

Guy Debord's Ex-centric Cinema: The Concept of Time and the Voice-Over Narration in his Films

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Abstract: Guy Debord's thought is invariably associated with a certain experience and critique of time. I am attempting to trace the concept of time in his cinematographic legacy and in the creation of his private mythology. In following Janet Harbord's notion of ex-centric cinema which defines a project of potentiality in the realm of experience, I am focusing on this particular kind of cinema that escapes the established forms and the non-lived. My aim is to trace through the method of film archaeology, the fragments of temporality, and to bring to the surface the concept of time and its manifestation in variable forms in Debord's cinematographic language. Thus, I am exploring the potentiality of the virtual in his cinema.

In order to trace the experience of the concept of time in Debord's cinema, I am discussing the discursive formation in two of his films: *Critique of Separation* (1961) and *On The Passage of a Few Persons Through a Rather Unity of Time* (1959). Whilst being composed of a variety of documentary footage, of shots of the urban landscape and of tracking shots of photographs, the films are a record of an invisible history that takes place within the city. The diegesis of the film is being formed by the narrator that argues about a micro-society that created a network of interactions within the urban landscape. I am focusing on the voice-over of Debord and particularly on his rhetoric. I am discussing how his language functions in relation to the images thus constructing a montage-palimpsest.

Keywords: Ex-centric Cinema, film archaeology, Guy Debord, time, spectacle

Introduction: Reconstructing the Invisible

In this essay, I am attempting an analysis of the concept of time in Guy Debord's two films *On the Passage of a Few Persons Through a Rather Brief Unity of Time* (*Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps*, France, 1959) and on *Critique of Separation* (*Critique de la Séparation*, France, 1961). The two films constitute the second and third part of his trilogy *Against Cinema* (*Contre le Cinéma*), with the first one being the film *Howlings in favour of Sade* (*Hurlément en faveur de Sade*, France, 1952). I am analyzing the development of the concept of time and the filmic construction of the two films. My main problematic focuses on the construction of the filmmaker's cinematographic language and with its correlation to his philosophical thought. One of the elements of the narration that I am focusing on is the relation of sound, and more specifically of speech, with montage. Finally, I am discussing how Debord's rhetorics affect the overall construction of the cinematographic event.

In Debord's cinema, there is no clear distinction between what is public and what is private. That is due to the fact that his films are a comment on his temporality (meaning the public sphere of his times and its conception of time) and at the same time a panegyric of his private life. We are coming across a figure who identifies himself with History and who has lived his life trying to overcome the strict limits of his temporality. Debord's language reveals elements and traces of a life that is non-representable and at the same time, it conceals them. This distinction between the private and the public has to do with the formation of a concept of time, which accordingly

forms a different form of life than that which is represented in mainstream cinema. As we shall discuss later on, this thesis is clearly underlined by the use of montage in his work.

The two films discussed here, are concerned with his bohemian life in Paris of the 1950's. *On the Passage* and *Critique of Separation* are comments on his temporality, on the passing of time and of the loss of youth. They are composed of newsreel footage, shots of Debord and of his friends, photographs and documents. The filmic construction of this composition is strongly accompanied by the voice-over narration, and the voice that we hear is mostly that of the filmmaker.

On the Passage of a Few Persons Through a Rather Brief Unity of Time takes place in 1952 in Paris, as we are being informed by a subtitle in the beginning of the film. The past tense is used by the narrator in order to describe the events during this period. The images of the film are a combination of the newsreel images and of shots and photographs of Debord's milieu. *Critique of Separation* takes place in 1961 again in Paris. It starts with a shot of a group in a café and with the voice-over narrator contemplating on the nature of documentary film. Again, Debord follows the technique of collage of different images. The film is a monologue on the means of action that the group should follow, without having a conclusion as the filmmaker mentions at the end.

