From Street to Screen

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Published online: 31 Jan 2019.

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Debord's drifting cinema

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In addition to his roles as editor of the journal *Internationale situationniste* and principal theorist of the Situationist International (SI), it is often forgotten that Guy Debord was, above all else, a filmmaker. Between 1952 and his death in 1994, Debord wrote and directed six films, and abandoned numerous others, including a feature-length work, *De l'Espagne*, that he was working on in the early 1980s. To borrow from Jason Smith (2013), these works can be divided into three periods. The anti-cinema of *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (*Howls for Sade*, 1952) in which Debord experiments with Lettriste techniques, such as an extra-diegetic voiceover and silent, black and white screens; the counter-cinemas of *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) and *Critique de la séperation* (*Critique of Separation*, 1961), defined by Debord as 'confused documentaries' on the Lettrist International (LI) and Situationist International (Debord 2003 [1959]: 18, 15); and three film essays, *La Société du spectacle* (*Society of the Spectacle*, 1973), *Réfutation de tous les judgements, tant élogieux qu'hostiles, qui ont été jusqu'ici portés sur le film 'La Société du spectacle'* (*Refutation of All the Judgements, Pros or Cons, Thus Far Rendered on the Film 'The Society of the Spectacle'*, 1975)[1] and *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978), where Debord detourns images, texts, films and even the hostile criticisms of film critics, to theorize about the ever greater circulation of spectacular commodities across the world.[2]

In common with the cinematic experiments of his contemporaries, such as Alain Resnais, Chris Marker, Agnès Varda and Jean-Luc Godard, film, for Debord, transcends fictional narrative, the production of dramatic stories.[3] On the contrary, cinema is a technology for politics, a device for explicitly critiquing the society of the spectacle through the use of direct address, intertitles, images and the insertion of often incongruous music. In addition to their overt didacticism, Debord's film essays constantly call the medium of cinema into question in ways that resonate with the Brechtian-inspired apparatus theory of critics such as Jean-Louis Baudry (1978) and Jean-Lous Comolli (1980), and of British Marxist commentators associated with the leading academic journal *Screen* in the 1970s and 1980s. However, in an age of what Gilles Deleuze terms 'control societies' (1992) and what Debord himself, in his final period, called 'integrated spectacle' (1990 [1988]: 9), these now somewhat orthodox (and perhaps discredited) forms of thinking through the politics of cinema – centred, as they are, on 'showing the apparatus' – can no longer account for the political relevance of Debord's film. A different method of analysis is needed – one in which the focus of attention is not based on contextualizing what the films say or in historicizing what they show, as most commentators on his films have done to date (Coppola 2003; Danesi 2011), but rather on how their rhythmic structures seek to liberate the audience from the dominant refrains of neoliberal capitalism.

There is a temporal irony involved in Debord's cinema, for while, as we outline below, it is always melancholically focused on the past, its significance is projected into the future. In this respect, Debord's films are marked by what art critic Boris Groys calls 'contemporaneity' – an uncanny mode of temporality in which to be historically attuned is always to be out of date, never in step with one's time:

> the contemporary is actually constituted by doubt, hesitation, uncertainty, indecision – by the need for prolonged reflection, for a delay. We want to postpone our decisions and actions in order to have more time for analysis, reflection, and consideration. And that is precisely what the contemporary is – a prolonged, even potentially infinite period of delay. (Groys 2009)

[1] The twenty-two minutes of *Refutations*, for instance, are made up entirely of Debord's responses, in text and image, to criticisms of the filmic version of *The Society of the Spectacle*.

[2] Debord also released a posthumous television film, screened on Canal+ in January 1994, *Guy Debord, son art, son temps (Guy Debord – His Art and His Time)*. The film was a collaboration between Debord and the journalist Brigitte Cornand.

[3] It should be noted, however, that Debord was highly critical of La Nouvelle Vague and was particularly hostile to Godard, calling him a 'Maoist liar' in the short text 'Cinema and Revolution' (2003 [1969]: 219).

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The fact that Debord is our contemporary is neither surprising nor contradictory. As the Retort Collective have argued (2006; see also pp.4–5 in this issue), capitalism is both an ideology and economic structure that simultaneously changes and stays the same. So while Debord's six films are explicit attempts to critique twentieth-century forms of alienation, they retain their acuity for us today for how they interrupt twenty-first-century capitalism's temporal regime. This is a regime in which capital has moved beyond Taylorist and Fordist models of industrial production, founded on the rhythm of the conveyor belt, and instead takes place in and through the signs, speeds and intensities of 'deterritorialized factories'. This move from the 'alienation of non-communication' to what the Marxist autonomist thinker Franco Berardi terms 'the panic' and 'depression' of an 'excess of communication' institutes a different order of rhythmic and, by extension, aesthetic politics (Berardi 2009: 100–2). For while the aim of capitalist temporality is always, on the one hand, ideological (the erasure of any possibility of living differently), and, on the other, economic (the increase of profit margins or surplus value), the fact remains that new technologies institute new forms of oppression and resistance. We mention this point from the outset of this essay, for to talk of the politics of Debord's cinema is to find oneself straddling a temporal faultline, in which industrial and post-industrial concepts of time often overlap *and* diverge.

