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| Situationist Cinema |
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| Situationist Cinema refers to the films and cinematic techniques of the left-wing radical group The Situationist International. While primarily a political organisation, the Situationists’ early writings established them as an avant-garde art movement, with many Situationists being filmmakers, painters, sculptors, architects, writers, activists, and political philosophers. Guy Debord and René Viénet were the only two filmmakers foundational to the organisation. Debord regarded film as ‘the central art of our society’ (With and Against Cinema 19), and in his book *The Society of the Spectacle* (a central work of Situationist theory) argued that modern society had become so saturated by advertising, entertainment, and visual culture that ‘all that was once directly lived ha[d] become mere representation’ (Debord, La Société 12). While he felt that film was one of the most powerful tools of capitalist propaganda, he also believed its power could be recovered for revolutionary purposes. Viénet echoed these sentiments, stating that cinema was ‘undoubtedly [the] most utilizable means of expression of our time’ (Knabb 275). Situationist filmmakers thus tried to recover film from commodity culture and disrupt viewers’ expectations by using cinematic techniques considered anti-art. |
| Situationist Cinema refers to the films and cinematic techniques of the left-wing radical group The Situationist International. While primarily a political organisation, the Situationists’ early writings established them as an avant-garde art movement, with many Situationists being filmmakers, painters, sculptors, architects, writers, activists, and political philosophers. Guy Debord and René Viénet were the only two filmmakers foundational to the organisation. Debord regarded film as ‘the central art of our society’ (With and Against Cinema 19), and in his book *The Society of the Spectacle* (a central work of Situationist theory) argued that modern society had become so saturated by advertising, entertainment, and visual culture that ‘all that was once directly lived ha[d] become mere representation’ (Debord, La Société 12). While he felt that film was one of the most powerful tools of capitalist propaganda, he also believed its power could be recovered for revolutionary purposes. Viénet echoed these sentiments, stating that cinema was ‘undoubtedly [the] most utilizable means of expression of our time’ (Knabb 275). Situationist filmmakers thus tried to recover film from commodity culture and disrupt viewers’ expectations by using cinematic techniques considered anti-art.  The audio tracks of Situationist cinema comprise one of its most salient features. When analysed alongside conventional pairings, the relationship between audio and visual tracks in Situationist films is often perceived as highly dissonant. The soundtracks typically consist of a patchwork of unconnected phrases, including excerpts from Marxist writings, popular fiction and literary works, scientific and sociological works, quotations from other films, news headlines, advertising copy, revolutionary rhetoric, and mundane conversation. In a similar montage-based style, the visual tracks of most of Debord’s films, including *Critique of Separation* (1961) and *The Society of the Spectacle* (1973), are composed of images collected from magazines, popular films, advertisements, and television. In Debord’s words, ‘the form corresponds to the content,’ meaning that the contrast between the images, and the audio and the seemingly random association of excerpts included in each track, are ‘an ultimately realistic description of a way of life deprived of coherence and significance’ (*Complete Cinematic Works*). This method is the cinematic version of a practice the Situationists called *détournement*, where the meaning of an image or an everyday object is changed by placing it in an unintended context, such as changing the speech bubbles in an existing comic strip.[[1]](#footnote-1)  Viénet’s films used montage less extensively than Debord’s, but his *La Dialectique Peut-Elle Casser Les Briques?* [*Can Dialectics Break Bricks?