



Film as Critical Practice
Thomas Y. Levin, Keith Sanborn, and Anthony Vidler
In Conversation with Jean-Michel Rabaté

Thomas Y. Levin: I thought we could begin by my telling you a little story that you have a trace of in this newly released box set of Guy Debord's film works. A version with English subtitles should be coming out eventually, hopefully with some of the corrections to the transfers that Keith Sanborn, who is here with us tonight, has noted in his excellent article in *Artforum*.

One of the most wonderful things about this box set (besides finally having access to these films) is that it includes a useful book with all kinds of documents and unedited pieces around the film works, which is a treasure trove. One of the first things you see when you open this little book is a preface by the widow Alice Debord. The second thing is a letter to me that is dated May 29, 1987, when I was living in Paris. Good things happen when you are avoiding finishing your dissertation, and I was avoiding writing mine by getting involved with a group putting together the first exhibition on the Situationist International at the Centre Pompidou.

My project was to write about the films, but those films were, as many of you may know, radically unavailable. They had been utterly *available* in a cinema that Debord's patron and friend, Gerard Lebovici, had bought to that end on the Left Bank. He would show Debord's films exclusively and continuously all the time. But, in 1984, Lebovici was suddenly assassinated in a parking garage off the Champs Elysées, in a murder that was never cleared up and which Debord was understandably outraged by. In a strange, but very typically Debordian gesture, he decided, "I'm going to withdraw my films. They will never again be shown in France, and this will be a fitting tribute to a man whose death I am

mourning.”

As a scholar, I took him at his word and wrote him a letter saying: “Look, I totally respect the gesture of mourning, etc., but I really need to see these films because I am writing about them. Is there anyway you would consider showing them to a young American scholar outside of France—say, in Germany or somewhere else?” I sent it to his press, to the Édition Champ Libre, and, to my amazement, I got a response. This response is the letter reprinted in this book accompanying the films. In it, he basically says “You know, actually, I was wrong. I should not have said never again in France, I should have said never again, or at least as long as I live, because after all nobody can fault me for what happens after I am no longer alive.” Indeed, in retrospect, it was a chilling description of exactly what would happen. Not two months after his suicide in November 1994, on January 9, 1995, two of Debord’s films, *La Société du Spectacle* and *Réfutation* (which we are going to see here tonight), were shown together for the first time with a kind of collaborative *télé-film* that he made with a French film television film producer named Brigitte Cornand. These were, astonishingly, shown on Canal+ in an evening *Soiree du Guy Debord* . Of course all of us freaks eagerly taped this, and this was the basis for the dissemination of these films for the subsequent decade.

It is on the basis of those videos that Keith Sanborn made the subtitled version which is largely responsible for the dissemination of both *La Société du Spectacle* and *Réfutation* in the United States. But of course this was well after I had written a long essay on these films. And so, in a sense, we are marking here, with this event, the radical shift away from a condition of complete unavailability...

But first, a footnote: One of the films that I had a chance to see as a result of my correspondence with Debord was in the archive of Asger Yorn in Silkeborg, Denmark. I made a pilgrimage up to Denmark, got the 35mm print, rented the local cinema and had the projectionist screen it for me four times. He thought I was a madman, but this was the basis of a later friendship with Guy Debord.

One of the results of that friendship is some of the artifacts you see in the installation at Slought Foundation in the room immediately behind us, and that became part of my collection of “Situana.”

So, tonight, we are all in the happy position of being able to see these films together, however comprised some of the transfers may be. We thought this was an excellent occasion to bring together some people who have worked on, and have an interesting critical take on, the Situationist material to talk about what they are all about. What are the films of Guy Debord about and what does it mean to talk about “theoretical cinema”? What relevance does this set of works spanning from the early 1950s to the early 1990s have for critical practice of all sorts today? What is the Situationist International and how does that relate to this strange body of works? These are some of the questions that we would like to talk about. I’m really delighted to welcome you all to this event; there will be time after our discussion for you to raise questions and make comments.

