudre ce que l'on appelle son sujet*]." Debord, *Critique of Separation*, 30. McDonough points out that "Debord played on the double meaning of the term 'subject,' suggesting the need to break up both the carefully circumscribed subject matter of the typical documentary film as well as its existential guarantor, the coherent ego of its author." Tom McDonough, "Calling from the Inside: Filmic Topologies of the Everyday," *Grey Room* 26 (Winter 2007): 19.

67. Debord to Frankin, 321.

68. "The revolutionary project of a classless society, of a generalized historical life, is also the project of a withering away of the social measurement of time in favor of an individual and collective irreversible time which is playful in character and which encompasses, simultaneously present within it, a variety of autonomous yet effectively federated times—the complete realization, in short, within the medium of time, of that communism which 'abolishes everything that exists independently of individuals.'" Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 116–117.

69. Marcel Mariën, "The Commander's Gait" (1955), in *The Situationists and the City*, 58.

70. Guy Debord, "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography" (1955), in *The Situationists and the City*, 63.

71. Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 88–89.

72. Debord, "Theory of the *Dérive*," 78.

73. See Jennifer Fisher Stob, "'With and against Cinema': The Situationist International and the Cinematic Image" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2010), 123. Stob's dissertation presents an analysis of the implications of the differences in the respective driving metaphors of surrealist and situationist practice: the metaphor of "the communicating vessels" for the surrealist and that of the Galton apparatus for the situationists. For more on the Galton apparatus in relation to the *dérive*, see also McKenzie Wark, *The Beach beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and the Glorious Times of the Situationist International* (London: Verso, 2011), 78–79. In discussing how Bernstein's novel *The Night*, a *détournement* of the spectacle of the novel "in its literary form" (à la Alain Robbe-Grillet), is structured around the *dérive* itself, Wark underscores how the novel subordinates the narrative of the story to the description of the situation, "bouncing from one trajectory to the next."

74. Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations," 44.

75. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), trans. Richard Philcox (New York:

Grove Press, 2004), 15.

76. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 4–5. “Looking at the immediacies of the colonial context, it is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what race one belongs to. In the colonies the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. The cause is effect. You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich.”

77. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 15.

78. Debord, “Theory of the Dérive,” 82.

79. Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (London: Verso, 2011), 113. If the existential quality of labor lies outside the realm of capital (and thus outside of Marx’s structural, systemic analysis in *Capital*), “How then will the worker’s side of the story be told?” Via a phenomenological principle, “that what allows an act to come to consciousness is not its success (for then its traces and achievements have simply become part of the world of being as such), as rather its failure, the gesture broken in mid-air, the tool shattered, the stumble and the body’s exhaustion.” Jameson, *Representing Capital*, 112–113.

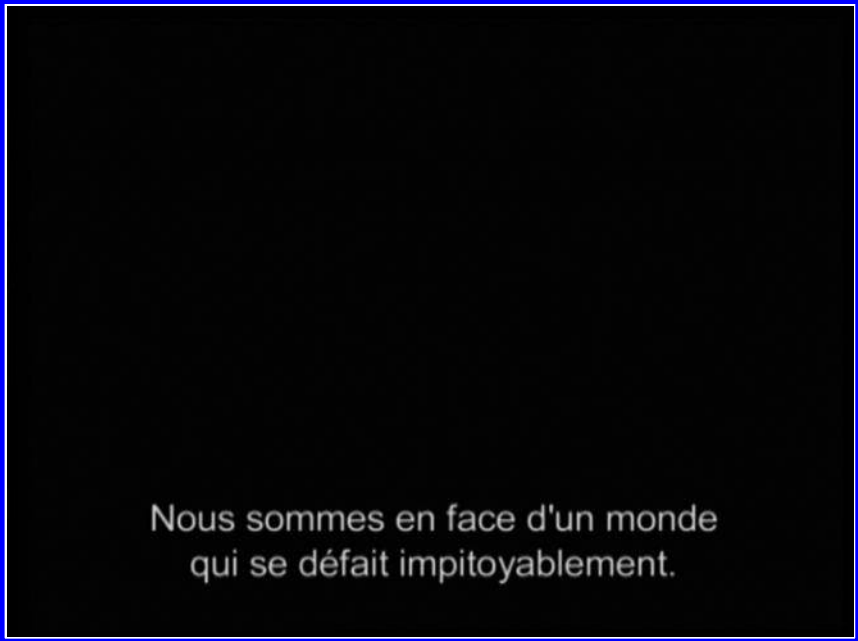
80. Marx, *Capital*, 390.

81. Debord, “Theory of the Dérive,” 82.

82. Debord, “Report on the Construction of Situations,” 50.

83. Debord, *On the Passage*, 24.

Guy Debord.
Critique de la séparation, 1961.
Frame enlargement.



Nous sommes en face d'un monde
qui se défait impitoyablement.

Missed Encounters: *Critique de la séparation* between the Riot and the “Young Girl”

JASON E. SMITH

Guy Debord's 1961 film *Critique de la séparation* (Critique of separation) declares itself to be both a “demystification of documentary” and an “experimental documentary.” The most thoughtful analyses and reflections on this film have treated it accordingly as a documentary film that paradoxically dismantles and exhibits the conventions and ideological presuppositions of the documentary form. Tom McDonough, for example, analyzes the way *Critique de la séparation* engages not simply the generic form of the documentary but what at the time was its most advanced, contemporary variant: the cinéma vérité and what is still often taken as the most important example of this technique, Jean Rouch's *Chronique d'un été* (Chronicle of a summer, 1960).¹ And yet, if Debord's film takes as its ostensible target the contemporary documentary film, the film also proposes other generic possibilities for itself, beyond the form of the documentary.

Take, for example, the final sequence of the film, which consists of a series of still photographs of members of the Situationist International (SI) accompanied by a monologue in Debord's voice. The last part of the monologue, which addresses the way the film will not be able to end properly, is pronounced over shot/reverse-shot sequences of images of the film's credited director, Debord, and the film's de facto producer, Asger Jorn, as if the two were in dialogue.² As Debord states that *Critique de la séparation* is “a film that cuts itself off, but does not finish,” the viewer of the film is compelled to read a series of subtitled statements that resemble the transcript of a private conversation, as if in an editing room, between Debord and Jorn.³ One of the subtitles, flashing on the screen as Jorn's image stares out at us, declares that the film we have just watched—for we are watching not the film itself but its aftermath, a footnote or appendix—is about “private life” and that it is therefore “only normal that a film about ‘private life’ would consist entirely of ‘private jokes.’”⁴ What follows, we must presume, is just such a joke: “We could

make it a series of documentaries, lasting three hours. A sort of ‘serial.’”/ “‘The ‘Mysteries of New York’ of alienation.’”⁵

Les mystères de New York is the French title for one of the more famous film serials of the silent era, *The Exploits of Elaine* (1914), starring Pearl White as the heroine relentlessly tracking down a mysterious villain who has killed her father and who is known by the charming handle “The Clutching Hand.” Like *Critique*, the film serial was much shorter than the feature films with which it was often shown, and it was structured in the form of episodes that could be screened consecutively from week to week, with each installment ending—or rather, not ending—in suspense (the “cliffhanger”). The proposed title might be a private joke alluding to Debord’s own dubious (if reflexively mediated) taste for the pulpier of genre fiction and cultural production, as evidenced by his 1958 book collaboration with Jorn, *Mémoires*, pieced together almost entirely from collaged fragments of science fiction novels, comic strips, *photo-romans*, and *Série Noire* detective novels. The reference to the obsolete, minor form of the film serial from the silent era of cinema’s history also suggests a throwback to a historical form that, once reactivated, *might* be able to demystify contemporary documentary.⁶ And it amounts to a prescient if unintentional nod to a near future in which the serial form will come to be identified not with film but with an increasingly rival medium or apparatus, television.⁷ Nothing forbids us from taking the joke literally, however, and conceiving of the series of short documentaries Debord began in 1959—*Critique de la séparation* would be the second episode in the “‘Mysteries of New York’ of alienation” series, after *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps* (On the passage of a few persons through a rather brief unity of time, 1959)—not simply as documentaries but as crime stories or mysteries as well. With one important specification: the crime in question can, in this case, no longer be located in narrative time or assigned to an individual agent. The crime in question is not this or that murder; it is not a “particular wrong” but what the early Karl Marx calls—in a passage used elsewhere by Debord—the “absolute wrong” of alienation, or of “separation.”⁸

But this is not all. For if *Critique de la séparation* is at once a documentary about “private life” and a crime story without solution, it also presents itself as a stereotypical love story starring a mysterious young heroine who perhaps distantly echoes the Elaine of *The Exploits* but more closely resem-



Right and opposite: Guy Debord.
Critique de la séparation, 1961.
Frame enlargements.

bles André Breton's *Nadja*. As with all of Debord's films, a great deal of *Critique de la séparation* is composed of stolen, borrowed, or detoured images or film fragments from newsreels, advertisements, or print media, among other sources. But unlike his other films—in particular the best-known among them, the 1973 film version of *La société du spectacle* (*The Society of the Spectacle*) and 1978's *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*—Debord's film from 1961 uses no footage from the history of cinema. Instead, Debord overlays his appropriated footage of young women in bikinis, Congolese riots, and strafing American warplanes with an apparently fictional narrative, shot on 35 mm film by cinematographer André Mrulgaski, of Debord—or a “character” played by him—pursuing a young girl through the streets of Paris. At times she slips away entirely, as in the opening “trailer” sequence of the film, where she is briefly glimpsed by a camera mounted in a moving car. At times she is held by the camera she faces, muted, her voice deprived of sound as she speaks (as in old silent films), or crowded out by Debord's imposed monologue, which addresses not her but the viewers of the film. The conventions of narrative fictional film would oblige us to separate the filmmaker Debord from both the voice of the film's commentary and from the “character” played by Debord, a man in his late twenties pursuing a young girl who appears to be no more than seventeen. This de rigueur separation of fictional instances is complicated by the fact that we glimpse, at one point, Debord's actual wife and the sole female founding member of the SI (Michèle Bernstein) accompanying the young girl, as if herself a part of the story, playing the role of procurer, seducer, or rival. Bernstein wrote two novels during the period Debord made this film. They appropriate not specific texts (as does Debord in, say, *Mémoires*) but entire genres and their conventions.⁹ Her stories center on the classical eighteenth-century literary theme of the love triangle, and if we take this into consideration we are forced to address the ambiguity of the apparently fictional layer of the film: we sense that *Critique de la séparation* both records and is a pretext for, rather than a simulation of, Debord's and perhaps Bernstein's actual seduction of the young girl who concentrates so much of the energy and focus of the film.

Who—or what—is this young girl? In a way, the real mystery the film

pursues is just this question. The young girl speaks (is heard) once in the film, but not within the diegetic “reality” produced by the fictional structure of the love story. Instead, her voice is heard at the beginning of the film, recit-



ing what might be called its epigraph: a passage from the linguist André Martinet about the “dissociation” of language and reality. The *jeune fille*, or wayward, underage girl, is a constant thematic reference in Debord’s films, from *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (Howls for Sade, 1952) through his final great film, *In girum*. But in his first two films, *Hurlements* and *Sur le passage*, the young girl (and youth and sexual difference more generally) is not only a thematic reference. In these two films, the young girl is first and foremost a voice interacting, dialectically, with other voices. In *Sur le passage*, for example, Debord’s own voice, described in the technical notes for the film as “sad and subdued,” is not the only voice but is staged in relation to other voices, one explicitly identified as that of a “young girl.”¹⁰ This early pluralization of voices necessarily emphasizes the dramatic or fictional structure of Debord’s own voice, denying it the privilege of its centrality or status as a source of theoretical or analytical propositions. Debord’s voice is one *tone* among others, melancholic and resigned, set off against the stereotyped “announcer’s” voice of the other male voice and the punctuation of the girl’s voice. As the two male voices occupy the conventional poles of objective neutrality and subjective lyricism, the exact place of the girl’s voice in this *Wechsel der Töne* is not easily circumscribed. The young girl is here often used to channel texts that are particularly discordant for her voice and age, seemingly *ironizing* them. She ventriloquizes, for example, the voice of Lenin speaking of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” in a text that, moreover, denounces what Lenin calls the “infantile” disorders of left-wing Communism—a political orientation with which Debord and the SI would identify, particularly in the period immediately following 1961.

Documentary, joke, serial, detective story, or fictionalized love triangle: *Critique de la séparation* cites and at times deploys all of these genres in its pursuit of the mysteries of alienation. And yet, unlike Debord’s first two films, here the “subject of enunciation” organizing the film is no longer fragmented through a plurality of fictional voices, tones, generations, and genders. Now, the authority of the voice is consolidated in Debord’s monologue, and the play of fictions and genres seems organized around this voice and its generic correlate, the documentary. The young girl who interrupted and disoriented the dialogue between men in *Sur le passage* no longer speaks, having passed over into the frame of the film. Now dumb, she is assigned the role of a “signal” that “emanat[es] from a more intense life.”¹¹



“For example, I don’t speak of her.” Guy Debord. *Critique de la séparation*, 1961. Frame enlargement.

From its first lines, *Critique de la séparation* declares its theme: loss. The opening sequence of the film, for example, concludes with a frame of a comic strip depicting a woman speaking of failure and a jeep sinking in the mud of a swamp, accompanied by Debord's voice-over asking "What veritable project has been lost?"¹² The form of the question underlines not only the failure or defeat of the project but an uncertainty about the nature and existence of the project itself. For the next fifteen minutes, the film returns again and again to this theme, of projects that have failed and adventures that lost their way. In this way, *Critique de la séparation* is indeed a sequel to *Sur le passage*, which is also concerned with the failure of the "few people" of its title to accomplish the projects they formulated in 1952, when the Lettrist International first formed. *Critique de la séparation* speaks in particular of loss and its relation to time: of "empty time" that spools out without incident, of "lost moments" and "wasted time" in which opportunities that will never return are missed, and more generally of time that "slips away" or that *we*—Debord, the revolutionary movement, his age as a whole—have *let* slip away. Time was there for the taking, Debord's voice-over melancholically recounts, but the time of the present, the time of the spectacle, is organized in such a way that every real encounter, every true opening in history is *missed*: "we have invented nothing," "when did we miss our chance?"¹³

In one of the more developed lyrical passages in the script—so many of the lines Debord utters seem like fragments, shards, phrases surrounded by a phantom, missing context—we find this theme of loss linked to an insistent figure in Debord's writing: not the young girl but the child, the *enfant*:

All that concerns the sphere of loss—which is also to say what I have lost of myself, time that has past; and disappearance, flight or escape [*fuite*]; and more generally the passing away of things, and even in the most dominant social sense, in therefore the most vulgar sense of the scheduling of time what is called wasted time—is strangely encountered in this old military expression "like lost children," encountering the sphere of discovery, of the exploration of an unknown terrain; all the forms of seeking, of adventure, of the avant-garde. It is at this crossroads that we find and lose ourselves and each other [C'est à ce carrefour que nous nous sommes trouvés, et perdus].¹⁴

Whatever one makes of his fundamental theses regarding Debord's life, work, and politics, Vincent Kaufman was surely right to organize the

entire trajectory of Debord's work around the expression and theme of "lost children."¹⁵ The military sense of the expression *les enfants perdus* refers to a detachment of soldiers sent well ahead of the regular troops, often behind enemy lines and generally with the understanding that their mission would be fatal or *forlorn* (the proper English translation of this expression, which loses the reference to children, is "forlorn hope").¹⁶ What I want to underline in this particular reference to *les enfants perdus* is simply the way the notion of the *encounter* is paradoxically conjugated with that of loss or escape: the vague contours of the sphere of loss are here given the concrete image of crossroads in which "we" at once find and lose one another. This general figure of a crossroads and a missed encounter—of a time or age that somehow "loses" itself—is what the film's and Debord's *tracking* of the young girl (first glimpsed at a crossroads in the film's opening sequence) appears to emblemize.

What "veritable" project, then, has been lost? *Critique de la séparation* is clear on this matter: that of "contesting the totality" of the capitalist order through the project of "collectively dominat[ing]" the environment: the natural world, the city, the conditions of existence more generally.¹⁷ What is at stake in this domination of the environment is not simply a collectively controlled and managed production of use-values. The *collective* domination of the environment is paradoxically the condition for the production of what Debord, closely following Marx, calls "real *individuals*"—and, more precisely, *real encounters among them*.¹⁸ The name for these encounters is an affective one, what Debord and the Lettrists and early situationists constantly refer to as "passions." The condition for real encounters in which a passion can crystallize is the collective capacity to "make our history" and to freely create situations. The term *situation* names a crossroads or encounter between rationality and contingency; it describes the specific kind of space and time that must be constructed by rational means in order to make possible the tangential, the contingent, the real encounter that alone can produce passions.

What *Critique de la séparation* calls the spectacle—founded on the operation of separation—is the programmed preemption of precisely these encounters. In an important text published in the SI's journal just after Debord's film appeared, Attila Kotanyi and Raoul Vaneigem argue that the modern city is organized around the logic of circulation: circulation is "the opposite of encounter."¹⁹ *Critique de la séparation* declares that what the spectacular city proscribes are chance *encounters* between real individuals, replacing them with the arbitrary *exchange* of things "haunted" by ghosts or "shadows."²⁰ Communism, for Marx as for Debord, is the name for a mode of existence in which collective domination of nature opens the path to real, passionate encounters among individuals.

But under the conditions of the spectacle, “some encounters,” Debord’s voice-over intones (as we again see the face of the young girl his character pursues through the urban fabric), are “like signals coming from a more intense life that has not truly been found.”²¹

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The structure of *Critique de la séparation* is determined by its avowal that it is a film that begins and “cuts itself off” for no reason, with no narrative or formal motivation. And yet this torso of a film includes an “ending” that speculates on the genre of the film, and it opens with a sequence of images that are meant to look like a trailer. These images are not referred to in Debord’s script, and they reappear at crucial points throughout the film, their uncertain combination suggesting a clue to deciphering both the thematic trajectory of the film as well as the logic of its construction.

