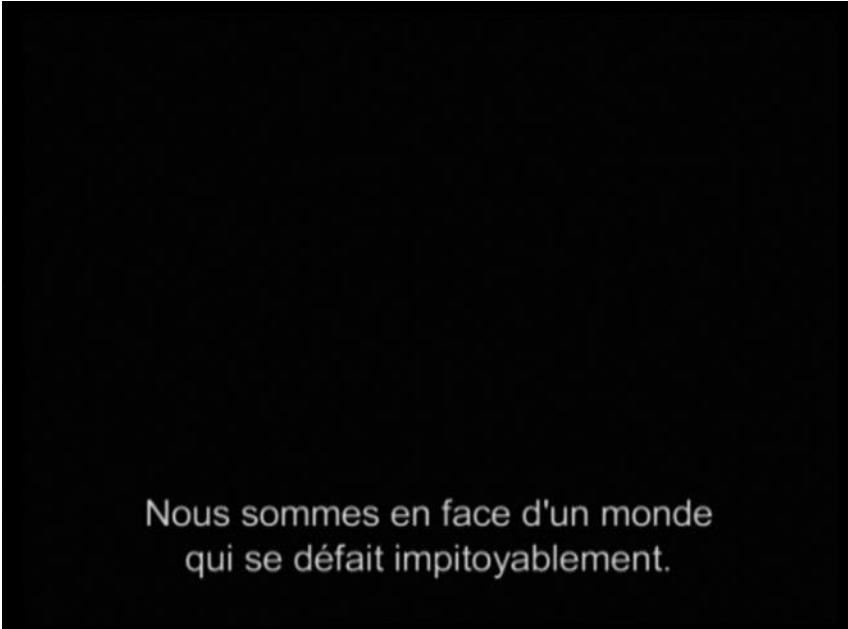


Guy Debord.  
*Critique de la séparation*, 1961.  
Frame enlargement.



Nous sommes en face d'un monde  
qui se défait impitoyablement.

# Missed Encounters: *Critique de la séparation* between the Riot and the “Young Girl”

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Guy Debord's 1961 film *Critique de la séparation* (Critique of separation) declares itself to be both a “demystification of documentary” and an “experimental documentary.” The most thoughtful analyses and reflections on this film have treated it accordingly as a documentary film that paradoxically dismantles and exhibits the conventions and ideological presuppositions of the documentary form. Tom McDonough, for example, analyzes the way *Critique de la séparation* engages not simply the generic form of the documentary but what at the time was its most advanced, contemporary variant: the cinéma vérité and what is still often taken as the most important example of this technique, Jean Rouch's *Chronique d'un été* (Chronicle of a summer, 1960).<sup>1</sup> And yet, if Debord's film takes as its ostensible target the contemporary documentary film, the film also proposes other generic possibilities for itself, beyond the form of the documentary.

Take, for example, the final sequence of the film, which consists of a series of still photographs of members of the Situationist International (SI) accompanied by a monologue in Debord's voice. The last part of the monologue, which addresses the way the film will not be able to end properly, is pronounced over shot/reverse-shot sequences of images of the film's credited director, Debord, and the film's de facto producer, Asger Jorn, as if the two were in dialogue.<sup>2</sup> As Debord states that *Critique de la séparation* is “a film that cuts itself off, but does not finish,” the viewer of the film is compelled to read a series of subtitled statements that resemble the transcript of a private conversation, as if in an editing room, between Debord and Jorn.<sup>3</sup> One of the subtitles, flashing on the screen as Jorn's image stares out at us, declares that the film we have just watched—for we are watching not the film itself but its aftermath, a footnote or appendix—is about “private life” and that it is therefore “only normal that a film about ‘private life’ would consist entirely of ‘private jokes.’”<sup>4</sup> What follows, we must presume, is just such a joke: “We could

make it a series of documentaries, lasting three hours. A sort of ‘serial.’”/ “‘The ‘Mysteries of New York’ of alienation.’”<sup>5</sup>

*Les mystères de New York* is the French title for one of the more famous film serials of the silent era, *The Exploits of Elaine* (1914), starring Pearl White as the heroine relentlessly tracking down a mysterious villain who has killed her father and who is known by the charming handle “The Clutching Hand.” Like *Critique*, the film serial was much shorter than the feature films with which it was often shown, and it was structured in the form of episodes that could be screened consecutively from week to week, with each installment ending—or rather, not ending—in suspense (the “cliffhanger”). The proposed title might be a private joke alluding to Debord’s own dubious (if reflexively mediated) taste for the pulpier of genre fiction and cultural production, as evidenced by his 1958 book collaboration with Jorn, *Mémoires*, pieced together almost entirely from collaged fragments of science fiction novels, comic strips, *photo-romans*, and *Série Noire* detective novels. The reference to the obsolete, minor form of the film serial from the silent era of cinema’s history also suggests a throwback to a historical form that, once reactivated, *might* be able to demystify contemporary documentary.<sup>6</sup> And it amounts to a prescient if unintentional nod to a near future in which the serial form will come to be identified not with film but with an increasingly rival medium or apparatus, television.<sup>7</sup> Nothing forbids us from taking the joke literally, however, and conceiving of the series of short documentaries Debord began in 1959—*Critique de la séparation* would be the second episode in the “‘Mysteries of New York’ of alienation” series, after *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps* (On the passage of a few persons through a rather brief unity of time, 1959)—not simply as documentaries but as crime stories or mysteries as well. With one important specification: the crime in question can, in this case, no longer be located in narrative time or assigned to an individual agent. The crime in question is not this or that murder; it is not a “particular wrong” but what the early Karl Marx calls—in a passage used elsewhere by Debord—the “absolute wrong” of alienation, or of “separation.”<sup>8</sup>

