"Speaking the Language of Religion for the Last Time": Guy Debord's Critiques of Religion

A.G. O'Meara


First printed May 2013
Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Religion and Dialectical History

Chapter 2: «The Spectacle is the Inheritor of the Religious Illusion»

Chapter 3: Diabolical Negation

Appendix of Figures

Bibliography

Cited Original French Text

Endnotes
PREFACE

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord says that he intends to “speak the language of religion for the last time.” The philosophers on which Debord's foundation for argumentation ultimately rely—Hegel and Marx—inform the intentions of this statement through their concept of dialectical history wherein all things are continually negated and superseded. For Hegel through this historical process, religion reaches its ultimate perfection, a perfection that is devoid of images; a perfection that humanity does not yet have the capacity to understand. For Marx, religious progress would entail the negation of religion altogether, but the concept of heaven and God would be refocused to reveal a better understanding of human nature and the potential for a better society.

But in order to achieve this negation, religion must first be understood. According to Marx, in order to understand society and capital, we must first understand religion. For Debord, once we understand religion's role in modern society, we can strategize the repurposing of religious ideas to combat and displace religion's ideological stronghold.

While it is atheistic, this philosophy can't be reduced to mere atheism. Unlike 21st Century atheist philosophers like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, Feuerbach's legacy, which reveals itself in Debord's ideas, sees human desire embedded into religion and aims to parse out the realities embedded in the illusion. We see Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* not only in Debord, but also, naturally, Marx, as well as the writings of Sigmund Freud, who Debord also read thoroughly, and Friedrich Nietzsche, who certainly made Debord's reading list as well.

And so here we can see that a long history of thought that contributes to Debord's work. While the title of this book may appear very specific, when dealing with such a well-read and ambitiously intentioned film-maker, the subject soon becomes exceedingly macro-cosmic. Looking into Debord's reading notes, we see that he's interested in the historical development of ideas that challenged starting with the French Revolution, which coexisted alongside the burgeoning ideas of the Marquis de Sade,
which later became popularized, and, in the 19th Century, writers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Isidore Ducasse (le Comte de Lautréamont). Inversions of traditional morality and of religion (which are interrelated but not equal) were achieved in all their writings through the use of the negative: for Lautréamont, this was expressed by the triumph of evil, for Louis Antoine de Saint Just and the Marquis de Sade, this was accomplished through perversions, both sexual and political, and, for Nietzsche, negation was accomplished through a single avant-garde dissident who (like Plato? Or even Moses?) brought anti-moralizing enlightened individual down from the mountaintop. However, Debord writes that his goal was neither hedonist pleasure nor individualism.

I find it important to note, for stylistic reasons, that Debord strove to in some ways thwart (or perhaps simply negate) the “project of western philosophy,” and art. He strove to make no concessions to academic standards – in fact, the Situationists mocked and reviled their contemporary academic philosophers. And so I make every attempt to write as truthfully and freely as possible, instead of preparing my tone and ideas for acclaim or recognition in any discipline, or for mild acceptance by institutions which may be privy to review. I see this is the clearest to Debord’s style, method, and intent. More importantly, in the spirit of Hegel and Marx, I make every attempt to focus on general trends of society and major drivers of historical change, as opposed to concentrating on specific details that disregard major drivers of Debord's inspiration that's rooted in intellectual history. That said, I'm essentially viewing Debord's arguments in his films as arguments inspired by close reading – I'm looking at Debord as an intellectual historian as much as a commentator on modern society. He asks the question, paraphrased, how has the history of thought developed into the society that currently exists; who revealed these developments and who challenged them? How can I use the ammunition of past writers to confront the modern world, which is, in so many ways, a product of the past – a product of the past that's ultimately rooted in medieval concepts like Catholicism?
Debord aspires to write general, Hegelian historical analyses as well: commenting on Marx’s The German Ideology in his notes for In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni, Debord writes, “Partial histories are not possible. Each history must be universal. It is only through universal history that one can understand particular cases.” Debord furthermore explains in his notes:

The author does not intend to critique this or that detail of our époque, a syndicalist or a starlet, but rather the époque in general, through which the details are inconsequential. He chooses details because of their function and accessibility in their spectacular diffusion.

By moving from general to specific, I do not intend to disregard historical accuracy; on the contrary, I strive for extreme accuracy of both historical facts and critical perception, without which the final impact of my writing would be insignificant to the currents of thought and of history. Too often, insignificant details become obsessions used as distractions from the structure of modern life and the inherent contradictions within those existing structures. But of course, drawing grand connections between religion, mass media, blockbusters, and state ideology is necessarily ambitious – and not necessarily popular.

It is ambitious to the extent that the writer must have perception that extends outside of the specifics of their own context to make conclusions about the function of ideology on the whole; it extends to the realm of the knowledge of a hypothetical God. It is exactly this omnipotent, Godly view over the seemingly universal dominion of ideology that is necessary to the understanding of ideology in the development from its past to its present manifestations. This omniscient perspective is possible because of the interconnectivity between ideological structures through the system of capital. Debord cites Proudhon-Marx-Picasso, “Each ideological domain, despite its relative autonomy, is connected to other ideological domains by its first cause: its economic base.”

Despite the emphasis on history in general, literature in general, religion in general, economics in general, and how they all interrelate (quite ambitious!), it should be said that my analysis is also,
perhaps ironically, highly specific: it is a close reading of, specifically, Debord's films, which use both words and images to demonstrate his ambitious points. The majority of the sources I will use are primary sources. After reading the available writings by Debord, I have had the opportunity to visit the archives of Guy Debord, the “Fonds Guy Debord” at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France where I was able to immerse myself in his working notes for *The Society of the Spectacle* (book), *The Society of the Spectacle* (film), *Howls for Sade*, and *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni*. I have also had the opportunity to immerse myself in Debord’s self-categorized reading notes labeled “Marxism,” “Philosophy/Sociology,” and “Poetry.” In pursuit of the ideas and practices of Debord, I find it most appropriate and most useful to concentrate on the primary materials of his books, films, and notes, more so than on other written histories.

All that said, my analysis of Debord is cannot be removed from my own socio-historical time and context. I had once believed it possible to present an objectively accurate, historically contextualized approach to a subject, but I am now confident that, instead, all writing and publication is based on agendas and contemporary trajectories. We are all rooted in our personal interests as well as our moment in history, and writing of value addresses both of those realities. After a long developing interest in Debord’s ideas, and returning to this particular book after waiting three years, I decided that I should not only represent aspects of Debord's ideas which would be a contribution to the existing understanding Debord, but also my own time and context. I originally wrote this book as a thesis submitted to the University of Notre Dame. Despite the fact that a thesis written at and for a Roman Catholic University might seem like a highly inappropriate context for a thesis about the destruction of religion and its historical authority in the Roman Catholic Church, it would be wrong of me to disregard the fact that the Catholic context and Catholic education given to me at Notre Dame deeply influenced and informed the creation of the following ideas. I like to think that the relationship between this paper and the Roman Catholic university is a dialectical negative and the dominant ideology; that
general dialectical and ideological struggles resonate with my specific situation, and likewise that my specific situation forms my own thinking as a response.

At the same time, the general critique of religion is not simply a specific, contextual response: it is the “prerequisite of all criticism.” In order to understand the dissemination of spectacular ideology, it is necessary to understand its source: “The spectacle [contemporary] is the reconstruction of the religious illusion [ancient].” As Debord observes in his notes, Marx foresees the development of religious ideology into the secular fetishism of the spectacle in the *Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*:

For Germany, the criticism of religion has been essentially completed, and the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism (...) Germany will one day find itself on the level of European decadence before ever having been on the level of European emancipation. It will be comparable to a fetish worshipper pining away with the diseases of Christianity.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would also like to thank the Nanovic Institute of European Studies for their generous Graduate Break Travel and Research Grant which funded this project, my advisers – Kathleen Pyne, Olivier Morel, and Gabrielle Gopinath – who supported my original undertaking of this project at the University of Notre Dame, and the Fonds Guy Debord of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, especially Laurence LeBras and Emmanuel Guy. I would like to thank Ryan Rogers, who continually challenges and inspires me, and who I love very much. Thank you especially to the people who re-ignited my interest in Debord, especially Ian Thompson, Julian Kabza, Nadège LeJeune, Catherine Goldstein, Kevin Wilson, and McKenzie Wark.
“This world runs the risk of becoming paradoxically invisible,” Debord wrote in the defense of *The Society of the Spectacle (film)*. Many paradoxes exist within the spectacle: a paradox lies in the fact that the spectacle connects yet distorts human interaction; the spectacle alienates in a way that also brings knowledge and communication closer together. And by bringing ideas and communication closer in a way that rifts individuals further apart, the spectacle accomplishes the *weltanshauung* – the omnipotent equating of all things under a cohesive ideological power – that the Catholic liturgy always aimed to accomplish in act, and the concept of a monotheistic God theorized. A paradox also exists in the fact that the spectacle is both material and transcendent: Spectacular ideology is the material basis of contemporary society, and yet it is ripe with the mysticism of “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” that imbue the material of capital and images with abstract forms. Abstractions distract from the material realities of power relations which they also insure. Finally, the spectacle is the amalgamation of the *seen*, and yet, through recreating a standardized, dreamed, projected, representational format for manipulating vision, the inner-workings of this system are shrouded.

Consider a world wherein this risk that is run – wherein the world is realized as paradoxically invisible. How might this vision of a possible future relate to the future predictions of Georg Hegel, the philosopher who recurs in Debord's hand-written margins in his personal Champ-Libre copy of *The Society of the Spectacle*? Hegel sees the world as progressing toward an «End of History» beyond artistic representation; that is, an imageless, immaterial world, beyond icons. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord envisions the negation of art as a distinct possibility, but, until art is negated, détournement is necessary. Such a future would in fact be a realization of the goals of art and religion, which, through representational conduits, work to fulfill human desire. However, to think that Debord
idealistically believes this future is even a possibility would be too prescriptive – personally, I envision this concept of an End of History as being more like a mathematical limit: even expression through language, Debord recognizes as representational. It seems that the more psychologically self-aware and the more ready-to-act art and language are, the more they mingle with the realities they aim to represent, confront, and enact. Humanity works this way, and, as a result, the spectacle has become a Freudian dream that cuckold our desires. As a result, we must react through language, art, and action to negate standardized desire with vocal, represented victories of everyday life through film and writing. In his notes for *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni*, Debord outlines this human reality wherein language is intrinsically alienating, but it exists as a psychological necessity that cannot fulfill sexual desire and human connection:

The necessity to speak exists as sexual desire. It mixes with it. It is just as strong. And, like [sexual desire], [the necessity to speak] is at once a movement of hope toward the world, toward participation, toward life and the suffering of missing someone. The necessity to speak manifests as desire when there is no one to be desired. They are lost. And then idle chatter comes to exist at the crux, dull libertinage where sexual habits and relations are mundane. Real acquaintances find nothing but this false language, this false love. Existing desire at its highest point meets its object, takes in its game everything that is possible in the world.¹⁴

The place where desire meets its object is the space where theory meets praxis, the space where love meets meaningful reciprocation, the space where “movement of hope toward the world” is not stagnant, but moving progression toward dialectical change. This is the space of situations, and the space of the real, material possible rather than the illusory. But does it even exist, or is it simply another limit toward which all human beings strive?