This necessary ambivalence is nowhere more evident than in the changed status of the drift or *dérive* in Debord's work. In its original foundation, the drift, as the SI makes clear in numerous reports and theoretical texts, was a critically informed walking practice, an attempt – what they called a technique of 'rapid passage' (1981 [1958]: 45) – to map urban atmospheres and to contest the society of the spectacle's attempt to produce new spaces and times where nothing of note happened, and where everything remained the same. Today, though, the drift retains its relevance not simply for how it calls out for new cities and emancipatory architectures (see essays by Stephen Hodge, David Pinder and Nick Whybrow in this issue), but rather for how it interrupts '24/7 capitalism['s]' desire

to capture attention through an expanded notion of the cinematic (Crary 2015) – a redistributed technology of screens, networked communications, and informational labour. In our present, the drift is both a temporal and ontological condition, something that contests what François Hartog critiques as 'presentism' (2015: xiii–xv), the sense in which capital seeks to erase alternative ways of living in time by tethering us to a now that wants to last forever.

The necessity of making such a critical shift in our understanding of drifting is evident if we consider the following words from philosopher Bernard Stiegler:

> In today's control societies (also modulation societies), aesthetic weapons play an essential role (this is what Jeremy Rifkin has referred to as 'cultural capitalism'); it has become a matter of controlling the technologies of *aisthēsis* (the audio-visual or the digital, for example) and, in this way, *controlling the conscious and unconscious rhythms of bodies and souls*; modulating through the control of flows these rhythms of consciousness and life. It is in the same context that the concept of *life time value* has recently been invented by marketing, as the *economically calculable* value of an individual lifetime (which amounts to the desingularization and disindividuation of its intrinsic value. (2014: 2)

Stiegler's point is reiterated by film scholar Jonathan Beller. In the influential publication *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (2006), Beller updates Jonathan Crary's (1999) and Mary Ann Doane's (2002) work on time and attention in nineteenth-century cinema and applies it to the age of digital spectacle:

> The term 'Cinematic Mode of Production' (CMP) suggests that cinema and its succeeding, if still simultaneous, formations, particularly television, video, computers and Internet are deterritorialised factories, in which spectators work, that is, in which they perform value-productive labour. In the cinematic image and its legacies, that gossamer imaginary arising out of a matrix of social/psycho-material relations, we make our lives. (2006: 91)

Stiegler's and Beller's insights are integral to contemporary debates about the politics of cinema. To argue, merely, for the politics of affect in a somewhat general sense, as Steven Shaviro (1993) and Laura Marks (2000) tended to do in the 1990s and early 2000s is no longer sufficient.[4]

4 Eugenie Brinkema is particularly good at arguing for a need for affect theorists to tie their *éloge* of affect to something specific and concrete (2015: xv).

The imperative now, as Michael J. Shapiro highlights in *Politics and Time* (2016), is to be specific about how one utilizes affect. Shapiro exemplifies his point by focusing on how 'the choreography of the camera' (2016: 90–166) can perturb 'the imposed rhythms of labour' in the 'global factory' (97, 103).[5]

Shapiro's language highlights the need to think of cinematic politics in terms of a corporeal performance, a dance whereby the intensity of capitalism's refrains, those things that capture bodies and minds as rhythms and not as discourse or form, are disrupted and jammed. As opposed to Walter Benjamin's ideas on the dialogical potential inherent in an aesthetic of shocks and jolts, Shapiro, like Beller and Stiegler, recognizes that alienation effects and affects are no longer tenable, in and by themselves, in a neoliberal world. Today, we are jolted and shocked on a daily basis, subjected to information overload, tyrannized by deadlines and signs, compelled to engage in the 'labour of looking' (Beller 2006: 2). Faced with such a disjunctive, panicked reality, the point is not so much to carve out a space for thought, but to set in motion a different refrain, to offer new rhythmic possibilities on a performative level.

In the context of what we have outlined above, it is significant that Debord should define his concept of cinematic politics as being primarily rhythmic in orientation. In a letter to his friend André Frankin *à propos* his second film *On the Passage*, Debord asks rhetorically: 'The question is, then: so what's the subject? Which is I think, the break in the routine of spectacle, an *irritating, upsetting* break with the habitual spectacle' (Debord 2003 [1960]: 214, our emphasis). As his use of the affective signifiers 'irritating, upsetting' demonstrates, Debord is acutely aware that his film is not simply oppositional in terms of its documentary content or even in its deliberate negation of standard cinematic forms, in the manner of the more acclaimed films of La Nouvelle Vague.[6] Rather, the full political significance of the work resides in how it purposely sets out to interrupt, at the level of sensation itself, the repetitive circuits of spectacle, their determination to institute a permanent present – what he terms 'the absence of "real life"' (214):[7]

The manufacture of a present which wants to forget the past and no longer seems to believe in a future, is achieved by the ceaseless circulation of information, always returning to the same short list of trivialities, passionately proclaimed as new discoveries. (Debord 1990 [1988]: 13)

