Guy Debord, or The Revolutionary Without a Halo

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“Long taken for a nonentity, in other words passed over in silence, then taken for a brilliant if rowdy character of chilly arrogance, the chances are good that Guy Debord will purposely spare himself the third stage of embalming: that of being taken for a remarkable writer.”¹ So wrote journalist and author Claude Roy in 1974 at the time of the release of Debord’s first feature-length film, The Society of the Spectacle, and at the time this appeared to be a rather reliable prediction. Debord was still thought of primarily as one of the founders and associates of the (recently defunct) collective enterprise known as the Situationist International, and as the author of the concise but dauntingly dense text upon which his film was based. His colleague Raoul Vaneigem tended to be considered the better writer, even if both were criticized for muffling their arguments “under [a] dense Hegelian wrapping.”²

The intervening thirty years, however, have provided ample evidence to contradict Roy’s confident forecast: it has, perhaps ironically, become a commonplace that Debord’s legacy is precisely that of a great author-essayist, a memoirist and moralist in a long line of classical French writers. If we were to date the arrival of this unanticipated reception of his work, we could do worse than to point to the year 1989 and the publication of his Panegyric, a slim volume of memoirs that was quickly and unexpectedly hailed by Philippe Sollers in the pages of Le Monde.³ Since that date Sollers has written a series of important articles on Debord for the French literary press, has aided in the publication of his works by the prestigious firm of Gallimard, and has even produced a television documentary on him; perhaps no single figure has played a greater role in defining Debord’s legacy for the reading public, at least in France. Sollers has been instrumental in consolidating Debord’s reputation as the author of a distinct and exemplary oeuvre: “Guy Debord’s style


can be recognized a mile away,” Sollers commented in a typical interview. “Amid all the printed commodities, his locution immediately gives him away. He possesses the grand style of a moralist.”

This is, needless to say, a rather odd homage to pay to someone who had long dismissed the prerogatives of authorship in favor of a practice of integral plagiarism, of what he and his colleagues had called détournement.

But I do not mean to claim that Sollers is simply wrongheaded, a conclusion that could be drawn simply enough from the evidence of much of his writings. Undoubtedly it is erroneous (if not utterly ludicrous) to assert, as he has taken to doing, that Debord was a “metaphysician” whose negativity was rooted in some deep identification with the demonic forces of Catholic mythology—as if the irony of allegorical procedures played no role in his citation of such figures. Yet despite such claims, Sollers has undeniably succeeded in recognizing crucial features of Debord’s work, particularly what we might call the “autobiographical turn” in his later films and writings. “We always refer to Debord’s beginnings,” he has remarked, 

to his heroic, romantic-revolutionary period, which is quite important of course, but which is rather closely tied to an entire horizon that we should properly call “Marxist.” What seems to me not enough emphasized is the very clear difference that takes place starting with the film In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni [produced in 1978 and released three years later]. . . . We might simply note the change that happens through the cinema, with In girum, in which the appearance of the “ego” begins to interest me tremendously.

The notion of a break in Debord’s work, which might be dated to the end of the 1970s, and which was marked by the deployment and consolidation of a normative—if not archaic—conception of selfhood, seems to me entirely correct. That this corresponded to a more or less wholesale abandonment of a Marxist analytic also seems accurate; whatever the virtues of his later writings (and I certainly do not mean to claim they are without virtue), a dialectical understanding of the present is not one of them. As a final corollary, we might add that these transformations likewise entailed a change in his strategy of writing, from one of détournement to one of quotation. Such a distinction may not be immediately clear, but Debord himself indicated the difference in a passage toward the opening of Panegyric, when he explained that in this book he would “have to make rather extensive use of quotations,” which were “useful in periods of ignorance or obscurantist beliefs.”

These he distinguished from “allusions,” by which he clearly meant *détournement*: “Allusions, without quotation marks, to other texts that one knows to be very famous. . . . should be reserved for times richer in minds capable of recognizing the original phrase and the distance its new application has introduced.”7 (Contrast this to his assertion, with Gil Wolman in their 1956 manifesto “Directions for Use of *Détournement*,” that one should feel free to “alter the meaning of [textual] fragments and to doctor, in whatever way is deemed best, what idiots insist on calling ‘quotations.’”)8 Such a strategic shift in technique, whatever the announced historical justification (and Debord along with his colleagues in the Situationist International had long decried the advent of a neo-illiteracy among the population of the developed world), had the effect of constructing, for the first time, a clear authorial—and authoritative—position for him. This was the advent of the Debord who could write, in the foreword to the 1992 republication of *The Society of the Spectacle* by Gallimard, “I am not someone who revises his work,” despite his earlier admiration for Lautréamont’s conception of plagiarism-as-revision, the replacement of false ideas with correct ones.9

