Late in life, Guy Debord worried that his first film, *Howls for Sade*, had been misunderstood. He attested his most notable revolt was “not the May 1968 revolt” but “what he’d done in 1952,” *Howls for Sade*. This article conducts a literary analysis of *Howls for Sade* that sees the film as deeply embedded in traditional allegories of the apocalyptic and enlightenment. Like traditional stories of epiphany and enlightenment, *Howls for Sade* presents a four-dimensional experience where white light encompasses the audience. Voices drone from an unspecified location, filling the theatre with an authoritative, godly presence. However, instead of giving way to conclusive knowledge through epiphany, *Howls for Sade* concludes in the black emptiness of infinite time and the infinite universe, demonstrating a fleeting nature of epiphanic truisms, as well as the fleeting nature of life and thought.

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The clearest definition of the film *Howls for Sade* is that it is imageless, and that the script is a montage of various poetic texts, Debord's ideas, and legal texts. However, most likely, the film originally was intended to include images. Before shooting *Howls for Sade*, Guy Debord compiled descriptions of a series of photographs to accompany the script. When the script was published in *Ion*, the film’s voice-over (“bande sonore”) and the descriptions of the images were placed side-by-side in juxtaposed columns (Figure 1). The described images were planned to be scenes of war, eroticism, and photographs of Debord himself. They were also planned to be a montage of panoramas, still-frames, and close-ups, similar to the montages in Debord’s later films. Shortly after the *Ion* publication, Debord reworked the script of *Howls for Sade* to exclude all images. The reworked version appeared in the Lettrist magazine *The Naked Lips* (Les Lèvres Nues). There, directions for the screen to change from all white to all black in *Howls for Sade* were indicated.

The decision to eliminate the previously described images indicates several things. First, it indicates that Debord had already developed an approach to montage that he would use in later films, but he found this method inappropriate for the aesthetic of *Howls for Sade*. It also indicates that Debord had images in mind, but he consciously decided to eliminate images altogether.

In *The Naked Lips*, the same magazine where Debord published the second script of *Howls for Sade*, Debord provides the following introduction to the film:

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This film does not show a single image. The voice-over only lasts twenty minutes, disjointed and abrupt, during an hour and a half of projection. The interruptions of sound, which are consistently very long, allow the screen and the room to be completely black. The responses were an exchange of voices that were rather unusual and resolutely monotone. These are almost always newspaper clippings, with judicial texts, and citations with changed meanings, making it all the more difficult to understand the dialogue. This film doesn’t achieve anything. After an allusion to incomplete histories that we were given to live—through a term designated to reconnaissance of the armed forces in the Thirty Years War—through lost children, a sequence of blackness that runs for 24 minutes, with the rage of mince-meat and beautiful boldness, its apotheosis is disappointing. The game continues; and we are more certain each day that it will carry on as it must. 4

Howls for Sade is the product of Debord’s voracious reading (as the appropriated quotations show) as well as a tradition of political and artistic radicalism that defined the Lettrist group. Debord’s work is never simply for aesthetic effect: his work is politically charged, allusive, and it aims to manifest a reality to theoretical ideas. In this paper, I aim to begin to make sense of how Howls for Sade responds to literary and philosophical discourses. I will begin this paper with a historical and contextual approach by placing Howls for Sade into the biographical, artistic and literary conversation in which it participated, which includes the works and thought of the Lettrists. Then I will consider writers and painters from whom Debord drew inspiration, particularly Malevich and Lautréamont. Beginning by placing Debord in the framework of what inspires him, I hope to unravel the artistic mission Debord expresses in the statement he makes in The Naked Lips. Perhaps my approach could be seen in junction with Debord’s approach to his writing, at least in his autobiography where he states,


“Ce film, fait en consequence, ne comportait aucune image. La bande sonore ne durait qu’une vingtaine de minutes, par à-coups, sur une heure et demie de projection. Les interruptions du son, toujours fort longues, laissaient l’écran et la sale absolument noirs. Les répliques étaient échangées par des voix assez inhabituelles et résolument monotones. L’emploi Presque constant de coupures de presse, de textes juridiques, et de citations détournées de leur sens, rendait d’autant plus malaisée l’intelligence du dialogue. Le film ne s’achevait rien. Après une allusion aux histoires incomplètes qu’il nous était donné de vivre—en usant de ce terme qui désignait les reconnaissances, das les armées de la Guerre de Trente Ans—en enfants perdus, une séquence noire de vingt-quatre minutes déroulait, devant la rage des friands de belles audaces, son apothéose décevante. Le jeu continue; et nous sommes chaque jour plus sûrs de le mener comme il faut.”
“I will tell of what I have loved, and, in that light, everything else will be made well enough understood”\textsuperscript{5}: I will tell of what inspired Debord and, in that light, I will create a baseline from which to interpret his film, \textit{Howls for Sade}. Approaching \textit{Howls for Sade} through the works that inspired it also seems appropriate due to the fact that it was Debord’s first mature work; he introduced his place in the arts in relation to those who had come before him. I will begin by discussing \textit{Howls for Sade} as a product of the Lettrists, a group led by Isidore Isou in which Debord participated during the production of the film. Here, perhaps we will discover some of the most immediate origins of Debord’s thinking in his production of \textit{Howls for Sade}.

CHAPTER ONE: THE LETTRISTS

On Friday, April 20th, 1951, Guy Debord attended a showing of Isidore Isou’s *Treatise on Venom and Eternity* (Traité de Bave et d’Éternité) at Le Vox theatre on the Rue des Antibes in Cannes. Up until that point, Debord had been attending Lycée Carnot in Cannes where he was living with his family. However, shortly after Friday, April 20th, 1951, Debord was inspired to stop attending Lycée Carnot. By September of that year, Guy Debord had written a letter to his the Lettrist Marc’O, who produced *Treatise on Venom and Eternity*, asking to join the Lettrist group in the Latin Quarter in Paris. Thus, the screening of *Treatise on Venom and Eternity* was not simply an inspirational and pivotal point in Debord’s artistic career, but an epiphanic beginning of a journey away from home; a tabula rosa of a new life, perhaps like the epiphanic tabula rosa of the shocking white screen in *Howls for Sade*. Debord took Isou’s avant-garde call to arms so literally that he actually abandoned his previous lifestyle directly after the film screening, and then sought out the Lettrists. Such heartfelt inspiration certainly illustrates Debord’s devotion to Isou’s work, at least in the early days.