Consider the first three images: a photograph of a young blonde girl in a bikini, taken from a print source; newsreel footage of a “riot” in the Belgian Congo; and footage shot by Debord of the young girl glimpsed with a car-mounted camera. The specificity of these images is important. And yet, whatever the *content* of the respective images, Debord is also presenting them in this sequence as the different *types* of images—and textures, temporalities, modes of production and distribution—that his film(s) will use. Which is to say that *Critique de la séparation* is as much about the layering *without articulation* of these different types of images and their sources as it is about loss, its stated theme. But the types of images used by Debord immediately trigger a set of associations. The young girl in the bikini evokes the empty or wasted time of spectacular “leisure,” the vacancy of *les vacances* and the beach as a kind of negation of the urban street (even if beneath this beach the riots and their paving stones slumber). The source of this image is most likely a woman’s magazine, of the sort read *on* the beach, but it is eroticized just enough to have originated, perhaps, in a vulgar magazine for boys. The image is, moreover, one the SI had already used, in the first issue of the organization’s journal, where it is embedded as a poor reproduction in “No Useless Leniency,” an

article by Bernstein, the one female founder of the journal and of the SI—and perhaps a wink or private joke among comrades (including, in this case, a married couple).²²

The second image, of the Congolese riot, is from newsreel



Guy Debord.
Critique de la séparation, 1961.
Frame enlargement.

footage. In the postwar period before *Critique de la séparation* was made, such footage would have been seen in the same movie theaters in which feature films were screened, often before or between features. The Congolese “riot” evokes, yet is different from, the types of European (or Japanese) riot images Debord uses in *Sur le passage* and in his later films, *La société du spectacle* and *In girum*. In *Critique de la séparation* we see demonstrators being beaten by heavily armed military police. We are unsure exactly what is happening or who the parties to the conflict are: the images are drawn seemingly at random from some point in the decolonization process in the Belgian Congo. We do not see images of Patrice Lumumba or of an organized leadership playing roles on the stage of history, only the uncertain conflictuality of a melee—a melee that in a certain sense is a *mise-en-abîme* of the conflictual mixing together of these images themselves. Debord’s interest in this image, however, is largely rooted in the distance from which we see it. Later in the film, when this footage is again used, Debord’s script invokes “unknown men [who] try to live differently,” only to lament that “always, it was far off” and “we hear of it through newspapers and Newsreels [*les Actualités*].” Whatever our sympathy for or even partisan position in favor of these revolts, the fact is that “we remain outside of it, as if before one more spectacle.”²³

Finally we come to the third image, a “fictional” sequence actually shot by Debord and his cinematographer, an image reminiscent of fragments of a nouvelle vague film that was never made, as if demonstrating the possibility of making such a film while refusing to do so.²⁴

Three images: the still of the girl in a bikini on vacation, the newsreel of the far-off riot, the missed encounter on the streets of Paris. What exactly is the relationship among these images? Quite possibly, nothing. And that would be the point. The idea is to emphasize the “anarchic” character of these sequences, the way in which the images are exchanged like things haunted by ghosts: like commodities. The very disorder of the images is what most adequately exhibits the conditions of life under the spectacle. Despite the spectacle’s claims to authority and order, it in fact resembles the “drunken monologue” the film claims to be. In the accumulated melee of images—what Debord calls a “spectacular junk heap [*pacotille*]”—that constitutes the spectacle, all have the same, derisory value, and as such each can be exchanged with all the others, in an order composed solely of exchanges among shades.²⁵ If the final of the three images depicts a missed encounter on the streets of Paris—the mode of relation that



Right and opposite: Guy Debord.
Critique de la séparation, 1961.
Frame enlargements.

constitutes the privative aspect of private or everyday life—then the relation *between the images* is defined in these same terms, as an encounter that never quite happens.

What we are watching has the disorder of a dream. But the dream has a logic, as we have known since Freud. We can ask what role the footage of the Congolese riot has in bringing together and separating the two women that bracket it: the frozen, long-haired blonde in the bikini and the short-haired, almost boyish brunette roaming the streets of Paris. Nothing in the film allows us to answer this question definitively. What we can verify in this combinatory, however, is a cluster of polarities. The riot in a far-off land is opposed to everyday life in the city, just as the *jeune fille* in the bikini—herself far from the city, not in the former colonies but that neocolony typical of the mature capitalist dynamics of the postwar period, the beach, with its managed voiding of time—is at once sister or peer and rival or enemy of the girl whom Debord or his film relentlessly chases after.²⁶

What the two young girls share in their separation is their age: they are both on the threshold between childhood and adulthood. If one of the central figures of Debord's oeuvre is that of the *enfants perdus*, these children are often young women or girls (whose ur-figure is no doubt Eliane Papaï, a former girlfriend whose image appears in both *Sur le passage* and *In girum*, among other places in Debord's work). This dynamic between Debord or his character and the young girls in the film invites us, however, to consider the brief appearance of two adult women in the film: Bernstein, who is seen walking with Caroline Rittener (the actress who plays the young girl) in one short passage; and the still photograph of one of the heroes of the Algerian War that was taking place during the making of the film, Djamilia Bouhired. Here again, the sequence consists of three images in succession: more Congolese "riots"; the image of Bouhired, her face in profile; and then the young girl again, this time facing the camera. Here, too, we see oppositions or tensions forming among the photos: the riot is opposed to the organized clandestine warfare cited by the image of Bouhired, while the riot and Bouhired are in turn opposed to the young girl by their geographical distance and by the way they express, as Debord's script notes with pointed understatement, the desire

to "live differently."²⁷

The passage from the photograph of Bouhired to the young girl is particularly instructive. The photograph is not simply any photograph: it is an iconic one, well-enough known that the jour-



nalist who appears in the photo as a pair of hands is also identified in the film's script. What we are looking at is just as much the iconic quality of the image as the content of the image itself; we are led to think about the conditions that led to its production and where the image subsequently appeared. In the next shot of the young girl, her face, in the foreground, is slightly out of focus: what we see or read instead are the newspapers displayed on a kiosk behind her. The shot of the front pages of the newspapers is crisp enough to allow us to read their headlines. We see not images of Bouhired but, in one case, a woman who might be thought of as her opposed double: the shah of Iran's wife, Farah Diba. What seems to be emphasized is both the distance with which we see this image—the geographical separation of Algeria and Paris, the historical separation between everyday life and revolutionary war, between Djamila the icon and whoever she might otherwise be—and the threshold between the young girl and the adulthood of the guerrilla leader and terrorist.

The threshold between childhood and adulthood is where the notion of *separation*—the critically examined object of the film, if we believe the film's title—is first developed in *Critique de la séparation* and in Debord's subsequent work. The term *separation*, which is at the core of Debord's theory of the spectacle, is first mentioned in the journal of the SI in reference to Debord's film, and the term appears in only a few passing references in the journal until its publication of the first chapter of *La société du spectacle* in the October 1967 issue.²⁸ This chapter, titled "Completed Separation," emphasizes that the logic of separation is by no means a contemporary phenomenon but is a characteristic of power in general, even in its most archaic forms. Power constitutes itself by consolidating itself in a separate instance, where it appears for us as what it is: for example, in the state. But in the era of completed or achieved separation, what is singular about the nature of separation is that it no longer appears *as* separation; it is no longer standing over against a life—everyday life, civil society, the economic, and so on—upon which it would impose itself. Completed separation is instead a pseudoreconciliation or unity of the terms that are in conflict or contradiction in previous forms of power: "the spectacle reunites what is separate, but it reunites *as separated*."²⁹

In his first pass at defining *separation* in *Critique de la séparation*, Debord knots together two terms: *childhood* and *poverty*. Over the course of a paragraph, four images pass by us, three of



Right and opposite: Guy Debord.
Critique de la séparation, 1961.
Frame enlargements.

them associated with space and space travel, as Debord sizes up what he calls “our age”:

Our age accumulates powers, and dreams that it is rational. But no one recognizes such powers as his own. Nowhere do we find access to adulthood: only the possible transformation, one day, of this long restlessness into a measured sleep. This is because no one ever stops being held in custody [*tenu en tutelle*]. The question is not one of noting that people live more or less poorly, but that they always live in a way that escapes them.³⁰

The first orbit of the earth by a human being was completed in the same year that *Critique de la séparation* was made. The “powers” invoked in this passage are identified with this specific technological breakthrough, an achievement then mocked by the trashy cover of a pulpy science fiction book that follows the newsreel footage. The almost frightening image of the faceless “aviator” (as he is called in the script), wearing a special suit that allows him to fly a plane into the stratosphere, suggests that the glorious exploit of orbiting the earth has, as Maurice Blanchot wrote in 1961, left humanity “all bundled up in his scientific swaddling clothes, like a new-born child of former times, reduced to nourishing himself with a feeding bottle and to wailing more than talking.”³¹

Debord’s point is simple enough: the massive accumulation of productive capacities and technological powers in the capitalist twentieth century has, far from emancipating humanity from the yoke of work, induced the most extreme separation of humanity from its own means of existence. What is experienced in this separation is a new form of poverty. Not the quantitative concept of poverty as a measurable, unequal distribution of collectively produced wealth, but a qualitative form of poverty that increases with every new access that humanity is offered to the products and commodities it produces. In *La société du spectacle*, Debord expresses this paradox in this way: “The worker does not produce himself, he produces an independent power. The success of this production, its abundance, comes back to the producer as an *abundance of dispossession*.”³² What is at work in this notion of poverty is a precise form of inversion or chiasmus: the more the working classes of

the Western capitalist democracies are integrated into the capitalist production process through the mediations of union representation and through increases in wages and buying power, the more they are separated from or



deprived of any hold on the conditions and means of their existence—that is, the more they are deprived of any capacity to “collectively dominate the environment.”³³



Critique de la séparation is reflexively concerned with the inadequacy of the cinema to give shape to the theme or experience that the film nevertheless claims as its own: “a film on private life,” on the “mysteries” of alienation (to use the terms used in the subtitles to the film’s final sequence).³⁴ What the cinema *is* suited for, to the contrary, is offering society an image of itself. The history the cinema recounts is the “static and superficial history of [this society’s] leaders,” the history therefore of the state.³⁵ As the voice-over recounts this, we watch a pageant of nominally inimical world leaders embracing one another, two by two—Charles de Gaulle and Nikita Khrushchev, Dwight Eisenhower and Francisco Franco—each with their part in the false antagonisms that articulate the different sectors of a global and unified logic of spectacular power. What is implicit in this account of the complicity between the cinema and the state and its history is that the cinema is incapable of inscribing in an objective form what Debord seems to oppose to these terms: not simply “private life,” but “the clandestinity of private life.”³⁶

While images of the Seine scroll past, largely void of any human presence, Debord tells us,

Here is daylight, and perspectives that, now, no longer mean anything. The parts of a city are, at a certain level, readable. But the sense they have for us, personally, cannot be transmitted, like the entire clandestinity of private life [*vie privée*], about which we possess only the most pathetic documents.³⁷

The images of the Seine we see in this sequence might have some “personal” resonance for Debord or, more generally, for those who were part of the Lettrist milieu that is the subject of his previous film, *Sur le passage*. The movement is clear. With the coming of daylight, those “perspectives” that had meaning have lost it; the city, from the aerial perspective of the map or the sociological analysis of its functions, can be grasped intellectually; what gets lost in this legibility is what by nature remains “clandestine.” Clandestine? Because it must keep out of the light of intelligibility in order to remain what it is, even if reclusiveness, the fleetingness (its constantly being *en fuite*) of that life is also a source, or effect, of this poverty. Clandestine? Because with the means of existence entirely in the hands of the enemy, this life can carry on only under the

cover of invisibility, in the nocturnal sea in which the guerrilla alone can swim. This is the reason we possess only the most laughable documents about this “private” life: *documents like this* “documentary” we are *now watching*. A “documentary” about “private life” that might just be little more than a compilation of private jokes, or itself a private joke: after all, *Critique de la séparation* would not, for decades, be screened publically.

The terms used in the expression “clandestinity of private life” appear on a few occasions in Debord’s work. The expression is, in fact, at the center of his thought. In an important presentation given to a group organized by Henri Lefebvre to research “everyday life” in the same year *Critique de la séparation* appeared, Debord could speak of the “clandestine problems of everyday life” and that “everyday life is thus private life, domain of separation and spectacle.”³⁸ The expression is clarified in a short text, “Defense inconditionnelle,” published in the August 1961 issue of *Internationale situationniste*—just half a year after the completion of *Critique de la séparation*. In the last paragraph of the unsigned text we read that the “entire apparatus of information and its sanctions being in the hands of our enemies, the clandestinity of lived experience [*du vécu*], which under current conditions is called scandalous, is brought to light only through certain details of its repression.”³⁹ The occasion for this short but important piece is what the Western press (the “apparatus of information”) referred to as a youth crisis or youth rebellion, one whose most significant symptom was the formation of gangs on the outskirts of urban centers, often in the housing projects built there after the war. The formation of these gangs is a result, the unnamed author argues, of a “total failure” of the social mediations developed to integrate these youth into a “society of consumption”: the total collapse of religious, cultural, and political institutions and organizations, the complete pulverization of the family and even of the symbolic order as such. These youth, by organizing themselves into gangs in the wastelands of the spectacular order, represent the final “vanishing point”—*point de fuite*—in the otherwise totally managed territory described so precisely in chapter 7 of Debord’s *La société du spectacle*. At this point of disappearance, flight, or escape, the clandestinity of private life is formed, a kind of *positive hole*—the term is borrowed from physics—that can be registered only by means of its repression. This is why we have, in the terms used by *Critique de la séparation*, only the most pathetic documents attesting to the existence of these holes. An antidocumentary can transcribe signals of a more intense life only by mirroring as closely as possible the world it confronts, this world that despite its calls for and impositions of order is “pitilessly coming apart.”⁴⁰

Critique de la séparation poses, within a wide-angle analysis of the contemporary capitalist order, the question of the cinema as a form or activity occurring under the conditions of a generalized separation. The film poses the question of the cinema but also acts out in a cinematic form the crucial distinction between exchange and encounter that this “order”—an “anarchic” one, we discover—enforces. The relationships among the images as they pass by us in their disorder seem to play out the logic of exchange: things haunted by ghosts, each exchanged against all the others. Among these exchanges *Critique de la séparation* seeks some type of *real encounter among its images*, some connection or communication among them in which a spark is set off, a passion induced.

The cinema exhibits in an exemplary manner the operations performed by the spectacle: the absolute nonparticipation or “nonintervention” on the part of the spectator (passivity) combined with, and inseparable from, the material condition of film as a medium—namely, its status as an index of a past. Film is fundamentally a form of memory; every film, whatever its purported genre, is a species of memoir. What film as a medium and as a technological configuration lacks is the capacity to seize the present as it slips away or flees, the *fuite* of time. As we watch a still photograph of two fellow Lettrists from Debord’s pre-SI period (referred to in the script as “lost children” and described in subtitles as “partisans of the power of forgetting”) give way to footage of an American prison guard standing watch over a prison riot, Debord announces that any “coherent artistic expression already expresses the coherence of the past, of passivity.”⁴¹ To “destroy memory in art,” we are told, is therefore “advisable.”⁴² As if to exhibit what such a destruction of memory would look like, the proposition is accompanied by a brutal tactic borrowed from Debord’s early Lettrist film: the extinction of the image entirely, a black screen.

As is well known, in Debord’s earliest film, *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*, the image is “destroyed” without remainder, the visual field of the screen simply alternating, at varying intervals, between white (when voices are heard) and black (when they are not). The use of blank screens in *Critique de la séparation* is ambiguous. Although the film here declares the need to destroy memory in art, the deployment of the black screen after the “partisans of forgetting” flit by seems less an attempt to register a pure passage of time in its flight than a citation, a reference, a nod to a past (the Lettrist period, Debord’s own film) and the writing of a kind of memoir, as Debord often did in his films. At the very least, we can note that while recourse to blank (black or white) screens is made in

almost all of Debord's films after *Hurlements*—notably in his second film, *Sur le passage*—his use of blank screens after *Hurlements* is always calculated, functioning less like gaping voids into which the image disappears than as active interventions and *punctuations* of a specific filmic phrase or sequence. In his later films, the blank is no longer an abyss into which every image dissolves, a sea into which all sequences flow. The blank becomes a cut or hole. A “positive hole.”⁴³

To banish the image, as Debord does in his early “destructive” or terrorist phase, is to solve in a one-sided way the question of the discrepancy of the image and sound so italicized by the Lettrist cinema of Isidore Isou; namely, by removing one of the terms of the disjunction.⁴⁴ This is why the reappearance of the blank screen in *Critique de la séparation* wavers between a *use* of this tactic and, to borrow speech-act theory's useful terms, a mere citation or *mention* of the blank screen: the invocation of a cinematic procedure that Debord implicitly acknowledges as a failure. While *Hurlements* exhibits a particularly reductivist drive toward a kind of “zero degree” of the cinematic phrase—the white screens of his 1952 film relaying the *écriture blanche* (“white,” or blank, writing) of Roland Barthes's almost contemporaneous *Writing Degree Zero*—Debord's later films draw back from this brink in order to inhabit and deform sedimented cinematic conventions, particularly those concerned with rules governing the relation between words or, more generally, sound and image.

Critique de la séparation, like *Sur le passage*, therefore deploys these blank screens in a very specific way. At moments in *Sur le passage*, for example, the blank screens work as passages *and* blockages between the two basic “themes” of the film: the wasted or *empty time* of everyday life and the punctual, fleeting intensity of the *riot*. Connoisseurs of Debord's films will note that scenes of urban riots (e.g., the Congolese riot footage used in *Critique de la séparation*), and often of rioting youth, are one of the most common forms of newsreel footage used in his films. In the first draft of his script for *Hurlements* one of the most frequently used images is simply “scenes from a riot.” Although Debord and the SI more generally had a certain taste for such riots—at least symptomatically, as a shattering of the heralded “social peace” of the postwar period—what becomes

clear particularly in the two films from 1959 and 1961 is a certain gap or separation between what *Critique de la séparation* calls “the clandestinity of private life” and the violence of street fighting and riots, the convergence of which



Guy Debord.
Critique de la séparation, 1961.
Frame enlargement.

would potentially trigger a properly revolutionary process. In the early phase of the SI, this short-circuiting of the separation or missed encounter between riot and private life—the young girl, a more intense life—is compared to the search, a century before, for the fabled Northwest Passage. Debord’s films from this phase of his life seek just such a “passage,” even as they inevitably reenact the separation such a passage would negate.

Notes

1. Tom McDonough, "Calling from the Inside: Filmic Topologies of the Everyday," *Grey Room* 26 (Winter 2007): 6–29.

2. Jorn established the Dansk-Fransk Eksperimentalfilmkompagni for the express purpose of producing Debord's films.

3. Guy Debord, *Critique de la séparation* [film script], in *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 552. All references to Debord's script for *Critique de la séparation* in this essay are to the version established in *Oeuvres*, 541–555. Translations are mine. We could take literally the proposition that *Critique de la séparation* cuts itself without ending: the length of the film is determined not by internal narrative or formal pressure but by running out of film.

4. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 552.

5. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 553.

6. *Les mystères de New York*, among other silent-era film serials, was an important point of reference for the surrealists, a predilection no doubt also being alluded to in this exchange. See Robert Desnos, "Fantômas, Les Vampires, Les Mystères de New York (1927)," in *French Film Theory and Criticism: 1907–1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 398–400.

7. Debord's films contain relatively few thematic references to television. In *La société du spectacle* (The society of the spectacle, 1973) footage is drawn from television and closed-circuit television, and in *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978) the modern "employees" in the first segment of the film are shown watching television. Debord made a "documentary" for television at the very end of his life: *Guy Debord, son art et son temps* (Guy Debord: His art and his time, 1995).

8. In the 1844 "Introduction" to Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, we encounter the description of the modern proletariat as "a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no particular right because no particular wrong, but wrong generally." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 186; emphasis in original. Debord detourns this passage in, for example, thesis 114 of *The Society of the Spectacle*: "No quantitative amelioration of its poverty, no illusion of integration into the hierarchy, can be a lasting solution for its dissatisfaction, for the proletariat cannot truly recognize itself in a particular wrong it has undergone nor in the rectification of any particular wrong or even a large number of these wrongs, but only in the absolute wrong of being pushed into the margins of life." Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle*, in *Oeuvres*, 816; emphasis in original.

9. Michèle Bernstein, *Tous les chevaux du roi* (Paris: Buchet-Castel, 1960); and Michèle Bernstein, *La nuit* (Paris: Buchet-Castel, 1961). The former is available in English translation as *All the King's Men*, trans. John Kelsey (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2008). On these novels and their relation to Debord's work, see Jean-Marie Apostolides, *Les tombeaux de Guy Debord: Précédé de portrait de Guy-Ernest en jeune libertin* (Paris: Exils, 1999).

10. She is identified in these terms in the "Technical Notes" Debord included in *Contre le cinéma* in 1964. Debord, *Oeuvres*, 486.

11. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 545.

12. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 541.

13. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 547 (“when did”), 552 (“we have”).

14. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 549.

15. Vincent Kaufmann, *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry*, trans. Robert Bonomo (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

16. “Hope” here refers not to its English cognate but to the Dutch word *hoop* in the expression *verloren hoop*. In “Defense inconditionnelle,” a text contemporary with Debord’s *Critique de la séparation*, the unnamed author compares the children who form urban gangs in postwar France to the orphaned children of the early Soviet period, whose parents died in the civil war following the revolution, the difference being that in postwar France the stray children were not produced by the physical elimination of parents but by the collapse of the symbolic and ideological mediation of the family and father. In *In girum*, Debord’s voice-over speaks of children who no longer even belong to their parents, being instead children of the spectacle who, in the absence of any functioning symbolic order or mediation, relate to their parents through the affect of hatred and consider themselves “rivals” to their parents rather than dependents of them. See Debord, “Défense inconditionnelle,” in *Internationale situationniste* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), 211–213.

17. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 544.

18. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 544. The term *real individual* is a crucial concept in Marx’s *German Ideology*, to which Debord is implicitly alluding here. To imagine that Communism meant for Marx the suppression of the individual is a great *contresens*. To the contrary, the collective domination of nature makes possible the production, for the first time in the history of humanity, of real individuals. The nature of this “reality” is precisely the question, however: the reality of the individual is constituted not by its mediated integration within a totality but in the sequence of real *encounters* it has with other individuals.

19. “Programme élémentaire du Bureau d’Urbanisme Unitaire,” *Internationale situationniste* 6 (August 1961), reprinted in *Internationale situationniste* (Fayard), 214–217. On the distinction between encounter and circulation, see Soyoung Yoon’s article in this issue of *Grey Room*.

20. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 544. A version of this passage appears in the June 1958 text “Problèmes préliminaires à la construction d’une situation,” *Internationale situationniste* 1 (June 1958), reprinted in *Internationale situationniste* (Fayard), 11–13. Many passages from Debord’s films from 1959 and 1961 borrow formulations and passages from texts, often not signed by Debord, published in *Internationale situationniste*.

21. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 545.

22. See Kelly Baum’s essay on the use of images of this sort in Debord and by the SI, and its relation to a politics founded on the idea of desire. Kelly Baum “The Sex of the Situationist International,” *October* 126 (Fall 2008): 23–43. In addition to Baum’s assessment of this (problematic) dimension of Debord’s and the SI’s theoretical and aesthetic production, see also Jen Kennedy, “Charming Monsters: The Spectacle of Femininity in Postwar France,” *Grey Room* 49 (Fall 2012): 56–79. Kennedy offers a rich historical contextualization of the term *jeune fille* and deploys it specifically in relation to the SI’s use of images.

23. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 547.

24. In “Filmic Topologies,” McDonough refers to Jean-Luc Godard’s *À bout de souffle*, for example.

25. The term *pacotille* is precisely chosen by Debord; it designates any odd assortment of objects, but specifically trinkets and other cheap things, and originally referred to “commodities destined for sale overseas or in distant countries” (*Trésor*).

26. *This* young girl flashes by even more quickly at the end of the film, among footage of tornadoes and the Congolese riots.

27. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 547.

28. The term appears, for example, in the first paragraph of the important piece “Défense inconditionnelle,” *Internationale situationniste* 6 (August 1961), reprinted in *Internationale situationniste* (Fayard), 211–213.

29. Debord, *La société du spectacle*, Thesis 29, 774.

30. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 545. “*Tenu en tutelle*” means kept watch over, supervised, or made the ward or guardian of someone.

31. Maurice Blanchot, “The Conquest of Space,” in *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. Michael Holland (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1995), 270. Debord often uses images of space and of people underwater in diving suits.

32. Debord, *La société du spectacle*, 774.

33. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 544.

34. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 544.

35. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 546–547.

36. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 547.

37. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 546.

38. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 576, 579.

39. “Défense inconditionnelle,” in *Internationale situationniste* (Fayard), 213. We see a decisive shift in the next issue, though, from youth rebellion to calling for a new cycle of struggles among workers. This is the crucial shift in Debord’s position.

40. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 551.

41. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 550.

42. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 550.

43. “L’absence et ses habilleurs,” *Internationale situationniste* 2 (December 1958), reprinted in *Internationale situationniste* (Fayard), 38–40.

44. In the early Lettrist period, Debord was fond of citing or referring to Louis Antoine de Saint-Just. And in one of the most important lines from *In girum*, when he speaks of the images used in the film as “image-dust”—“*poussière d’images*”—he is *détourning* a famous line from a speech by Saint-Just.

The Insolent Edit

MCKENZIE WARK

In the passing show of images that populate Guy Debord's late films, little is ever explained to the spectator. In *La société du spectacle* (The society of the spectacle, 1973) in particular, the images flit by in a seemingly absurd order. Occasionally they seem to correspond to Debord's voice-over, but often the link is obscure. They make little immediate sense in relation to one another. In the late films, one does not find the complete disconnect between sound and image of the kind advocated by Isidore Isou as *discrepant cinema*.¹ Rather, Debord has taken Isou's initial break between sound and image and conceived of a way to reconnect them differently. The crisp rhythms of the edits accumulate as the film progresses. Clusters of images that together do not make much sense reveal themselves in the light of later ones. Surprising complexity and consistency emerges if one accepts a central premise: the spectacle attempts to negate the possibility of making history, but history remains as a residue within the spectacle in fragmented form.

Martine Barraqué edited *La société du spectacle* and its sequel, *Réfutation de tous les jugements, tant élogieux qu'hostiles, qui ont été jusqu'ici portés sur le film "La Société du Spectacle"* (Refutation of all the judgments, pro or con, thus far rendered on the film "The Society of the Spectacle," 1975). Her significance in realizing Debord's films is honored in the credits. She gets an entire title card to herself. *Spectacle* and *Réfutation* are best treated as one work rather than two. As Barraqué remembers, "*Réfutation* was entirely made out of footage that had not been included in the *Society of the Spectacle*."² This is not entirely the case. *Réfutation* includes footage of the "Carnation Revolution" in Portugal, which postdates the earlier film. Still, Barraqué is probably remembering right in terms of the film-making system set up to make the first film continuing on for the second. *Réfutation* is an extraordinary precursor to the answer-video of the kind that proliferate on the Internet in the early twenty-first century. In appending it to *La société du spectacle*, Debord makes a complete work that subsumes not only the actual reactions to the film but any possible reaction to the work itself, in advance.

Barraqué came to Debord via the patron Debord acquired in the 1970s, Gérard Lebovici. Barraqué was already working as an assistant editor for François Truffaut, and makes two brief uncredited appearances in Truffaut's *Day for Night* (1973), playing a film editor. She would go on to

edit, among other films, *The Green Room* (1978) and *The Last Metro* (1980) for Truffaut, but Debord's *La société du spectacle* was her first credit as an editor. It would be amusing to compare her Debords and Truffauts to see if Barraqué left a comparable stylistic signature on them. Of Truffaut and Debord she says, "they were both (I was in the middle of them) curious about one another." Perhaps it is time to be a little curious about Martine Barraqué too.

La société du spectacle uses select passages from Debord's 1967 book of the same name, read by Debord in an even tone that is at odds with the tradition of voice-over delivery for the cinema. The sound track was recorded in Debord's apartment. The images were cut to the sound track. Barraqué explains the process:

We had lists of documents that we had to search for, keep and file once found, and that we would use in future work. The documents could be old news, we had a lot of still images that he cut out from magazines (that his wife must have read, and that he used to cut images from), that he kept and that I had filmed in order to have them in the film as 24 frames per second images. It was very detailed work. He could come to the editing room at 2 p.m., and by then I already had the images sorted so that he would look at them. We went through the images together, and then he decided the order in which they would be presented. Afterwards, we would look for the paragraph that would be juxtaposed to the images.

The relationship between image and text in Debord's late films is not representational. The images do not usually illustrate the text, nor does the text explain or refer to what is on screen. The relation between the two is discrepant but also critical.

Cinema's limitations can be turned to advantage, like a jujitsu move, using the weight and power of the enemy against itself. The spectacle tries to abolish the qualitative space and irreversible time of history. In its place it offers mere representations of time and space, images that have a formal equivalence, any of which can be exchanged for another. The worth of any image is measurable in other images, but only in other images. Any image can follow any other. Time loses its irreversible, historical quality.

By freeing images from these constraints, Debord does not want to further reduce them to meaninglessness. His approach is quite the opposite; it is to take the images of the spectacle as a true representation of a falsified world. A fine example is his proposition in *Réfutation* that spectators do not get what they desire; they desire what they get. An English television ad shows a man going to a tailor to be measured for a *tailor-*

made cigarette. Once the customer decides on the exact length that suits him, the tailor offers him a Senior Service cigarette, which, it turns out, his desire exactly matches. To commit a historical act, a people needs its desires; but to merely watch the spectacle act in their place, a people merely desires the needs it is offered.

The spectacle classifies the world by genre and organizes it by narrative. All images, sounds, and stories are formally equivalent in the spectacle. Any element of it can be measured in the currency of another. A Marilyn Monroe image might be worth four Mao Tse-tungs or twenty anonymous pinup pictures. All the elements of the spectacle can be arranged in a hierarchy of value, and the spectator is encouraged to make distinctions among them. This is the essence of middle-class café or dinner-party conversations, not to mention a certain kind of college education about aesthetics.

From the archives of the spectacle itself, Barraqué built an archive specifically designed to catalog images for Debord's purposes.

I had a very, very long list of documents that I had selected, classified, and archived by (say) group: history, fashion, scoops, decoration, (what else?), politics, and speeches. So, whenever he would ask "Do you remember this? Could you find this again for me?" My assistant and I, knowing where we had classified them, would be able to fetch them very quickly.

Using this archive, Debord cuts the image away from both narrative and genre, but not to make it just a free-floating sign. Rather, he cuts to produce—out of the tension between the senses it brings with it from its previous context and the senses Debord imposes by embedding the image in a critical context—a new ensemble of significance.

What separates Debord's 1970s films from his earlier ones is the sophistication with which images produce critical friction through their relation to one another independently of their relation to the voice-over, which then provides a *second* axis of critical heat. This is where the crisp rhythms of the editing of *Spectacle* and *Réfutation* really stand out. For instance, in *Spectacle*, Barraqué cuts together images of women on the beach with images of an iceberg as seen through the periscope of a nuclear submarine, followed by images of that submarine, then of Cuban leader Fidel Castro in a TV studio, then of Castro haranguing a crowd. The logic of the images connects what is to be desired within the spectacle, the power that maintains the spectacle, and the counterpower of another form of the spectacle. For Debord the Cold War clash between the concentrated spectacle of the socialist East and the diffuse spectacle of the capitalist West masks a commonality of interest in maintaining

spectacular domination. One side gets a charismatic demagogue to look at; the other side gets half-naked women to look at, women whom we might describe as fallen palimpsests of that Platonic ideal of the West, its answer to the Law of the Father, the figure of The Girl.³

Not that the diffuse spectacle of the West is without its own pinups of power. Barraqué cuts images of The Girl next to a political leader (Georges Pompidou), a car show, more avatars of The Girl. Here the rostrum camera pans along a series of bikini-clad women several times, as if in endless succession like the endless succession of factory-made images, cars, leaders. “Everything happens as though the image (myth, ideology, utopia, or what you will) of the total woman had replaced the image or the idea of the total man after the latter had collapsed.”⁴ That women’s bodies become the surface of desire, the mediators between the commodity and fetishizing, will become a whole genre of critique. What is interesting is the way Debord connects this to a broader critique of the spectacle.

Something Debord intuits about The Girl in these films is later expanded upon by *Tiqqun*: “The supposed liberation of women has not consisted in their emancipation from the domestic sphere, but rather the extension of that sphere over the whole of society.”⁵ What was extended across the social domain was not the factory but the boudoir. Life in the overdeveloped world is not a social factory but a social boudoir. In the overdeveloped world, labor becomes affective labor. Politics becomes family drama. Art becomes interior decoration. The struggle over the remaking of the form of social life becomes kitchen renovation. The image of The Girl becomes the emblem through which this modification in the world of images is managed and felt. That modification of the world of images corresponds in turn to an extension and modification of the spectacle. The demise of the concentrated spectacle lays the groundwork for the supersession of Big Brother by these little sisters.

The omnipresence of The Girl shows only that the legend of the intimacy of woman with nature has found a new home, that of second nature, or the spectacular world of finishes and veneers. The Girl’s utopia is domestic, but the domicile of the domestic is imagined as the whole world. The Girl makes every scene an interior, as if any place in the world could be her private domain. “What is good appears; what appears is good.”⁶ The good that appears—beauty, figured by The Girl—is outside of time. Experience, aging, memory—in short, history—is not to appear. Time is marked out by the structural permutations of the fashion cycle.

Scenes of industrial waste, a car driving past mountains of garbage, a smoggy panorama of a contemporary city are then linked to scenes from the 1965 Watts riots. A black woman manhandled. A bloodied black

man on the ground. Here Barraqué conjoins the two *externalities* of spectacular society. On the one hand, pollution; on the other, the proletariat. This is followed by riot police rehearsing against a fake street riot, which they easily defeat; then scenes from May 1968; then Mao Tse-tung meeting President Richard Nixon and his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger. The link is between the police function of the state and the spectacular function of the leader. Nixon's pact with Mao isolated their mutual enemy, the Soviet Union. For Debord, the real struggle was between the state of spectacular society—both East and West—and their respective peoples. The spectacle's overcoming of history is spectacular, but history's overcoming of the spectacle will be historical. Cinema can do no more than register a trace, in negative, of a historical time external to cinema's spectacular organization.

Some poignant images of Marilyn Monroe alternate with French socialist politician François Mitterrand, leaflets thrown to a crowd, the Nazi rise to power, more riot police, the Vietnam War, the Nazi rally at Nuremberg, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev at a Moscow May Day parade, tanks, traffic, industrial food. The range of available celebrities models the range of available desires, be they sexual or political. Either way, they propose an end to historical time, which nevertheless leaves behind fragments of its furtive, fugitive existence. In both East and West, spectacular political power is built on the ruins of failed attempts to seize it. Whether fascist, Communist, or capitalist, the spectacular falsification is in some respects the same—and should be treated with the same insolence.

A cake factory, motor racing, Mao and Lin Biao, Stalin, Hungarians destroying a statue of Stalin in the 1956 uprising, a pinup girl, a box factory: One of these things is not like the others. As the film progresses, its rhythm changes, and more and more images of the subjective moment in history, the seizure of historical time, appear. But the spectacle erases history, turning it into mere images, the significance of which fade.

Perhaps Mao's face is still well-known only because Andy Warhol made a portrait of it. But who remembers Lin Biao? The general who led the People's Liberation Army into Beijing in 1949 became Mao's second in command and designated successor during the Cultural Revolution, before he died in that mysterious plane crash. Lin Biao was most likely assassinated in the power struggles of the time. As is characteristic of the occulted state, nobody who knows will speak of it, and anyone who speaks of it does not know. Debord's *La société du spectacle* was made at a time when Mao exercised an extraordinary fascination over the French left.⁷ In Debord's films Mao, Castro, and the Soviets are all versions of the concentrated spectacle, and as such are images of domination.

Prewar Shanghai divided by colonial concessions is followed by tourists

on a bus and a boat. The city becomes an image of itself. Pleasure boats and seaside apartments follow the riot police who guard against outbreaks of history that might render such spectacular distractions moot. The subjective moment in history can be represented only within the spectacle, and these representations appear as isolated moments, contained within narratives that neutralize them. Debord retrieves them from these constraints, whether documentary or fictional, and puts them together.

Rather than moments of historical time neutralized by spectacular narrative and isolated by genre, here comes everybody. Cavalry charges, the storming of the Winter Palace, the Spanish Civil War: situations of irreversible action in time. Spread throughout the film is a sequence of moments in which historical time accelerates and the conflict of forces pushes history toward new qualities: Paris 1871, St. Petersburg 1917, Barcelona 1935, Watts 1965, Paris 1968. The sequence continues in *Réfutation* with the “Carnation Revolution” in Lisbon, 1974.⁸ That one could be forgiven for not knowing that some of these events even happened is a sign of the further progress of the spectacular erasure of historical time, just as attempts to leave the twenty-first century, in Thailand or Greece or Tunisia or Egypt, run the risk of erasure from history.

