“When We Were on the Shenandoah”

JACQUES RANCIÈRE

TRANSLATED BY JASON E. SMITH

What should be done with the cinema? At the beginning of Hurlements en faveur de Sade (Howls for Sade, 1952), a radical solution is evoked:

Just as the projection was about to begin, Guy-Ernest Debord was supposed to step onto the stage and make a few introductory remarks. Had he done so, he would simply have said: “There is no film. Cinema is dead. No more films are possible. If you wish, we can move on to a discussion.”

This solution was left to the side. The film, which passes from black to white only when the silence is broken by voices, continues even when we see a screen with no images. And the announced howls are in fact phrases that mix, in a surrealist way, the immediate lyricism of adventure and love with the explosive force of unexpected connections. In this way a small temporal rift runs furtively between a lyrical phrase and a trivial one: “When we were on the Shenandoah.” This memory of Shenandoah will, in La société du spectacle (The society of the spectacle, 1973), be put back into context; it refers specifically to the scene from John Ford’s Rio Grande between Colonel York (John Wayne) and his superior, General Sheridan, who had ordered him to set fire to the fields of the valley of the Shenandoah in the fight against the southerners and is now ordering him to break federal law by pursuing Indians into Mexican territory.

Between these two phrases the entire poetics of Guy Debord is played out. What he “should” have done but did not do was stop the projector and declare the end of the cinema. The tactic of howling to interrupt art is dadaist; it declares art over in the name of a new life. For Debord it signifies a sin [faute] against the dialectic: wanting to suppress art without completing it. The inverse sin is that of surrealism: wanting to complete art without suppressing it, by identifying with the magic of the dream images slumbering in the spectacle of the street. But the impartiality of the dialectician that places dadaists and surrealists on the same level hardly conceals Debord’s actual preference for the second path. From the first films up to In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni, the narrative
form privileged by Debord will be that of the voyage, the urban promenade that prolongs the promenades of *Nadja, Paris Peasant*, or the “adventuress who crossed Les Halles at summer’s end.” ⁴ Surrealism makes us feel this necessity that was forgotten by dadaism: art should not only overcome itself in life; it should do so as *art*. The surrealist promenade through the streets of Paris designates a strategic site for the art of living that must succeed the art of separation: the taking back of the city, the transformation of architecture into a space of voyage and play. Only it forgets that the city is not merely a sleeping beauty ready to be awakened; it is also a battleground that the enemy never ceases refashioning in its own image. No ecstasy before signage or vitrines of commodities transformed into enchanting settings. The commodity makes us dream of nothing other than the reign of the commodity. The treasure we searched for is one that the enemy has appropriated and fashioned into a weapon.

This is what *détournement* means. *Détournement* is first of all a maneuver in war. Guy Debord and Gil J Wolman put it in blunt terms that challenge every modernist vision of a subversion carried out through the autonomous development of art: “The literary and artistic heritage of humanity should be used for partisan propaganda.” ⁵ The model is in this sense not provided by Duchamp and the Mona Lisa’s mustaches but by Brecht introducing cuts in classical texts to give them a didactic value. *Détournement* does not consist in making high culture prosaic or in revealing the naked reality behind beautiful appearances. It does not attempt to produce a consciousness through unveiling the mechanisms of the world to those who suffer from their ignorance of these mechanisms. It wants to take back from the enemy those properties that the enemy has transformed into weapons against the dispossessed. The essence of *détournement* is the Feuerbachian and Marxist transformation of the alienated predicate into subjective possession; it is the direct re-appropriation of what has been put at a remove in representation. But this property to be taken back over and against spectacular alienation is not the work that has passed into the produced object. It is the free action, always at once ludic and warlike, that the festivals and tournaments of the Renaissance, celebrated since Taine and Burckhardt as the very art of life, emblematize better than every work of art, however “revolutionary.”

*Détournement* also has nothing to do with Brechtian “distanciation.” *Détournement* does not distance, does not make us understand a world by making it strange. Nothing is behind or beneath the image to understand. *Détournement* has to reappropriate what is *in* the image: the action that is represented as separated from itself. It has to take this action back from the expropriators. The cinema is a privileged terrain for this operation for two reasons: because it is essentially the representation of an
action in the form of images and because it is the form of occupying free
time that most perfectly integrates itself into the architectural forms
of the spectacular occupation of space. For Debord, the cinema is the
“passive substitute for the active, unitary artistic activity that is now pos-
sible.” It is the form of active appearing or of apparent action in which
time and space can be shown to be the immediate stakes of a combat
between two antagonistic uses.

Nothing is more contrary, therefore, to Debord’s poetics than those
contemporary exhibitions, staged under his patronage, at which the
spectator must learn—with the help of wall texts—to “critique” the
message of advertisements or dubbed television shows. Détournement is,
Debord says, positive or “lyrical.” But the lyricism is in the content of
the action itself, not in the timbre of the voices or the play of light and
shadow. It is easy to imagine that the three extracts from Johnny Guitar
included in La société du spectacle are shown, out of contempt for
Hollywood films, not only in black and white but also in an atrocious
French-language version in which the hero is supposed to say things
such as “What’s bugging your friend?” But the opposite is true: Debord’s
cavalier treatment of the original shows us that what is important is neither
the reds and greens of the saloon nor Sterling Hayden’s relaxed tone.
What is important is the “content,” what the action directly shows us in
each of the three extracts: the greatness of the voyage (Johnny’s arrival in
the wind), of play (Johnny, turning around, sees in the countershot not
Vienna’s empty saloon but the buzzing gambling house of Shanghai
Gesture), of song, and of love (evoked in the late-night conversation with
Vienna). The exact opposite of the Brechtian pedagogy en vogue in the
1960s, détournement is an exercise in identifying with the hero.

