

BUT NEITHER WOOD NOR FIRE FIND ANY PEACE OR SATISFACTION
IN ANY WARMTH, GREAT OR SMALL, OR IN ANY RESEMBLANCE
BETWEEN THEM, UNTIL THE MOMENT WHEN THE FIRE BECOMES
ONE WITH THE WOOD AND IMPARTS ITS OWN NATURE TO IT.
OR: HOW TWO FRAGMENTS MEET AND A FILM IS MADE

by

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INTRODUCTION: WHY REMAKE *THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE?*

I want to cast a question over this text, the same question that everyone has rightfully asked since I began re-making Guy Debord's obscure 1973 film *The Society of the Spectacle* — “why re-make this film?” I had no idea what the answer was when I began working with Debord's film; instead I was working from two instincts. The first was intuition — that there was something relevant in the film adaptation of a book that has such a strong presence in the art world yet seems scarcely understood in its complexity. In an email regarding an upcoming class, a film instructor writes to me playfully: “I desperately want to avoid the “illustrate this theory” assignment, that much I know already. For instance, please, I never want to see another misapplied critique video art piece relying on *The Society of the Spectacle* ever again...” It is a bit hard to illustrate how pervasive a concept like spectacle has become in a quantitative way; this anecdote characterizes the problem accurately. Of course, this doesn't equate to a need for more stock commentary on the Situationist International, but a thorough inquiry into its experimental, cultural, aesthetic and political aspects remains an important project.

The second, relatedly, was simply to better understand this book and film. In thinking about the convergence of revolutionary or critical theory and its fraught relationship to art — as well as my own ambivalence about the political possibilities of art — it made sense to study one of the most significant artistic outputs of the SI considering their huge influence on artists and revolutionaries alike.

CHAPTER I ON DÉTOURNEMENT

An un-returnable gift

In an interview McKenzie Wark mentions a comment by a friend regarding the title of his book, *50 Years of Recuperation of the Situationist International*:¹

‘50 years of recuperation of the Situationist International? May there be 50 more!’ And I thought, thank you! That is exactly right! The work that is valuable in culture in the long term is *the unreturnable gift*, the thing we just don’t know how to get rid of. I’m sorry to say, love her or not, Amy Winehouse: There’s an art that, in a couple of years, we could be done with. It’s a gift we can return, it’s probably not up there (though I could be proven wrong). We can repay that one and it’ll go away. But this one, the Situationist International, it just won’t go away.²

I start here because this resonates with the constant presence of terms like ‘spectacle’ and the always-lingering Situationist influence on the leftist artistic milieu of which I am a part. Wark anecdotally suggests that maybe recuperation isn’t the worst thing, but more importantly, that regardless of whether or not the Situationists are recuperated by this institution or that person they are an inheritance we must make use of. In a later work on the Situationists Wark develops this thought into a more helpful articulation: “For past works to become resources for the present requires their use in the present in a quite particular way. It requires their appropriation as a *collective inheritance*, not as private property...”³ What Wark intends to do with this statement is surpass any moaning about co-optation and instead place the Situationists’ gifts — their writings, art, and

¹ McKenzie Wark, *50 Years of Recuperation*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008. This text was later developed into a more significant ‘de-centered’ history of the SI focused on what has in the past been

² “The unreturnable Situationist International: Berfois Interviews McKenzie Wark.” <http://www.berfrois.com/2011/09/berfrois-interviews-mckenzie-wark/>. Accessed February 11, 2013.

³ McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street: the Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International*. New York: Verso, 2011.

experiments. They are gifts to the cultural commons because they are *not* private property. If one digs a little beneath the surface of the most popular commentaries it is easy to find there has been various cultural and political milieus that have been working with Situationist ideas since before their dissolution in 1972.⁴ Artistically the most visible characters in this history were the groups related to the SI themselves, most of which divorced from the SI between 1959-1962.⁵

Concurrently, left communists and in some cases anarchists, particularly in Europe, were developing the Situationists' more 'political' work. But the SI's influence has spread much wider and deeper on the anti-capitalist left over the past 40 years, well beyond the militant groups of the 70s. While the SI's influence in a more 'on the ground' activist sphere cannot easily be summarized here, suffice it to say that their embrace of council communism, their vehement rejection of Leninism and an early critique of the

⁴ The dissolution of the French section occurred in 1972. Rightly or wrongly, the French hub is commonly understood as *the* Situationist International. On the dissolution of the SI see Situationist International, *The Real Split in the International* [1972], trans. John McHale. London: Pluto Press, 2003.

⁵ This is a muddy history, but notably there was Gruppe Spurr, a group of artists who were the German section of the SI briefly; King Mob was a nebulously connected group of UK artists / activists / pranksters. Perhaps the most well known peripheral relation to the SI after their split was the Scandinavian section sometimes referred to as the 'Second Situationist International,' although most agree this was never really a group, merely a declaration by Jörgen Nash. This contingent of SI were dubbed the 'Nashists,' by Debord and his cohorts, which refers to Jörgen Nash, a Scandinavian artist with whom the SI had a rather nasty split. In *International Situationiste* #8 a definition was published on 'Nashists/ism:' "Term derived from the name of Nash, an artist who seems to have lived in Denmark in the twentieth century. Primarily known for his attempt to betray the revolutionary movement and theory of that time, Nash's name was detoured by that movement as a generic term applicable to all traitors in struggles against the dominant cultural and social conditions..." The term also applies Nash sympathizers. See "The Counter-Situationist Campaign," in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb. Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006. pp 145-9. For more on the peripheral SI movements see: See McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street*; and *Expect Anything, Fear Nothing: The Situationist Movement in Scandinavia and Elsewhere*, eds. Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Jakob Jakobsen. New York: Autonomedia, 2011. These are two recent works on lesser developed areas of SI's history, but one can also look to the work of Stewart Home for a lineage of counter-cultural inheritors of the SI, see in particular two books by Home: *What is Situationism: A Reader*, Oakland: AK Press, 2001; An edited volume with various texts on the SI from underground rags throughout the 80s and 90s, See also *The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War*, Oakland: AK Press, 2001. On King Mob, see *King Mob Echo: English Section of the Situationist International* ed Tom Vague, London: Dark Star, 2000. Finally, if one needs more evidence that the SI never disappeared, see Simon Ford's *The Realization and Suppression of the Situationist International: An Annotated Bibliography 1972-1992*, Oakland: AK Press, 2001.

then fashionable Maoism, and accordingly their hardline anti-bureaucrat stance continues to make them relevant for both anti-state communists and anarchists.⁶

In the art world of English speaking countries, the lineage or history stemming from the SI is in many ways overshadowed by a groundswell of academic interest regarding the SI. This interest seems to inaugurate around the 1989 exhibition *On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International 1987-1972*, a traveling exhibition organized by Peter Wollen which made stops in Paris, London, and Boston.⁷ Unsurprisingly an exhibition organized for three major art museums tended to favor the artistic legacy of the SI, which seemed to do two things. First, it established a precedent for academic considerations of the SI that tended to focus less on their later (post-‘62 split) ‘political’ work. Second, the museum exhibition marked the beginning of what many believe is the co-optation of the SI into stale academic Art History. Renewed interest also occurred with the arrival of various

⁶ The only work I have found to systematically study the influence of the SI regarding their later, more explicitly political, writings is Karen Goaman’s *The Old World is Behind You: The Situationists and beyond in contemporary anarchistic currents*, New York: Autonomedia, 2007. The book is now near impossible to find but is available online in its dissertation form at: 1000littlehammers.wordpress.com/situationist. Other evidence of the SI’s influence can be found in anti-state communist figures like Gilles Dauvé aka Jean Barrot who wrote “Critique of the Situationist International,” now available in *What is Situationism: A Reader*, Oakland: AK Press, 2001. Dauvé also wrote the influential text “When Insurrections Die,” 1998. Available online at: http://endnotes.org.uk/texts/endnotes_1/when-insurrections-die.xhtml. Both accessed February 27, 2013. Additionally one can look to the journals *Endnotes* and *Sic: International Journal of Communisation* for European communist theory that has inherited a great deal from the Situationists’ later work, and of course anonymous French journal/collective Tiqqun, which has had a significant influence on the anarchist milieu in the west.

⁷ For more on the exhibition see the catalog *On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989. The exhibition takes its name from a 1959 film by Debord, which is thought to refer largely to Debord and his cohorts in the 50s and his time with the Lettrists while transitioning into the Situationists. This history, which takes place in and around the bohemian Paris neighborhood of Saint-Germain, can be found in Chapter 1 of Wark’s *The Beach Beneath the Street*.

publications around the same time as the exhibition,⁸ but the dam seemed to break in the late '90s with a special edition of *October* dedicated to the work of the SI in 1997 and no less than six books published about the SI by 2005.⁹

A brief note on the academy and the SI

The emergence of academic interest in the SI naturally struck a chord with former members and other pro-Situs who had been purposefully working outside major institutions since the SI's inception. The SI made no secret of their hatred for academics — they saw them as contributors to spectacular knowledge production, complicit in the university's service of the capitalist State. This hatred was very much part of their time, when academic Marxist intellectuals were either apologists for the French Communist Party (PCF), Structuralists, or Maoists. The SI fiercely broke with the 'official thought' of Communist Russia and all Stalinists and Leninists who followed their lead or made any excuses for their authoritarianism or bureaucratic interventions. The PCF in their dogmatism and Stalinist alignments, were and could only be counter-revolutionary. The same goes for union leaders and Socialist bureaucrats, who have sold out the revolution

⁸ Notably Guy Debord's *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, New York: Verso, 1988; Guy Debord *Panegyric*, New York: Verso, 1989; Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1989; and Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*, New York: Routledge, 1992.

