

Extract from **Internationale Situationniste at Context XXI**

(http://contextxxi.org/refutation.html)

extracted on: 4 October 2023

Date of this contribution: 1975

Refutation

of All the Judgments, Pro or Con, Thus Far Rendered on the Film “The Society of the Spectacle”

■ GUY-ERNEST DEBORD ■ KEN KNABB
(TRANSLATION)

Refutation of All the Judgments, Pro or Con, Thus Far Rendered on the Film “The Society of the Spectacle” (film script)

The spectacular organization of the present class society has led to two widely evident consequences. The first is a general deterioration in the quality of both products and rationales. The second is the fact that those who claim to find happiness in this society are obliged to maintain a careful distance from the things they pretend to like — because they invariably lack the intellectual or other means that would enable them to attain a direct in-depth knowledge of them, or to incorporate them into a coherent practice, or to develop any genuine taste regarding them.

These consequences, which are already so evident when it is a matter of housing conditions, cultural consumption, sexual liberation, or the quality of wine, are naturally all the more pronounced when we come to revolutionary theory and to the formidable language with which that theory denounces our terminally ill world.

It is thus hardly surprising that this combination of naïve falsification and ignorant approval, so characteristic of the modern spectacle, is reflected in the diversely uncomprehending responses

to the film entitled *The Society of the Spectacle*.

This particular incomprehension is inevitable, and will continue to be so for some time to come. The spectacle is an infirmity more than a conspiracy. Those who write for the newspapers and magazines of our time are not concealing their intelligence : what we see is all they've got. What could they possibly say of any pertinence about a film which attacks their habits and ideas en bloc, and which does so at a time when they themselves are beginning to sense the collapse of every one of them ? The stupidity of their reactions stems from the breakdown of their world.

Those who claim to like my film have liked too many other things to be capable of liking it ; and those who say they don't like it have also accepted too many other things for their judgment to have the slightest significance.

The poverty of their discourse reflects the poverty of their lives. You need only look at their surroundings and their occupations, their commodities and their ceremonies, which are on view everywhere. You need only listen to those imbecilic voices giving you contemptuous hourly updates on the current state of your alienation.

Spectators do not find what they desire ; they desire what they find.

The spectacle does not debase people to the point of making them love it, but many are paid to pretend that they do. Now that such people can no longer get away with assuring us that this society

is completely satisfactory, they hasten to declare themselves dissatisfied with any critique of it. These dissatisfied people all feel they deserved something better. But do they really imagine that anyone is trying to win them over ? Do they really believe there is still time for them to rally to such a critique, supposing that they suddenly became convinced of its truth ? Do these ill-lodged inhabitants of the land of approbation suppose that they can continue to speak without it being noticed where they're speaking from ?

In a freer and more truthful future people will look back in amazement at the idea that pen-pushers hired by the system of spectacular lies could imagine themselves qualified to offer their smug opinions on the merits and defects of a film that is a negation of the spectacle — as if the dissolution of this system was a matter of opinion. Their system is now being attacked in reality and it is defending itself by force. Their counterfeit arguments are no longer accepted, which is why so many of these professional agents of falsification are facing the prospect of unemployment.

The most stubborn of these endangered liars still pretend to wonder whether the society of the spectacle actually exists or whether it is perhaps just an imaginary notion that I thought up. But since the woods of history have for the last few years begun to march against their castle of false cards and are continuing at this very moment to close ranks and move in for the kill, most of these commentators are now fawningly praising the excellence of my book, as

if they were capable of reading it and as if they had already welcomed its publication in 1967 with the same respect. They generally complain, however, that I have abused their indulgence by bringing the book to the screen. The blow is all the more painful because they had never dreamed that such an extravagance was possible. Their anger confirms the fact that the appearance of such a critique in a film upsets them even more than in a book. Here, as elsewhere, they are being forced into a defensive struggle, on a second front.

Many complain that the film is hard to understand. Some say that the images prevent them from understanding the words ; others that the words distract from the images. By telling us that they find the film exhausting, and by proudly elevating their individual fatigue into a general criterion of communication, these critics are trying to give the impression that they have no problem understanding — or even perhaps largely agreeing with — the same theory when its exposition is limited to a book. They are attempting to disguise as a mere disagreement between different conceptions of cinema what is actually a conflict between different conceptions of society, and an open war within the existing society.

