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## The Emaciated Spectator

On May 17, 1961, Guy Debord delivered his talk *Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life* at a conference organized by Henri Lefebvre and the Group for Research on Everyday Life. In order to problematize the role of the lecture format itself, Debord's talk was pre-recorded and played on a tape recorder in front of the audience. Members of Debord's Situationist International (1957-1972) had been giving what they called ›industrial lectures‹ since 1958 and Debord states early in the talk, »These words are being communicated by way of a tape recorder [...] in order to seize the simplest opportunity to break with the appearance of pseudocollaboration, of artificial dialogue, established between the lecturer ›in person‹ and his spectators« (KNABB 2006: 90). A successful industrial lecture would generate »total *stupor* from the audience« (DEBORD 2008: 110). This talk is usually cited as a piece of Situationist lore to demonstrate Debord's intransigence and disrespect for authority and institutions, no matter how modest or well intentioned they might be. Rarely is this posited relationship between lecturer and spectator examined in writing on Debord, which is strange in that a particular notion of the spectator is so integral to his work, informing concepts from the constructed situation to the society of the spectacle.

What I would like to do here is to look at some of the assumptions and reverberations of this particular conception of spectatorship by

discussing Debord alongside Jacques Rancière, particularly his essay *The Emancipated Spectator* (RANCIÈRE 2007), originally delivered as a lecture at the Fifth Summer Academy of the Arts in Frankfurt in 2004. Very little of Debord's texts that decry the spectator are concerned with the academic world; rather, Debord considered spectatorship to be the general condition of those living in the »society of the spectacle«. Debord's disdain for the spectator continued until his death in 1994, giving the inhabitants of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail the derisive title *Homo Spectator* in binomial nomenclature as late as 1992. What Rancière provides is an alternative, non-pejorative way of conceiving of spectatorship. For Debord, spectatorship was associated with the passive immersion in the spectacle (whether it be the society of the spectacle or any given spectacle like a play or sporting event), and an early edition of *Society of the Spectacle* featured a photo of the audience at a 3-D film on its cover. Rancière, partially by directly attacking Debord, comes to a conception of spectatorship that avoids the active/passive dichotomy. While Rancière's critique of Debord is legitimate and forceful, and while Debord is indeed being conceptually lazy in his disdain for spectatorship as such, Debord's own artistic and political practice reveals a practitioner with a more complex notion of spectatorship. In other words, rather than focusing on the various ways in which Debord conceives of a passive spectator, I will be looking at how his work engages an emancipated spectator.

It is easiest to understand Debord's pronouncements on spectatorship in relation to the theatre. Debord may reveal in his correspondence that »I am very unfamiliar with the problems and attainments of the theatre, which I have only dwelt on very briefly,« but his understanding of these problems and attainments seem to inform a great deal of his theory and artistic practice (DEBORD 2008: 375-376). In this same letter Debord briefly sketches two visions of what we could perhaps call a Situationist theatre. The first is a form of street theatre in which the actors would not have roles, but a theme with which to guide them as they intervene in urban life. »These actors could special-

ize in either scary or surprising roles; or represent sad or happy possibilities in life. They would create a new spectacle without location (a break in the space of play), without order, that no one would need to understand, but in which everyone would be able to find opportunities for living« (DEBORD 2008: 376). This spectacle would not create spectators who would be passively observing a spectacle, but rather immerse them in the performance unwittingly, a performance – or a situation – with which they would obviously be able to interact and alter. »This new spectacle would thus depart de facto from the sphere of the spectacle« (DEBORD 2008: 376). The second sketch is concerned with a kind of anti-theatre, presumably on a traditional proscenium stage, in which the actors would have a normal everyday conversation: »a *permanent* and empty spectacle, like life – not beginning or ending *that day* – with brief overtures of what could be« (DEBORD 2008: 376). Debord is rather vague about what this second form of theatre might accomplish, but it seems designed to make palpable the banality of everyday life under the present social and political organization and suggest something better.