⁹ *October*, #79, Winter 1997. There are likely more than six, but notable texts, in chronological order: Christopher Gray, *Leaving the 20th Century*, London: Rebel Press, 1998 (originally published in 1974); Anselm Jappe, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, *Guy Debord*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999; Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999; *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, ed. Tom McDonough. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002/4; Simon Ford, *A User's Guide to the Situationist International*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004; *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works*, ed. Ken Knabb, Oakland: AK Press, 2005.

time and again.¹⁰ This acute sense of co-optation by State-supported individuals and institutions was correct, and translates easily to why there was such vehemence toward a museum exhibition that not only excluded the SI's more radical, and many would argue sophisticated, communist politics in favor of their aesthetic experimentations, but was also held at three world-renowned museums that propagated themselves of cultural gatekeepers in major capitalist countries. This exhibition was for many quite obviously sacrilege at best, and at worst actively destroying the SI's radical potential.

There is no doubt that the museum is not a hotbed for radical possibilities, but the academic embrace of the SI's oeuvre since 1989 is more fraught in the integrated spectacle. The wiggle room of autonomous thinking is perhaps more complicated in our time, making the groundswell of scholarship on the SI ambivalent at best. Some will most certainly disagree with any hint of suggesting academic's use of the SI might be productive, but purity is no longer a luxury we can afford. Each academic work, while problematic in its own way, must be considered not only in the quality of the work but also how it is put to use, and these questions are usually not as clear as they might appear on the surface.

To speak of the SI as a 'collective inheritance,' then, is also to inherit these academic dealings. For better or worse, this is the primary space in which I've encountered Situationist theory and practice, as a cultural heritage that can be made use of in varied ways. The point isn't to produce more individual and privatized knowledge about the SI, nor is it to freeze their contributions in their own time. Instead it is to pull their most useful aspects into the present, and it is this act of pulling the SI into the

¹⁰ The SI point to the Communist failure to support revolution in Spain in 36-9, their crushing of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, as well as the bureaucrats selling out the workers and students in May '68, among others.

present that leads us back to their work on détournement — a deceptively complex method and practice that attempts to restore all earlier critical efforts in culture, philosophy, and revolutionary movements to their most radical potentials.

Preliminary notes on détournement

In issue one of *International Situationiste* a provisional Situationist dictionary defined détournement as:

...short for “détournement of preexisting aesthetic elements.” The integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu. In this sense there can be no situationist painting or music, but only a situationist use of those means. In a more elementary sense, détournement within the old cultural spheres is a method of propaganda, a method which reveals the wearing out and loss of importance of those spheres.¹¹

Debord previously elaborated the basis for the definition above with fellow Lettrist Gil Wolman in a text entitled “A User’s Guide to Détournement” penned in 1956. This text predates the formation of the Situationist International, but remains one of the best articulations of the concept and provides the groundwork for what would become much of Situationist cultural antagonisms. To understand détournement one must also understand the totalizing critique the SI put forward: “we believe that all known means of expression are going to converge in a general movement of propaganda that must encompass all the perpetually interacting aspects of social reality.”¹² In other words, all expressions through spectacular mechanisms serve to strengthen the spectacle. This includes art production, which has been corrupted by bourgeois separation of the senses from life. Thus there can be no culture produced that doesn’t converge into the spectacle.

¹¹ “Definitions” in *Situationist International Anthology*, *Situationist International Anthology*, pp 52.

¹² Debord and Wolman, “User’s Guide to Détournement,” *Situationist International Anthology*. pp 14.

All art and spectacular media must be detourned to be used “for partisan propaganda purposes.”¹³ Propaganda can swing both ways, but it must include a critique of itself to have any radical possibilities. It is necessarily political for Debord and Wolman because it is one means of communicating in an incommunicable world, a primary source of alienation.

For us, every use of the permitted forms of communication has therefore to both be and not be a refusal of this communication: it must, that is, be a communication that contains its refusal and a refusal containing communication, i.e., the inversion of this refusal into a constructive project. All this must lead somewhere. Communication will now contain *its own critique*.¹⁴

Thus détournement can be a method for directly combating the spectacle without organizing as the vanguard.

The most significant claim in “A User’s Guide to Détournement” is the call to push past the “idea of a mere scandal, which has become pretty much old hat.” Artists must surpass simple negation of the bourgeois notion of ‘artistic genius’ à la Marcel Duchamp and proceed toward “pushing the process to the point of negating the negation.”¹⁵ This double negative is what can bounce out of the dialectical loop that circles back and eats itself, the loop that reinforces bourgeois art production even in its would-be critical forms. This is the basis for their critique of Duchamp — he merely turns the *Mona Lisa* upside-down with her new mustache, but it is still hanging in the museum. Only after this loop is knocked off its axis can the SI venture into the propagandistic and communist possibilities of détournement; only in getting outside this

¹³ Ibid. pp 15.

¹⁴ “Editorial Notes: Primary Communication,” trans. Tom McDonough in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*. pp 134.

¹⁵ Debord and Wolman, “User’s Guide to Détournement,” *Situationist International Anthology*, pp 15.

mode of artistic production entirely, which can for the SI only express decayed bourgeois culture, can cultural work be used in the class struggle. It follows then that for détournement to have any political significance we must “eliminate all remnants of the notion of personal property... we have to go beyond them,” because only then can détournement, “clashing head-on with all social and legal conventions,” become a “powerful cultural weapon in the service of a real class struggle... It is the real means of proletarian artistic education, the first step toward a *literary communism*.”¹⁶

I’ll return to détournement, particularly regarding Debord’s film *The Society of the Spectacle* — but first it is important to understand our contemporary cultural and academic relationship to the SI, which defines their influence and use within activist spheres, the art world, and the academy.

The invisible films of Guy Debord

While Debord’s 1967 book *The Society of the Spectacle* has received considerable notoriety and popularity, his films are much less known and scarcely studied. This is largely because Debord withdrew his films from circulation in 1984 in a gesture of mourning and protest after the murder of his friend and financier Gérard Lebovici, who ran a radical publishing house in France that published Debord’s work. Not only did Lebovici publish Debord’s books and finance his films, he purchased a cinema to show Debord’s films exclusively and continuously.¹⁷ Debord stuck to his word that his films

¹⁶ Ibid. pp 15, 18.

¹⁷ In recognizing the potential paradox of having a financier for what purportedly are some of the most radical films ever to have been produced, Debord was sure to make his public aware of his autonomy as a filmmaker. In the announcement of *The Society of the Spectacle* he writes: “In the socio-economic context, the total freedom required to create such a film obviously means that the producer must renounce any claim to exert any preliminary control over the director, whether by insisting that he present a synopsis or by

would not be shown, and indeed they weren't until after his suicide in 1994. As one of a few scholars who have studied Debord's films, Thomas Levin lets on in a panel discussion that in 1995 when Debord's film *The Society of the Spectacle* (1973) was shown on French television he and other fans of SI eagerly taped the film, which became the basis for the subsequent translation by Keith Sanborn. Sanborn's translation ultimately led to the only available version of the film to this day.¹⁸ By 1996 bootleg copies with English subtitles were timidly being sold by Sanborn and subsequently the folks over at the feisty and long-running underground Situationist-inspired journal *Not Bored!* bought one of Sanborn's bootlegs and began selling cheaper versions of *SoS*. This eventually led to selling bootlegs of other Situationist films, including René Viénet's *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?*, until 2003.¹⁹ All to say, these bootlegged and underground copies remained the only possible way to view the film until it was put online some years later. It wasn't until the film was posted on ubuweb that it was accessible in any

seeking to obtain from him any other sort of meaningless commitment. This has been recognized in the contract between the filmmaker and the producer, Simar Films: 'It is understood that the filmmaker will carry out his work in complete freedom, without any control or supervision whatsoever, and without even being obliged to pay the slightest attention to any comment that the producer might make regarding any aspect of the content or of the cinematic form that the filmmaker feels appropriate for his film.'" In "Original *The Society of the Spectacle*, (announcement of the film)" trans. Ken Knabb. *Guy Debord, Complete Cinematic Works*, pp 222.

¹⁸ For more on the history of Debord's films see Thomas Y. Levin, "Dismantling the Spectacle: the Cinema of Guy Debord," in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, pp 321-454. The panel discussion which included Thomas Levin, Keith Sanborn, Jean-Michel Rabaté, and Anthony Vidler was part of the Slought Foundation's programming entitled "Film as Critical Practice: The Cinema of Guy Debord and the Spectre of the Situationist International," to mark the occasion of the DVD release of Debord's films in 2006. It can be listened to at: <http://slought.org/content/11323/>. Accessed February 8, 2013.

¹⁹ See "Keith Sanborn's \$30 Bootlegs" in *Not Bored!* #27, May 1997. Available at: <http://www.notbored.org/sanborn2.html>. And a statement announcing why they are no longer selling Debord's films at: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-films.html>. November 2003. Both accessed on February 8, 2013.

meaningful way.²⁰ There was a DVD box set released in 2005 of Debord's films in Europe, which was not subtitled and released in its original French. However, due to the resurgence of interest in the films around the box set, and because a few English-speaking scholars were working on the project, it was thought there would be an official release of English versions of Debord's films.²¹ While access to Debord's films is today much greater, primarily thanks to ubuweb, the quality of online versions remains quite low, and there are still two films that are not available with English subtitles: his first and last films, *Howls in Favor of Sade* and *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*. This makes the project of describing Debord's films in English an incomplete one.