But this is not all. For if *Critique de la séparation* is at once a documentary about “private life” and a crime story without solution, it also presents itself as a stereotypical love story starring a mysterious young heroine who perhaps distantly echoes the Elaine of *The Exploits* but more closely resem-



Right and opposite: Guy Debord.  
*Critique de la séparation*, 1961.  
Frame enlargements.

bles André Breton's *Nadja*. As with all of Debord's films, a great deal of *Critique de la séparation* is composed of stolen, borrowed, or detoured images or film fragments from newsreels, advertisements, or print media, among other sources. But unlike his other films—in particular the best-known among them, the 1973 film version of *La société du spectacle* (*The Society of the Spectacle*) and 1978's *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*—Debord's film from 1961 uses no footage from the history of cinema. Instead, Debord overlays his appropriated footage of young women in bikinis, Congolese riots, and strafing American warplanes with an apparently fictional narrative, shot on 35 mm film by cinematographer André Mrulgaski, of Debord—or a “character” played by him—pursuing a young girl through the streets of Paris. At times she slips away entirely, as in the opening “trailer” sequence of the film, where she is briefly glimpsed by a camera mounted in a moving car. At times she is held by the camera she faces, muted, her voice deprived of sound as she speaks (as in old silent films), or crowded out by Debord's imposed monologue, which addresses not her but the viewers of the film. The conventions of narrative fictional film would oblige us to separate the filmmaker Debord from both the voice of the film's commentary and from the “character” played by Debord, a man in his late twenties pursuing a young girl who appears to be no more than seventeen. This de rigueur separation of fictional instances is complicated by the fact that we glimpse, at one point, Debord's actual wife and the sole female founding member of the SI (Michèle Bernstein) accompanying the young girl, as if herself a part of the story, playing the role of procurer, seducer, or rival. Bernstein wrote two novels during the period Debord made this film. They appropriate not specific texts (as does Debord in, say, *Mémoires*) but entire genres and their conventions.<sup>9</sup> Her stories center on the classical eighteenth-century literary theme of the love triangle, and if we take this into consideration we are forced to address the ambiguity of the apparently fictional layer of the film: we sense that *Critique de la séparation* both records and is a pretext for, rather than a simulation of, Debord's and perhaps Bernstein's actual seduction of the young girl who concentrates so much of the energy and focus of the film.

Who—or what—is this young girl? In a way, the real mystery the film

pursues is just this question. The young girl speaks (is heard) once in the film, but not within the diegetic “reality” produced by the fictional structure of the love story. Instead, her voice is heard at the beginning of the film, recit-



ing what might be called its epigraph: a passage from the linguist André Martinet about the “dissociation” of language and reality. The *jeune fille*, or wayward, underage girl, is a constant thematic reference in Debord’s films, from *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (Howls for Sade, 1952) through his final great film, *In girum*. But in his first two films, *Hurlements* and *Sur le passage*, the young girl (and youth and sexual difference more generally) is not only a thematic reference. In these two films, the young girl is first and foremost a voice interacting, dialectically, with other voices. In *Sur le passage*, for example, Debord’s own voice, described in the technical notes for the film as “sad and subdued,” is not the only voice but is staged in relation to other voices, one explicitly identified as that of a “young girl.”<sup>10</sup> This early pluralization of voices necessarily emphasizes the dramatic or fictional structure of Debord’s own voice, denying it the privilege of its centrality or status as a source of theoretical or analytical propositions. Debord’s voice is one *tone* among others, melancholic and resigned, set off against the stereotyped “announcer’s” voice of the other male voice and the punctuation of the girl’s voice. As the two male voices occupy the conventional poles of objective neutrality and subjective lyricism, the exact place of the girl’s voice in this *Wechsel der Töne* is not easily circumscribed. The young girl is here often used to channel texts that are particularly discordant for her voice and age, seemingly *ironizing* them. She ventriloquizes, for example, the voice of Lenin speaking of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” in a text that, moreover, denounces what Lenin calls the “infantile” disorders of left-wing Communism—a political orientation with which Debord and the SI would identify, particularly in the period immediately following 1961.

Documentary, joke, serial, detective story, or fictionalized love triangle: *Critique de la séparation* cites and at times deploys all of these genres in its pursuit of the mysteries of alienation. And yet, unlike Debord’s first two films, here the “subject of enunciation” organizing the film is no longer fragmented through a plurality of fictional voices, tones, generations, and genders. Now, the authority of the voice is consolidated in Debord’s monologue, and the play of fictions and genres seems organized around this voice and its generic correlate, the documentary. The young girl who interrupted and disoriented the dialogue between men in *Sur le passage* no longer speaks, having passed over into the frame of the film. Now dumb, she is assigned the role of a “signal” that “emanat[es] from a more intense life.”<sup>11</sup>



“For example, I don’t speak of her.” Guy Debord. *Critique de la séparation*, 1961. Frame enlargement.

