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Destroy Cinema!/Destroy Capital!: Guy Debord's The Society of the Spectacle (1973)

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A preview for Guy Debord’s film *The Society of the Spectacle* (1973) at the Studio Gît-le-coeur announced it with the following text that appeared on a black screen: “When the idea occurred to me to create the world, I foresaw that there one day, someone would make a film as revolting as *The Society of the Spectacle*. Therefore, I thought it better not to create the world. (signed): God” (Levin 397). Debord was the founding member, and leading theorist, of the heterodox French Marxist group the Situationist International. In 1967, he had published his book *The Society of the Spectacle* and in 1973, he released the film version under the same name. Eisenstein had failed in his ambition to film *Capital*; although the situationists were of the opinion that, even if it had been made, “considering his formal conceptions and political submissiveness, it can be doubted if his film would have been faithful to Marx’s text” (*Cinematic* 220). In contrast Debord had succeeded, in his own opinion, in using film as a medium for presenting revolutionary theory. This was due, in part, to the events of May 68, in which Debord and the situationists had been actively involved. It was this revolutionary rupture that made possible the bringing to the screen of such a work, and which this work also celebrated. As the events had broken with the “old world” so the film aimed at the “unmaking” of the existing world.

One of the situationists favorite quotations was from Marcel Carné’s film *Les Enfants du Paradis* (1943–5): the character Lacenaire says “It takes all kinds to make a world—or to unmake it” (*Cinematic Works* 157). What Debord aimed to do was to put the “unmaking” of cinema in the cause of the “unmaking” of capitalism, and so to unmake the world. These two tasks had to be carried out simultaneously, as the history of cinema cannot be distinguished from the history of modern capitalist society. The first thesis of *The Society of the Spectacle*, which is also the first thesis spoken on the film’s soundtrack, begins: “In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented an immense accumulation of spectacles” (*Cinematic* 43). That is, capital takes the form of the society of the spectacle. It does not exist in one particular image but instead reigns as a regime “in which everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation” (*Cinematic* 43). What is required in this situation is not “a few partial political critiques, but a total critique of the existing world” (*Cinematic* 221). Why then choose cinema as the site in which to conduct this critique? Doesn’t Debord fall, immediately, into a “performative contradiction”: denouncing the society of the spectacle in its most spectacular medium? This is entirely inadequate as a criticism. Debord recognizes that cinema is an integral part

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of capitalism; that is the point. As he states “revolutionary critique engages in battle on the very terrain of the cinematic spectacle” (Cinematic 221). What then is the nature of this battle?

The situationists set out to destroy cinema. This “destruction” might be characterized more precisely as a negation of cinema, in the Hegelian sense. That is, the negation of cinema as Aufheben: an act that ends, abolishes or annihils at the same time as it raises, picks up or preserves. What are “preserved” are the moments of truth of cinema, that is, those moments which promise the revolutionary negation of capitalism. This negation is directed at all existing forms of cinema. The situationists did not only direct their critique against classical cinema, the “cinéma du papa” of Cahiers and Hollywood cinema. They were also scathing about the avant-garde alternatives, such as the new wave, reserving particular bile for Jean-Luc Godard—a “Maoist liar” who lacks “the slightest personal originality” (Cinematic 219). There is no doubt that the situationists would be amused by the recent academic canonization of “Saint Godard”. Finally, they critiqued the existing forms of documentary cinema, arguing that “to demystify documentary cinema it is necessary to dissolve its ‘subject matter’” (Cinematic 30). In each case existing cinema was to be subject to ruthless critique, to the point of destruction.