Written words and representational images are necessarily of the past, because they perpetuate the legacy of the past works of their creators, as is made evident by the prefix “re” in the word “representation.” Since words and images externalize desire, they can only falsely fulfill the desire for real things such as rebellion, love, and sex.
Given the cuckolded, unsatisfying alienation of images and their intrinsic link to sexual desire, it makes sense that, in his preliminary plans for *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord notes that he intended to use pornography, because it is clear that there is an essential human desire that pornography mirrors, caters to, and cannot fulfill, whereas other desires of the spectacle are often constructed and their relation to real human desires is often stretched or nonexistent. He writes:

This film should (1) denounce the spectacle (2) speak of what it wants (as a revolutionary film); the positive (life, love, revolution), in spectacular terms [..]

for example, pin up photos.15vi

Although Debord acknowledges that words are inherently alienating, he continues to write, specifying that he intends to write poetically.17 Debord specifies that his method of negation is “not a negation of style, but a style of negation.”16 A poetic style of negation confronts ideology and society instead of diluting them into the nihilism of the Dadaists, the scientific intellectualism of Althusser, or the moralizing of Social Democrats. Rather, the poetic utterance will demonstrate the living, true, yet repressed aspects of human life which exist implicitly in the writing and images of even some of the most conservative, dogmatic ideological productions, such as crucifixion paintings and the novels of Chateaubriand. Debord hopes for a future where images and illusions do not govern, but, instead, material consciousness liberates human beings from hierarchical and historical governance altogether. As Debord articulates it, this material consciousness exists outside of the rationalized constructions of Enlightenment thought.

**Religion as a General Term**

It is necessary to address the fact that I intend to use the general term “religion,” and I intend to discuss the somewhat more specific historical developments of Western Judeo-Christianity in its relationship to the development of power and capital. Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx and Debord all speak in the general terms of “religion” as well as in terms of Christianity, Catholicism, and Protestantism as developments within the history of religion. However, I am not merely deciding to use the term “religion” merely out of an objective (objectified) analysis of Hegelian-Marxist critical
theory. Rather, as Marx explains in comparing himself to Aeschylus’ Prometheus, it is necessary for the ideological liberation of humanity not simply to reject certain religions, but rather to “detest all of the gods”\textsuperscript{18} for their general ideological function. As Max Raphael explains, “each ideological domain, despite its relative autonomy, is connected to other ideological domains by its first cause:”\textsuperscript{19} the dominant power of those with the means to production. At the same time, the variable of religion exists along the Hegelian-Marxist narrative of history; religion interacts with, influences, coheres with, and conflicts with itself, with capitalism, with politics, with its believers and with its dissenters. The history of power and the history of struggle are imbedded deeply into the ideological components of religion, which, at its base, functioned as a means of disseminating the dogmatic interpellation of power structures long before the advent of television, cinema, and before the advent of the printed word. “Reasoning about history is inseparably reasoning about power.”\textsuperscript{20}

Debord’s general criticism of “religion” drew from the Hegelian-Marxist historical narrative of world religions. For Marx, the concept of religion as a general theme was deeply inspired by Feuerbach’s \textit{Essence of Christianity}: religion,” Feuerbach proposed, can be treated as a general “anthropological” subject,\textsuperscript{21} but, as Marx qualifies, it also must be seen in relation to the historical narrative of class struggle, revolution, dissent, and dialectical change. Religion must be seen not simply as a material anthropological science, but also as a construct that can be changed and eventually superseded. While the general “anthropology” of “religion” is important, Christianity and its history is the specific focus of this paper because, as Debord argues in \textit{The Society of the Spectacle}, the spectacle embodies many specifically Christian tendencies, and it has a recent Christian lineage. Just as the spectacle extends from particular regional focal points of power, the dominant power in the history of religion became the dominance of the Judeo-Christian project, especially through the domination of capitalism, which developed in Western Europe, whose nexus existed in the primarily
Christian United States and the historically Eastern Orthodox CCCP. Thus, while broader issues of interpellation, ideology, power, and mystification encompass all religious trajectories, the more specific dominant trend of the development of Christianity is most relevant to the development of the spectacle. This chapter will consider the Marxist critiques of religion in *The Society of the Spectacle* (book) and Debord’s notes. I will begin to situate Debord’s understanding of the history of religion, his vision of its supersession, and the emergence of the spectacle as the dominant means of ideological production in the modern age in the context of the history of dominant ideological production.

**Despotic Religion**

The most ancient form of the religious structure isn't specifically Christianity, but ancient despotism, wherein society, science, and religious beliefs were interchanged without question. Debord shows the spectacle as the expansion of capitalist ideology as replacing archaic despotism, of Catholicism, and of Protestantism. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord begins the meta-narrative of religion with the caveat that modern historiography regards previous societies as one-dimensionally, mythically religious, often without much regard for the social role of religion, the connection between religion and the state, or how those relationships shape general historical trajectories. Power and exploitation are often not considered, or are left merely as footnotes to mythical civilization.

History deploys itself and succumbs separately, leaving the underlying society unchanged precisely because this history remains separated from the common reality. This is why we reduce the history of Oriental empires to the history of religions: the chronologies which have fallen to ruins left no more than the apparently autonomous history of the illusions which enveloped them. The masters who make history their private property, under the protection of myth, profess first of all a private ownership over the mode of illusion: in China and Egypt they long held a monopoly over the immortality of the soul, just as their famous early dynasties are imaginary arrangements of the past.22

The religious ideological illusions of society were historically governed by their governmental structures, but ancient religions and despotic systems of control are represented in modern
historiography as autonomous entities. Debord’s knowledge of Chinese and Egyptian civilizations comes partly from his reading of Karl Wittfogel’s *Oriental Despotism*, who argues the interdependence and collaboration of ancient states and dominant religions:

The hydraulic state, which permitted neither relevant independent military nor propriety leadership, did not favor the rise of independent religious power… Nowhere in hydraulic society did the dominant religion place itself outside the authority of the state as a nationally (or internationally) integrated autonomous church.\(^{23}\)

**Medieval Heresies**

All the way up until the Middle Ages, from Babylon to Greece to Rome, religion and state were one and thus any opposition was quashed as a political threat. However, dissidents always existed and, according to Hegel, dissidents are the force that move historical dialectics forward. Debord takes interest in the early Christian heresies of the in the 12\(^{th}\) and 13\(^{th}\) Centuries. The Cathars are sometimes seen as a point of origin for the transition from Catholic theology to first Arthurian legend and, later, to Protestantism. Debord wrote the following quote in his notes from *La Genese de la Pensée Moderne* by Marcel Jean and Arpad Mezei:

Luther did not possess the major heresies we speak of who, in wanting to approach the generality identified with the sacred and the profane; the inheritor is does better who otherwise would have searched the salutation directly connected to a gap: the Cathars. The Cathar heresies opposed the absolute manner in which two worlds, the profane world as well as the less assimilated to Lucifer the same German doctrines concurrent with a real autonomy outside of the sacred. Certainly, Luther affirmed that grace could touch some parts of this reality. However, the idea of predestination constituted the organic concept of the solar myth of the Round Table, Christianized in the Middle Ages in the novels of the cycles of Arthur by a tradition which is certainly Cathar in its origin.\(^{24}\)

The Cathars, also known as the “Albigenses,” of 11\(^{th}\) Century Southern France criticized Roman Catholic beliefs by attesting that Christ was not a man, but a ghost, and that there were in fact two Gods: a God of good and an opposing God of evil, much like later Protestant notions of Satan.\(^{25}\) The Catholic Church crusaded against the Cathars until mere vestiges of Cathar beliefs remained.
Scholars like Norman Cohn, however, have aligned themselves with the argument of Marcel Jean that the Cathar critique informed the Protestant Reformation, as certain themes of the Cathar heresy are also present in the rhetoric of the Protestant Reformation.

The Cathars were interested in the Apocalyptic, God as eternal and omnipotent, and the “making” of a trajectory of history which allows no room for free will. In *The Peasant Uprising in Germany*, Friedrick Engels identifies a connection between heretical mystics like the Cathars and the Protestant Reformation in the thought that influenced a peasant uprising attributed to Thomas Müntzer. Engels saw Müntzer as not just simply a polemical theologian, but a social revolutionary for peasants:

The revolutionary opposition to feudalism was alive throughout all the Middle Ages. According to conditions of the time, it appeared either in the form of mysticism, as open heresy, or of armed insurrection. As mysticism, it is well known how indispensable it was for the reformers of the Sixteenth Century. Müntzer himself was largely indebted to it. The heresies were partly an expression of the reaction of the patriarchal Alpine shepherds against the encroachments of feudalism of the cities that had out-grown it (The Albigenses [Cathars], Arnold of Brescia, etc.), and partly direct insurrections of peasants.

In *The Peasant Uprising in Germany*, Engels demonstrates that Medieval and Renaissance social revolt was necessarily heretical, because religion and government structures were inextricably intertwined.

Under such conditions, all general and overt attacks on feudalism, in the first place attacks on the church, all revolutionary, social and political doctrines, necessarily became theological heresies. In order to be attacked, existing social conditions had to be stripped of their aureole of sanctity.

Debord extends Engels’ interpretation of the peasant uprising associated with Thomas Müntzer. Belief in a coming apocalypse led Müntzer to advocate for a revolt against the Catholic Church was necessary for the liberation of the peasant class. Debord writes in *The Society of the Spectacle*:

The social revolt of the millenarian peasantry defines itself naturally first of all as a will to destroy the Church. But millenarianism spreads in the historical world, and not on the terrain of myth. Modern revolutionary expectations are not irrational continuations of the religious passion of millenarianism, as Norman Cohn thought he had demonstrated in *The Pursuit of the*
Millennium. On the contrary, it is millennialism, revolutionary class struggle speaking the language of religion for the last time, which is already a modern revolutionary tendency that as yet lacks the consciousness that it is only historical.  

Norman Cohn’s *The Pursuit of the Millennium* argues that “popular eschatology” of the Cathars, such as Engels' analysis, which was informed by Müntzer, envisioned mystical peasants as socially radical, but, in fact, the Cathars they had no intention to forward the interests of the peasant class. Müntzer crusaded against the “unbelievers” as “Christ’s messenger.” He spoke of “becoming Christ” and hoped to “usher in the New Millennium.” To say that such belief is inherently socially radical is to disregard Müntzer's own arguments, wherein he sees his mission as other worldly; a mission wherein death is a side-effect or even a necessity for change, and the interests of believers, not necessarily peasants, rested in their belief in God, not in worldly interests. However, we nevertheless can see some argumentative similarities to revolutionary thinking, and, if we step back from the primary arguments into the context, the believers, in Müntzer's case, primarily ended up being peasants, and their revolt for the new millennium was a revolt against an existing, oppressive order. Thus, Debord sees millennialist thinking as “revolutionary class struggle speaking the language of religion for the last time, which is already a modern revolutionary tendency that as yet lacks the consciousness that it is only historical.” Class struggle in history would continue—there is no final utopia or heaven on earth.

The connection between heretical struggle against predominant religion and revolutionary struggle is anything but a new idea; in fact, it's classically Marxist. But I'm not referring necessarily to Utopian idealism—rather the idea that, in order to subvert ideologies, it only makes strategic sense to find replacements for them. We certainly see this in early Christianity, when Pagan traditions are détourned, and in the French Revolution, when martyrs like Marat replace the Pieta, when Socrates and Jesus become conflated icons of enlightenment thought. But lets consider how Marx analyzes this historical phenomenon. People often consider Marx and Engels as believers in a secular, proletarian utopia...perhaps there are indicators of such thinking in *The German Ideology*, but both concede that
the nature of society in the future is difficult to pinpoint. Nevertheless, it's difficult to not consider Marx's détournement of religious thinking when he speaks of “bringing heaven to earth” in The German Ideology, and when, in On the Jewish Question, he highlights the Jewish community, if secularized, as the ideal avant-garde for revolution and for dissent against Christian nations.