One might easily identify with the lanky hero of that filmmaker who
is the exemplary figure of the “good” America (the militant America of
the artists of the Farm Security Administration or the cracked-up
America of Fitzgerald’s little brothers)—all the more so given that Debord
skips the shooting lesson Johnny gives to young Turkey. The same is not
true of the other two Westerns used to illustrate La société du spectacle:
They Died with Their Boots On and Rio Grande. The first is a monument
erected by Raoul Walsh to the glory of the highly controversial General
Custer and played by a reactionary Errol Flynn. The second is perhaps
not the anti-Communist fable during the time of the Korean War that it is
taken for by Joseph McBride. But this film, starring the emblematic John
Wayne, is the most anti-Indian of Ford’s Westerns. Neither film is out to
denounce American imperialism. Both are, to the contrary, entirely posi-
tive. If the hero of Rio Grande has seen his family life shattered by the
fire in the Shenandoah Valley, the fragment of dialogue isolated by Debord
makes no reference to this. In deciding to cross the border in violation of federal law, the two officers simply assume their responsibilities toward history just as they took on this responsibility, years before, when setting fire to the valley.

We could say that here we glimpse the reader of Clausewitz. But this Clausewitz is not the theorist of the ruses of war. He is the witness to the risky rendezvous with history. The officers’ dialogue shows us the art of “historical communication” that breaks with the face-to-face of power with itself embodied by the VIP stands of the Soviet Communist Party.9 History, which the young Marx said was the only science, is for Debord the only great art, the treasure already celebrated by Herodotus and initially illustrated in La société du spectacle by Uccello’s Battle of San Romano before it is illustrated with images of May 1968. History is the art of time appropriated in its irreversibility. From the tent of Colonel York the camera passes directly to the Tennis Court Oath. And in They Died with Their Boots On Debord is no longer concerned with strategy. Custer’s virtue is, to the contrary, to have ignored every strategy other than this: always remain ahead of your troops. Debord’s film asks us to completely identify with the officer as he runs or gallops ahead, sword drawn. The “propaganda film” is itself a ludic and warlike action. It already carries out the reappropriation it calls for: the transformation of the passivity of the image into living activity. The transformation of the spectator into an actor is the fundamental image of every thought of the “overcoming of art.” In the first issue of Internationale situationniste, a short text called “With and Against Cinema” dreamed of the new contributions to be brought about by the much-discussed technical advances of the 1950s: Cinerama, 3-D cinema, and the “Circarama” in which the spectator finds him- or herself projected into “the center of the spectacle.”10

Of course, the image does not tip over into direct action, and the film is still a film. The “center” takes on a completely different sense in In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni. If Custer always surges forward, sword brandished, he no longer does so in order to break through the southern lines. He goes to the very heart of the trap where his army will be surrounded and decimated by Sitting Bull’s Indians, just as the “Light Brigade” celebrated by Curtiz’s film charges beneath the cannon fire in Balaklava. The war sequences are now sequences of defeat; the city of the future has become a city of the past, similar to the studio reconstructions of The Children of Paradise; and the music of Johnny Guitar has become the ballad of the lost children, sung by the shackled troubadour of Visiteurs du soir. We no doubt know that repeated defeats can prepare us for an unforeseen time of the most lucid struggles. Returning to the point of departure of the palindrome, ending with the passage past the Venice
customs post and on the words “to be taken up again from the begin-
ning” is not to declare the victory of cyclical time over the time of living
history, of the _Odyssey_ of return over the _Iliad_ of the feats of war. That the
arc of the hero, according to Hegel’s phrase, ends up running aground
upon the sandbank of finitude confirms the greatness of those who have
been able to completely identify their life with the assumption of the irre-
versible. What is essential is to have been on the Shenandoah, to which
one can never return. As distant from the contemporary activism of artis-
tic performance as it is from the Godardian imaginary museum, the art
of history remains the sole great art. In going back to aesthetic utopia, the
inheritor of Cobra and Lettrism made the identification of art and life
drift as far as possible from the beliefs of his contemporaries.
Notes

“Quand nous étions sur le Shenandoah” was originally published in Cahiers du cinéma 605 (October 2005), 92–93.


2. [The title of Rancière’s essay is drawn from a line in the script of Guy Debord’s first film, Hurlements en faveur de Sade, which is apparently a citation of a line from John Ford’s Rio Grande. The scene from which the line was taken will be used twenty-one years later in Debord’s film version of La société du spectacle. The line in question appears to be General Sheridan’s vow to Colonel York: “If you fail, I assure you members of your court martial will be the men who rode with us at Shenandoah.”—Trans.]


4. [The quotation is of the first line in André Breton’s poem “Tournesol”; see also André Breton, Nadja (1928), trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960); and Louis Aragon, Paris Peasant (1926), trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Exact Change, 1994).—Trans.]


9. [On the art of historical communication, compare Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, 97–98.—Trans.]

10. [“Avec et contre le cinéma,” 8; “With and Against Cinema,” 19.—Trans.]