This is not the dismissal of cinema per se. As they state in their article “Cinema and Revolution”: “The cinema as a means of revolutionary communication is not inherently mendacious just because Godard or Jacopetti has touched it” (Cinematic 220). How then can cinema be negated? The principle strategy, demonstrated particularly in the film of The Society of the Spectacle, is détournerment. This is “the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble” (Situationist 55). In the case of The Society of the Spectacle we find the use of classic films, which Debord obviously respects, such as Nicolas Ray’s Johnny Guitar (1954) and Orson Welles’ Mr. Arkadin (1955). The film also uses images drawn from advertising, news footage, and from the bureaucratic filmmakers of the “so-called socialist countries”. Not only this but also these images are located against the soundtrack, which selects the most important theses from The Society of the Spectacle. That book itself was also an example of détournement, using Marx, Hegel, Freud, and others. We have multiple levels of détournement in the film, but these levels are all coordinated together in a “new ensemble”.

This strategy is explicitly linked to dialectical negation. As the situationists put it in their critique “The Role of Godard”: “In all cases, détournement is dominated by the dialectical devaluing/revaluing of the element within the development of a unifying meaning” (Situationist 176). It is a strategy of the devaluation of existing elements, and then their revaluing in a new ensemble, which is what distinguishes it from any “method of combining neutral and indefinitely interchangeable elements” (Situationist 176). That sort of “method” is what, for the situationists, characterized the work of Godard, and it is also evident in the practices of “postmodern” bricolage and deliberate intertextuality. These methods serve to “recuperate” détournement by neutralizing its negativity, because they treat the elements they combine as neutral. The endless game of pastiche and quotation produces what is just an aesthetic effect, a spectacle. Whether it is in Godard, contemporary advertising, or “experimental” filmmaking, the aesthetic may be “critical” but it is still an aesthetic. Without the “charge” of negativity we are left contemplating a surface play of images, in which any element can be exchanged for another.

If Debord’s cinema breaks with the aesthetic, as the creation of a separate realm of alienated art, it also breaks with the conventional forms of aesthetic “pleasure” associated with cinema. Debord’s cinema is a cinema of “unpleasure”, at least in terms of what we might usually think of as the pleasures of cinema. To watch this film, which largely
lacks a soundtrack, in which the theses are spoken in a lugubrious fashion, and which deploys images in an austere manner, is difficult. However, in their practice and theoretical critiques the situationists always rejected any form of “Left asceticism” and the piety of the revolutionary militant. They are not anti-pleasure but they are opposed to the false pleasures offered us by capital, including the false “aesthetic pleasures” of existing cinema. Out of the false pleasures of existing cinema, and society, we must find and preserve real pleasures, including the pleasure of revolt. Détournement not only devalues but also revalues. In devaluing the false pleasures of cinema, we can revalue cinema as the site of real pleasures that have been occluded.

Within the film, this “revaluation” of pleasure often takes place with the problematic deployment of the nude or semi-nude female body, largely drawing on images from advertising, pornography and everyday life. At one level, these “objectified” images of female sexuality function as a synecdoche for wider processes of commodification. This is in a similar fashion to the use of prostitution as a metaphor for alienated labor. Also, at another level, they are images of “pleasure” denied by this commodification. In both cases they partake of a heterosexism typical of certain “revolutionary critiques”, especially during the 1960s and 1970s. In these critiques the naked female body is used to represent the commodity and to “transgress” bourgeois conventions. What they risk maintaining, however, is a conventional and sexist “male gaze” that risks repeating the “objectification” they are critiquing. In the case of The Society of the Spectacle it is a matter for the viewer to decide whether these images do devalue the objectifying gaze and revalue pleasure, or whether they repeat the “male gaze”. These détourned images place us before the image of commodified sexuality but they remain, in some senses, undecidable. This is an effect to which I will return.

