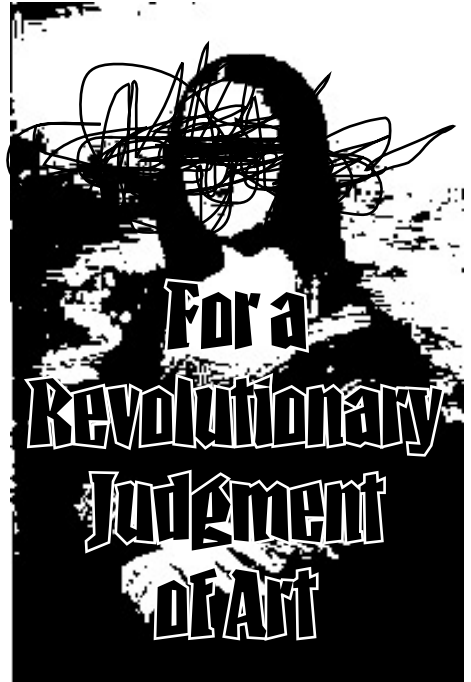


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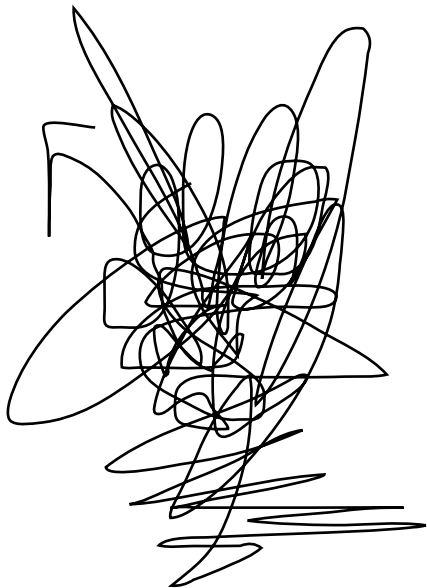


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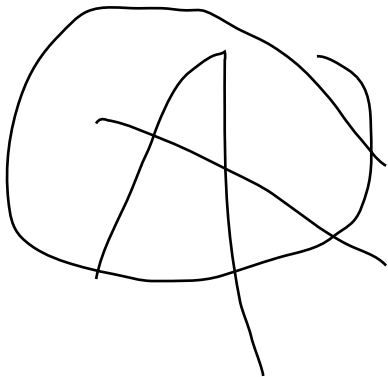


Linktree

**for a
Revolutionary
Judgment
of Art**
by Guy Debord



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SUCK



Fuck
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 W/ho

Chatel's article on Godard's film [*Breathless*] in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* #31 can be characterized as film criticism dominated by revolutionary concerns. The analysis of the film assumes a revolutionary perspective on society, confirms that perspective, and concludes that certain tendencies of cinematic expression should be considered preferable to others in relation to the revolutionary project. It is obviously because Chatel's critique thus sets out the question in all its fullness, instead of merely debating various questions of taste, that it is interesting and calls for discussion. Specifically, Chatel finds *Breathless* a "valuable example" supporting his thesis that an alteration of "the present forms of culture" depends on the production of works that offer people "a representation of their own existence."

2

A revolutionary alteration of the present forms of culture can be nothing less than the supersession of all aspects of the aesthetic and technological apparatus that constitutes an aggregation of spectacles separated from life. It is not in its surface meanings that we should look for a spectacle's relation to the problems of the society, but at the deepest level, at the level of its function as a spectacle. "The relation between authors and spectators is only a transposition of the fundamental relation between directors and executants. . . . The spectacle-spectator relation is in itself a staunch bearer of the capitalist order" (Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program).

2 One must not introduce reformist illusions about the spectacle, as if it could be eventually improved from within, ameliorated by its own specialists under the sup-



On the contrary, the revolutionary movement must accord a central place to criticism of culture and everyday life. But any examination of these phenomena must first of all be disabused, not respectful toward the given modes of communication. The very foundations of existing cultural relations must be contested by the critique that the revolutionary movement needs to really bring to bear on all aspects of life and human relationships.

posed control of a better-informed public opinion. To do so would be tantamount to giving revolutionaries' approval to a tendency, or an appearance of a tendency, in a game that we absolutely must not play; a game that we must reject in its entirety in the name of the fundamental requirements of the revolutionary project, which can in no case produce an aesthetics because it is already entirely beyond the domain of aesthetics. The point is not to engage in some sort of revolutionary art-criticism, but to make a revolutionary critique of all art.

3

The connection between the predominance of the spectacle in social life and the predominance of a class of rulers (both being based on the contradictory need for passive adherence) is not a mere clever stylistic paradox. It is a factual correlation that objectively characterizes the modern world. It is here that the cultural critique issuing from the experience of the self-destruction of modern art meets up with the political critique issuing from the experience of the destruction of the workers movement by its own alienated organizations. If one really insists on finding something positive in modern culture, it must be said that its only positive aspect lies in its self-liquidation, its withering away, its witness against itself.

4 From a practical standpoint, what is at issue here is a revolutionary organization's relation to artists. The deficiencies of

but which would attempt to expose Godard's own participation in an entire sector of the dominant cultural mythology: that of the cinema itself (shots of the tête-à-tête with the photo of Humphrey Bogart, cut to the Café Napoléon). Belmondo — on the Champs-Élysées, at the Café Pergola, at the Rue Vavin intersection — could be considered as the image (largely unreal, of course, "ideologized") that the microsociety of Cahiers du Cinéma editors (and not even the whole generation of French filmmakers who emerged in the fifties) projects of its own existence; with its paltry dreams of flaunted subsponsaneity; with its tastes, its real ignorances, but also its cultural enthusiasms.

