

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).