Jean-Michel Rabaté: The challenge for all of us that are at Slought tonight is to consider not only the availability, but also the meaning, of these films today—politically and also artistically. We are interested in interrogating the main concepts underpinning these practices.

Keith Sanborn: Debord says it quite well himself: he talks about the lack of accessibility to the collective art of our time, by which he means the cinema. *Critique de la Séparation* , the next film that he made after *Sur le passage* , is even more explicitly about situations. I would say this is definitely a period when he is articulating this theory, and it seems quite clear that he’s going to great pains to show how problematic it is to communicate that via a film.

It’s articulated in an indirect manner, however. It’s always, as he says, “just like this bad tracking shot.” There’s always this gap that occurs. I don’t remember exactly where, but he compares this tracking shot to bad newsreel footage of Saint-Germain-des-Près. If you’ve seen any French newsreels from that

period, it's pretty obvious what he's talking about. I don't think it's just a case of making a virtue of necessity. I think it seems fairly deliberate that he uses what he does.

Rabaté: Without further ado, perhaps we can just start by screening "Sur le passage"...

[Screening]

Anthony Vidler: There seems to be a very strong contrast in this film between the *société du café* and the society of the bourgeois outside. It's very interesting because one finds that between 1951 and 1953 Debord is rediscovering the society of the *précieux* in the 17th century. And he's precisely looking very hard at the *Carte du Tendre* or the Map of Tenderness.

He writes about it in 'Potlatch,' around the same year he makes this film. It's interesting because he says the society of the *précieux* is oppositional in the same way as Pascal countered Descartes. It's a society which is counter to the rule, the norm, the geometrical, and so on. And it is a society established through conversation. By being established through conversation, it becomes an *other* society which can produce almost a kind of utopian existence. It also discovers, he says, the architectural promenade. The notion of the architectural promenade through the garden, conversing secretly, becomes also synonymous for him with the promenade through the city. This is developed into the form of the *dérive*, as we know.

The *dérive* is that moment in a kind of group psychological dynamic of winding one's way through the city. It's a kind of automatic writing by means of actual physical movement in a city—quite randomly, but of course unconsciously (and therefore not by chance) and with a little inebriation (usually after lunch)—tracing a city as if it has an unconscious. As you remember, the first map that Debord and Asger Jorn make is also subtitled with a Pascalian title, "The Passions of the Soul." It's a matter of trying to find the passions of the soul in

a city which is rapidly transforming. There's an element of nostalgia in all his shots of Paris, even in the '50s, especially the shots of Les Halles which are already being planned for destruction. So it's almost like the moment when Aragon looks at the *passages* of Paris in the *Paysan de Paris* as if to say, 'Well, it's all gone already so I'm looking, even though I'm here and looking at it physically, it's already a dream.'

Levin: The city is the site of all kinds of possibilities—some lost forever, only to be nostalgically mourned. It is also the site where various tactical interventions such as the *dérive* can take place and be put into operation. One of the forms that I love the most is the rigorous navigation of, say, the city of Paris using, and strictly following, a map of London. That kind of encounter of newness in something that is in fact familiar, all too familiar. There's also the possibility precisely in *dérive*, as he puts it in this film, of discovering architectures for slightly less mediocre [gains/games \(12:57\)](#).

Vidler: *De mettre en place le paysage urbain*. So it's a landscape, an urban landscape, but another use of it. You can't transform the buildings, right? We've given up, actually, on large scale urban renewal. We can't transform the buildings but we can transform the psyche of the city from Baudelaire to Breton to Debord.

Rabaté: This calls up Surrealist group activities in a broad sense. One of their games was to go to the Paris boulevards and there move from cinema to cinema, seeing films at random without following any consistent story. What surprises me again each time that I see these images and hear the soundtrack is the classicism of the form, something that I think is particularly Debord's—it comes out quite strange when you see it coupled with his brand of neo-Marxism. There is also something that goes beyond Surrealism, it is extremely poetic, a poem to Paris you might say with a lot of nostalgia. Is this something that you see as productive or symptomatic?