Debord, then, in his late effort to aestheticize his life, to conceive his self as an art work, lent himself to precisely the uses that have since been made of him by commentators such as Sollers.10 And that effort, as the latter has postulated, began as early as 1978 with the second, “autobiographical” half of *In girum*. A hostile critic described it at the time of its release as “Latin Quarter folklore that would be more moving if it were leavened with humor,” which may not be entirely inaccurate. But what of the first half of the film? That same critic wrote that it consisted of “a bourgeois [who] cries for the poor proles”11—which was certainly not the case. It was neither the case that the working class was Debord’s subject, nor was lamentation much in evidence. In fact the long opening sequence of *In girum* was an excoriating attack on the vastly expanded ranks of the contemporary petty bourgeoisie, what Debord described as all those “low-level agents specializing in the various posts of those ‘services’ for which the current production system has

10. It should come as little surprise that this autobiographical project has been embraced as well by influential segments of the visual art world; see, notably, Nicolas Bourriaud, *Formes de vie* (Paris: Denoël, 1999), pp. 78–81.
such urgent need.”

In other words, it was an attack upon the very audience sitting before the screen of his movie, critics included. (And we would do well to remember that *In girum* was not necessarily screened before small, sympathetically leftist audiences, but that thanks to its producer, Gérard Lebovici, it enjoyed distribution to three mainstream Parisian movie houses.) We could in fact read this first part of the film as a kind of late-twentieth-century reversal of Baudelaire’s famous dedicatory note, “To the Bourgeois,” from his “Salon of 1846,” an entirely unironic cinematic preface devoted “To the Petty Bourgeois,” and understand Debord’s ferocity here as an acknowledgment that, to paraphrase T. J. Clark, petty bourgeois culture—which appeared in the film’s opening sequence in the form of a welter of appropriated advertisements displaying the lifestyles and accoutrements of this class—had long since become “the only viable medium of bourgeois class power,” the only voice in which that power could be spoken. (And what, we might add, was much of *The Society of Spectacle*, if not precisely an accounting of the experiences of this class for whom identification with the bourgeoisie proper could take place only through the mediation of the image, across that is the varied surfaces of social life?)

Debord’s contempt was intended to undercut the force of such illusory identifications. Against the images of abundance on screen he insisted in the most strident of terms that members of the lower middle class

much resemble slaves, because they are penned up as a whole, and cramped for room, in unpleasant, unhealthy, and gloomy houses; ill-nourished with an adulterated and tasteless food; poorly treated for their constantly recurring illnesses; unceasingly and meanly watched; maintained in the modernized illiteracy and spectacular superstitions that correspond to the interests of their masters.

This is a typical excerpt from a Debord harangue and much of it is, needless to say, entirely predictable. The tone of aristocratic disdain would become familiar in his writings during the final decade of his life, from the *Considerations on the Assassination of Gérard Lebovici* of 1985 through “This Bad Reputation . . . ” of 1993. (As Debord increasingly retreated into the project of shaping his life as an art work, he seemed unable to comprehend that this sort of condescension, the loftiness of expression that all too often barely concealed the banality of thought, was itself nothing less than the form assumed by the petty bourgeoisie’s self-recognition. To put it grossly, we might say that Debord was born into this class and, at the end of his life, returned to it.) Undoubtedly that tone has its partisans, particularly in the

world of academia and among the literati, which perhaps goes some way to accounting for Sollers’s championing of its cause, but it seems to me to have marked a fundamental shift away from a critical language that was meant to self-reflexively embody its own critique. So far I have been, somewhat against my own will, rather unrelentingly negative in my assessments, but let me say that *In girum* is a film that strikes me as caught between two moments, between two strategies: looking back, on one hand, to the project of *détournement* and, on the other, looking forward to the later “classical” Debord of whom I have also spoken.

*In girum* was of course composed almost entirely through appropriation, like Debord’s earlier cinematic works, and there remains, I think, a great critical force in the montage of images, particularly in the opening segment under consideration. As I stated, it consisted of a whole parade of advertisements for contemporary fashions, objects, settings, and modes of life, similar in many ways to those seen in the film version of *The Society of the Spectacle*. But in the later film one image, a photograph, was singled out as somehow emblematic of the whole; in it, we see a husband and wife in their well-appointed living room, their two children frolicking amid the tasteful, expensive furnishings. The photo remained on screen for some time, followed by a series of close-ups of various details (the couple, the few books that decorate the room, the children playing). Significantly, this was the only image that Debord reprised, returning to examine it once again toward the end of this opening sequence. One cannot help but be struck by those details, which are conspicuous precisely for the care with which they were explored, for the manner in which the camera lingered over them, in sharp contrast to much of the rest of the montage in this opening segment, which proceeded at a rather faster pace. It was as if this commonplace advertisement nevertheless hid a secret, and that close examination, a true meditation upon these mute photographs, might compel them to speak and render up their hieroglyphic meaning. There seems to me, then, to be a tension between image and sound here, less in the sense of a productive discrepancy than as two competing modes of analysis: one textual, contemptuous, and dismissive (the voice of Debord the “moralist,” the one that would become dominant in his later work), the other visual, probing, and critical. I do not mean to say that he somehow valued these scenes of everyday life in the late capitalist world for themselves; when he said that he was proud of having made a film out of whatever lay to hand, “*avec n’importe quoi,*” that this film in fact “scorns the visual dust of which it is composed,”15 we should certainly take him at his word. But the point is that for Debord, it was absolutely necessary to work with whatever lay at hand, with the most degraded images produced by the culture industry and its adjuncts—and that such images would form the contemporary visual horizon, and that only their tendentious refocusing through *détournement* would allow one to take up a valid position on the field of sociocultural struggle.