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When asked about the film, Michèle Bernstein, said that *Howls for Sade* was “produced in Cannes.” She was most likely referring to the Lettrists’ rambunctious and rebellious attendance of the 1952 Cannes Film Festival that was protesting the fact that Isou’s film was not included. Debord references this rebellious act in *Howls for Sade*: “A sizable commando of some thirty Lettrists, all wearing the same uniform that is their only really original trademark, showed up at Cannes determined to provoke a scandal that would draw attention to themselves.” Given Debord’s recent escape of Cannes, his childhood home, this rebellious Lettrist protest would have most likely have personal ramifications for Debord. The dichotomy between his recently left-behind childhood and his entrance into the revolutionary Lettrist group is exemplified in *Howls for Sade* through the clear distinctions between the “pre-revolutionary” world and the “revolutionary”, as well as a connected dichotomy between film and that which comes after film’s revolutionary death that Debord triumphantly proclaims: “cinema is dead.” The first half of Isou’s *Treatise on Venom and Eternity* is a manifesto to incite innovation and the avant-garde in film theory and in life. The intention of manifestos—to incite action and rethinking of lifestyles—was certainly effective for *Treatise on Venom and Eternity*, given Debord’s act of leaving school in response to the film. The manifesto-style of *Treatise on Venom and Eternity* perhaps explains Debord’s emphasis on inspiring action in *Howls for Sade*. *Treatise on Venom and Eternity* lays the groundwork for a long, complicated exploration of the relationship between film and life in the course of Debord’s career. Furthermore, we should remember that Isou appeared in *Howls for Sade* through a voiceover; he thereby became an integral aesthetic part of the film and he probably had a direct hand in its creation. It is no wonder that Isou proudly declared himself the “messiah” that inspired Debord’s earliest film. *Howls for Sade* reflects notable stylistic and ideological aspects of *Treatise on Venom and Eternity*, one of which is the prominent use of the pure white light of an uninhibited projector. Isou lacerated lively white gashes directly on the filmstrip, which created bright white moving lines similar to the appearance of lightning

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Similarly, the white light of *Howls for Sade* is not from footage, but from the projector. The use of lacerated film or the lack of film creates brightness that is generally not even possible in traditional cinema, where the projector’s whitest light is still inhibited by the filter of the film. Isou’s lightning strikes often directly hit his characters on the head and form circles that scratch out faces and heads. This has several implications: the lightning removes their identities by removing their faces; it implicates pain; it gives them a sense of emanating spirit. *Howls for Sade* appropriates Isou’s lightning phenomenon, but, instead of exposing characters in his film to lightning strikes, he assaults his audience. Debord’s characters developed in the voiceover are absorbed by the screen. They are both overcome with light and devoid of image—an extension of Isou’s concept to a further extreme. Other similarities exist between the two films: removing personal identity from the victims of bright light, causing implied pain, and emanating a sense of spirit. Isou explains in the script published by Gallimard: “If you analyse the composition of any film, you realise that it’s made up of a series of images where the word, the script, strikes down the visual gestures of the hero with lightning.” Isou’s manifesto at the beginning of *Treatise on Venom and Eternity* has certain similarities with *Howls for Sade*. Isou begins *Treatise on Venom and Eternity* by stating his beliefs about how film does and should function in a voiceover. Then he provides an example of the sort of film he suggested. In Isou’s film-manifesto, he calls for the “destruction of cinema” and the “disconnection between sound and image”; he calls for a film where a “howling mass” prevails over imagery. Debord nuances the concept of the film-manifesto. Instead of providing a spoken/visual manifesto then demonstrating it, *Howls for Sade* is a spoken manifesto that deprives the audience of illusive images. Instead of creating a “disconnect between sound and image” and “mutilating images,” Debord clears the screen of images all together and leaves only the “howling mass.” He integrates Isou’s suggestions on how to carry out the work of art with the manifesto itself, making a chimera of the manifesto and performance/literary/visual art. In following with the destruction of film by Isou and Gil J Wolman, Debord declares: “cinema is dead.” He clears film of the images that defined film at its origin, when film was
silent, and replaces the images with the light of the projector. Debord rids film of illusion and physical inhibitions to light and he exposes the material of the light particles that comprise the screen along with the “howling mass” upon which he titles his film (“Howls for Sade”). By ridding film of illusion, Debord follows Isou’s strong encouragement to destroy the image in film:

*Voice A:* Take photography away and cinema becomes radio. It’s like reading in a chair.

*Daniel:* Why not? Radio through television becomes a species of cinema. Why shouldn’t cinema, in turn, become a species of radio?

But Isou doesn’t simply ask for the exclusion of images, he also demands an effect in imagery or lack-there-of similar to the effect of the bright white screen in *Howls for Sade*:
The enrichment of photography leads me to its being nibbled away...
Let people come out of a movie with a headache... I would rather ruin
your eyes than leave them indifferent in this mess of vision. The voice
alone shall be coherent and terrible. The spectator must emerge blind,
his ears crushed, quartered and shriveled from this disjunction of
speech and image... I will call a willfully lacerated film, a chiseled film.
Intrinsic in this violent attack on imagery is the triumph of the
voiceover. Isou calls for a new kind of film where: Speech would not
come off the screen as a consequence of the scenes but from without
as if it were a surplus unconnected with the organism, a tie of drivel
hung on an ivory tooth, as if incessantly, the image had an invisible
and inhuman ally whence a voice indifferent to human things would
intone prophecies. While Isou’s film-manifesto “intones prophecies” of
However, both films are concerned with the future, and the
voiceover, which comes from a source without an image, takes on an
inhuman, godlike quality. The differences between Isou and Debord’s
“prophecies” are reflected by the tone of the voiceovers. Isou shouts
with “incessant,” violent courage. His shout has a sort of optimistic
quality but it is nevertheless abrasive. He confronts an imagined
audience that makes itself known thru shouting and jeering in the
voiceover. Debord, on the other hand, calls his voiceovers “pitiful”:
[Howls for Sade] naturally outraged the most advanced aesthetes...
pitiful sentences were spoken over a completely blank screen,
interspersed with extremely long passages of silence during which the
screen remained completely dark.10 He also calls the voiceovers
“unusual and resolutely monotone,”11 deviating from the self-
righteous conviction of Isou’s triumphant and abrasive shouting, and
instead creating a hypnotic trance of “pitiful sentences” that
communicate both what Debord wants to establish as manifesto (e.g.
the construction of situations), and what Debord disagrees with (e.g.
legal ordinances that deprive individuals under 19 years old of adult