To track the affective politics involved in the 'irritating, disconcerting breaks' that Debord's cinema looks to create demands a new approach to his films. Instead of focusing on the use of *détournement*, often seen as his great innovation by an earlier generation of scholars (see Levin 2002 and McDonough 2005), we concentrate on the films' rhythmic qualities, which, we contend, are connected to his theory of dérive. In its original formulation, the dérive, of course, was not figured as a cinematic technique at all, even though Debord's driftmaps with Asger Jorn make specific references to the film noir *Naked City* (Dassin, 1948). Nevertheless, it is telling that all of the films after *Hurlements* either reflect on the drift directly and/or use it as a compositional device. Where *On the Passage* and *Critique of Separation* represent the drift explicitly through images of people and places and by ruminating, melancholically, on the defeat of the dérive – in *On the Passage*, for instance, one of the three off-screen voices who feature in the film says 'We haven't changed anything' (Debord 2003 [1959]: 22) – in Debord's subsequent cinematic work the dérive is located primarily in the rhythms of the films themselves. In the same way that drifting through the city on foot, as Thierry Davila explains, allows images to impact on consciousness in a cinematic fashion, creating a kind of 'internalized montage' (2002: 31, our translation), Debord's films reverse – or better still – transpose this process, subjecting the viewer to a constant barrage of apparently disconnected faces, spaces and histories.[8] In *Society of the Spectacle* and *In girum*, for instance, there is a perpetual cutting back and forth between different visual modes – stills from anonymous, soft porn movies and magazines, photographs of historical figures, comic strips, advertisements for commodities – and there are long sections that stitch together whole sequences from well-known Hollywood and Soviet-era films, including *Johnny Guitar* (Ray, 1954), *Rio Grande* (Ford, 1951), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (Wood, 1943) and *Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein, 1925). In the same way that

[5] Critics who tie affect to specifics include Massumi (2002) and Thrift (2007).

[6] Debord's awareness that the 'realism' of the film resides in its affective dimension is also apparent in the letter to Frankin, when he mentions that the brevity of the film might work against his purpose. For him, a longer duration is more suitable for translating 'the slow movement of exposure and negation … I was trying to embody in *Passage*' (2003 (1960]: 214). The key idea, again, is rhythmic: the references to movement, pace and embodiment prove this.

[7] It is worth noting that *On the Passage* includes the word 'unity' (*unité*) in its title, a word which, in French, translates as a 'measurement of rhythm', the way of accounting for a tempo. To look for a new *unité* of time, then, is to search for a new rhythm of life.

[8] There is an interesting dialectic at work here, which critics have failed to mention. Namely that cinema gives rise to a desire to drift, which, in turn, produces a desire for a new, drifting cinema.

[9] For a list of the films used, see Knabb's notes (Debord 2003: 43–193; and 223–41).

[10] Inevitably, there are departures too. Although we don't have the space to consider these differences in the detail, it seems important to say that where Beller concentrates on temporal quantity – the time spent in front of a screen – we are more concerned with quality: the intensity of the cinematic rhythm, its refrain. Likewise where Shapiro looks at the relationship between rhythm and the Fordist factory, we prefer to concentrate on the deterritorialized factories that Beller speaks of. Finally, where Stiegler seems to want to institute a new symbolic solution to the misery of hyper-industrialism, we look to the pleasures of drifting.

[11] Although we have coined the term 'drifting montage', there are, of course, aspects of rhythm in film generally, and in Debord's cinema in particular, which are beyond editing per se, not least the movement of characters in the frame, the movement of the camera across still photographs, and so on. That said, the main aspect of our concept of an arrhythmic form in the films is located in montage.

[12] For more on the politics of allure as charisma, see Thrift (2010).

[13] Guattari's work on assemblages evinces a similar logic: 'In short when we talk about the components of an assemblage, what is at play is not just forms and quantities of information or differentiations, but also irreducible material traits such as the viscosity of a transmission channel, the rhythms, inertia, the black holes, that are proper to a biological, social, or machinic stratrum, etc.' (2016: 212).

drifters sought to actively lose themselves in the rhythms of the city, so Debord attempts to disorientate spectators in their cinema seats, to create what he called a 'static derive' (Debord 1981 [1958]: 52) – a drift in which viewers are released from the static refrains of spectacular time, and so have the opportunity, as we argue, in the final section of this essay, to reinvent the future by reconnecting with the past.[9]

In seeking to understand how Debord's films sought to break with the 'dominant equilibrium of spectacle' (Debord 2003 [1961]: 34), we have two main objectives in mind. First and foremost, we want to rethink how Debord's cinema has been configured to date, by scholars in film studies and those interested in the SI; second, and more broadly, we aim to expand the conceptual vocabulary of political film criticism by exploring the concept of the dérive in relation to questions of montage and the political possibilities of rhythm. For while it would be an exaggeration to say that the SI dérive has been completely ignored by film scholars – one thinks here of work by Guiliana Bruno (2002), Leo Charney (1998), Véronique Fabbri (2008), Soyoung Yoon (2013), Laura Rascaroli (2014 and Rick Warner (2018) – no one has thought to attend in detail to its rhythmic politics, to how it might interrupt contemporary capitalism's economy of attention in ways that build on the research of Stiegler, Beller and Shapiro on cinema and the cinematic.[10] In order to prevent any possible confusion in our argument, it seems important to make clear that we have little interest in the aesthetics of slow cinema, whose advocates, such as Manohla Dargis and A. O. Scott (2011) and Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barrades Jorge (2015), assume that speed itself is the privileged site of contestation. Rather our focus is on the possibilities afforded by disruption and interruption, in tracking the anachronistic tempos and variegated temporalities produced by a 'drifting montage', which is the major factor in constructing what we call the 'arrhythmic form' of the films.[11]