We can also discover Debord's position on spectatorship in relation to the concept of the ›constructed situation‹, which gave the Situationist International their name. A constructed situation is defined as »a moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambiance and a game of events«, and appears similar to Debord's first sketch for a Situationist theatre (KNABB 2006: 51). In a text delivered at the Situationist's founding meeting, Debord explicitly relates the construction of situations to the theatre and spectatorship: »The construction of situations begins on the other side of the modern collapse of the idea of the theatre. It is easy to see how much the very principle of the theatre – nonintervention – is linked to the alienation of the old world.« Debord continues, »conversely, the most pertinent revolutionary experiments in culture have sought to break the spectators' psychological identification with the hero so as to draw them into activity by provoking their capacities to revolutionize

their own lives. The situation is thus designed to be lived by its constructors. The role played by a passive or merely bit-part playing ›public‹ must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors, but rather, in a new sense of the term, ›livers‹, must steadily increase« (KNABB 2006: 40-41). The constructed situation is perhaps the apex of the sequence of the avant-garde that tried to reduce the boundary between art and life. In the constructed situation the very division would be eradicated and surpassed – abolished and realized in art’s transcendence (DEBORD 1995: par. 191).<sup>228</sup> This can be summed up in the following quote by Debord: »Revolution is not ›showing‹ life to people, but bringing them to life« (KNABB 2006: 396).

Debord’s conception of the spectator is also taken up directly in and by his films. If forced to choose an occupational designation, Debord said he would have classified himself first and foremost as a filmmaker, and despite the fact that ›active‹ intervention in a film is near impossible, from an early stage the Situationists saw a great deal of potential in the cinema. Like much else related to Debord and the Situationists, there is considerable exaggeration surrounding Debord’s films. Ken Knabb says they are »amongst the most brilliantly innovative works in the history of cinema« and qualifies this by claiming – apparently sincerely – that Debord is virtually the only filmmaker in the history of cinema to have provoked spectators to think and act for themselves rather than suck them into passive identification with heroes or plots (KNABB 2003: viii). Debord’s career as a filmmaker spans twenty-five years and six films but for the sake of space, in what follows I’ll be focusing on his first film, *Howlings in Favour of De Sade* (1952), and his last, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978, a Latin palindrome that means »We Go Around in Circles in the Night and Are Consumed by Fire«).

Debord made *Howlings in Favour of De Sade* (1952) when he was only twenty years old and a member of the Lettrists, a pre-Situationist avant-garde group based in Paris. The film, which is eighty-eight minutes long with a script of just over one thousand words, consists of four voices making various claims, reports, statements, jokes, or poetic ex-

clamations, over alternating white and black screens. The voices come in while the screen is white; when the screen is black there is only silence. In the beginning there is quite a lot of dialogue but this is interrupted with increasingly long periods of black. The film ends with twenty-four minutes of uninterrupted silence and darkness. The lack of images in *Howlings*, writes Thomas Levin, »is employed as the essential ingredient in a recipe of provocation intended to »radically transform« the cinematic »situation« from a shrine of passive consumption into an arena of active discussion, a shift *away* from the spectacular and *toward* critical engagement. As will become increasingly evident in Debord's later films, already here the focus has begun to shift toward the problem of cinematic *reception*, that is, the issue of spectatorship« (LEVIN 2003: 347). Despite the use of the term »situation« here, Levin characterizes *Howlings* as a »decidedly letterist work« and even as perhaps the first true Dadaist film (LEVIN 2003: 344, 348).

Debord, with characteristic chutzpah, proclaims *Howlings* and his own date of birth, as two of the most important eight moments in the history of cinema early in the film. Despite these grandiose proclamations, the film itself – its content – is rarely discussed in any detail, even by Situationist aficionados; the various screenings of *Howlings*, however, have drifted into the annals of Situationist legend. The first screening, on June 30<sup>th</sup> 1952 at the Avant Garde Film Club in Paris, marked Debord's public debut. Two letterists hid in the balcony with rotten vegetables and bags of flour with which to pelt and powder the audience, another pretended to be a professor and prior to the start of the film gave a pretentious lecture on the importance of Guy Debord in cinematic history (HUSSEY 2001: 61) – promising the audience that if they waited until the very end of the film they'd see »something really dirty« (KAUFMANN 2005: 20). The reaction of the audience, according to one of Debord's biographers, Andrew Hussey, was a mixture of »boredom and fury« and the screening turned into »something between a walk-out and a brawl,« exactly what Debord and his co-conspirators intended (HUSSEY 2001: 118). Another screening happened at London's