From its first lines, *Critique de la séparation* declares its theme: loss. The opening sequence of the film, for example, concludes with a frame of a comic strip depicting a woman speaking of failure and a jeep sinking in the mud of a swamp, accompanied by Debord's voice-over asking "What veritable project has been lost?"<sup>12</sup> The form of the question underlines not only the failure or defeat of the project but an uncertainty about the nature and existence of the project itself. For the next fifteen minutes, the film returns again and again to this theme, of projects that have failed and adventures that lost their way. In this way, *Critique de la séparation* is indeed a sequel to *Sur le passage*, which is also concerned with the failure of the "few people" of its title to accomplish the projects they formulated in 1952, when the Lettrist International first formed. *Critique de la séparation* speaks in particular of loss and its relation to time: of "empty time" that spools out without incident, of "lost moments" and "wasted time" in which opportunities that will never return are missed, and more generally of time that "slips away" or that *we*—Debord, the revolutionary movement, his age as a whole—have *let* slip away. Time was there for the taking, Debord's voice-over melancholically recounts, but the time of the present, the time of the spectacle, is organized in such a way that every real encounter, every true opening in history is *missed*: "we have invented nothing," "when did we miss our chance?"<sup>13</sup>

In one of the more developed lyrical passages in the script—so many of the lines Debord utters seem like fragments, shards, phrases surrounded by a phantom, missing context—we find this theme of loss linked to an insistent figure in Debord's writing: not the young girl but the child, the *enfant*:

All that concerns the sphere of loss—which is also to say what I have lost of myself, time that has past; and disappearance, flight or escape [*fuite*]; and more generally the passing away of things, and even in the most dominant social sense, in therefore the most vulgar sense of the scheduling of time what is called wasted time—is strangely encountered in this old military expression "like lost children," encountering the sphere of discovery, of the exploration of an unknown terrain; all the forms of seeking, of adventure, of the avant-garde. It is at this crossroads that we find and lose ourselves and each other [C'est à ce carrefour que nous nous sommes trouvés, et perdus].<sup>14</sup>

Whatever one makes of his fundamental theses regarding Debord's life, work, and politics, Vincent Kaufman was surely right to organize the

entire trajectory of Debord's work around the expression and theme of "lost children."<sup>15</sup> The military sense of the expression *les enfants perdus* refers to a detachment of soldiers sent well ahead of the regular troops, often behind enemy lines and generally with the understanding that their mission would be fatal or *forlorn* (the proper English translation of this expression, which loses the reference to children, is "forlorn hope").<sup>16</sup> What I want to underline in this particular reference to *les enfants perdus* is simply the way the notion of the *encounter* is paradoxically conjugated with that of loss or escape: the vague contours of the sphere of loss are here given the concrete image of crossroads in which "we" at once find and lose one another. This general figure of a crossroads and a missed encounter—of a time or age that somehow "loses" itself—is what the film's and Debord's *tracking* of the young girl (first glimpsed at a crossroads in the film's opening sequence) appears to emblemize.

What "veritable" project, then, has been lost? *Critique de la séparation* is clear on this matter: that of "contesting the totality" of the capitalist order through the project of "collectively dominat[ing]" the environment: the natural world, the city, the conditions of existence more generally.<sup>17</sup> What is at stake in this domination of the environment is not simply a collectively controlled and managed production of use-values. The *collective* domination of the environment is paradoxically the condition for the production of what Debord, closely following Marx, calls "real *individuals*"—and, more precisely, *real encounters among them*.<sup>18</sup> The name for these encounters is an affective one, what Debord and the Lettrists and early situationists constantly refer to as "passions." The condition for real encounters in which a passion can crystallize is the collective capacity to "make our history" and to freely create situations. The term *situation* names a crossroads or encounter between rationality and contingency; it describes the specific kind of space and time that must be constructed by rational means in order to make possible the tangential, the contingent, the real encounter that alone can produce passions.

What *Critique de la séparation* calls the spectacle—founded on the operation of separation—is the programmed preemption of precisely these encounters. In an important text published in the SI's journal just after Debord's film appeared, Attila Kotanyi and Raoul Vaneigem argue that the modern city is organized around the logic of circulation: circulation is "the opposite of encounter."<sup>19</sup> *Critique de la séparation* declares that what the spectacular city proscribes are chance *encounters* between real individuals, replacing them with the arbitrary *exchange* of things "haunted" by ghosts or "shadows."<sup>20</sup> Communism, for Marx as for Debord, is the name for a mode of existence in which collective domination of nature opens the path to real, passionate encounters among individuals.

But under the conditions of the spectacle, “some encounters,” Debord’s voice-over intones (as we again see the face of the young girl his character pursues through the urban fabric), are “like signals coming from a more intense life that has not truly been found.”<sup>21</sup>

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The structure of *Critique de la séparation* is determined by its avowal that it is a film that begins and “cuts itself off” for no reason, with no narrative or formal motivation. And yet this torso of a film includes an “ending” that speculates on the genre of the film, and it opens with a sequence of images that are meant to look like a trailer. These images are not referred to in Debord’s script, and they reappear at crucial points throughout the film, their uncertain combination suggesting a clue to deciphering both the thematic trajectory of the film as well as the logic of its construction.