Millenarianism has medieval roots—and heretical roots—but continued to be a potent trend in the majority of Protestant sects and ideas. And, really, what better representation of the legacy of millenarian Protestantism than Hegel's Philosophy of History? Or the humanist trends in Protestantism represented by Feuerbach's The Essence of Christianity? Debord points out that the Protestant aspirations for access to the world of the Last Judgment, which is Hegel's eternal End of History, function similarly to capitalism in that it predicates its power on the desire for the infinite. Debord writes:

In Reformation Christianity the form of increased capital is actually inverted in religious thought and becomes a countdown: the hope of access to the genuine other world before time runs out, the expectation of the last Judgment. Eternity came out of cyclical time and is beyond it. Eternity is the element which holds back the irreversibility of time, suppressing history within itself by placing itself on the other side of irreversible time as a pure punctual element to which cyclical time returned and abolished itself.31

Thus, Debord proceeds to connect the rise of Protestantism with the rise of capital and the spectacle. The spectacle similarly imagines an ideal world based on real longings; it imagines the end of history which is beyond cyclical time, and its representation makes the longings it represents the unfulfillable, like a dream of “earthly paradise.” Debord attests that the difference between millenarian thinking and revolutionary thinking is that millenarian thinking is that it is focused on the infinite, which is a distant judgment, rather than contemporary struggle.

It is millenarianism, revolutionary class struggle speaking the language of religion for the last time which is already a modern revolutionary tendency that as yet lacks the consciousness that it is only historical. The millenarians had to lose because they could not recognize the revolution as their own operation...The peasant class could not attain an adequate consciousness
of the functioning of society or of the way to lead its own struggle: because it lacked these conditions unity in its action and consciousness, it expressed its project and led its wars with the imagery of an earthly paradise.32

Hegel and especially Feuerbach viewed Christology as a means of understanding God’s manifestation in man, with a particular focus on the historical Christ, in order to empower the “Phenomenology of Spirit” of real human beings in real historical eras. Feuerbach entirely secularizes Hegel’s Christology in his «Introduction” to Principles of the Philosophy of the Future with an explanation of the Reformation as a progressive move toward humanism that undermines the mystical externalization of God through its focus on the humanity of Christ (which, in a way, we can see as derived from Kierkegaard's paradox—and Kierkegaard also plays a role in Debord's thinking):

The God who is man, that is to say the human God, Christ, this is and only this is the God of Protestantism. Unlike Catholicism, Protestantism is no longer concerned with what God is in himself, but only with what he is for man…It [Protestantism] has ceased to be theology—it is essentially Christology; that is, religious anthropology.33

Similarly, the shift from Catholic ideological dominance to spectacular dominance was a shift from an ideological focus on the invisible, extraterrestrial to the visible, terrestrial. Thus, changes in dominant ideology and its progression exist as parts of the same general historical trend which leads to both the rise of Protestantism and the rise of the spectacle.

The historical progression toward humanism was primarily driven by the development 19th and early 20th century capitalism, which developed simultaneously and permeated all sectors of life, including Protestant ideology with the introduction of texts such as The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism by Max Weber. Engels called the Reformation the “first bourgeois revolution in religious disguise.”34 Capitalism, like religion, has a mystifying, magical, transsubstantiative power that was difficult to see and understand with its inception: The commodity's domination was at first exerted over the economy in an occult manner; the economy itself, the material basis of social life, remained unperceived and not understood, like the familiar that is not necessarily known.35 It is through magic and mystification that the specialization of power is able
to exert itself, and it was this developing force with which the progress of capitalist society and the power of Protestantism contended, as we especially see in 18th and 19th Century German writing, most prominently in the writings of Hegel and Marx. Marx considers the contemporaneously established structural correspondence between Protestantism and capitalism:

In the form of paper the monetary existence of commodities is only a social one. It is Faith that brings salvation. Faith in money-value as the immanent spirit of commodities, faith in the mode of production and its predestined order, faith in the individual agents of production as mere personifications of self-expanding capital. 36

While the dominant power shifted from Catholicism to Protestantism and secular humanism, this was neither a complete break nor an erasure of historical Catholicism. The spectacle, similarly, is not a complete erasure or a break from the historical trajectory of dominant power, which previously existed in the religious sphere. The spectacle is the product of historical religious conflicts in ideology, representation, and power. It is a modern development with strong dependencies on past and even archaic expressions of desire, magic, myth, mystification, icon, morality, and the backdrop which binds them all together, power, which Debord calls “the oldest social specialization.” 37 In the next chapters, I outline some of the ancient vestiges that manifest in modern ideology in order to provide a historical lineage, not of breaks, but of dialectical progressions, while still articulating historical changes.

**Magic & Mysticism in Contemporary Thought**

Debord writes in his notes on Henri Lefebvre’s *Trois Epigraphes* ½:

Myths? We cannot completely eliminate them. (...) Magic has been reinvented in the imaginary, which maintains certain (but not all) characteristics of magic: communication and communion, (...) enunciation and resurrection of that which no longer exists, the insertion of man in the universe.38vii

The spectacle is a “reinvention” of archaic magic; it thrives on the realization of the imaginary and it creates a communion of modern peoples around unified representations and invocations of dominant
ideology. Television becomes the means of disseminating icons and ideology; television becomes the modern ritual, the modern mass, through which myths resurrect the past and stagnate the present. The cultural production of reverence for the ideological forms of high art and the avant-garde tends to fulfill the same role of mystification and mysticism. In *Internationale Situationniste #1*, the Situationists criticize the so-called rebels of the American beatniks and Angry Young Men for their archaic mysticism:

The rotten egg smell exuded by the idea of God envelops the mystical cretins of the American ‘Beat Generation,’ and is not even entirely absent from the declarations of the Angry Young Men.

In *Internationale Situationniste #2*, John Cage is accused of “Californian Buddhism.” Problematic approaches to Debord such as the writings of Ken Knabb see no issue in discussing Zen Buddhism and peaceful Occupy protests next to his translations of Guy Debord and accounts of his attempts to create situations, evidencing Debord’s claims that American radical movements of the 20th Century have tended toward Eastern religious mysticism. But the specifically American art world and avant-garde movements certainly do not provide the only evidences of religious affiliation in the spectacle:

*Situationniste Internationale #2* also accuses the contemporary French art critic, Michel Tapié, of being a “secret agent of the Vatican,” calling the reader to remember that traditionally France is specifically Catholic, a history that permeates modern French art and formalist traditions.

And so, as Debord argues in *The Society of the Spectacle*, the ancient is at once modern. Through dialectical progressions of history, we don't erase the past—it's built upon, for better or worse. Vestiges of even the most ancient despotism exist in the fact that its hard for us to even recognize distinctions between modern myth, modern reality; the state and the spectacular—they are all inextricably linked; they are beautifully homogenized through funding requirements, spectacular mandates like the Marshall Plan, wherein a certain percentage of projected films in France had to be
American, through the Celebrity Commodity, through our manipulated perception of time regarding the workday and otherwise, consumption, vacation, the things that we're prescribed to like, literal prescriptions from psychiatry to medicine...How could we even hope to separate ourselves from this world that's driven by all of the same motivators (power and capital) when it permeates the entire structure of our existence? Wittfogel argued a similar construct for ancient despotism. But is our current world so different? Raoul Vaneigem in *The Movement of the Free Spirit* addresses Debord's thoughts on how the modern is at once ancient, and how the present has not progressed toward Hegelian, abstract lucidity, but rather perpetuates ancient relics and systems of control:

No previous era, however clouded by its unavoidable confusions, has more successfully propagated the idea that everything rides on the present moment...Today the modernist spirit prophesies its own glorious annihilation, followed by a state of ultimate lucidity, when it will continue to dominate the relics of the material world...Economics has been the most durable lie of the approximately ten millennia mistakenly accepted as history. From it stem all those eternal truths and sacred causes that have governed master and slave alike.
Chapter 2: 
**The Spectacle is the Inheritor of the Religious Illusion**

The Cathedral in the Modern City

Gothic and Neoclassical cathedrals have a prominent presence in Debord's films, particularly in *The Society of the Spectacle* and *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni*. *In Girum* chooses two Parisian cathedrals, the Enlightenment Neoclassical temple of the Panthéon and the Gothic cathedral, Église St-Eustache, Notre Dame, the St-Germain-des-Près, in the context of the urbanism that surrounds them. An aerial pan glazes over the urban topography around the Panthéon and Église St-Eustache while Debord discusses the pre-Haussmannian Paris they governed. Panthéon literally means “all of the gods,” that is, in this context, the perfect representation of the general approach to “religion.” Debord cuts between the Panthéon and Église St-Eustache while explaining their relevance and relation with the voiceover:

Liars were in power, as always (Figure 1); but economic development had not yet given them the same means to lie about everything, or to confirm their lies by falsifying the actual content of all production. One would have been astonished then to find printed or built in Paris all the books that have since been composed of cement and asbestos, and all the buildings that have since been built out of dull sophisms (Figure 2), as one would be today to see the sudden reappearance of a Donatello or a Thucydides...I shall thus limit myself to a few words to announce that, whatever others may say about it, Paris no longer exists. The destruction of Paris is only one striking example of the fatal illness that is currently wiping out all the major cities, and that illness is in turn only one of the numerous symptoms of the material decay of this society. But Paris had more to lose than any other. Bliss it was to be young in this city when for the last time it glowed with so intense a flame.

Debord indicates in his notes that these lines détourn a discussion between Cacciaguida and Dante in Dante’s *Paradise*. Cacciaguida foretells Dante’s exile and solitude due to Dante’s polemical and political writings, which perhaps resonated with Debord’s self-exile in Champot during the time he was creating *In Girum*. Cacciaguida reflects on the Florence past of the as a happier time, before corruption and decay: “Florence, within her ancient limit-mark,/Which calls her still to matin prayers and noon,/was chaste and sober, and abode in peace.” Debord
essentially uses this concept of the chaste, peaceful city as an illustration of the façade that the liars in power have always used to curb the desires of the masses; to make them chaste, sober, and peaceful. Instilling a sense of nostalgia and reverence for the past that would allow timeless stagnation to exert its control. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord calls this a “frozen” society (*Black & Red.*)

Nevertheless, Debord is nostalgic for the old Paris, but not because it was chaste or sober—more of the opposite. As Debord describes the placidity of modern Paris, which is not so different from old Paris, he shows us the Vatican. It makes sense, given the Catholic history of France; it especially makes sense given the fact that Debord indicates that Dante's exile from Rome is on his mind. Here is the peaceful, sober, chaste Rome in *Paradiso*. It's remained, it seems, just as peaceful to this day. Things carry on with or without Dante or his ancestors (Cacciaguida.) The same religious buildings rule the urban landscape. But, at the same time, such placidity is a sign of imminent decay:

![Image of Paris](image-url.com)

*Figure 1: Guy Debord, Brigitte Cornand, Alice Debord, and Olivier Assayas, "In Cirum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni," *Guy Debord, Œuvres Cinématographiques Complètes*, Œuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Paris: Gaumont Video, 2005.*