Institute for Contemporary Art in June of 1957. The British audience reacted with confusion and anger. »However«, Hussey (2001: 124) writes, »although many members of the audience were furious at having been cheated, no one dared ask the mysterious ›Situationists‹ for their money back. One man threatened to resign from the ICA and another complained that he and his wife had come all the way from Wimbledon and had paid for a babysitter. The commotion reached the queue for the second showing of the film who were made all the more eager to see it by the protests of those leaving. Nobody really believed that a film could be a complete blank, and the air was charged with further excitement and anticipation«. This, Hussey (2001: 124) claims, was seen by Debord to be »a most perfect demonstration of the innate passivity of all audiences«. The intention of the film seems to have been to either provoke the spectator into action or else expose the spectator's passivity for putting up with such provocation.

I was recently invited to participate in the Guy Debord retrospective at the Lucca Film Festival at which Debord's six films were to be shown followed by a panel discussion. Interestingly, the films were shown in a converted cathedral and Debord – who once claimed that »it is in the cinema that I have aroused the most extreme and unanimous outrage« (DEBORD 2005: 146) – seems to have gradually become canonized and given his place in film history. The first film to be shown was *Howlings*, and having already seen the film multiple times and familiar with its reception on previous showings, I was more interested in observing the audience's reaction. Would they storm out and demand their money back? Would they sit through the silence frightened to look like impatient philistines, too accustomed to the rapid cuts and constant stimulation provided by most film and television to be able to sit through a work of high art? Or were most people like me: familiar with the film and sitting there quietly, half watching the film, half the audience, eagerly awaiting some violence? In the end, there was no riot, no fight, no one even seemed that angry, disappointed, or surprised (perhaps the fact that Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale* [1971], which is literally

nothing but a 190-minute pan shot of Canadian wilderness by a robotic camera, was shown the day before, made sitting through twenty-four minutes of darkness feel relatively painless). How do we think of a film like *Howlings* when it no longer is capable of shocking or provoking: when it has become a truism within the contemporary art world that shock and provocation have become the trademarks of some of the most commercially successful art of the past decades? Does a film like *Howlings* become a mere historical relic?

Surprisingly perhaps, we can start to get a more nuanced answer to these questions by returning to Debord's later films and writings on the cinema. Despite the notion of the cinema as the most inevitably passive, and thus ›spectacular‹ of all mediums, Debord and the Situationists never had such a pessimistic understanding of its potentials. In *In Girum* for example, Debord, the narrator, claims, »it is a particular society, not a particular technology, that has made the cinema like this. It could have consisted of historical analyses, theories, essays, memoirs. It could have consisted of films like the one I am making at this moment«. In a text from the first issue of the Situationist journal, *For and against the Cinema* (1958), they take up this question directly. Cinema is seen to facilitate »an exponential increase in the reactionary power of nonparticipatory spectacle«, but it can be reclaimed and is not inevitably spectacular (LEVIN 2003: 329). Films could be made that encouraged passive spectatorship, the worship of celebrities and consumption, but it would also be possible to make films that would actively engage the audience or at least provoke some sort of response. At this stage this is still theorized in a manner not too distant from *Howlings* and in this 1958 text, Debord even hails innovations like odorama as being highly significant for the development of a future Situationist cinema.