Sanborn: I want to back up a little bit. I have to object somewhat to this.

Although there's clearly a line that passes through the Surrealists, the Situationists are very skeptical about the richness of the unconscious. And so, we're not talking about *Nadja* here; it is a tactic, a purposeful one: if you are walking around even someplace you know very well and you are completely wrecked, you're going to get a different view of it, but there is still always this project of a theoretical positioning and articulation of things. I would say you might want to substitute the social for the unconscious. There's always a sociological aspect to psychogeography even if it's coined somewhat problematically or somewhat offhandedly. I would say (and this ties in with the issue of nostalgia), there's a point at which Debord says something about small groups and their own private languages, which sounds very much like an essay that appeared in one issue of the SI journals, by Michèle Bernstein, in which she talks about the need for secret languages. And the language that they are talking about is really the language of the *Coquillards*. It's the group of thieves that were followers of, or the group of the thieves that in the latter part of his life François Villon associated himself with. And it's interesting that both Michèle Bernstein and Alice Becker-Ho have written extensively on this. There's a book by Alice Becker-Ho, that I just happen to be reading at the moment, it's called *Argot: The Inheritors In Bastardy* and she talks about the relationship between the *Coquillards* and the Knights Errant, which, I would suggest, is a nostalgic connection, but one developed with a very disabused understanding of both. She develops a very interesting and non-traditional sense of the secret allusive language of the Provençal troubadours called *trobar clus*. And there's a way in which there's a direct comparison made between these new words like *dérive* and *détournement*, formulated by the Situationists, and this older tradition of secret languages. The Situationists even give a dictionary for those interested. They are articulating a new language which is deliberately set at variance with certain other traditions...

Levin: Maybe I could just interrupt for a moment, just to make sure we are on the same page: *détournement*. Let's just develop a quick working definition. And since we have a beautiful catalog in this film of *détournement*, at least in its cinematic manifestation, what is *détournement* and why is it so central to the

SI project, and certainly to Guy Debord's cinematic project?

Sanborn: In French, *détournement* has three basic meanings. The first one is embezzlement, like "*détournement de fonds*." The second one is hijacking, like "*détournement d'un avion*."

Sanborn: And, the third one is corruption of a minor, like "*détournement d'une mineure*." And with these meanings in mind they provide their own definition, which is "the reuse of preexisting materials in a higher construction of the milieu." Said a little less opaquely, it means quotations both in the sense of verbal quotations and filmic quotations.

Levin: In a word tactical plagiarism.

Sanborn: Exactly.

Levin: So in other words, taking in this case, you saw pieces of other films, citations of other works. A lot of the voice overs are texts taken from all kinds of sources. Some of the images you saw were taken from films and photographs. Even the blank or white screen is itself, you could say, a citation, a plagiarism, a recycling of perhaps the key moment of Debord's *succès de scandale*, the 1952 "Hurlements en Faveur de Sade." As many of you may know, this is a film that was technically described as a film without images. When there was a voice on the soundtrack, you saw a white screen, and when there was silence on the soundtrack you saw a black screen, up to and including the final 24 minute long black silence, which as you can imagine caused quite a bit of unease in the audience. Indeed, here I would say this film in its citation of that moment, a kind of reductio moment of cinema, not only refers to this early experiment in another moment in Debord's career, his Lettrist phase (and we can talk about the Lettrists in a moment), but this question of, as one of the phrases at the end of the film says, "*le cinéma devra être détruit aussi*": "cinema too must be destroyed." So we are witnessing here an attempt to think through the destruction of a certain cinema and the invention—you

know, tentative, exploratory as it may be—of a different kind of cinema. What kind of a new cinema is it? How does it compare to other work being done at the time, early Godard, etc.? This is also something we can talk about, in the context of *détournement* and *dérive*.