DRESSAGE AND STOPPAGE

Reflecting on the combat waged against spectacle in *In girum*, the voiceover, spoken by Debord himself, distils its essence down to a war of movement:

The most fundamental issue in this war, for which so many fallacious explanations have been given, is that it is no longer a struggle between conservatism and change; it is a struggle over which kind of change it will be. We, more than anyone else, were the people of change in a changing time. The owners of society, in order to maintain their position, were obliged to strive for a change that was the opposite of ours. We wanted to rebuild everything and so did they, but in diametrically opposed directions. (Debord 2003 [1978]: 190)

Against Althusserian and Gramscian notions of Marxism, both of which saw ideology or hegemony in largely psychological and spatial terms, Debord contends, like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, that capitalism is a temporal phenomenon simultaneously committed to deterritorialization *and* reterritorialization, a matter of refrains. In this predominately rhythmic relationship, domination does not operate – at least not initially – through an imaginary capture of consciousness. Rather, it works at the affective level of pulse and beat, or what in French goes by the name of *allure*[12] – a word that fuses ideas of temporality, kinaesthesis and fascination. By establishing a rhythmic rapport with the world, spectacle transmits a kind of motile spell, in which commodities, bodies, minds and histories are synchronized, made temporally equivalent.[13] In the 1967 book version of *The Society of Spectacle*, Debord contends that such an allure is predicated, like clock time, on an 'infinite accumulation of equivalent intervals' (1994 [1967]: thesis 94), in which all difference is abolished and where perception is mobilized for the sake of commodity production and consumption. While Debord is speaking primarily of industrial or factory time in 1967, his insights about the general equivalence of capitalist rhythm hold good for twenty-first-century temporality, too. Only now, as we have suggested, those refrains are more intense in their choreographies and omnipresent in their networks of influence. In today's deterritorialized factories, in which all distinctions between private and public space have been collapsed, there is simply no escape from labour time. There is always a drive to work.

Debord's rhythmic reading of political economy – what we could simply call 'perception under capitalism' – is close to the ideas proposed by the Marxist geographer Henri Lefebvre. In

Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life, Lefebvre, who worked closely with the SI from 1957 to 1962, proposes that socialization works through the construction of militaristic rhythms or 'dressage':[14]

> To enter into a society, group or nationality is to accept values (that are taught), to learn a trade by following the right channels, but also to bend oneself (to be bent) to its ways. Which means to say: dressage. Humans break themselves in [*se dressent*] like animals … Dressage can go a long way: as far as breathing, movements, sex. It bases itself on repetition. (2004: 39)

Crucially, Lefebvre does not attempt to delimit dressage to the practice of bodies performing physical drills together in actual time and space. In today's spectacle, dressage is cinematic, a disciplinary rhythm produced by and transmitted through digital images, networked communication systems, and electronic screens. As Lefebvre puts it: 'There is neither separation nor an abyss between so-called material bodies and representations … training, information and communication pass through rhythms: repetitions and differences, linearly or cyclically' (43).

In order to break the repetitive rhythms of spectacular dressage, which operate through the invisible and global circuits of what Beller names the 'cinematic mode of production', Lefebvre has little truck with standard models of critique, rooted in a Habermasian ideal of rational communication. Instead, he prefers to concentrate on kinetic disruption, the production of irregular rhythms:

> All becoming irregular (*dérèglement*) (or, if one, wants all deregulation, though this word has taken on an official sense) of rhythms produces antagonistic effects. It *throws out of order* and disrupts; it is symptomatic of a disruption that is generally profound, lesional, and no longer functional. It can also produce a lacuna, a hole in time, to be filled in by an invention, a creation. That only happens, individually or socially, by passing through a *crisis*. (44)

But how does this decidedly resistant notion of 'deregulation' relate to film, and, in particular, to Debord's drifting cinema? Some insight is provided by Giorgio Agamben. In an important but largely theoretical essay on Debord's use of détournement in film, Agamben points out

how it is structured around two competing but ultimately complementary movements: '*repetition* and *stoppage*' (2002: 315). Where repetition, for Agamben, 'restores the possibility of what was … by transforming the real into the possible and the possible into the real' (316), stoppage, by contrast, interrupts the flow of the present, and '"exhibits" words and pictures' (317): 'The image worked by repetition and stoppage is a means, a medium that does not disappear in what it makes visible. It is what I call a "pure means", one that shows itself as such' (318). Through this insistence on the showing of appearance, Debordian montage, creates not only 'a chronological pause' in the telling of a story that would give us time to think. More radically still, it disrupts the rhythmic flow of narrative itself, the normative sequencing of time into past, present and future, and, as such, is better approached as temporal force, an invisible intensity. Agamben explains: It is not merely a matter of chronological pause, but rather a power of stoppage that works on the image itself, that pulls it away from the narrative power to exhibit it as such (317).