Ex-centric Cinema and the Method of Film Archaeology: Guy Debord's Thought under a New Perspective

I am using Janet Harbord's notion of ex-centric cinema in order to define and localize in a precise way the subject of my investigation. First of all, the concept ex-centric means something that escapes or that it differentiates itself from the normative. Secondly, with ex meaning out of and with the word center implying the normative cinema, Harbord refers to a different conception of cinema. Ex-centric cinema establishes in its core the project of a potentiality of the virtual, which has image as its basis but by clearly transcending it, it moves to the realm of experience beyond cinema.

Ex-centric cinema is concerned with the concept of life, the representation of life through the image and its relation with the un-lived. Harbord mentions, that "in every living moment there are potential experiences that are un-lived, possible iterations of a life that exists in a space around the life that we lead" (Harbord 2). The "living moment" is defined by the unlimited possibilities that exist in the realm of the real, in the actual realization of the choices that are made and on the method that is being followed.

The project of ex-centric cinema moves beyond the point of classification of the archive. As a project it escapes a possible classification, since it is situated outside the archive and without being delimited to a center. Thus, this project is a constant process of research on the potentialities of the possibilities of the real. Concerning the result of this research, Harbord argues that "what we discover is untold possibilities for a cinema not yet born, the location of which is hard to determine in spatial terms" (Harbord 3).

The potentialities of cinema are clearly expressed by Guy Debord in his film *In Girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (France, 1978). Debord mentions that "it is a society and not a technique that has made cinema what it is today. [Cinema] It could have been a historical treatise, a theory, an essay or a mémoire. It could be the film that I am creating write now" (Debord 1348-1349). More specifically, in his last film he refers to what we call mainstream cinema as a system that propagates control, propaganda, pseudo-amusement and pseudo-critique (Debord 1335). Debord's work is a total critique of the existing forms of life, of the contemporary organization of bios and of the representation of those two. His aphoristic claim is thus expressed as follows: "The existing images show the existing lies" (Debord 1348). Debord's cinematographic work then, is a polemic against the contemporary representations of life, and that allows me to refer to his work as anti-cinematic in the strict sense of the term. By the term anti-cinema I am referring to Debord's

negation of the cinematic practices and themes of his contemporaries as well as to his neglect of the spectators. Debord considers cynical the relationship between filmmakers and spectators, since, according to the filmmaker, the first are manipulators and the second totally deprived of liberty (Debord 1334). Hence, what we are coming across here, can be summed up to Harbord's following axiom, concerning an "unlived history of cinema", that refers to "a cinema that is not visible until its negative form is cast as a set of objects, networks, practices and iterations" (Harbord 1). Thus, this kind of cinema manages to escape the strict limits of organization of both, the everyday life, and that of the cinematic representation of life. Debord's cinema is a negation of cinema, since it is at the same time a negation of the current organization of life and of its time. That is according to Harbord "a cinema that resides not only in the margins and ephemera of cinema, but in the direct light of the everyday as a negative form, as space yet uncast" (2016:1). The filmmaker uses the established means of cinema in order to negate it and to transcend it.

Such an attempt escapes the established aprioris of the normative and focuses upon the construction of a form-of-life that is not visible nor identifiable. By appropriating images as tools, Debordian cinema transcends the representation of life as has been defined by the image. Thus, life in its conceptualization as bios cannot be confined within the limits of the image, but outside of it.

The method of film archaeology that I am applying here examines under the prism of the potentiality of what cinema could have been and of what it was for a specific period of time. Debord's cinema is a paradigm of this thesis. The possibilities of the real can never be captured concretely. Thus, in this particular case, the goal of archaeological investigation is an attempt to go back to time and reconstruct the possibility of an experience of time. Agamben refers to the archaeologist's gesture as the power of the imaginary (Agamben 107). Concerning Debord's films, there is always an empty space that needs to be filled, since the image reveals so little, whilst at the same time the virtual is created in the mind of the viewer.