It is little surprise, then, that so few have seen Debord's film adaptation of *The Society of the Spectacle* (1973), let alone studied it in any significant way. Still, considering the art world's love affair with Debord and the concept of the spectacle in particular, it's odd that this film — arguably the most significant artistic output Debord ever completed — has largely slipped under the radar of so many art-types who frequently use Debord's theory to situate a critical arts practice against a highly mediated consumer society. Where there is commentary it usually comes in the form of a few pages in a longer text on Debord or the SI.²²

²⁰ A link to this video, as well as all available Situationist films, can be found on the website situationistfilm.wordpress.com. Accessed March 15, 2013.

²¹ See Ken Knabb's introduction in *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works*. Here Knabb lets on that his translations will be the basis for the English release of Debord's film, and that the project is in the works. Unfortunately the project has not come to fruition.

²² As mentioned previously, Thomas Levin's "Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord" is the most significant engagement with Debord's entire film repertoire to date, but one can also find commentary in Kaufmann's *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry*, pp 332-338; as well as a handful of articles on Debord's cinema all available online at: situationistfilm.wordpress.com/texts/.

When and if one begins to engage with Debord's film *SoS*, the reasons it is understudied and under-viewed, become a bit clearer. It is a complicated film, experimental, political, and theoretical all at once. It is just as challenging as the book, with the added difficulty of processing Debord's method of *détournement* as well as the escalation of his critique to encompass the specificity of the images scrawled across the screen. It is also difficult for the simple fact that Debord's film is an epic 90-minute theory film that wasn't made for an English-speaking audience, let alone viewed today 40 years after the film's creation. Enemies were never abstract for Debord; there are always apologists and collaborators like union bureaucrats and socialist politicians to be attacked, as well as spectacular languages like the cinema and the media to be deconstructed and subverted. This meant that the included images are of their era; in no other way could Debord wage his war without spiraling into abstraction or generalizations.²³

Additionally the film can't be taken piecemeal, it demands engagement in its totality or not at all. Debord alludes to this in his original announcement of the film in 1974 when he says: "Its present cinematic adaptation, like the book itself, does not offer a few partial political critiques, but a total critique of the existing world; that is, a critique of all aspects of modern capitalism and of its general system of illusions."²⁴

The film is made up of hundreds of images, some of which hold up quite well but others that do not. These include, among other things, French bureaucrats from the 60s and 70s; artworks significant to French history; various films that have fallen out of favor since 1973 (some of which probably fell out of favor long before); and finally personal

²³ See Levin's "Dismantling the Spectacle," pp 381-382.

²⁴ Guy Debord, *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works*, pp 221.

images of Debord himself and his SI compatriots. Together these images make for a film that is obscure to most contemporary and especially non-French viewers, even relatively informed ones. This aspect of Debord's film is both acknowledged and unacknowledged in the scholarship that does exist. On the one hand, scholars insist that Debord was a strategist who believed that his film and theories were "made to die in the war of time."²⁵ On the other hand, the specificity of the film's image citations tend to become a bit generalized, marking generic commodities common to capitalism, which in turn glosses over the film's accessibility to non-specialized audiences. Taken together, those aspects of the film make it a particularly difficult film to unpack. I suspect that it isn't a failure of scholarship so much as it is a necessity of time and space, as one could quite easily write a book on the film, between its technical and formal aspects, interpretation, and analysis and theoretical development of methodologies Debord uses like *détournement*.

Détournement in *The Society of the Spectacle* (film)

Before elaborating on how Debord utilizes *détournement* in his film I want to — with some reticence for fear of simplifying rather complex practices — introduce two modes of *détournement* for reasons that I will make clear. Although I will make distinctions, it is important to note that they often overlap and become entangled. My goal then is to peel away some of the operative layers in the film to glean some possibilities of *détournement* as a praxis. The first I will refer to as *subversive détournement*, and the second *recuperative détournement*. I'll discuss both modes in

²⁵ Guy Debord, from the script of *In girum imus nocte et consum imir igni*, in *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works*, trans. and ed by Ken Knabb, Oakland: AK Press. 2003. pp 150-151. For a discussion of Debord as a Strategist, see Jason E. Smith "Strategy and the Passions: Guy Debord's Ruses," in *Beyond Potentialities? Politics between Possible and the Impossible*. eds. Mark Potocnik, Frank Ruda, and Jan Völker. Zürich: diaphanes. pp 169-182.

relation to examples from Debord's film but first must lay some general groundwork of Debord's articulation of *détournement* in *The Society of the Spectacle*.

Let's begin by attempting to understand how Debord framed his film:

The cinema is itself an integral part of this world, serving as one of the instruments of the separate *representation* that opposes and dominates the actual proletarianized society. As revolutionary critique engages in battle on the very terrain of the cinematic spectacle, it must thus *turn the language of that medium against itself* and give itself a form that is itself revolutionary.²⁶

There is perhaps no better succinct statement on Debord's film *SoS* than his own regarding his intentions with the film. In order to turn the cinema against itself, his primary weapon is *détournement*, which he describes succinctly in his announcement to the film as "communication that includes a critique of itself."²⁷ *SoS* is Debord's fourth film and the first to be constructed entirely of appropriated or detoured images (to say nothing of the written text which serves as a voiceover).²⁸ What is significant regarding the above quote is two things: one, that the cinema was an important battleground when *SoS* was made (if this is still true it is to a lesser degree post-internet and with the further proliferation of television), and two, *détournement*'s goal is usually not to negate a single image but to dismantle the languages of power. For Debord, the language of cinema was derivative of the bankruptcy of art when it detaches itself from life. When this happens it becomes a *representation* of sensory experience and can only be expressed in the historical language of power of its era, aka the spectacle.

²⁶ Guy Debord, "On *The Society of the Spectacle* (announcement of the film)," [1974] in *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works*, pp 221.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ For a good analysis and explanation of Debord's use of *détournement* in the book *The Society of the Spectacle* see Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord*.

Of course there is a danger of theorizing a totalizing language of power in which all expressions of culture are expressed within its context. To illustrate Debord's intellectual process of solving this problem, I want to juxtapose his description of the then fashionable structuralism with his notion of culture within the spectacle. It is no coincidence that Debord's discussion of structuralism arrives in the book *SoS* just before his theoretical development of *détournement*. What Debord's critique of structuralism shows is that he always saw a way to struggle outside any vanguardist organizing and never became stuck in the paralyzing notion 'there is no outside' that many intellectuals of the time appeared to. This is the reason he takes to a swipe at structuralism:

This fantasy of a preexisting unconscious structure's hegemony over all social practice is illegitimately derived from linguistic and anthropological structural models — even from models of functioning capitalism — that are misapplied even in their original contexts; and the only reason why this has occurred is that academic approach fit for complacent middle-range managers, a mode of thought completely anchored in an awestruck celebration of the existing system, crudely reduces all reality to the existence of that system.²⁹

and:

[...] Structuralism is *a thought underwritten by the State*, a thought that conceives of the present conditions of spectacular "communication" as an absolute. Its fashion of studying the code of messages in itself is merely the product, and the acknowledgement, of the society where communication has the form of a cascade of hierarchical signals.³⁰

Debord goes on to explain why it is important to avoid the crippling logic of structuralism as he moves into his discussion of *détournement*. Notably this discussion

²⁹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* [1967], trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1995. Thesis 201, pp 141-2.

³⁰ Ibid. Thesis 202, pp 142. Emphasis original.

comes eleven years after “A User’s Guide to Détournement” and brings with it a much more sophisticated analysis of detournement’s possibility. I’ll quote at length:

Without a doubt, the critical concept of the *spectacle* is susceptible of being turned into just another empty formula of sociologico-political rhetoric designed to explain and denounce everything *in the abstract* — so serving to buttress the spectacular system itself. For obviously no *idea* could transcend the spectacle that exists — it could only transcend ideas that exist about the spectacle. For the society of the spectacle to be effectively destroyed, what is needed are people setting a practical force in motion. A critical theory of the spectacle cannot be true unless it joins forces with the practical movement of negation within society; and this negation, which constitutes the resumption of revolutionary class struggle, cannot for its part achieve self-consciousness unless it develops the critique of the spectacle, a critique that embodies the theory of negation’s real conditions — the practical conditions of present-day oppression — and that also, inversely, reveals the secret of negation’s potential. Such a theory expects no miracles from the working class. It views the reformulation and satisfaction of proletarian demands as a long-term undertaking. To make an artificial distinction between theoretical and practical struggle — for, on the basis here defined, the very constitution and communication of a theory of this kind cannot be conceived independently of a *rigorous practice* — we may say with certainty that the obscure and difficult path of critical theory must not be the path of the practical movement that occurs at the level of society as a whole.³¹

This is a great moment from Debord in which one can really get a sense of how the SI set themselves apart from most of their contemporaries. Debord’s differentiation between what he saw as a totalizing complicit paralysis (or bourgeois indifference) and a total war on every level of society is clear enough, and this is the stage that is set for a theoretical articulation of détournement in *The Society of the Spectacle*. The next step would be to begin implementing the theory in practice, and since ‘cinema is an integral part of this world,’ it is as good of a place to start a war as any.

³¹ Ibid. Thesis 203, pp 143. It might be useful to mention that Debord’s discussion of both structuralism and détournement are in a chapter 8 of *Spectacle* entitled “Negation and Consumption in the Cultural Sphere,” which might be misinterpreted as a reduction of what we commonly refer to somewhat interchangeably as art and/or culture.