Although Agamben declines to provide a concrete analysis of how the power of stoppage functions in Debord's film, the cogency of his argument remains pertinent. In Debordian montage, there is often a gap between what the eye sees and what the ear hears, creating a disjunction between the act of viewing and listening. The images come too thick and fast, without warning of their provenance or context for their placement, and the voiceover is invariably too dense and philosophical to grasp in one hearing. What we are presented with is what Thomas Y. Levin terms the '*mimesis of incoherence*' (2002: 360), a resonant phrase for describing Debord's refusal to communicate. In an early sequence in the film *The Society of the Spectacle*, a series of shots are edited together in quick formation – missiles being fired from warships, men in space, the stock exchange, riot police marching in formation, a mounted policeman attacking a man sitting on a park bench, two semi-naked women performing an erotic dance on a stage, a still image of a young couple watching an image of a yacht on a television screen, the construction of skyscrapers. These images accompany Debord's

[14] For more on the fraught relationship between Lefebvre and the SI, see Ross (2002).

narration as he outlines his thesis on separation and spectacle. This is followed by a somewhat arbitrary cut to a shot of a rising sun, and then black screen and white intertitles: 'Some cinematic value might be acknowledged in this film if the present rhythm were to continue; but it will not be continued' (Debord 2003 [1973]: 49). The film then makes a rhythmic gear change as it cuts to a three-minute-long sequence of detourned Soviet cinema footage of the Russian Civil War, with the narrator offering an extended and dense thesis on détournement and dialectics. The effect is to create a distance – what Agamben sees as 'a stoppage' – between the on-screen images and the narrator's voice. In this interruption of sound and sense, time takes on a durational quality, a type of thickness. It is no longer simply something we follow from moment to moment, but something we are part of – a stuttering, syncopated now that simultaneously passes and does not pass.

With these concepts of dressage and stoppage in mind, the questions to ask in the second part of this essay are the following: How does such a montage make us drift? And what are the temporal politics involved in cinematic drifting? For the purposes of our analysis, we have selected *On the Passage* to focus on, precisely because it reflects on the dérive as an actual, historical practice, but also because, as Debord makes clear in his letter to Frankin, it looks to make spectators drift by composing alternative experiences of rhythm and time. The film represents a radical departure in form from Debord's debut film, the anti-cinematic *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*, which consists solely of monochrome screens and off-screen voices. In his second film, these features remain; however, they are added both to original and detourned footage. Regardless of the specificity of focus, our overarching argument here is applicable to Debord's subsequent films, all of which either provide sustained meditations on the dérive or transpose it from street to screen. Keeping in mind Jason Smith's caution that Debord's films are often contextualized but rarely analysed (2013: 9), we have made the decision to read the opening eight minutes of *On the Passage* minutely. The intention is to grasp, in detail, how Debord creates a drifting montage.

DRIFTING WITH DEBORD

On the Passage is a nineteen-minute-long black and white film about the formation and dissolution of the Lettrist International (LI). There is no real information given about the formation or history of the group, but throughout the film there are specific references to the practices of the dérive, reflecting on what it was intended to achieve, and why it failed to achieve its ends:

> The group ranged over a very small area. The same times brought them back to the same places. No one wanted to go to bed early. Discussions continued on the meaning of it all. (2003 [1959]: 15)

> There was the fatigue and cold of morning in the much-traversed labyrinth, like an enigma that we had to resolve. (16)

> No one counted on the future. It would never be possible to be together later, or anywhere else. There would never be a greater freedom. (16)

> Once again, morning in the same street. Once again, the fatigue of so many similarly passed nights. It is a walk that has lasted a long time. (22)

Although the film is presented as a documentary, there are numerous occasions throughout when it appears as an anti-film, a type of cinema that seeks to erase itself. Towards the end of the film, and against the backdrop of a white screen, one of the narrators says: 'This project implies the withering away of all the alienated forms of communication. The cinema too must be destroyed' (23). And the very last words of the film, following an advert starring Jean-Luc Godard's future wife Anna Karenin, and spoken, again, against a blank screen, intone that: 'The point is to understand what has been done and all that remains to be done, not to add more ruins to the old world of spectacles and memories' (24).

