

senses of cinema

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Guy Debord

b. 28 December, 1931, Paris, France
 d. 30 November, Bellevue-la-Montagne, France

by **R.D. Crano**

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Guy Debord and the Aesthetics of Cine-Sabotage

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.'

This announcement is made just moments into the opening voiceover sequence of Guy Debord's 1952 cinematic debut *Howls for Sade*, a film comprised of alternating white and black blank screens and readings of (mostly) found text fragments. An appropriate introduction to his self-proclaimed "style of negation", this utterance captures both the revolutionary desire and inherent playfulness of this mode. As he is wont to do, Debord does not perform as had been "supposed"; the stage remains devoid of any real human presence; there *is* a film, and the cinema in fact is not dead though perhaps critically wounded and desperately in need of being violently reappropriated from the machinery of capitalist production. The raw materials of the cinema – the light and projection surface that here become the very subject of Debord's anti-production – are shown to exist prior to their current applications within the industry. Thus we begin to grasp the ambitious goals of Debord's project – namely, the dissolution of all communicative forms indebted to consumer capitalist accumulation and the fundamental reinvention of social reality and human life.

Revolutionary art, for Debord, shows how one lives, and so all of his films – three feature-length, three shorts, produced over the course of 27 years – are in some sense autobiographical, whether as pseudo-documentaries of his Letterist activity or unprecedented adaptations of his aphoristic, nearly impenetrable theoretical texts, for which he is far better remembered. Almost entirely unseen until recent years, Debord's cinema is a notorious challenging body of work, especially for the viewer or critic invested in such standard filmic elements as plot, character, shot composition and so on. In spite of their brazen affront to cinematic conventions, though, Debord's films are often illuminating and always funny. Taken on their own, they can be made to fit neatly into the history of avant-garde experimentation. *Howls* does the work for us, in fact, playfully preempting the task of the critic by providing a pointedly concise "crib sheet for the history of film" that runs from Méliès through German expressionism, Soviet montage, Chaplin and the Dadaists, and then up through the Letterist movement that it would end up splitting in two. The point, of course, is that such reductionism fails to account for the singular coming into

being of any given film, and, consequently, we must take his films not as *works* of art in and of themselves but as tactical constructions intent on provoking real social change. For past avant-gardes, significant change has always been confined to the specific and separate sphere of art; Debord's, in turn, is a Marxist cinema set not so much on revolutionising the medium as on appropriating the medium in order to revolutionise the structure of life itself.

Orson Welles once remarked that "everything that's been called directing is one big bluff. Editing is the only time when you can be in complete control of a film." (1) Debord implies a similar sensibility in composing image tracks almost exclusively from pirated footage, photographs and text frames. Labelling him a "great director" in any traditional sense, then, would be a disservice to his radical intentions. Debord, for his part, remains staunchly anti-authoritarian, always quick to remind us of his penchant for obscurity and his hard-fought refusal of spectacular fame, desiring historical success for his Situationist movement without accumulating any of the power and prestige that comes with leading revolutions or directing films. He categorically denounces any aspiration to "greatness" as a misguided desire beholden to spectacular production.

The cinema is the space *par excellence* of passive consumption – a microcosm of spectacular domination. The projection screen embodies the one-way communicative principle of spectacle whereby spectators, stripped of autonomous speech, are related to each other only through an appearance. Debord's counter-cinema, on the other hand, forces the medium to give way to "discussion", which – derived from the Latin for "disperse", "agitate" and "drive away" – encourages entirely new relationships between spectators as well as between spectatorial subject and the filmic object of her gaze.

I.

