

# “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.”<sup>1</sup>

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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup> 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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> 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.]