Debord, Guy (December 28, 1931 – November 30, 1994)

Guy Ernest Debord (1931-1994) was a French radical political theorist, writer, activist and filmmaker. After his early involvement with French avant-garde art movements in the 1950s, Debord founded the revolutionary organization the Situationist International (SI) in 1957. Inspired by earlier avant-garde movements like Dada and Surrealism, Debord sought to create an explicitly political and critical art practice that could be employed to transform everyday life. The SI attracted sound poets, architects, writers, activists, graphic artists and painters. The movement sought to merge everyday life, art and politics through such practices as radical city planning, the beautification of the city through graffiti, and rambling psycho-geographic driftsthrough urban spaces, seeking to uncover the desire and beauty that had been hidden by advanced capitalism.

In 1967, Debord wrote his influential book of radical political theory, *La Société du spectacle* (*The Society of the Spectacle*). Among the disparate set of sources he employs in the book, Debord goes back to the Hegelian methodology of critique found in the young Marx and the theory of reification found in the work of Marxist theorist György Lukács to comment on the modern alienation of consumer capitalist societies. Debord claims that modern life is characterized as a spectacle, where individuals live their lives as passive consumers and social relationships between people becomes mediated by mass media and popular culture representations that provide them both with objects of desire and the value system through which they measure their own lives.

Debord and the SI sought different artistic and political practices that would allow them to critically intervene into everyday life. One of their best known methods, *détournement*, was adapted from both Dada and the French author Comte de Lautréamont. *Détournement* (while this term is never translated, its closest English translation would be ‘diversion,’ ‘deflection’ or ‘hijacking’) is a type of subversive semiotic theft/plagiarism that takes a media or cultural text (film, music, comic books, political propaganda, street signs, etc.) and alters it enough to turn it against itself, creating a wholly new object that distorts and ridicules the original meaning and authority associated with it. Debord fully explored the concept of *détournement* in his 1973 film *La Société du spectacle* based on his 1967 book of the same name. In his relentless critique of the alienation that characterizes modern consumer society, Debord appropriates and re-situates footage from a diverse set of sources (industrial films, Hollywood and Soviet films, softcore pornography, etc.) in an attempt to drain these images of the ideological and libidinal power they have over individuals. While *La Société du spectacle* is the best known of Debord’s six completed films, his first film, *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (*Howls for Sade*, 1952), is certainly his most infamous and radical anti-cinema statement. Containing no filmic image and announcing that “there is no film. Cinema is dead. No more films are possible. If you wish, we can move on to a discussion,” *Howls for Sade* simply consists of an alternating blank white screen where voices on the soundtrack discuss random and unrelated topics, and a black screen that keeps the theatre darkened and silent from 1 to 24 minutes. The film’s premiere in Paris ended in scandal with the film being stopped shortly after it began.

By the mid-seventies, Debord’s work began to find a large and receptive audience outside of France. His ideas, particularly his notion of the spectacle and media *détournement*, would have a strong and indelible influence on the subsequent art and political activism of early punk rock, culture jamming, tactical media, and the worldwide Occupy movements of the twenty-first century.

**Further Reading:**

Debord, G. (2003) *Complete Cinematic Works: Scripts, Still, Documents*. Oakland, CA:

AK Press.

Jappe, A. (1999) *Guy Debord*. Berkeley, Calif, University of California Press.

Kaufmann, V. (2006) *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry*. Minneapolis,

MN, University of Minnesota Press.

**List of Works:**

Debord, G. (1990) *Comments on the society of the Spectacle*. London: Verso.

Debord, G. (1994) *The Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books.

Debord, G. (2004) *Panegyric: Volumes 1 & 2*. London: Verso.

**Filmography:**

*Hurlements en faveur de 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* (The Society of the Spectacle, 1973)

*Réfutation de tous les jugements, tant élogieux qu’hostiles, qui ont été jusqu’ici portés sur le film “La Société du Spectacle”*  
(Refutation of All the Judgments, 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)

**Paratextual Material:**

Attached:

1. Portrait of Guy Debord

2. A Steve Canyon comic strip becomes a text on the politics of class struggle. An example of détournement from the Situationist International.

3. Cinematic terrorism. A ticket for the disastrous second screening of *Howls For Sade* (1952).

4. The influence of the Situationist International and détournement on early punk rock aesthetics. Anarchist designer Jamie Reid’s “God Save the Queen” poster for The Sex Pistols.

5. “iRaq” poster campaign (2004). An example of tactical media and détournement from the Los Angeles collective Forkscrew.

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