In his early twenties, Debord became involved with the Letterist movement, founded by the poet-filmmaker Isidore Isou with the aim of transcending art through research and experiment geared towards "the conscious construction of new affective states." (2) Art works themselves must hereby be devoted to "chiselling" away a given medium to its bare foundations. *Howls for Sade* follows this materialist emphasis. The projection of light, without which the cinema could not exist, becomes, along with its contrapuntal darkness, the primary focus of the film, taking no object except for the screen itself. By the mid-1950s, however, Debord would sever ties with Isou's group; accusing them of artistic idealism and an institutional cult of creativity, Debord eventually recognised the need to fuse the avant-garde directive "change life" with an historical-economic critical theory. Letterist practices would hereby be infused with a Marxist analysis of alienated labour and commodity fetishism and adopt the Hegelian dialectic as its primary operative principle.

Debord's mode of cinematic situation construction owes much to Marx's understanding of the relationship between production and alienation, especially as articulated in the *Economico-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. For Marx, the commodification of labour in a capitalist society means the loss of reality for the worker; in turn, the subsequently produced commodity ensures her simultaneous loss of and bondage to the object produced. Situationist cinema reverses this trend by refusing to produce any new filmic "work", any reified artifact for consumption whose potential exchange value might negate the use-value acquired in its spatio-temporal projection and the subsequent construction of an indeterminately meaningful event.



Debord picks up Marxian concepts that the Marxist tradition hitherto had all but ignored, frequently echoing Marx's conclusion that alienation



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appears as the true induction into civil life, and, even more significantly, his observation and critique of “commodity fetishism” in capitalist society. (3) The spectacle, Debord argues, thrives on the repetition of commodity form, reinvesting the structure with seemingly new products and images. By compiling image after image of the commodification of life by consumer capitalism (female bodies, political figures, product advertisements, popular films, and so on), his films expose this oppressive repetition and artificial sense of the new, and, as if

to help along one of the most problematic concepts in Marx's work, *Society of the Spectacle* (1973) ponders the commodity's “metaphysical subtleties” while sequentially imaging automobile showrooms and naked cover girls.

Debord wants nothing to do with a cinematic generation of spectacles aimed at the mass reproduction of passively consumed films. In his persistent efforts to subvert quantitative reductionism and restore the qualitative character of human labour, he “directs” films that refuse to congeal into market commodities. Entrusted to the proletariat, the cinema becomes a revolutionary weapon and a constitutive element of situations, rather ill-equipped – in the closing words of *On the Passage of a Few Persons through a Rather Brief Unity of Time* (1959) – “to add more ruins to the old world of spectacles and memories.”

The book version of *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) describes the post-war period as marking a radical transition in the development of capitalist ontology; where it had already substituted *having* for *being*, it now espouses the immateriality of pure image production, replacing *having* with spectacular *appearance*. More than mere image or an accumulation thereof, the spectacle is itself a social relationship *between* individuals, relating spectatorial subjects to each other only indirectly in a way that reroutes all communicative interaction through its ideological nexuses. The mediator of social relations and guarantor of model subjectivity, spectacle functionally conditions our very being-in-the-world-with-others, whose distinctive ontological mark in a capitalist society is separation.

Critique of Separation (1961), as should be most obvious, takes this mark as its point of critical departure, and, in more ways than one, *Society of the Spectacle* picks up where the former had left off, further dissecting “the official language of universal separation”, voiced here (and consequently *détourned*) by appearances of French government ministers and union bureaucrats integral to the restoration of spectacular order following May '68. Here, the political leaders of spectacular society attain an unprecedented star status, and their citizenry consequently becomes reduced to passive spectatorship; images of rulers institute a one-way, top-down communicative model wherein the constituent has no autonomous voice, no means of talking back.

Separation is recognised as “an integral part of the unity of this world”, and Debord uses the film to lend an immediacy and specificity that the text alone cannot capture; here illustrated by multiple images of



assembly line work, "separation" refers to that particularly Marxist kind between man and his labour and between that labour and whatever use-value it may have once possessed. Elsewhere an image of a bourgeois couple watching television is used to exemplify the idea that individuals are linked only in their separateness by the spectacular centre. At one point during the long still frame sequence that opens his final film (*In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* [1979]), the image track displays a tight close-up of the paradigmatic bourgeois couple, while Debord's voiceover provides a sharp yet sombre critique of interpersonal relationships under the conditions of spectacle: "Separated from each other by the general loss of any language capable of describing reality."