But if my film is so far beyond them, how can we suppose they are any more capable of understanding everything else that falls to their lot in a society that has so thoroughly conditioned them to mental exhaustion ? How could such easily fatigued people find themselves in any better position, amid the incessant cacophony of so many simultaneous commercial and political messages, to see through the crude sophisms designed to make them accept their work and their leisure, or the wisdom of President Giscard, or the taste of food additives ? The difficulty is not in my film, but in their servile minds.

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.”

There are people who understand, and others who do not understand, that the class struggle in Portugal has from the very beginning been dominated by a direct confrontation between the revolutionary workers organized in autonomous assemblies and the Stalinist bureaucracy allied with a few defeated generals. Those who understand such things will understand my film ; and I don’t make films for those who don’t understand such things, or who make it their business to prevent others from understanding.

Though all the reviews come from the same zone of spectacle-generated pollution, they are as apparently varied as any other present-day commodities. Several of the reviewers claimed that my film filled them with enthusiasm, but none were able to explain why. Whenever I find myself approved of by those who should be my enemies, I ask myself what error have they made in their reasoning. It’s usually easy to find. Faced with an unusual number of innovations and an insolence that is utterly beyond their comprehension, these avant-garde consumers vainly try to rationalize a ground for approval by attributing these fascinating eccentricities to a nonexistent individual lyricism.

One of them, for example, admires my film for its supposed “lyricism of rage” ; another discovered by watching it that the passing of a historical epoch produces a certain melancholy ; others, who greatly overestimate the refinements of present-day social life, attribute to me a certain dandyism. These are nothing but different forms of the perennial tactic of all ruling apologetics : Deny what exists and explain what does not. A critical theory that accompanies the dissolution of a society does not concern itself with expressing rage, much less with presenting mere images of rage. It seeks to understand, to describe, and to precipitate a movement that is developing before our very eyes. As for those who present us with their own pseudo-rage as a sort of newly fashionable artistic content, it is obvious that this is merely their way of compensating for the spinelessness, compromises, and humiliations of their actual life — which is why spectators so readily identify with them.

Political reactionaries are naturally

even more hostile to my film. Thus an apprentice bureaucrat claims to admire my audacity in “making a political film not by telling a story, but by directly filming a theory.” Unfortunately, he does not like my theory. He senses that despite my apparent “uncompromising leftism,” I am actually shifting toward the right because I systematically attack “the men of the United Left.” The cretin’s mouth is full of such inflated terminology. What union ? What Left ? What men ?

The “United Left” is, of course, nothing other than the current alliance of the Stalinists with other enemies of the proletariat. Each of the partners knows the others well. They clumsily plot against each other and stridently denounce each other every week. But they have now come together in an effort to sabotage the revolutionary initiatives of the workers, in order — as they themselves admit — to maintain at least the essentials of capitalism if they can’t save all the details. They are the same type of bureaucrats as those who are repressing workers’ “counterrevolutionary strikes” in Portugal, just as they did in Budapest not so long ago ; the same as those who aspire to take part in a “Historic Compromise” in Italy ; the same as those who called themselves “Popular Front governments” when they broke the French strikes of 1936 and sabotaged the Spanish revolution.

The United Left is only a minor defensive hoax of spectacular society, a temporary expedient that the system only occasionally needs to resort to. I only evoked it in passing in my film, though I naturally attacked it with all the contempt it deserves — just as we have since attacked it in Portugal on a broader and more beautiful terrain.

A journalist close to that same Left, who has since achieved a certain notoriety by invoking “freedom of the press” in order to defend his publication of an implausibly faked document, exhibited a similarly clumsy falsification by insinuating that I failed to attack the bureaucrats of Beijing as sharply as the other ruling classes. He also 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.

Another sophist of similarly limited mental capacity presents a contrary argument : By publicly denouncing the spectacle, am I not thereby entering the spectacle ? This sort of purism, which sounds particularly strange coming from a journalist, is obviously invoked in the hope of convincing people that no one should ever appear in the spectacle as an enemy of it.

Those who do not have even a subordinate post in spectacular society, and who thus have nothing to lose but their ambitious hope of eventually serving in one of its juvenile relief corps, have given a more frank and furious expression of their discontent and even of their jealousy. An anonymous individual of this sort has for some time been expounding the latest trendy ideas in a most appropriate forum : the weekly magazine of the laughable foot soldiers of Mitterand's electoral constituency.

