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Guy Debord, director. *The Society of the Spectacle*. 91 min. DVD and streaming. (Icarus Films, 2020). \$29.98 U.S.

Review by Tom McDonough, Binghamton University.

Among the movie advertisements for a revival of Ingmar Bergman's drama *To Joy* (1950), the documentary *La république est morte à Diên Biên Phu* (1974, dir. Philippe Devillers, Jérôme Kanapa, and Jean Lacouture), and the sex comedy *Le Mouton enragé* (1974, dir. Michel Deville) in the Tuesday, April 30, 1974 edition of *Le Monde*, one could find an austere black box whose plain white typeface text announced: "Que la tentative révolutionnaire de mai 1968 ait marqué le changement d'une époque, voilà ce que démontre le simple fait qu'un livre de théorie subversive comme *La Société du Spectacle* de Guy Debord puisse être aujourd'hui porté à l'écran par son auteur lui-même, et qu'il existe un producteur pour financer une telle entreprise." [1] The filmic version of Debord's "livre de théorie subversive," first published six and a half years earlier, premiered the following day, Wednesday, May 1, at the Studio Gît-le-Coeur, a small Parisian cinema specializing in art and essay films, located in the heart of the sixth arrondissement, a few steps away from the boulevard Saint-Michel.

The film, as the advertisement noted, was the result of the unlikely collaboration of Debord—founder and animating member of the Internationale situationniste, and onetime director of a few experimental films—and Gérard Lebovici, one of the most powerful producers in the world of French cinema. [2] Plans for a filmic adaptation of the former's book of revolutionary theory had been mooted as early as fall 1969, but lack of funding kept the project from realization until Debord met Lebovici. The producer had himself been radicalized in the wake of May 1968, gravitating from a moderate socialism to the far left, even as his Artmedia agency continued to represent some of the most prominent European filmmakers and actors. He met Debord early in 1971, through the intermediary of a militant publishing house he had founded to support his interest in anarchist and heterodox Marxist thinkers. By 1973, having in the meantime become Debord's publisher, he agreed to finance *La Société du spectacle*, the first cinematographic project that the Situationist had undertaken in over a decade.

With Lebovici's assistance, Debord assembled a team composed largely of veterans from the French film industry, many of whom had worked with François Truffaut. Debord whittled the original 221 theses of his book down to eighty-seven and reordered them in significant ways to become the film's voiceover (which he narrated himself); meanwhile, his researcher, Suzanne Schiffman (who had begun working with Truffaut as script girl in 1960 and was by this time his assistant director) and editor Martine Barraqué (who had served the same role on Truffaut's last

three films) were locating and editing the visual documents that would become the film's image track.[3] This was composed through the Situationist technique of *détournement*, making the film a tissue of appropriated imagery: fashion shoots; newsreels; text panels quoting Marx, Machiavelli, Tocqueville, Clausewitz, and the like; fragments drawn from cinema classics ranging from Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October* (1927) to Orson Welles's *Mr. Arkadin* (1955); and still images drawn from advertising and the era's softcore pornography. The result was a dense montage of image and text, often running in counterpoint, which together constructed the director's implacable critique of contemporary society. It was also, at moments, quite moving, not least during elegiac sequences reflecting on the "revolutionary effort of May 1968," accompanied by eighteenth-century French composer Michel Corrette's cello sonata Opus 20, known as the "Délices de la solitude."

*La Société du spectacle* would have a five-week run at the Studio Gît-le-Coeur, with six screenings each day, at two-hour intervals from noon to 10.00pm. Debord wrote triumphantly to an Italian friend the morning after the film's premiere: "Il y avait une foule à toutes les séances, quantité de places refusées, mais aussi des gens qui exigeaient tout de même un billet pour s'asseoir par terre ou rester debout. Mais le phénomène le plus important, c'est que la majorité de ce public était constitué de jeunes ouvriers et marginaux, de 'loulous' venus de leur banlieues. [...] [C]e public a écouté tout le film dans un extraordinaire silence. Ils exigeaient le silence même de quelqu'un qui ouvre un paquet de bonbons. C'est seulement le soir qu'a commencé à venir l'intelligentsia." [4]

Outside the theater, Debord reported, the crowd of young workers, taking advantage of the May Day holiday to see the film, attracted the attention of the police, who blocked off the narrow street and attempted to disperse those awaiting entry or lingering in discussion, resulting in scattered clashes. In Debord's view, "ce genre d'anti-cinéma" had found its proper public, "une pègre surgie des bas-fonds de la société, bref, des prolétaires." [5] The following days would, however, see the advent of a different audience; according to Christophe Bourseiller, subsequent screenings were often heckled, or even shut down, by far-left militants who perceived the film as a kind of sellout to commercial interests on the filmmaker's part. [6] Someone even scrawled a graffito on the cinema's façade that read "Debord, tu aurais mieux fait de te taire." [7] Whatever these controversies, however, *La Société du spectacle* in the end found only a modest audience, selling a total of just under 10,000 tickets. [8]

