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(<http://contextxxi.org/on-the-passage-of-a-few-persons.html>)

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On The Passage of a Few Persons through a Rather Brief Period of Time

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(TRANSLATION)

1959 DANSK-FRANSK EXPERIMENTAL-FILMS KOMPAGNI

Voice 1 (male announcer) This neighborhood was made for the

SUB-TITLE: PARIS 1952

(Facade of buildings in the neighborhood of Saint-Germain-des-Près) wretched dignity of the petit-bourgeoisie, for respectable occupations and intellectual tourism. The sedentary population of the upper floors was sheltered from the influences of the street.

(Young people pass by)

This neighborhood has remained the same. It was the strange setting

(A photograph of two couples drinking wine at a table is studied by the camera in the manner of an art film.)

HANDEL: FORMAL LOVE THEME

for our story. Here a systematic questioning of all the diversions and works of a society, a total critique of its idea of happiness, was expressed in acts.

These people also scorned “subjective profundity.” They were interested in nothing but an adequate and concrete expression of themselves.

Voice 2 (Debord, monotone) Human beings are not fully conscious of their real life ... usually groping in the dark; overwhelmed by the consequences of their acts; at every moment groups and individuals find themselves confronted with results they have not wished.

THE MUSIC IS INTERRUPTED.

Voice 1 They said that Oblivion was their ruling passion. They

(Other faces)

wanted to reinvent everything each day; to become masters and possessors of their own lives.

Just as One does not judge a man according to the conception he has of himself, one cannot judge such periods of transition according to their own consciousness; on the contrary, one must explain the consciousness through the material conditions of material life, through the conflict between social conditions and the forces of social production.

(The pope and other ecclesiastics)

The progress achieved in the domination of nature was not yet matched by the corresponding liberation of everyday life. Youth

(Young girls coming out of school)

passed away among the various controls of resignation.

(French police in the streets)

Our camera has captured for you a few aspects of a provisional micro-society.

(A sequence in reportage style of cafe tables in Saint-Germain-des Pres)

The knowledge of empirical facts remains abstract and superficial as long as it is not concretized by its integration into the whole — which alone permits the supersession of partial and abstract problems so as to arrive at their CONCRETE ESSENCE, and implicitly at their meaning.

This Group was on the margins of the

economy. It tended toward a role of pure consumption, and first of all the free consumption of its time. It thus found itself directly engaged in qualitative variations of daily life but deprived of any means to intervene in them.

The group ranged over a very small area. The same times found them

(Night time in Les Halles)

in the same places. No one went to bed early. Discussion on the

(Panoramic view over a very lively and packed square in Les Halles at night) meaning of all this continued.

Voice 2 “Our life is a journey — In the winter and the night — We seek our passage ...”

Voice 1 The abandoned literature nevertheless exerted a delaying

(Several views of dawn over Les Halles) action on new affective formulations.

Voice 2 There was the fatigue and the cold of the morning in this much-traversed labyrinth, like an enigma that we had to resolve. It was a looking glass reality through which we had discovered the possible richness of reality. On the bank of the river, evening

(Paris — the river Seine looking east) began once again; and caresses; and the importance of a world

Piles of bricks on the Quai Saint-Bernard)

DELALANDE: NOBLE AND TRAGIC THEME FOR SOLO BASSOON without importance. Just as the eyes have a blurred vision of many things

and can see only one clearly, so the will can strive only incompletely toward diverse objects and can completely love only

(a girl) THE MUSIC DIES DOWN
one at a time.

Voice 3 (Young girl) No one counted on the future. It would never

(Inside the labyrinth of bricks)

(Police vans depart)

be possible to be together later, or anywhere else. There would

(The Ile Saint-Louis at dusk)

(Two very young couples dancing on a beach next to a guitar player)
never be a greater freedom.

Voice 1 The refusal of time and growing old, automatically limited

(Some locations between Place Saint-Sulpice and rue Mazarine)

encounters in this narrow contingent zone, where what was lacking was felt as irreparable. The extreme precariousness of the means of getting by without working was at the root of this impatience, which made excesses necessary and breaks definitive.

Voice 2 One never really contests an organization of existence

(The screen remains white)

without contesting all of that organization's forms of language.