On the level of the image, the film consists of blank black and white screens, intertitles that locate the action geographically and historically and moving image footage of Paris – of the city's architecture, street life, the Seine, Les Halles market area, shots in a café-bar, with (presumably) members of the LI drinking wine and conversing, and a self-reflexive sequence in which Debord and a camera crew are filming at a street corner. These images are shot through with found footage that has been subjected to creative hijacking or

détournement: young people dancing on a beach; a Monsavon soap advertisement; prominent religious figures; De Gaulle; images of conflict and protest in Algeria, England, France and Japan; and, not least, a solar flare. The moving images are supplemented with photographs of Debord and his contemporaries, and a sense of movement is created through scans across, or crops of, the photographs. Other still images of faces of unknown men and women appear, although the provenance of these photographs is never stated. There are also monochrome credits announcing what appears to be a forthcoming film. Notably, the original footage is silent and the detourned footage is stripped of its sound. As such, image and sound are only brought into contact in post-production, and remain relatively autonomous. The soundtrack comprises an audio recording of the third conference of the Situationist International held in Munich from 17 to 20 April 1959. It documents three off-screen voices – two male voices, Voice 1 and Voice 2 – reflecting on the actions of the dérivers and citing unattributed quotes from politics and literature. An additional female voice, Voice 3, enters the soundtrack intermittently but is restricted to performing the second of these tasks. The music consists of Handel's *Théme cérémonieux des aventures* and Delalande's *Noble and Tragic Theme* and *Court Music Allegro*, which recur, randomly, throughout the film and create a sense of historical dissonance between what the viewer sees and hears. A triumphant Baroque past, full of possibility and energy, contrasts with a depressing and monotonous present.

Analysis of the opening section indicates something of the film's disjunctive rhythm as these seemingly disparate images and sounds are assembled together. The film opens with a black screen as voices from the SI conference are heard in debate. White opening titles and credits then appear against the black background before we cut to an establishing shot of apartments in the Saint-Germain-des-Près neighbourhood with white intertitles locating the action in 'PARIS 1952', a reference to the establishment of the Lettrist International in the city in that year. Placed in the centre of a city square, the camera pans right across a row of trees, beyond them, rows of apartment blocks and shops. Voice 1

states: 'This neighbourhood was designed for the wretched dignity of the petty bourgeoisie, for respectable occupations and intellectual tourism' (13). After three quick shots of a statue, a café and of people emerging from a Métro station, the camera moves, awkwardly and hastily, across the tops of the residential buildings as Voice 1 continues: 'The neighbourhood itself has remained the same. It was the external setting for our story' (13). The apparent protagonists emerge as the film cuts to a still image of (from left to right) Michèle Bernstein, Asger Jorn, Colette Gaillard and Guy Debord sitting at a wine-soaked table, atop of which sits four wine glasses and a well-used ashtray. The pace is somewhat sedate until we hear Handel's incongruous, upbeat music, which conjures a sense of historical dissonance between image and sound. Of note here is that rhythm is not solely a property of the visual, shaped by the pace of cutting between shots and sequences, or the movement of on-screen characters or figures, or indeed in the scanning across the still images present in the montage. Rather, sound – specifically, in this instance, classical music – operates to impact directly on how rhythm is composed and experienced in the film as something irregular and deregulated – a type, then, of arrhythmia.[15]

Following this jarring 'musical intervention', the camera proceeds, somewhat clumsily, to zoom in on the glasses and Bernstein's hand as she is holding a cigarette, before panning left across her leather-jacketed body and tilting up to rest on her face, with the lower part of Jorn's face shown in the top of the frame.[16] The volume of the music is lowered as the narrator continues, 'where a few people put into practice a systematic questioning of all the works and diversions of a society, a total critique of its notion of happiness' (13). As the narrator continues his account, in a lateral but monotonous commentary, we see a series of tighter shots of the four figures in extreme close-up, including Jorn's eyes, Debord's mouth, with a cigarette close to his lips, then a close up of Gaillard, who looks, unsettlingly, directly to camera. At this point, Voice 2 interjects, 'Human beings are not fully conscious of their real lives' (14), although, significantly, it is unclear if the voice is directing attention to the on-screen persons or addressing the spectator

[15] That Debord was acutely attuned to the affective qualities of the rhythm of music and texture of voice in his films is evident by looking at his 'Instructions to the *In girum* Sound Engineer' (1977). Here, Debord talks about frequency, loudness, tone of voice and the need to create abrupt musical shifts (Debord 2003 [1977]: 224).

[16] This technique is associated with the US documentarian Ken Burns, who cites *City of Gold* (Koening and Low, Canada, 1957) as an early exemplar of the method. That *City of Gold* won the Palme d'Or and was nominated for an Academy Award testifies to the quality of the technique in this film; however, Debord's use seems deliberately awkward, like the 'poorly executed tracking shot' he describes later in the film (2003 [1959]: 22).

alone. An ambiguity – or gap – is deliberately created that suspends an all too easy suture from occurring between voice and image. There is always a syncopated beat to Debordian montage - a form of editing that stumbles and staggers along, and, in the process, calls attention to itself in an act of self-conscious theatricality, which, differently from the editing techniques of French New Wave directors, is never tied to a narrative or focused on a star performer. In Debord's deregulated rhythms, there is no way of reconciling political sounds and sense. We are constantly rebuffed.