Like the audience, critics were divided. Those with backgrounds in literature tended to be more favorably inclined to the film. Claude Roy, writing in the *Nouvel Observateur* the week of the film's opening, described how its "démontage chirurgical et sardonique du capitalisme" gave way, at moments, to the sentiments of "un romantique noir et rouge." He concluded his review by noting that "Debord dit (à sa manière) qu'il n'est pas nécessaire d'espérer pour démolir ni de réussir pour continuer de vouloir que la vie soit une vie." [9] In *Le Monde*, François Bott labeled the film a "western 'théorique'," recalling the genre's numerous citations in its found footage: "Imaginez, sous la forme d'un western, une œuvre de même sorte que *le Capital*, et vous pressentirez ce qu'est le film de Guy Debord." He too noted its frequently melancholic tone, calling it, using appropriately Hegelian terminology, "la biographie de la conscience malheureuse." [10] Critics in the professional cinema press were typically harsher, focusing on perceived formal shortcomings. In *Cinéma 74*, Debord was taken to task not only for his pedantic voiceover, but also for his use of images, which, while described as "souvent bien choisies pour leur caractère évocateur - on n'ose dire spectaculaire," were seen to play "un simple rôle d'illustration, ce qui

révèle un maniement au moins maladroit du langage cinématographique.”[11] Examples could be multiplied, but in a sense Debord had anticipated these reactions, for the ultimate aim of his film was not to persuade, not to be liked, but, as Vincent Kaufmann has astutely put it, “to divide, to exclude, and to establish a relationship of intransigent confrontation with the viewer.” In other words, “to *infuriate* the public.”[12]

Positive or negative, critics of all persuasions failed to perceive *La Société du spectacle*'s place in relation to the wider field of leftist filmmaking. This was neither the straightforward militant documentary of a René Vautier, nor the vérité exploration of everyday life of a Jean Rouch, nor the avant-garde experiments of a Jean-Luc Godard and his Dziga Vertov Group. Perhaps the closest in formal terms, Pier Paolo Pasolini's *La rabbia* (1963), with its use of documentary footage and its politico-philosophical voiceover, was not well-known in France. In a scathing review of Debord's film, Jean-Pierre Oudart of *Cahiers du cinéma* called it a “message interstellaire,” which is an apt summary of its sheer strangeness, its unclassifiable nature.[13] Today, we are more familiar with this sort of montage essay, thanks to subsequent work by filmmakers such as Godard, Harun Farocki, or Hito Steyerl, but in 1974 it indeed seemed like an alien form appearing onscreen in its Left-Bank cinema.

*La Société du spectacle* remained impossible to see in North America for some thirty years until, following Debord's suicide in late 1994, Canal+ screened it on French television as part of a “Soirée Debord.” Pirated videotape copies supplied with English subtitles soon appeared for sale online. Gaumont's 2005 distribution of his “Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes” in a three-DVD box set raised hopes of an imminent official English-language release, but it took another sixteen years before Icarus Films, a distributor of documentary cinema, has made available *The Society of the Spectacle*, in an excellent 2K restoration.[14] One may, however, regret the meagerness of the package: no trailer, no accompanying booklet to set the film in context, with only, as a supplement, an unofficial English-language version of the film with a voiceover narrated by American artist Paul Chan, a project originally dating to 2013.

Certainly, this DVD arrives at a moment when the literature on Debord's cinematic endeavors has burgeoned. Thomas Y. Levin's pioneering study of 1989 has been complemented by work on the part of French scholars, notably Guy-Claude Marie and Fabien Danesi, and their American counterparts, including Kaira Cabañas, Jason E. Smith, and Soyoung Yoon, among others.[15] Yet much historical work remains to be done--on the technical aspects of these films, on their relation to a broader field of French cinema, on their complex reception. And, of course, on the question of their contemporary resonances. Many of the events represented in newsreels in *La Société du spectacle*--notably, footage of French politicians speaking before crowds (1974 was a presidential election year)--will be unfamiliar to today's audiences. But viewing the film in 2023, one might be struck by the preponderance of images of war and of women: war at a distance, represented by scenes of aerial bombardment drawn from America's ongoing conflict in Vietnam, at that point entering its tenth year, the repressive violence that subtends the regime of spectacle; and women most often unclothed, the fantasy of sexual liberation as it was played out on the pages of men's magazines, the ideological violence imposed by spectacle as it transformed these bodies into commodities.