Voice 1 When freedom is practiced in a closed circle, it fades into

(Tracking shots in a cafe, the camera's movement arbitrarily cut by boards: "The passions and celebrations of a violent age"; "In the course of movement and accordingly on the transitory side"; "The most exciting suspense!")

a dream, becomes a mere representation of itself. The ambiance of play is by nature unstable. At any moment "ordinary life" can prevail once again. The geographical limitation of play is even than its temporal limitation. Any game takes place within the

(Board: "With marvellous decor specially made for the purpose!")

more striking contours of its spatial domain. Around the neighborhood, around its fleeting and threatened immobility,

(People pass along the Boulevard Saint-Michel in foggy weather)

stretched a half-known city where people met only by chance losing

(A couple at a table in a cafe)

their way forever. The girls there, because they were legally under the control of their families until the age of eighteen, were often

(In Japan several hundred police come into view running)

recaptured by the defenders of that detestable institution. They

(The outside walls of the Chevilly-Laure prison)

were generally confined under the guard of those creature who among the bad products of a bad society are the most ugly and repugnant: nuns.

What usually makes documentaries so easy to understand is the

(The screen remains white)

arbitrary limitation of their subject matter. They describe the atomization of social functions and the isolation of their products. One can in contrast envisage the entire complexity of a moment which is not resolved into a work, a moment whose movement indissolubly contains facts and values whose meaning does not yet appear. The subject matter of the documentary would then be this confused totality.

Voice 2 The epoch had arrived at the level of knowledge and

(Violent confrontations between Japanese workers and the police. General view of events. The police gain ground.)

technical means that made possible, and increasingly necessary a DIRECT instruction of all aspects of liberated, affective and practical existence. The appearance of these superior means of action, still unused because of the delays in the project of liquidating the commodity economy, had already condemned aesthetic activity, whose ambitions and powers were both outdated. The decay of art and of all values of former mores had formed our sociological background. The ruling classes monopoly over the instruments we had

(The screen remains white)

to control in order to realize the collective art of our time had excluded us from a cultural production officially devoted to illustrating and repeating the

past. An art film on this generation can only be a film on its absence of real works.

Everyone unthinkingly followed the paths learned once and for all,

(People pass by in front of the railings of the Cluny Museum)

To their works and their homes, To their predictable future. For them duty had already become a habit, and habit a duty. They did not see the deficiency of their city. They thought the deficiency of their life was natural. We wanted to break out of this conditioning,

(Windows lit up at night in the Rue des Ecoles and the Rue Monagne-Sainte-Genevieve)

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in quest of another use of the urban landscape, in quest of new passions. The atmosphere of a few places gave us intimations of the future powers of an architecture it would be necessary to create to be the support and framework for less mediocre games. We could

THE MUSIC ENDS

expect nothing of anything we ourselves had not altered. The urban

(Some houses in Paris)

environment proclaimed the orders and tastes of the ruling society just as violently as the newspapers. It is man who makes the unity of the world, but man has extended himself everywhere. Men can see nothing around them that is not in their own image; Everything speaks to them of themselves. Their very landscape is alive. There were obstacles everywhere. There was a coherence in the obstacles

(English police on foot and horseback drive back demonstrators)

of all types. They maintained the coherent reign of poverty.

(The screen remains white)

Everything being connected, it was necessary to CHANGE EVERYTHING by a unitary struggle, or nothing. It was necessary to link up with the masses, but we were surrounded by sleep.

Voice 3 The dictatorship of the proletariat is a desperate struggle, bloody and bloodless, violent and peaceful, military and economic, educational and administrative, against the forces and traditions of the old world.

Voice 1 In this country it is once again the men of order who have

(A demonstration of while colonists in Algiers, May 1958. General Massu and General Salan. A company of parachutists marches towards the camera)

rebelled. They have reinforced their power. They have been able to aggravate the grotesqueness of the ruling conditions according to their will. They have embellished their system with the funeral ceremonies of the past.

(General De Galle speaks on a rostrum and bangs his fist)

Voice 2 Years, like a single instant prolonged to this point, come

(The screen remains white) to an end.