The other danger would be that the impression of arbitrariness given by Chatel's exaltation of Godard's revolutionary value might lead other comrades to oppose any discussion of cultural issues simply in order¹³ to avoid the risk of lacking in seriousness.

to hold a discussion on a false pretext and with false means.



Leaving aside its external effects, the practice of this type of cinematic criticism immediately presents two risks to a revolutionary organization.

The first danger is that certain comrades might be led to formulate other criticisms expressing their different judgments of other films, or even of this one. Beginning from the same positions concerning the society as a whole, the number of different possible judgments of *Breathless*, though obviously not unlimited, is nevertheless fairly large.

To give just one example, one could make a
12 critique just as talented as Chatel's, expressing exactly the same revolutionary politics,

bureaucratic organizations and their fellow travelers in the formulation and use of such a relationship are well known. But it seems that a completely conscious and coherent revolutionary politics must effectively unify these activities.



The greatest weakness of Chatel's critique is precisely that he assumes from the start, without even alluding to the possibility of any debate on the subject, that there is the most extreme separation between the creator of any work of art and the political analysis that might be made of it. His analysis of Godard is a particularly striking example of this separation. Having taken for granted that Godard himself remains beyond any political judgment, Chatel never bothers to mention that Godard did not

explicitly criticize “the cultural delirium in which we live” and did not deliberately intend to “confront people with their own lives.” Godard is treated like a natural phenomenon, a cultural artifact. One thinks no more about the possibility of Godard having political, philosophical or other positions than one does about investigating the ideology of a typhoon.

Such criticism fits right into the sphere of bourgeois culture — specifically within its “art criticism” sector — since it obviously participates in the “deluge of words that camouflages every single aspect of reality.” This criticism is one interpretation among many others of a work on which we have no hold. The critic assumes from the beginning that he knows better than the author himself what the author means. This apparent presumptuousness is in fact an extreme humility: the critic so completely accepts his separation from the artistic specialist in question that he despairs of ever being able

unilaterally, from the top to the bottom, never from the bottom to the top. Nevertheless, these three categories are quite close to one another in their common confused powerlessness, as spectators making a show of themselves, in relation to the real dividing line between them and the people who actually make the films. The unilaterality of influence is still more strict in relation to this division. The considerable differences among the various spectators’ mastery of the conceptual tools of film-club debates are ultimately diminished by the fact that those tools are all equally ineffectual. A film-club debate is a subspectacle accompanying the projected film; it is more ephemeral than written criticism, but neither more nor less separated. In appearance a film-club discussion is an attempt at dialogue, at social encounter, at a time when individuals are increasingly isolated by the urban environment. But it is in fact the negation of such dialogue since these people have not come together to decide on anything, but in order

order to achieve, or at least strive toward, an equal degree of participation. The cinematic spectacle is one of the forms of pseudo-communication (developed, in lieu of other possibilities, by the present class technology) in which this aim is radically unfeasible. Much more so, for example, than in a cultural form such as the university-style lecture with questions at the end, in which dialogue and audience participation, though subjected to rather unfavorable conditions, are not absolutely excluded.

Anyone who has ever seen a film-club debate has immediately noticed the dividing lines between the leader of the discussion, the aficionados who regularly speak up at every meeting, and the people who only occasionally express their viewpoints. These three categories are clearly separated by the degree to which they have mastered a specialized vocabulary that determines their
10 place within this institutionalized discussion. Information and influence are transmitted

to act on or with him (which would obviously require that he take into consideration what the artist was explicitly seeking).

S

Art criticism is a second-degree spectacle. The critic is someone who makes a spectacle out of his very condition as a spectator — a specialized and therefore ideal spectator, expressing his ideas and feelings about a work in which he does not really participate. He re-presents, restages, his own nonintervention in the spectacle. The weakness of random and largely arbitrary fragmentary judgments concerning spectacles that do not really concern us is imposed upon all of us in many banal discussions in private life. But the art critic makes a show of this kind of weakness, presenting it as ex- 7
emplary.

6

Chatel thinks that if a portion of the population recognizes itself in a film, it will be able to “look at itself, admire itself, criticize itself or reject itself — in any case, to use the images that pass on the screen for its own needs.” Let us first of all note that there is a certain mystery in this notion of using such a flow of images to satisfy authentic needs. Just how they are to be used is not clear. It would first of all seem to be necessary to specify which needs are in question in order to determine whether those images can really serve as means to satisfy them. Furthermore, everything we know about the mechanism of the spectacle, even at the simplest cinematic level, absolutely contradicts this idyllic vision of people equally free to admire or criticize themselves by recognizing themselves in the characters of a film. But most fundamentally, it is impossible to accept this division of labor between uncon-

trollable specialists presenting a vision of people’s lives to them and audiences having to recognize themselves more or less clearly in those images. Attaining a certain accuracy in describing people’s behavior is not necessarily positive. Even if Godard presents people with an image of themselves in which they can undeniably recognize themselves more than in the films of Fernandel, he nevertheless presents them with a false image in which they recognize themselves falsely.

7

Revolution is not “showing” life to people, but bringing them to life. A revolutionary organization must always remember that its aim is not getting its adherents to listen to convincing talks by expert leaders, but getting them to speak for themselves, in