Consider the first three images: a photograph of a young blonde girl in a bikini, taken from a print source; newsreel footage of a “riot” in the Belgian Congo; and footage shot by Debord of the young girl glimpsed with a car-mounted camera. The specificity of these images is important. And yet, whatever the *content* of the respective images, Debord is also presenting them in this sequence as the different *types* of images—and textures, temporalities, modes of production and distribution—that his film(s) will use. Which is to say that *Critique de la séparation* is as much about the layering *without articulation* of these different types of images and their sources as it is about loss, its stated theme. But the types of images used by Debord immediately trigger a set of associations. The young girl in the bikini evokes the empty or wasted time of spectacular “leisure,” the vacancy of *les vacances* and the beach as a kind of negation of the urban street (even if beneath this beach the riots and their paving stones slumber). The source of this image is most likely a woman’s magazine, of the sort read *on* the beach, but it is eroticized just enough to have originated, perhaps, in a vulgar magazine for boys. The image is, moreover, one the SI had already used, in the first issue of the organization’s journal, where it is embedded as a poor reproduction in “No Useless Leniency,” an

article by Bernstein, the one female founder of the journal and of the SI—and perhaps a wink or private joke among comrades (including, in this case, a married couple).<sup>22</sup>

The second image, of the Congolese riot, is from newsreel



Guy Debord.  
*Critique de la séparation*, 1961.  
Frame enlargement.



footage. In the postwar period before *Critique de la séparation* was made, such footage would have been seen in the same movie theaters in which feature films were screened, often before or between features. The Congolese “riot” evokes, yet is different from, the types of European (or Japanese) riot images Debord uses in *Sur le passage* and in his later films, *La société du spectacle* and *In girum*. In *Critique de la séparation* we see demonstrators being beaten by heavily armed military police. We are unsure exactly what is happening or who the parties to the conflict are: the images are drawn seemingly at random from some point in the decolonization process in the Belgian Congo. We do not see images of Patrice Lumumba or of an organized leadership playing roles on the stage of history, only the uncertain conflictuality of a melee—a melee that in a certain sense is a *mise-en-abîme* of the conflictual mixing together of these images themselves. Debord’s interest in this image, however, is largely rooted in the distance from which we see it. Later in the film, when this footage is again used, Debord’s script invokes “unknown men [who] try to live differently,” only to lament that “always, it was far off” and “we hear of it through newspapers and Newsreels [*les Actualités*].” Whatever our sympathy for or even partisan position in favor of these revolts, the fact is that “we remain outside of it, as if before one more spectacle.”<sup>23</sup>

Finally we come to the third image, a “fictional” sequence actually shot by Debord and his cinematographer, an image reminiscent of fragments of a *nouvelle vague* film that was never made, as if demonstrating the possibility of making such a film while refusing to do so.<sup>24</sup>

Three images: the still of the girl in a bikini on vacation, the newsreel of the far-off riot, the missed encounter on the streets of Paris. What exactly is the relationship among these images? Quite possibly, nothing. And that would be the point. The idea is to emphasize the “anarchic” character of these sequences, the way in which the images are exchanged like things haunted by ghosts: like commodities. The very disorder of the images is what most adequately exhibits the conditions of life under the spectacle. Despite the spectacle’s claims to authority and order, it in fact resembles the “drunken monologue” the film claims to be. In the accumulated melee of images—what Debord calls a “spectacular junk heap [*pacotille*]”—that constitutes the spectacle, all have the same, derisory value, and as such each can be exchanged with all the others, in an order composed solely of exchanges among shades.<sup>25</sup> If the final of the three images depicts a missed encounter on the streets of Paris—the mode of relation that



Right and opposite: Guy Debord.  
*Critique de la séparation*, 1961.  
Frame enlargements.

constitutes the privative aspect of private or everyday life—then the relation *between the images* is defined in these same terms, as an encounter that never quite happens.

What we are watching has the disorder of a dream. But the dream has a logic, as we have known since Freud. We can ask what role the footage of the Congolese riot has in bringing together and separating the two women that bracket it: the frozen, long-haired blonde in the bikini and the short-haired, almost boyish brunette roaming the streets of Paris. Nothing in the film allows us to answer this question definitively. What we can verify in this combinatory, however, is a cluster of polarities. The riot in a far-off land is opposed to everyday life in the city, just as the *jeune fille* in the bikini—herself far from the city, not in the former colonies but that neocolony typical of the mature capitalist dynamics of the postwar period, the beach, with its managed voiding of time—is at once sister or peer and rival or enemy of the girl whom Debord or his film relentlessly chases after.<sup>26</sup>

What the two young girls share in their separation is their age: they are both on the threshold between childhood and adulthood. If one of the central figures of Debord's oeuvre is that of the *enfants perdus*, these children are often young women or girls (whose ur-figure is no doubt Eliane Papaï, a former girlfriend whose image appears in both *Sur le passage* and *In girum*, among other places in Debord's work). This dynamic between Debord or his character and the young girls in the film invites us, however, to consider the brief appearance of two adult women in the film: Bernstein, who is seen walking with Caroline Rittener (the actress who plays the young girl) in one short passage; and the still photograph of one of the heroes of the Algerian War that was taking place during the making of the film, Djamilia Bouhired. Here again, the sequence consists of three images in succession: more Congolese "riots"; the image of Bouhired, her face in profile; and then the young girl again, this time facing the camera. Here, too, we see oppositions or tensions forming among the photos: the riot is opposed to the organized clandestine warfare cited by the image of Bouhired, while the riot and Bouhired are in turn opposed to the young girl by their geographical distance and by the way they express, as Debord's script notes with pointed understatement, the desire to "live differently."<sup>27</sup>