But, at the same time, Debord says that Paris had something to lose, and it wasn't always this serene vision of rotting, old sophisms. First of all, compared to modern grid structures, cities like Paris were disorganized and unplanned, and spectacular capital had far from reached its fruition. The center of Paris, instead of being a historical center wherein cotemporary bourgeois power and capital reigned, was in fact poor, its culture was not dictated entirely by dominant powers, and the poor were not forced
to leave the center-city each day to travel to satellite suburbs. As a result of the diffusion of power, there was more potential for concentrated radicalism through the construction of barricades in the narrow streets and through the concentrated congregation of the working class. It clearly would have been easier to defend a barricade before Haussmann widened and organized city streets, as was evident in the successes of French Revolution, but also in the general relationships between the poor. It would have been easier to “go to the streets” during, say, the Russian Revolution, which wasn't based on a grid; which existed before surveillance and recording...Past revolutions existed before the modern developments and centralization of the police force. And so the aspects of the ancient that remain in modern society are aspects of power, but that power has increased, and, in fact, the assets to the old world have dissipated. It is actually the peacefulness of the modern world that is the greatest reason to be nostalgic. Debord's invocation of Dante is ironic, but a clever means of wrestling with nostalgia, with what the modern world has inherited, and with decay. Debord describes his nostalgia for the

In Girum:

The Paris of that time, within the confines of its twenty districts, was never entirely asleep; on any night a bacchanal might shift from one neighborhood to another, then to another and yet another. Its inhabitants had not yet been driven out and dispersed. A people remained who had barricaded their streets and routed their kings a dozen times. They were not content to subsist on images. When they lived in their own city no one would have dared to make them eat or drink the sort of products of adulteration had not yet dared to invent. The houses in the center were not yet deserted, or resold to cinema spectators born elsewhere, under other exposed-beamed roofs. The modern commodity system had not yet fully demonstrated what can be done to a street. The city planners had not yet forced anyone to travel far away to sleep.47

Despite the positive qualities of living in pre-Haussmannian Paris, what remains, Debord demonstrates, are cathedrals and art (Donatellos): icons of ideology. The mythical monumentality of these cathedrals in modern historiography parallels the modern mythical conceptions of ancient Egypt and China, which, as Wittfogel asserts, are known now for religious monuments and not for social struggles. Monumentality enforces remembrance through architectural arguments, and architecture exists as an emulation of past icons in order to extend the accumulation of power administrations had not fully
realized in their own time through repetition, enforced memory, and nostalgia. Cathedrals were organized, ritualistic spaces wherein ideology controlled movement, action, and thought; where the silent masses were organized by class to listen to words to which they were not allowed to respond or refute. This interior plan of the cathedral extended from and outside of the cathedral with the advent of urban planning. The liturgy structure that was once interior to the church's highly effective, spatially narrative interior architecture expanded outside of the interior of the church space to the street, first through Haussmann’s urban planning through planned mechanisms of spatial control, and then through the both spacial and ideological narrative the proliferation of images, which now do not simply occupy cathedral walls, but they are deeply imbedded in the urban landscape. It is this religious ideology and organization that was preserved, remembered, extended, and revered, making the image of past Paris an image of dominant power and submission rather than recalling the bacchanals. Debord shows the remaining cathedrals as centers of gravitation for the city plan that reverently framed the cathedrals long after their inception as evidence that cathedrals gained power in the development of the city plan over time. In Potlatch #23, Debord argues that, in the event of a revolution, these churches should not be repurposed or their ideological history and power would remain. Instead, all “religious buildings” would have to be destroyed:

G. –E. Debord argued for the complete demolition of religious buildings of all denominations. (No trace should remain of them and their sites should be used for other purposes.)

Modern ideology continues to frame the historical role of cathedrals as formalist accomplishments in art. Gothic architecture and imagery, which functioned as a concentrated power, are given the title “art” as a rearticulation of its original mystical, sacred reverence. This connection exists so fluidly because the origin of the modern concept of art is in the sacred. In a letter to Constant, Debord explains the travesty of the modern design of cathedrals in avant-garde groups, and the Catholic quality of the tendency toward mystical formalism:
It is obvious that their excuse (indifference to destination, within the general problem of a model of a church) is extremely criticizable, not only from the point of view of Unitary Urbanism, but even from that of classical urbanism. We risk falling back into a kind of art-for-art's-sake, into free-formalism; a little like the ideology of the [International Movement for an] Imaginist Bauhaus, if the secret Catholicism of Simondo had dominated it more than he actually did!49

The historiography of cathedrals is a combination of history and myth: history, which most often becomes another word for the concentration of dominant political power, and myth, which is another word for distraction from material reality in order to concentrate ideological dominance. Thus, history and myth compose the spine supporting the modern approach to the reverence toward images —“art in the most general sense.”50 Debord writes in his notes on Lewis Mumford:

Art: all antiquity is in every way a concentration of human powers. The age-old specialization of power. But it [art] was in fact a sacred specialization. The history of sight was religion and it was at the same time historical and mythical. The modern specialization of profanity is our collective passivity.51

While the structures of the modern city are in conversation with their ancient past, the ancient past continues to articulate its adjustable presence in the modern world, through the material renovation of places of worship into modern architectural forms with modern carpets and through the adoption of spectacular political platforms and means of disseminating information by contemporary religious sects. For example, in the case of modern religious buildings such as those of Le Corbusier, who Debord mentioned in his letter to Constant. “The modern is also the most archaic,” while the most archaic also attempts to exist as the most modern. Debord demonstrates this point in The Society of the Spectacle with the image of the interior of a modern building inside of which a congregation is organized around a cross-formation, resembling a traditional church. The crowd looks in the same direction, toward the viewer, who is given thereby given the position of power. A man in uniform facilitates the event at the raised, altar-like center. This image is coupled with a voice-over of Debord saying “the modern is also the most archaic,” (below) drawing a comparison between ancient, religious
congregations and modern mechanisms for organizing people for the purposes of concentrating ideological power.

In another scene in *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord comments on the cathedral as a literal framework for the evolution of capitalist overproduction and consumerism in an image of the entrance to a cathedral frames a pile of discarded wooden crates and, in the foreground, cars (below).
In this film, Debord furthermore asserts that contemporary politics maintains its archaic connections to religious organizations, where he shows a navy ceremony being led by both an officer and a clergy member (below).

Similarly, near the end of *In Girum*, Debord blatantly communicates his methods of visual comparison between the old world of religion and new, frailer, modern structures, often which imply construction by framing the tower of a Cathedral precisely within two support structures for construction (Figure 6).
Connections between religion and the state are furthered when Debord considers the historical connection between religious buildings and palaces. Debord writes in his notes on Wittfogel, “Giant palaces express a life reserved for masters (the domination of one.) Temples, however, express the illusion which guarantees this life.” In other words, places of worship function to secure power ideologically while the actual power which is secured exists in its own removed and unquestioned space. In the modern era, image dissemination secures the mysterious and often unrevealed actions and lifestyles of imperialists and exploitative industries (all industries under capitalism wherein power is hierarchically concentrated are exploitative industries.) However, the irony of the ideological structures of the palace and the temple is that their ideological content is minimal—it is merely the proliferation of existing power—and the material that ensures it is maximal in financial input, in repetition, in size; in other words, in monumentality. Debord quotes Wittfogel in his notes, “[Monumentality] is the aesthetic effect obtained through the minimum of ideas and the maximum of material.” Debord adds, “This here is excellent for the architecture of The Society of the Spectacle, which approaches the ‘material’ at the cost of the human being
in order to apply rigid technocratic power.” Size and density indicate power more so than a complexity of ideas; the less conceptual the monument, the more universally it can exert its power and, therefore, the more monumental it becomes.

**Icons: Religious and Spectacular**

According to Debord and Wittfogel, while, since ancient times, temples and palaces have both been architectural centers of political control, temples were given the task of legitimating the power of the palace, and, specifically, the king, “the domination of one.” The king was seen as the real, terrestrial bodily connection between abstract ideology and the material world—essentially, the Jesus; the human representation of ideology. In his own notes on Marx, Debord quoted Marx’s notes on Hegel to make this very point:

> Political constitution up until this point has been of the religious sphere, the heaven of its universality, vis-à-vis the terrestrial existence of its reality (…) And it gives the impression of being mystical and profound (…) but how do we determine the difference between one person and others? Their body. And the highest function of the body is its sexual activity. The highest constitutional act of the king is his sexual activity, through which he makes a king and perpetuates his body.

Drawing from this quotation, it would seem logical to conclude that the strongest connection between the real desire of human beings and the control of the spectacle is sexual desire and, through that sexual desire, the perpetuation of authority as derived from representations of physical bodies. As far back as Plato, we can see that the consolidated power of the leader of the Republic was seen to be most successful if that leader was sexually attractive. The contemporary spectacle’s emphasis on the female nude and sexual ecstasies perpetuates its power through realizing unattainable desires and, often, through transference. Similarly, Catholicism’s concept of the “body of Christ” is at once an abstract corporation and a literal body consumed through transubstantiation and communion which thereby physically enters into the bodies and minds of the participants. It asks them to relate and to let Jesus
into their bodies through literal consumption. Catholic crucifixion icons and paintings display the full-length nude at once in its reifying humiliation, its sexual power in its strength and vulnerability, and, especially in Northern Renaissance and 19th-century painting, its orgasmic religious ecstasy. While the king would literally produce sons from his physical lineage who were most often acclaimed for traits like their kingly noses, Christ’s body perpetuates its kingly lineage through repetition of the same image at the altar of almost every church, metaphorically impregnates mystics, and marries the church in its entirety, which is the “bride of Christ.” One of the most notable aspects of the religious icon is its consistent and intentional similarity with other icons of its region and time. The spectacle, too, is iconic in its repetition of tropes and forms which articulate its bodily power and perpetuate its seemingly material body in order to seduce its public. While the spectacle is not an individual, and it is not the “domination of one,” it thrives on repetitive simplicity of form and content which seduces through the schematized physical features of women. Debord writes in *The Society of the Spectacle*, “The fetishism of commodities reaches moments of fervent exaltation similar to the ecstasies of the convulsions and miracles of the old religious fetishism. The only use which remains here is the fundamental use of submission.”

Another identifier of the tradition of the traditional icon is the flattening of the image and its removal from space, often with a black background. Debord demonstrates the presence of the same rhetorical methods and fetishistic (of both the religious meaning and the sexual meaning) forms of the religious icon in the spectacle with stills in *The Society of the Spectacle*, including a still of his wife, Alice Becker-Ho (below).
We see the presentation of the nude body through the extension of the arms in the same form as crucifixion paintings. For example, the composition and the visual rhetoric of this image are strikingly similar to Francisco Goya’s crucifixion painting, and, given Debord’s affinity for the works of Goya discussed in Panegyric, may even be the inspiration. In Goya’s Christ (below), it is clear that Goya’s emphasis is on the physical body of the dying Christ in religious ecstasy, and even the physical form of the cross dissolves into the black, empty background.
Crucifixion paintings depict undying, infinite godliness at a moment of death, and, especially in nineteenth-century romanticism as in Goya’s image, crucifixion paintings became a platform for depicting the terrible beauty and sublimity of the grotesque. In the most general considerations of representation, all representations of human beings portray the undying dominant power of the past, making the icon of the crucifixion especially appropriate to the function of spectacular ideology. Like Roland Barthes’s commentary on the photograph of Lewis Payne before his execution, “He is dead and he is going to die,” crucifixion paintings such as Goya’s leave the viewer with the constant impression, “He is dead and he is going to die”—Christ is at his last breath. At the same time, these images tell us, “He is dead and he is going to live forever” through resurrection and through the immortality of art, which is the formula through which all reactionary dogma proliferates itself. It is through this formula that the modern remains the most archaic. This idea of death as religious ideology, manifests in art as well: art is always a product of ideas and creation that are already past for the artist; the work of art is a vestige of what was. Thus, the final product of art is inherently dead and colorless:

When art becomes independent, depicting its world in dazzling colors, a moment of life has grown old and it cannot be rejuvenated with dazzling colors. It can only be evoked as a memory. The greatness of art begins to appear only at the dusk of life.58

Contrary to this inherent lifelessness of art, it is by framing his wife, Alice, within the constructs of historical religious art, that Debord mimics and parodies the old. He uses the structure of old ideas and invokes them in a representation of what is most dear to him. This is how, throughout history, art has worked—through reusing old ideas. It is how the spectacle envelops us: we see what we love most within the context of what we've been conditioned to revere. But it is also, perhaps, a means of reclaiming the virility of our individual day-to-day lives. This is integral to the principle of the “revolution of everyday life.” But this is also a parody that demonstrates a reliance on the iconic to
invoke reverence and sexual sensation. Raoul Vaneigem, who wrote *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, calls the dominance of archaic language as the language of people who have “corpses in their mouths.” This phrase both humanizes the language of the dominant past and alludes to that fact that it is a grotesquely revered corpse, an illustration which is similar to Goya’s Christ; Vaneigem says, “We have the drool of Jesus Christ upon our lips.” 59

The icon of the cross also appears in *In Girum* as a jeweled pendant around the neck of a dancing young woman (probably Michèle Bernstein) (below).