Until this moment, the pace has been relatively slow and measured, albeit with some abrupt cuts across the still photographs, with movement generated through the filmed action and from camera movement across the still images. At just over four minutes, however, this is followed by a violent cut to archive footage of a religious procession, before cutting to footage of Pope Pius XII, a notoriously anti-Communist figure who had died the year before the film's release, held aloft in a chair. These images mark a significant shift, from still to moving image, from the Situationist rebels to theocratic leaders, oblivion to theology. Here, we could contrast the group's desire – 'They said that oblivion was their ruling passion' (14) – with the dedication to established order that the Church might prefer. However, such an intellectual linkage is somewhat opaque, and the film's uneven rhythm denies it in the sheer immediacy and variety of images that hit the retina. In contradistinction, say, to Sergei Eisenstein's notion of rhythm in montage in which the collision of different images and/ or sounds is organized in a dialectical manner to create a specific synthesis at the point of reception (Eisenstein 1977: 45–63), Debord's editing is more lateral and open-ended. The point is not to impose meaning, but to release us from its burden, to allow our attention to drift arrhythmically, and in that drifting to liberate perception from Hartog's tyranny of 'presentism', the fetishization of immediacy. Where Eisenstein wants, always, to immerse us sensorially into the drama unfolding in front of our eyes – to bring us closer to the action through the construction of 'conflict' (53–8) – Debord, on the contrary, creates a gap, a temporal abyss between the screen and

the spectator. In the syncopated rhythms of his montage, Debord produces a different kind of affect: one in which the spectator is moved this way and that, and caught between stoppage and flow, gathering together fragments of meaning and never being allowed to gaze unencumbered at the screen, as one does, say, in slow cinema. As Voice 2 puts it in a comment that resonates with Theodor Adorno's notion of negative dialectics, the ambition is to create a film that 'succeeds in being as fundamentally incoherent and unsatisfying as the reality it dealt with … as impoverished as this botched tracking shot' (Debord 2003 [1959]: 22).

In this cinematic corollary of the dérive, the isomorphic resemblance between street and screen operates at two levels. On the one hand, the abrupt editing techniques, with no graspable, or at least obvious meaning, work, like the walking dérive, to jolt spectators from the fixity of the present and to set them on a journey without end. On the other hand, the pace of the editing, which rejects the continuity techniques of conventional narrative cinema (be they fictional or documentary), embodies Lefebvre's desire for arrhythmia, irregular movement. This emerges more clearly in the scene that follows the Pope's cameo as the film cuts to a Paris street. Here, the camera captures five fixed long shots of street activity as the street moves from being mostly empty, thronged with young people, then becoming quieter once more. The flow, however, is never continuous but interrupted by four jump cuts. We stumble through it, awkwardly. Then, suddenly, our attention is troubled again as we are placed behind police lines as young people throw rocks at French police, before the camera cuts back to the café, where two men and two women, but not the previous foursome, sit around a table. In this sequence, the group's actions – talking, smoking, drinking, often interacting with the apparatus – are captured in moving images rather than in still life. In the absence of synchronized sound, all we hear is Voice 1 intoning 'our camera has captured for you a few glimpses of an ephemeral microsociety' (15) before outlining the group's actions in rejecting the dominant norms of capitalist life.

Approaching eight minutes into the film, a new element appears as a blank, white screen

is shown with accompanying narration. It follows a statement that points to the group's fracturing and dissolution (an apparent reference to the break with the LI and the establishment of the SI in 1957): 'the extreme precariousness of their methods for getting by without working was at the root of this impatience which made excesses necessary and breaks irrevocable' (17). This is followed by a sequence overloaded with content. We return to the café and here, as Handel's music recommences, an extended tracking shot traces twenty or so of the group as they occupy a table. Tellingly, in this audio-visual representation of the drift, the tracking shot is immediately punctuated by the appearance of black and white titles (one of which reads 'the most gripping suspense' and appears to be a playful announcement for a fiction film that does not exist). These are followed quickly by images of Boulevard Saint-Michel, returns to the café, a rapid shot of Japanese riot police running towards demonstrators, and the outer wall of Chevilly-Larue reformatory before cutting back to another blank, white screen as Voice 1 makes an inherently meta-theatrical comment:

> What makes most documentaries so easy to understand is the arbitrary limitation of their subject matter. They confine themselves to depicting fragmented social functions and their isolated products. In contrast, imagine the full complexity of a moment that is not resolved into a work, a moment whose development contains interrelated facts and values and whose meaning is not yet apparent. This confused totality could be the subject matter of such a documentary. (18)

These words are revealing. For what the film strives to convey, at the level of form and experience, is precisely this confused totality, characterized by fragments of image and audio that refuse the coherent and consumable narratives of mainstream cinema. Thus, while explicitly presented as a documentary, this is a film that erases itself, seeking to transpose the drift from street to screen. Crucially, though, in *On the Passage*, dérive does not just operate in terms of representation but also, and more radically, through syncopation. By breaking with capital's relentless dressage, the film discloses the multiplicity and variability of time itself, allowing spectators to feel what Leo Charney calls

'empty moments' of 'errant vagrancy' (1998: 11) – instances where the retina is liberated from the image and allowed to float free.