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The semi-nostalgic tone of *On the Passage* seems to lament the ultimate failure of the Letterists in bringing about world-changing events, while also expressly understanding that true beauty can be achieved only through the revolutionary event and does not present itself in any reified, reproducible work of art. Like Walter Benjamin's thesis on the effects of mechanical reproduction technologies, (4) the Situationists argue that new productive forces demand new modes of aesthetic production, the revolutionary artist must refuse to contribute to the mass accumulation of commodified objects of labour. Artistic creation, consequently, cannot be justified as any sort of superior or compensatory activity, and the art of the future will be nothing if not "the radical transformation of situations", an "extremism independent of any cause."

In his account of the parallel developments between cinematic and militaristic technologies Paul Virilio argues that war's "very purpose is to *produce* [...] spectacle: to fell the enemy is not so much to capture as to 'capture' him, to instill the fear of death before he actually dies." (5) In this context, we might think of Debord's as a guerilla cinema pitted against the military-industrial cinema of the capitalist state. The found images that comprise Debord's collagist film essays are effective precisely because they "produce" nothing new and seek to send a re-educated audience back into the streets militantly engaged rather than to hold it "captive" to an ideological apparition: a non-productive cinema in which the final work is little more than a superfluous and entirely unnecessary afterthought of the critical movement of its screening.

Along these lines, it is important to keep in mind the sharp differences between Debord and, say, Eisenstein or Pontecorvo; where the latter make films *about* political situations, Debord seeks to make films that are themselves revolutionary political determinants. The Situationists, frequently during the '60s, polemically attacked Godard for presenting little more than "false model[s] of revolution" (6) and ultimately producing consumable, if slightly challenging, works. Borrowing a line from Dziga Vertov, Debord suggests that the cinema had the potential to be many things before its means of production were seized by capitalist interests and its constructions relegated to coherent narratives that could quell the desire for drama, adventure, and love in one's own life. Godard espouses a similar philosophy and, with his late masterpiece *Histoire(s) du cinema*, aspires to revolutionise cinematic language to this end; but whereas his collage seems more like an essay on art history, the sort of collages Debord sutures together serve as vicious – if sometimes humorous – cultural critiques. For the latter, there is no room for reverent homage to the past when there is such a deep necessity for a more totalising negation.

II.

Debord recognises what he (with Nietzsche) names the “grand style” of an era by its “obvious yet carefully concealed necessity for revolution”, and we might in turn understand his work, both in print and on film as a critical encounter with the grand style of post-war consumer capitalism, an attempt to uncover that which the grand style means to hide. As the “liberation of everyday life” demands breaking down all of its alienated forms of communication, Debord's must remain first and foremost an analytical interrogation of representation per se. To re-present is to partake in the concealment project of spectacular society's “grand style”.

Rather unabashedly, *Society of the Spectacle* opens with the claim that “everything directly lived has receded into representation”: a space shuttle tracking shot of a similarly receding earth is followed by a quick shot of a floating astronaut and a long, almost unwatchable striptease. Situation construction aims to recover something of what it feels like to “live” – here, on earth – in a “restless and exitless present”. Like the Letterist protagonists in *On the Passage*, Debord's films ultimately seek “a satisfactory concrete expression of [...] life”; only an “active direct communication” (7) can bridge the dehumanising separation perpetually reinscribed by spectacular society.



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Silence, as played out most explicitly in his earliest work, plays an integral role in establishing the parameters of such communication; there is an intense though radically undetermined significance to the space devoid of the always-already commodified language of spectacular representation. As if tracing the very limits of thought and speech, the soundtrack remains empty for approximately 100 of the film's 120 minute run time, leaving only the monotonous and expectedly irksome sounds of an unspooling projector and a restless crowd; 24 minutes of silence and black leader conclude the film, following the simultaneously playful yet dispassionately articulated suggestion that “like lost children we

live our unfinished adventures.”