The camera scrutinizes the moving body of the woman, beginning with her legs, and slowly moves up her torso to her head. Debord thus reinforces the theme of the cross as sexualized, as in the dedication to Alice at the beginning of *The Society of the Spectacle* (*film*). The voiceover uses general terms to explain the scene as part of an allegory for Debord’s time in the Situationist International:

It is commonplace that even in periods shaken by momentous changes, even the most innovative people have a hard time freeing themselves from many outdated ideas and tend to retain at least a few of them, because they find it impossible to totally reject, as false and worthless, assertions that are universally accepted. 60
The outdated ideas referenced in the visual component of the sequence are Christianity and the spectacular necessity to express feminine sexuality by putting the body on display through dance. In the two images below, frames from In Girum, we see the connection between spectacular seduction and the iconic cross.

The architectural use of intersecting posts and lintels as support structures make the shape of a cross in Debord’s films. In *The Society of the Spectacle (film)*, Debord emphasizes this post and lintel form as the crux of the most basic and banal components of modern architecture, such as cranes, fences, and telephone poles. These modern crosses are presented monumentally in their simplicity. A shot of a ship’s mast is reminiscent of the three-barred Russian Orthodox cross. Debord pushes its silhouette to the front of the composition and dissolves the background into a mystical mist. The Eastern Orthodox cross became a prominent image in photography of World War II, depicting the graves of dead Soviets.
as well as through its appearances in Soviet cinema—perhaps here Debord refers to the use of old icons in cinema. Perhaps the sense of a graveyard also comes into play through the general repetition of the cross. In *In Girum*, Debord draws the connection between the cross image and consumer society, comparing both to a “graveyard,” by taking a traveling shot that moves from a cross on the top of the tower of the St.-Germain-des-Près, down to the entrance of the cathedral, across the street to the famous café, Les Deux Magots, then across the street again to a pharmacy, which is represented by a glowing cross (below).
This green cross is perhaps the one of the most common street signs in Paris. Debord perhaps compares this cross, this famous yet stereotypical historic artist’s café and the St.-Germain-des-Près cathedral to a graveyard as well as a place of general reverence for artists—reverence for the quarter, not just for the cathedral that gave the quarter its name—the Saint-Germain-des-Près was specific area Debord inhabited, and, it seems through his references to the area in Howls for Sade, revered at one point in his life at least. The green cross also makes a prominent appearance in Isou’s Treatise on Venom and Eternity as the protagonist, Daniel, walks the streets of the St-Germain-des-Près.

Debord indicates that the architecture in The Society of the Spectacle intends to depict the triumph of the material structure of society over the human. We can begin to relate ourselves to the anthropomorphic yet alien form of the post and lintel in his films, superimposing ourselves on top of its structure as in a crucifixion. Through this exercise, the prevalent aesthetic of anti-human, alienating, bureaucratic sadism that exists at the heart of crucifixion paintings as well as at the heart of the alienating spectacle begins to reveal itself. Posts and lintels, symbols of support and rigid stability, organize and divide visual compositions into technocratic grids. Like modern society, the cross formation of posts and lintels of the crucifixion function as an example of the organization and rigidity of the formal, mechanical, and governmental structure at the cost of human life. Crosses are formed in a human shape, yet they are anti-humanist. In fact, the structure of the Christian cross became more humanized over time as it shifted from a crux commissa (capital “T”-shaped form) to a crux emissa (lowercase “t”-shaped form) which emphasizes the human form of head-arms-legs. Given his notes on Wittfogel, this is the message Debord wanted to give with regards to architecture and monumentality in The Society of the Spectacle: that the ‘material’ of the monumental was at the cost of the human being in order to apply rigid technocratic power. What could be more monumental than the idealized, towering, larger-than-life body iconic image of the dying Christ on the cross? At the same time, the posts and lintels that hold up society also represent ultimate architectural banality and the structure of
the past governing the present, just as the cross represents the relatable anti-humanist and inhuman authority of religion.

**Inspiration from Isou, the Messiah**

Isidore Isou, who was likely Debord’s greatest motivator in the early days when Debord was a member of the Lettrist group, blatantly encapsulated the sadistic, monumental, iconic and empowering nature of the cross in *Treatise on Venom and Eternity*. Isou identified his pseudonym, Isou, the artist as an immortalized manifestation of his work, detached from his individual being, as the Messiah of the Lettrist movement, which heralded the destruction of language as well as the realization of the historical progression of the novel from Proust to James Joyce. Here is a page from a collection of prints titled *The Journals of the Gods* wherein Isou created storyboards for biblical allegories which contained bestial, fantastical, explicit depictions of sex and violence:

![Page from Isou's Journals of the Gods](image)
Isou’s film manifesto, *Treatise on Venom and Eternity*, declared the necessity to violently scratch and destroy film stock in order to attack the film industry and to create dialectical conflict which would progress toward a “better future for humanity.” In this film, the scratches and the paint smears on the film stock are often clearly in the shape of crosses:

Isou’s flyer for Treatise on Venom and Eternity depicted a cross with embellishments, inside of which he formed the “I” in Isidore and in Isou, making his name and the cross one—which creates a three-barred Eastern Orthodox cross:
At one point, a painting of what appears to be Christ’s birth appears wherein a seemingly out-of-place and out-of-context women dance with hands on their hips. Some of the figures have halos and they appear to be in a manger, implying the traditional nativity scene with a Madonna and Child:

At another point in the film, a dark figure is surrounded by a bright Star of David, implying that it the figure radiates the power that religion and religious icons have indicated in the past. It also probably relates to the fact that Isou was born into a Jewish family:
The Modern Holy Family

Isou’s use of the primitivistic Madonna and child, the modern holy family, is a persistent recurrence in *In Girum*. In Debord’s film images are fixated around spectacular representations of the smiling, idyllic bourgeois family, which was the point of critique in Marx’s *The Holy Family*, where the connection between the religious icon of the family and the contemporary bourgeois family, in the figures’ placated, happy composure, is made clear. The persistent recurrence of a family seated on a large sofa obtains an iconic status which depends on our recognition of the image, its repetition throughout the film, and the long duration of the segment. Similarly, a spaceless, adorned image of a primitivistic modern Madonna and child opens the film as a reminder of the heavenly, distant aspiration expected of bourgeois men of capitalist society, as well as the reiteration of their power over the women and children controlled by the patriarchal structure of the traditional bourgeois family and the decadent commodities that are lavished on it, in this case, a large bed:
Debord also makes a blatant reference to religious icons in the trailer for In Girum wherein he presents a still image of what he calls a “Byzantine painting of God”:

The icon, filmed in black-and-white, depicts God the Father seated on a throne. God’s massive body and clothing fabric dominate the center of the composition. He looks directly at the viewer, calmly and knowingly, raising his right hand in a gesture of blessing. A quotation in typeface gives speech to this meditative, knowing, silent, still God on the film screen:

At the moment I created the world, I foresaw that one day Guy Debord would film In Girum which made me prefer to not create the world.— God. (Figure 20)
An icon of God the Father is a vision of ultimate organized and focused power. It floats in timeless space, the time-frame of an infinitely regressing circle which the world works around but the nature and identity of the inner circle and the rigidly upright, unmoving, and stoical God stays the same.

**Pseudo-Cyclical Time and Medieval Conceptions of Time**

In *The Society of the Spectacle (book and film)*, Debord defines this stagnating, imposed time “spectacular time,” wherein people work within ever-circulating schedules of assigned work hours and vacations. Schedules which impose control for people to never function outside of dominant powers, hierarchical and ideological, wherein work hours allow overproduction and vacation hours allow consumerist spending on things like movies and tourism. Ideology represents this scheduling as a universal good, just as previous religious ideologies like Roman Catholicism strove to exert its universal hierarchical and ideological powers as universal good—an ideology evident in the very definition of the word, “Catholicism.” The image of God, historically, was a representation of universal good and universal power as a human figure. God in art is given a human form and character. God, as a character, would not exist without his representation as a material, human being. Otherwise, God would simply be perceived as universal good or authority rather than an entity with which one could have a personal relationship. It is through interest in the physical body of God and, in the language of Catholicism, “the body of Christ,” that the medieval Catholic church and, in the case of the Byzantine icon, the Eastern Orthodox Church exerted their power, while hiding the societal benefactors of such representations—the aristocracy. Debord here draws an analogy with the modern spectacle as it similarly exerts the invisible authority of the bourgeoisie through idealized manifestations of the female body, in infinite youth and infinite progeny through the media of the television and the cinema, which Debord depicts in the photograph of Alice reenacting the crucifixion.
However, the concept of an all-powerful God does not seem to satisfy the reasons for using a specifically “Byzantine” icon in the trailer for In Girum. Debord was raised in a devout Catholic family in Italy, which perhaps problematizes the prominence of Eastern Orthodox imagery in his films. Perhaps the most reasonable hypothesis for Debord’s interest in Eastern Orthodox iconography is that it connects to the imagery, ideology, and context of the Russian/Soviet avant-garde. Debord expressed interest in Malevich’s work in Panegyric and Potlatch. The Black Square intended to replace the Eastern Orthodox icon in its shape, simplicity, and placement in the upper corner of a room, where traditional icons were placed. Malevich was also interested in the simplified, abstracted, powerful shape of the cross. Debord’s imageless film, Howls for Sade, included several transitions between completely black and completely white screens to emulate and supersede the aesthetic of Malevich’s Black Square and White Square. The iconoclasm of images in general also refers to the iconoclasm of specifically religious images, as in Malevich, thereby drawing the connection between religious icons and representation in general. The blankness of the icon of the square refers partly to Hegel’s End of History, which, for Hegel, is also the end of art and representation due to the culmination of the perfection of consciousness which needs no exteriorization. The black square is an iconoclastic negation of religion as well as a negation of representation in general.