American Phantom jets on an aircraft carrier, more pinups of The Girl—a refrain of the earlier moment where Barraqué links The Girl with a nuclear submarine. These images appear with a picture of Alice Becker-Ho, to whom Debord was married in 1972. *La société du spectacle* begins with love and ends with friendship. Dissolved in 1972, the Situationist International no longer existed when Debord made the film. By then Debord had returned to the forms of discreet sociality out of which it in part emerged. Here two series confront each other. One series is spectacle/spectator. The other is a little harder to define but is composed of history as the collective and subjective being in an irreversible time, and being in discreet relations of friendship or love that also entail irreversible moments.

Barraqué interrupts the rhythmic succession of clusters of images at key moments for fragments of scenes from movies, complete with their original dialogue and music. While the newsreel footage was simply purchased from archives, getting hold of feature films involved a certain amount of deception and secrecy. “And it was lots of fun!” Barraqué says.

Going, calling, telling people that the director I worked for and the film were very important, but that he was currently scouting for locations in Italy (and then in America, etc.). So that we didn’t know the exact date that he could come in to watch the films, and

so that I needed them for—at least—three days: the time it took for me to insert the rigs in the copy, have an inter-negative made, wait for the results, then remove the rigs from the copy, and then give it back to the distributor. Still, I was able to obtain all that was needed. We therefore stole—without paying any copyrights (not a dime to any of them).

The feature films are detoured to a different effect than are the newsreels. As Debord writes, these stolen films are deployed for the “rectification of the ‘artistic inversion of life.’”⁹ They are like blocks of affect, of potential feeling that can be retrieved from the cinematic inversion and put back on their feet, as the vehicles by which to make one’s own meaning, one’s own sense. Debord and Barraqué use Nicholas Ray’s *Johnny Guitar* (1954) for its ambivalent, tender, yet fraught memories of love; *Shanghai Gesture* (1941) for the confused and excited sensation of adventure; John Ford’s *Rio Grande* (1950) for the giddy élan of historical action; Orson Welles’s *Mr. Arkadin* (1955) for the pathos of authentic friendship; Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) for the moment of collective decision. In each case an insolent disregard for narrative and genre frees the fragment for redeployment.

Cinema, like the novel, was of interest to Debord to the extent that it posed a certain problem with time. His interest in cinematic time is in its historical and affective dimensions, not the conceptual and ontological time of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Cinema has a different ontological status for Debord than for Deleuze. The form of cinema for Debord is true to the spectacular organization of the commodity form, but that spectacular organization is a falsification of the world. “In a world that has really been turned upside down, the true is a moment of the false.”¹⁰

As Debord wrote in a 1959 letter to André Frankin, after some remarks on the novel:

It seems to me that the question of time is posed in an analogous manner by the cinema, which is another form of the representation of the temporal flow of things. Here, as there, what’s interesting lies in those moments at which the alienated satisfactions of the spectacle can, at the same time, be rough sketches (in negative) of a planned development of affective life, that is to say, of the affective events inseparable from thought and action.¹¹

Like Deleuze, Debord sees the form of film as isomorphic with that of the world, but for Debord the world is false, known only through its negation. His cinema affirms nothing even though it may still be shot through with fragments that gesture to an ontological time.

Many of the fragments Debord detourned from various films have a particular quality, a distinctive emotional tone that corresponds to a situation in which an irreversible action is beginning. Johnny and his old flame Vienna warily reunite in very different times. A general commits troops to battle just as he learns that the enemy knows of the attack, dooming it from the start. Sailors gather under threat of a firing squad and in an instant coalesce in mutiny. But where cinema under both the concentrated and diffuse spectacle seeks to neutralize these moments, strapping them down to predictable narrative arcs and the expectations born of genre conventions, for Debord they can serve as proxies for a quite different sense of time. This is not to be confused with the idea that spectators make their own meaning, that their viewing is active, subversive of dominant codes and so on. The point of *détournement* as a practice is not that people could make new meaning but that they could make new social relations. The appropriated images are still only proxies, blocks of sense mobilized to open up a possibility outside of themselves.

Debord's insolence toward cinema does not devalue all of it. Rather, he claims his desire to make of it what is needed. Which war or which lovers are portrayed does not always matter. Instead, the diagram of forces, the picturing of the game of time, is what matters. But cinema, like any art, represents the world too well. Lived time disappears in art, and art at best can only mourn its passing. Cinema is a kind of memory, an abstract memory not of particular events or particular people but of the possibility of life before it becomes mere representation—a life about which cinema can say nothing, show nothing, which it can acknowledge only in passing. Johnny Guitar asks his lost love, Vienna, "How many men have you forgotten?" And in this game, Vienna gives as good as she gets: "As many women as you've remembered."

The Dancing Kid tosses a coin to decide whether to kill Johnny or let him play Vienna a song on his guitar. She catches the coin in midair. Johnny's song for Vienna puts her into a reverie, but she catches herself: "play something else," she commands. Those times are gone and cannot be relived. Cinema cannot bring life itself back to life. It's the same with historical time on a grand scale. General Sheridan orders John Wayne to catch and kill the Indians, even if he has to cross the border with Mexico to do it. If he is caught, he will be court-martialed. If he is court-martialed, Sheridan will have him judged by others who were with them both at Shenandoah. This prompts Sheridan's reverie: "I wonder what history will say about Shenandoah?" They might say of this Civil War event that its scorched-earth destruction of the South's economic power signaled the beginning of modern warfare—to the practice of which Sheridan later added his genocidal campaigns against the Indians. For

Debord there's something else here as well. The experience of lived time, irreversible time, on a small or a grand scale, is that which escapes the spectacle and hence remains a resource against it. And yet the spectacle cannot help itself; it is drawn again and again to the memory of that which it erases.

Those who experienced lived time together are bound thereafter by it. They may no longer be lovers, comrades, or even friends, but something remains, something unsaid, something unspeakable. Orson Welles as Mr. Arkadin tells a parable about a graveyard where the dates recorded on the tombstones are not the lifespans of the deceased but the length of time the dead kept a friend. He then proposes a toast: "To friendship!" The friendships commemorated on the tombstones may be as brief as many of the memberships in the Situationist International. These things have their time, and the memory of lived time is a resource against the dead time of representation.

Johnny rides through the desert and finds Vienna's saloon. When he enters, he finds it empty, the barman and croupiers standing ready. A man shows Gene Tierney around a crowded casino. "The other place is like kindergarten compared to this," she says. "Anything could happen at any moment!" Barraqué adroitly joins scenes from different films that both present the moment a situation opens, with its finite but barely known field of possibilities. Of course, in cinema only one possibility can occur. The narrative moves on, and cinema is usually impatient to move it on. Barraqué finds the exact bounds of the event in the relentless mechanical time of the cinema. Interpretation can open the situation again, open toward an infinite realm of possibilities. But this is not what interests Debord. Rather, his attention to the situation is to the finite and specific options for action any given situation contains.

Power cannot be seized the old way. The revolutionary movement is over. Some might think it died in Paris in 1968. For Debord it died in Barcelona in 1935, when the Communists defeated the revolutionary movement in the name of winning the civil war, which was lost anyway to Francisco Franco and his Nazi backers.¹² A civil war general, on learning that Franco's forces already know about their attack, says, "Too late. That means we're done for. This time we fail. Too bad. Yes, too bad." The failure of the workers' revolutions is that they relied on the same thought, the same methods, as the successful bourgeois revolutions before them. The fruits of bourgeois enlightenment, from its specialized forms of knowledge to its hierarchical forms of organization, cannot be turned against it.

In *Spectacle*, Debord shows an etching by Jacques-Louis David of *The Tennis Court Oath* (1791), signal event of the French Revolution. The

image is designed to draw the eye to Maximilien de Robespierre in the middle, one hand raised, the other on his heart as he takes the oath. David was close to Robespierre and a powerful figure in the arts during the Revolution. Imprisoned with Robespierre's fall from power, he would later ingratiate himself with Napoleon I and create for him his *empire style*. Debord shows Robespierre, then in close-up the political specialists beneath him making their little deals on the quiet. Then he cuts to a woman and child in a window above, spectators at the making of history. The very form of bourgeois power now has to be opposed, just as the form of its cinema must be opposed. *La société du spectacle* and *Réfutation de tous les jugements* are about not just the clamor of images but the silence of power, a silence that, since the 1970s, has become deafening.

Notes

1. See Isidore Isou, *Traité de bave et d'éternité* (1951), in *Avant Garde 2: Experimental Cinema 1928–1954*, DVD (New York: Kino International, 2007).

2. Martine Barraqué-Curie, interview conducted in French by Julia Carrillo and McKenzie Wark, Paris, 27 April 2009; translated by Carrillo and Wark. All subsequent quotes from Barraqué-Curie are from this source.

3. See Ann K. Clark, "The Girl: A Rhetoric of Desire," *Cultural Studies* 1, no. 3 (1987): 195.

4. Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne II—Fondements d'une sociologie de la quotidienneté* (Paris: L'Arche, 1961), 86.

5. "Premières matériaux pour une théorie de la Jeune-Fille," *Tiqqun: Organe conscient du parti imaginaire* (Paris: Tiqqun 1999), 101. Here I am translating *jeune-fille* as "The Girl," to align *Tiqqun* with Clark, *op. cit.*

6. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* [film script], in *Complete Cinematic Works* (Oakland: AK Press, 2003), 46; and Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle* [film script], in *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 1,200.

7. For a sympathetic account, see Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). The films of former situationist René Vienet offer a far-less-charming portrait.

8. Jaime Semprun, *La guerre sociale au Portugal* (Paris: Champ Libre, 1975).

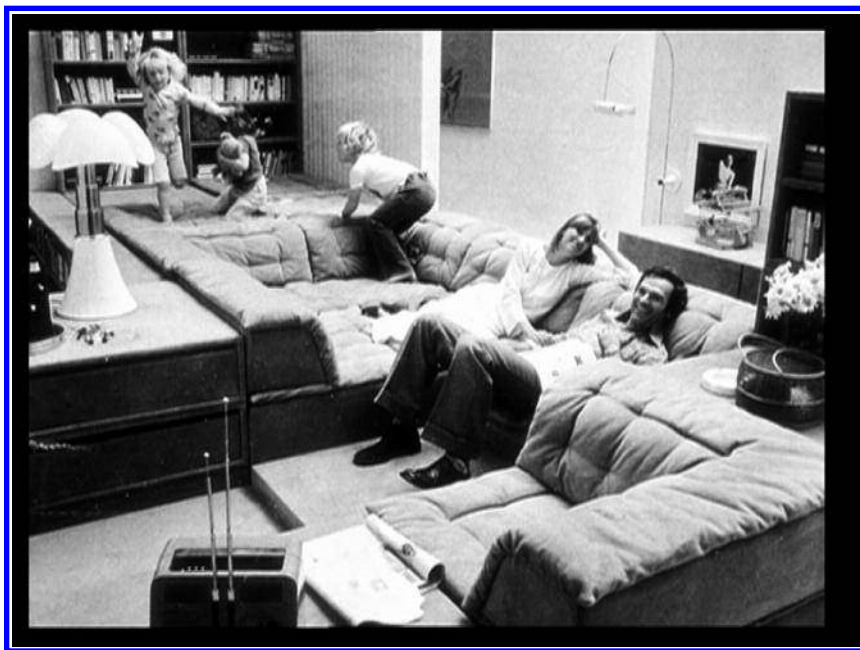
9. Debord, "The Use of Stolen Films" (1989), in *Complete Cinematic Works*, 223; and Debord, *Oeuvres*, 1,412.

10. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* [film script], in *Complete Cinematic Works*, 46; and Debord, *La société du spectacle* [film script], in *Oeuvres*, 1,199.

11. Guy Debord to André Frankin, 15 July 1959, in Guy Debord, *Correspondence*, trans. Stuart Kendall and John McHale (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008). See also Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (London: Continuum, 2005).

12. On the suppression of the revolution by the Communists in Spain, the classic firsthand account is George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (London: Penguin, 2000). Published in French as *Hommage à la Catalogne 1936–1937* (Paris: Champ Libre, 1981).

Guy Debord. *In girum imus
nocte et consumimur igni*, 1978.
Frame enlargement.



Guy Debord's Time-Image: *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978)

BENJAMIN NOYS

In his *Rhapsody for the Theatre* (1990), Alain Badiou compliments Guy Debord's final film *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978)—the film's title is a Latin palindrome that can be translated as “we go round and round in the night and are consumed by fire”—for revealing a “pure temporal moment [that] speaks to the glory of cinema, [and] which may very well survive us humans.”¹ One can easily imagine that Debord would have been dismissive of Badiou's claim. In a letter to Jacques Le Glou sent on November 15, 1982, Debord expresses particular ire at Badiou's judgments on *In girum*, describing Badiou as “Maoist carrion.”² Badiou's invocation of a “pure temporality” at the service of cinema would seem to ignore and minimize Debord's political project, placing Debord as merely another cinematic auteur. This may have been Badiou's purpose. In his *Theory of the Subject* (1982), Badiou suggests that Debord and the situationists could only offer a Promethean politics of “active nihilism.” This politics was limited to a transitional stage and could not reach true political virtue.³ Therefore, Badiou's reclamation of Debord for the “glory of cinema” might be an attempt to further marginalize this politics by limiting the virtues of Debord's project to the aesthetic. This marginalization of Debord as “aesthetic” figure, as exemplar of the “last avant-garde,” is remarkably common.

To insist on the necessity of a political reading of Debord's cinema, and especially *In girum*, in order to counter this kind of claim might seem like a relatively simple matter. And yet, in a text cowritten with Gianfranco Sanguinetti at the time of the dissolution of the Situationist International (SI) in 1972, Debord states that “the SI had been, from the beginning, a much vaster and more profound project than a simply political revolutionary movement.”⁴ The reason for this was the SI's conception of time as “made of qualitative leaps, of irreversible choices, of occasions that will never return.”⁵ So, although Debord constructs his “time-image” as a political act, he also hints that it serves a more profound project. In this case, the various politicizing readings of the situationists, which aim simply to revise and continue their political project, often fail to attend

to this broader dimension of the situationist project.

This “tension” suggests the need to give a more thorough consideration to Debord’s construction of a “time-image” in *In girum*. The film itself can be seen as staging an unresolved tension between politics and “pure temporality” in the practice of Debord. On the one hand, the film is explicitly intended as a political critique of the “dead time” of capitalism, which is relentlessly probed through the portrayal of the misery of bourgeois society by frozen images of the (then) capitalist present accompanied by a caustic commentary. On the other hand, the film’s use of images of water and its references to Taoism and romanticism suggest a “more profound project”—although the hostile critic could charge that these invocations give off just the “rotten egg smell” of “mystical cretinism” that the situationists had excoriated in the American Beats.⁶ The aestheticizing and politicizing readings of Debord can both claim fidelity to his legacy in the case of *In girum*.

The problem, in either case, is that Debord would suppose the capacity to detach from “fallen” capitalist time a redeemed and “pure” noncapitalist time, whether political or metaphysical. This opposition between a “fallen” time and a “pure” time could be accused of being atemporal and abstract. The very structure of *In girum* seems to incarnate this opposition. The first part, of approximately fifteen minutes, is dedicated to a series of images of urban space and images drawn from advertising to portray the life of what Debord calls in the commentary “the stratum of low-level skilled employees in the various ‘service’ occupations.”⁷ The second part is an autobiographical reflection, as Debord states in the commentary: “I am going to replace the frivolous adventures typically recounted by the cinema with the examination of an important subject: myself.”⁸ This consists of a recounting in the commentary of his experiences in Paris in the 1950s, when he mixed with a bohemian milieu of petty thieves and nihilists. Debord is the final referent of this flow of time, and in this way we simply pass from the “bad” time of capitalism to the “good” time of Debord and the situationists.

Anselm Jappe, a highly sympathetic reader of Debord, critically remarks on Debord’s tendency to “reduce society to two opposing monolithic blocks, neither of which has any serious internal contradictions, and one of which may be either the proletariat, or simply the Situationists, or even just Debord himself.”⁹ In fact, we have not yet come to terms with the possibilities of *In girum* as the site of an aesthetic *and* political practice that deliberately sets out to complicate such an abstract schema. Contrary to the common reading that Debord and the situationists are compromised by a Rousseauian politics of “purity” or “transparency,” *In girum* offers a complex image practice that engages with the problem of abstrac-

tion itself.¹⁰ Instead of suggesting a simple leap into a “pure” image of time, Debord’s film engages in “qualitative leaps” that try to problematize the forms of state and capitalist abstraction. Therefore, a return to Debord is not so much a matter of either valorization or condemnation but instead the opportunity to engage with Debord’s *In girum* as a deliberately unfinished project. Although *In girum* is explicitly a summation and balance sheet of Debord’s experiences, this does not imply that it can bring time to a close. Rather, Debord’s insistence on the finite nature of his own experiment with time is a strategy to encourage and develop a new image of time as irreversible. Close attention to this one film offers a space from which to contest the usual historicizing, aestheticizing, and politicizing readings, which do not consider sufficiently how Debord transforms these categories through his creation of a new time-image.

Dead Time

In girum, like many of Debord’s earlier films, makes use of existing images that are accompanied by a lugubrious commentary voiced by Debord. This is a typical instance of Debord’s practice of *détournement*—the reuse of existing images in a new critical context and the addition of a voice-over or intertext. In 1956, in a text cowritten with Gil Wolman, Debord argued that cinema offered the best prospects for *détournement*, which would achieve in cinema “its greatest beauty.”¹¹ This “beauty” is, however, wrested from existing images, and, in his commentary for *In girum*, Debord states, “I am simply stating a few truths over a background of images that are all trivial or false. This film disdains the image-scrap of which it is composed.”¹² Therefore, this “use” of the image is not an act of aesthetic valorization but a form of critique. The “beauty” produced is, again, equivocal, attesting to the “scraps” of capitalist culture from which Debord hopes to construct an alternative image of time.

In the first, short part of *In girum* the use of *détournement* is developed to draw out a contrast or contradiction between the commentary and the images. The images are largely drawn from advertising and are intended to display the joy of consumption. They show families playing together, consumers in supermarkets, people on business trips, and dinner parties. Subjected to Debord’s acerbic commentary, we find that these “lively” images are in fact images of the “dead time” and pseudo-enjoyment offered by capitalist consumption. In particular, Debord’s commentary directly addresses the audience of the film, supposing that such an audience belongs to the same class as the people he is portraying on the screen. The film aims at a reflexive critique in which we can no longer comfortably contemplate the narcissistic image of “people like us” but are forced to realize our own subjection.