For Debord, the great deception of capitalism lies in its communications technology, which instills a false sense of closeness as the speed of information increases at an exponential rate. Ironically, however, such tele-communication is a defining characteristic of spectacular separation and a telltale sign of a fundamental failure to satisfy the conditions of active and direct discourse. Debord returns often to his quest for meaningful communication and mutual understanding. *Critique* aspires to “a certain sort of objectivity: a documentation of the conditions of noncommunication”, addressing this theme with a fascinating illustration. As the voiceover regretfully details the perpetual uncertainty of communicative efficacy, we are presented with an image of failed communication: a still of a U.S. Navy radiotelegrapher and the subtitle “Do you read me? Do you read me? Answer me, answer me... Over!” The result of this sound-image couplet achieves a more successful transmission

of an idea than any spectacle-sanctioned model of communication.

Perhaps *Critique's* most significant contribution to Debord's filmography is its specific attack on the documentary genre that it seeks to replace. It begins by reproaching cinema for its compliant enforcement of the capitalist operative principle of separation. Documentary cinema is especially guilty, here, on the grounds of separating art from life, delimiting its subject matter from situational complexities, and buttressing spectacle by creating the illusion of coherence.

Debord's meta-cinematic explorations are intended as real-time disruptions of a reductionist cinema that serves only to perpetuate the myth of coherence within the spectacular society, a cinema whose images have hitherto achieved nothing but the reinforcement of existing lies. His rigorous self-awareness often takes the form of irony; in *In girum*, he suggests that "the cinema [...] could have consisted of films like the one I am making at this moment." And sure enough, it does. The film-in-process, the one Debord "is making" not only in 1979 but each time it unspools anew for a critically attuned spectator, is presented as a direct contradiction to the "could have" lament. With *In girum*, Debord utilises the tools of his medium to achieve a simultaneity of critical negation and positive construction; where the voiceover narration offers a scathing critique of bourgeois cinema, the film structure and image arrangement offers a rather appealing alternative. Reviving an earlier tactic, *On the Passage* pairs a blank white screen with the claim that an attack on social organisation requires a corresponding disavowal of all forms of language utilised by that organisation, which, of course, is accomplished through the recurrent insertion of pure absence onto the image track of the film.

On the Passage can ultimately be viewed as a documentary whose subject is the "confused totality" in which it – as a reflection of such confusion – exists. Contrary to the spectacle's repression of confusion, Debord challenges us to "imagine the full complexity of a moment that is not resolved into a work." Because of the ruling class monopoly on the means of cultural and artistic production, "an art film on this generation [such as this] can only be a film about its lack of real creations", and the film itself, in its failure to "resolve", mimes this proto-revolutionary lack.

The true inventiveness of Debord's cinematic syntax derives from its collagist appropriation of already existing forms of expression, as it slips in and out of cultural critique, absurdist humour, personal memoir and revolutionary propaganda, all the while carving out a fragile space in which each of these forms turns in on itself as it is positioned to interfere with the static self-enclosure of the others. As for the relation of sound and image in Debord's anti-spectacular cinema, we find that sometimes the soundtrack provides commentary on a particular image and sometimes an image is used to illustrate comments metaphorically, as a rhetorical extension of the verbal imagery (e.g. a photo of an industrial waste dump compliments the description of spectacular society as a "cesspit"). Often, though, it is impossible to determine which way the relationship goes or whether there might in fact be no difference between the two models.

As early as 1956, in "A User's Guide to Detournement", Debord and Situationist collaborator Gil J. Wolman had argued that film, whose "extensive powers" have gone "glaringly under-coordinated", is the single most conducive mechanism for "effective and beautiful" detournement. (8) Literally "to divert", "distract" or "redirect", detournement is most concisely defined as the mutual interference of two worlds expressed with an acute indifference to the forgotten and inherently meaningless original sources. The revolutionary force of this tactic rests in its bringing together images, sounds or texts that remain separate through the normal functioning of spectacle.