10 Debord, Guy, Brigitte Cornand, Alice Debord, and Olivier Assayas. 2005. Guy Debord,
oeuvres cinématographiques complètes. Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes. France:
Gaumont Video.
pp. 111-123.
rights.) Debord’s claims are often ironic, but they are blended together with the sincere. This creates a less blatant, less approachable array of phrases in relation to Isou’s frank and direct approach. Certain criticisms make their way into *Howls for Sade* that are in fact subversive to Isou’s authority. There are a few major factors that ideologically and formally (which are consistently intermingled) distinguish *Treatise on Venom and Eternity* from *Howls for Sade*. *Treatise on Venom and Eternity* was more of a discussion or an experiment with Isou’s propositions than a demonstration of Isou’s call to duty like *Howls for Sade*. Of course, Isou’s explicit call to disconnect voice-overs and images is changed in *Howls for Sade* due to the fact that it has no images. But, on a deeper level, *Howls for Sade* challenges Isou and the Lettrists with poignant politically charged phrases like “and their revolts became conformisms.” Similarly, Debord’s allusion to the Cannes’ protesting “commando” was hardly flattering: “a sizable commando of some thirty Lettrists, all wearing the filthy uniform that is their only really original trademark, showed up at Cannes determined to provoke a scandal that would draw attention to themselves.”

This criticism that the Lettrists lack originality hardly characterizes them as ideal advocates of the avant-garde. Of course, Debord’s criticism here is situational rather than ideological. However, for a group such as the Lettrists, who emphasize lifestyle and action as the roots of art and liberation, the situational is what matters. The situational is also what matters for Debord: he lays out the claim in *Howls for Sade* that “the arts of the future can be nothing less than disruptions of situations,” a claim which the Lettrist protest fulfills, despite the fact that Debord expresses its susceptibility to conformity and its lack of originality.

Despite Debord’s initial love for Isou’s work, he and other Lettrists had been planning a break from the tyrannical Isou, an underhanded schism that took place in 1952 that instituted Debord as

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the leader of a new Lettrist group. Plans for this scission were underway by the time *Howls for Sade* was produced, which explains some of Debord’s attacks on the state of the Lettrist group. Lettrist Gil J Wolman, who was perhaps Debord’s closest friend as well as Debord’s most ardent supporter, avidly supported the scission with Isou. Wolman produced an anti-film in 1951 just before the production of *Howls for Sade*, which was titled *The Anticoncept* (L’Anticoncept).[^14] *The Anticoncept* played a foundational role in the thought-process behind *Howls for Sade*. In fact, it was so integral to the concepts in Debord’s *Howls for Sade* that Debord dedicated the film to Wolman; a dedication which, interestingly, Wolman, himself, recites. Both *Treatise on Venom and Eternity* and *The Anticoncept* are listed in the chronological litany of important historical films presented at the beginning of *Howls for Sade*.

*The Anticoncept* presents a shaking white circle in front of a black background, providing a contrast between black and white similar to the contrast in *Howls for Sade*. *The Anticoncept* also aims to deviate from the traditions of illusive film and similar attention is drawn to the voiceover, which is recited by Wolman himself. The voiceover is a poetic combination of phrases that are ungrammatically connected. These phrases express a multitude of images, particularly violent and sexual images. In the middle of the film, Wolman addresses the form of the floating white circle that appears on the screen as well as the concepts of lack-of-sight, black and white, voices and silence: “I can barely see you but it’s her one doesn’t mistake rotaries bodies I I reinvent you I watch her confront “hello” she watches me it’s you I tell you your name a name of a river you speak “you were saying” your voice is a hard light lights her face it’s not her middle of the night hatched with unequal circles the silence exasperates the boys gathered together from the country cancer solitude embodies mine from this day on he carefully emphasized that death was nothing but that it was difficult to die and he had doubts about nothing was to enter into a formulation I see nothing in order

to become the problem.”¹⁵ Light, darkness, blackness, nothingness, silence and conversive voices are all elements of Debord’s aesthetic in *Howls for Sade* that appear as prominent in Wolman’s aesthetic and his spoken text. Wolman and Debord both align these concepts with sexuality and death. By creating a context of obscurity and the unknown in darkness, silence, and light, they manifest the dark underbelly of the unconscious, wherein, according to Freud and the Surrealists who birthed the Lettrists, lies the obscure, unconscious, dreamlike humanity of *eros* and *thanatos*, sexuality and death.

Wolman’s phrase, “I see nothing in order to become the problem,” is particularly interesting: it implies that there is a single “problem” that one must become through nothingness. Perhaps this simply means that Wolman intends to conjure the problematic undercurrents of repressed *eros* and *thanatos* and of the fear of the unknown in order to liberate the human psyche as the surrealists aimed to create years before. Debord similarly thrusts his audience into a state of darkness, obscurity, and silence interspersed with strangely juxtaposed, dreamlike memories and conversations.

Perhaps the most striking element of *The Anticoncept* is the Post Script:

*Post Script resembles you and keeps me her mouth breathless near the ruins she speaks with your works renews past situations life is not retrospective I AM IMMORTAL AND LIVING*¹⁶

The proclamation, “I am immortal and living,” is perhaps meant to be ironic since recordings are intrinsically not living and people are not immortal. However, this phrase combines the living Wolman with the immortalizing recording, giving the impression that the film has become the human and the human has become the film. Debord similarly experiments with the concepts of recording and life as well as individual and material in *Howls for Sade*. One potent example of this is when the voice of Debord references the living Debord, emphasizing the distinction between material and artist:


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.’

The black and white screen also gives feelings of epiphany, void, and godlikeness of the recording, coming from this brilliantly lit screen. The conviction of The Anticoncept that Wolman/Wolman’s voiceover “is immortal and living” manifests a similar ironic godliness to the material that Debord later invokes in Howls for Sade.

CHAPTER TWO: EPIPHANIES Although Debord pronounces in *Howls for Sade* that “film is dead,” the eerie aliveness of the grainy white screen and the voices inside of it seem to portray that the essence of film lies in its natural material, not what film can represent nor what a specific deliberate genius-author wants to explicitly express. The luminescence of the screen creates a stunning brilliance in a way that a flat, empty white square or black page could not. The screen is organic. It is speckled with the black imperfections of reflections of dust. It is natural and at the same time mechanical. Debord extrapolates on natural brilliantly lit aesthetic experiences in *Panegyric* where he describes a lightning strike that struck close to him while he was living in Florence: “Just once, at night, I saw lightning strike near me outside: you could not even see where it had struck; the whole landscape was equally illuminated for one instant. Nothing in art has seemed to give me this impression of an irrevocable brilliance, except for the prose that Lautréamont employed in the programmatic exposition that he called *Poésies*. But nothing else: neither Mallarmé’s blank page, nor Malevich’s white square on a white background, nor even Goya’s last pictures, where black takes over everything, like Saturn devouring his children. Violent winds, which at any moment could rise from one of three directions, shook the trees.”