The passage from the photograph of Bouhired to the young girl is particularly instructive. The photograph is not simply any photograph: it is an iconic one, well-enough known that the jour-



nalist who appears in the photo as a pair of hands is also identified in the film's script. What we are looking at is just as much the iconic quality of the image as the content of the image itself; we are led to think about the conditions that led to its production and where the image subsequently appeared. In the next shot of the young girl, her face, in the foreground, is slightly out of focus: what we see or read instead are the newspapers displayed on a kiosk behind her. The shot of the front pages of the newspapers is crisp enough to allow us to read their headlines. We see not images of Bouhired but, in one case, a woman who might be thought of as her opposed double: the shah of Iran's wife, Farah Diba. What seems to be emphasized is both the distance with which we see this image—the geographical separation of Algeria and Paris, the historical separation between everyday life and revolutionary war, between Djamilia the icon and whoever she might otherwise be—and the threshold between the young girl and the adulthood of the guerrilla leader and terrorist.

The threshold between childhood and adulthood is where the notion of *separation*—the critically examined object of the film, if we believe the film's title—is first developed in *Critique de la séparation* and in Debord's subsequent work. The term *separation*, which is at the core of Debord's theory of the spectacle, is first mentioned in the journal of the SI in reference to Debord's film, and the term appears in only a few passing references in the journal until its publication of the first chapter of *La société du spectacle* in the October 1967 issue.<sup>28</sup> This chapter, titled "Completed Separation," emphasizes that the logic of separation is by no means a contemporary phenomenon but is a characteristic of power in general, even in its most archaic forms. Power constitutes itself by consolidating itself in a separate instance, where it appears for us as what it is: for example, in the state. But in the era of completed or achieved separation, what is singular about the nature of separation is that it no longer appears *as* separation; it is no longer standing over against a life—everyday life, civil society, the economic, and so on—upon which it would impose itself. Completed separation is instead a pseudoreconciliation or unity of the terms that are in conflict or contradiction in previous forms of power: "the spectacle reunites what is separate, but it reunites *as separated*."<sup>29</sup>

In his first pass at defining *separation* in *Critique de la séparation*, Debord knots together two terms: *childhood* and *poverty*. Over the course of a paragraph, four images pass by us, three of



Right and opposite: Guy Debord.  
*Critique de la séparation*, 1961.  
Frame enlargements.

them associated with space and space travel, as Debord sizes up what he calls “our age”:

Our age accumulates powers, and dreams that it is rational. But no one recognizes such powers as his own. Nowhere do we find access to adulthood: only the possible transformation, one day, of this long restlessness into a measured sleep. This is because no one ever stops being held in custody [*tenu en tutelle*]. The question is not one of noting that people live more or less poorly, but that they always live in a way that escapes them.<sup>30</sup>

The first orbit of the earth by a human being was completed in the same year that *Critique de la séparation* was made. The “powers” invoked in this passage are identified with this specific technological breakthrough, an achievement then mocked by the trashy cover of a pulpy science fiction book that follows the newsreel footage. The almost frightening image of the faceless “aviator” (as he is called in the script), wearing a special suit that allows him to fly a plane into the stratosphere, suggests that the glorious exploit of orbiting the earth has, as Maurice Blanchot wrote in 1961, left humanity “all bundled up in his scientific swaddling clothes, like a new-born child of former times, reduced to nourishing himself with a feeding bottle and to wailing more than talking.”<sup>31</sup>

Debord’s point is simple enough: the massive accumulation of productive capacities and technological powers in the capitalist twentieth century has, far from emancipating humanity from the yoke of work, induced the most extreme separation of humanity from its own means of existence. What is experienced in this separation is a new form of poverty. Not the quantitative concept of poverty as a measurable, unequal distribution of collectively produced wealth, but a qualitative form of poverty that increases with every new access that humanity is offered to the products and commodities it produces. In *La société du spectacle*, Debord expresses this paradox in this way: “The worker does not produce himself, he produces an independent power. The success of this production, its abundance, comes back to the producer as an *abundance of dispossession*.”<sup>32</sup> What is at work in this notion of poverty is a precise form of inversion or chiasmus: the more the working classes of

the Western capitalist democracies are integrated into the capitalist production process through the mediations of union representation and through increases in wages and buying power, the more they are separated from or



deprived of any hold on the conditions and means of their existence—that is, the more they are deprived of any capacity to “collectively dominate the environment.”<sup>33</sup>



*Critique de la séparation* is reflexively concerned with the inadequacy of the cinema to give shape to the theme or experience that the film nevertheless claims as its own: “a film on private life,” on the “mysteries” of alienation (to use the terms used in the subtitles to the film’s final sequence).<sup>34</sup> What the cinema *is* suited for, to the contrary, is offering society an image of itself. The history the cinema recounts is the “static and superficial history of [this society’s] leaders,” the history therefore of the state.<sup>35</sup> As the voice-over recounts this, we watch a pageant of nominally inimical world leaders embracing one another, two by two—Charles de Gaulle and Nikita Khrushchev, Dwight Eisenhower and Francisco Franco—each with their part in the false antagonisms that articulate the different sectors of a global and unified logic of spectacular power. What is implicit in this account of the complicity between the cinema and the state and its history is that the cinema is incapable of inscribing in an objective form what Debord seems to oppose to these terms: not simply “private life,” but “the clandestinity of private life.”<sup>36</sup>