Rabaté: And then there is this rhyme that I think is more obvious in French, *vie/ville*, concerning everyday life and the city. Somehow I think this has to be negated or critiqued. There were obviously lots of quotes from Marx. Which leads me to my actual question—since you all know Debord's works far better than I do—about the role of Marx or of a certain Marxism. Would you say that Marx is also *détourné*? Is he no more than just a text that will function next to Pascal and lots of other writers?

Vidler: Well, 1952. Paris, 1952, with the Algerian War at its height and oppression of both demonstrators in Algeria and in France and across Europe at their height. With very antique methods, we come out of the Second World War—we are only seven years out of the Second World War—and Charles De Gaulle is still at the height of his power. And yet, at the same time, we're living in a pre-war world with pre-war attitudes from the ruling classes and opening up to the society of consumption which is parodied in the soap and the fingernails and the sort of beauty efforts and the car efforts and so on and so forth. Those kinds of clashes are brilliantly portrayed in this film. I mean the politics of this film is on the one hand incredibly overt, but on the other hand extremely subtly mediated to show how those worlds are in fact living not just side by side but inside each other in that Paris, and it's very difficult to extract each of those things. And of course the Surrealists—Breton and Aragon—were Marxists, communists in fact, PC members. So I think that the Marxism of Debord and his generation is a very select Marxism. It becomes in the late fifties the Marxism of the early Althusser and the young Marx—a post-Hegelian Marx. And I think there's a whole discussion to be made actually about Debord and Hegel and, if you like, the Marxization of Hegel as the young Marx's manuscripts, the "Anti-Dühring" and so on, are being discovered at that moment and translated in the very bookstores that *Pollatch* is being distributed in.

Sanborn: Yeah, absolutely. I think it is a rereading of Marx, who is definitely part of the intellectual horizon. But there is also a kind of rereading of Marx through Hegel and specifically through the neo-Hegelians. In *Society of the Spectacle*—I was mentioning this earlier—there's a quotation from August von Cieszkowski, from his book called *Prolegomena to Historiosophy*, in which Hegel is described as thinking basically that he had arrived at the end of philosophy; philosophy ended with him. And he also thought that art had suffered a similar kind of fate. So what von Cieszkowski talks about is what comes next. And he calls it post-theoretical synthetic praxis. And I think this complexity that you're talking about there is precisely that. Debord is not philosophizing over an image as Godard sometimes does, rather he's making a complex use of the cinema. There's some place in their definitions where they say that there can be no Situationist cinema, there can only be a Situationist use of those means. Now of course they do contract themselves later on—René Viénet does call for a Situationist cinema. In a way, it's a small point, but it's also a kind of important point, about finding their own particular place. Building their own reading of history out of these fragments and creating something, that's meant to be fun but is also meant to be something that you can't express any other way.

Vidler: And continuously resisting reification. No Situationism, only the use of Situationist means. There's no labeling, although they label like crazy. The labels are continuously taken off and floating and repositioned in a different image.

Sanborn: Right. They refused to be labeled while they're quite willing to label other people.

Levin: Maybe it might help for me to quickly list some of the citations, some of the authors cited, in the voice over of the film you just saw. These sources are at least according to those identified for me by Debord. One of the first voice overs is by Henri Lefebvre, then a quote by Marx, then a quote by what he calls

pseudo-Pascal, [Huisinga??, given the questions of the game and play, essential (26:29 – 26:36), Marx, Lenin, and the sociologist Edgar Moran (?)]... (26:41) whose work "L'homme ordinaire au cinéma" just came out in an English translation last year. He's a very interesting figure. Anyway, it gives you a sense of the landscape.

Vidler: And I've very recently found that the black screen and the white screen are actually quotations from his favorite English novel, Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. He uses the play on narrative in the novel as a comment on the whole problem of mapping and how in fact you can't actually narrate anything without a map but you can't make a map of a narration. And then you suddenly realize that the black page in *Tristram Shandy* which cuts the narrative in a particular way, at the statement "Alas poor Yorick" completed by the black page that stands in for "he is dead." For Debord this in turn stands in for the screen of no more cinema.