Dreamed Paradise

In the analysis of religion and ideology in general, Debord looks to Freud, especially to The Interpretation of Dreams. He sees Freuds psychoanalysis not as a mere investigation into the mind and the self, but as political statements and analyses. Debord’s problematizing of Freud begins with a problematizing of Freuds spectrums of interior and exterior, pleasure and trauma, nightmare and paradise. For Debord, the guardian of the unconscious, the guardian of sleep, is not the preconscious, which only unleashes the unconscious in dreams and revealing language, but it is the spectacle, which at once keeps people asleep and shields them from understanding the underlying rhetoric and nature of
their perpetually unconscious being. In the spectacle, paradisical pleasure abounds, all that is good appears, all that appears is good; normativity and repression effectively sedate dreamers into accepting happiness. The multiple personalities of alienated work force individuals into a schizoid state, and, concurrent with Freuds definition of paranoia, realities of social relations, power relations, and oppression are intentionally unrecognized; reality is unrecognized because it has been shielded by the domination of illusion. And so madness is often prescribed incorrectly, when society is mad and the individual is merely looking for a means to detach from the collective dream. Marcuse is most likely in many ways the origin of these critiques, and I recommend watching the documentary *The Century of Self* for an outline of both Marcuse's political critiques and interpretations of Freud, as well as the use of Freudian psychology in the history of marketing (and the spectacle.)

Like Andrée Breton, Debord had a friend who he thought was victimized by the ills of psychiatry and, specifically, the sanitarium. This was not necessarily the fault of Freud, but it certainly must have come into play, personally, when Debord appropriated Marcuse's critiques. Debord's good friend, Ivan Chtcheglov, was declared mad and institutionalized for threatening to blow up the Eiffel Tower. Debords deep distress by the fact that Chtcheglov was declared mad most likely prompted his venture into diagnoses of madness, which historically have been common for revolutionary figures and those who resist normative social behavior, for those who want to change and destroy the normative along with the structure of society.

Freud writes a comparison between paradise, dreams, and infantilism in Chapter 5 of *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

In this age of childhood, in which the sense of shame is unknown, seems a paradise when we look back upon it later, and paradise, itself, is nothing but the mass-fantasy of the childhood of the individual. This is when in paradise men are naked and unashamed, until the moment arrives when shame and fear awaken; expulsion follows, and sexual and cultural development begin. Into this paradise, dreams can take us back every night.65
Freud interprets dreams as at once the space of the infantile shamelessness and unconscious manifestations of sexual desire, and, elsewhere in his writings, deviance. Most importantly, dreams are a space for the containment of desire. For Debord, the spectacle becomes a space for the containment of sexual and revolutionary desire, and for the prolonging of constrained, stagnant infantilism, as well as the loss of the potential adventurousness of youth. Similarly, Freud connects dreams to reality as a creation of reality, and of the desires for what reality could be. Dreams are paradisiac visions because they manifest wish fulfillment, but, at the same time, Freud hypothesizes that dreams are the scientific vehicle that allow the dreamer to remain asleep. Freud writes:

In a certain sense, all dreams are convenience—dreams; they serve the purpose of continuing to sleep instead of waking. The dream is the guardian of sleep, not its disturber.66

Freud later hypothesizes that the “result of the dream” is “censorship,” because dreams function as an internalization and a screened representation of desires. Debord combines Freud’s ideas of the “guardian of sleep” with repression and censorship in his reflection on Freud’s Interpretation of Dreams:

If we admit that the contents of dreams represent a created reality, and if the obscurity of its contents are the work of censorship which modifies and manifests repressed material, we can begin to determine the function of dreams. It is said that dreams are disruptions of sleep, but we conclude that dreams are the guardian of sleep.67

Repressive internalization and the continuation of sleep are the functions of the spectacle. Debord détourns Freud’s analysis of the dream as “the guardian of sleep” to explain the spectacle:

To the extent that necessity is dreamed, the dream becomes necessary. The spectacle is the nightmare of imprisoned modern society which ultimately expresses nothing more than its desire to sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of sleep.68

The irony is that this nightmare of imprisoned modern society frames itself as paradisiacal. Debord’s thesis just before the détournement of Freud’s guardian of sleep explains the descent of false religious concepts of paradise from a celestial beyond to the construction of existing society.
[The most earthly life] becomes opaque and unbreathable. It no longer projects into the sky but shelters within itself its absolute denial, its fallacious paradise. The spectacle is the technical realization of the exile of human powers into a beyond; it is the separation perfected within the interior of man. The “real world” of society is in fact a space for the manifestations of desires for power, such as the urban architecture of Haussmann, which is experienced by Parisians both in waking and in sleeping. The 1968 slogan from the Atelier Populaire explained, “There’s a policeman inside of all of our heads.” The experience and manifestations of exterior human desires in such architecture is primarily unconscious, making dreams and reality almost indistinguishable and equally unconscious, except for the potential imperfect, dialectical process of liberation of the conscious through demystification and revolution which cannot be superseded by one person or one generation. Similarly, the archaic religious dreams of paradise are imbedded into the interpellated unconscious of everyday life and, even after the long history of revolts against religious institutions, the vestiges of religious thinking and power remain. Debord quotes Diderot in his notes: “They told me that the veil is not destroyed in one day, and that I cannot remain convinced that I dreamed all that I did and that I did all that I dreamed.”

Debord argues that Freud’s dream-world is manifested in the spectacle, and that the dream-world of reality is, contrary to Surrealist arguments, the essence of non-liberation. André Breton and the French Surrealists, who were both credited with the birth the Lettrists, aimed for “the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory.” The Surrealists saw a connection between dreams and reality. They championed Freud’s dream-world and heralded its realization in the world beyond the dream. The moving images of the spectacle (for the Surrealists, of cinema) are compared to the mechanism of dreams through their cuts and manipulations of space. Luis Buñuel argues, “The cinema seems to be the involuntary imitation of the dream.” Such arguments come from the earliest approaches to film theory by the psychologist Hugo Münsterberg at the turn of the twentieth century, who described “the photoplay” of early cinema as a space wherein
“every dream becomes real, uncanny ghosts appear from nothing and disappear into nothing.” For Münsterberg and Buñuel, the photoplay “overcomes reality by fantasies and dreams,” but Debord argues that the spectacle provides visions of fantasies and dreams without allowing their fulfillment in reality.

However, in Debord’s films, as in Surrealist film, techniques of hypnotic stupor and juxtapositions that would be impossible in the real world make the film comparable to a dream. Debord argues that the spectacle uses similar rhetoric of hypnotic panoramas, for example, of spinning cars on pedestals and impossible juxtapositions in cuts, effects, breaks between programming and commercials, and the presence of idyllic images floating above a tranquilly hypnotized, sleeping world. Hypnosis, like the spectacle, intends to induce a dream-like state in order to sedate a patient and to manipulate or change the patient’s consciousness. Hypnosis allows an exterior creator of dreams. However, for those already thoroughly hypnotized by the modern spectacle, dreams become a combination of the imposed consciousness of hypnotic interpellation of the exterior and the instinctive, human reality of what Debord recognizes as real desire.

Unlike Breton, Debord and Freud agree that dreams are inherently repressive and unfulfilling. However, Debord and Breton are both interested in the social and political ramifications of Freud’s Interpretation of Dreams and the conflation between dream and reality. Debord argues that the external spectacle both mirrors and creates desires that would not have always existed originally: “to the extent that necessity is socially dreamed, the dream becomes necessary.”

Interestingly, Freud connects the unconscious and the history of religion, especially near the end of his life, in works like Moses and Monotheism, wherein Freud argues that religious allegories can be reduced to common psychological themes, like patricide, castration, and father/son struggles. This allegory becomes perfected in Christianity. Freud refers to these traditions when he says: “I must admit
that I have argued as if there were no question that there exists an inheritance of memory—traces of what our forefathers experienced, quite independently of direct communication...I speak of an old tradition still alive in a people,” (pp. 127), basically describing the arguments Debord makes, wherein we inherit ancient religious ideas...but, here, Freud clearly connects this phenomenon of the religious ideas we inherit to the psychological themes that manifest in our unconscious and in our dreams.

Debord uses texts from the Christian tradition to further his connection between the spectacle and traditional notions of paradise. In the reading companion to *In Girum,* Debord lists a détourned quotation from the first lines of Dante’s *Inferno,* revealing the connection between the religious ideas of the unconscious pathway to the religious beyond and sober melancholy.

The lines from Dante are as follows:

Midway upon the road of our life I found myself within a dark wood, for the right way had been missed. Ah! How hard a thing it is to tell what this wild and rough and dense wood was, which in thought renews the fear! So bitter is it that death is little more. But in order to treat of the good that here I found, I will tell of the other things that I have seen there. I cannot recount how I entered it, so full was I of slumber at that point where I abandoned the true way.

Debord’s détournement in *In Girum* describes the melancholy path to hell as the idle habit of frequenting cafés and bantering which he experienced:

Midway on the journey of real life we found ourselves surrounded by a somber melancholy, reflected by so much sad banter in the cafés of lost youth.

In this world of the stagnated “beyond” of “somber melancholy,” there is no divide between what Debord calls the “fallacious paradise” of the spectacle of modern society and the *Inferno,* the biblical “valley of exile” of the modern world. Heaven is hell; good is bad; dreams are nightmares: “the true is the moment of the false.”

Debord also kept analyses of *Faust* by Lukács in his notes. *Faust* provides the classic example of hell as fallacious paradise, of dreams as wish fulfillment that disintegrate the potential for the fulfillment of sexual desires in real life, the classic example of ideological manipulation for the benefit
of a diabolical authority who is the sole creator and manipulator of the dream-world Faust inhabits. In his notes, Debord writes a quote from Faust taken by Lukács’ Goethe and His Age: “What a spectacle, but alas, it is only a spectacle!” Here, the reference to the dream-world of the spectacle is made explicit. Goethe seems a prophet of a society governed by the manipulative, sleep-inducing images, which control the very people whose desires and will created them. Debord also takes note of a quotation from Faust that appears in Marx’s Capital: “In the beginning was the deed,” which Marx explains, “[Commodity owners] have…already acted before thinking. The natural laws of the commodity have manifested themselves in the natural instinct of the owners of the commodity.” Marx argues that capital-exchange is in fact an instinctual and unconscious product of both the producers and the produced. The commodity owners, who now consume spectacle, live a Faustian dream wherein action is fated, and the commodities are in fact products of their instinctual dreams.

It is in this context that Debord transcribes part of Psalm 90 in his notes, a psalm he marks as attributed to Moses. The psalm exemplifies the sleepy malaise of religious and ideological devotion:

A thousand years in your sight/ are like a day that has just gone by,/ or like a watch in the night./ Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death—/they are like the new grass of the morning:/ In the morning it springs up new,/ but by evening it is dry and withered.

The connection between unconscious vision and sleep is apparent in both Faust and this psalm. Moses’s psalm focuses not only on the connection between sleep and sight, but also on the stagnation of eternal, paradisiacal time in relation to the human cycle of life and death. Debord quotes Freud in The Society of the Spectacle, explaining that the unconscious is eternal and that the conscious, like life, is fleeting: «All that is conscious wears out. The unconscious remains unalterable. But once freed, does it not fall to ruins in turn?» (Freud). In Moses’s description of paradise, there is no living and dying, there is only malaise and the vision of repetitive cycles of distant human life. Paradisiacal time has no memory of the past; the past and the present are constant. So, too, is the case with Debord’s description of pseudo-cyclical time in The Society of the Spectacle.
What is really lived has no relation to the official irreversible time of society and is in direct opposition to the pseudo-cyclical rhythm of the consumable by-product of this time. This individual experience of separate daily life remains without language, without concept, without critical access to its own past which has been recorded nowhere. It is not communicated. It is not understood and is forgotten to the profit of the false spectacular memory of the unmemorable.\textsuperscript{87} 

While the fallacious paradise of the spectacle exists on earth, yearning persists, a yearning for fulfillment, a yearning for an external paradise, as Debord illustrates in \textit{In Girum}. 