It is interesting that Debord specifically indicates Malevich’s white square on a white background by saying that Malevich’s piece insufficiently captured the “irrevocable brilliance” of a lightning strike. Kaszimir Malevich was a Russian avant-gardist painter at the turn of the 20th Century who painted geometrical abstractions, notably a white square on a white canvas. Malevich was an innovator in the avant-garde communist generation previous to Debord. Both Malevich and Debord were revolutionaries who created revolution through dissolving the existing order and presenting a degree-zero point from which to restart through works that renounced illusory representation. The passage from Debord’s *Panegyric* brings attention to the fact that, unlike Malevich’s white square, Debord’s white screen is luminescent and his black screen leaves the theatre completely dark. However, Debord extends from

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Malevich; he implies in *Panegyric* that he wants to accomplish an aesthetic that Malevich intended, an aesthetic of “irrevocable brilliance.” Thus, it seems natural to draw the comparison Debord himself invokes between Malevich and the aesthetic Debord wishes to create. Furthermore, Debord not only extends from Malevich regarding aesthetic philosophy, but also regarding politics: Malevich represented a previous generation of avant-garde Marxist artists at the turn of the 20th century. Like Debord, Malevich sought to destroy art as a means of achieving an anarchistic political future that ended art, ideology, and individualism. The idea of an organic form exists in both Malevich’s square and *Howls for Sade*. Malevich’s square is not quite square and his paint strokes are imperfect. The square subtly floats on the page at an angle that suggests that it is moving organically. Similarly, the graininess of Debord’s screen gives it a sort of living, breathing, moving quality that emphasizes the fact that it is within the borders of a square screen, like Malevich’s canvas and square: the medium’s shape becomes the form of the piece, drawing attention to the physical reality of the medium. Also, like Malevich, Debord expresses that something is liberating in eliminating images. As he says in the film, eliminating images “takes him out of that ephemeral crowd” of the spectacular, of the flâneur. Also, the elimination of images draws attention to the words being spoken. It makes the film a discourse within itself rather than a visual spectacle. However, *Howls for Sade* deviates from Malevich’s white square first in that it has luminescence and second in that this luminescence is contrasted with the complete darkness of a full theatre, creating a deeply experiential aspect to the film screening much different from the experience of viewing Malevich’s painting. In *Howls for Sade*, the visual aesthetic is inextricably related to the situation of watching it. This argument is furthered by the discussion of “situation” in the film and the advent of Situationism shortly after the film was first screened. This is furthered by the fact that the film calls for variable situations; it asks for discussion, which in fact was carried out in the Lincoln Center screening as a clever debate about the nature of film by the audience. Similarly, Debord and Bernstein had prepared to pour flour from the balcony during the first screening, though the

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screening was stopped before they got the chance. Thus, they intended to make the film an immediate, non-reproducible event: a situation. A situation where the aesthetic of the bright white screen became a material reality. Not only would the images on the screen be blinding, but the audience members would also be made unseen and their own vision of their surroundings would be hampered. Debord embraced le Compte de Lautréamont with a similar intention of making his art a physical reality:

After all, it was modern poetry for the last hundred years that had led us [the Lettrists] there [to nihilism]. We were a handful who thought that it was necessary to carry out its program in reality, and in any case to do nothing else. It is sometimes surprising…to discover the atmosphere of hate and malediction that has constantly surrounded me and, as much as possible, kept me hidden. Some think that it is because of the grave responsibility that has often been attributed to me for the origins, or even for the command, of the May 1968 revolt. I think rather that it is what I did in 1952 that has been disliked for so long.20

Thus, Debord connects “what he did in 1952” (Howls for Sade) with “modern poetry” (Lautréamont). Interestingly, Debord attests that literature (Lautréamont), not the visual arts, accomplished this “irrevocable brilliance”. Just the use of the word, “irrevocable,” etymologically refers to this “brilliance” as characterized by “voc”: words, voice: “Nothing in art has seemed to give me this impression of an irrevocable brilliance [of a lightning strike], except for the prose that Lautréamont employed in the programmatic exposition that he called Poetries (Poésies).”21 Debord explains the experience of his lightning strike in a way that seems to describe both Lautréamont’s work and Howls for Sade.

Le Compte de Lautréamont (Isidore Ducasse) wrote at the turn of the 20th century. He is considered a direct precursor to Surrealism, as well as a participant in the foundation of the Surrealist movement. Debord states that “the people who I admired more than anyone in the world were Arthur Craven and Lautréamont.” The actual content of Poetries is quite similar to the of the content of Howls for Sade to the point that it is essentially paraphrased, e.g. Lautréamont’s quote, “Love is not happiness,” is similar to Debord’s script, “Love is only valid in a pre-revolutionary period”. Howls for Sade and Poetries also have similar formats: they are both collections of pulled-together, disconnected ideas. They both are predominately concerned with the concept of art, which are approached both didactically and poetically. In fact, Debord’s uses didactic material as part of the aesthetic that it aims to create. Thus, the work and manifesto for the work become one in the same. Didactics become the aesthetic, which in a way fosters an aesthetic of clarity, straightforwardness, and demystification. At the same time, the accumulation of disconnected ideas intentionally hinders legibility and flow, forcing the reader to draw connections between very different notions, as one would in a surrealist painting. The use of short, bold, and disconnected phrases has a similar notion of epiphany similar to the lightning-like white screen, which represents a literal enlightenment, an epiphany. Both the short, often pithy phrases and the unbearably bright screen are incessant and overwhelming. Also, just as the brilliance of the lightning strike created an epiphany from a confrontational source outside of the self, the phrases in the script are also often either drawn from outside sources or they recall events that created thought-provoking memories. Perhaps then it can be concluded that Lettrist/Situationist-created “Situations” are events like lightning strikes that are abrasive, unpredictable, and therefore epiphanic. The short, bold, and disconnected phrases in Lautréamont’s Poetries can be understood in relation to the aesthetic of a lightning strike. The script of Howls for Sade uses this same stylistic approach: direct, quotable quotes, disconnected from one another, each proposing pithy, universal ideas. Debord continues to employ this style in a less poetic, more didactic form in The Society of the Spectacle: pithy,