Levin: So you've already given us a hint about one of the key tactical moves of the cinema: the refusal of a certain kind of narrative logic. In the first white screen of the film we just saw, he says "In order to really properly critique a social formation you have to critique or refuse all forms of language of that social formation." So if the dominant cinematic language is what film theorists and narratologists have called "classical Hollywood narration," it refuses that. Yet he evokes at least two other genres. (The meta-theoretical or film theoretical comments always come at the white screen, which is a good flag.)

First of all, he talks about a theory of documentary. What would it mean to make a documentary about a particular historical moment? This is a question which this film can also be read as in some sense also an answer to. In another white screen, he also talks about another genre, which is the art film. And Debord's relationship to aesthetic practice, indeed the entire Situationist project and its relationship to initially what was a series of avant-garde formations, even in their refusal of dominant critical artistic practice, is nevertheless an artistic practice. This was of course the problem for the curatorial team that was

putting together an exhibit in a museum. What do you do with a formation where the question of works, in the sense of something you would put on a wall, drops out very fast, and where the notion of the aestheticized framed pamphlet is in fact anathema? It is in fact a gross caricature of everything they were trying to do—aestheticization, reification, commodification, etc.

Vidler: One of the things that is left out of our analysis is the voice over of the quotations in the images, the actual voice over, and the voice over of the musical quotations, for of course all the music is in quotations. All the music is absolutely and precisely quoted. There's one magnificent moment at the end, when Handel's Royal Fireworks music arises in the Place de Louis XV. There's a kind of extraordinary evocation of the power of the *Ancien Régime*... and then back to the café.

Rabaté: I have a more conceptual question: "situation" had already been used by Sartre in his own critique of reification and yet Sartre is never quoted as far as I know. Perhaps because Sartre is the dangerous double of what they are trying to do. But what I was trying to think through here is how can this critique of alienation, reification, and commodification be wielded in the name of a group that is obviously outside the cycles of production? Does negation have to be radical—does everything have to be destroyed—or can there be something like a dialectical negation or a political negation?

Levin: One way to begin, and perhaps Tony can speak to this, is as complicated and seemingly contradictory as the project of what it means to make Situationist Cinema. It is also the question of what it would mean to think Situationist Architecture. At early points in the project there was the notion "Well, we could actually build something!" and the relationship with Constant seems to promise, or hold out the promise, of another way of building. Anyway, do you see that as a way of perhaps talking about the constructive possibility of limits?

Vidler: There is obviously an elaborate theory of the construction of situations, which is very non-Sartre. But of course the construction of situations is also

aleatory, partly chance, partly psychic, partly group dynamics, partly the environment, and so on. But occasionally it has the ring to my ears of an earlier Futurist moment where the Futurists used to provoke their audiences by throwing pepper into the audience, or putting glue on the seats so the audience couldn't get up, and so on. The provocation of situations...

Levin: 24 minutes of black silence.

Vidler: Right. Exactly. So there is a kind of *action* there in terms of provoking situations. And I think there's a moment when a sort of analytical moment of the psychic organization of the city does intersect with a moment in a kind of post-war utopianism in architecture. I think that there is a brief confluence of these two. I remember going to a conference at the ICA in London where the Situationists came to explain their ideas and they were skeptically received by the more utopian of the architecture groups in London—the Archigram group in particular—and entirely dismissed by the establishment in Architecture and especially by the members of Team Ten. But there was a moment where there was a kind of utopian confluence—and I think it was all around, everybody at that time was absolutely excited by Fourier and the rediscovery of a notion of an alternative voluntary collective which could arrange things psychically (and sexually) that never had been done before precisely because, in a sense, natural inclinations could be followed. The architects and the activists in these sort of small group movements in society had this illusion that they could build it first—an illusion which was very quickly dispelled when the buildings of Constant looked very much like the buildings of Van Eyck or the buildings of Team Ten. And suddenly Debord had to pull back and say, in fact...

Levin: "No way!"

Vidler: Very quickly. In one year.