*] (1973) is nonetheless a definitive example of film as *détournement*. The visual track follows the entirety of the existing Kung Fu film *Crush*, directed by Tu Guangqi, and replaces only the audio track, primarily with recitations from Marxist and anarchist publications. The contrast between the images and the script intended to show viewers how conventional cinema sheltered them from the realities of their lives by placating them with non-critical entertainment. Viénet’s next film, *Les Filles de Kamare* [*The Girls of Kamare*] (1974) similarly set an existing film to a new soundtrack, but also inserted additional images from popular sources. Viénet’s last film does not impose *détourne* onto an existing film, but is a political documentary about Maoism composed from several existing visual sources. Selected List of Works:Directed by Guy Debord *Hurlements pour Sade* [*Howls for Sade*] (1952)  *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps* [*On the Passage of a Few Persons Through a Rather Brief Unity of Time*] (1959)  *Critique de la séparation* [*Critique of Separation*] (1961)  *La Société du Spectacle* [*Society of the Spectacle*] (1973)  *Réfutation de tous les jugements, tant élogieux qu’hostiles, qui ont été jusqu’ici portés sur le filme ‘La Société du Spectacle’* [*Refutation of All the Judgements, Pro or Con, Thus Far Rendered on the Film ‘The Society of the Spectacle’*] (1975)  *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* [*We Turn in the Night, Consumed by Fire*] (1978) Directed by Guy Debord and Brigitte Cornand *Guy Debord, son art et son temps* [*Guy Debord: His Art and His Time*] (1994) Directed by René Viénet *La Dialectique Peut-Elle Casser Les Briques?* [*Can Dialectics Break Bricks?*] (dir. René Viénet; 1973)  *Les Filles de Kamare* [*The Girls of Kamare*] (dir. René Viénet; 1974)  *Chinois, encore un effort pour êtres r*é*volutionnaires!* [*Peking Duck Soup*] (dir. René Viénet; 1977) |
| Further reading:  (Debord and Cornand, Guy Debord, son art et son temps [Guy Debord: His Art and His Time])  (Debord, Critique de la séparation [Critique of Separation])  (Debord, Hurlements pour Sade [Howls for Sade])  (Debord, In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni [We Turn in the Night, Consumed by Fire])  (Debord, La Société du Spectacle [Society of the Spectacle])  (Debord, Réfutation de tous les jugements, tant élogieux qu’hostiles, qui ont été jusqu’ici portés sur le filme 'La Société du Spectacle' [Refutation of All the Judgements, Pro or Con, Thus Far Rendered on the Film 'The Society of the Spectacle'])  (Debord, Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps [On the Passage of a Few Persons Through a Rather Brief Unity of Time])  (Viénet, La Dialectique Peut-Elle Casser Les Briques? [Can Dialectics Break Bricks?])  (Viénet, Chinois, encore un effort pour êtres révolutionnaires! [Peking Duck Soup])  (Viénet, Les Filles de Kamare [The Girls of Kamare])  Debord, Guy. *Complete Cinematic Works: Scripts, Stills, Documents*. Ed. and trans. by Ken Knabb. Oakland: AK Press, 2003. Digital version of most of the book’s contents available at: <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord.films/index.htm> [A comprehensive resource on Debord’s films, this book includes transcripts of all of his film scripts, translated into English, and detailed descriptions of the images used in each film.]  Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1995. [Often considered a Situationist manifesto, this is Debord’s most influential book, in which he argues that modern society has become merely spectacle and advocates for *d*é*tournement* as revolutionary practice.]  *Grey Room* 52 (Summer 2013). [A special journal issue on Guy Debord’s Cinema.]  “Guy Debord.” UbuWeb Film. <http://www.ubu.com/film/debord.html> [Most of Debord’s films are available for viewing here.]  Knabb, Ken, ed. and trans. *Situationist International Anthology*. Oakland: AK Press, 2006. [A collection of translated Situationist writings, this is an essential resource for anyone interested in Situationist ideas and activities. It includes several important pieces on film from the *Internationale Situationniste* journal, including “A User’s Guide to Détournement” (14-21), “Cinema and Revolution” (378-79), Viénet’s “The Situationists and the New Forms of Action Against Art and Politics” (273-76), and “The Role of Godard” (228-29), in which the editors of *IS* express considerable disdain for Jean-Luc Godard and his work.]  McDonough, Tom ed. *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*. MIT Press, 2004. [A selection of translated Situationist writings, as well as critical essays on the Situationists. Of particular interest is a reprint of one of the most comprehensive essays on Debord’s films, “Dismantling the Spectacle: The Films of Guy Debord,” by Thomas Levin (321-454).]  “Rene Viénet.” UbuWeb Film. <http://ubu.com/film/vienet.html> [All of Viénet’s films are available for viewing here.]  Wark, McKenzie. *The Spectacle of Disintegration: Situationist Passages out of the Twentieth Century*. London: Verso, 2013. [Contains several chapters on Situationist filmmaking, including a detailed discussion of Debord’s filmmaking process and the integral role of his editor and the producer Gérard Lebovici, who funded his last three films.]  “With and Against Cinema.” Trans. Jason E. Smith. *Grey Room* 52 (Summer 2013), 19-21. [An English translation of “Avec et Contre le Cinema,” un unattributed editorial note from the first issue of the journal *Internationale Situationniste*, June 1958.] |

1. See Knabb p. 14-21 for a more fulsome discussion of *détournement*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)