Theory is nothing until historically realised in a concrete practice such as this, that at once destabilises both aesthetic and political propriety. Diametrically opposed to quotation, which attempts to preserve a text by abstracting it from its historical existence yet keeping it essentially at a distance, detournement – as a sort of subset of plagiarism – brings new, indeterminate meaning to cultural artifacts by juxtaposing them in violent and deliberately incoherent ways. Debord basically sees this as a practical application of Hegelian dialectics, though the specific filmic correlatives for the positions of thesis, antithesis and synthesis remain somewhat ambiguous, and intentionally so, given detournement's move to make use of existing concepts (like Hegel's) while recognising a temporal fluidity not otherwise apparent.

Where an image of antagonism between, say, bureaucratic (i.e. state-based) and commodity-oriented (i.e. western, market) capitalist, gives way to an underlying spectacular unity, the eventful construction of (cine-)situations, by way of critical negation, injects a real antagonism whose incompatibility threatens to undo the epistemological foundations of capitalist structure. Detournement is always already there, latent in the mass production of the spectacular economy. Like Marx, Debord wants to show precisely how capitalism paradoxically designs its own reversal. It might here be worth developing another sort of analogy between war and cinema, wherein the visual-aural space of the theatre becomes the site of confrontation between the spectacular image and its own inbuilt negation. Where current conditions allow for mere representations of conflict, "shame spectacular struggle between rival forms" (e.g. Mao and Nixon, as likened by *Society of the Spectacle*), this "style of negation" presents images as *other than* expected and radically antagonistic to how spectacular ideology had intended them to be seen. We recognise our existence to be one oversaturated by capital-cum-image, here detourned both synchronically (by the voiceover critique) and diachronically (by the next, no longer unrelated, image), in an unpredictable movement that constructs a new, diagonal axis as it unfolds.

Brutally dissecting the microeconomic life of the fast expanding "service worker" class, the soundtrack of *In girum* detourns a series of stills of apparently happy spectator-consumers in moments of pseudocyclical self-enjoyment: watching television, shopping, eating, and so forth. In addition to being a most effective tactic for the subversion of spectacular image-production, detournement has inbuilt defense mechanisms against its own ideological coagulation – as Greil Marcus has it, "a technique that could not mystify because its very form was a demystification", (9) a writing or cinema always already set on auto-critique. In Debord's later film, for example, his own written texts self-detourn in the dialectical play between the phonocentric presence of the spoken voice and the spatialisation of signifiers performed by the subtitled narration.

This sort of plagiarism – so much more than mere replication – further justifies itself on economic grounds, as an essential device in the movement towards a true literary communism. Everything one might need for the creation of revolutionary art is already there; there is no reason to produce more textual or filmic artifacts in a world so filled with material waste; the human energies involved in such productions could be better applied elsewhere in the name of historical transformation. Upon the arrival of a post-spectacular, Situationist era, "everyone will be free to détourn entire situations by deliberately changing this or that determinant condition of them." (10)

For its restorative effect, detournement hinges on what Debord notably refers to as "evocation", and indeed this tactic teases out all of the etymological implications therein: the allusions to magical operations, the simultaneous de- and re-construction of memory, the summoning from inferiority to superiority, the act of calling forth a spirit into a new and unpredictable existence in the present, to shatter representational reification of the

image of capital. Detoured scenes from *Johnny Guitar* in *Society of the Spectacle*, for example, evoke a middle-of-nowhere sensation of smooth space or the mysteriousness of love. As images of capital, such scenes had concealed these sentiments as re-presentations, but in Debord's hands they attain a sort of double negative status that brings the spectator decisively closer to qualitative life. Debord's critique relies heavily on such a renewed rhetoric of "life", wrenched from the segmentation and exchangeability ascribed it by capitalist production-consumption and reacquainted with the drives and desires that had been covered over by spectacular falsehoods. Time and again we find Debord returning to such eternal philosophical problems of "happiness", "truth", "love" and the meaning of "life". We should, however, not be taken aback by this rhetorical mode, for his strategy here is again one of detournement, bringing abstract categories of classical thought into contact with a current historical situation at the tipping point of revolution. And as we move away from old uses of those reified categories, so too are we encouraged to reconsider our current terms of film analysis, moving away from synchrony and diachrony to a cinema that cuts diagonally across these traditionally separate axes.