Levin: But it explains why one of the first buildings that was acknowledged potentially as something of a model for Situationist architecture was Constant's

model for a gypsy camp—talk about a mobile alternative for social configuration! This building was ultimately never built, but that I think one finds resonances in the later project for the Fun House, of a building for the Construction of Situations that would be staffed by a team of "professional Situationist managers" who would, you know, change. Everything was modular and changeable and you could produce atmospheres and spaces and literal climates to provoke new forms of situations.

Vidler: Debord had to pull back from this sort of almost Disneyland fantasy.

Sanborn: I think there's a strong neg-utopian impulse in the work and in some of the architectural interventions they talk about. As opposed to things that are actually built, they talk about putting a dimmer switch on a street lamp so you can adjust it to the brightness you'd like, or making stairways across the roofs of buildings so you can go different places at night.

Levin: Refocusing the city?

Sanborn: It's a repurposing of the city rather than the building of the New Babylon that was Constant's project.

Vidler: And that's the difference with the Surrealists. The Surrealists want to re-semanticize the city whereas the Situationists want to re-functionalize the city in a completely other form. They want to open up the city to use...

Levin: Where use is a use of game, of play, of abandon, of craziness.

Sanborn: Debord is also a bit of a social engineer himself. And the Situationists never operate entirely by chance. Debord's a great social engineer; he's a student of Balthasar Gracián, and others, but in particular Gracián because he talks about how to succeed and it's a little bit more like what Bakunin says about being the pilot at the secret center of the storm. His version of anarchism is one where he plays an off-screen role; the social engineering he practiced is one

where *he* creates the situations. Ralph Rumney talks about a game that Debord proposed about people trying to cross a certain street. And Debord's the kind of person who likes to specify the rules for a game and then see what happens when you play it. There's an element of chance, but really, every situation is a kind of loose laboratory situation.

Levin: But that seems so at odds with the film that we just watched. Where is the notion of playfulness, of humor, of *les passions de l'amour*, which you see an example of here in the room behind us in the psychogeographic map of Paris? Maybe I'm missing it, but do you see that playfulness in these films? And if not, what does that tell us?

Vidler: Is there a shift, do you think?

Sanborn: I think there's a certain amount of playfulness here. I think there's also, as he says in "Critique," a number of in-jokes. If you recognize the players, there's certain players he keeps focusing on. His then-partner, and later wife, Michèle Bernstein is there. And there's the still that he focuses on where Michèle is sitting across the table and he has his arm around the neck of this other woman. There's a lot of these. He's referring to a lot of little games that go on within the café world. And it's playful in a very sharply ironic way.

Levin: This points us towards one way of understanding how a film could produce, as he puts it in the beginning of the film we just saw, a *micro-société provisoire*—a provisional micro-society. It's through a certain often ironic wink wink, a private language, a new form of language, but also a kind of encryption. This is a film where every image is kind of cipher. For instance, it's about recognizing that one of the first houses and streets you see from the Left Bank is the building that Debord lived in all his life, or even the recognition of certain spaces, for instance what was later called the *Le Continent Contrescarpe* around the Pantheon where the SI had its offices and which then became the space of the May '68 insurrection. The more you know, the more you are part of the group, and the more, as it were, it speaks to you. Like the journal itself,

you begin to recognize the creation of a community through a kind of collective production...

Vidler: And a continuum, inclusion followed by an exclusion. Talk about social engineering...

Sanborn: Throughout the whole history of it...

Vidler: There was only one left at the end.

Sanborn: Well, actually three I think. Three! There was Viénet, Michèle Bernstein, and Debord. And they finally dissolved it at the end.

Levin: Perhaps this is not too thematically coherent, but could you also read his own suicide as a kind of auto-exclusion? "I want to have the last word, not mere biology. Thank you very much. Goodbye." And I say that as somebody who, myself, was also excluded! Having become friends with Debord at one point I was reading with him regularly to talk about the research I was doing. I then made a mistake. I had some friends at Zone Books who were trying to publish the new translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith of the *Society of the Spectacle*, and Debord was not giving his permission. So they said "Tom, would you? Would you please intervene on our behalf and get him to say okay?" The next time I went to his house for dinner, between an incredible number of bottles of wine, I said to Debord "Look, I've looked at this translation, and really it's very good. It's not how I would translate it, but it's serious and we need a new translation. Would you please? Why are you objecting?" What I hadn't realized was that the translator, Nicholson-Smith, was an ex-Situ. And thus by advocating the work of someone he had excluded, I had gone over, as he put it, to the side of "le gangster."