quotable, concise ideas are grouped together in related but separated short, numbered sections. The fact that Debord had a literal experience with a lightning strike makes his testament to its aesthetic all the more powerful. He describes this experience with great reverence for the aesthetic of lightning, of nature, of the expanse of the skies, and of solitude. Furthermore, he draws connections between these natural phenomena and his relationship with an unnamed Andalusian woman with the pathetic fallacy, much in the spirit of Lautréamont and the 19th century literature that Debord was so fond of: I stayed in an inaccessible house surrounded by woods, far from any village, in an extremely sterile, exhausted, mountainous region, deep in a deserted Auvergne. I spent several winters there... The house seemed to open directly on to the Milky Way. At night, the nearby stars would shine brilliantly one moment, and the next be extinguished by the passing mist. And so to our conversations and our celebrations, our meetings and our tenacious passions. It was a land of storms. They would approach noiselessly at first, announced by the brief passage of a wind that slithered through the grass or by a series of sudden flashes on the horizon; then thunder and lightening were unleashed, and we were bombarded for a long while and from every direction, as if in a fortress under siege. Just once, at night, I saw a lightning strike near me outside: you could not even see where it had struck; the whole landscape was equally illuminated for one startling instant. Nothing in art has seemed to give me this impression on an irrevocable brilliance except for the prose that Lautéamont employed in the programmatic exposition that he called Poetries. But nothing else: neither Mallarmé’s blank page nor Malevich’s white square on a white background, nor even Goya’s last pictures, where black takes over everything, like Saturn devouring his children...It should be pointed out that the charm and harmony of these few seasons of grandiose isolation did not escape me. It was a pleasing and impressive solitude. Lautréameont describes scenes of lightning strikes, mountains, storms, darkness, and pathetic fallacy in Maldoror similar to Debord’s description of Auvergne: “I sat on a rock near the sea... The storm was going to begin its on slaughters and already the sky was darkening, turning into a blackness almost as hideous as a man’s

23 Lautréameont describes scenes of lightning strikes, mountains, storms, darkness, and pathetic fallacy in Maldoror similar to Debord’s description of Auvergne: “I sat on a rock near the sea... The storm was going to begin its on slaughters and already the sky was darkening, turning into a blackness almost as hideous as a man’s

heart...The wind whistled furiously from all four points of the compass, and made mincemeat of the sails. Claps of thunder crashed amid the lightning but could not outdo the sound of sailing to be heard...He who has not seen a vessel founder amid a hurricane, in intermittent lightning and deepest darkness, while those aboard are overcome with despair knows not life’s mischance’s...And to cap this gracious spectacle, night has fallen, dense, implacable.”

The storm and the struggle continue for several pages, ending in the spectator falling in love with a ravenous shark. This story portrays some of the violent aspects of lightning strikes and storms, giving the title of the film, Howls for Sade, more sense. The audience perhaps struggles, but also becomes exposed to the sadistic, pleasurable spectacle of “irrevocable brilliance”, struggle, and the adrenaline from a sense of a threatening natural disaster. Lautréamont’s play with themes of conceptual lightning and lightning-like style are made explicit in the following passage from Maldoror:

I grasp the quill which is going to construct the second canto...an implement ripped from some russet sea-eagle’s wing...But...what ails my fingers? As soon as I start work, their joints stay paralyzed. But I need to write...it’s impossible! Well, I repeat: I need to write down my thoughts: I have the right, like others, to yield to this natural law... But no, no, the pen remains inert!...Look—across the fields—see the lightning sparkle afar. The storm sweeps through space. It is raining...always raining...How it rains! Lightning flashes...swoops down through my half-open window, strikes my brow, and sends me sprawling on the floor. Poor youth! Your face was adequately marked by the premature wrinkles and birthmark without needing (in addition) this long sulphurous scar [...] These celestial policemen zealously perform their painful duty—judging by my wounded brow. I do not have to thank the Omnipotent for his astonishing adroitness. He aimed the bolt so that it would exactly bisect my face, from the forehead [...] down.

Here, the narrator is inspired by lightning, by “the Omnipotent”, by pain, as in a religious allegory of epiphany. The author becomes the muse of the “celestial”, a natural force that imposes itself upon the author as a “policeman,” depriving the author of the individualistic words that he was unable to write due to the fact that his fingers were “paralyzed”. In much the same way, Debord characterizes himself as a muse of a muse (the recording) of the celestial. His voice becomes something that is no longer his own through becoming a recording. Both he and the audience are pained by the brilliant understanding of material truth, the cosmic brilliance of the white screen, and the empty black silence. One particularly potent passage in Maldoror juxtaposes a series of natural brightness with the light of a camera obscura, an outmoded light-producing machine much like a projector:

_The renegade’s arm and the murderous instrument have merged in linear unity, like the atomistic elements of the camera obscura ... Mervyn, followed by the chord, resembles a comet trailing after its flaming tail. The iron ring of the slipknot, flashing the sun’s rays, itself serves to complete the illusion._

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We see the cosmic/natural qualities of brilliant light merging with projector machinery. The “illusion” created by the metaphorical camera obscura demonstrates the fusion between the scientific and the artistic. Lautréamont describes the camera obscura as “atomistic.” Similarly, Debord marries the projector with the natural, scientific concept of its projection. It is equally enlightening and true in its demystified reality. The light from the projector is brilliant, epiphanic, interstellar, and atomistic. Debord describes it in Howls for Sade as such by alluding to both the grandness of “interstellar space” and the atomistic, chemical elements of “sodium chloride fireworks.” But it is not just the aesthetic of what is revealed by the projector that appeals to Lautréamont and Debord, it is also the aesthetic of depriving the viewer of images. Instead of telling us that Howls for Sade shows flashes of white and black, Debord tells us, “This film does not show any images.”

27 Thus, there is an aesthetic of feeling deprived, of oppressed desire, an oppression that assaults the audience violently.

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Lautréamont calls for such an aesthetic:

*I might, by sewing together your eyelids, deprive you of the spectacle of the universe and make it impossible for you to find your way: I should not act as your guide.*

Debord and Lautréamont both use didactics yet, in the end, refuse to guide their audience. In fact, they aim to confuse, to blind, to leave their audience to find their own way, but depriving them of vision so that there is nothing physical to be “found.” However, other sense perceptions become prioritized: touch, through physical brutality, and sound. Both of these senses take on a sort of magic force since their source cannot be seen. Lautréamont speaks of a cruel and powerful God who he describes in the following passage:

*Good and evil fused together gush from your royal gangrenous bosom in impetuous suggest as torrent does from rock—through the secret spell of a blind force.*

Lautréamont speaks of a “secret spell.” This “spell” invokes archaic superstitions where vocal utterances have both magic, godly qualities and tangible but fleeting physical qualities: Lautréamont’s spell is a “force” from which good and evil gush “as torrent does from rock.” Debord’s “resolutely monotone” voiceover speaks of such lofty, godly, obscure concepts, but beyond just content, spells are usually recited in a sort of hypnotizing monotone. The monotone of spells gives the words an inhuman quality, usually implying that the speaker has become a sort of muse through which a magic or godly power speaks. Furthermore, spells are a connection between vocal and physical power; they are words through which external, physical actions, often harmful actions can take place without a tangible exertion from the speaker. Spells break the barrier of space and movement, making physical actions possible from a distance. Debord and Bernstein’s plan

