

Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord's Films

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My aim here is to define certain aspects of Debord's poetics, or rather of his compositional technique, in the area of cinema. I will purposefully avoid the notion of "cinematographic work" with respect to Debord, because he himself declared it inapplicable. "Considering the history of my life," he wrote, "I see clearly that I could not make what is called a cinematographic work" (*In girum inus nocte et consumimur igni*). Indeed, not only do I find the concept of work to be useless in Debord's case, but more importantly I wonder if it isn't necessary today, whenever one seeks to analyze what is called a work—literary, cinematographic, or otherwise—to call into question its very status as a work. Rather than inquiring into the work as such, I think we should ask about the relation between what could be done and what actually was done. Once, when I was tempted (as I still am) to consider Guy Debord a philosopher, he told me: "I'm not a philosopher, I'm a strategist." Debord saw his time as an incessant war that engaged his entire life in a strategy. That's why I think that where Debord is concerned, we should ask about the meaning that cinema could have in this strategy. Why cinema, for example, and not poetry, as was the case for Isou, who was very important for the situationists, or why not painting, as for another of Debord's friends, Asger Jorn?

What is at stake here, I believe, is the close tie between cinema and history. Where does the tie come from and what is the history involved?

What is at stake is the specific function of the image and its eminently historical character. There are a couple of important details here. First, man is the only being who is interested in images as such. Animals are very interested in images, but only to the extent that they are fooled. You can show a male fish the image of a female fish and the male will eject his sperm; you can fool a bird with the image of another bird, in order to trap it. But when the animal realizes it's dealing with an image, it loses interest completely. Now, man is an animal who is interested in images when he has recognized them as such. That's why he is interested in painting and why he goes to the cinema. A definition of man from our specific point of view could be that man is a moviegoing animal. He is interested in images after he has recognized that they are not real beings. The other point is that, as Gilles Deleuze has shown, the image in cinema—and not only in cinema, but in modern times generally—is no longer something immobile. It is not an archetype, but nor is it something outside history: rather, it is a cut which itself is mobile, an image-movement, charged as such with a dynamic tension. This dynamic charge can be clearly seen in the photos of Etienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge which are at the origins of cinema, images charged with movement. It was a force of this kind that Benjamin saw in what he called the "dialectical image," which he conceived as the very element of historical experience. Historical experience is obtained by the image, and the images themselves are charged with history. One could consider our relation to painting in a similar way: paintings are not immobile images, but stills charged with movement, stills from a film that is missing. They would have to be restored to this film. (You will have recognized the project of Aby Warburg.)

But what is the history involved? Here it must be stressed that it is not a matter of a chronological history in the strict sense, but of a messianic history. Messianic history is defined by two major characteristics. First, it is a history of salvation: something must be saved. But it is also a final history, an eschatological history, in which something must be completed, judged. It must happen here, but in another time; it must leave chronology behind, but without entering some other world. This is the reason why messianic history is incalculable. In the Jewish tradition, there is a tremendous irony surrounding calculations to predict the

day of the Messiah's arrival, but without ceasing to repeat that these were forbidden calculations, because the Messiah's arrival is incalculable. Yet at the same time, each historical moment is the time of his arrival. The Messiah has always already arrived, he is always already there. Each moment, each image is charged with history because it is the door through which the Messiah enters. This messianic situation of cinema is what Debord shares with the Godard of *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. Despite their old rivalry—you may recall that in 1968 Debord said Godard was the stupidest of the pro-Chinese Swiss—Godard finally adopted the same paradigm that Debord had been the first to sketch. What is this paradigm, what is this compositional technique? Serge Daney, writing about Godard's *Histoire(s)*, explained that it is montage: "Cinema was looking for one thing, montage, and this was the thing twentieth-century man so terribly needed." This is what Godard shows in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*.

The specific character of cinema stems from montage, but what is montage, or rather, what are the conditions of possibility for montage? In philosophy since Kant, the conditions of possibility for something are called transcendentals. What are the transcendentals of montage?

There are two transcendental conditions of montage: *repetition* and *stoppage*. Debord did not invent them, but he brought them to light; he exhibited the transcendentals as such. And Godard went on to do the same in his *Histoire(s)*. There's no need to shoot film anymore, just to repeat and stop. That's an epoch-making innovation in cinema. I was very much struck by this phenomenon in Locarno. The compositional technique has not changed, it is still montage, but now montage comes to the forefront and is shown as such. That's why one can consider that cinema enters a zone of indifference where all genres tend to coincide, documentary and narrative, reality and fiction. Cinema will now be made on the basis of images from cinema.

But let's return to cinema's conditions of possibility, *repetition* and *stoppage*. What is repetition? There are four great thinkers of repetition in modernity: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gilles Deleuze. All four have shown us that repetition is not the return of the identical; it is not the same as such that returns. The force and the grace of repetition, the novelty it brings us, is the return

as the possibility of what was. Repetition restores the possibility of what was, renders it possible anew; it's almost a paradox. To repeat something is to make it possible anew. Here lies the proximity of repetition and memory. Memory cannot give us back what was, as such: that would be hell. Instead, memory restores possibility to the past. This is the meaning of the theological experience that Benjamin saw in memory, when he said that memory makes the unfulfilled into the fulfilled, and the fulfilled into the unfulfilled. Memory is, so to speak, the organ of reality's modalization; it is that which can transform the real into the possible and the possible into the real. If you think about it, that's also the definition of cinema. Doesn't cinema always do just that, transform the real into the possible and the possible into the real? One can define the already-seen as the fact of perceiving something present as though it had already been, and its converse as the fact of perceiving something that has already been as present. Cinema takes place in this zone of indifference. We then understand why work with images can have such a historical and messianic importance, because they are a way of projecting power and possibility toward that which is impossible by definition, toward the past. Thus cinema does the opposite of the media. What is always given in the media is the fact, what was, without its possibility, its power: we are given a fact before which we are powerless. The media prefer a citizen who is indignant, but powerless. That's exactly the goal of the TV news. It's the bad form of memory, the kind of memory that produces the man of *ressentiment*.