While images of the Seine scroll past, largely void of any human presence, Debord tells us,

Here is daylight, and perspectives that, now, no longer mean anything. The parts of a city are, at a certain level, readable. But the sense they have for us, personally, cannot be transmitted, like the entire clandestinity of private life [*vie privée*], about which we possess only the most pathetic documents.<sup>37</sup>

The images of the Seine we see in this sequence might have some “personal” resonance for Debord or, more generally, for those who were part of the Lettrist milieu that is the subject of his previous film, *Sur le passage*. The movement is clear. With the coming of daylight, those “perspectives” that had meaning have lost it; the city, from the aerial perspective of the map or the sociological analysis of its functions, can be grasped intellectually; what gets lost in this legibility is what by nature remains “clandestine.” Clandestine? Because it must keep out of the light of intelligibility in order to remain what it is, even if reclusiveness, the fleetingness (its constantly being *en fuite*) of that life is also a source, or effect, of this poverty. Clandestine? Because with the means of existence entirely in the hands of the enemy, this life can carry on only under the

cover of invisibility, in the nocturnal sea in which the guerrilla alone can swim. This is the reason we possess only the most laughable documents about this “private” life: *documents like this* “documentary” we are *now watching*. A “documentary” about “private life” that might just be little more than a compilation of private jokes, or itself a private joke: after all, *Critique de la séparation* would not, for decades, be screened publically.

The terms used in the expression “clandestinity of private life” appear on a few occasions in Debord’s work. The expression is, in fact, at the center of his thought. In an important presentation given to a group organized by Henri Lefebvre to research “everyday life” in the same year *Critique de la séparation* appeared, Debord could speak of the “clandestine problems of everyday life” and that “everyday life is thus private life, domain of separation and spectacle.”<sup>38</sup> The expression is clarified in a short text, “Defense inconditionnelle,” published in the August 1961 issue of *Internationale situationniste*—just half a year after the completion of *Critique de la séparation*. In the last paragraph of the unsigned text we read that the “entire apparatus of information and its sanctions being in the hands of our enemies, the clandestinity of lived experience [*du vécu*], which under current conditions is called scandalous, is brought to light only through certain details of its repression.”<sup>39</sup> The occasion for this short but important piece is what the Western press (the “apparatus of information”) referred to as a youth crisis or youth rebellion, one whose most significant symptom was the formation of gangs on the outskirts of urban centers, often in the housing projects built there after the war. The formation of these gangs is a result, the unnamed author argues, of a “total failure” of the social mediations developed to integrate these youth into a “society of consumption”: the total collapse of religious, cultural, and political institutions and organizations, the complete pulverization of the family and even of the symbolic order as such. These youth, by organizing themselves into gangs in the wastelands of the spectacular order, represent the final “vanishing point”—*point de fuite*—in the otherwise totally managed territory described so precisely in chapter 7 of Debord’s *La société du spectacle*. At this point of disappearance, flight, or escape, the clandestinity of private life is formed, a kind of *positive hole*—the term is borrowed from physics—that can be registered only by means of its repression. This is why we have, in the terms used by *Critique de la séparation*, only the most pathetic documents attesting to the existence of these holes. An antidocumentary can transcribe signals of a more intense life only by mirroring as closely as possible the world it confronts, this world that despite its calls for and impositions of order is “pitilessly coming apart.”<sup>40</sup>

*Critique de la séparation* poses, within a wide-angle analysis of the contemporary capitalist order, the question of the cinema as a form or activity occurring under the conditions of a generalized separation. The film poses the question of the cinema but also acts out in a cinematic form the crucial distinction between exchange and encounter that this “order”—an “anarchic” one, we discover—enforces. The relationships among the images as they pass by us in their disorder seem to play out the logic of exchange: things haunted by ghosts, each exchanged against all the others. Among these exchanges *Critique de la séparation* seeks some type of *real encounter among its images*, some connection or communication among them in which a spark is set off, a passion induced.

The cinema exhibits in an exemplary manner the operations performed by the spectacle: the absolute nonparticipation or “nonintervention” on the part of the spectator (passivity) combined with, and inseparable from, the material condition of film as a medium—namely, its status as an index of a past. Film is fundamentally a form of memory; every film, whatever its purported genre, is a species of memoir. What film as a medium and as a technological configuration lacks is the capacity to seize the present as it slips away or flees, the *fuite* of time. As we watch a still photograph of two fellow Lettrists from Debord’s pre-SI period (referred to in the script as “lost children” and described in subtitles as “partisans of the power of forgetting”) give way to footage of an American prison guard standing watch over a prison riot, Debord announces that any “coherent artistic expression already expresses the coherence of the past, of passivity.”<sup>41</sup> To “destroy memory in art,” we are told, is therefore “advisable.”<sup>42</sup> As if to exhibit what such a destruction of memory would look like, the proposition is accompanied by a brutal tactic borrowed from Debord’s early Lettrist film: the extinction of the image entirely, a black screen.