It is also important to point out, against the enlarged ego that often surrounds avant-garde histories as well as Debord's own at times self-aggrandizing rhetoric, that his proposal here is for *détournement* to join the movement that negates society as part of the revolutionary class struggle. In this light, Debord's film, while grandiose in scale and rhetoric, could be read as a rather modest contribution to the 'long-term demands' of a proletarian struggle. One could easily detourn obsolete social and political organizational models, or methods of sabotage and direct action, for example. And although my emphasis here is on film, it should not be mistaken that I am attempting to elevate its importance as a sphere of struggle. Instead, Debord's attempt at cultural negation reflects his insistence to not lead anyone but contribute where he felt he could develop a methodology and critique. *SoS* was also an experiment in deploying a theoretical critique in a new terrain and does not sacrifice any complexity in the name of 'accessibility.'

If one recognizes Debord's film as an effort in developing a methodology of *détournement*, as an exercise of theory-in-practice, the common condemnation of the film as elitist becomes less stable. Despite Debord's ego, I would claim he was most interested in attempting to develop these methods of critique and modes of communication rather than acting as anyone's leader (other than the SI's, of course) or assuming that he had any answers to the revolutionary struggle. It follows then that we must extract Debord's contributions in *SoS* and build on them, rather than studying them under glass as a relic of a lost revolutionary moment.

To attack languages of the spectacle Debord generates a "critical theory that has to be communicated in its own language — the language of contradiction..."³² In order to

³² Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 204, pp 143.

do this in *SoS*, in many instances, he uses images in a generalized way, as stand-ins for tropes of the capitalist landscape. There are dozens of images of nude or scantily clad women, for example, in what is surely the most problematic aspect of the film. In this instance, each woman remains nameless, iterated as the exchangeable commodity object she has become in the economy, a stand-in for a spectacular and commodified sexuality detached from oneself. As an example, in only a few seconds into the film we see a woman at a fair distance who is doing the splits on a stage, rolling her torso back and forth. It then cuts to a shot in which she is much closer, now on her knees, and in a sort of ambiguously sexual and/or trancelike wild series of movements, she pulsates upward from the floor in guttural and forceful gestures. Wearing only small bikini bottoms, she first rubs her breasts until she falls backward while still on her knees to rip part of her bottoms off in what seems to be an uncontrollable urge. It is an uncomfortably long scene at about twenty-five seconds. In other words, this is an anonymous soft-core porn clip from presumably the 70s, and could be one of hundreds of clips (millions today). While the woman is onscreen the voiceover proceeds in a monotone voice: "...The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of that life can no longer be recovered. *Fragmented* views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a *separate pseudoworld* that can only be looked at."³³

³³ Script from "The Society of the Spectacle," in *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works*, pp 44. The film can be viewed online at: http://ubu.com/film/debord_spectacle.html. Accessed February 27, 2013. Even though the script is based on the book, I'll refer to the script when referencing the film's usage of particular theses. Emphasis original.

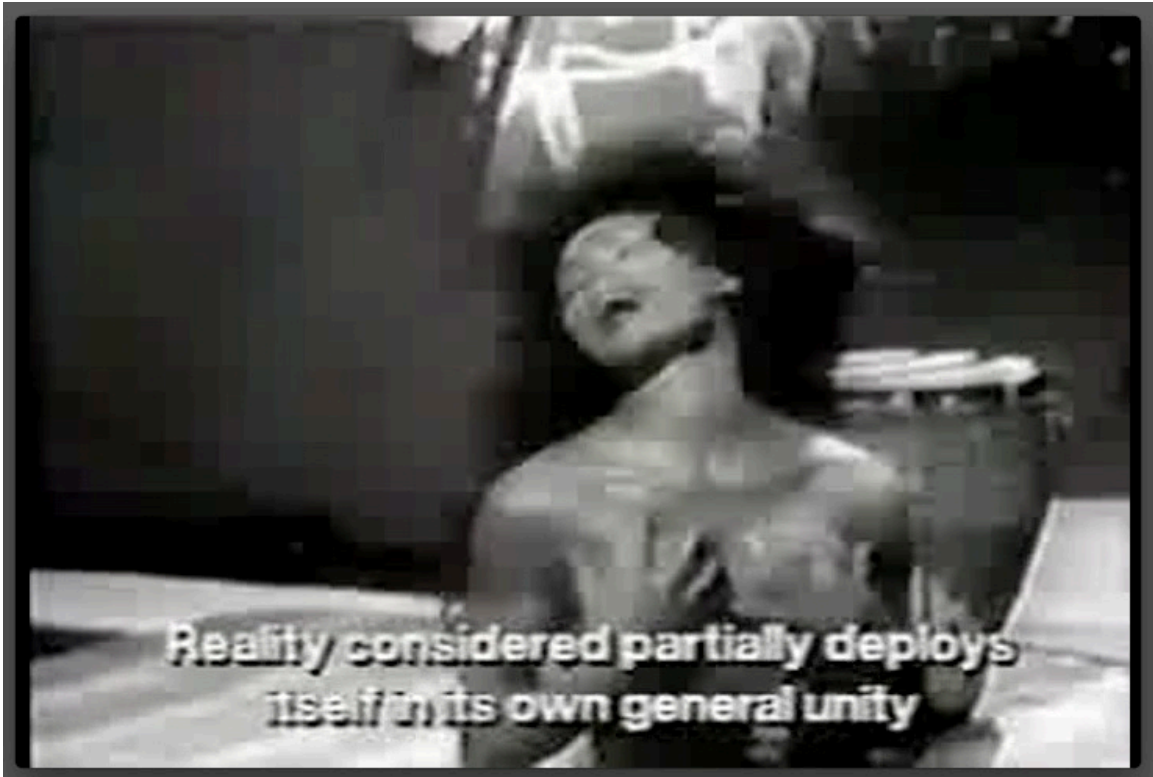


Figure 1: “Long Striptease,” still from *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967.

As mentioned above, the goal isn't the destruction of an image per se but to communicate in a way that includes a critique of itself. This style of communicating with a dialectical tension brought to the surface is a style of dialectical theory *in practice* that is displaced into the spectacle with intention of doing harm to it. In the spectacle, détournement “is a scandal and an abomination to the canons of the prevailing language, and to the sensibilities molded by those canons, because it includes in it its positive use of existing concepts a simultaneous recognition of their rediscovered fluidity, of their inevitable destruction.”³⁴ It is a scandal because in the spectacle “‘what appears is good; what is good appears.’ The passive acceptance it demands is already effectively imposed

³⁴ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 205, pp 144.

by its monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without allowing any reply.”³⁵ And while the spectacle legitimates itself through unilateral communication and performance, Debord also suggests that language’s possible destruction is located in the creation of cracks in that language of power through the manifestation of a dialectical tension via *détournement* — the ‘present style of critical theory in practice.’ Thus, Debord doesn’t negate a single image; he offers cracks from which to sabotage a spectacular language. This is the basis for what I’ve offered as a *subversive détournement*, primarily because it preoccupies itself with negation as the goal of subversion. Naming such mode of *détournement* subversive also is in following with common understandings of *détournement* found more broadly in cultural inheritors of Situationist practice, if a bit simplistic in their deployment.³⁶

In order for this style of critical theory in practice to work, Debord must also reiterate the language of power to posit its critique. While Debord uses hundreds of images and a wide range of them — from banal politician’s speeches to Hollywood films, from images of war to images of nude women — they all have some degree of resonance, pleasurable or not (often-times both). In “A User’s Guide to *Détournement*” Debord and Wolman describe the possibilities of putting two dissonant worlds together in a dialectical friction: “the mutual interference of two worlds of *feeling*, or the juxtaposition of two independent expressions, supersedes the original elements and produces a

³⁵ Script from “The Society of the Spectacle,” in *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works*, pp 46. This thesis is presented in the film only a three minutes after the ‘long striptease,’ and displays images of Fidel Castro while the voiceover delivers the text. Castro is first addressing television cameras with a huge image of Cuba behind him, and second excitedly addressing press reporters.

³⁶ “Culture Jamming” for example has direct lineage to *détournement*, but generally it is discussed and enacted in much less sophisticated ways than Debord is utilizing in his film.

synthetic organization of greater efficacy. Anything can be used.”³⁷ Most, if not all, images express some form of violence in that they demonstrate and re-inscribe a separation from life and offer a mere representation. But some images and languages carry with them much more affective charges and elicit a strong feeling response. There are moments in the film, and I would argue the scene described above is one of them, that the feeling response singular images carry are rendered truly ambivalent, succeeding in Debord’s goal of opening a space for that image regime’s possible destruction. The length of this scene, ‘the long striptease’ as it is described in the script, is enough to at least complicate one’s participation of voyeurism and complacency in not only the ideologically inflected position of spectatorship but also its positive violence that inscribes itself on marked [sexualized] bodies (a similar case could be made with images of colonial wars).

Debord’s use of sexualized images of women denotes the affective nature of the spectacle. While some images are banal and others mark a stronger visceral response, Debord underestimates this disproportional display of violence embodied in feeling responses to particular spectacular languages. On this basis Debord’s use of women as commodified stand-ins for a withering passion in the spectacle marks not only ambivalence but also, in certain moments in the film, a re-inscription of its original patriarchal violence. Even though I think the scene described above was successful, Debord pushes his luck as the film proceeds by continually parading more and more of the same images at the viewer. At a certain point the parade of women that flash on Debord’s screen become little more than glossy backdrop to his theory. One might argue that these images of women’s persistence is mirrored in the spectacle (which is true), but

³⁷ “User’s Guide to Détournement,” *Situationist International Anthology*, pp 15. Emphasis mine.

their proportional time in Debord's film can only offer so much before our feeling responses don't overwhelm their supposed negations. Whether we view them with a misogynist pleasure or with a deep discomfort and anger, no new criticisms are advanced. While their appearance as commodities might be theoretically justified on the basis of their exchangeability (as images, as commodities), again, these images' feeling response (in this instance, their violence) overshadows any attack on the spectacle-commodity economy Debord can muster. More plainly, with Debord's images of sexualized women we reach a saturation point, and they can only act as repetitions of the patriarchal violence they have already perpetrated in their past life.