III.

Segueing from cinema audience to classroom, Debord explicates the similar function of both spaces in the identity construction of the spectacular subject. With *In girum*, Debord makes it explicitly clear that his intended audience all along had not been an arthouse crowd but rather the class peculiar to spectacular society – namely, the "service workers", who, conveniently, are the most frequent filmgoers. The opening presents a photographic representation of a cinema audience; the spectator sees herself as though the screen has become a mirror, and, so mirroring its own audience, the film denotes spectatorship in general as the very object of its critique. Its aim will be nothing short of the stylistic negation of the spectacular subject.



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Debord's critical cinema forces its spectators to perceive not the actors or characters that have been filmed but her own self as spectator. Inundated with images of spectacular ideology (in the form of advertisements, newsreels, bourgeois home life, filmic commodities etc.), the spectator undergoes a transformation from passive consumer to active social critic – no longer "captivated" by capitalist image production. By displaying the film-goer's own reified mode of subjectivity, *In girum* seeks a direct intertwining of subject and object which bypasses spectacular representation; rather than "identifying" with protagonists and plots, we are *presented* with capitalist society's raw interpellation of subjects, and the result is nothing short of a certain break with the spectacular models and processes of identity construction. Through Debord's cinematic detournements, we experience the spectacle no longer as subjects under the sway of its ideological impositions, no longer in a properly subjective manner, but objectively, in the space of pure difference and universal variation.

The Letterist and Situationist practice of the psychogeographic derive – in which

participants drift aimlessly through a stratified city-space guided only by subspectacular proclivities for passion and adventure – similarly deconstructs the ideological subject of capital. Where the old urbanism is characterised by its technology of separation, they theorise a “unitary urbanism” founded on the premise that “real individuals” emerge only out of environments collectively dominated from the bottom up. Cinema and city alike must be detoured and reconceptualised so as to provide a space for “encounters like signals emanating from a more intense life.” Like the city, the cinema is ripe for the derive, and, accordingly, we might read a film like *Society of the Spectacle* as a sort of film editor's derive through an imagistic oversaturation of spectacular ideology.



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These concerns are given their most articulate expression in *In girum*, which is, for all intents and purposes, a film primarily of and about space(s), spacing(s) and general spatiality – of and about the dynamic tension between smooth and striated spaces and the perpetual movement from on to the other. (11) The striated space-time of spectacular society – shown in fixed images of bourgeois living rooms, shopping adventures, automobiles, factories, housing complexes, hygienic routines, film-goers, city maps, and so on – is offset, early in the film, by the seemingly smooth space-time depicted by a moving image (the film's first, nearly ten minutes in) of a

Tahitian ritual dance; but this latter, uncolonised space, we soon realise, can only be presented in the process of becoming circumscribed by the anthropologising gaze of the film camera, and so the viewer herself becomes disconcertingly implicated in the hegemonic act of colonisation. As the film continues, Debord depicts, via detournement, countless examples of territorialisations-in-process: the cavalry in *Charge of the Light Brigade*, infantrymen at Normandy from D-Day newsreels; American westward expansion as made possible by railroad technology. Cut into the film at a number of points are maps of Paris that present an urban space primed for smoothing, hinted at by repeated tracking shots that imag(in)e a flight by water from the trappings of city walls (this time those of Venice). Though each city is a singularity that must be escaped in a way that corresponds to its own peculiar (spatial) construction, the end result of the derive, no matter its vehicle, remains the same – a burst of liberation, a newfound temporality, and a negation of spatial striation.