Those who have not yet begun to live but who are saving themselves for a better time, and who therefore have such a horror of growing old, are waiting for nothing less than a permanent paradise. Some of them locate this paradise in a total revolution, others in career promotion, some even in both at once. In either case they are waiting to access what they have gazed upon in the inverted imagery of the spectacle: a happy, eternally present unity. But those who have chosen to strike with the time know that the time that is their weapon is also their master.\textsuperscript{88} 

Debord illustrates the motif of the bad dream using the language of the spectacle in \textit{In Girum}, wherein multiple women from détourned films indicate in their original scripts that they are having bad dreams.
CHAPTER 3: DIABOLICAL NEGATION

Revolts Against God

In 1950, before Debord’s time in the Lettrist International, Isidore Isou and other Lettrists, including Debord’s god-father, Marc’O , disguised themselves in clerical garb, entered Notre Dame, and handed out pamphlets with the following statement:

Today, Easter Sunday of the blessed year, here, in the remarkable basilica of Notre Dame of France, we proclaim the death of Christ-God so that Man may finally live.90

The reference to Feuerbach’s secular Christology and its supersession is evident. There is also perhaps a sense of the Sanhedrin trial of Christ when he was condemned by the Jewish crowd who vie instead for the freedom of a political revolutionary when Pontius Pilate presents Christ with the words “ecce homo,” “here is the man.” Referring to this biblical allegory, Friedrich Nietzsche called for the death of God and the triumph of the strength of men as «Dionysian heroes» in his books Ecce Homo (wherein the hero is Nietzsche, himself) and The Anti-Christ. The Anti-Christ is really a perfect reference for Debord's thinking—Nietzsche argues that the fault of Christianity is “tolerance” and “resignation,” which inform the structure of modernity.

Debord conveys a connection between Nietzsche’s words, “God is dead,” and the Lettrist proclamation of the “death of Christ-God” in In Girum when he reflects on his praxis of rebellion and blasphemy in the Lettrist International and Situationist groups:

Putting an end to art, announcing right in the middle of a cathedral that God was dead, plotting to blow up the Eiffel Tower—such were the little scandals" sporadically indulged in by those whose ongoing way of life was such a big scandal.91

The triumph of the death of God suggests an interpretation of the crucifixion images as not only a commentary on the spectacle and its religious deadness, but also on the sublime and positive prospect of the death of God, the death of Christ, and the death of religion. Debord clarified in the above quote that a single instance of blasphemy could not be enough, implying that many other “little scandals”
occurred. Indeed, these small scandals against the Church were a regular event; Debord spoke of a personal example of such an experience in a letter to Herve Falcou in 1950:

Yesterday evening, or to be more precise this morning (I’ve always been very aware of these arbitrary changes of days and years) I was at midnight Mass with a few friends. For a while we made a discreet rumpus, then to cap the scandal I lit a cigarette from a candle in front of an appalled crowd.92

Debord inscribed a quotation from Don Juan in his notes, which explains the revolutionary virtue and the path to liberation in blasphemy against God:

…Nothing of this popular imagery stops me from the prayer to eternally pose essential questions and the search for the meaning of life. There is not a thesis or a tentative demonstration of abstract philosophy; but before us there is living and "" dying, which is just as true if we know our path against God, who cuts us from "" loving women and seeks to create himself through human morality. Up there, God"" is colliding into himself, and we must provoke him. 93 xiii

For Debord, however, God exists as ideology, as social authority, and, thus, God is destructible through blasphemy and sin against his will, and the act of destroying God makes the destroyer empowered and God-like. In his notes, Debord writes a quotation from Jean Meslier, a Catholic priest who came to promote atheism and the denunciation of religion at the end of his life:

If God is everywhere, he is in me, he acts with me, he lies with me, he offends God with me, he combats the existence of God with me.94xiv

By combatting the existence of God and thereby becoming more God-like, Man and the Self realize the Christian promise of salvation. Debord quotes Max Stirner in his notes:

We admit that Man is the result of the trajectory of history and Christian thought and all of the effort of man toward religion and the ideal. Then what is Man? Me! I am Man, the end and the result and Christianity, and I am the point of departure and the path to a new history, a history of jouissance after a history of sacrifice.95

Here, the idea of history and the identity of the one who writes it are vitally important. Christianity and capitalism depend on the concepts of sacrifices for the future and the distancing of desire for the paradise. The Messiah is the necessary alienating promise that paradise only comes after necessary suffering and exploitation; desires which had been determined in the past for the Man of the present. Debord explains in his notes on The Differences Between Fichte and Schelling that the societal focus
on the rituals of the past is the origin of the idea of an infinite God, and the ongoing war with historic ritual and authoritative ideology will always be integrally connected with a war with the history of religion.

The growth of knowledge about society, which includes the understanding of history as the heart of culture, derives from itself an irreversible knowledge, which is expressed by the destruction of God. But this “first condition of any critique” is also the first obligation of a critique without end.96

The Diabolical

The title *In Girum Imus Nocte in Consumimur Igni* is a macaronic palindrome meaning “we go wandering in the night and are consumed by fire,” which was known in Medieval times as the “devil’s verse.” European legends sometimes described the Devil as a character who spoke in palindromes, while other medieval Christian palindromes would use palindromes as prayers, often arranged in the form of crosses for to draw attention to the geometrical perfection of their symmetry.97 For example, gnostics would write the palindromic charm, albathanalba, in an ink derived from acorn leaves in evenly spaced capital letters. This was thought to deter forces of evil. Similarly, Debord draws attention to “In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni” in the title sequence of the film as evenly spaced, silently appearing, palindromic letters that appear one by one across the screen in two lines, revealing the similarity of each letter. However, instead of intending to bring peace, but a sword.”101 Here, Christ is a revolutionary; he is God on earth for the purposes of intervention and destruction, revolution and terror; he is the Man-God, fully endowed by his superhuman mission for fiery change in the future.

The term “Prince of Darkness” was first used in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*,102 which portrays Lucifer as a sympathetic, revolutionary figure. Milton’s “Prince of Darkness” is disenchanted with the banality and the centralized authority of heaven, and so he falls to hell, calling the angels and humanity to join him in his effort to create a new world and a new future which are ungoverned by God. Debord’s *In Girum* returns to the story of his past as a revolutionary quest like that of the Prince of Darkness; an adventurous journey of the heroic anti-heroes in search of negation which had not yet been discovered. He intercuts the following segment of the script with shots of the Devil
in Marcel Carné’s *Les Visateurs du Soir*.

We did not seek the formula for overturning the world in books, but in wandering. Ceaselessly drifting for days on end, none resembling the one before. Astonishing encounters, remarkable obstacles, grandiose betrayals, perilous enchantments—nothing was lacking in this quest for a different, more sinister Grail, which no one else had ever sought. And then one ill-fated day the finest player of us all got lost in the forests of madness—But there is no greater madness than the present organization of life. […] We brought fuel to the fire. In this manner we enlisted irrevocably in the Devil’s party—the ‘historical evil’ that leads existing conditions to their destruction, the ‘bad side’ that makes history by undermining all established satisfaction.103

The person Debord refers to as “the finest player of all of us” who “got lost in the forests of madness” is Ivan Chtcheglov. A portrait photograph of Ivan makes a short appearance in the film, showing incredible contrast between light and dark, making Ivan appear to be a dark, bruiting, abstract, ghostly figure:

![Portrait of Ivan Chtcheglov](image)

In Debord’s notes, he specifies that the character of the Devil in his film who appears in détourned segments from the devil in Marcel Carné’s *Les Visateurs du Soir*, first of the Devil warming his hands by the fire, and then playing chess, showing the Devil’s affinity for fiery destruction and strategy. The Devil introduces himself as he warms his hands by the fire:

Oh! What a beautiful fire! I love fire. Look at how the flames come to me. They lick my fingers like a little dog. How pleasant. Excuse me, but I haven’t introduced myself. It’s true, my name, though titles don’t tell much: I come from very far away. Forgotten by my country, unknown elsewhere, this is the destiny of travelers.104
Carné’s self-presentation of the Devil coincides with a quotation Debord took in his notes from Goethe’s *Faust*, when Mesphistopheles defines himself and his intentions to Faust:

> I am the Spirit that denies! / And justly so: for all things, from the Void/ Called forth, deserve to be destroyed:/ ‘Twere better then, were naught created. Thus, all which you as Sin have rated,/ Destruction, aught with Evil blent,/ That is my proper element.105

Here, Mesphistopheles, a devil, is more absolute in his power than a meager demonic devil; he is the embodiment of destruction, sin, negation (“denial”), who blends with evil, but he is not reducible to evil. In fact, in the French, Debord writes a translation where Mesphistopheles states “I am the spirit that always denies, and I do so with Justice,” synthesizing sin, evil, destruction, and Justice.

In his “Notes on the intentions of In Girum,” Debord includes in his notes the famous quotation from Mallarmé, “Destruction was my Beatrice”106: Beatrice, the holy object of modest, ideal, feminine sexuality who guides Dante through Purgatory and Heaven, becomes synonymous with diabolical self-destruction. But self-destruction through negation is a process of purging both oneself and the world of the unnecessary, which, Mesphistopheles says, all of the world is unnecessary, and, Malevich’s Black Square implies, ultimate, fulfilled freedom is in the infinite void of iconoclastic blackness. Thus, destruction is the true Beatrice leading Debord into the fiery heaven-hell of revolt. A Beatrice-like figure in a flowing white gown appears in In Girum running and floating in the darkness, an abstract and mysterious bringer of destruction:
The theme of diabolical fire as an emblem of revolutionary destruction is best conveyed in Debord’s synopsis of *In Girum*:

This whole film (with the help of images, but also in the textual commentaries) is based on the theme of water. Therefore, it cites fluid poetry (Li Po, Omar Khayyam, Héraclite, Bousset) All of them speak on the theme of water, which represents time. Secondarily, there is the theme of fire; the lightning of the instant: that's revolution, St.-Germain-des-Près, youth, love, the negation of the night, the Devil, battle, and lost causes where men die like falling rocks as passing voyagers, and the desire in the night of the world…But the water of time quells what creates fire.

Indeed, the contrast between the ever-flowing river of the Seine and the coast of Italy suspends our view of cityscapes as if they were floating in a heavenly paradise above time, which is exactly how Debord describes the stagnating lull of spectacular time. The modern industrial and the archaic Romanesque protrude from an ever flowing, ever living body of water, which defines has defined and shaped urban landscapes since their origins:
Fire and darkness, which Debord illustrates as the antipodes of water, act in a manner similar to that of water, that is, as an abstracting force, as shadowing and obscuring, yet as sublime and, unlike water, as disunifying. Debord détourns a line from *The Ecclesiastes* regarding the shadowy nature of time while showing the shadowy images of firey destruction in juxtaposition to lines of ornamented crosses around a rooftop:

“For what purpose doth a man seek what is above him, he who knoweth not what" is good for him during his days on the earth, during the time that passeth like a" shadow?”
Between themes of fiery destruction and the ongoing water, we question our purpose given imminent, quick death, and the fact that the world continues to flow smoothly without us. Such questions perhaps resonate as especially potent for the often short lifespan of the emissary of societal destruction, who seeks change and action in spite of the stagnant, inhuman, fallacious paradise of the modern world.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Norman Cohn, The Pursuit of the Millenium: Revolutionary Millenarians and the""Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages, Revised and Expanded Edition, New""


Debord, Guy. « Encyclopedie des Nuisances. » Compendium. libcom.org, 1992.""