I linger on Debord's use of sexualized imagery largely to trace a potential limit to *détournement* as it is used for a tool of negation in *SoS*, and perhaps more importantly the danger that is always present in re-stating a language of power. If these languages are to be re-stated in order to be knocked off their unilateral track of communication, there is always the possibility that the critical forces attempting to derail said language might simply be overrun by sheer force. Spectacle has never been accused of weakness or lack of intelligence, and thus picking a fight with it always runs the risk of creating material echoes in its re-inscription.

Parenthetically, I also spend additional time here not only because it warrants attention (as do many other parts that I have neglected), but also because critics of this film have by and large overlooked this rather loud and complicated aspect of the film. Perhaps this oversight is due to the inconvenience or supposed irrelevance of this problem to their thesis, but to describe the revolutionary potential of any film without pointing out its most obvious sexist flaws is at best problematic. Additionally, in a

discussion of *détournement* and/or subversion, surely this aspect of Debord's film itself warrants detouring. In this respect, the detour of criticism is not only relevant to the thesis, but imperative.

While Debord's primary project is to attack the languages of the spectacle, in this case he is also developing *détournement* as a cultural practice that borrows the best elements from the past and alters them so they might again become subversive in the present. It is here that we locate *recuperative détournement*. "...The device of *détournement* restores all the earlier critical effort's subversive qualities to past critical judgments that have congealed into respectable truths."³⁸ McKenzie Wark takes this statement of Debord's further in a discussion of academic discourse, in particular the academy's love affair with Foucault.

Foucault undermines the romantic theory of authorship by speaking of *discourse* as a distribution of author functions. For Foucault, a statement is authorized by a particular form of discourse, a regime of truth, a procedure for assigning truth-value to statements. It is not hard to see why this captivated the minds of academics. It made the procedures in which academics are obsessively drilled the very form of power itself. As if that by which academics are made, the molding of their bodies to desks and texts, that about which they know the most, even more than they know their allotted fields, were the very index of power. Reading Foucault is like taking a master class on how the game of scholarship is to be played, and with the reliable alibi that this knowledge of power, of knowledge as power, is to be used in the interests of *resistance* to something or other. *Détournement*, on the other hand, turns the tables, upends the game.³⁹

Thus for Wark it isn't the discourse of Marxism, for example, that makes Marx useful for subversion, but instead the appropriation of the best aspects of Marx's thought. To detourn Marx is to destabilize his thought from its codification in discursive languages

³⁸ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 144, pp 144-5.

³⁹ McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street*, pp 40-1.

locked in a complicit academic ritual. In this re-appropriation of a fragment of culture for détournement there is a simultaneous valuing and devaluing; as the “fluid language of anti-ideology... its internal coherence and its adequacy in respect of the practically possible are what validate the ancient kernel of truth that it restores. It founds its cause on nothing but its own truth as critique at work in the present.”⁴⁰

This recuperative side to détournement is essential in establishing the “first steps toward literary communism.” It is also what constantly moves a culture so as to not become hardened in the movement of history that has been consumed by spectacular time. “At stake is the viability of history itself... There is official history and there are other histories, including a history of the desire not to end history but to partake of it.”⁴¹ To take history as a resource is also to reject its status as property and the discourse that legitimates it as such; this distinguishes détournement from the concept and presupposing capitalist logic of quotation in its entirety.⁴²

Détournement treats all of culture as *common property to begin with*, and openly declares its rights. Moreover, it treats it not as a *creative commons*, not as a *wealth of networks*, not as *free culture* or *remix culture*; but as an active place of challenge, agency, strategy, and conflict. Détournement dissolves the rituals of knowledge in an active remembering that calls collective being into existence...⁴³

In this vein Debord uses some images in *SoS* with more respect, or at least with less disdain. These don't serve as an image of spectacle (although they can only be expressed

⁴⁰ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 208, pp 146.

⁴¹ McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street*, pp 42.

⁴² “*Détournement* is the antithesis of quotation, of a theoretical authority invariably tainted if only because it has become quotable, because it is now a fragment torn away from its context, from its own movement, and ultimately from the overall frame of reference of its period and from the precise option that it constituted within that framework...” Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 208, pp 145-6.

⁴³ McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street*, pp 41.

within the spectacle) but instead fragments of culture that carry historic resonance for Debord's war against the spectacle. For example, one montage involves legendary Spanish anarchist Buenaventura Durruti in dialog, through the use of textframes, with a revolutionary sailor from Eisenstein's *October: Ten Days that Shook the World*. "Fellow proletarians, are we really living?" Durruti asks the sailor; he shakes his head no. Durruti continues, "are rest and nourishment not weak remedies for the continual illness that torments us..."⁴⁴ In moments like this, the provenance of the character and/or film bring additional "truth" to the context — a gesture toward recapturing a revolutionary moment in history that resisted all the models of power that have hardened with time in the spectacle. Fuel is added to the fire when those ready to overthrow their masters, whether capitalist or socialist, are agitated with propaganda written by Debord and ostensibly spoken by Durruti. In this way, the insurrectionary nature of Eisenstein's sailor is significant and these détournements of respected figures like Durruti and works like Eisenstein's offer another perspective to Debord's use of détournement rather than pure negation and subversion: one of recuperation.

It is not without ambivalence that the term 'recuperation' is used here, but I offer it in the spirit described by Stephen Shukaitis, who sets recuperation apart from cooption in order to distance it from the notion that recuperation only refers to the theft by capitalists, curators, academics or artists that are consumed by institutional powers. Instead, recuperation also refers to a period of recovery,⁴⁵ which brings us to Debord's description of détournement's interest in restoring earlier critical efforts' subversive

⁴⁴ Script from "The Society of the Spectacle," in *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works*, pp 66.

⁴⁵ See Chapter 10 of Stephen Shukaitis' *Imaginal Machines: Autonomy and Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Life*. London: Minor Compositions, 2009.

qualities. Finally, thinking of recuperative détournement may also return us to and clarify the opening quote of this text where McKenzie Wark celebrates 50 years of recuperation of the Situationist. If taken together, subversive and recuperative modes of détournement can reflect a pre-figurative communist cultural practice that freely borrows and builds upon the cultural commons while simultaneously offering a mode of attack and subversion within the spectacle.

A note on audience and propaganda

Debord and the SI sometimes appeared to oscillate between high intellectualism (one thing they could not be accused of was being academic) and uncritical embrace of the autonomous proletariat.⁴⁶ Debord's book and film *SoS* was no different — while deeply philosophical, so full of unspoken lines of détournement,⁴⁷ Debord nevertheless insisted that *certain* workers might understand his film. *Refutation of All Judgments, Pro or Con, Thus far rendered on the film "The Society of the Spectacle"* is a companion film to *SoS* completed by Debord in 1975. It is a film perhaps unlike any other, dedicated entirely to refuting all judgments of his film but in so doing clarifying his positions. Debord's clarifications come in the guise of illustrating why the critics simply couldn't

⁴⁶ The SI were critiqued eloquently in "Bring out your Dead," originally published in the UK journal *Endnotes* 1, October 2008. Available online at: <http://endnotes.org.uk/articles/8>. Accessed March 18, 2013. Here the SI is critiqued for their inability to distinguish form and content; their philosophical critique of separation led them to a collapsing of form and content in their embrace of council communism. One can also look to "The Beginning of an Era," in *Anthology*, pp 288-325. Here, the SI reflects on and critiques the events of May '68, and are consistent in their insistence that theory does not dictate action, but that the proletariat must find its theory *in* action. "The May movement was not some political theory looking for workers to carry it out; it was the acting proletariat seeking its theoretical consciousness." pp 293.

⁴⁷ A few have attempted to track down many of Debord's detourned phrases and concepts in *The Society of the Spectacle*. See Anselm Jappe's *Guy Debord*, as well as "Detournements, Allusions, and Quotations in Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*," published online by *NotBored!* At: <http://www.notbored.org/SOTS-detournements.html>. Accessed March 18, 2013.

understand the film, regardless of whether they love or hate it. This film deserves its own analysis, but I want to draw from a few curious breadcrumbs Debord leaves us. First, Debord's voiceover included tidbits such as:

No film is more difficult than its era. For example, there are people who understand, and others who do not understand, that when the French were presented with a new ministry called the 'Quality-of-Life Department,' this was nothing but an age-old ruling-class ploy, designed, as Machiavelli put it, 'to allow them to retain at least the name of what they have already lost.' ...⁴⁸

This statement is clear enough, and in keeping with Debord's critique of bureaucrats, certainly. The point here, and the point he makes over and over again in *Refutations*... is that one's ideology can also blind them to comprehending his film *correctly* and in so doing form an analysis that falls outside the dogmatic confines of the spectacle, be it Communist or otherwise. Fair enough, but then he offers something quite different. In responding to a leftist journalist and critic who reviewed *SoS*, Debord offers:

[This journalist] regrets that a mind of my quality has limited its expression to a 'cinema ghetto' where the masses will have little chance to see it. This argument does not convince me. I prefer to remain in obscurity with these masses, rather than to consent to harangue them under the artificial floodlights manipulated by their hypnotizers.⁴⁹

While Debord never says his film is 'for the masses' exactly, he does make equivocal statements that understanding his films are quite simple, really — one simply must understand basic things about politics, one must be on the right side and not be so stupid, that is, corrupted by spectacular ideologies. This is the implication in the first quote, and yet, those who understand that the 'Quality of Life Department' is a ploy might not

⁴⁸ Script from "Refutation of All Judgments, Pro or Con, Thus far rendered on the film 'The Society of the Spectacle'," in *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works*, pp 117-8.