15. Ibid., p. 146. Trans. mod.
But why the particular attention focused on this advertisement, among all the others montaged into the opening sequence of *In girum*? Why linger over this “visual dust?” It is, at first glance, entirely prosaic: a modern, comfortable interior, with rich, warm materials, and an atmosphere suffused with well-being, even joy; but Debord’s camera seems to bring out an underlying melancholy. He brings out, I think, what we might call the melancholy of consumption. What he seeks to reveal here is the fact that, despite the solid and luxurious quality of the décor, nothing carried the weight of personal or social associations. Indeed, the objects and furniture pictured were curiously abstract, without presence or history, unmarked by human relations. They had been reduced to object-signs, ready for consumption, and as such they occasioned a similar reduction in the nature of human interaction. My argument here parallels that of Jean Baudrillard in his 1968 book, *The System of Objects*; this first book of his, still quite close to the ideas of his mentor Henri Lefebvre and in many ways to Debord’s extension of the notion of commodity fetishism into spectacle, concerned itself precisely with the increasingly central role of consumption in the everyday life of advanced capitalism, and the way that the circulation of commodities tended to become an end in itself, eclipsing the subjects who produced or purchased them. Indeed, I think Baudrillard provides a vocabulary to account for the peculiarly deep melancholy this segment of *In girum* inspires: in the reduction of our life-world to an infinite series of object-signs, devoid of materiality and defined only by the chain of differences along which they are articulated, we have produced a setting in which the familial relation itself has become one more sign, “in pure complicity with the system of objects which signifies it.”16 Without wishing to express any nostalgia for the bourgeois family unit, Debord still manages to plumb the depths of contemporary dehumanization, the advent of a world in which lived relations can be experienced only as images. Couches, coffee table, knickknacks, “it is the idea of a relation that is signified in these objects,” Baudrillard wrote, “‘consumed’ in them, and consequently annulled as a lived relation.”17

I have written at such length on this segment of *In girum*, first, because it has always struck me as being among the most moving, most personal moments in the film—rather than the manifestly “autobiographical” images and text of its second half, which, whatever their beauty and poetry, ask us to experience them as distant spectators removed from the “great adventure” they depict. But in confronting this anonymous advertisement we remain, in contrast, in the realm of critical détournement. And this brings me to the second, more significant, reason for discussing this image: that it still operated according to the logic that lay behind the most important of the Situationist International’s activities, that of the negation of the negation. I mean to say that here we are still witnesses to the conviction that the only way out of the paralysis and anomie of the present is through mining

17. Ibid., p. 24.
and mimicking the lowest depths of nothingness, randomness, abjection, dispersal, insignificance—in the hope that out of the utter detritus of the “modern” would come something charged and whole. These are the grounds upon which we might link In girum with Debord’s earlier work, such as his collaged Memoirs of 1958—both insisted on speaking “the beautiful language of my century,” to echo the final appropriated phrase of the latter work. We should be clear about what that line, clipped from a Baudelaire prose poem, meant: coming at the end of a book composed entirely through détournement, through borrowed passages whose sources ranged from Joyce to Elle, it was a declaration that a critique of the world of spectacle could only be articulated through the components of spectacle itself, that there was no lofty height (or farm in the Haut-Loire) from which social analysis could be pursued, but that only by working through the surfaces of social life could a critical position be found.

Let me conclude, then, on this Baudelairean note: Debord and the Situationist International were not, at their best, “angels of purity,” as Vincent Kaufmann has so eloquently argued in the past, but may be better understood to have been cultural and political revolutionaries who had “lost their halos.” They would not simply place themselves above the everyday life of advanced capitalism, even in its most debased forms, but would throw themselves into every kind of filth (se livrer à la crapule, Baudelaire would have said) in order, by way of its appropriation, to make it speak otherly. “The beautiful language of my century” was precisely the language of exchange, of the commodity, and by the later twentieth century the Situationists understood that no other language existed outside of its pervasive influence. Debord in the last decade or so of his life tended either to seek a false refuge from this language by recourse to a series of “classical” literary models, or to simply point disgustedly at the crapule around him (as he did, for example, in his 1994 antitelevisional documentary, Guy Debord, His Art and His Age, produced in collaboration with Brigitte Cornand). But ultimately the legacy of the SI lay not in the idealist project of replenishing a world of blighted signs, of struggling against the erosion of language into mere “communication” via its utopian resurrection into some totalizing, Mallarméan Book. It resided in the refusal to simply transcend the hollow babble of spectacle culture and instead, through black humor and joyous irony, it constructed a language of contestation out of fragments of the dominant discourse, out of the very depths of reification.