Sanborn: Wasn't it a matter of money? They didn't want to pay him?

Levin: Who knows. This may be the melodramatic high-moral-groundization of

what was ultimately pecuniary. However it may be, the result for me was that Debord put it, in classic Debordian fashion, “*je me vois forcé de te rayer de ma liste des amis*”—I have no choice but to cross you out from the list of my friends. And indeed, I never spoke to him again.

Vidler: He probably meant it literally, too.

Levin: “NEXT!”

Rabate: To have been excluded by Debord, that already justifies a whole career. But I think we could take two questions now before moving on...

[Audience question]

Levin: The question that has just been asked concerns the relationship of Debord with the more or less contemporary works of Godard.

Sanborn: I would say two things in response. I'm not a profound scholar of Godard, but I think if you look at what Godard is doing in 1957 and what is happening here, I think you'll see that this film—and it's what I asserted in my recent piece in *Artforum* and what I believe to be true—has almost all of the cinematic tropes of the French New Wave in one film. Godard works through some of those eventually...

Levin: Give us an example or two.

Sanborn: Well, for example, I can cite the white screen and the black screen that I believe Godard uses in *Le Gai Savoir*. What set Debord off was somebody praising the use of a black screen for “a nearly interminable amount of time,” which was maybe 15 seconds when he, Debord, had already made a film where the last 24 minutes of a feature length film was absolutely black and absolutely silent in a way that you can't even do in a 35mm film. It was a very special thing that he did.

The other kind of thing that I am talking about is “One + One”, where Godard has these guys talking to the camera, reading Marxist tracts, talking into their Nagra. It's amazing to think they could even stand up that long with a Nagra, those things weigh 25 pounds at least. Anyway, just reading these tracts in a very flattened way, to do the whole thing justice would be more than I can do extemporaneously.

Levin: But there's one important detail which we have to mention, *por favor*...

Sanborn: You're the one who noticed it first of all, though.

Levin: I hope we're not talking about the same thing. Did you notice the soap ad at the end of the film? Did you notice who the actress was? It's Anna Karina!

Sanborn: Who shortly thereafter married Godard. So, I mean, it's amazingly prescient in a weirdly personal way. This is a young actress who is working her way up through the French system from fashion ultimately to cinema, and Debord points at her as being a kind of paradigmatic case, even at this stage of her career.

Levin: And of precisely everything that Debord and Godard are ostensibly attempting to critique, at least in her incarnation as a Bathwater Babe. But maybe we need to ask, to the extent that Godard's project can be understood as a theoretical intervention, or an intervention in cinema of a theoretical sort, is what sense these films—this film, and the other films by Debord—can be said to be a practice of theory. Not film theory, per se, but theory as film. And not only at the level of reading of a theoretical text in the voice over, but in their very practice themselves. In the very complex and essayistic use of new forms of sound, image, and text, they are configurations—constellations.

Rabaté: Is there another question?

[Audience Question]

Vidler: The question that was just asked was about the members of the SI that were struck off the list of Debord's friends. The first time I ever heard about the SI was when Donald Nicholson-Smith and T.J. Clark, who were both at Cambridge at the time I was, came up to me at a political fair at Cambridge and wondered if I was interested in joining a group that was parallel to the sort of late-Potlatch early-SI group in Paris. Of course, I declared myself far too much of a Leninist to have anything to do with such things. But then in '67 just after we'd all graduated, they became members of the SI and immediately one year later were excluded. I believe it was because they wanted to publish in America.