⁴⁹ Ibid. pp 123.

necessarily understand Hegel or Marx, and Debord doesn't really do any favors in dumbing them down.

This practice of clarifying positions — or of correcting those who constantly misunderstand Debord is significant and became a common practice for Debord.⁵⁰ One way we might interpret this practice of constant clarification (aside from attributing it to his possible egoism which teaches us nothing) is to remember that Debord never sought any kind of vanguard position. He was staunchly critical of Lenin and Leninists, and insisted that the result of Leninism's 'professional revolutionaries' was "total social management."⁵¹ Debord took great pains to *not* provide *the* revolutionary theory for the proletariat. Instead Debord attempted to explain and describe the spectacle and clarify positions. Debord provides a strong critique of the scientific defense of revolution on the basis that it mistakenly "identifies the proletariat with the bourgeoisie with respect to the *revolutionary seizure of power*."⁵² "The bourgeoisie came to power because it was the class of the developing economy. The proletariat will never come to embody power unless it becomes the *class of consciousness*..."⁵³

The fusion of knowledge and action must be effected within the historical struggle itself, in such a way that each of these poles depends for its validation on the other. What constitutes the proletarian class as a subject is its organizing of revolutionary struggles and its organizing of society at

⁵⁰ In addition to *Refutations*... one can also see "How Not to Understand Situationist Books," in *Anthology*, pp 336-347. Published in *IS* #12 in 1969 this essay spends the bulk of its time clarifying misrepresentations of two famous Situationist books that were published the previous year, *The Society of the Spectacle* and Raoul Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life* [1967], trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oakland: PM Press, 2012. Also *Comments on 'The Society of the Spectacle,'* as well as *Considerations on the Assassination of Gérard Lebovici* were both largely responses to what was being spoken about Debord and his theories.

⁵¹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 98. pp 68.

⁵² *Ibid.* Thesis 86. pp 56.

⁵³ *Ibid.* Thesis 88. pp 58.

the *moment of revolution*: this is the point at which the *practical conditions of consciousness* must be assembled and the theory of praxis verified by virtue of its transformation into theory-in-practice...⁵⁴

The proletariat's agency will *not* be a theoretical discovery; it will be worked out in practice. When this is not the case, and this is the basis for Debord's critique of Leninism, theory is

...*imposed* by statist and hierarchical methods borrowed from the bourgeois revolution. The forms of organization developed subsequently by the worker's movement on the basis of this dereliction of theory have tended to turn to bar the construction of a unitary theory, to break theory up instead of into a variety of specialized and fragmentary types of knowledge.⁵⁵

In other words, what *should* have been developed and transformed with time by the proletariat as a unitary historical *practice*, was instead replaced by 'professional revolutionaries' who imposed models of organization upon them. This is the theoretical logic of understanding why the bureaucrats consistently fail to understand spontaneous workers' struggles like those of May '68, because Leninist theory is "ideologically alienated, it cannot even recognize the practical verification of the unitary historical thought that it has betrayed whenever that verification emerges in spontaneous workers' struggles; on the contrary, all it can do is help repress it and destroy all memory of it."⁵⁶

I recount Debord's articulation of theory-in-practice to offer a thesis on why he was so committed to clarifying his positions, usually by way of attacking professionals — be they academics, journalists, or critics — because he saw these apparently wrong positions as having very real authoritarian and counter-revolutionary danger when

⁵⁴ Ibid. Thesis 90. pp 59-60.

⁵⁵ Ibid. pp 60.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

‘spontaneous’ workers’ struggles emerge, like those of May ‘68. Because we know Debord didn’t believe in a vanguard, and that he didn’t see his film as an organizational tool for a proletarian struggle (his theory wouldn’t allow for this), but instead as an intervention into the field of spectacular media. It is significant that Debord’s chapter on *détournement* in the book *SoS* arrives after his long chapter entitled “The Proletariat as a Subject of Representation,” which lays out Debord’s scathing critiques of any notion of a vanguard I’ve described above. This sentiment perhaps might be summarized best by the famous pro-situ quip “we will not lead, we will only detonate.” *Détournement* and intervention into spectacular media can dialog back with the workers’ movement, but also combat the ‘artificial floodlights of the manipulators.’

As a critique, one often might say “by publicly denouncing the spectacle, am I not thereby entering the spectacle?” Debord, of course, has a response: “This sort of purism is obviously invoked in the hope of convincing people that no one should ever appear in the spectacle as an enemy of it.”⁵⁷ But this project was necessary for Debord in lieu of the fact that it was his only option for communication within spectacular languages. So while workers can organize themselves, it is necessary to subvert, and eventually with others, join in a movement to destroy the languages that are the cause of their alienation.

⁵⁷ Script from “Refutation of All Judgments, Pro or Con, thus far rendered on the film ‘The Society of the Spectacle’,” in *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works*, pp 123.

CHAPTER II NO USELESS COMMENTARY

Do we really need more commentary on the spectacle?

Finally we can return to the question: why remake *The Society of the Spectacle*? I've tried to illustrate through Debord's theoretical articulation and his practice of détournement, this concept's continual relevance. Additionally the Situationists have become a collective inheritance with which we can make use of in practice. But the danger remains when commenting on any past work of freezing it in its time.

I always have the impression that commenting on Debord is a way of withdrawing his work from its specific time (which is a definite time, outlined by Debord himself) in order to place it in the much hazier time of reflection, analysis or exegesis, which always risks being either academic, or else corralled into a kind of literary history to which he wanted to belong.⁵⁸

All the academic work on the SI leads Wark to provocatively, and a bit snidely, ask: "Do we really need another commentary on *The Society of the Spectacle*?"⁵⁹ While there are multiple commentaries on Debord's famous text, there are not as many as one might think.⁶⁰ Most commentaries are mediocre and peppered throughout histories of the SI and biographies of Debord that make engaging with spectacle a secondary concern.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Oliver Assayas, trans. Adrian Martin and Rachel Zerner, *A Post-May Adolescence: Letter to Alice Debord*, Austrian Film Museum. 2012. pp 87-88.

⁵⁹ Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street*, p 4.

⁶⁰ The most useful commentaries on the concept of spectacle are Debord's *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*; and Part 1 of Jappe's *Guy Debord*, which is the most thorough engagement with Debord's intellectual history and his knowledge of, in particular, Marx, Lukács, and Hegel, who were significant in his developing completion of *The Society of the Spectacle*.

⁶¹ There are at least four Debord biographies in English: Jappe's *Guy Debord* cited above; Vincent Kaufmann, *Guy Debord; Revolution in the Service of Poetry*, trans. Robert Bononno. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010; Andy Merrifield, *Guy Debord*, London: Reaktion Books, 2005; Len Bracken, *Guy Debord: The Life and Times of a Situationist Revolutionary*. Venice, CA: Feral House, 1997. Jappe's text is the most significant engagement with Debord's work and less so about his biography, and

Even more commonly, one will find brief summaries of spectacle in various articles that more times than not drastically reduce the sophistication of Debord's work into a relatively simplistic totalizing concept that rarely engages with Debord's theorization outside of his analysis of media-centric corporate conglomerations and cultures. So in many ways, yeah, we do need more work on spectacle.

The problem within the art field is the way in which the spectacle becomes a shorthand for a totalizing mediatic alienation-machine in the way of all of society, which must be ruptured by, you guessed it, artists. Debord made a similar observation on the tendency to be reductive with his totalizing critique in his follow-up book *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*: "Rather than talk of the spectacle, people often prefer to use the term 'media.' And this is meant to describe a mere instrument..."⁶² The risk is recognizing the media *as* spectacle rather than the media *as an instrument* of spectacle is to open space for reformism. Liberal reform of the media, which might include an insistence on state-supported independent media to act as a check and balance to both capitalist and/or State-sponsored media, while perhaps a generally good thing, is by no means revolutionary. To misapprehend a fragment for the total can only result in such reformism.

Debord's method of engaging in struggle within and against the spectacle via détournement was much more sophisticated and interlocked with historical, political, and cultural manifestations than simple reductions to the 'mass media.' In these scenarios, spectacle becomes a blanket concept to juxtapose any artworks or social experiments that

takes a particular care to emphasize Debord's Hegelian-Lukacs orientation in *The Society of the Spectacle*. For a more significant biographical account, see Kaufmann, who balances intellectual and personal history well.

⁶² Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, pp 6.

are remotely critical of contemporary society and express desire to resist alienation. But this kind of deployment usually neglects to pursue Debord's revolutionary project, and certainly overlooks his analysis of professionalized culture as always-already co-opted and unable to produce real potential for an unmediated anti-capitalist movement.⁶³

It is no wonder that Wark claims we need no more commentary on the spectacle, but perhaps he is a bit hardline — surely we still need solid interpretation of *SoS*, right? After all, detourning Debord for present use might make it a whole lot easier if he was understood in a more profound way in the first place, as it is certainly the case that spectacle is understood poorly and deployed in fast and loose ways by many. But point taken — there is always a question of *how* to make best use of theory not simply to interpret it. And I'm inclined to agree with Wark when he says of *SoS*: “perhaps today one could only do it justice by refusing to paraphrase it.”⁶⁴

Notes on *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2013

In retrospect, I intuitively followed Wark's advice to refuse to paraphrase Debord's massive work and instead attempt to understand it in its totality as it was presented, in its own time on its own terms. Ideally, this solves both the problem of refusing to be reductive while also detourning Debord in proper form, that is, restoring ‘earlier critical effort's subversive qualities to past critical judgments that have congealed into respectable truths.’ While that is a bold claim, and I certainly wouldn't insist upon

⁶³ Whether or not the SI was correct in their well-known thesis that art must be suppressed in order to be realized, it is a mistake to overlook the problem of professionalization; especially in a time when the field of art and culture is highly professionalized and certainly by and large complicit with capitalism. For more on this see “For a Revolutionary Judgment of Art,” in *Situationist International Anthology*, pp 393-398.