Towards a Critique of Time and Life

Given the importance that the concept of life has in Guy Debord's work and consequently to its use of time, I shall have to present the theoretical tools that I am using in order to define the concept of life and of how I am applying it. Firstly, my theory is based upon Giorgio Agamben's conception of life as bios. According to the definition given by Agamben in *Homo Sacer I*, the word bios is used in order to indicate "the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group" (Agamben 1). Bios is the organized way of life that results from the contemplative way of thinking thus constituting a form-of-life. In its turn, a form-of-life is life that cannot be separated from its form and identifies in many ways with political life which is oriented towards an idea of happiness (Agamben 13-19). Such a concept originates from the Aristotelian conception of the human being as *zōon politikon*, as a political animal. According to Agamben, the genuine contemporary political element is the idea of the incommunicable (Agamben xv) that Debord has so strikingly pointed out in his films and especially in his second short feature *On the Passage*. Agamben argues that Debord's conviction was based on the ex-centric lifestyle of him and of his friends - something that Debord calls in the aforementioned film a "provisional micro-society", whose uniqueness consists in "an almost ridiculous clandestinity of private life" (Agamben xv).

Debord celebrates this clandestinity in the film which is an elegy for the loss of youth, by composing a film-document that captures abstract moments of his temporality. In pointing out the characteristics of this "micro-society", Debord provides us with a portrait of his marginal and ex-centric life during the fifties: "They said that Oblivion was their ruling passion. They wanted to reinvent everything each day; to become masters and possessors of their own lives" (Debord). The lines are accompanied by shots of photographs of Debord's friends. The voice-over, accompanied with a montage of images of bricks, shots of police cars and the island Saint-Louis in Paris, continues: "No one counted on the future. It would never be possible to be together later, or anywhere else" (Debord).

Debord's idea of cinema then is moving beyond a mere recording of the conditions of the present life. Firstly, he provides us with a narration of things past. In many ways the narration is a search for the lost time of youth. We find Debord's concept of time in a line of thought that starts with the irreversibility of actions such as we find it in Heraclitus, continues with the conceptualization of the vanity of this world with Ecclesiastes and celebrates life and the present time with the poetry of Omar Khayyam. It is a celebration and, at the same time, a mourning for an experience of time that has been exercised in everyday life. For instance: "The refusal of time and growing old, automatically limited encounters in this narrow contingent zone, where what was lacking was felt as irreparable. The extreme precariousness of the means of getting by without working was at the root of this impatience, which made excesses necessary and breaks definitive" (Debord). Secondly, Debord implies that the situationist group has created an autonomous zone that was not part of the everyday life of the petite bourgeoisie in France nor part of the process of production in the factories. The motto "Ne Travaillez Jamais" (Never Work) written on a Parisian wall and captured in a photograph during the 1950's, is the best example of it. The situationist group was oriented towards the directive: Realization of Philosophy (Debord 1871).

In his text *Time and History* (2007), Giorgio Agamben mentions that "every conception of history is invariably accompanied by a certain experience of time which is implicit in it, conditions it, and thereby has to be elucidated. Similarly, every culture is first and foremost a particular experience of time, and no new culture is possible without an alteration in this experience. The original task of a genuine revolution, therefore, is never merely to 'change the world', but also—and above all—to 'change time'" (Agamben 99). Debord's critique of the forms of art and life of the past, that still persist in his present, are the center of his polemic. His goal is to point out those decaying forms of life and art from the past which have led to the false consciousness of the present time condition.

Further, Debord's thought associates the false nature of the alienated labor with the false experience of time. In the film *The Society of the Spectacle* (France, 1973) he speaks of a "pseudo-cyclical time" which manifests itself in the everyday life and it is inseparable from the images that the Spectacle produces. By the term pseudo-cyclical time, Debord refers to the appropriation of the manifestation of nature (that is the traces of nature) by capitalism and to its use in the capitalist era. That appropriation leads to the subsequent transformation of nature and it is manifest in an endless construction of images to be consumed. Debord cites as example, the day and the night, the working days and the days of rest and the period of vacation (Debord 1230). The representation of the natural rhythm becomes the medium of the merchandise, since time has been turned into merchandise.