Debord's particular style of caustic and aristocratic critique is apparent in his comment that

For the first time in history we are seeing highly specialized economic professionals who, outside their work, have to do everything for themselves. They drive their own cars and are beginning to have to personally fill them with gasoline; they do their own shopping and their own so-called cooking; they serve themselves in the supermarkets and in the entities that have replaced railroad dining cars.¹³

This could be dismissed as mere personal abuse by Debord of a particular class or group that provokes his ire. However, the exact practice and wider scope of his use of *détournement* as critique through both image and commentary is worth considering in more detail.

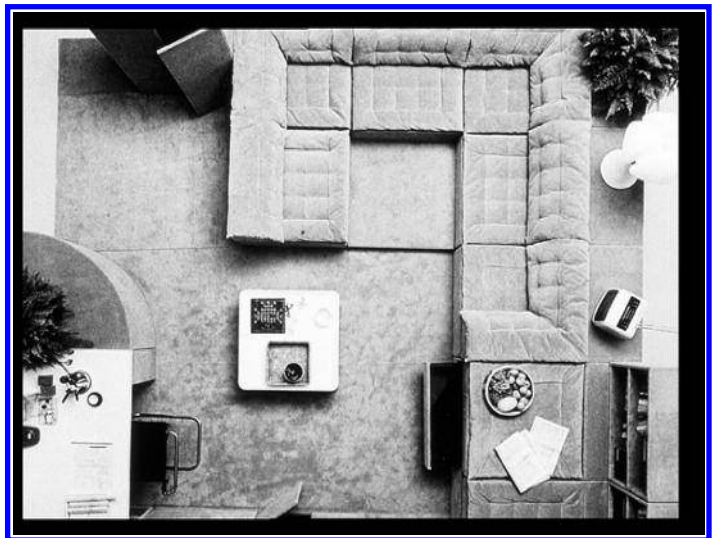
In girum tends to repeat static images that are then commented upon. One key image in the first part of the film is that of a family at play in their living room. In this image Debord suggests we can see the image of happiness and joy offered by the bourgeois spectacle in the carefree play of children and the happy smiles of their parents, the latter directed toward the photographer but also toward the television in the bottom left-hand corner of the frame. This seems to be an image of freedom, but one that Debord suggests is actually an image of constraint. He first renders the image as static object in the space of film, which arrests the usual "smooth" flow of images that constitute cinema.¹⁴ We are left to gaze at the image for over a minute, and in forcing our concentration on this image Debord aims to reveal the abstract congealing of time under capitalism, in which leisure is confined to the downtime from labor.

His second technique is to pair this image with an immediately following image of what appears to be a similar sofa in a similar living room, although differently arranged, empty of people, and viewed from above. The downward view has the effect of rendering the living room as a geometric and abstract space in which the lines and squares of the furniture form a "grid." The "grid" is a familiar modernist trope, or myth, and as Rosalind Krauss notes, it announces "modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse."¹⁵ In contrast, Debord places the grid in relation to commentary, to narrative, and also tries to push the static image into the flux of images. In Krauss's terms, although in a more political sense, Debord is practicing a "centrifugal" strategy of the grid that displaces the grid from the figuration of "pure modernism" into contact with its modulations through capitalism and through its contact with radical contestation.¹⁶ This suggests that Debord's interest is not solely in the figuration of abstraction but in the putting of abstraction *into* time. While the abstract grids of capitalist forms freeze

time, they cannot escape the effects of time. Debord is not suggesting that we contemplate capitalism as a closed system. Rather, he constantly stresses the tension built in to the grid, which uses an abstract form to try to delimit time to the time of labor and enforced recreation.

In contrast to the first instance of this displacement, where the family playing on the sofa seems to incarnate everyday life and joy, Debord's use of the second image suggests the constrained space in which they actually operate. Here the grid is not simply a gesture of abstraction to render the space strange but aims to reveal the abstract structure of space under capitalism. Rather than the flowing time of play, Debord is implying that this play is limited and structured by this spatial and architectural constraint. This point is later extended in an image of adults gathered together to play *Monopoly*. This archetypal capitalist game—which involves a “grid” in the form of property and space—indicates that what we might take as an image of “free” enjoyment is, in fact, shaped by the commodity. Debord's use of the image of *Monopoly* also connects the grid to Debord's own counter game: *Le jeu de la guerre* (*The Game of War*), which he developed and which he includes as a signature image in *In girum*. The limits of play in capitalism do not simply suggest play is redundant; rather, they are a call to the invention of new forms of play that do not operate in the circularity of capitalist accumulation, a circularity that is figured in the “grid” form of *Monopoly*.

Debord's practice is to suggest that we *overlay* the two images of the aptly named “living room.” The result is that rather than simply opposing life to dead time, Debord implies that these forms of vitality are not really living. The “grid” is revealed as the true figure of capitalism and yet also subject to displacement through immersion in the “flow” of cinematic images and the narrative “flow” of the commentary. This suggestion of movement is also a matter of a change in time. Against the repetitive time of capital, we find a hint of a new practice that would register an irreversible time that might “leap” across the abstract grid. This is only implied, however. At this point in the film one could easily read Debord as suggesting we are perpetually trapped within capitalist culture, that the grid is the “iron cage” of abstraction (in Max Weber's formulation). In that case, invocation of another time somehow buried or encrypted “under” the grid (“beneath the cobblestones the beach”) would be merely consolatory fantasy. To stop the film at this moment, however, is to freeze Debord into the common image of him as patrician pessimist.¹⁷



Guy Debord. *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, 1978. Frame enlargement.

The Negative Holds Court

The second and major part of the film, which takes up most of its running time, is dedicated to a “quarter [of Paris] where the negative held court.”¹⁸ This refers to Debord’s experiences with the Lettrists, a precursor group to the SI, in the 1950s. The Lettrists correspond more closely to Badiou’s diagnosis of “active nihilism,” practicing a dadaist art of destruction. In recounting the “adventures” of the Lettrists in his commentary—over images of Paris and various friends, comrades, and partners—Debord reverses the earlier images of capitalist culture. Now, we seem to have true freedom instead of constrained play, real activity instead of mere spectatorship, and the lived experience of time as flux instead of the spatialized “dead time” of capital. In particular the activities of the Lettrists are coded through a sexual politics of transition from the heterosexual “grid” of the petit-bourgeois family to the libertine (although still heterosexual) elective freedom of the avant-garde.¹⁹

This one-sided valorization reinforces the tendency to locate Debord and the SI as merely a late instance of the avant-garde. But closer attention to the commentary and images suggests something different. In a brief note written on the film’s themes, Debord identifies its primary theme as “water,” contrary to the Promethean ambience of the title and to the film’s detourned images of the devil warming himself before a fire. While fire, Debord argues, is “*momentary brilliance*—revolution, Saint-Germain-des-Prés, youth, love, negation in the night, the Devil, battles and ‘unfulfilled missions’ where spellbound ‘passing travelers’ meet their doom; and *desire within this night of the world* (‘nocte consumimur igni’)”—in short, much of what is treated in this section of the film—the true image of “the *evanescence* of everything” is water.²⁰ Thus, we should not take this section of the film on the “momentary brilliance” of this avant-garde as the achieved time-image. This section of the film also operates as a reply, in advance, to Badiou’s restriction of Debord and the situationists’ politics to the hope “that this fire may consume the world.”²¹ Water, not fire, is the true revolutionary element.

We must take seriously Debord’s remark about Saint-Germain-des-Prés being a place in which the negative *holds court*. This is not an unlimited struggle but one that operates within a confined geometric space, and

this section of the film constantly uses aerial views of Paris. We have not escaped the grid of capitalist space. What differs is that the Lettrists and the bohemian milieu Debord reconstructs deliberately take up a relation of nega-



tivity in relation to abstract space. We move from the revealed negativity of the poverty of petit-bourgeois life to an *inhabited* negativity, which is a negativity turned against capitalist life. This is an obvious advance. Debord is not saying that this avant-garde is as constrained as the representatives of contemporary capitalist life. The thesis is not one of total recuperation, in which the avant-garde can form only a negative image of the bourgeoisie. That said, Debord is indicating a *limit* to this practice. The finitude of his conception of time implies that all practice is, by definition, limited.

The true practice of the time-image is one that recognizes the necessity of this limit. Fire may burn brilliantly, but it burns out. When Debord describes the “advance” of this practice of negativity, he does so over a tracking shot made from a boat in a narrow canal in Venice, suggesting the constricted path of negativity, which remains canalized. Yet, Venice is privileged over Paris because it represents the finitude of a city built “on water.” Whereas the Lettrists tried to “inhabit negativity” as an activity, Debord suggests the impossibility of simply inhabiting negativity per se. We cannot ascribe to Debord, in the ironic characterization of T.J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith, the “the burning-with-the-pure-flame-of-negativity thesis.”²²

We can understand the complication that Debord introduces to this “thesis” if we grasp the image practice of *In girum*. Contrary to the separation of some absolute image of inhabited negativity, some image of “pure temporality,” Debord insists that this negativity is finite and transitional. Yet this seems to leave us only with images of failure. The stress on finitude means that the image of the Lettrists, holed up in their quarter, is the deeply ironic one of a detoured film sequence showing Custer’s last stand; it, too, returns us to the charge of pessimism against Debord.²³ Again, we must continue with the film to trace Debord’s practice of the time-image.

The Game of War

The crucial mediating image between “fire” and “water” and between the abstract stating temporality of the spectacle and the “flow” of time is that of Debord’s *Le jeu de la guerre* (*The Game of War*). Debord not only invokes an image of this game in the film, but in his commentary he continually invokes the classical authors of the art of warfare (Sun Tzu, Carl von Clausewitz, and Machiavelli). *Le jeu de la guerre* is a war game that Debord



Right and opposite:
Guy Debord. *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, 1978.
Frame enlargements.

patented in 1965, ten years after inventing it. In 1977, while working on *In girum*, Debord formed a games company with his film producer and publisher Gérard Lebovici to publish the game. Four or five sets were produced by a craftsman with pieces made in silver-plated copper, and one of these sets is featured in the film.²⁴

The game is designed to replicate Clausewitz's theory of war and is based on "classical" eighteenth-century warfare.²⁵ In Debord's "Preface to the First Edition," he states, "[T]he aim has been, within the minimum workable territorial, force-level, and temporal limitations, to incorporate all the main difficulties and means encountered universally in the conduct of war."²⁶ The board consists of 500 squares arranged in a twenty-by-twenty-five-square grid. The intention of the game was pedagogic, to inculcate a mastery of strategy that would be of use to the revolutionary.

Crucial to this understanding of strategy is the sense of "surprise" that is part of warfare. Debord remarks, "The surprises of this *Kriegspiel* [*sic*] seem inexhaustible; and I fear that this may well be the only one of my works that anyone will dare acknowledge as having some value."²⁷ So, although we now have another grid, we also have a sense of the game's constraints producing an "inexhaustible" series of surprises. At this point in the film we have come closest to an image of "pure temporality" precisely through what seems to be a constrained series of repetitions ("moves") that harbor strategic possibilities that can be "played out" on the grid. Crucially, the form of warfare Debord explores is one of movement. He remarks that this is "[a] war in which territory *per se* is of no interest."²⁸

On the one hand, the image of the game shown in the film incarnates a spatial and temporal confinement, which therefore links this image to the vertical view of the living room, the couples playing *Monopoly*, and the aerial views of the quarters of Paris. On the other hand, as an "inexhaustible" game in which territory is of "no interest," *Le jeu de la guerre* simultaneously displaces the confinement of the "grid"—or turns the grid into a mobile field. Thus, rather than suggesting a simple escape from the "grid" or that we find "pure temporality" in some final and full image—an eschatological option—Debord's time-image here passes through a strategic practice that uses and displaces the grid.

This strategic practice is a reply to the limits of Lettrist practice. In his commentary, Debord remarks that the desire to hold a confined ground of the negative results in entrapment in "a static, purely defensive



Guy Debord. *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, 1978. Frame enlargement.

position.”²⁹ Debord recognized the risk and even necessity of failure in any strategic activity. *Le jeu de la guerre* itself is designed to demonstrate that we do not fight on ground of our own choosing. The terrain is fixed and players array their forces without knowledge of each other. If we take the images of *In girum* as our guide, we find a constant attention to the tension of particular forces and contradictions within and between images. To follow this path is to suggest that Debord does not condemn abstraction per se in favor of the flow of time or the heroics of strategic maneuver.

In that sense Debord’s invocation of *Le jeu de la guerre* in *In girum* is meant to reinforce a mode of viewing and analyzing the image practice of the film. The aim is to suggest that we cannot suppose, in a pessimistic or melancholic register, that the “grid” of capitalist abstraction inexorably captures all life and existence. Nor can we simply produce a contemplative image of time as flow that would provide some consolation against this. When the activity of playing this game is posed to the contemplative cinema-viewer, it suggests the necessity of active viewing. We must, the film implies, proceed on the terrain of abstraction and transform that space into a space of strategy, war, and, therefore, time.

Repetition

The film ends on the subtitle “To be gone through again from the beginning,” which seems to be not only a demand for an attentiveness that Debord regards as lacking in his viewers but a plea for the necessity of again passing through the experience to which his film attests. The circular nature of the film’s palindromic title is replicated in this demand. However, to turn in this circle implies an image of stasis. Here the image of time Debord proposes would seem to coincide with the image of time as eternal recurrence, and especially with the cyclical time of capitalism, rather than the image of time as irreversible. More in line with Debord’s intentions, this “circle” could be read as the need to recover and rework previous experiences—those of the Lettrists and the SI, or Debord’s own experiences—from the flattened time of capital. Rather than a return, such a reading suggests something like a “repetition,” in the sense Giorgio Agamben argues is at work in Debord’s filmmaking: “Repetition restores the possibility of what was, renders the possibility anew.”³⁰ Repeating the adventure of the SI in the image is not simply, on this reading, an act of memory or nostalgia but a repetition that renders up this lost possibility.

Debord is by no means uncritical about this “possibility.” Failure is a necessary result of strategy, as strategy means accepting our immersion in time without the ability to absolutely master it. Debord’s film engages

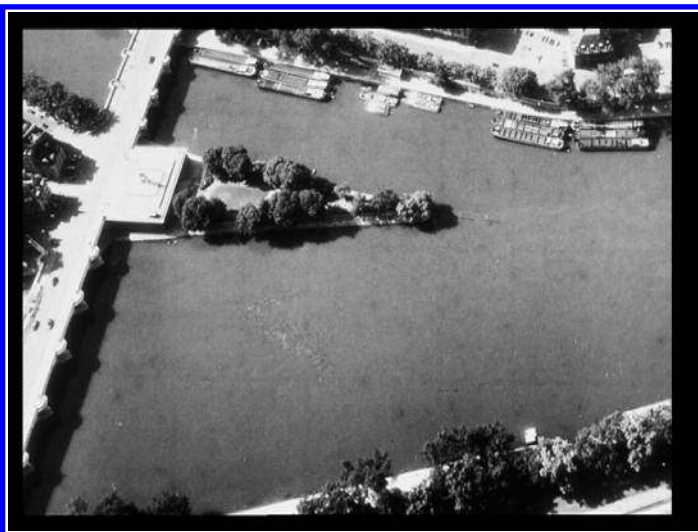
with this tension of necessary failure. Contrary to the impression created by some of Debord's own proclamations, however, *In girum* is not self-congratulatory or self-mythologizing—or not only that. Rather, it stresses the often intractable engagement—political, historical, and at the level of image practice—with the forms of capitalist society.

One final image condenses the difficulty of Debord's image practice and this entanglement. An image of La Pointe du Vert-Galant shows water constrained between the banks of the Seine and cut into by the sideways V of the "pointe," suggesting that the "flow" of time is not able to escape into a "pure temporality" or a "pure politics." The tension staged in this image suggests the necessity of a strategic consideration of time that can erode the image-regime of capitalism. In this sense the image of politics and temporality is found only in this strategic practice, including work on the image. Debord's point is that we have never been presented with a choice of terrains and thus the terrain we have we did not choose.

While Debord can be celebrated or condemned as the "mystic" of a "pure temporality" or a "pure politics," such a reading does not take the measure of the repetition that *In girum* sets in motion. To deny any "mystical" reading out of hand is not possible. Debord's own practice, as well as his commentary, in some ways invites this reading. However, another mode of attention, closer to Debord's own recommendations, attends to the strategic demands of his image practice and how this demand implies an image of time at war within and against the imperative of capitalist abstraction. Debord's own emphasis on how we are always embedded within time, and how this forms a necessary horizon, suggests that we can never "purify" our, or his, practice. Contrary to the image of Debord and the SI as "purists," his film practice, which is most engaged in actual work on images, ought to be taken as the "time-image" for a politics and practice that never tries to escape time but rather tries to engage within it.

In reading Debord this way, we would not remain in the constricted circle that consists in historicizing, aestheticizing, or politicizing Debord's cinematic practice. These all, in different ways, suppose a closed and restricted temporal sequence. Historicizing implies a finite sequence that

remains firmly in the past. Aestheticizing assimilates Debord to the figure of the last avant-garde. And politicizing supposes that we can merely repeat, in the bad sense, Debord's own practice. The lesson of Debord's stress on



Guy Debord. *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, 1978. Frame enlargement.

qualitative time is one of reactivation and reworking that attends to the finitude of practice without supposing closure. For this reason a return to *In Girum* demands, if we are to measure up to Debord's time-image, the rendering of a new possibility of time.

Notes

1. Alain Badiou, "Rhapsody for the Theater: A Short Philosophical Treatise" (1990), trans. Bruno Bosteels, *Theater Survey* 49, no. 2 (2008): 188.
2. Guy Debord, "Letter to Jacques Le Glou (15 November 1982)," trans. Not Bored! <http://www.notbored.org/debord-15November1982.html>.
3. Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* (1982), trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009), 330.
4. Guy Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti, "Theses on the Situationist International and Its Time," in *The Veritable Split in the International: Public Circular of the Situationist International* (London: Chronos Publications, 1985), Thesis 41, 63.
5. Debord and Sanguinetti, "Theses," Thesis 29, 43.
6. "The Sound and the Fury," trans. Ken Knabb, in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), 41. The article was originally published in *Internationale situationniste* 1 (June 1958).
7. Guy Debord, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* [film script], in *Complete Cinematic Works*, trans. and ed. Ken Knabb (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2003), 134.
8. Debord, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* [film script], in *Cinematic Works*, 149.
9. Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 114.
10. On the "common reading," see Vincent Kaufmann, *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 222. For a more philosophically sophisticated version of this charge, see Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (1996), trans. R.D. Richardson and A.E. O'Byrne (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 52.
11. Debord, "A User's Guide to Détournement (excerpts)" (1956), in *Cinematic Works*, 209.
12. Debord, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* [film script], in *Cinematic Works*, 146.
13. Debord, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* [film script], in *Cinematic Works*, 140.
14. On this "arresting" of the image by Debord, see Giorgio Agamben, "Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord's Films," in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 313–319.
15. Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 9. The essay was originally published as "Grids," *October* 9 (Summer 1979): 50–64.
16. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 21.
17. Kaufmann, *Guy Debord*, 100.
18. Debord, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* [film script], in *Cinematic Works*, 156; translation modified.
19. On the gender politics of the situationists, see Kelly Baum, "The Sex of the Situationist International," *October* 126 (2008): 23–43.
20. Debord, "The Themes of *In girum*" (1989), in *Cinematic Works*, 223; emphasis in original.
21. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 330.