This anonymous individual concludes that it would have been fine to film my book in 1967, but that in 1973 it was too late. The reason he gives for this conclusion is that it seems crucial to him that from now on everybody should stop talking about everything of which he himself is ignorant — Marx ; Hegel ; books in general (because they cannot be an adequate means of liberation) ; any use of film (because it is merely film) ; theory, above all ; and even history itself, which he congratulates himself for having anonymously abandoned.

Such decomposed thought could obviously have oozed forth only from the desolate walls of Vincennes University. Within living memory no Vincennes student has ever come up with a single theory. This is no doubt why we are currently seeing some of them advocate "antitheory." What else could they parlay into an assistant professorship in that neo-university ? Not that they content themselves with that — even the most talentless candidate-coopters are ringing every doorbell, applying for the position of film director or at least of series editor at some publishing house (the anonymous individual of whom I

have been speaking does not hide his envy of what he imagines to be the lavish rewards of cinema work). We can therefore confidently predict that these antitheories will not easily be reduced to the silence that would seem to be their only logical implication, because in that case their authors would be deprived of the sole "qualification" that elevates them above the ranks of unskilled labor.

Our anonymous imposter gives away his real aim at the end of his review. The reason he wants to dissolve history is so he can elect another, so that he himself can designate the thinkers of the future. And with a straight face this blockhead nominates for that role Lyotard, Castoriadis, and other crumb-grubbers — people who had already shot their bolt more than fifteen years ago without managing to particularly dazzle their century.

No loser loves history. Moreover, once they have gone so far as to collectively repudiate history, it is hardly surprising to see these resolutely ultramodern careerists urging us to read coopted thinkers in their fifties. It's no more contradictory than it is for someone to pride himself on having remained anonymously silent since 1968 while admitting that he has not even reached the point of scorning his professors. Our anonymous critic nevertheless has the merit of having illustrated better than the others the utter ineptitude of the antihistorical perspective he advocates and the real motivations behind these impotent people's pretended disdain for reality. In postulating that it was too late to undertake a cinematic adaptation of *The Society of the Spectacle* six years after the appearance of the book, he overlooks the fact that there have not been three books of social critique of such importance published in the last hundred years. He also fails to consider the fact that I myself had written the book. There is no standard of comparison for judging whether I was relatively slow or fast in making the film since it is obvious that the best of my predecessors had no access to the film medium. Everything considered, I must admit that I found it very gratifying to be the first person to carry out this sort of exploit.

The defenders of the spectacle will be

as slow to recognize this new use of film as they were in recognizing the fact that a new era of revolutionary opposition was undermining their society ; but they will be obliged to recognize it just as inevitably. And they will follow the same sequence : first remaining silent, then speaking beside the point. The reviewers of my film have reached the latter stage.

The specialists of the cinema have said that my film's revolutionary politics were bad ; the left-wing political illusionists have said that it was bad cinema. But when one is both a revolutionary and a filmmaker, it is easy to demonstrate that their shared bitterness stems from the fact that the film in question is a precise critique of the society they do not know how to combat ; and the first example of a kind of film they do not know how to make.

Translation

New translation by Ken Knabb of the main voice-over soundtrack of Guy Debord's fifth film, *Réfutation de tous les jugements, tant élogieux qu'hostiles, qui ont été jusqu'ici portés sur le film "La Société du Spectacle" (1975).*

The complete script of this film, with illustrations, detailed descriptions of the images, and extensive annotations, is included in Debord's *Complete Cinematic Works* (AK Press, 2003). For further information, see *Guy Debord's Films*.

Translation copyright 2003 by Ken Knabb. (This copyright will not be enforced against personal or noncommercial use.)

Guy-Ernest Debord: Geboren 1931 in Paris, gestorben 1994 bei Bellevue-la-Montagne. Radikaler Kapitalismuskritiker, Revolutionär, Filmmacher. Gründungsmitglied, Schlüsselperson und — nach dem Ausschluss der meisten übrigen — auch eines der letzten Mitglieder der *Situationistischen Internationale*.

Ken Knabb: Geboren 1945 in Louisiana. Autor, Übersetzer und radikaler Theoretiker, Betreiber des Website *Bureau of Public Secrets*.