As is well known, in Debord’s earliest film, *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*, the image is “destroyed” without remainder, the visual field of the screen simply alternating, at varying intervals, between white (when voices are heard) and black (when they are not). The use of blank screens in *Critique de la séparation* is ambiguous. Although the film here declares the need to destroy memory in art, the deployment of the black screen after the “partisans of forgetting” flit by seems less an attempt to register a pure passage of time in its flight than a citation, a reference, a nod to a past (the Lettrist period, Debord’s own film) and the writing of a kind of memoir, as Debord often did in his films. At the very least, we can note that while recourse to blank (black or white) screens is made in

almost all of Debord's films after *Hurlements*—notably in his second film, *Sur le passage*—his use of blank screens after *Hurlements* is always calculated, functioning less like gaping voids into which the image disappears than as active interventions and *punctuations* of a specific filmic phrase or sequence. In his later films, the blank is no longer an abyss into which every image dissolves, a sea into which all sequences flow. The blank becomes a cut or hole. A “positive hole.”<sup>43</sup>

To banish the image, as Debord does in his early “destructive” or terrorist phase, is to solve in a one-sided way the question of the discrepancy of the image and sound so italicized by the Lettrist cinema of Isidore Isou; namely, by removing one of the terms of the disjunction.<sup>44</sup> This is why the reappearance of the blank screen in *Critique de la séparation* wavers between a *use* of this tactic and, to borrow speech-act theory's useful terms, a mere citation or *mention* of the blank screen: the invocation of a cinematic procedure that Debord implicitly acknowledges as a failure. While *Hurlements* exhibits a particularly reductivist drive toward a kind of “zero degree” of the cinematic phrase—the white screens of his 1952 film relaying the *écriture blanche* (“white,” or blank, writing) of Roland Barthes's almost contemporaneous *Writing Degree Zero*—Debord's later films draw back from this brink in order to inhabit and deform sedimented cinematic conventions, particularly those concerned with rules governing the relation between words or, more generally, sound and image.

*Critique de la séparation*, like *Sur le passage*, therefore deploys these blank screens in a very specific way. At moments in *Sur le passage*, for example, the blank screens work as passages *and* blockages between the two basic “themes” of the film: the wasted or *empty time* of everyday life and the punctual, fleeting intensity of the *riot*. Connoisseurs of Debord's films will note that scenes of urban riots (e.g., the Congolese riot footage used in *Critique de la séparation*), and often of rioting youth, are one of the most common forms of newsreel footage used in his films. In the first draft of his script for *Hurlements* one of the most frequently used images is simply “scenes from a riot.” Although Debord and the SI more generally had a certain taste for such riots—at least symptomatically, as a shattering of the heralded “social peace” of the postwar period—what becomes

clear particularly in the two films from 1959 and 1961 is a certain gap or separation between what *Critique de la séparation* calls “the clandestinity of private life” and the violence of street fighting and riots, the convergence of which



Guy Debord.  
*Critique de la séparation*, 1961.  
Frame enlargement.



would potentially trigger a properly revolutionary process. In the early phase of the SI, this short-circuiting of the separation or missed encounter between riot and private life—the young girl, a more intense life—is compared to the search, a century before, for the fabled Northwest Passage. Debord’s films from this phase of his life seek just such a “passage,” even as they inevitably reenact the separation such a passage would negate.

## Notes

1. Tom McDonough, "Calling from the Inside: Filmic Topologies of the Everyday," *Grey Room* 26 (Winter 2007): 6–29.

2. Jorn established the Dansk-Fransk Eksperimentalfilmkompagni for the express purpose of producing Debord's films.

3. Guy Debord, *Critique de la séparation* [film script], in *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 552. All references to Debord's script for *Critique de la séparation* in this essay are to the version established in *Oeuvres*, 541–555. Translations are mine. We could take literally the proposition that *Critique de la séparation* cuts itself without ending: the length of the film is determined not by internal narrative or formal pressure but by running out of film.

4. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 552.

5. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 553.

6. *Les mystères de New York*, among other silent-era film serials, was an important point of reference for the surrealists, a predilection no doubt also being alluded to in this exchange. See Robert Desnos, "Fantômas, Les Vampires, Les Mystères de New York (1927)," in *French Film Theory and Criticism: 1907–1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 398–400.

7. Debord's films contain relatively few thematic references to television. In *La société du spectacle* (The society of the spectacle, 1973) footage is drawn from television and closed-circuit television, and in *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978) the modern "employees" in the first segment of the film are shown watching television. Debord made a "documentary" for television at the very end of his life: *Guy Debord, son art et son temps* (Guy Debord: His art and his time, 1995).

8. In the 1844 "Introduction" to Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, we encounter the description of the modern proletariat as "a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no particular right because no particular wrong, but wrong generally." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 186; emphasis in original. Debord detourns this passage in, for example, thesis 114 of *The Society of the Spectacle*: "No quantitative amelioration of its poverty, no illusion of integration into the hierarchy, can be a lasting solution for its dissatisfaction, for the proletariat cannot truly recognize itself in a particular wrong it has undergone nor in the rectification of any particular wrong or even a large number of these wrongs, but only in the absolute wrong of being pushed into the margins of life." Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle*, in *Oeuvres*, 816; emphasis in original.