⁶⁴ Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street*, pp 4.

my ability to re-instate the apparent and/or supposed brilliance of a film like *SoS*, I would, however, insist that my film quarrels with Debord's book and film, struggling to bring alive Debord's most lucid insights.

In starting the film, I studied Debord's use of images closely, which required primarily understanding his images-as-citations. Although *détournement* can appear to have little regard for the specificity of a given image on the basis that all images are reflective of the spectacle, Debord was incredibly precise and purposeful about his use of imagery. Some images were so specific as to cite singular battles in a war; other images were of political figures, union leaders, and of course, filmmakers. To begin re-making a film like *SoS* it was imperative to have at least a working understanding of Debord's methodology, of which I've tried to unpack a few of the different ways Debord deploys imagery above. The next step was to replace or locate a parallel each image for each of Debord's, one-for-one, always while considering three things. First, what/who is in the images? Second, what is Debord's relationship to these images? And third, what is a given image's relationship to the source text and voiceover? There was always a dialogic relationship between these questions and my own understanding of the film, as well as my own experience as a critic and maker in a different time and place (that is, in America in 2013).

In my film one can locate at least four uses of images. We might call for the first use of imagery, for the sake of clarity, images that illustrate the 'persistence of the spectacle' — that the spectacle is alive and well, and Debord's images merely need updating. The second use of imagery revises the thesis through the use of imagery. In these instances, images present some friction with the source-text, revealing its

limitations or points where the analysis breaks down under today's conditions. Thirdly, images are used in order to critique Debord's analysis and use of imagery. This is one reason I've kept certain problematic images from the original, in order to dialog and quarrel with them. Lastly, some images are used without particular self-reflexivity regarding their existence *as images* but instead mark important moments over the course of the last 40 years. I'll pick up on why I think each of these are important separately, not because I believe they are mutually exclusive, but to extrapolate each layer that overlaps and crisscrosses at several points.

The 'persistence of the spectacle' strategy often comes by way of the use of a two-channel diptych with a 'new' (mine) and 'old' (Debord's) image. In the most didactic moments, these scenes are reiterations of Debord's theses that still resonate. To further explain this we can look at two examples from early in the film. While still establishing what can be considered an introduction to the spectacle, there are several moments when this strategy is used. The first picks up the thread of Debord's use of images of women and engages the same scene, 'the long striptease,' described previously. While Debord's soft-core porn was used to push visceral buttons of the viewer, I've opted a more banal approach to reiterate what everyone already knows — that these images are as common and as problematic as ever. I've coupled a generic clip of a cinematic representation of an exotic dancer. This is one of the more direct usages of images in my film, and importantly it arrives very early. To defend stating a rather obvious fact — that the objectification of women as sexualized and nameless objects — through the usage of yet another strip scene can only come in the introductory moments

of the film and acts as a quick and rough sketch of the spectacular terrain. From there, we can begin to pick it apart and complicate said representations.



Figure 2: “Long Striptease II,” still from *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2013.

Another example of this ‘then and now’ strategy, but differing in that the images are specific rather than generic stand-ins for commodities, can be found in the coupling of the shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald with the hanging of Saddam Hussein. Here the observation of Debord’s original text continues to have profound resonance, and thus reinstating the strategy of the state and/or capital is significant. While we are watching Oswald be shot and Hussein hung, the voice-over reads:

The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a *means of unification*. As a part of society, it is the focal point of all vision and all consciousness. But due to the very fact that this sector is *separate*, it is in reality the domain of delusion and false

consciousness: the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of universal separation.⁶⁵



Figure 3: Hussein and Oswald in spectacular executions, still from *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2013.

In thinking about revising Debord's imagery I also want to point to the section of the film in which Debord discusses *détournement*. In the original, Debord provides a cinematic representation of a military battle between the White Guard and Red partisans in Russia. In my film I've provided a long video documentation of Zapatistas occupying a military base in 2001. Zapatismo can in many ways be thought of as a *détournement* of Marxist traditions of revolution and organization, revised by people to fit their culture and context, allowing their organizational and political culture to change with time as needed. This illustrates beautifully the 'flexible language of anti-ideology,' as well as how to recuperate historical models of both thought and organization in useful and relevant

⁶⁵ Script from "The Society of the Spectacle," in *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works*, pp 44.

ways. This *détournement* exists on a material basis in a community and marks an important moment in history when new terrains of struggle were opened up.

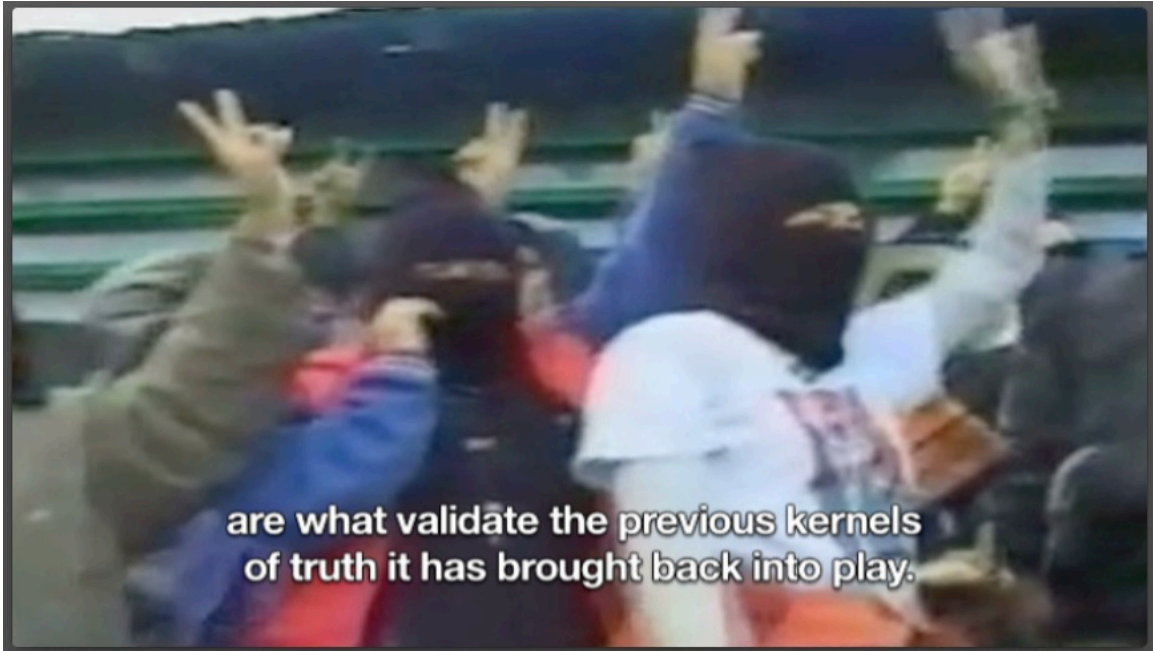


Figure 4: Zapatistas occupy a military base in Chiapas, still from *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2013.

Similar to the way in which the emergence of Zapatistas in Chiapas marks a particular geopolitical context, some images are used to cite major social or political transformations. For example, in the book *SoS* Debord locates spectacular power in both Communist and Capitalist governments — concentrated and diffuse spectacle, respectively. But what happened after the failure of Communism? I've included an image of the lowering of the Soviet flag for the last time in 1991. While we watch the slow lowering of the Red flag, we hear:

The fraudulence of the satisfactions offered by the system is exposed by this continual replacement of products and of general conditions of production. In both the diffuse and concentrated spectacle, entities that

have brazenly asserted their definitive perfection nevertheless end up changing, and only the system endures.⁶⁶



Figure 5: Lowering of the last Soviet flag in Russia, 1991, still from *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2013.

And the spectacle certainly has endured! The fall of Communism only opened the floodgates for capitalism to spread its wings. This comes as a surprise to no one, and Debord himself predicted this transition in introducing the “integrated spectacle” in 1988.⁶⁷ But we needn’t elaborate this too much, as the advancement of the integrated spectacle is located in images throughout the film, notably images of the internet, as well as commercials that have proven to co-opt feelings, affects, and revolutionary sensibilities. This sentiment is characterized clearly by the Levi’s campaign ‘Go Forth,’ which is shown

⁶⁶ Script from “The Society of the Spectacle,” in *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works*, pp 64.

⁶⁷ Guy Debord, *Comments on The Society of the Spectacle*, pp 8-13.

in its entirety. This Levi's ad uses famous writer Charles Bukowski's "The Laughing Heart":

*your life is your life
 don't let it be clubbed into dank submission.
 be on the watch.
 there are ways out.
 there is a light somewhere.
 it may not be much light but
 it beats the darkness.
 be on the watch.
 the gods will offer you chances.
 know them.
 take them.
 you can't beat death but
 you can beat death in life, sometimes.
 and the more often you learn to do it,
 the more light there will be.
 your life is your life.
 know it while you have it.
 you are marvelous
 the gods wait to delight
 in you.*



Figure 6: Still from Levi's 'Go Forth' commercial, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2013.