At the same time, cinema is seen as being the realm in which »détournement can attain its greatest effectiveness and, for those concerned with this aspect, its greatest beauty« (KNABB 2006: 12). *Détournement* is defined by the SI as »The integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu« (KNABB 2006: 52). In-

spired by the plagiarisms of Comte de Lautrémont and drawing on the Dadaist collage and Duchamp's readymades, it is essentially a form of sampling in which text, images, or sounds are taken from their original context and placed in a new context, creating a new meaning. Post-*Howlings*, Debord's films by and large consist of *détourned* clips from newsreel and other films, mixed with shots from his personal life, and are a blend of critique and autobiography. The soundtrack is always a relatively dense narration, written and read by Debord. In 1973, for example, Debord released the adaptation of his 1967 book *The Society of the Spectacle*, the least biographical of his films, which consists of about ninety of the book's 221 paragraphs (Debord claimed the best ones) read over images. Unlike *Howlings*, which seems to have been designed to provoke the audience to leave their seats and misbehave, in Debord's other films one has to sit in one's seat, completely focused on the screen like an obedient spectator in order to follow the narration, understand the citations, etc.

In other words, Debord's later films require the retention and attention of spectators rather than their elimination. These spectators are not well, however, and need to be nursed back into health. They are emaciated and lack nourishment, barely subsisting on a diet consisting primarily of mediocre Hollywood films, bad television, and advertisements. Importantly, since *détournement* is used as a primary technique throughout Debord's *oeuvre*, these Hollywood films and television series are not to be completely jettisoned but brought into play. As Tom McDonough writes, Debord and his colleagues »did not simply place themselves above the everyday life of advanced capitalism, even in its most debased forms, but rather threw themselves into every kind of filth in order, by way of its appropriation, to make it speak otherly« (MCDONOUGH 2007: 6). McDonough (2007: 15) notes that unlike the Italian Futurists who wanted to flood the museums, the SI wanted to take the paintings from the museums and hang them in various bars (15). Rather than eradicating or sidestepping the spectacle, Debord's and the Situationists sought to make use of it. While it was a challenge,



spectators could still be engaged with, and the production – and destabilization – of meaning via image and text was a key battlefield in the class struggle.

Debord's attitude towards the spectator does not seem to have developed alongside his cinematic practice, however. In his final film from 1978, the feature-length *In Girum*, the spectator is harangued for the film's first twenty minutes. Debord claims he makes no concessions in his own life, and thus makes no concessions to the spectators of his films, unlike the audiences of other films who are »above all treated like retarded children« (KNABB 2003: 136). Primarily, the audience is attacked for the world they have submitted to live in: their jobs, their homes, the fact that they think themselves the kings and queens of the world but do their own shopping, wash their own clothes, and cook their own dinners. Everything is written either in the third person plural (refereeing to ›they‹, the audience) or the first person singular (Debord congratulating himself for not making the same compromises as everyone else).

Who is this scathing critique, this barrage of insults, actually for? Are the spectators expected to be shocked into reflecting upon their wasted lives the same way the spectators of *Howlings* were expected to be shocked into action (or verify their status as spectators by doing nothing)? Anyway, rather than being offended, is it not more likely that the viewer of the film sees herself as someone for whom concessions are not needed, as someone who also hates most cinema, most politicians, and what urban planners have done to Paris and their own city? Referring primarily to Debord's intentions with *Howlings*, but in terms that can be applied to his work as a whole, Vincent Kaufmann writes, »from the first, it was important to move away from one-way communication, from the passivity that characterizes modern forms of cultural consumption, to ›discussion‹, to authentic dialogue, which is also conflict, of which scandal is the most extreme form. To move from film to discussion, to conflict, to make use of art as a means of division, in turn conferring on art that coefficient of reality and effectiveness that

the avant-garde has so often attempted to give it. Ever since Dadaism, such provocation and scandal have represented something like an irruption of the real into the world of art. In this sense, there is nothing gratuitous about provocation, or, more accurately, its meaning exists precisely in its gratuitousness, in the pure transition to action it aspires to and with which is reestablished, beyond the artistic artifact, a form of communication that is irrefutably authentic because of its adversarial nature« (KAUFMANN 2006: 22-23). This argument strikes me as being ridiculously facile. The artist spitting in the spectators face awakens »a form of communication that is irrefutably authentic«? Such a conception of artistic activity and the active/passive, actor/spectator binaries is not even one of the most complex or developed within what Rancière calls the »aesthetic regime of art«, and in the end, it is difficult to make sense of Debord's later films in these terms, even if they can be applied to *Howlings*. By moving now to Rancière it is possible to ask a different set of more productive questions.

Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator* discusses spectatorship primarily in relation to the performing arts. For Rancière, the historical debates around the concept and role of the theatre can be traced to what he calls the »paradox of the spectator«: there is no theatre without spectators, but spectatorship is a bad thing. Spectatorship is considered to be a bad thing because being a spectator means merely passively looking at a spectacle. Looking is said to be the opposite of knowing. One who looks can be easily deceived by appearances. Looking is also the opposite of acting: one is rooted in one's chair, unable to intervene in the spectacle. Those working with and on the theatre have traditionally drawn two conclusions from this paradox. The first is that theatre must be abandoned because it is the place of illusion and passivity. This argument stretches back to Plato and contributes to the banning of the theatre from his republic. The second, and this is the conclusion drawn by the 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-gardes, is that there is a need to create a new theatre. This new theatre aims to eliminate passivity – eliminate passive spectatorship – and make the audience into active participants. This attitude can be seen in

everything from the Italian Futurists in 1913 selling multiple tickets to the same seat, oiling up the floor, and inviting known mental patients to pinch women's behinds to Cirque du Soleil and relational aesthetics. Within this tradition, Rancière identifies two antagonistic ways of understanding this need, epitomized by Brecht's epic theatre and Artaud's theatre of cruelty. In Brecht's epic theatre, a certain distance or alienation was required so that the spectator could extrapolate from the action on stage greater truths about her own situation and the social forces that shape it. In the theatre of cruelty by contrast, the spectator was to be completely drawn into the production, both mentally and physically. Having their senses flooded, they would overcome themselves, fuse with the production, and no longer merely be spectators.

The problem with this discourse for Rancière is that there is a whole series of assumptions that this critique of the theatre makes that need desperately to be brought back into question. »It is a whole set of relations, resting on some key equivalences and some key oppositions: equivalence of theatre and community, of seeing and passivity, of externality and separation, mediation and simulacrum; oppositions between collective and individual, image and living reality, activity and passivity, self-possession and alienation« (RANCIÈRE 2007: 274). Behind each of these binaries Rancière sees inequality and incapacity. »What counts in fact is only the statement of the opposition between two categories: there is one population that *cannot* do what the other population does. There is *capacity* on one side and *incapacity* on the other« (RANCIÈRE 2007: 277). They are the contours of what Rancière calls a particular »distribution of the sensible«: »a distribution of the places and of the capacities or the incapacities attached to those places«, an organization and hierarchization of the senses that literally structures and limits what can be thought, said, and created (RANCIÈRE 2007: 277).

Emancipation, on the other hand, is first of all about overcoming these categories that are defined on inequality. It is based on the assumption that those occupying either side of each of the above binaries are capable of seeing, hearing, feeling, experiencing, or expressing the

same thoughts, dreams, or emotions. The spectator does not come to a performance as an empty container, to passively absorb the lesson or experience the director seeks to instil in her. Rather, »the spectator is active, as the student or the scientist: he observes, he selects, compares, interprets« (RANCIÈRE 2007: 277). There is no transmission but translation. The spectator is constantly actively translating the work into her own terms, her mind wanders throughout the stage (if the production is on a proscenium stage), her concentration drifts from the production momentarily and tangentially as an aspect of the performance reminds her of something in her personal life. What prevents any kind of direct transmission between dramaturge and audience for Rancière is the mediation of the work itself. The work - whether it be a book, performance, film, poem, or painting - denies any possibility of being directly transmitted. It can at best be the translation of one's thoughts, emotions, feelings, into another language, to another person.

Rancière's *Emancipated Spectator* is highly informed by one of his earlier books, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991). (In fact, Rancière reveals in the talk's introduction that he was invited to give the lecture after the organizer was impressed by the book.) To a large extent, the lecture is an application of the argument of his book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* to the theatre. By making the reverse movement, by going from *Emancipated Spectator* to *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, we can end up back in the lecture space or seminar room with Debord and his tape-recorder.