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29 Ibid. pp. 93.
to pour flour on the audience during Howls for Sade is spell-like in that it breaks the barrier between the invocations on the screen and physical assault; the flour appears to be a result of the speaking, magical screen. Adding to the sense of magic, the flour would have been both a blind and a blinding force, coming from seemingly nowhere and leaving audience members without vision. Such obscurity and surprise would have the impression of a magic trick wherein the source was not identified. Magic implies a disconnect between the doer and the done, a disconnect that seems to transcend the laws of the physical world. In this way, being assaulted with flour that seemed to somehow relate to the speaking screen in a disconnected way would seem magical, furthering the idea that the voiceover is like a spell. Spells also are traditionally thought to have the potential to control the thoughts and minds of individuals. This superstitious traditional concept is in fact quite similar to the Marxist view that the words and views of the ruling class manifest themselves in popular film and art through which they underhandedly gain control over and favor of the masses. Debord addresses the connection between ideology and religion/superstition in *The Society of the Spectacle*:

*The spectacle is the material reconstruction of religious illusions. Spectacular techniques cannot dissipate religious trends where men have placed their own power, detached from themselves: religion is simply realized terrestrially... The spectacle is the technical realization of the exile of human power; the scission achieved at the interior of man.*

Ideology creates an out-of-body religious experience that undermines all individual human power. Debord seems to take the concept of the muse, where religious words or spells manifest themselves through a powerless human, and apply the concept to secular power structures through the medium of the spectacle. The spectacle, which is media, television, film, through which ideology speaks, becomes an inhuman form with a human voice that conveys the ideological will of ruling powers, traditionally called “God,” but actually simply the

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infrastructure of social control which is not led by any one human puppeteer, but rather by simply the inhuman, circulating structure of the spectacle, itself. In this vein, Debord recites passages from the law in Howls for Sade as if the law was a magic spells meant to control his audience.

But we should keep in mind that Debord and the voiceover are not the same. Debord draws the distinction between the real, physical him and the recordings. The recording reinforces that he is not present, not physically or visually: his voice says that “Debord was going to step on stage,” but he is not on stage or on the screen. Thus, perhaps it is not “Debord” who is the reinforcement of ideology, control, etc, but rather the repeatable recording of his voice, which has become the magical muse of sources greater than Debord as an individual. This magic quality is reinforced by the fact that a source of the sound cannot be seen. “Pitiful” “howls” come from the screen with a combination of voices that are impossible to identify without knowing the individuals; they do not identify themselves but they allude to others. The printed scripts do not indicate the speakers, either. Thus, their voices become a conglomerated mass that represent inhuman powers, both social and natural, with ephemeral obscurity, like the sublime “winds” in Debord’s Panegyric or the “howls” in Lautréamont’s Malodoror, which naturally express pain in a way that is uncontrolled by the human emitting the sound and therefore inspired by the violent power of an exterior source:

My tight chest unable to exhale the life-giving air quickly enough, my lips parted and I cried out...a cry so earsplitting...that I heard it! The trammels in my ears came loose abruptly, the eardrums cracked at the shock of this mass of resounding air forced vigorously forth from me, and there occurred a new phenomenon within the organs condemned by nature. I had just heard a sound! A fifth sense revealed itself in me! But what pleasure could I have found in such a discovery? Henceforth human sound reached my ear only with the sensation of pain which pity for a great injustice engenders. Whenever anyone addressed me I recalled what I had seen that day, above the visible spheres, and the translation of my stifled feelings into an impulsive howl whose tone
was identical with my fellows.

Lautréamont describes this howl as a natural reaction to an “injustice,” a reaction that blends together in unison with his “fellows,” who are forced by their pain to emit shrieks. His howls responded to visions “above the visible spheres,” referring to a vision of a cruel “Creator.” Debord, too, reveals unjust godlike powers in Howls for Sade with words that are not his own, but are removed from his environment. The film, itself, is a response to “stifled feelings” in solidarity with the other speakers and, if made effectively angry, the audience, who is being assaulted. However, instead of actually howling or shrieking on screen, Debord speaks with godly monotone primarily in the exact words of the structures that oppress him. Thus, perhaps the “howls for Sade” are meant to be the howls of the audience, who are placed into a situation, like the speaker in Malodoror, “above the visible sphere.” Debord intends to pain his audience, perhaps not simply to cause them pain, but also to draw attention to “injustice” that causes “stifled feelings.” Thus, Debord presents the situation that caused the howls in Maldoror rather than the howls themselves, all the while implying his own “stifled feelings” of “howls” by the title and hoping to achieve solidarity with the audience in angry, stifled, howling emotion. This is furthered by the fact that Debord ends his first publication of the script of Howls for Sade in Ion with the direction: “A short silence, then very violent cries in the dark.”

When Debord and Lautréamont describe storms, they pay special attention to the sounds of wind and of thunder. Debord connects storms to “tenacious passions” and the “18th century battle-scenes” in Panegyric, indicating that revolution and amorous interactions are often storm-like. The monotone recitations in Howls for Sade can be seen as a sort of consistent wind, while spouts of shouting, pithy phrases, and disjointed subjects give the impression of thunder, e.g. “Did you sleep with Françoise? – What a spring!” Debord portrays stormy weather as a powerful sublime in Panegyric, but he also portrays the powerful “storms” of government control as unjust in La Planète Malade where he advocates against pollution:

When it rains, when there are false clouds over Paris, do not ever forget that this is the fault of the government. Alienating industrial production makes rain. Revolution makes good weather.  