22. T.J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith, "Why Art Can't Kill the Situationist International," in *Guy Debord and The Situationist International*, 473.
23. Kaufmann, *Guy Debord*, 100.
24. Alice Becker-Ho, "Historical Note" (2006), in Alice Becker-Ho and Guy Debord, *A Game of War*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Atlas Press, 2007), 9.
25. Becker-Ho and Debord, *Game of War*, 13.
26. Becker-Ho and Debord, *Game of War*, 9.
27. Guy Debord, *Panegyric*, trans. James Brook (London: Verso, 1991), 64.
28. Becker-Ho and Debord, *Game of War*, 24; emphasis in original.
29. Debord, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* [film script], in *Cinematic Works*, 169.
30. Agamben, "Difference and Repetition," 316.

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Guy Debord and the Cultural Revolution

SVEN LÜTTICKEN

*D'ailleurs, c'est moins de formes qu'il s'agit que de traces de formes, d'empreintes, de souvenirs.*¹

One of the crucial tropes of Guy Debord's and of the situationists' practice is the *dépassement* of specific arts and of art as such. In his film *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps* (On the passage of a few persons through a rather brief unity of time, 1959), Debord makes a dismissive remark about filmmakers who insist on presenting themselves as auteurs, like "authors of novels" did back in the day. In fact, rather than being elevated to the ranks of art and authorship, "the cinema, too, must be destroyed."² This avowed desire for destruction notwithstanding, the tendency to reevaluate Debord's cinematic work that was inaugurated by Tom Levin's 1987 essay has become much more pronounced since Debord's death.³ This development has been helped by the fact that we now have access to Debord's films, which at the time of Levin's essay had largely been withdrawn from circulation. That is, a "body of work" is now available to us. But perhaps *work* should here be read as *travail* rather than as *oeuvre* (*d'art*), as activity rather than result. In *Sur le passage*, Debord notes that his subject was "*the collective art of our time*" and that "An art film on this generation can only be a film about its lack of real creations [*l'absence de ses oeuvres*]."⁴ As the Russian productivist critic Nikolai Tarabukin wrote (in a book published by Champ Libre, the publisher with which Debord was closely associated), "the art of the future will not consist of luxury items but of *transformed labor*."⁵

In *Sur le passage*, Debord uses the term *activité esthétique* as a synonym for *art*, but when examining Debord's practice much is to be gained from making a distinction between art and the aesthetic and using the notion of aesthetic activity or practice as one that problematizes the existence of art as a separate social sphere. If one element can be found in all forms of Marxian aesthetics, it is—in Hans Magnus Enzensberger's words—the promise of "an aesthetic which is not limited to the sphere of 'the artistic.'"⁶ When Karl Marx predicted (or demanded) that under Communism *painters*, people exclusively devoted to the profession of painting, would be replaced by *people who also paint*, he was announcing the transfor-

mation of work as the aesthetic project par excellence.⁷

Neither Marx's nor Debord's imagined future came to pass, but Debord's *praxis* has contributed significantly to our understanding of the transformation of work in general and of aesthetic labor in particular. My subject here is not limited to Debord as filmmaker or to Debord's films; rather, I focus on Debord as an aesthetic activist whose cinematic and other oeuvres are equally absent and present. I discuss films such as *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978) as stand-ins for "absent works" whose problematic status is part of the point. We can see or read some of his "works," we can publish or screen or exhibit them, but they exist as something both more and less than tangible facts. They are performance rather than object. In this they mirror more-general transformations of capitalism during the 1960s and 1970s, but Debord's practice pushes performance to the point where it becomes a form of action turned against the performative regime itself. In this sense, *In girum* was not actually Debord's final word on the cinema, because he continued to be involved in the "performing" of his *oeuvres cinématographiques*.

New Forms of Action in Painting and Publishing

In the crucial period when the Situationist International (SI) ridded itself of the "Nashist" and "Spurist" tendencies (the years 1960–1962), the central point of contention was the status of art as a field that depended on the production of a specialist type of commodity.⁸ Whereas "the artists" wanted to cling to established artistic media and formats—such as painting—Debord and his allies sought to negate such conventional forms through an avant-garde aesthetic of transgressive actions. But what remains when art is negated? One answer is that the negation of art is itself an aesthetic and political action.

A few artifacts were left behind by the SI. An object such as the poster for the 1962 SI conference in Antwerp, with its detoured image of Marilyn Monroe, is not just a critical negation of film posters and stills but also of the rarified painting-commodities produced by the artists of the "other" SI: namely, the "Nordic" group around Asger Jorn and Jørgen Nash. More explicitly and hence polemically, Debord would challenge the Nordic painters head-on with his 1963 series of *Directives*, which consisted of painted slogans on canvas (one was a reused piece of industrial painting by a former member of the SI, Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio). The *Directives* were shown at the exhibition Destruction of the RSG-6, in Odense—an attack on the Scandinavians in their own backyard.⁹ Saluting actions by Spies for Peace in the UK, who made public the secret plans for an atomic fallout shelter to be used by the government ("RSG-6"), the SI organized the antinuclear exhibition Destruction of RSG-6 in order to

reclaim art from the Nashists for the Debordian SI—and to do so by lauding destructive anti-art gestures. The show included “works” that detoured both modern painting and the iconography of the Cold War, as in J.V. Martin’s quasi-expressionist “Thermonuclear Paintings.” In a crucial text written on the occasion of Destruction of the RSG-6, “The Situationists and New Forms of Action in Politics and Art,” Debord affirms the rejection of “Nashist ‘situationism’” as a “falsification,” while at the same time acknowledging the “perpetrators” of certain “new radical gestures as being situationist,” promising “to support them and never disavow them, even if many among them are not yet fully aware of the coherence of today’s revolutionary program, but are only moving in that general direction.”¹⁰ Among the “acts that have our total approval” was the attempt by revolutionary students in Caracas to take hostage paintings from an exhibition of French art and use them as collateral. A subsequent bomb attack on a police van transporting the recovered paintings “unfortunately did not succeed in destroying it.”¹¹

Debord enthused that this

is clearly an exemplary way to treat the art of the past, to bring it back into play in life and to reestablish priorities. Since the death of Gauguin (“I have tried to establish the right to dare everything”) and of Van Gogh, their work, coopted by their enemies, has probably never received from the cultural world an homage so true to their spirit as the act of these Venezuelans.¹²

Recalling Mikhail Bakunin—who in 1849 had proposed to place paintings from the museums on the barricades, “to see if this might inhibit the attacking troops from continuing their fire”—Debord notes that the Caracas skirmish “links up with one of the highest moments of the revolutionary upsurge of the last century, and even goes further.”¹³ Here the fetish of the “Nashists,” the easel painting, is subjected to a terrorist attack.

Jorn and other situationist painters were likewise engaged in a struggle with the Western tableau, the history of Western painting, and the antinomies of artistic production in the society of the spectacle; however, they did so immanently, within the medium of painting itself. By contrast, for Debord to pay “homage” to the “spirit” of heroic modernists such as Paul Gauguin or Vincent van Gogh necessitated an external attack on painting and a critical rejection rather than an immanent critique. However, such an attack would not necessarily be extra-aesthetic. A “normal” revolutionary group would hardly deem paintings a prime target for revolutionary action. Indeed, in the same text Debord insists that the SI can be seen “as an artistic avant-garde” as well as

an experimental investigation of possible ways for freely constructing everyday life, and as a contribution to the theoretical and practical development of a new revolutionary contestation. From now on, any fundamental cultural creation, as well as any qualitative transformation of society, is contingent on the continued development of this sort of interrelated approach.¹⁴

The aim of the project of the *dépassement de l'art*—as inscribed on one of the *Directives* exhibited in Odense—was not so much to abolish art as to actualize its potential in society, in life, as aesthetic praxis. Art as Weberian sphere had to go in favor of a lived aesthetic practice. As Debord wrote in 1958 in his “Theses on Cultural Revolution,” “Art can cease to be a report on sensations and become a direct organization of higher sensations. It is a matter of producing ourselves, and not things that enslave us.”¹⁵ What Debord terms *cultural revolution* needed to be complemented by or be the complement and completion of a social and political revolution. In a statement on cultural revolution written in the context of the SI’s 1959 Munich conference, André Frankin notes that

capitalism has separated [artists] from culture, substituting what should be the real practice of life with false modes of life and leisure. To this false dichotomy of technology and culture is born a false unitary vision of civilization. The future and the present of every political and social revolution depend *above all* on the consciousness of this second alienation, more profound and more intractable than economic alienation.¹⁶

Cultural alienation necessitates a cultural revolution. An alliance of sorts between the alienated artists and the alienated proletariat was therefore essential to any revolution worthy of the name.

Whereas the term *cultural revolution* would have a significant career following the upheavals of 1967 and 1968, and was used extensively in German “actionist” and New Left circles, for the situationists the concept had become tainted, not least because of the Maoist connotations that were hard to avoid after 1966.¹⁷ For the situationists, only idiots could think “something [was] ‘cultural’ about this affair [the Chinese Cultural Revolution],” because it was merely window dressing for a power struggle.¹⁸ By contrast, aiming at a full-blown cultural revolution rather than a mere takeover of the state, the avant-garde of the 1960s reexcavated the aesthetic promise of Communism. Politicizing Friedrich Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Marx had envisaged the end of the division of labor as making possible a more sensuously rich and diverse existence.

What united a number of groups in the New Left and the avant-garde in the 1960s was the insight that culture could no longer be seen as a mere superstructural/ideological reflection of the base. The productive forces were no longer exclusively industrial, and the culture industry and the media were themselves as much base as they were superstructure. Hence—to summarize a series of complex and contentious debates—artists and students were potentially as much of a revolutionary class as the proletariat. Marx had already argued that capitalist technology turned knowledge into a productive force, and in the late 1960s his notion of the “general intellect” from the *Grundrisse* became crucial for theorists of “new forms of action” such as Hans-Jürgen Krahl, who tried to forge new alliances.¹⁹ Student movements in various countries appeared to show the revolutionary potential of the cognitariat, with May 1968 in France being the *locus classicus*.

Debord’s position regarding May 1968 is paradoxical. On the one hand, he and the SI had been instrumental in calling attention to cultural activism as (potentially) political and revolutionary; on the other hand, while Debord remained interested in the radicalism of bohemians and the *classes dangereuses*, he never really addressed the decline of the classic industrial proletariat and its consequences for the revolutionary project. Debord tended to ignore or minimize the social changes that were taking place during his lifetime, especially the decomposition of the classic proletariat and the effects of this development on the chances of a revolution. While Debord had always accorded an important role to bohemian intellectuals, artists, and antisocial elements, he left to others in France and elsewhere—including the Dutch Provos and various German and Italian theorists—the task of articulating more fully the perspective of a postclassical revolutionary politics. For a long time after May 1968, Debord remained on the lookout for signs of a revolution to come, and his conception of the revolution was not without classicizing traits—traits that also characterized his literary preferences.

From 1971 onward, Debord forged an ever-closer working relationship with Gérard Lebovici’s Champ Libre publishing house, which had been created in the aftermath of May 1968. Champ Libre not only became the primary publisher of Debord’s writings but also reflected his preferences in its overall program. Although Debord bristled at the suggestion that he was Champ Libre’s *éminence grise*, he played exactly this role and with gusto.²⁰ To some extent, Champ Libre and its successor, Éditions Gérard Lebovici, came to function as a library of Debord-approved classics, from the revolutionary Anacharsis Cloots to the Hegelian August Cieszkowski—whose theory of the act made an impact on the early Marx—to the

seventeenth-century Cardinal de Retz, with a heavy helping of Russian avant-garde.²¹ Champ Libre was defiantly historical and even historicist. In 1986, when Éditions Gérard Lebovici opened a bookstore on its new premises in the rue Saint-Sulpice, Debord devised a program for “thematic vitrines” with regularly changing displays of the publisher’s books—focusing, for instance, on the avant-garde, “Hegelo-Marxism,” anarchism, Spain, or military strategy.²² In these historical permutations, a book could appear in different contexts, foregrounding various aspects. Debord played with the publisher’s backlist—shaped by his own interests—in what amounts to a curious form of action below the radar of most positions in politics or art; it is an anachronistic performance that reflects a redefinition of labor pioneered but never fully theorized by Debord. In a media-saturated economy, books need to be staged as events, and authors need to become performers of their work. Champ Libre resolutely rejected this, even to the point of refusing to send review copies to the press. The understated displays suggested by Debord were pithy anti-events that performed the back catalog in ways that were sure to pass largely unnoticed. The ongoing cultural revolution retreated into ever more marginal forms of action, though with the occasional splash: in an ad published in *Le Monde* on Saturday, August 28, 1976, Champ Libre commemorated the collapse of the Western Roman Empire on August 28, 476—and proceeded to plug books by authors including Bakunin, Cieszkowski, Clausewitz, and Debord, all of whom were supposedly hastening the collapse of capitalism.²³

Minor though it may be, Debord’s “curatorial” activity for his publisher’s bookstore suggests that for him cultural production—in this case, publishing—was not limited to the production of certain artifacts but encompassed the “performance” of these artifacts and through this ultimately the production of specific modes of reception and use. The specificity of these modes potentially turns Debordian performance into one of the forms of action Debord theorized. As Marx writes in the *Grundrisse*,

Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth. Production thus produces not only the object but also the manner of consumption, not only objectively but also subjectively. Production thus creates the consumer. . . . The object of art—like every other product—creates a public which is sensitive to art and enjoys beauty. Production thus not only creates an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object.²⁴

Louis Buffier. *Les conseils superflus* (Unnecessary advice), 1950s or early 1960s. Postcard showing Guy Debord's graffiti "Ne travaillez jamais" (Never work).



But if this is a general characteristic of production, the nature of production changed during the period in which Debord practiced his version of the cultural revolution. The industrial production of goods was increasingly supplemented and partially supplanted by the production of subjectivity through cognitive or immaterial labor. Producing became forever reperforming texts and images.

Debord participated in and responded to this shift when, for instance, he replied in 1963 to a letter from the Cercle de la Librairie demanding money for copyright infringement. Debord was accused of having taken the photo of the “Ne travaillez jamais” (Never work) graffiti published in *Internationale situationniste* from one of a series of postcards of Parisian scenes with “funny” captions—as in fact he had. In response Debord argued that because he was the author of the original graffiti back in 1953 (something for which he claimed he could produce several witnesses), the photographer and the publisher had infringed *his* copyright.

Rejecting the whole of intellectual property law, Debord then magnanimously promised not to press charges himself, but he insisted that the publisher remove the “funny” caption “Les conseils superflus” (Unnecessary advice) from the card.²⁵ As he had probably anticipated, Debord never heard from the publisher again.

As ephemeral graffiti, “Ne travaillez jamais” was beyond recuperation, hardly an *oeuvre*. As the picture postcard *Les conseils superflus* subsequently detoured by the SI, however, the piece becomes work, is put to work. In reprinting the photo (albeit cropped and shorn of its offensive legend) and engaging in a correspondence (that has now been published as part of his *Correspondance*), Debord assisted in its transformation. Debord engaged in a legal skirmish not just to prove that the copyright of the slogan was really his but to stress that he rejected the entire legal framework of copyright. By engaging in this exchange and writing a lengthy letter, Debord effectively participated in the redefinition of work and turned performative “semiotic” labor into a form of action.

However, the articulation of conflicts and antinomies is itself a crucial part of the new labor, a way of turning performance into a form of action. If some of these conflicts became apparent only years after the fact, Debord was instrumental in publishing the *Correspondance* of Champ Libre precisely in order to show what goes on behind the scenes, to show the reality of this far-from-generic cultural enterprise—which cultivated the art of the insult as part of its own version of the reinvention of work.²⁶

Against the Cinema

His work as film director to some extent forced Debord to play the game of intellectual property—even if he played it with the aim of upending it. For his films, in particular those produced by Lebovici during the 1970s, Debord made lists of films he wished to detourn, and attempts were made to secure the rights. In his final film, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, Debord included extensive footage from the 1936 version of *The Charge of the Light Brigade* in order to “illustrate” the battles of the situationist avant-garde. Earlier, he had tried to include part of the 1968(!) color remake in his film version of *La société du spectacle* (*The Society of the Spectacle*). The copyright holder, however, proved to be excessively suspicious, and nothing came of it.²⁷ While an extended sequence in *In girum* was culled from the 1936 film, a short clip from the remake turns up toward the end of the film, but in black and white. The montage in films such as *La société du spectacle* and *In girum* is thus shaped by commercial negotiations; this is, so to speak, *embedded détournement*.

By detourning the films, Debord screens or performs them in a specific manner, as part of his montage. But how are the films that are thus produced shown in turn? Film has to be performed in order to be seen, to appear. A roll of celluloid in a can is nothing; it has to be *projected* under certain conditions. As Mary Ann Doane emphasizes, film has a double existence: as *stored* and as *projected* film.²⁸ In Doane’s words, “the cinema generates a confusion about the location of the image, abstracting location itself. The virtuality of the image indicates not a question about its substance or materiality, but an undecidability as to where it is.”²⁹

Where and when *was* Debord’s cinema, which is now freely available to us but no longer in cinematic form? The regular cinema screening situation was profoundly problematic for Debord, as the epitome of the spectacle and of the reign of fetishism and separation. Two images in particular encapsulate his and the SI’s problematization of cinema as a spectacle in which captive spectators with impoverished lives project their desires onto actor-fetishes.

The first is the image captioned “London, 1960: Situationists at the Cinema” in the *Internationale situationniste*. Various photos of this tableau are known to exist, taken from different angles.³⁰ They all show a group of situationists in London at the ICA cinema/auditorium, illuminated starkly from the front by the projector beam, with the white screen behind them. The image suggests an audience standing in the light of Debord’s *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (*Howls for Sade*, 1952), which was shown at the theater in June 1960. The photo—or rather, series of photos—was taken in September, on the occasion of the SI conference in

Guy Debord. *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, 1978.
Frame enlargement.



