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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’ (*Society of the Spectacle* 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’ (‘The Situationists and the New Forms of Action Against Art and Politics’ 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’ (*Society of the Spectacle* 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’ (‘The Situationists and the New Forms of Action Against Art and Politics’ 275). Situationist filmmakers thus tried to recover film from commodity culture and disrupt viewers’ expectations by using cinematic techniques considered anti-art.  One of the most salient features of Situationist cinema are the films’ audio tracks, which intentionally do not match the visual tracks in a conventional manner. 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 the contrast between the images and the audio and the seemingly random association of excerpts on 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 (see ‘A User’s Guide to Détournement’).  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. |
| Further reading:  (Debord, Complete Cinematic Works: Scripts, Stills, Documents)  (Debord, The Society of Spectacle)  (13Gr)  (Guy Debord (1931-1994) )  (Knabb)  (Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents)  (Rene Viénet)  (Wark)  (With and Against Cinema )  (Debord, Hurlements pour Sade [Howls for Sade] )  (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])  (Debord, Critique de la séparation [Critique of Seperation])  (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, In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni [We Turn in the Night, Consumed by Fire])  (Debord and Cornand, Guy Debord, son art et son temps [Guy Debord: His Art and His Time])  (Viénet, La Dialectique Peut-Elle Casser Les Briques? [Can Dialectics Break Bricks?])  (Viénet, Les Filles de Kamare [The Girls of Kamare])  (Viénet, Chinois, encore un effort pour êtres révolutionnaires! [Peking Duck Soup]) |