

Guy Debord, Filmmaker

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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.