London. During the conference, SI members staged a demonstration and debate at the ICA that excruciated the audience with endless delays over translations and ended when the situationists left in protest after an audience

member asked for the definition of the term *situationism*.³¹ As an exercise in audience provocation, the ICA debate recalls screenings of *Hurléments*. Guy Atkins recalls SI members in the first rows making catcalls while Maurice Wyckaert read out the SI's statement—translated by Atkins on Debord's behest into a highly literal, and hence all but incomprehensible, English—with a heavy Flemish accent.³² Here assembled for a photo shoot in front of the screen, the situationists (minus Debord) are lit up by the cinema, but as acting subjects refusing to buy into the spectacle of Hollywood's prized actors they relegate film to the status of mere backdrop.³³

The second image is a photo of "A contemporary movie audience, photographed from the screen at which they are staring fixedly, so that the spectators find themselves face to face with nothing but themselves." This is how the image is described in the script of *In girum*.³⁴ Unlike the photo of the 3-D movie audience used for the U.S. edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*, this audience-in-the-movie looks directly at the viewers-in-the-auditorium. This photo of a movie audience is, after all, meant to be seen in the cinema, as part of *In girum*. This image is a mirroring return, to use a Duchampian phrase. The question quickly becomes one of identity: Do the viewers of *In girum* face "themselves," or might they be or become something other than a generic "contemporary cinema audience," a different kind of collective entity? Seeing *In girum* now on DVD hardly gives the same sense of interpellation. If Debord is a master of montage, the montage includes not only the often highly layered audiovisual montage of his films, with their dialectical interaction between still and moving images, inter- and subtitles, monologues and other sounds; it also includes the montage of film and audience, of film and *screening situation*. In short, Debord's montage is also a form of social montage.

La société du spectacle and *In girum*, both produced by Lebovici's Simar Films, were released with some fanfare—even if, by film industry standards, it was a marginal sort of fanfare. Debord prided himself on the "triumphant" premiere of *La société du spectacle* on May 1, 1974, before an audience of laborers and *marginiaux*.³⁵ Here, in the politically charged context of May Day and a nonbourgeois (and antibourgeois) audience, the project of a countercinema seemed to become a momentary reality.



In girum, however, would contain a grim indictment of the “regular” cinema audience—represented by the photograph of the “contemporary movie audience”:

The movie-going public, which has never been very bourgeois and which is scarcely any longer working-class, is now recruited almost entirely from a single social stratum, though one that has been considerably enlarged—the stratum of low-level skilled employees in the various “service” occupations that are so necessary to the present production system: management, control, maintenance, research, teaching, propaganda, entertainment, and pseudocritique. Which suffices to give an idea of what they are. This public that still goes to the movies also, of course, includes the young of the same breed who are merely at the apprenticeship stage for one or another of these functions.³⁶

In girum was released, with some delay, by Gaumont in 1981. A photo of a cinema in the Quartier Latin shows it playing alongside a Hollywood film of the day, *Quelque part dans le temps* (*Somewhere in Time*).³⁷ This incongruous montage is not without its own charm, but soon Lebovici would give Debord the opportunity of having a small cinema dedicated to his films: Lebovici bought Studio Cujas in Paris, and Debord determined the sequence in which his films were to be shown there on a weekly basis. The films were to be projected—performed—even if an audience failed to materialize; the films would be shown to an empty house.³⁸ A somewhat idiosyncratic episode, no doubt—but all the more interesting for that. Just when a certain cinema culture that had blossomed in the 1960s and early 1970s was in terminal decline, with the video geek replacing the old cinephile, Debord created a completely dysfunctional performance of film. The Cujas séances played to a different counterpublic than that of the (sub-)proletarian May crowd, and at times it was a counterpublic of absence, one that did not in fact exist in the desert of the present. Here a failed performance became a form of action that had no immediate social or political effect but prided itself on being

a genuine avant-garde action precisely because it was utterly useless—a little potlatch, a sovereign gesture.

In Debord's films—particularly *Sur le passage* and *In girum*—one finds an insistence that they pertain to a lost world, being paeans to lost groupings and comrades. This insistence brought with it certain formal strategies. In *Sur le passage*, the camera pans across photographs of young bohemians as a mockery of *films d'art*. A café scene resembling one of these photos is then restaged for the film—a “reconstitution pauvre et fausse comme ce traveling manqué.”³⁹ The “documentary” photo that serves as cliché footage for an art film must be as impoverished and false as the botched tracking shot of a reenacted drinking session. *In girum* embroiders further on the same theme, reusing some of the same photos as well as scenes showing Zorro in action and *The Charge of the Light Brigade* in combination with tracking shots of the waterfront of Venice, which were recorded specifically for the film. With *In girum*, Debord claims to be stating

a few truths over a background of images that are all trivial or false. This film disdains the image-scrap of which it is composed. I do not wish to preserve any of the language of this outdated art, except perhaps the reverse shot of the only world it has observed and a tracking shot across the fleeting ideas of an era. What needs to be proved by images? Nothing is ever proved except by the real movement that dissolves existing conditions—that is, the existing production relations and the forms of false consciousness that have developed on the basis of those relations.⁴⁰

A great deal more could be said about the polyphonic montage of different kinds of images and Debord's *monologue d'ivrogne* in *In girum*. Benjamin Noys has analyzed some of the recurring images and their interrelations. For example, photos of the grid for Debord's *Le jeu de la guerre* (*The Game of War*), a board game he conceived, echo photos of angular, modular sofas seen elsewhere in *In girum*, as well as aerial photographs of Paris.⁴¹ As the historical battlefield par excellence for Debord, Paris had irregularities and specific qualities deriving from its singular history—even though the aerial photos transform the lived reality of Paris into crystalline images.⁴² By contrast, *Le jeu de la guerre* as an abstract model of conflict appears to replicate, as artist Rod Dickinson says, “the abstraction of capitalist space that is founded on networks of banks, business centres and information lattices, rather than space with specific, local character.”⁴³ Debord had a small edition of the board game made in 1977, just in time to be photographed for *In girum*, and in March 1978, while working on the film, Debord wrote to Lebovici that cinema

was “finished” and that a mass-market edition of the game should be released as soon as possible.⁴⁴ Even if the Studio Cujas episode and a 1982 contract Debord signed with one of Lebovici’s companies to make a film about Spain show that Debord did not completely abandon the cinema as a field of action, at the time of *In girum, Le jeu de la guerre* was presented as the next step after the *fin de cinéma*.

Games after Play

As Dickinson, a member of the Class Wargames group, notes in an essay on Debord’s *Jeu de la guerre*, the game, with its ruthless rules trapping players time and again, appears to be “the very antithesis of Debord’s earlier proclamations on the Situationist approach to play, where winning is ‘the wretched product of a wretched society.’”⁴⁵ The Lettrist International and early SI were marked by “ludic” rhetoric; the aim of the *grand jeu* of revolutionary aesthetic action was to produce an unalienated life of play. In this context, the cinema, with its passive spectatorship rather than active involvement, became the enemy par excellence. If the spectacle is the reign of separation and passivity, *play* is seen as a counterspectacle in which the division between actors and spectators is sublated. And because cinema is the epitome of spectacle, play opposes cinema. The cinema spectator had to become an actor—not a film actor but an actor in the unscripted play of his or her own life.⁴⁶

As a game, and a game of war no less, Debord’s *Jeu de la guerre* should be distinguished from the early situationist hymns to *play*, to play unbound, to a life without rules—or at least with only *moral*, rather than conventional social or economic, rules. The game was a tool for sharpening one’s strategic skills in the struggle for a life that would indeed be play unbound, but had yet to be realized. While *Le jeu de la guerre* was allegedly developed in the 1950s and patented in 1965 (Debord playing the game of intellectual property for the occasion), his 1970s attempt to promote and market the game fits his “strategic turn” in that decade. Clausewitz became a crucial point of reference for Debord in the 1970s (Champ Libre published Clausewitz in translation during this period), and Debord’s *Jeu de la guerre* ultimately harks back to Clausewitz’s own social circle—to the *Kriegsspiel* (war game) constructed by the Prussian official Georg Leopold von Reisswitz in 1812.⁴⁷ However, Debord stated that his game ultimately reflects a pre-Napoleonic, eighteenth-century mode of warfare. Playing *Le jeu de la guerre* is a strange experience. Not particularly engaging as a board game, it becomes a historical game in a different way. If we do not see it as merely a symptom of retreat, a flight from history into historicism, we might say that it operates differently from “normal,” successful games. Going over moves and strategies in an



archaic setting becomes a play with history.

In addition to the recent English-language edition of the game and its manual, the groups Class Wargames and Radical Software have created their own versions. The game derives some of its surprising contemporary relevance from its break with the ludic ideology of the neo-avant-garde, an ideology that has proved to be compatible with capitalism's own "ludic turn" in recent decades. In the age of Facebook and Instagram, creative involvement is itself the rule. Welcome to the new labor, in which ludic play works in the service of economical games. Today's performative labor mocks Marx and Debord alike in appearing to transform work into play—though this play is an economic *game*.

The ludism of the neo-avant-garde coincided with an increasing dominance of games—rather than play—in economic theory. As Pamela M. Lee writes, this game theory "[has] nothing to do with the ludic," revolving rather around bargaining and decision-making in military as well as economic contexts.⁴⁹ Like cybernetics, which was the subject of situationist attacks in the 1960s, game theory analyzes information in terms of loss and gain, efficiency and rationalization. If the situationists demanded new forms of play that could not be contained by any fixed set of rules, game theory was very much dependent on such rules, on the permutations of a limited set of options and on the analysis and development of strategies that depend on feedback to one's moves in this delineated field of possibilities—feedback in the form of the move made by an opponent who may or may not be human. Norbert Wiener warned that "there are in existence government agencies bent on applying [the theory of games] to military and quasi-military aggressive and defensive purposes."⁵⁰

Class Wargames, which stages public matches with a version of Debord's *Jeu de la guerre* produced by Dickinson, created an online film about the game which states that every player should study the strategy employed by Frederick the Great during the Seven Years' War—the monarch's focus on good lines of supply and communication having influenced twentieth-century warfare and its technological apparatuses.⁵¹ Debord's

emphasis on lines of communication could be seen as a “cybernetic” modernization of the game—even though Debord cited the Seven Years’ War as his historical model.⁵² As Dickinson stresses,

“The Game of War” departs from the traditional game of *Kriegsspiel* by utilising a system of communication relays to keep pieces in play and active. . . . As a player you quickly discover that the road to victory is by smashing your opponents’ communication network, rather than trying to eliminate his or her players. The game only needs the addition of PR companies employed by contemporary armies to complete a 21st century depiction of warfare.⁵³

Debord’s game, then, would not be a completely alien entity in today’s age.

However, perhaps the outmoded elements of Debord’s own war game are more valuable than this “contemporary” aspect. The digital version of the game created by the Radical Software Group stresses its alterity; it could not be more different from first-person shooter games or, as Alexander Galloway stresses, from real-time strategy games and swarm games.⁵⁴ With their multiple actors and multiplicity of events unfolding in real time, such games are far removed from the chess-like sequences of Debord’s game, unfolding in an abstract temporality ruled by two commanders who move around the troops of history. Although Debord rejected game theory and its math-based bargaining and although his game aims to teach us to shatter the perpetual present of such zero-sum games, his game of strategy has more in common with game theory than he would have cared to admit. In fact, Debord tended to conceive of revolutionary history as a finite game with narrowly defined rules.

Like the Studio Cujas film “performances” or the book “events,” *Le jeu de la guerre* is another instance of late Debord at his most problematic and most essential. The game today is an aesthetic “form of action” that is as new as it is obsolete; to play it is to be stuck between historical moments that all seem equally blocked. In thus reactualizing Debord’s anachronistic relevance, the experience of *Le jeu de la guerre* can serve as a warning against normalizing some of Debord’s other activities. The increasing scholarly focus on Debord’s films should not turn them into manageable oeuvres—into classic essay films, for example. Even while analyzing the intricacies of Debord’s dialectical montage, we must notice that, to paraphrase Paul Chan, these films are works that work precisely insofar as they *do not quite work*.⁵⁵ Debord’s practice does not meet the standards of economy and productivity that tacitly underpin many aesthetic judgments. His acts are not efficient; whatever agency they have rests in this.

Notes

1. “And we are dealing not so much with forms as with traces of forms, with imprints, with memories.” Subtitle in Guy Debord, *Critique de la séparation* [film script] (1961), in *Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 54.

2. Guy Debord, “On the Passage of a Few Persons through a Rather Brief Unity of Time [film script],” trans. Ken Knabb, Bureau of Public Secrets, <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord.films/passage.htm>. For the original French, see Guy Debord, *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps* [film script] (1959), in *Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes* (1994), 35.

3. Thomas Y. Levin, “Dismantling the Cinema: The Films of Guy Debord,” in *On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International 1957–1972* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Boston: ICA, 1989), 71–121.

4. Debord, “On the Passage [film script]”; and Debord, *Sur le passage* [film script] (1959), in *Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes* (1994). At first glance, the voluminous Gallimard edition of Debord’s *Oeuvres* seems to contribute to a reactionary normalization and co-optation of Debord’s life, turning him into a “classical author” (admittedly, Debord himself did increasingly exhibit classicizing tendencies). However, the book makes a great effort to present highly divergent types of text (film scripts, books, articles, letters, various documents)—and some images (film stills)—as manifestations of Debord’s “art de vivre.” See Alice Debord, introduction to *Oeuvres* by Guy Debord (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 10. Debord had already published his *Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes* (Paris: Champ Libre, 1978)—*oeuvres* that include his remark on *the absence of proper oeuvres*.

5. Nikolai Taraboukine, *Le dernier tableau: Du cheval à la machine: Pour une théorie de la peinture* (Paris: Champ Libre, 1972), 56. This publication, edited by Andrei B. Nakov, was published when Debord’s position at Champ Libre was not yet as dominant as it would later become. In a 1975 letter to Gérard Lébovici in which he critically reviews Champ Libre’s past publications, Debord singled out for praise a number of books by authors including Carl von Clausewitz and Mikhail Bakunin, as well as George Kubler and Taraboukin’s *Le dernier tableau*—specifying that he had not yet read the latter but was relying on the judgment of “people with taste.” Guy Debord, *Correspondance*, vol. 5 (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 2005), 264.

6. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Constituents of a Theory of The Media,” *New Left Review* 64 (November/December 1970): 25.

7. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Die deutsche Ideologie* (1845–1846), in *Werke*, vol. 3 (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 1990), 379.

8. In the SI’s idiom, “Nashist” refers to the mostly Scandinavian situationists around Asger Jorn’s brother, Jørgen Nash, who split from the SI on March 15, 1962. “Spurist” refers to the Gruppe Spur, which functioned as the German section of the SI until its members were excluded on February 10, 1962.

9. See Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, “To Act in Culture while Being against All Culture: The Situationists and the ‘Destruction of RSG-6,’” in *Expect Anything Fear Nothing: The Situationist Movement in Scandinavia and Elsewhere*, ed. Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Jakob Jakobsen (Copenhagen: Nebula; Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2011), 75–113.

10. Guy Debord, “The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Politics and Art” (1963), trans. Ken Knabb, Bureau of Public Secrets, <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/new-forms.htm>.

11. Debord, “The Situationists and the New Forms of Action.”

12. Debord, "The Situationists and the New Forms of Action."
13. Debord, "The Situationists and the New Forms of Action."
14. Debord, "The Situationists and the New Forms of Action."
15. Guy Debord, "Theses on Cultural Revolution," trans. Ken Knabb, Bureau of Public Secrets, <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/1.cultural-revolution.htm>; emphasis added. For the original French, see Guy Debord, "Thèses sur la révolution culturelle," *Internationale situationniste* 1 (June 1958): 21.
16. André Frankin, "Platform for a Cultural Revolution," trans. Reuben Keehan, Situationist International Online, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/platform.html>. For the original French, see André Frankin, "Plate-forme pour une révolution culturelle," *Internationale situationniste* 3 (December 1959): 25.
17. For example, issue 16 (1969) of the German left-wing *Kursbuch* (edited by Hans Magnus Enzensberger) contains a section on *Kulturrevolution* with texts by Walter Kreipe and Peter Scheider, the latter titled "Die Phantasie im Spätkapitalismus und die Kulturrevolution" (1–37).
18. "The Explosion Point of Ideology in China," trans. Ken Knabb, Bureau of Public Secrets, <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/11.China.htm>. For the original French, see "Le point d'explosion de l'idéologie en Chine," *Internationale situationniste* 11 (October 1967): 5.
19. See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (1857–1858), in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, vol. 42 (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 2005), 602. See also Hans-Jürgen Krahl, "Produktion und Klassenkampf" (1970), in *Konstitution und Klassenkampf: Zur historischen Dialektik von bürgerlicher Emanzipation und proletarischer Revolution* (Frankfurt: Verlag Neue Kritik, 2008), 392–414. On Marx's notion of general intellect and Hans-Jürgen Krahl, see Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (New York: Semiotext[e], 2009), 58–70. The concept of the general intellect would come to play a central role in the context of Italian post-*operaismo*.
20. In December 1976, after Lebovici rejected his manuscript, Jaime Semprun sent Debord a letter, addressing him as "coresponsible" because of his position at Champ Libre. Debord rejected any suggestion that he was somehow (co)directing Champ Libre, stating that he came to join the publisher "belatedly," in the summer of 1971, when Champ Libre had already acquired a subversive prestige. Debord is no doubt correct in this regard, and he understandably felt a need to fight grotesque accounts of his "sinister" influence over Lebovici, as if the latter were Debord's sock puppet. However, from 1971 to 1974, when the editorial *équipe* around Gérard Guégan was fired by Lebovici, Debord's influence steadily grew thanks to his developing friendship with Lebovici and Lebovici's wife, Floriana. After the departure of the "Guéganists," Floriana took control of the day-to-day operations.
21. After the assassination of Lebovici in 1984, the company was renamed Éditions Gérard Lebovici in his honor. After Floriana Lebovici's death in 1990, Debord left the publishing house, which was dissolved, and its backlist was taken over by the newly founded Editions Ivrea.
22. Debord also suggested ways to combine the publisher's different lists. The combination of lists F, D, and S, for instance, would create a sequence from "The Russian Avant-Garde and dada" via "The SI and '68" to "The Consequences of '68." Guy Debord to Floriana Lebovici, 29 March 1986, in *Correspondance*, vol. 6 (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 2006), 397–400.
23. In a letter dated September 6, 1976, Debord congratulates Lebovici on the

“perfect” ad, placed in an issue of *Le Monde* teeming with “symptoms of a universal decadence.” Debord, *Correspondance*, vol. 5, 363. In a short text purportedly written by Lebovici and which a disgruntled Mustapha Khayati attempted to insert into Champ Libre’s edition of *La misère en milieu étudiant* in October 1976, Khayati includes a mocking reference to this ad, treating it as a symptom of delusions of grandeur. See Éditions Champ Libre, *Correspondance*, vol. 1 (Paris: Champ Libre, 1978), 35.