Voice 1

That which was directly lived reappears frozen in the

(The star of an advertising film Mon-savon)

(A girls face)

distance, fitted into the tastes and illusions of an era carried

(A cavalry charge in the streets of a town) away with it.

Voice 2 The appearance of events that we have not made, that

(The screen remains white)

others have made against us, obliges us from now on to be aware of the passage of time, its results, the transformation of our own desires into events. What differentiates the past from the present

(The face of another girl)

is precisely its out of reach objectivity; there is no more should

(A starlette in a bath)

be; being is so consumed that it has ceased to exist. The details

(Tracking shot of the starlette in the bath)

(The solar eruption shot continues its rising movement)

are already lost in the dust of time. Who was afraid of life, afraid of the night, afraid of being taken, afraid of being kept?

Voice 3 That which should be abolished continues, and we continue

(In Japan a dozen police with helmets and gas masks continue to advance across a large space, now cleared, slowly firing tear gas grenades)

to wear away with it. We are engulfed. We are separated. The years pass and we have not changed anything.

Voice 2 Once again morning in the same streets. Once again the

(Day breaks over a Paris bridge)

(Slow panorama across the Place des Victoires at dawn)

DELALANDE: NOBLE AND TRAGIC THEME (REPRISE)

fatigue of so many similarly passed nights. It is a walk that has lasted a long time.

THE MUSIC DIES DOWN

Voice 1 Really hard to drink more.

(The screen remains white)

Voice 2 Of course one might make a film of it. But even if such a

(A film crew around a camera)

film succeeds in being as fundamentally incoherent and unsatisfying

(The tracking shot across the cafe, as seen before, but uncut and with a series of faults: people getting into the edge of the frame, reflections in the lens, camera shadow, with a panorama drawn at the end of the shot)

as the reality it deals with, it will never be more than a re-creation — poor and false like this botched tracking shot.

Voice 3 There are now people who flatter themselves that they are

(The screen remains white)

authors of films, as others were authors of novels. They are even more backward than the novelists because they are ignorant of the decomposition and exhaustion of individual expression in our time, ignorant of the end of the arts of passivity. They are praised for their sincerity since they dramatize, with more personal depth, the conventions of which their life consists. There is talk of the liberation of the cinema. But what does it matter to us if one more art is liberated through which Pierre or Jacques or Francois can joyously express their slave sentiments? The only interesting venture is the liberation of everyday life, not only in the perspective of history but for us and right away. This entails the withering away

of alienated forms of communication. The cinema too has to be destroyed.

Voice 2 In the final analysis, stars are created by the need we

(A car stops. Tracking shot of the star of Monosavon coming downstairs) have for them, and not by talent or absence of talent or even by

(Two images of the film's clapboard recorded for two shots already seen)

the film industry or advertising. Miserable need, dismal, anonymous life that would like to expand itself to the dimensions of cinema

(Horse riders in the Bois de Boulogne) life. The imaginary life on the screen is the product of this real need. The star is the projection of this need.

The images of advertisements during the intermissions are more

(The advertising starlette shows how much she likes the soap and smiles to the audience)

suited than any for evoking an intermission of life.

To really describe this era it would no doubt be necessary to show

(The screen remains white until thirty seconds after the last word is spoken) many other things. But what would be the point? Better to grasp the totality of what has been done and what remains to be done than to add more ruins to the old world of the spectacle and of memories.

Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps, est un court métrage de 600 mètres, (20 minutes) en format 35 millimètres, noir et blanc. Produit par la DANSK-FRANSK EXPERIMENTAL-FILMS KOMPAGNI, il a été tourné en avril 1959. Le montage a été achevé en septembre 1959. Le commentaire est dit par les voix de Jean Harnois (voix 1), Guy Debord (Voix 2) et Claude Brabant (voix de fille).

Translation

Translation by Ken Knabb, 1981. No copyright.

Guy-Ernest Debord: Geboren 1931 in Paris, gestorben 1994 bei Belle-

vue-la-Montagne. Radikaler Kapitalismuskritiker, Revolutionär, Filmmacher. Gründungsmitglied, Schlüsselperson und — nach dem Ausschluss der meisten übrigen — auch

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