Undoubtedly Debord seeks in these passages to catch out the viewer's gaze, understood not only in gendered terms as male but also, in economic terms, as capitalist, acquisitive; yet just as surely there is a violence, too, in reproducing them, in enlarging them even to the scale of the movie

screen, and in insisting on their passivity. In Debord's film, as in the wider world of spectacle, men talk--Joseph Stalin before the Party Congress, Fidel Castro before Cuban television cameras, French politicians of the left lauding their *Programme commun*--and women are silent, to be looked at by the eye of the camera, the eye of spectacle.[16] Perhaps, alongside *La Société du spectacle*, we might in the future program another film from 1974 which brings together Debord's themes of war and women in a different register: Delphine Seyrig and Sami Frey's *Femmes du Vietnam*, with its evocation of women's resistance to colonialism and neocolonialism.[17] "Le spectacle ne chante pas les hommes et leurs armes," Debord intones in his film over a series of nude or scantily-clad pinup girls, "mais les marchandises et leurs passions." Seyrig and her sister feminist filmmakers remind us that there are other songs to be sung.

## NOTES

[1] *Le Monde*, April 30, 1974, 33.

[2] On Debord and Lebovici, see Jean-Marie Apostolidès, *Debord* (Paris: Flammarion, Coll. "Grandes biographies," 2015), pp. 330-348. See also Jean-Luc Douin, *Les jours obscurs de Gérard Lebovici* (Paris: Stock, 2004).

[3] Other Truffaut regulars involved included sound engineer Antoine Bonfanti and production administrator Christian Lentreten. To date, McKenzie Wark is the only scholar to have drawn attention to these crucial collaborators on the film; see his *The Spectacle of Disintegration* (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 123-136. Here, he notably interviews Martine Barraqué on her work with Debord, although it should be noted that she misremembers a key fact: rights were obtained for all the films quoted in *La Société du spectacle*; they were not pirated.

[4] Guy Debord, *Correspondance*, 8 vols (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1999-2010), V (2005), ed. Patrick Mosconi, pp. 147-148.

[5] *Ibid*, p. 148.

[6] Christophe Bourseiller, *Vie et mort de Guy Debord* (Paris: Plon, 1999), p. 336.

[7] As reported in Debord, *Correspondance*, Vol. 5, p. 152.

[8] As reported in *Le Film français* 1580 (May 16, 1975): 124; cited by Anna Trespeuch-Berthelot, *L'Internationale situationniste: De l'histoire au mythe (1948-2013)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2015), p. 366.

[9] Claude Roy, "L'arrache-coeur," *Nouvel Observateur* 494 (April 29, 1974): 62.

[10] François Bott, "'La Société du spectacle'...en film: Le western 'théorique' de Guy Debord," *Le Monde*, May 9, 1974, 20.

[11] Bernard Pauly, "La Société du spectacle," *Cinéma* 74 188 (June 1974): p. 147.

[12] Vincent Kaufmann, *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): 235-236.

[13] Jean-Pierre Oudart, "LA SOCIÉTÉ DU SPECTACLE (G. Debord)," *Cahiers du cinéma* 266/267 (May 1976): 88.

[14] French director Olivier Assayas was instrumental in bringing Debord's films back into public circulation, and he is himself an insightful commentator on this œuvre. See Brian Price and Meghan Sutherland, "On Debord, Then and Now: An Interview with Olivier Assayas," *World Picture Journal* 1 (Spring 2008), accessible at [worldpicturejournal.com](http://worldpicturejournal.com); and "The Hidden Work: Interview with Olivier Assayas," *undercurrent* 6 (April 2010), accessible at [www.fipresci.org](http://www.fipresci.org). See also Keith Sanborn, "Return of the Suppressed," *Artforum* 44/6 (February 2006): 184-191.

[15] See Thomas Y. Levin, "Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord," in Elisabeth Sussman ed., *On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989), 72-123; Guy-Claude Marie, *Guy Debord: de son cinéma en son art et en son temps* (Paris: Vrin, 2009); Fabien Danesi, *Le Cinéma de Guy Debord (1952-1994)* (Paris: Paris Expérimental, Coll. "Classiques de l'Avant-Garde" no. 17, 2011); and the texts assembled in *Grey Room 52* ("Special Issue: Guy Debord's Cinema," ed. Jason E. Smith) (Summer 2013).

[16] The most trenchant feminist approaches to the Situationists' appropriation of images of women are Kelly Baum, "The Sex of the Situationist International," *October* 126 (Fall 2008): 23-43; Jen Kennedy, "Charming Monsters: The Spectacle of Femininity in Postwar France," *Grey Room* 49 (Fall 2012): 56-79; and Frances Stracey, *Constructed Situations* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), pp. 94-121.

[17] Sami Frey and Delphine Seyrig, directors. *Femmes au Vietnam*. Les Insoumuses, 1974. 60 min.

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