24. Karl Marx, *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, Marxists Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch01.htm>; Marx, *Grundrisse*, 27.

25. See Guy Debord to the Cercle de la Librairie, 27 June 1963, in *Correspondance*, vol. 2 (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 2001), 244–247.

26. From 1978 on, when the first volume was published, correspondents were warned that their letters might show up in a future volume. See the ironic reference in a letter from Hanna Mittelstadt and Lutz Schulenburg of Edition Nautilus in Éditions Champ Libre, *Correspondance*, vol. 2 (Paris: Champ Libre, 1981), 82.

27. See Debord, *Correspondance*, vol. 5, 85, 325.

28. Mary Ann Doane, “The Location of the Image: Cinematic Projection and Scale in Modernity,” in *Art of Projection*, ed. Stan Douglas and Christopher Eamon (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 151.

29. Doane, “The Location of the Image,” 164.

30. *Internationale situationniste* 8 (December 1960): 8. A photo from a different angle is published in Robert Ohrt, *Phantom Avantgarde: Eine Geschichte der Situationistischen Internationale und der modernen Kunst* (Hamburg: Edition Nautilus, 1990), 232.

31. Christophe Bourseiller, *Vie et mort de Guy Debord 1931–1994* (Saint-Malo, France: Pascal Galodé, 2012), 178–183.

32. See Ohrt, *Phantom Avantgarde*, 232.

33. The “spectator becoming actor” was a concern of Debord’s erstwhile Lettrist colleague Marc’O. “Le spectateur devient peu à peu acteur, s’agit avec le film qui devient secondaire” (The spectator becomes little by little an actor, grows restless with the film which becomes secondary). Marc’O [Marc-Gilbert Guillaumin], “Introduction au cinéma nucléaire,” *ION* 1 (April 1952): 245.

34. Guy Debord, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978), trans. Ken Knabb, in Guy Debord, *Complete Cinematic Works* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2003), 133. The original French script is in Guy Debord, *Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes* (1994), 193.

35. Guy Debord to Gianfranco Sanguinetti, 2 May 1974, in *Correspondance*, vol. 5, 147–149.

36. Debord, *In girum*, 134. For the original French, see Debord, *Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes* (1994), 194–195.

37. The cinema in question is the Quintette Pathé in the rue de la Harpe on the Left Bank. The photo of the cinema is published in the booklet accompanying the DVD set *Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes* (Paris: Gaumont, 2005), 81.

38. Bourseiller, *Vie et mort de Guy Debord*, 398. The program consisted of *Sur le passage* and *La société du spectacle* from Wednesday to Saturday, and *Réfutation de tous les jugements, tant élogieux qu’hostiles, qui ont été jusqu’ici portés sur le film “La Société du Spectacle”* (Refutation of all the judgments, pro or con, thus far rendered on the film “The Society of the Spectacle,” 1975) and *In girum* from Sunday to Monday. See Guy Debord to Gérard Lebovici, 11 September 1983, in *Correspondance*, vol. 6 (Paris: Arthème

Fayard, 2006), 243.

39. A “reconstruction as impoverished and false as this botched tracking shot.” Debord, “On the Passage,” <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord.films/passage.htm>; translation modified.

40. Debord, *In girum*, 146. For the original French, see Debord, *Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes* (1994), 212.

41. Benjamin Noys, “Guy Debord’s Time-Image: *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978),” in this issue of *Grey Room*.

42. The second volume of Debord’s late autobiographical exercise, *Panegyrique* (1997), combines an aerial photo of Paris with a quotation from Johan Huizinga’s *The Waning of the Middle Ages* about the change effected by the increasing importance given to the visual remains of the past: the past became more serene because “the visual arts do not lament.” Guy Debord, *Panegyrique* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), n.p.; my translation.

43. Rod Dickinson, “Why I Hate Playing the Game of War” (unpublished manuscript, n.d., written as part of a correspondence with Richard Barbrook).

44. Guy Debord to Gérard Lebovici, 8 March 1978, in *Correspondance*, vol. 5, 451.

45. Dickinson, “Why I Hate Playing the Game of War.”

46. Arguing that the spectator is always already active, Jacques Rancière has attacked the Feuerbachian underpinnings of Debord’s notion of the spectacle and states that “looking is already an action” and “‘interpreting the world’ is already a means of transforming it, of reconfiguring it.” Jacques Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator,” *Artforum* 45, no. 7 (March 2007): 277. Granted: Debord pays insufficient attention to the different modalities of spectatorship in what he termed “the spectacle.” Furthermore, the quintessential avant-garde project of the “emancipation of the spectator” can seem dirigiste and—horror of horrors—proto-totalitarian to the contemporary observer. But although stating that the spectator is always already active and emancipated may seem enlightened, Rancière’s position seems to frustrate attempts at differentiation between subject positions even more than does Debord’s Manichaean opposition between spectacle and playful life. At least Debord had two categories rather than one, and two might be the beginning of a series.

47. In a 1972 letter to Lebovici, Debord points out the nineteenth-century (public domain) French translations of Clausewitz’s writings. Guy Debord to Gérard Lebovici, 16 April 1972, in *Correspondance*, vol. 4 (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 2004), 541–542.

48. Guy Debord to Gérard Lebovici, 24 May 1976, in *Correspondance*, vol. 5, 351.

49. Pamela M. Lee, “New Games,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 10, no. 1 (2010): 39.

50. Norbert Wiener, *Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 1954), 181.

51. Class Wargames, *Guy Debord’s The Game of War* (2011), http://www.class-wargames.net/?page_id=149.

52. On the Seven Years’ War, see Debord, *Correspondance*, vol. 5, 531. Vladimir Lenin used Clausewitz’s theory of war as a model for revolutionary war, an obvious precedent for Debord. See Tony Cliff, *Building the Party*, vol. 1 of *Lenin* (London: Pluto Press, 1975), ch. 14, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1975/lenin1/chap14.htm#s6>.

53. Dickinson, “Why I Hate Playing the Game of War.”

54. Alexander Galloway, lecture at Mediamatic, Amsterdam, 25 October 2007. For a summary of the lecture, see Anne Helmond, “Alexander Galloway—The Game of

War @ Mediamatic, Amsterdam,” *New Media Research Blog*, 27 October 2007, <http://www.annahelmond.nl/2007/10/27/alexander-galloway-the-game-of-war-mediamatic-amsterdam/>.

55. “A work works by not working at all.” Paul Chan, “A Lawless Proposition,” *e-flux journal* 30 (December 2011), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/a-lawless-proposition/>.

“When We Were on the Shenandoah”

JACQUES RANCIÈRE

TRANSLATED BY JASON E. SMITH

What should be done with the cinema? At the beginning of *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (Howls for Sade, 1952), a radical solution is evoked:

Just as the projection was about to begin, Guy-Ernest Debord was supposed to step onto the stage and make a few introductory remarks. Had he done so, he would simply have said: “There is no film. Cinema is dead. No more films are possible. If you wish, we can move on to a discussion.”¹

This solution was left to the side. The film, which passes from black to white only when the silence is broken by voices, continues even when we see a screen with no images. And the announced howls are in fact phrases that mix, in a surrealist way, the immediate lyricism of adventure and love with the explosive force of unexpected connections. In this way a small temporal rift runs furtively between a lyrical phrase and a trivial one: “When we were on the Shenandoah.”² This memory of Shenandoah will, in *La société du spectacle* (The society of the spectacle, 1973), be put back into context; it refers specifically to the scene from John Ford’s *Rio Grande* between Colonel York (John Wayne) and his superior, General Sheridan, who had ordered him to set fire to the fields of the valley of the Shenandoah in the fight against the southerners and is now ordering him to break federal law by pursuing Indians into Mexican territory.

Between these two phrases the entire poetics of Guy Debord is played out. What he “should” have done but did not do was stop the projector and declare the end of the cinema. The tactic of howling to interrupt art is dadaist; it declares art over in the name of a new life. For Debord it signifies a sin [*faute*] against the dialectic: wanting to suppress art without completing it. The inverse sin is that of surrealism: wanting to complete art without suppressing it, by identifying with the magic of the dream images slumbering in the spectacle of the street.³ But the impartiality of the dialectician that places dadaists and surrealists on the same level hardly conceals Debord’s actual preference for the second path. From the first films up to *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, the narrative

form privileged by Debord will be that of the voyage, the urban promenade that prolongs the promenades of *Nadja*, *Paris Peasant*, or the “adventuress who crossed Les Halles at summer’s end.”⁴ Surrealism makes us feel this necessity that was forgotten by dadaism: art should not only overcome itself in life; it should do so *as art*. The surrealist promenade through the streets of Paris designates a strategic site for the art of living that must succeed the art of separation: the taking back of the city, the transformation of architecture into a space of voyage and play. Only it forgets that the city is not merely a sleeping beauty ready to be awakened; it is also a battleground that the enemy never ceases refashioning in its own image. No ecstasy before signage or vitrines of commodities transformed into enchanting settings. The commodity makes us dream of nothing other than the reign of the commodity. The treasure we searched for is one that the enemy has appropriated and fashioned into a weapon.

This is what *détournement* means. *Détournement* is first of all a maneuver in war. Guy Debord and Gil J Wolman put it in blunt terms that challenge every modernist vision of a subversion carried out through the autonomous development of art: “The literary and artistic heritage of humanity should be used for partisan propaganda.”⁵ The model is in this sense not provided by Duchamp and the Mona Lisa’s mustaches but by Brecht introducing cuts in classical texts to give them a didactic value. *Détournement* does not consist in making high culture prosaic or in revealing the naked reality behind beautiful appearances. It does not attempt to produce a consciousness through unveiling the mechanisms of the world to those who suffer from their ignorance of these mechanisms. It wants to take back from the enemy those properties that the enemy has transformed into weapons against the dispossessed. The essence of *détournement* is the Feuerbachian and Marxist transformation of the alienated predicate into subjective possession; it is the direct re-appropriation of what has been put at a remove in representation. But this property to be taken back over and against spectacular alienation is not the work that has passed into the produced object. It is the free action, always at once ludic and warlike, that the festivals and tournaments of the Renaissance, celebrated since Taine and Burckhardt as the very art of life, emblemize better than every work of art, however “revolutionary.”

Détournement also has nothing to do with Brechtian “distanciation.” *Détournement* does not distance, does not make us understand a world by making it strange. Nothing is behind or beneath the image to understand. *Détournement* has to reappropriate what is *in* the image: the action that is represented as separated from itself. It has to take this action back from the expropriators. The cinema is a privileged terrain for this operation for two reasons: because it is essentially the representation of an

action in the form of images and because it is the form of occupying free time that most perfectly integrates itself into the architectural forms of the spectacular occupation of space. For Debord, the cinema is the “passive substitute for the active, unitary artistic activity that is now possible.”⁶ It is the form of active appearing or of apparent action in which time and space can be shown to be the immediate stakes of a combat between two antagonistic uses.

Nothing is more contrary, therefore, to Debord’s poetics than those contemporary exhibitions, staged under his patronage, at which the spectator must learn—with the help of wall texts—to “critique” the message of advertisements or dubbed television shows. *Détournement* is, Debord says, positive or “lyrical.”⁷ But the lyricism is in the content of the action itself, not in the timbre of the voices or the play of light and shadow. It is easy to imagine that the three extracts from *Johnny Guitar* included in *La société du spectacle* are shown, out of contempt for Hollywood films, not only in black and white but also in an atrocious French-language version in which the hero is supposed to say things such as “What’s bugging your friend?” But the opposite is true: Debord’s cavalier treatment of the original shows us that what is important is neither the reds and greens of the saloon nor Sterling Hayden’s relaxed tone. What is important is the “content,” what the action directly shows us in each of the three extracts: the greatness of the voyage (Johnny’s arrival in the wind), of play (Johnny, turning around, sees in the countershot not Vienna’s empty saloon but the buzzing gambling house of *Shanghai Gesture*), of song, and of love (evoked in the late-night conversation with Vienna). The exact opposite of the Brechtian pedagogy *en vogue* in the 1960s, *détournement* is an exercise in identifying with the hero.

One might easily identify with the lanky hero of that filmmaker who is the exemplary figure of the “good” America (the militant America of the artists of the Farm Security Administration or the cracked-up America of Fitzgerald’s little brothers)—all the more so given that Debord skips the shooting lesson Johnny gives to young Turkey. The same is not true of the other two Westerns used to illustrate *La société du spectacle*: *They Died with Their Boots On* and *Rio Grande*. The first is a monument erected by Raoul Walsh to the glory of the highly controversial General Custer and played by a reactionary Errol Flynn. The second is perhaps not the anti-Communist fable during the time of the Korean War that it is taken for by Joseph McBride.⁸ But this film, starring the emblematic John Wayne, is the most anti-Indian of Ford’s Westerns. Neither film is out to denounce American imperialism. Both are, to the contrary, entirely positive. If the hero of *Rio Grande* has seen his family life shattered by the fire in the Shenandoah Valley, the fragment of dialogue isolated by Debord

makes no reference to this. In deciding to cross the border in violation of federal law, the two officers simply assume their responsibilities toward history just as they took on this responsibility, years before, when setting fire to the valley.

We could say that here we glimpse the reader of Clausewitz. But this Clausewitz is not the theorist of the ruses of war. He is the witness to the risky rendezvous with history. The officers' dialogue shows us the art of "historical communication" that breaks with the face-to-face of power with itself embodied by the VIP stands of the Soviet Communist Party.⁹ History, which the young Marx said was the only science, is for Debord the only great art, the treasure already celebrated by Herodotus and initially illustrated in *La société du spectacle* by Uccello's *Battle of San Romano* before it is illustrated with images of May 1968. History is the art of time appropriated in its irreversibility. From the tent of Colonel York the camera passes directly to the Tennis Court Oath. And in *They Died with Their Boots On* Debord is no longer concerned with strategy. Custer's virtue is, to the contrary, to have ignored every strategy other than this: always remain ahead of your troops. Debord's film asks us to completely identify with the officer as he runs or gallops ahead, sword drawn. The "propaganda film" is itself a ludic and warlike action. It already carries out the reappropriation it calls for: the transformation of the passivity of the image into living activity. The transformation of the spectator into an actor is the fundamental image of every thought of the "overcoming of art." In the first issue of *Internationale situationniste*, a short text called "With and Against Cinema" dreamed of the new contributions to be brought about by the much-discussed technical advances of the 1950s: Cinerama, 3-D cinema, and the "Circarama" in which the spectator finds him- or herself projected into "the center of the spectacle."¹⁰

Of course, the image does not tip over into direct action, and the film is still a film. The "center" takes on a completely different sense in *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*. If Custer always surges forward, sword brandished, he no longer does so in order to break through the southern lines. He goes to the very heart of the trap where his army will be surrounded and decimated by Sitting Bull's Indians, just as the "Light Brigade" celebrated by Curtiz's film charges beneath the cannon fire in Balaklava. The war sequences are now sequences of defeat; the city of the future has become a city of the past, similar to the studio reconstructions of *The Children of Paradise*; and the music of Johnny Guitar has become the ballad of the lost children, sung by the shackled troubadour of *Visiteurs du soir*. We no doubt know that repeated defeats can prepare us for an unforeseen time of the most lucid struggles. Returning to the point of departure of the palindrome, ending with the passage past the Venice

customs post and on the words “to be taken up again from the beginning” is not to declare the victory of cyclical time over the time of living history, of the *Odyssey* of return over the *Iliad* of the feats of war. That the arc of the hero, according to Hegel’s phrase, ends up running aground upon the sandbank of finitude confirms the greatness of those who have been able to completely identify their life with the assumption of the irreversible.¹¹ What is essential is to have been on the Shenandoah, to which one can never return. As distant from the contemporary activism of artistic performance as it is from the Godardian imaginary museum, the art of history remains the sole great art. In going back to aesthetic utopia, the inheritor of Cobra and Lettrism made the identification of art and life drift as far as possible from the beliefs of his contemporaries.

Notes

“Quand nous étions sur le Shenandoah” was originally published in *Cahiers du cinéma* 605 (October 2005), 92–93.

1. [Guy Debord, *Howls for Sade* [film script], in *Complete Cinematic Works*, trans. Ken Knabb (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2003), 2.—Trans.]

2. [The title of Rancière’s essay is drawn from a line in the script of Guy Debord’s first film, *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*, which is apparently a citation of a line from John Ford’s *Rio Grande*. The scene from which the line was taken will be used twenty-one years later in Debord’s film version of *La société du spectacle*. The line in question appears to be General Sheridan’s vow to Colonel York: “If you fail, I assure you members of your court martial will be the men who rode with us at Shenandoah.”—Trans.]

3. [On wanting to complete art without suppressing it, compare Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1994), 136.—Trans.]

4. [The quotation is of the first line in André Breton’s poem “Tournesol”; see also André Breton, *Nadja* (1928), trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960); and Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant* (1926), trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Exact Change, 1994).—Trans.]

5. [Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, “A User’s Guide to Detournement,” in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 15.—Trans.]

6. [“Avec et contre le cinéma,” *Internationale situationniste* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1997), 8–9. This text appeared in the inaugural issue of the journal of the Situationist International in June 1958. A translation of the text appears in this issue of *Grey Room*.—Trans.]

7. [Debord, “The Use of Stolen Films,” in *Complete Cinematic Works*, 223.—Trans.]

8. Joseph McBride, *Searching for John Ford* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003).

9. [On the art of historical communication, compare Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 97–98.—Trans.]

10. [“Avec et contre le cinéma,” 8; “With and Against Cinema,” 19.—Trans.]

11. [In the mentioned passage, Hegel is referring to the character of Hamlet. In T.M. Knox’s standard translation of Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics, this passage is rendered, “But death lay from the beginning in the background of Hamlet’s mind. The sands of time do not content him.” G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*, vol. 2, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1975), 1,231. Hegel’s original reads, “Sandbank der Endlichkeit.”—Trans.]