The storm of Howls for Sade is sublime and accusatory of power structures as evil, godlike bringers of war, destruction, and pollution. However, the relationship between good and evil in Howls for Sade is multidimensional. Both Lautréamont and Debord manifest sadistic aesthetics of terror as an extension of unconventional views of good and evil. Debord dedicates his film to the Marquis de Sade in the title. Lautréamont writes about the brutal travesties from the perspective of an evil man, Maldoror. Lautréamont explains Maldoror’s desire for evil as a “yearning for the infinite,” where the extremes of good and evil become one in the same and resemble the power of God and of nature. Alas, what is good and what is evil? Are they both one single thing with which we furiously attest our impotence and passion to attain the infinite by even the maddest means? Or are they two different things? Yes … they had sooner be one and the same. This illustrates many instances of extreme light and darkness that are meant to parallel the extremes of good and evil. In Howls for Sade, the instances of pure light and pure darkness are equally blinding and equally abrasive. They also experiment with the extremes of what the projector and the environment can do. “Guy Debord did not make much art, but the art he did make was extreme.” Debord’s invocations of both ideals and sadistic evils through the godlike white/black screen seem aligned to Lautréamont’s “infinite” of both good and evil: it is essentially the power fantasy of being a god. Isou, an avid proponent of Sade’s ideas, says in Treatise on Venom and Eternity: “For the sake of my soul, I will run my own risks. I want

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33 Lautréamont, comte de, Alexis Lykiard, and comte de Lautréamont. 1994. Maldoror & the complete works of the comte de lautreamont. Cambridge, MA : Exact Change pp. 36
heaven and hell for myself.” Morality is therefore no longer a constriction, but, rather, good and evil are approached as infinite expanses to which the individual seeks access. Isou says: “Discovery is important, in good and as in evil, in the best and the worst.” Immersion in complete whiteness and immersion in complete blackness have similar effects of disorientation and extremity just as good and evil, in their extremes, are similarly powerful and infinite. This concept of the similarity of darkness and lightning appears in André Breton’s Art Poétique: “I have discarded clarity as worthless. Working in darkness, I have discovered lightning.” Here, it is obscurity that creates epiphany, epiphany in the form of lightning; it is darkness that is enlightening, contrary to the etymology of the term “enlightenment” and the traditional search for clarity of the enlightenment. Debord both admired and hated Breton; perhaps this is reflected by the fact that Debord includes both admirable and hateable quotes in his strokes of lightning, showing that not all epiphanies are productive in creating better artistic and political futures. Breton’s optimism in his artistic discoveries are therefore both emulated and brought into question in Howls for Sade. Nevertheless, the use of the projector in Howls for Sade is clearly similar to the projector work for which that Breton and Burroughs were recognized. The slight difference in argument is that Breton and Burroughs seem to wholly champion the enlightening, religious experience of the abrasive projecting light juxtaposed with darkness, whereas Debord associates more closely to the concepts of the terrible sublime and the manipulatively sadistic. For Debord, the enlightenment is forced by the puppeteer recordings hidden from sight, whereas, for Breton and Burroughs, the unlocked subconscious of the subjected individual is in ultimate control of the experience.

37 Ibid.
But back to Lautreamont's fascination with the relativity of good and evil – given Debord's appropriation of religious experience stripped of moral implications, this concept certainly comes into play; in fact, Debord discusses the brutal nature of sadism manifest in Nihilism in *Panegyric*. The concept of good and evil as equal and necessary to fulfill a power fantasy originates with Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*. The human desire to become a god-like, inhuman figure like the voices in *Howls for Sade* or Maldoror is perhaps derived from Nietzsche’s übermensch, which literally means “beyond man,” a man who has risen above humanity to become a sort of god. Debord explains how he took part in an amoral nihilistic quest to satisfy desires when he joined the Lettrists, which ironically tended to justify actions morally:

Before the age of twenty, I was the peaceful part of my youth come to an end, and I now had nothing left except the obligation to pursue all my tastes without restraint, though in difficult conditions. I headed first towards that very attractive milieu where an extreme nihilism no longer wanted to know about nor, above all, continue what had previously been considered the use of life or the arts. This milieu had no trouble recognizing me as one of its own. There my last possibilities of one day returning to the normal round of existence disappeared. I thought so then, and what came after proved it...Nihilism is quick to moralize, as soon as it is touched by the idea of justifying itself: one man robbed banks and gloried in not robbing the poor, while another had never killed anyone when he was not angry. Despite all the eloquence at their disposal, they were the most unpredictable people from one hour to the next, and they were occasionally rather dangerous.

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Debord here expresses the distinction between a peaceful youth and a nihilistic future, perhaps explaining the stark distinctions between the “pre-revolutionary” and the “revolutionary” in Howls for Sade. He states that he “had nothing left but to pursue all [his] tastes without restraint,” showing his own quest for power and nihilism, but at the same time admitting the troubling irony that “nihilism is quick to moralize.” The understanding of this irony was not simply as a result of a retrospective; it appears in Howls for Sade as well, a work that fixates on the powerlessness of the individual in relation to systems of control, death, and the expanse of the universe. Nevertheless, Debord appropriates the words of systems of control as well allusions to the power of the cosmos in order to give the impression that the voiceover in Howls for Sade is a sort of inhuman übermensch created by the truisms spoken by indistinguishable voices. According to Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra, the übermensch gains power in the place of God once “God is dead.” Debord appropriates the phrase, “God is dead,” with the phrase, “Cinema is dead.” From the ashes of cinema comes a new and ominous creature, melded together with an array of voices that cannot be seen, intoning, as Isou puts it, “prophecies.” This sort of mythical language inspired by religious allegory is in the same vein as Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra, where “God is dead,” yet a mythical, allegorical, prophetic future of power and emptiness remains. This religious allegorical emergence of a single powerful being from the voices of many becomes the means by which, according to some of his associates, Debord later leads the Situationist International:

[The SI] was ruled by a sort of collective responsibility, according to which individual theoretical statements and behaviors automatically involved everyone else. This feature, similar to one of the aspects of religious sects, has in the case of the SI an aesthetic meaning, referring to the importance of the constraining and binding element of style; as Nietzsche writes, it imples the erasure of individual specificity, a deep sense of discipline and a repugnance for a disorganized and chaotic nature. These requirements [...] perfectly corresponded to Debord’s way of being.42

However, for Debord, this future of the übermensch ends in silence and lostness whereas Nietzsche’s future ends in absolute power and order. Thus, Debord inverts the concept. In The Society of the Spectacle, Debord explains, “All that was absolute becomes historical.”43 The übermensch-like voice in Howls for Sade is consumed by the greater natural power of history, of the infinite expanse of time. Even the great powers of the universe, like stars, die in the simulated extended timeline of Howls for Sade. Nietzsche explains, “One must have chaos within oneself to give birth to a dancing star.”44 How better to describe the majesty and chaos of Howls for Sade then as a dancing star, birthed from within the self? And where better to find the true power and meaning of the insignificant world than in the indifferent yet mighty cosmos? Debord brings similar astronomical terms into Howls for Sade:

*The cold interstellar space, thousands of degrees below freezing point or the absolute zero Fahrenheit, Centigrade, or Réumur: the incipient intimations of proximate dawn.*

The description of interstellar space as “cold” reflects the cold, unfeeling, interstellar experience of Howls for Sade where, as Isou says, the cinema exhibits an “inhuman indifference” where there is no good or evil. Debord locates the insignificant earth in the scheme earlier in Howls for Sade:

*He was well aware that nothing of his [sexual] exploits would remain in a town that revolves with the Earth, as the Earth revolves within a galaxy that is only an insignificant part of a tiny island endlessly receding from us, totally dark, eyes closed to the enormity of the disaster.*45

Debord also uses the terminology of stars in his description of the stormy weather in Florence: “The house seemed to open directly to the Milky Way. The stars would shine brightly one moment, only to be extinguished by the passing mist. So, too, would our conversations and our tenacious passions.” So, too, the god-like voice and light putters out slowly, then it is extinguished entirely in a long, black, deathly, 23-minute-long silence in Howls for Sade. Brilliant, powerful, chaotic stars—which perhaps attest to the potential of the speaking individual or of the society which wrote many of the quotes he speaks—die, time and light continue, then, eventually, the end of time extinguishes all powers in apocalyptic emptiness. This is unlike the progressive Nietzschean power fantasy, which was based on Hegelian progress. Howls for Sade draws upon the same sort of Nietzschean arbitrary but extreme good/evil, light/dark relationships, but instead of a crescendo of progression toward an ultimate power, the film decrescendos from brilliant explosions and demonstrations of power to waning light and disconnected power. The soundtrack begins with law and the history of film, dissolving to arbitrary conditions of everyday life with longer and longer interspersed silences until the long, empty, twenty-three minute death of the black, silent screen. The last spoken phrase is: “Like lost children, we live our unfinished adventures,” which is optimistic in a way but clearly combats the traditional avant-garde/Hegelian/ Marxist concepts of progress and the Nietzschean will to power, despite the fact that Debord’s theories and aesthetics are so deeply inspired by the avant-garde, Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche.

Perhaps it is, in fact, the darkness, the emptiness, and the obscurity that is the trajectory of progression. Debord distinguishes the pre-revolutionary and the revolutionary in Howls for Sade, implying that revolutionary history is not directionless. He attests that “the perfection of suicide lies in its ambiguity”: ambiguity is perfection. Furthermore, Debord and the Lettrists proclaimed the good of getting lost. The black theatre gives the feeling of becoming lost, alone, dead. It is also an ultimate extreme. It presents the result of an explosion. It first provides the lightning strikes that kills cinema, then it presents the effect: blackness. It seems that the progression of Howls for Sade is an exposition of violent electrical shock that results in the feeling of being lost and alone in the dark. Thus, the film creates the necessary exterior methods of causing fear to invoke the “adventure” in being lost and directionless. This experience of directionlessness is a metaphor for history, which does not progress cleanly or predictably; rather it dissolves into a mess wherein we find ourselves wonderfully lost. Isou, too, saw the ultimate end of revolution in cinema as the destruction of the art:

*I believe the cinema is too rich, it is obese. It has reached its limit, its maximum. The instant it attempts to broaden itself, it will burst. Congestion will rupture this fat pig into a thousand pieces. I herald its destruction. The first apocalyptic sign of disjunction of this bloated organism known as film: the pictures they make these days have a completed, perfect, tranquil quality. It is the result of the...classic unity between the elements.*

Howls for Sade attempts to end film and therefore perhaps to end traditional hegemony of ideology and culture over thought. It aims to realize absolute truths such as death, transcendence, emptiness, nature and humanity that are ultimately disappointing. Debord thus calls the film a “disappointing apotheosis.”

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Despite the disappointment, Howls for Sade portrays violence and death as beneficial for knowledge, aesthetic pleasure, and sexual arousal in the spirit of Sade, who found enlightenment in violence, as well as in the spirit of Freud, who likened the human desires for death and sex (thanatos and eros), and also simply of French tradition where an orgasm is called a “petite mort” (“little death”). The very imagery of white flashing light in Howls for Sade is deemed evocative, even orgasmic, and the bright, exploding white light becomes like cum: “She constantly reappeared in his memory, in a flash like sodium fireworks on contact with water.” The vision of the sexualized woman is not described with images, but rather with the orgasmic sentiment of flashing white light on water. The natural images of storms and natural disasters similarly use the pathetic fallacy to describe orgasm in the same colors and intensity as the fiery, flashing lights: “So close, so gently, I lose myself in the hollow archipelagos of language. I bear down on you, you’re open as a cry, it’s so easy. A hot stream. A sea of oil. A forest fire.”

However, the connection between religious epiphany and sexuality is highly characteristic of the surrealist movement in writing, particularly Lautréamont, who also happened to coin the term, “Surrealism.” Since the Lettrist group was birthed from the Surrealist movement, it seems that Debord marries his historical inspirations gained through reading like Sade, Nietzsche, and Malevich to his more immediate artistic origins. Lautréamont’s writing is in some ways both a historical and an immediate inspiration for Debord as a Lettrist. Despite the aim to destroy film and ideology and to look to a new, different, bleak future, Debord looks intently at previous literature, philosophy and art with a critical but invested love-hate response. He attests that his “project and [...] critique is [...] the surpassing of philosophy from Hegel to Nietzsche.”

Debord brings Hegel and Nietzsche to the forefront of his discussion in order to build on their ideas and finally to “surpass” them. Debord also approaches


with artists like Isou and the Surrealists in this way. He was highly critical of the Surrealists, which Jean-Michel Mension likens to “killing his father”51 due to the fact that Debord and Lettrist art was birthed from the Surrealist movement. In the spirit of Hegel’s dialectic, Debord looks at the past in order to build on it, overcome it, and ultimately destroy it. He gains inspiration from sources like the Surrealists, but he refuses to prescribe to them; in fact, he violently confronts their ideas like “killing his father,” just as he kills his audience and his own individuality. Debord gains inspiration from a plethora of sources, claiming to “steal” quotations, but the fusion of those sources change their original meanings, a technique he called “détournement.” Concepts of the past are synthesized into a fiery cry of white light that acts as both inspiration and emptiness. The knowledge the quotations provide is finally “disappointing.” As Debord writes: “Death, even nuclear death, is an old idea.”52 The bright white light and the silence of Howls for Sade is like the experience of nuclear bombing ending in the apocalypse, a clear alignment with his contemporary political moment, but a nuclear holocaust entirely informed by knowledge from experience and from the art and writings of history. Marc’O called Howls for Sade an example of “nuclear cinema,” a necessary new form for his contemporary film and for film “of the future.”53 The imminent nuclear threat, that ominous cloud that darkened the 1950s, was yet another symbol for Debord, a motif in history, that ultimately (literally) illuminates the relationships between the individual, the whole of history, and the expanse of an indifferent universe.

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