Détournement is not the only strategy used by Debord in this film. As well as setting the images of existing cinema in a new whole that ruptures their previous meanings Debord also plays these images off against the soundtrack and the use of inter-titles. Part of the effect of the film rests on this practice of juxtaposition, in which images are not only freed through their new relations to each other but also through their relation to the spoken text. The images are not simply “illustrations” of the theses of the book but placed in dialectical relation to them, each sparking off the other. The thesis “The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images” (Cinematic 49) is spoken over an image of the earth seen from the moon. The irony is that our first images of the earth as a totality coincide with capital constituting itself as a total “world-market”. This juxtaposition performs what Walter Benjamin called the “jump” or the “leap” that characterizes the materialist dialectic (261). In this case Debord aims at both a “leap” out of the history of cinema and, at the same time, a “leap” out of the history of class society. Without this double move Debord’s film would risk being confined to just another avant-garde “move” in the history of cinema. How does he make this “leap” out of capital?

Given that capital has no particular image but is, instead, a social relation that “is mediated by images” (Cinematic 45) then the problem that Debord’s film confronts is how to put capital on the screen? The answer is that capital can only be put on screen as this “social relation” that makes everything into an image, even “the most radical gesture”. This effect is staged at the beginning of the film with détourned footage of Fidel Castro giving a television broadcast. The situationists had no illusions about Castro’s “radicalism”—they remained thoroughly skeptical of any “third-worldism”. As early as 1967 they had made a critique of Maoism, which did not, unfortunately, prevent large sections of the French Left succumbing, en masse, to the “Mao cult” (Situationist 185–194). This scene is not, therefore, an uncritical representation of third world revolution. Instead
it shows the spectacles’ absorption of revolutionary energies into the staged spectacle of revolt. The masses no longer intervene in history but are organized as its spectators: either before the television screen or in the massed ranks that must observe the spectacle of the supposedly “revolutionary leader”. These scenes recur throughout the film: the workers are seen assembling to listen to the decisions of their “representatives”: Mitterand, Union bureaucrats, or Brezhnev.

The film also analyses how societies in the West stage what one thesis calls a “purely spectacular rebelliousness” (Cinematic 59). This thesis is spoken over images of the rock musician Johnny Halliday and The Beatles. What these forms of “rebellion” indicate is that, as the thesis goes on to state “dissatisfaction itself becomes a commodity as soon as the economy of abundance develops the capacity to process that particular raw material” (Cinematic 59). The spectacle has penetrated so far into everyday life that even our dissatisfaction with it can become another resource. Whether we are dealing with the “concentrated” bureaucratic management of the spectacle in the so-called socialist countries, or the “diffuse” bureaucratic management of the spectacle in overtly capitalist “liberal democracies”, the relation remains the same. In both cases passivity is maintained precisely through the illusion of involvement in “rebellion”; the “revolution” becomes a spectacle. But these scenes are also juxtaposed with images of the interventions of the masses in history: the storming of the winter palace, the civil war in Spain, and the revolt of May 68.

The film therefore places us in the position of a decision: do we choose the passivity of the spectacle or the activity of real revolt? If the film did not place us in this position then it could be argued that in placing capital on screen it simply reinforces the image of capital as a social relation that can never be resisted. The problem is that in doing so it faces another possible “performative contradiction”. In trying to present “real” revolution is it not just providing us with another spectacle? Can Debord really avoid playing the role of the manager of the revolutionary spectacle? To answer this charge two points can be made: first the film is recovering images of real revolt from their systematic occlusion by the society of the spectacle, against the mystification of the images of “revolution”. Secondly, in the act of détournement, the active negation of the image, the film tries to break open the images that capital commodifies. Through the use of montage, and the arrangement of these images in relation to the soundtrack text, the film carries out work on these images; this work is what Hegel called the “labor of the negative”.

Debord states that: “The spectacle has deported real life behind the screen. I have tried to ‘expropriate the expropriators.’” (Cinematic 223) He does this through negating the existing use of images to reveal the revolutionary promise of those images. It is not simply that all images are images of capital or that all images lie, rather it is that capital tries to neutralize the power of the image by separating us from “real life” and placing it “behind the screen”. The film of The Society of the Spectacle recovers “real life” by breaking up the usual narrative of cinema and isolating particular scenes and images. In this way what is held within those images is released. Again this is similar to what Walter Benjamin described as the task of the materialist historian: “to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it” (255). In this case this “wresting” takes the form of a practice on the image that “arrests” the image to fracture its calm surface. Beneath the Hollywood conventions that Johnny Guitar operates within, and puts under pressure, we can extract, through détournement, the “real memories of love” (Cinematic 223).