Now, in contrast to the spectacular time of capitalism, the situationist thought tends towards the formulation of its own experience of time. The experience of time in this particular sense is not only an attempt to exist outside the confined limits of spectacular everyday life but also to free everyday life. In the following sequence, accompanied by shots of Parisian cafés, Debord speaks of the experience of time in his temporality: "This Group was on the margins of the economy. It tended towards a role of pure consumption, and first of all, the free consumption of its time. It thus found itself directly engaged in qualitative variations of daily life but deprived of any means to intervene in them" (Debord). And he continues, as he presents a shot of the central market of Paris: "The group ranged over a very small area. The same times found them in the same places. No one went to bed early. Discussion on the meaning of all this continued" (Debord).

Most of the times the narrator refers to his way of living during the 1950's in the past tense. His monologues are strongly characterized by a sense of melancholy. That sentiment is expressed first and foremost in the construction and on the use of the material in his films. Whilst being composed of a variety of documentary footage, of shots of Parisian places and of tracking shots of photographs, the protagonist of both the films is the narrator's voice. Hence, I am arguing that Debord's films are "voco- and verbocentric" (Chion 6). By that I mean, that the voice-over is the

most essential element in the films, since it projects a meaning over the images. Further, the diversity and variety of the films' images, which are combined together through montage, are being unified through the action of speech. In this context the diegesis of the film is being formed by the narrator that argues about an invisible history of a group that identified itself with the transformation of life in the urban landscape and lived according to the Rimbaud-like motto: "real life is elsewhere" (Debord 53). The voice-over's scope aims at three directions: 1) to outline the continuous transformation of urban spaces and a way of living in the 1950's, 2) to reconstruct through language the remembrance of a past that has eclipsed, and 3) to present a personal critique of his times, since Debord identifies his personal history with History. That leads me to my basic argument which is that Guy Debord is a modernist philosopher of time who constructs a montage-palimpsest that consists of traces of the past and of fragments of moments. In that way, Debord reveals his own idea of cinema, that which escapes the pre-established order of time and culture.

Part of his cinematic experience is the non-representable and the incommunicable. He projects the idea that it is impossible to (re)present the experienced time through images; only, his words can commemorate the past and solely through the rhetoric of melancholy and of loss. The loss and consequently the failure of that kind of experience is a recurrent theme in Debord's cinema. The following reflection by Harbord demonstrates the above thesis: "What cinema delivers are fragments that may be assembled as partial things through its signature mode of montage. Cinema is composed of fragments not only in the sense of its multiple sequences that are strung together, but also in its framing of an image cut from a larger whole, and again in its positioning of the camera which can never be a totalizing point of view but only the multiplication of infinite points of view of the event. That is, in every act of recording, cinema demonstrates the opposite, the impossibility of documentation, revealing incompleteness as its founding condition" (Harbord 47).

From a cinematographic point of view, what Debord demonstrates in his films is the incompatibility of the cinematic reality and its representations of life with what he calls, inspired by Arthur Rimbaud, the real life. The concept of real life corresponds to a transformation of the everyday. According to this conception, real life in its totality, can not be demonstrated visually. Since real life opens up a space of limitless possibilities, the representation of life would require the subjugation of those possibilities by the image. We find the best example of this thesis in the film *On the Passage*. We see a panoramic shot of a photograph of a couple in a café, whilst the narrator mentions: "Human beings are not fully conscious of their real life...usually groping in the dark; overwhelmed by the consequences of their acts; at every moment groups and individuals find themselves confronted with results they have not wished" (Debord).

Debord considers that the liberation of everyday life reveals its limitless possibilities, hence leading to a total transformation of reality. The thinker's approach to the everyday has at its basis Henri Lefebvre's book *Critique of Everyday Life*. In his book, Lefebvre makes a comparison between everyday life and theater. He considers everyday life to resemble to theater as long as it "summarizes, condenses and "represents life" for the real spectators" (Lefebvre 145). For him, in the everyday life appearance and reality mix up. That is due to the propagation of the false conscience that is caused by alienation. Since our conscience is false, our life cannot be realized. And it remains false, since our life remains alienated, (Lefebvre 201). In Debordian terms, the falsehood of the everyday and its theatricality are being depicted in the notion of the Spectacle. According to thesis number 6 of the *Society of the Spectacle*: "The spectacle is not a set of images, but a social relation between persons that is mediated by images" (Debord 767). The thesis points out the separation that has occurred between the real world and a pseudo-world. In this pseudo-world the spectacle mediates between the human being as well as its desires between the relations of human beings. That occurs, since life in the modern world is an immense accumulation of spectacles (Debord 766). According to this thesis, life is represented as a false idea. Since life is represented by a detached image, the time of that life becomes something external to the human