Debord, Guy. Fonds Guy Debord. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.""

Debord, Guy. Le Marquis de Sade a les Yeux de Fille. Paris : Librarie de Fayard, 1998.""


Lawrence & Wishart, 1983.


« Des histoires partielles ne sont au fond possible. Chaque histoire doit être histoire doit être histoire universelle. Le nest que par rapport à lhistoire universelle quon peut traiter un cas particulier. »

« L’auteur n’a pas envisagé de critiquer tels ou tels détails de notre époque, un syndicaliste ou une starlette, mai la généralité de cette époque—devant laquelle les détails sont indifférents. »

« Chaque domaine idéologique agit, malgré son autonomie relative, sur tous les autres domaines, et réagit enfin sur sa propre cause, la base économique. »

« Ce monde risque de devenir paradoxalement invisible. »

« Le besoin de parler existe comme le désir sexuel. Il se mêle à la fois mouvement de mort vers le monde, vers la participation, la vie pleine, et souffrance du manque. Le besoin de parler existe comme le désir sexuel. Il se mêle à lui. Il est aussi fort. Et, comme lui, il est à la fois mouvement de mort vers le monde, vers la participation, la vie pleine, et souffrance du manque. Le besoin de parler qui surgit comme le désir quand il n’a personne. Qui se perd. Et ensuite existent le bavardage creux, le libertinage plat ou les habitudes des relations sexuelles, des relations mondains. Des gens réels rencontres ne trouvent que ce faux langage, ce faux amour. Le désir existe, au plus haut point, reconnaissent son objet, prenant dans son jeu tout le possible dans le monde. »

« Le film doit (1) dénoncer le spectacle (2) parler de ce qu’il veut (en tant que film rév.) dire le « positif » (vie, amour, révolution) en termes spectaculaires,—en qq. sorte retournés (…) par ex. les photos de pin up (…) puisque les seules images pour montrer ceci sont déjà là, mais ainsi (…) eu avoir oublier qu’un « film (…) »la vie heureuse, et la stratégie même de rév. »

« Les mythes ? On ne peut pas complètement les éliminer. (…) Le magique s’est déplacé vers limaginaire, et limaginaire garde certaines (non pas tous) caractères du magique : communication et communion, méditation, participation au lointain et l’absent – énonciation ou résurrection de ce qui n’est plus – insertion de lhomme dans l’univers. »

« Le palais géant exprime la vie réservée aux maîtres (avec domination d’un seul.) Le temple exprime lillusion qui garantit cette vie. »

« Le style monumental partout (pyramides et tableaux) : Ceci effet esthétique est obtenu au moyen d’un minimum d’idées et d’un maximum de matériel. Ceci excellent pour larchitecture de S du S, (…) le matériel a cessé d’être humain»

103
x « La constitution politique fut jusqu'ici la sphère religieuse, populaire, le ciel de son universalité, vis-à-vis de l'existence terrestre de son réalité (...) Et lon donne aussi"" l'impression de mystique et du profond (...) mais quest-ce qui la différence en déminer"" bien de la façon concrète une personne de tout autres ? Le Corps. La plus haute"" fonction du corps, c'est l'activité sexuelle. L'acte constitutionnel le plus haut du roi,"" c'est donc son activité sexuelle, car c'est par elle il fait un roi et perpétuéson corps. »

xi « Si nous admettons que le contenu du rêve représente un déréalisé, et si l'obscurité de son contenu est œuvre de la censure qui modifie et travestit les"" matériaux refoulés, ils nous deviennent aisée déterminer la fonction du rêve. A"" linverse de ce qui est admis par l'opinion courante qui vent voir dans le rêve le"" perturbation du sommeil, nous avons à cette singulière conclusion que le rêve sert au"" sommeil de gardien. »

xii « Qui ma dit que la voile ne se déchirait pas un jour, et que je ne resterai pas"" convaincu que j'ai rêvé tout ce que j'ai fait et fait réellement tout ce que j'ai rêvé. »""

xiii « ...rien de cette imagerie populaire m'empêche la prière de poser éternellement des questions essentielles à ceux qui cherchent le sens de la vie. Il ny a"" pas de thèse, aucune tentative abstraite démonstration philosophique ; mais devant"" nous vit et meurt, aussi vrai que si nous le rencontrions sur notre chemin, au (horaire)"" qui a parie contre Dieu (...) Il a traversé lamour des femmes, cherchant à se créer lui-"" même, hors des morales humaines (...) Au-delà, c'est à Dieu qu'il s'est heurté, et il la"" nié pour mieux le provoquer. » (Don Juan de la notice de Robert Jouanny. P100)

xiv « Si Dieu est partout, il est en moi, il agit avec moi, il se trompe avec moi, il"" offense Dieu avec moi, il combat avec moi l'existence de Dieu. »

xv « Tout ce film (aussi à laide des images, mais digit dans le texte de commentaires) est bâti sur le thème de leau. On y cite donc les poètes de lécoulement"" de tout (Li Po, Omar Khayyam, Héraclite, Bousset) qui tous ont parlé de leau. C'est le"" temps. Il y a, secondairement, le thème du feu ; de léclat de linstant : c'est la"" révolution, St.-Germain-des- Prés, la jeunesse, lamour, la négation dans la nuit, le"" Diable, la bataille et les entreprises inachevées où vont mourir les hommes éboulis en"" tant que voyageurs qui passent et le désir dans cette nuit du monde (nocte et"" consimimur igni.) Mais leau du temps démure qui emporte le feu et léteint (...) »
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: An ariel view of the Panthéon in Paris from In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni, shot on camera as a pan over a larger photograph. Guy Debord, Brigitte Cornand, Alice Debord, and Olivier Assayas. “In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni.” Guy Debord, Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Paris : Gaumont Video, 2005 ........................................35


Figure 4: Guy Debord, Brigitte Cornand, Alice Debord, and Olivier Assayas. “La Société du Spectacle.” Guy Debord, Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Paris : Gaumont Video, 2005 .............................40

Figure 5: Guy Debord, Brigitte Cornand, Alice Debord, and Olivier Assayas. “In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni.” Guy Debord, Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Paris : Gaumont Video, 2005 .....................40

Figure 6: Guy Debord, Brigitte Cornand, Alice Debord, and Olivier Assayas. “La Société du Spectacle.” Guy Debord, Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Paris : Gaumont Video, 2005. Image of Alice Becker-Ho during her dedication, which introduces the film. The dedication includes a quote from Shakespeare’s Richard III at the bottom of the image: “Since each sentiment is only a part of life and not life in its entirety, life burns to spread through the diversity of sentiments and find itself as the sum of that diversity. In love, separation still exists, but not as separated, as one, and the living meets the living.” ........................................40

Figure 7: Francisco Goya, Christ on the Cross, Museo de Santa Cruz (Toledo, Spain), University of California, San Diego [ArtStor] ..................................................44
Figure 8: Guy Debord, Brigitte Cornand, Alice Debord, and Olivier Assayas. "La Société du Spectacle." *Guy Debord, Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes*. Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Paris : Gaumont Video, 2005…………………46

Figure 9: Fence in the shape of a cross. Guy Debord, Brigitte Cornand, Alice Debord, and Olivier Assayas. "La Société du Spectacle." *Guy Debord, Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes*. Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Paris :"" Gaumont Video, 2005……………………………………………………………………46

Figure 10: Guy Debord, Brigitte Cornand, Alice Debord, and Olivier Assayas. "La Société du Spectacle." *Guy Debord, Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes*. Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Paris : Gaumont Video, 2005…………………46

Figure 11: Guy Debord, Brigitte Cornand, Alice Debord, and Olivier Assayas. "In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni." *Guy Debord, Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes*. Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Paris : Gaumont Video, 2005…………………………………………………………………………………………44

Figure 12: Guy Debord, Brigitte Cornand, Alice Debord, and Olivier Assayas. "In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni." *Guy Debord, Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes*. Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Paris : Gaumont Video, 2005…………………………………………………………………………………………47

Figure 13: Guy Debord, Brigitte Cornand, Alice Debord, and Olivier Assayas. "In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni." *Guy Debord, Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes*. Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Paris : Gaumont Video, 2005…………………………………………………………………………………………47

Figure 14: Isou, Isidore, Marc-Gilbert Guillaumein, Jean Cocteau, Jean-Louis Barrault, Blaise Cendrard, Marcel Achard, Danièle Delorme, et al. *Traité de bave et d'éternité*. Paris : Re:Voir, 2008………………………………………………………………………………………47

Figure 15: Isou, Isidore, Marc-Gilbert Guillaumein, Jean Cocteau, Jean-Louis Barrault, Blaise Cendrard, Marcel Achard, Danièle Delorme, et al. *Traité de bave et d'éternité*. Paris : Re:Voir, 2008………………………………………………………………………………………47

Figure 16: Isou, Isidore, Marc-Gilbert Guillaumein, Jean Cocteau, Jean-Louis Barrault, Blaise Cendrard, Marcel Achard, Danièle Delorme, et al. *Traité de bave et d'éternité*. Paris : Re:Voir, 2008………………………………………………………………………………………47
Figure 17: Isou, Isidore, Marc-Gilbert Guiliaumin, Jean Cocteau, Jean-Louis Barrault, Blaise Cendrard, Marcel Achard, Danièle Delorme, et al. *Traité de bave et d'éternité*. Paris: Re:Voir, 2008. 47

Figure 19: Guy Debord, Brigitte Cornand, Alice Debord, and Olivier Assayas. "La Société du Spectacle." *Guy Debord, Œuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Œuvres Cinématographiques Complètes*. Paris: Gaumont Video, 2005. 47

Figure 20: Guy Debord, Brigitte Cornand, Alice Debord, and Olivier Assayas. "In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni." *Guy Debord, Œuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Œuvres Cinématographiques Complètes*. Paris: Gaumont Video, 2005. 48

Figure 21: Kazimir Severinovich Malevich, Installation: Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10 St. Petersburg. San Diego: University of California, 1915-1916. *ArtStor*. 48

Figure 22: Guy Debord, Brigitte Cornand, Alice Debord, and Olivier Assayas. "La Société du Spectacle." *Guy Debord, Œuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Œuvres Cinématographiques Complètes*. Paris: Gaumont Video, 2005. 52


Figure 24: Guy Debord, Brigitte Cornand, Alice Debord, and Olivier Assayas. "La Société du Spectacle." *Guy Debord, Œuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Œuvres Cinématographiques Complètes*. Paris: Gaumont Video, 2005. 57

Figure 25: Guy Debord, Brigitte Cornand, Alice Debord, and Olivier Assayas. "In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni." *Guy Debord, Œuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Œuvres Cinématographiques Complètes*. Paris: Gaumont Video, 2005. Film photograph of Ivan Chevlechov. 67


Figure 27: Guy Debord, Brigitte Cornand, Alice Debord, and Olivier Assayas. "In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni." *Guy Debord, Œuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Œuvres Cinématographiques Complètes*. Paris: Gaumont Video, 2005. 69

Figure 28: Guy Debord, Brigitte Cornand, Alice Debord, and Olivier Assayas. "In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni." *Guy Debord, Œuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Œuvres Cinématographiques Complètes*. Paris: Gaumont Video, 2005. 69

Figure 29: Guy Debord, Brigitte Cornand, Alice Debord, and Olivier Assayas. "In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni." *Guy Debord, Œuvres Cinématographiques Complètes. Œuvres Cinématographiques Complètes*. Paris: Gaumont Video, 2005. 69