The film of The Society of the Spectacle does not only “screen capital” but also screens what capitalist commodification of the image disavows: “real life”. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has argued that this practice releases the “potential” of the image. He
suggests that, in this film, Debord reveals “the image as a zone of undecidability between the true and the false” (“Difference” 319). This undecidability of the image is presented through a practice of montage that exhibits the image as such. In this use of montage Debord reveals to us the two transcendental conditions of this technique, which Agamben names as the power of repetition and the “power of stoppage” (“Difference” 317). On the one hand, montage operates through the repetition of particular images, and this repetition indicates their status as images. On the other hand it also operates through the power of “freezing” particular images, which again reveals the image as such. What is revealed is the image as no longer the image of something but the image as a pure medium, or, as Agamben puts it: “The image gives itself to be seen instead of disappearing into what makes it visible” (“Difference” 315). In a sense Agamben is shifting the register slightly from Debord’s original political intention, although he is also trying to retain the problem of cinema as one that is ethical and political rather than aesthetic. This shift in register is away from seeing this practice on the image as releasing the “real life” that is concealed by the society of the spectacle and towards a practice on the image that releases the “imagelessness of the image” (“Difference” 319).

While Agamben is not trying to recuperate or de-politicize Debord’s cinematic works he is, I think, suggesting a rather different politics that we might “recover” from this practice. In another article he argues that “the element of cinema is gesture and not image” (“Notes” 55). Linking this claim to his work on Debord we can argue that Debord’s filmmaking is exemplary for its release of this gestural element, or what Agamben calls “pure gesturality” (“Notes” 60). The revelation of the image as such, as an undecidable wavering that opens the image to its own disappearance into “imagelessness”, is also a revelation of what is fixed within that image. Film both records gestures, as is most evident in the proto-film work of Edweard Muybridge and in silent film, but it also obliterates gestures through representing them. This obliteration takes place through confining images within narrative structures and through a distraction from the gesture through the soundtrack, which can lead us away from the image. The film work of Debord, which is a political critique of representation, releases the “gestures” that are the elements of cinema through his practice of montage. He recovers the potential of cinema that has been exhausted in the representation of particular gestures, leading us back to the gesture itself.

I would argue that, if we follow this analysis, the politics of Debord’s cinema does not particularly lie within any of the images selected as such, but rather in what is done with those images. And, in particular, how Debord’s use of montage destroys those images as images and turns them toward the gestural, which the image usually conceals. For example, in the images of fashion models at the beginning of *The Society of the Spectacle* we can see how their “robotic” poses mimic the routines of the production line. By replaying these images our loss of “gesturality” is revealed as a process of loss that can be reversed; this is, precisely, an “undecidable image”. In the case of the images détourned from *Johnny Guitar* the “gestures” of Hollywood melodrama become the gestures of real lover through removing them from their original narrative and locating them in a new ensemble. At the same time with its use of spoken text and its restraint in the use of music and other soundtrack elements, we are left with a “pure” contemplation of the image.

In reading Debord in this fashion we pass from the destruction of cinema and the destruction of capital, which encompasses Debord’s project, to the limit of that project: the destruction of the image. By making this step we also pass from the particular anti-capitalist politics of Debord and the situationists to something like the problem of the political and the ethical before, or within, any particular politics or ethics. Certainly this can easily be taken as a move which is, fundamentally, depoliticizing and “philosophical” (in a pejorative
I am suggesting something rather different. “Reading” Debord’s film with Agamben is actually a way of maintaining the political import of his work. This is particularly true because Debord’s work generally, and his film work in particular, has faced two symmetrical responses which tend to “recuperate” that political effect. The first is the general forgetting of his films—Debord himself remarked that “My very existence as a filmmaker remains a generally refuted hypothesis” (Cinematic 147). Since his withdrawal of his films after the assassination of his producer and publisher Gérard Lebovici in 1984 they have led an underground existence. This has only recently been lifted as Debord’s widow began the process of re-releasing the films with a complete retrospective at the Venice film festival in 2001. Currently the schedule is for the films to be released, as a DVD set in 2005, in the original French.