Sanborn: Who knows what the real reason was. As Michèle Bernstein said, the reasons given were not always the real reasons.

Vidler: Who knows what Debord would have thought. He probably would not have liked it.

Sanborn: I do think that Debord continued to think that his critique was extremely useful. He modestly called it "the most important book of the twentieth century." And he did, in fact, revise his notion of what he calls the concentrated and diffuse spectacles into the integrated spectacle. But what would he think about it? Given those politics, he might object, but he probably would just not comment on it. That would be the most civil response.

Vidler: I think there's been a very, very quick assimilation of the word "spectacle" to the word "image," and I think this is not what he was about.

Sanborn: In typical fashion, he uses it to critique Daniel Boorstin who was in Paris at the time, promulgating his critique of "the image." Also, there is a long history of the SI in the Bay Area and so it wouldn't be surprising if there were yet another group that came out of there. There's a continuing tradition.

Levin: I think nothing could be more appropriate to a discussion of the SI than to always pose a question concerning the contemporary political situation. Moreover, any discussion of the SI that ignores the contemporary political situation, I would argue, has descended into a kind of self-serving **facho-museolization** which is deeply antithetical to the kind of commitment to the contemporary political struggle which is always of paramount importance.

To give a kind of schematic answer to the urgent question that you pose: recall that for Debord the spectacle is defined not in terms of the image, but as a way of discussing a social relation mediated by images. If we think of today, as one possible avenue into that social condition, perhaps one of the most urgent conditions that we need to consider is the increasing abrogation of civil liberties in the name of security, homeland or otherwise. Which is to say the proliferation without legislative restraint of surveillance in all its forms. And most importantly non-phenomenal surveillance, which is not of the order of the image at all, which is to say data-veillance. That is one of the significant features of our landscape, and I would say Debord's project today has an urgency of enormous contemporary significance precisely because it requires us to think about the relationship between the production of *spectacles of security*, such as the theatrics which we encounter every time we get on a plane. I hope that nobody here is under the mistaken impression that what this is really about is actually preventing certain objects from getting on planes, since the return of metal knives on airplanes in just a few short years after 9/11 demonstrates that this is not the case. Rather, this is about the theatrics of security and these kinds of *mise-en-scène* of the political. These are the kinds of questions that Debord and his always *collective* project would, I think, be interested in today.

Sanborn: And let us not forget that there are plenty of images of surveillance as well in *Society of the Spectacle*. The media as surveillance, for example.

Levin: As we bring this conversation to a close, we are now about to see a very strange kind of film, *Réfutation de tous les jugements*.

When *Society of The Spectacle* comes out, not surprisingly all kinds of journalistic responses are published. Some of the laudatory, some of them critical, but for Debord all of them equally and fundamentally misunderstand what the work is about, and what it would mean to translate, or to cast, or to revisit *La Société du Spectacle* as a theoretical work, as a piece of cinema. One of the interesting suggestions Debord makes is that "People shouldn't be surprised that I would make a film, *La Société du Spectacle*, since the book itself is already constructed as a *scénario*." Namely, as a script.

This is interesting to think further about. To what extent is the book already cinematic? In any case, what does Debord do? After the death of Lebovici he publishes a kind of compilation, a *détournement* if you like, concerning all the journalistic responses to Lebovici's assassination. Similarly, here he literally responds to all the criticisms of the film. He does so by making the act of film critical practice itself part of the machine of cinematic apparatus. And the film itself becomes the subject for a critical, analytical, and symptomatic analysis.

Interestingly enough, today political filmmaking has increasingly migrated into the museum. The museum has become, for better or for worse, a place where political filmmakers find something they could never find for the longest time—a space where their films can be shown on a regular, and indeed continuous basis to an audience of however many. But of course it is under an entirely different set of conditions—often ambulatory or flâneurial as Raymond Bellour has once said. My point is that what we had in Debord's cinema was a kind of early film installation, a form of installation, a kind of cinematic **Beyrouth** where you made a pilgrimage to see the films of Debord.

[Screening of *Réfutation de tous les jugements*]