Equally important for Debord's project is the critical reconceptualisation of temporality. The two chapters of *Society of the Spectacle* that are least read today are perhaps the two most directly relevant to any discussion of cinematic (counter-)production. “Time and History” and “Spectacular Time” detail the tandem temporalities at work in post-war, western economies: first, the irreversible, linear temporality necessary to capitalist accumulation and, second, the pseudo-cyclical time that sustains the docility of the spectacular subject – both starkly opposed to the “lived time” reinvented by the psychogeographic derive and cinematic detournement. The spectacle maintains itself by divesting time of its qualitative attributes and converting it into quantitative, exchangeable segments, abstracting it, rendering it newly fit for consumption. The spectacle itself, for

Debord, ultimately boils down to "a false consciousness of time" (12) The image track of *SS* is particularly helpful in concretising these difficult chapters, with irreversible, "commodified" time presented in images of tire factory work, pseudocyclical time in those of beach vacationers on the French coast.

Cinematic convention paradigmatically embodies such spectacular time; it adopts the irreversible time of capitalist production with its unending supply of mechanistically form-fitting film commodities and emphasises pseudocyclical time as it perpetually inscribes the movie house as a liminal space from which the spectator can return to the public sphere with a perpetually renewed passivity. Accordingly, Debord constructs his cinema to counteract these tendencies: the use of already existing footage exacts a redundancy irreconcilable with irreversibility, while demarcations between cine-space and the public sphere are dissolved as the former is reconfigured to demand a critical engagement with spectatorial subjectivity vis-à-vis the latter.

The hope is to resurrect "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." (13) This sort of lived temporality, as opposed to both the irreversible time of capitalist production and the pseudocyclical time of ritualistic consumption, should be understood as an essential motive for Situationist construction. Each authentic experience of and in time (and here Debord admittedly sounds strangely similar to Heidegger) marks a little death in the heart of the spectacle. Revolution, in a nutshell, can be defined by the moment of absolute anticipation in which anything is possible – the complete appropriation of temporality from capitalist production. "True irreversible time" is intensely memorable at the same time as it imparts the threat of oblivion. In *Society of the Spectacle*, Historical periods mesh as a text frame depicting May '68 calls for the occupation of factories spills into an image of an October Revolution banner reading "occupy factories..."; May '68 evokes October '17 and vice versa, each cinematically turning into the other as well as into whatever other "vital eras" Debord might decide to resurrect.

In the spectacular society, individual commodified images are continuously replaced so that "only the system endures" (p. 70). Debord's cinema mimics this operative principle, so that, rather than constructing some sort of linear narrative or cohesive argument, his filmic images fold into and repeat themselves at the same time that they rub against their undetoured original appearances. Like the impenetrable and self-perpetuating commodity form of spectacular cinema, Debord's filmic critique of that cinema is potentially infinite, which is to say, essentially, that we need more Debords to continue to mount guerilla attacks from strategic localities of spectacular subject creation. The films themselves clearly spell this out: *Critique*, for example, is constructed rhizomatically – all middle, no proper beginning or end – and closes, as any of his films very well could have, with the popular serial line "to be continued", which he of course does some 12 years later with *Society of the Spectacle*. The palindromic *In girum*, whose title literally doubles back on itself, closes with the subtitled instruction "To be gone through again from the beginning."

Like the palindromic title of the film itself, *In girum* brings Debord's film career (if we dare label it as such) full circle, as it detourns the blank white screens and the already detoured spoken fragments from *Howls for Sade*. And it is only fitting that Debord culminates his filmic oeuvre with a long tracking shot through the rigidly striated space of a Venice canal out to the smooth space of open water, with the deteriorating city of Venice – which is in fact literally eroding – fading fast in the distance. "Like lost children we live our unfinished adventures." "If you wish, we can move on to a discussion."