By placing repetition at the center of his compositional technique, Debord makes what he shows us possible again, or rather he opens up a zone of undecidability between the real and the possible. When he shows an excerpt of a TV news broadcast, the force of the repetition is to cease being an accomplished fact and to become possible again, so to speak. You ask, "How was that possible?"—first reaction—but at the same time you understand that yes, everything is possible. Hannah Arendt once defined the ultimate experience of the camps as the principle of "everything is possible," even the horror we are now being shown. It is in this extreme sense that repetition restores possibility.

The second element, the second transcendental, is stoppage. It is the power to interrupt, the "revolutionary interruption" of which Benjamin spoke. It is

very important in cinema, but once again, not only in cinema. This is where the difference lies between cinema and narrative, the prose narrative with which cinema tends to be compared. On the contrary, stoppage shows us that cinema is closer to poetry than to prose. The theorists of literature have always had a great deal of trouble defining the difference between poetry and prose. Many elements that characterize poetry can also pass over into prose (from the viewpoint of the number of syllables, for example, prose can contain verse). The only things that can be done in poetry and not in prose are the caesura and the enjambment (that is, the carryover to a following line). The poet can counter a syntactic limit with an acoustic and metrical limit. This limit is not only a pause; it is a noncoincidence, a disjunction between sound and meaning. This is what Paul Valéry meant in his very beautiful definition of the poem: "the poem, a prolonged hesitation between sound and meaning." This is also why Hölderlin could say that by stopping the rhythmic unfolding of words and representations, the caesura causes the word and the representation to appear as such. To bring the word to a stop is to pull it out of the flux of meaning, to exhibit it as such. The same could be said of the stoppage practiced by Debord, stoppage as constitutive of a transcendental condition of montage. One could return to Valéry's definition of poetry and say that cinema, or at least a certain kind of cinema, is a prolonged hesitation between image and meaning. It is not merely a matter of a 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. It is in this sense that Debord in his films and Godard in his *Histoire(s)* both work with the power of stoppage.

These two transcendental conditions can never be separated, they form a single system. In Debord's last film there is a very important sentence right at the beginning: "I have shown that the cinema can be reduced to this white screen, then this black screen." What Debord refers to is precisely repetition and stoppage, which are indissoluble as transcendental conditions of montage. Black and white, the ground where the images are so present that they can no longer be seen, and the void where there is no image. There are analogies here with Debord's theoretical work. Take, for example, the concept of "constructed situation," which gave its name to situationism. A situation is a zone of undecidability,

of indifference between a uniqueness and a repetition. When Debord says we should construct situations, he is always referring to something that can be repeated and yet is also unique.

Debord says the same thing at the close of *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, where instead of the traditional word "End" there appears the sentence "To be taken up again from the beginning." The same principle is at work in the very title of the film, which is a palindrome that can be read both ways. A sentence that curls back into itself. In this sense, there is a kind of essential palindromy in Debord's cinema.

Together, repetition and stoppage carry out the messianic task of cinema I have described. This task essentially involves creation. But it is not a new creation after the first. One cannot consider the artist's work uniquely in terms of creation; on the contrary, at the heart of every creative act there is an act of de-creation. Deleuze once said of cinema that every act of creation is also an act of resistance. What does it mean to resist? Above all it means de-creating what exists, de-creating the real, being stronger than the fact in front of you. Every act of creation is also an act of thought, and an act of thought is a creative act, because it is defined above all by its capacity to de-create the real.

If such is the task of cinema, what is an image that has been worked on in this way, by repetition and stoppage? What is it that changes in the status of the image? We will have to rethink entirely our traditional conception of expression. The current concept of expression is dominated by the Hegelian model, in which all expression is realized by a *medium*—an image, a word, or a color—which in the end must disappear in the fully realized expression. The expressive act is fulfilled when the means, the medium, is no longer perceived as such. The medium must disappear in that which it gives us to see, in the absolute that shows itself, that shines forth in the medium. On the contrary, 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 would call a "pure means," one that shows itself as such. The image gives itself to be seen instead of disappearing in what it makes visible. Historians of the cinema have noted, as a disconcerting novelty, the moment when the main character of Bergman's film *Monika*, Harriet Andersson, suddenly

stares directly into the lens of the camera. Bergman himself has written of this sequence: "Here, and for the first time in the history of cinema, a direct, shameless contact is established with the viewer." Since then, pornography and advertising have made this procedure banal. We are accustomed to the gaze of the porno star who stares fixedly into the camera while doing what she has to do, as a way of showing that she is more interested in the viewer than in her partner.

Since his early films and ever more clearly as he went along, Debord has shown us the image as such, that is to say, according to one of his principles from *The Society of the Spectacle*, the image as a zone of undecidability between the true and the false. But there are two ways of showing an image. The image exhibited as such is no longer an image of anything; it is itself imageless. The only thing of which one cannot make an image is, if you will, the being-image of the image. The sign can signify anything, *except the fact that it is in the process of signifying*. What cannot be signified or said in a discourse, what is in a certain way unutterable, can nonetheless be shown in the discourse. There are two ways of showing this "imagelessness," two ways of making visible the fact that there is nothing more to be seen. One is pornography and advertising, which act as though there were always something more to be seen, always more images behind the images; while the other way is to exhibit the image as image and thus to allow the appearance of "imagelessness," which, as Benjamin said, is the refuge of all images. It is here, in this difference, that the ethics and the politics of cinema come into play.

NOTE

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