being. She/He lives her/his life through its representation. Consequently, what the Spectacle reproduces is a false idea of life and a false conscience, which is the organization of the relations of production of a given era (Debord 1347-1348). It is in the constructed abstraction of the everyday life that the Spectacle accomplishes to replace the sensible world by a set of selective images. Merchandise and image are now one and inseparable.

Lefebvre and after him Debord reflect upon the praxis that overtakes the false conscience of the everyday. As I have mentioned above, Debord reveals the power of dialectical thinking in his thesis *Realization of Philosophy*, which is a concept that completes Lefebvre's conception of the goal of dialectical thinking in the everyday. According to Lefebvre: "Dialectical thought can and has to transform itself in the dialectical conscience of life, in life: into a unity of the mediate and of the immediate, of the abstract and the concrete, of culture and of natural spontaneity" (Lefebvre 86). For both thinkers, the theory of praxis cannot be isolated from its actual realization in the everyday life. That will be, then, the inverse movement to that of the Spectacle.

Now, concerning cinema, it is in the fabricated image that represents life that the Spectacle propagates its hegemony. In the beginning of *Critique of Separation* Debord presents his critique and his idea of cinema: "The cinematic spectacle has its rules, its reliable methods for producing satisfactory products. But the reality that must be taken as a point of departure is dissatisfaction. The function of the cinema, whether dramatic or documentary, is to present a false and isolated coherence as a substitute for a communication and activity that are present. To demystify documentary cinema it is necessary to dissolve its 'subject matter'" (Debord). The situationist praxis has as its goal to inverse the spectacular hegemony through dissolving it. So, when Agamben refers to Debord's "almost ridiculous clandestinity of private life" (Agamben xv), he actually refers to exceeding the distinction between the separated forms of life, which are the private and the public.

Debord often refers to his films as documentaries. That kind of classification is accurate and at the same time very limited. Firstly, the performance of the voice upon the images and, secondly, the interaction between the images that is being formulated by montage, form a virtual negation of the existing representations. Benjamin Noys argues that "life is saturated and subsumed by power. For this reason we cannot pass through the image to life, but rather we have to perform an ambiguous un-working on the image, an act of profanation, to free from the image the *dynamis* that exceeds and refuses the deployment of the image within the smooth space of the capitalist sensorium" (Noys 90). But it is only in terms of an absolute negation of the image that we can view Debord's work and that is due to the fact that he uses the voice-over as a means to depict the non-representable. Debord's cinema constitutes, not simply, a negation of the existing order, but above all a praxis that overtakes it. Thus, we see how Debord's anti-cinema becomes an ex-centric cinema.

Language and Time: Forms of Experience

Debord's films apart from polemic works are films that speak of a specific experience of time, without revealing it at the same time. Since, time and life are associated, as I have shown earlier, we can only have a fragmentary idea of Debord's experience of time. He provides us only with a fragment of his conceptualization, thus creating the idea to the viewer that he will only communicate that which will be able to be communicated. In this way Debord expresses the idea of experience of time that can be communicated in the 20th century, after what Agamben has called the destruction of experience.

The fundamental conception of the role of the avant-garde is not only to create new forms of communication, but also, to involve itself with those of the past. Present time in Debord's films seems to be more of a remembering of things past and a desire for the realization of thought in the future. Present time then, can be viewed as a no man's land, as a wasteland and at the same time as a field of possibilities, where the past and the future are trying to relate to each other.

Agamben mentions that “in our century estrangement and the read-made, appropriation and quotation, have represented the last attempts to reconstruct this relationship (at its moments of commitment, the avant-garde has never turned to the future, but represents an extreme effort to relate to the past)” (Agamben 161).