Using what is now a common trope, this ad co-opts images of youthful sex and rebellion. The short-film turned commercial is full of beautiful young bodies engaging in activities as if they were straight out of the beat generation with contemporary clothes. Most egregiously, there are a few scenes of militant activists confronting cops. Resisting capitalism and street fighting with cops brought to you by Levi's! This sequence is the fantasy of integrated spectacle — to co-opt images of revolutionaries and thus also co-opt imaginative possibilities for resistance.

Finally, and no less importantly, we can look to moments in the film that directly critique Debord's use of imagery. One of the most difficult aspects in working on this film was not only understanding Debord's use of women as sexualized objects, but also how to engage with and critique this broader paradigm that was so favorable of avant-garde men in the 60s and 70s. Because it is such a common paradigm in the avant-garde tradition, I found it important to not simply gloss over the images. Nor did I want to continue displaying them with a wink, as if my awareness of their violence was enough.

In figures 7 and 8 one can see stills from the founder of the 'alternative' soft core porn company Suicide Girls (SG), self-described on their website as "an adult lifestyle brand that redefines beauty with our unique pin up girls and active, smart online community." In this clip the founder of SG, whose name we learn is Missy, is introducing a book called *Beauty Redefined* and flips through its pages showing various beautiful tattooed and pierced Suicide Girls. It is only with their tattoos and piercings that these women stray at all from the normative standardized blonde beauty; in every other way these women are beautiful by all cultural standards.

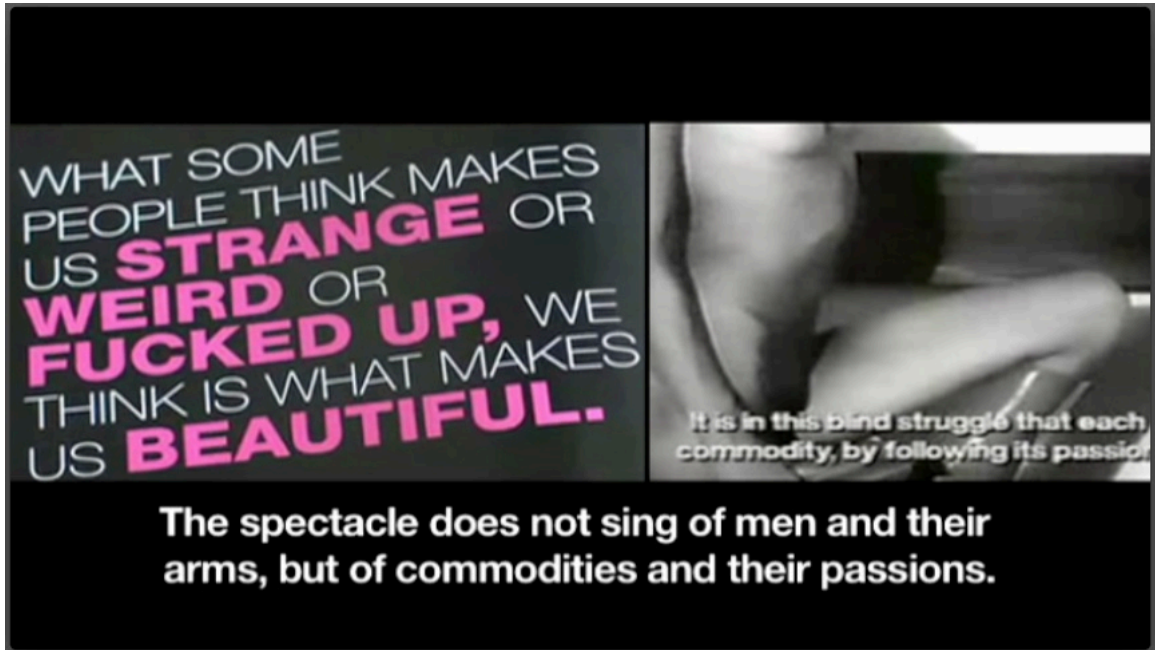


Figure 7: Suicide Girls I. SG expresses itself as 'alt,' still from *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2013.



Figure 8: Suicide Girls II. The founder discusses a new book, coyly and playfully covering a model's breasts. Still from *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2013.

There is a lot going on in this scene. First we have Debord's original stills of nude women that operate completely gratuitously as stand-ins for the hegemonic representation of sexualized beings. They offer little critique that hasn't already been made earlier in the film (both the original and in my re-make). In order to hold Debord's feet to the fire, so to speak, it was important to include his images despite their obvious problems. By juxtaposing these photos against a video of the founder of the Suicide Girls, the friendly and cute Missy, discussing SG's new beautiful, glossy, coffee table book *Beauty Redefined*, the problem of the sexualized woman as exchangeable image is complicated in various ways. Missy is a capitalist and occupies the position of peddler in the name of quasi-empowerment through the supposed rupture of the hegemonic representation of women and normative standards of beauty. As the still above shows, the book proudly declares it is forging a space for the underdogs of the sexualized woman as commodity: "What people think is *strange* or *weird* or *fucked up*, we think is what makes us beautiful." The proliferation of different tastes is suggested via the notion of the alt-beauty but what purports to break the hegemony of the normative blonde models of Debord's banal parade of nameless women, obviously can only march lock-step in line with the other women's bodies into spectacular representation, tattoos and all.

The second significant complication in this sequence is that we are also introduced to a woman with some agency. She has a name, subjectivity, and agency — an ability to act and perform in her commodification of other women as capitalist. But this agency is a corrupt one, and the spectacle is happy to grant it to her.

All the while these two scenes play out and dialog with one another, doubling over into a complex ball of gender and its relation to spectacular representation, the voice-over reads:

Each individual commodity fights for itself. It avoids acknowledging the others and strives to impose itself everywhere as if it were the only one in existence. The spectacle is the epic poem of this struggle, a struggle that no fall of Troy can bring to an end. The spectacle does not sing of men and their arms, but of commodities and their passions. In this blind struggle each commodity, by pursuing its own passion, unconsciously generates something beyond itself: the globalization of the commodity (which also amounts to the commodification of the globe). Thus, as a result of the *cunning of the commodity*, while each *particular* manifestation of the commodity eventually falls in battle, the general commodity-form continues onward toward its absolute realization.⁶⁸

The parallel between commodities fighting for themselves, carving out their niche to glean capital from their markets, and the SG ‘alt’ strategy to developing new tastes and desires is obvious enough, while they continue onward, with their blonde counterparts, to their absolute realization as commodity-form.

Thus far the entire discussion of patriarchal and misogynist expressions in spectacle still casts women as a problem to be solved vis-à-vis their exploitation as the greatest example of spectacular representation. This is true enough but the fact remains that such a proceeding, if taken alone, runs the risk of creating a mathematical formulation that avoids the difficult work of subjective transformation that sheds the skin of patriarchal sensibilities. The obvious solution to this was to simply provide not only ‘positive’ images of women, but scenes that allow for radical feminist subjectivities to proliferate. The perhaps strongest moment of this rather simple strategy was through the inclusion of scenes from Peter Watkins’ wonderful film *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*.

⁶⁸ Script from “The Society of the Spectacle,” in *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works*, pp 62-3. Emphasis original.

Watkins' film fascinatingly lets its characters that are taking part in the Paris Commune drift in and out of the period, slipping into contemporary times and discussing contemporary capitalism through the lens of the film and the Commune. I don't say 'out of character' because actors in this film are never really out of character from themselves, whether they live in 1871 or 2000, they carry the same agency and politics. Early in the film Commune TV is introduced, an obvious technologically ahistorical addition to the narrative, which has a direct cinema style of documentation in order to bring us closer to the daily expressions and politics of the communards. In one of the most beautiful and moving scenes in the film near the end as the Versailles government gets closer and closer to the barricades, a revolutionary woman and communard, surrounded by dozens of her feminist comrades, armed and at the barricades states with great emotion: "Not to fight means dying inside. We bring the Commune with us to the barricades. It's our choice and our freedom." And as she shies away from the microphone and camera adds "Thanks to the struggle. That's all I wanted to say." Her comrades continue to sing "La Marseillaise" in the noisy background, as others shoot over the barricade and drums are beating.

...The bloody banner is raised / The bloody banner is raised! ... The feminist communards sing in French.

The interviewer continues to prompt her: "Think you'll survive this?" She responds, "I don't know but... I have faith. I couldn't fight if I didn't." *...The roar of these ferocious soldiers? / They come into your arms / To Kill your sons, your companions! ...* The interviewer then provokes her with news that others are being wounded at the barricades, "Yes, but I'm free to fight." *...To arms, citizens, / Form your*

battalions, / Let us march! ... She responds, “By doing that, I can escape manipulation. It’s the first time.”

One needn’t change anything in this beautiful scene; the only act of *détournement* necessary is to put it in dialog with the rest of the film to escalate not only a feminist politic but a revolutionary and feminist politic.



Figure 9: Still from *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*, 2000 and *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2013.

As I’ve already mentioned — these distinct uses of imagery constantly interact and overlap, and chart a certain complexity that I hope reflects the visual landscape present in capitalism. In laying out these various strategies I’ve attempted to offer ways in which to suss out the complications inherent within the film without prescribing too much meaning to any given sequence. Inevitably, undertaking a project of this size introduces various complexities and complications. However, at the very least I can say

that every image was chosen deliberately and carefully to critique, test, or further articulate a critique — to deepen but also complicate this thing called spectacle.

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