THE POLITICS OF RHYTHM: SYNCOPATION AND MEMORY

In her book on the politics of rhythm *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture*, feminist thinker Catherine Clément makes the important point that 'the subject in search of syncope does not want to escape from time' (1994: 251). Instead s/he is looking to plunge into it, to liberate life from the constructed dressage that everywhere diminishes its potentiality in a spectacular society (251):

> The expression 'social body' defines the shackles that must be destroyed: an enormous flesh made up of constraints and customs, of conventional gestures and paths taken, an invisible and everyday network – the socius, citizenship, relations are suddenly unbearable. (251)

As Clément's description intimates, it is important that the drift-like quality of Debordian montage is not approached, psychologically or textually, as an alienation effect – a discursive *gestus* – that would allow spectators to decipher the signs of the work in front of them, as if they were Brechtian cigar-smokers. On the contrary, the discombobulating *gestus* of Debordian editing is experiential; its primary function is to draw spectators into a syncopated movement, an arrhythmia. The politics of Debord's rhythms, then, are not found in *taking one's time*, but in *feeling* the heterogeneous movements of time, undergoing the anarchic play of its durations, pulses and cuts. 'Syncope is an act of rebellion', Clément contends, 'an abundant jamboree of defiant inventions' (261, 242). In the syncopated beat of the cinematic drift, time unmoors itself from spectacle's rhythmic disciplinarity and drifts where it will, escaping all attempts to rivet it down.

By replacing the concentrated 'drill' of spectacular dressage with the 'dance' of moving images and (dis)associated sounds, Debordian syncopation, like the urban dérive, restores temporal heterogeneity to perception, attuning us to finitude and evanescence. Here, the awareness of 'the passage of time', its brevity, haunts the fixity and perpetuity of the present. Like the three

voices in *On the Passage*, we are compelled to remember. It is important to note, however, that memory or repetition, for Debord, cannot recover the past as it was lived. The most – the best – that memory can do is to allow the past to return differently, to accept the very thing that spectacle is terrified by: loss, transformation, slippage:

> I have let time slip away. I have lost what I should have defended. (Debord 2003 [1959]: 34)

> This general critique of separation obviously contains and conceals, some particular memories. (34)

> Everything involving the sphere of loss – that is, what I have lost of myself, the time that has gone; and disappearance, flight; and the general evanescence of things. (35)

It would be easy to attribute Debord's sensitivity to loss, to an alcoholic consciousness, the melancholy of the drinker, but to do so is to foreclose the potentiality of rhythm in his montage – and, in particular, its dialectical relationship with memory.[17] By forcing an encounter with loss, with that which cannot be recuperated, *On the Passage*, as with Debord's subsequent films, compels the spectator to remember, and thus to exist in a temporal universe that marks the present as contingent, provisional, always in the process of becoming. To remember, then, is never to be on time, as spectacular time-keeping insists upon, but rather to be inherently and unavoidably errant, to miss our appointments, always. Bernard Stiegler notes:

> It is enough to have heard a melody twice through in order to be able to state that in these two hearings consciousness had not been listening with the same ears: that something happened between the first and second hearings … This difference obviously results from an alteration in the phenomena of retention – i.e. from a variation in selection: consciousness does not retain everything. (2014: 17)

In the search for a 'different unity' of time that challenges the mastery of consciousness, Debord seeks to retrain the faculty of memory, to re-engage with its capacity to invent the future. In line with the messianic thought of Jacques Derrida and Walter Benjamin, memory is integral to Debord's political project.[18] As Debord explains in the closing titles of *In girum*, to end is not to finish. Rather, endings, for him, mark the pause,

the syncope, when everything starts up again and 'from the beginning' (2003 [1978]: 193). Like time itself, Debord's films are unfinishable, their temporal indeterminacy keeps the drift alive as a past that haunts our future. So while we learn in *On the Passage* that the drift was abandoned in the 1950s, the very fact that we are watching it, or its cinematic spectre, in 2018 shows that its time, quite vertiginously, may yet be still to come. As Debord puts it in *Panegyric I*, simultaneously his most melancholic and defiant work: 'All revolutions run into history, yet history is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers of revolution come, thither they return again.' (2009: 23)

The revolutionary potential that Debord accords memory illuminates the rhythmic politics of his cinema, his desire to make films that allow perception to drift – and it is telling, in this instance, that the metaphor Debord uses for revolution is an aquatic one, the image of a river whose flows, sedimentations and deposits bear witness to the passage of time, and, yet whose geomorphology is in constant process and may be different in the future.[19] By refusing to conform to orthodox notions of narrative coherence and closure, be they fictional, documentarian or essayistic, Debord's drifting montage suspends the suture between sight and sound that ties perception to the present. Through their arrhythmic form, Debord's films look to liberate attention from the rhythms of today's deterritorialized factories, and their desire to make us labour endlessly. The hope – or possibility – behind such a liberation is that we may be able to connect with abandoned pasts whose future remains to be fulfilled. In this way, Debord's drifting montage, forged in the 1950s, rethinks the relationship between film and politics in a manner that attempts to account for what a resistant cinematic theory and practice is – and may yet become – in an age of post-Fordist spectacle.

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[17] Debord notes in *Panegyric Volume 1*, 'Although I have read a lot, I have drunk even more' (2009 [1989]: 29).

[18] This reading of memory in Debord is very different from the position adopted by Rancière, who claims that Debord's films are concerned with time as 'the assumption of the irreversible' (2013: 132). Rancière is half right. In Debord's cinema, time passes and yet simultaneously does not pass.

[19] Debord sees *In girum* as an 'elemental' film (2003 [1977]: 224).

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