The second threat is the recovery of his films as historical documents of the “avant-garde”. While academic research into the films is essential, and this article is obviously part of this effort, too often the “historicization” of the Debord and the situationists confines them in the museum of past radicalism. Sometimes literally, as with the touring exhibitions in which the work of the situationists is exhibited as “art”. This is not to dismiss out of hand these efforts but to note how exactly they recuperate the situationists by turning them into radical artists or radical theorists. The gesture of forgetting and the gesture of recovery are symmetrical because they often go hand-in-hand: the forgetting or obliteration of Debord’s practice as filmmaker is countered by the “historicization” of his practice. But both, in different ways, serve to neutralize his politics: either by ignoring his work or by “recovering” it in such a way as to reduce it to the history of the avant-garde. Oddly then, the seemingly “ahistorical” philosophical reading of his films by Agamben may be far more sensitive to the historical and political stakes. What is truly “radical” is not the location of the films in the materiality of their cultural and historical conditions but attention towards what in these films serves to “dissolve” those conditions.

This form of “reading” demonstrates more fidelity to Debord’s own understanding of his work than those that try to “faithfully” locate his practice. One of the images that Debord uses in The Society of the Spectacle for the proletarian assault of May 68 is a cavalry charge. In his final film, In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni (1978) (a Latin palindrome meaning “We go round and round in the night and are consumed by fire”), Debord uses another, linked, image for the situationist “adventure”. This is the charge of the light brigade, détourned from Michael Curtiz’s 1936 film. The image captures the quixotic attack by the situationists on the society of the spectacle and their dissolution at the moment of their greatest success, in the wake of May 68. But this image of the “charge of the light brigade” is not simply the image of defeat. Debord remarks on the film’s soundtrack “Avant-gardes have only one time; and the best thing that can happen to them is to have enlivened their time without outliving it” (Cinematic 182). In a sense the resistance to “historicization” comes from a different “historicization”, one that refuses to make this practice outlive its own time. In locating this practice “in time” we can, at the same time, register what ruptures with that time.

Again the reference to Benjamin seems essential; as he states “historical materialism cuts through historicism” (255). What historical materialism does is to register the ruptures of the continuum of “homogeneous, empty time” (261) that makes up the time of historicism. In the same way The Society of the Spectacle is a film that registers the ruptures of May 68, but not as an example of memories that belong to a safely recorded past. Instead those images of struggle are opposed to the forgetting of history that the spectacle incarnates. As Debord would later write “Nothing in the last twenty years has been so thoroughly coated in obedient lies as the history of May 1968” (Comments 14). The work on time in the film
is one of enlivening, but this is not carried out to simply erect May 68 as the spectacle of revolt, as various commemorations of those events have done. In the same way we must refuse to take Debord as the model of radical filmmaking practice. This would involve taking his work out of its time and falsely reifying it as the synthesis of theory and praxis. It is not a matter of making his work, or this film, outline its time but of returning to the film as the exploration of that time. What is explored in the film is the rupture of gestures with the model of time as homogeneous and empty.

Therefore, we are not opposing an “historicization” of Debord to an “ahistorical” philosophical reading, but opposing the historical forgetting of his work to a work that records time as what Benjamin calls “presence of the Now” (261). I would argue that “historicization” of his work, as a supposed act of recovery, actually tends to be another act of forgetting or obliteration. What is lost is what is recorded in The Society of the Spectacle: struggles that rupture or mark the images of the society of the spectacle, not only then but always. That is the “presence of the Now” as the presence of gestures that remain at the limit of these images as they dissolve in imagelessness. The film is not just a record of the past but a record of these “brief moments in time” that still cannot be recuperated. Without this active “memory” that addresses this presence then capital can impose itself as the seamless order of separation. According to Debord, in his 1988 book Comments on the Society of the Spectacle this is exactly what has happened.