In traditional education, what Rancière refers to as the stultifying ways of the Old Master, the teacher explicates, she leads minds from the simple to the complex, she recognizes the distance between the student's present state and the goal. With this comes an inevitable set of hierarchies and divisions between knowing/ignorant, ripe/immature, capable/incapable, and intelligent/stupid. In stultifying education, wills and intelligences are matched. The student wants to advance, the teacher wants to fill her head with knowledge until she too reaches the point of mastery. Emancipatory education on the other hand sees an alignment of wills but not of intelligence. Emancipa-

tion is defined as the »act of an intelligence obeying only itself while the will obeys another will« (RANCIÈRE 1991: 3). For Rancière the mind knows two modalities: attention and distraction. Attention is the act that makes an intelligence proceed under the absolute constraint of a will. The state of distraction is a succumbing to laziness and is the result of the desire to retire from effort. In distraction the mind underestimates its own power and the boredom that ensues is a form of self-contempt and contempt for others. Equality admits no quantitative difference between intelligences. Everything is translatable. Emancipation is always self-emancipation.

The passive spectator is something like the stultified spectator. Put into Rancière's vocabulary, what Debord was attacking in his films was the stultifying quality of most cinema, in the theorization of the constructed situation the stultifying quality of everyday life in the society of the spectacle, and in his tape recorder lecture, the stultifying quality of the lecture space. As Rancière argued, the opposite of stultification is not necessarily activity, but emancipation. Spectators do not have to be removed from their seats in order to be ›actively‹ engaged with the production. Debord wants to emancipate spectators from spectatorship; Rancière wants to emancipate spectators so that they can spectate actively. Spectatorship is not about absorption, spectatorship constructs.

Of course we all – as educators, theorists, or artists – fancy ourselves to be emancipated emancipators and not stultified stultifiers. The first sentence of Debord's tape recorded talk *Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life* is as follows: »To study everyday life would be a completely absurd undertaking unable even to grasp anything of its object, if this study was not explicitly for the purpose of transforming everyday life« (KNABB 2006: 90). Obviously the same could and should be said of emancipation. What exactly this means, how exactly we turn the seminar/conference/lecture space, the cinema, or the theatre into an emancipatory rather than stultifying environment is up for discussion. As Rancière points out, there are no formulas here, no

pedagogical or formal methodologies we can simply adopt, and there is no guarantee we will be successful despite our best efforts. Nor is emancipation about getting your audience to dance, start punching each other, or mindlessly rebel. At the above mentioned festival in Lucca, Anselm Jappe, who has actually written a very good book on Debord, attempted to demonstrate the conditions of non-dialogue within the society of the spectacle by mumbling his talk into a microphone as it pierced everyone's ears with feedback for twenty minutes. It is not only that avant-gardist gestures like these cannot really be repeated and that he came off looking more like a pathetic anachronism than anything else, his contempt for not only the audiences' capabilities, but also his own ability to make himself understood, was palpable and the result was completely stultifying: a mixture of stupor and frustration that probably provoked more people into never engaging with the work of the Situationists again than anything else.

Rancière concludes *The Emancipated Spectator* with the following line: »Breaking away with the phantasms of the Word made flesh and the spectator turned active, knowing that words are only words and spectacles only spectacles may help us better understand how words, stories and performances can help us change something in the world where we are living« (RANCIÈRE 2007: 280). Perhaps what is most ironic about Debord's continual critique of spectatorship is that in his cinematic practice he developed techniques whose purpose is to engage an enlightened spectator and are meant to help emancipate the spectator from her immersion in the spectacle. *Détournement* requires attentive spectators, capable not only of understanding complex constructions of image and language, but of translating these constructions into their own life worlds. While much of Debord's work, theoretical and cinematic (if such a distinction even makes sense in his case), is concerned with showing the difficulties of emancipation – the manner in which the forces of the society of the spectacle conspire to prevent and pervert translation – his texts and films demonstrate that these difficulties can be overcome.

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