9. Michèle Bernstein, *Tous les chevaux du roi* (Paris: Buchet-Castel, 1960); and Michèle Bernstein, *La nuit* (Paris: Buchet-Castel, 1961). The former is available in English translation as *All the King's Men*, trans. John Kelsey (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2008). On these novels and their relation to Debord's work, see Jean-Marie Apostolides, *Les tombeaux de Guy Debord: Précédé de portrait de Guy-Ernest en jeune libertin* (Paris: Exils, 1999).

10. She is identified in these terms in the "Technical Notes" Debord included in *Contre le cinéma* in 1964. Debord, *Oeuvres*, 486.

11. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 545.

12. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 541.

13. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 547 (“when did”), 552 (“we have”).

14. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 549.

15. Vincent Kaufmann, *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry*, trans. Robert Bonomo (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

16. “Hope” here refers not to its English cognate but to the Dutch word *hoop* in the expression *verloren hoop*. In “Defense inconditionnelle,” a text contemporary with Debord’s *Critique de la séparation*, the unnamed author compares the children who form urban gangs in postwar France to the orphaned children of the early Soviet period, whose parents died in the civil war following the revolution, the difference being that in postwar France the stray children were not produced by the physical elimination of parents but by the collapse of the symbolic and ideological mediation of the family and father. In *In girum*, Debord’s voice-over speaks of children who no longer even belong to their parents, being instead children of the spectacle who, in the absence of any functioning symbolic order or mediation, relate to their parents through the affect of hatred and consider themselves “rivals” to their parents rather than dependents of them. See Debord, “Défense inconditionnelle,” in *Internationale situationniste* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), 211–213.

17. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 544.

18. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 544. The term *real individual* is a crucial concept in Marx’s *German Ideology*, to which Debord is implicitly alluding here. To imagine that Communism meant for Marx the suppression of the individual is a great *contresens*. To the contrary, the collective domination of nature makes possible the production, for the first time in the history of humanity, of real individuals. The nature of this “reality” is precisely the question, however: the reality of the individual is constituted not by its mediated integration within a totality but in the sequence of real *encounters* it has with other individuals.

19. “Programme élémentaire du Bureau d’Urbanisme Unitaire,” *Internationale situationniste* 6 (August 1961), reprinted in *Internationale situationniste* (Fayard), 214–217. On the distinction between encounter and circulation, see Soyoung Yoon’s article in this issue of *Grey Room*.

20. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 544. A version of this passage appears in the June 1958 text “Problèmes préliminaires à la construction d’une situation,” *Internationale situationniste* 1 (June 1958), reprinted in *Internationale situationniste* (Fayard), 11–13. Many passages from Debord’s films from 1959 and 1961 borrow formulations and passages from texts, often not signed by Debord, published in *Internationale situationniste*.

21. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 545.

22. See Kelly Baum’s essay on the use of images of this sort in Debord and by the SI, and its relation to a politics founded on the idea of desire. Kelly Baum “The Sex of the Situationist International,” *October* 126 (Fall 2008): 23–43. In addition to Baum’s assessment of this (problematic) dimension of Debord’s and the SI’s theoretical and aesthetic production, see also Jen Kennedy, “Charming Monsters: The Spectacle of Femininity in Postwar France,” *Grey Room* 49 (Fall 2012): 56–79. Kennedy offers a rich historical contextualization of the term *jeune fille* and deploys it specifically in relation to the SI’s use of images.

23. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 547.

24. In “Filmic Topologies,” McDonough refers to Jean-Luc Godard’s *À bout de souffle*, for example.

25. The term *pacotille* is precisely chosen by Debord; it designates any odd assortment of objects, but specifically trinkets and other cheap things, and originally referred to “commodities destined for sale overseas or in distant countries” (*Trésor*).

26. *This* young girl flashes by even more quickly at the end of the film, among footage of tornadoes and the Congolese riots.

27. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 547.

28. The term appears, for example, in the first paragraph of the important piece “Défense inconditionnelle,” *Internationale situationniste* 6 (August 1961), reprinted in *Internationale situationniste* (Fayard), 211–213.

29. Debord, *La société du spectacle*, Thesis 29, 774.

30. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 545. “*Tenu en tutelle*” means kept watch over, supervised, or made the ward or guardian of someone.

31. Maurice Blanchot, “The Conquest of Space,” in *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. Michael Holland (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1995), 270. Debord often uses images of space and of people underwater in diving suits.

32. Debord, *La société du spectacle*, 774.

33. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 544.

34. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 544.

35. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 546–547.

36. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 547.

37. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 546.

38. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 576, 579.

39. “Défense inconditionnelle,” in *Internationale situationniste* (Fayard), 213. We see a decisive shift in the next issue, though, from youth rebellion to calling for a new cycle of struggles among workers. This is the crucial shift in Debord’s position.

40. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 551.

41. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 550.

42. Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 550.

43. “L’absence et ses habilleurs,” *Internationale situationniste* 2 (December 1958), reprinted in *Internationale situationniste* (Fayard), 38–40.

44. In the early Lettrist period, Debord was fond of citing or referring to Louis Antoine de Saint-Just. And in one of the most important lines from *In girum*, when he speaks of the images used in the film as “image-dust”—“*poussière d’images*”—he is *détourning* a famous line from a speech by Saint-Just.