The society of the spectacle that Debord interrogated in his 1973 film has not stood still, instead it has learned from its enemies. Where the spectacle was divided between the concentrated spectacle of bureaucratic and authoritarian socialism (best represented by the former Soviet Union) and the diffuse spectacle of capitalist liberal democracy (best represented by America) now it has reached the “perfection” of the “integrated spectacle” (Comments 8). This new form of the spectacle, which combines elements from both previous models, can be traced in its first appearance in France and Italy. Now the spectacle is now characterized by its use of secrecy and a systematic blurring of the line between legality and illegality, governments behave like Mafias and Mafias behave like governments. In fact the society of the spectacle has “succeeded in raising a whole generation molded to its laws” (Comments 7). What Debord marks is the increasing penetration of the spectacle into life, both horizontally, as it extends across the globe, and vertically, and it extends further and further into all reaches of everyday life.

This is also true of cinema itself. While it may be premature to simply declare cinema dead or at an end the modes of cinematic production and distribution radically limit cinema to a spectacular cinema. Debord himself felt no difficulty in announcing that “Since art is dead, it has become extremely easy to disguise police as artists” (Comments 77). He argues that the state penetrates art and turns it into another mechanism of persuasion. It is difficult to say whether his pessimism is misplaced, or if it is, rather, realism in our existing circumstances. Certainly politically radical and avant-garde filmmaking does continue but whether it mounts anything other than “partial critiques” or gives us anything more than a “critical aesthetic” is open to question. That is why it is necessary to return to Debord’s cinema, but not to simply plunder it for models of “radical” practice. As I have suggested this is only a mode of recuperation. Instead it offers us the potential of cinema that is, nearly everywhere, denied to us. Whether that potential still remains in a time when the integrated spectacle “permeates all reality” (Comments 9) is our question to answer.

In this situation it may well be that it is only through the “detour” of the philosophical reading that we can truly “read” Debord’s film, without conceding to recuperation. But if we were to take this detour as a complete solution to the problem of addressing this film and Debord’s cinema (or anti-cinema) then we risk another reification. What it does
provide, through Agamben’s unabashedly philosophical reading and my use of it, is another opportunity to open the potential of the image. In the same way that Debord détourned the images of cinema so his own images must be détourned again. That is what Agamben does by revealing the gestures frozen at the heart of any and all images. If, now, we living in the “society of the integrated spectacle”, in which all social relations are organized through the mediation of the image, then this revelation of “pure gesturality” is still a pressing political task. That includes posing this “pure gesturality” against the “recuperation” of Debord’s own films as historical artifacts. What might seem the most abstract argument for leading “images back to the homeland of gestures” (“Notes” 55) is in absolute fidelity to Debord’s materialist practice on the image.

In this fidelity we also find the possibility of a new “de-aestheticization” of cinema, which would allows its withdrawal from the society of the spectacle and its return to ethics and politics. It is difficult to identify signs of this taking place but in some of the responses to and uses of the new digital technologies, such as Abbas Kiarostami’s Ten (2002), there is an interrogation of the image and gesture. The possibility of this “de-aestheticization” and return to ethics and politics depends on re-iterating the situationist claim that the cinema “is not inherently mendacious”. This may well involve a critique of the corrosive irony of Godard’s “Photography is truth and cinema is truth twenty-four times per second” in Le Petit soldat (1960). What would be a cinema of truth, without irony? Is there any truth preserved in cinema anymore? How might we détourn the cinema of the integrated spectacle? The suggestion I make is that cinema must be destroyed in the cause of releasing the potential of the image. This is the revolutionnary “promise” of Debord’s film.

Works Cited