Thus consciousness of the subject can only be formed by and through time. It is through the flaw of time that the subject is being formed. The formation of the subject can take place, only, through discourse. In *Critique of Separation*, Debord refers to the consciousness that he has formed concerning his temporality. Whilst we see a travelling shot of Parisian streets, the narrator declares: “Everything that concerns the sphere of loss — that is to say, the past time I have lost, as well as disappearance, escape, and more generally the flowing past of things, and even what in the prevalent and therefore most vulgar social sense of the use of time is called wasted time — all this finds in that strangely apt old military expression, *en enfants perdus*, its meeting ground with the sphere of discovery, of exploration of unknown terrains; with all the forms of quest, investigation, adventure, avant-garde. It is the crossroads where we have found and lost ourselves.” In this passage from the film, the thinker clearly talks about the possibilities of his times and of his consequent failure in his temporality. The image of the street is being used as a metaphor for his quest. Hence, it is a speech that celebrates the possibilities of the real, and at the same time, an account of the non-accomplishment of those possibilities. Thus, Debord’s account of his successes and failures, of his adventures and experiments, reveals itself as being a process of discourse in order to lead to his self-consciousness.

It is only in relation to the past that the subject in its literal sense— that which is subjected to, that which lies under— can form its unique singularity and thus create history. In the following passage Agamben mentions that: “If [...], the individual can be grasped only as something past, the only way to catch hold of the singularity in its truth is in time. The past tense ‘was’ in the formula *ti en einai* certainly expresses the identity and continuity of being, but its fundamental achievement, whether or not Aristotle was fully aware of it, is the introduction of time into being. The ‘something more profound’ that ‘is hidden’ in the past tense ‘was’ in time: the *identity* of the being that language has divided, if one attempts to think it, necessarily entails *time*. In the very gesture with which it divides being, language produces time” (Agamben 125). Debord’s discourse is an actualization of Agamben’s thesis concerning the secrecy and the revelation of things in the present. That is why, I may argue, Debord made those two films in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s: it was a present that reconciled itself with the past; a revelation of the junction between what was lived in the past and its assimilation in the present.

I consider that the above thesis does not only have an existential quality but that it is also related to Debord’s theory of the subject. This concept is the accomplishment and the realization of philosophy and the creation of a new aesthetic subject that will be able to reveal herself /himself in History. In that way, the new subject will be History. This realization and the consequent reflection that it brings about to the subject is formulated in the film *On the Passage*. Whilst the screen remains white we hear the narration: “The appearance of events that we have not made, that others have made against us, obliges us from now on to be aware of the passage of time, its results, the transformation of our own desires into events” (Debord). The director cuts to a close up of a girl, later on to be followed by a photo of a starlet in her bathtub. He continues: “What differentiates the past from the present is precisely its out of reach objectivity; there is no more should be; being is so consumed that it has ceased to exist” (Debord). After that, we see a solar eruption as it interchanges with the shots of the starlet, whilst we are listening to the voice-over: “The details are already lost in the dust of time. Who was afraid of life, afraid of the night, afraid of being taken, afraid of being kept?” (Debord). In this sequence Debord’s montage is in strict correlation with the narration. Whilst referring to the passage of time, he shows a white screen, which symbolizes the incommunicable of that experience. Further, he underlines the dichotomy of the past with the

present by presenting a female friend of his as a representation of the past and that of the starlet for the present. Between them, there is a huge gap which is expressed by the eruption.

Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to analyze of the concept of time as it appears in Guy Debord's two films. I have tried to clarify the following two points that concern my problematic: 1) The conceptualization of time that appears in Debord's reflection on life and cinema, and 2) that the evidence of that kind of experience is elliptical and fragmentary. As I have underlined, through the method of film archaeology, the experience of time that Debord so strikingly exclaims is a type of virtual experience that cannot be fully represented in the image. We can only be led to a reconstruction of a hidden (Hi)story through Debord's fragments. In this particular case, photographs, testimonies, film material and above all Debord's voice constitute a series of fragments that help the historian to reconstruct that unknown history.

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