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Endnotes

1. Cited in Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema*, Verso, New York, 1989, p. 49. ▲
2. Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord*, Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, U of California P, Berkeley, 1999, p. 59. ▲
3. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. Prometheus, New York, 1988. ▲
4. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, Trans. Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, New York, 1968, pp. 217–252. ▲
5. Virilio, p. 5. ▲
6. "The Role of Godard" (1966). In Knabb, pp. 175–176. ▲
7. *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 116: "It is here that the objective preconditions of historical consciousness are assembled, opening the door to the realization of that active direct communication which marks the end of all specialization, all hierarchy, and all separation, and thanks to which existing conditions are transformed 'into the conditions of unity.'" ▲
8. "A User's Guide to Détournement" in *Complete Cinematic Works*, p. 209. ▲
9. Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*, Harvard UP, Cambridge, 1990, p. 159. ▲
10. "A User's Guide to Détournement", p. 208. ▲
11. See especially: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "1440: The Smooth and the Striated", *A Thousand Plateaus*, Trans. Brian Massumi, U of Minnesota P, Minneapolis, 1987, pp. 474–500; Deleuze, "Occupy without Counting" in David Lapujade (ed.), *Two Regimes of Madness*, Semiotext(e), New York, 2006, pp. 292–299. ▲
12. *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 158: "The spectacle, being the reigning social organization of a paralyzed history, of a paralyzed memory, of an abandonment of any history founded in historical time, is in effect a *false consciousness of time*." ▲
13. *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 163, which continues: "The complete realization, in short, within the medium of time, of that communism which 'abolishes everything that exists independently of individuals.'" ▲



Filmography



Hurllements en faveur de Sade (Howls in Favor of Sade) (1952)

Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps (On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Unity of Time) (1959)

Critique de la separation (Critique of Separation) (1961)

La Société du spectacle (The Society of the Spectacle) (1973)

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 Judgments, Laudatory as Well as Hostile, Passed up to Now on the Film "The Society of the Spectacle") (1975)

In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni (In Circle in the Night and are Consumed by Fire) (1979)



Guy Debord



Select Bibliography

Works by or in part by Guy Debord (limited to those of particular interest to cinema scholar)

"The Avant-Garde of Presence" (1963) in Tom McDonough (ed.), *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002, pp. 137–152.

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Complete Cinematic Works: Scripts, Stills, Documents, Trans. and Ed. Ken Knabb, AK Press, Edinburgh, Scotland, 2003.

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"Methods of Detournement" (1956) in Knabb, pp. 8–13.

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"Theory of the Dérive" (1958) in Knabb, pp. 50–54.

Works dealing specifically with Debord's cinematic output

Giorgio Agamben, "Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord's Films" in McDonough, pp. 313–320.

Allyson Field, "Hurlements en faveur de Sade: The Negation and Surpassing of 'Discrepant Cinema'", *SubStance* 28, 1999, pp. 55–70.

Howard Hampton, "The Devil's Envoy: Guy Debord and the Cinema of Annihilation", *Film Comment* vol. 42, no. 3 (May/June 2006), pp. 60–65.

Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord*, Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, U of California P, Berkeley, 1999.

Vincent Kaufmann, *Revolution in the Service of Poetry*, U of Minnesota P, Minneapolis, 2006.

Thomas Y. Levin, "Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord" in McDonough, pp. 321–454.

Tom McDonough, "Situationist Space" in McDonough, pp. 241–266.

Martin Puchner, "Society of the Counter-Spectacle: Debord and the Theatre of the Situationists", *Theatre Research International* 29, 2004, pp. 4–15.



Web Resources

The Society of the Spectacle

Ken Knabb's translation of Debord's seminal text, available through Treason Press as a .pdf file

Translated Scripts

Knabb's translation of all of Debord's cinematic works

Guy Debord on UBUWEB

Downloadable versions of select films, most without subtitles

Situationist International Online

A comprehensive archive of Situationist texts available in English

Debord at NotBored.org

Extensive collection of letters and documents translated into English

Click [here](#) to buy Guy Debord DVDs and videos at Facets



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