Born in Paris in 1931, Guy Debord grew up in the Mediterranean city of Cannes as the child of a formerly well-to-do family. After the world-wide economic crisis, his family was able to retain only a negligible part of their former means and possessions, and Debord spent his youth conscious that he would soon be without the secure life to which he had been accustomed. He moved—as he later wrote—"slowly, but unceasingly towards a life of adventure, keeping his eyes wide open," for he had decided to undertake nothing that might improve his prospects, such as a degree or a career or anything whereby one trades for a future those elements that block the way to it. As a consequence, he passed over the promises of a regulated bourgeois life and began to free his actions from economic ties.

Chance had it that Debord would early on have his attention drawn to a small group of young people who would make his path easier. In the summer of 1951 this group descended on Cannes from Paris, to bring chaos to the famous Film Festival, and to exploit it as propaganda for their own film productions. They called themselves the "Lettrists," and in post-war Paris their role was undoubtedly the most active. These young people—most of whom, like Debord, were scarcely 20 years old, were quite familiar with the main coordinates of the Parisian avant-garde, for they occupied themselves with attempting to snatch power away from the established representatives of artistic Bohemia, such as the Surrealists or the Existentialists. Debord accompanied the Lettrists back to Paris.

By the spring of 1952 Debord already played an important part among them. When the latest films and theories of the Lettrists were presented in the journal ION, a screenplay by Debord was also printed, along with his photo. The photo appears slightly scratched and out of focus, with black and white spots, as though taken against the sun. It portrays him as if his life had already become a memory, tossed away, and picked up again at a different time like in a retrospective image of when one had first met him. He manifests perhaps a youthful detachment, which for a moment is made
up of melancholy thoughts, yet still remains immature; it is unidentifiable, like the inquisitiveness that wants to experience all the possibilities of itself and the world and is full of confidence that there must be surprises.

Debord, as a matter of course, took part in the construction of such surprises in the way that usually only young people can devise—that is, contrary to facts and their consensus. At the end of June 1952 the Lettrists prepared the showing of a film, the script of which had already been presented in ION. Usually when such an occasion occurred in one of the Parisian ciné-clubs, diverse members of the avant-garde would come, such as the elder surrealists—Cocteau or Breton—with their young followers; a couple of the more fashionable Existentialists; no doubt, a budding artist, too, like Yves Klein or the affichistes Raymond Hains and Jacques de la Villeglé; and most certainly the ardent admirers of cinematic art, the young "Cinéasten." The latter would make themselves known in the mid-1950s with Cahiers du Cinéma, and become the most significant participants of the French New Wave.

At the premiere of the film by "Guy-Ernest Debord," quite an illustrious crowd was gathered when the lights went down. After five minutes the projector was shut off, and a rowdy confusion ensued. The audience was certainly used to putting up with a lot, and, of course, no one was close-minded, but there was absolutely nothing to be seen except the white screen, accompanied by some bombastically radical or banal sayings that seemed to have no connection whatsoever to the audience. Then the loudspeaker, too, no longer offered its services. The audience at the Ciné-Club d’Avant-Garde would not tolerate a dark screen and an on-going silence... and naturally, the Lettrists had aimed at precisely this. The film finally came on, accompanied by indignation and a stumbling confusion, not to mention whistling and booing, but this was really nothing more than its title and a proclamation of itself: Howlings in Favor of Sade. And, of course, a young woman’s voice from the soundtrack mentioned casually, “In this film nothing is said about Sade.” Why should anything need to be said? He had entered the theater in a different way.

The Mémoires of a 27-Year-Old

Debord looked back on these events at the end of the 1950s. The first of the three chapters composing his Mémoires, entitled “Juin 1952,” was published in 1959 when he was 27 years old. Similar to his technique for his 1952 film, Debord found sentences in newspapers, books, or advertisements,
tore them out, and scattered them on drawings made expressly for this book project by his friend Asger Jorn, a Danish painter. Without any recognizable order, he had thrown together the particulars and offered them to the public. Nevertheless, the Mémoires, like Howlings in Favor of Sade, was composed with exactitude. The second chapter relates—after the triumph of the summer—the dramatic and sometimes bitter period of “décembre 1952,” a time when the youthful heroines and heroes experienced a mood of unalleviated hopelessness, with no sign of overcoming it. No one wanted to submit to conditions dictated by society, to work, or to recast themselves as something better, possibly as an artist. Debord’s memories—of illegal activities, starvation, alcohol, drugs, love, and despair—are reported with the same total confusion of mind as belonged to the moment itself.

The last chapter, entitled “septembre 1953,” presents itself as an unexpected turning point, moving away from “The Comfort of the Last Days before a Suicide.” The Lettrist International had been formed, and its members now began to take action in a more organized manner against their enemy. The unpredictability of the solitary individual was now intensified in a group setting, and they were armed with visions and theories. Debord participated in the Lettrist International throughout the 1950s until its dissolution into the Situationist International in the summer of 1957. He was thus continuously involved with a collective project and even acted as its driving force. Already in 1959, however, he looked back to the period of 1952-53 with a melancholy longing. This is manifest not only in the Mémoires but also in his short 1959 film, On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Unit of Time. His first experiences in Paris are documented in the film, and are gradually interpreted as elements of an heroic epoch, a period that no present can match.

The Situationist International

This is rather striking, given that from 1957 on, Debord, more than anyone, determined the actions of the Situationist International (SI), a movement that sought to set itself up as the only contemporary power against all the forces of the past. At their founding meeting, Debord had presented the programmatic text, Report on the Construction of Situations, in which he outlined the strategic position of the SI vis-à-vis the cultural avant-garde. In the meantime, while acting as editor, he prepared the third issue of their journal, L’Internationale Situationniste. In 1959 there was indeed no other movement in the realm of art that could move around Europe with similar

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ease. Not even Fluxus, several years later, would be able to compete with them on so many different stages; and Fluxus, after all, was in 1962 still more or less a fairly active traveling circus. In the late 1950s, there were groups in all the important European cities that were active only locally, who at best could or at least wanted to include one or two other hubs, say perhaps the Nouveaux Réalistes in Paris or the Independent Group in London. The SI was the only exception. It covered all the different cultural centers and affirmed its internationality, which could be proved practically as well. Its members were quick-witted and self-assured whenever they intervened in a local debating arena. A second book, or—to be more chronologically precise—the first one involving the collaboration of Jorn and Debord, entitled Fin de Copenhague, was a result. It was published in 1957 in London (I.C.A.), the headquarters of the Independent Group. As with the Mémoires, it put on the same level the language of international modern painting (like Jackson Pollock’s technique, which would soon be relegated to “old school”), and the emerging position of comic strips, advertisements, and the various manifestations of the aesthetics of the mass media and consumer culture, including Pop Art. In 1957, all this was the main topic in the London I.C.A., while Fin de Copenhague critiqued any ingenuous approach that simply wanted to modernize the artist and his production by being attuned to the industrial products of mass culture. The Situationists not only crossed national borders, but also artistic ones. They disregarded any reservations about their latest projects, especially since most of these, later treated as the latest artistic innovations, had long beforehand been sketched out in their programmatic texts or illustrated in their journal.

Even though in 1959 the SI was remarkable in its ability to act and engage, this did not stop Debord from instituting, three years later, a definitive turning away from art and everything associated with it. When he purged the organization of artists at the end of 1962, the international lines of communication were also cut off, and the SI remained thereafter almost solely a Parisian concern.

**Situationist International and Student Unrest**

Not quite four years later, Debord and his small circle maneuvered in the most important scandal of the pre-‘68 movement in France. In this case, too, there is a denial of the accepted view of the forces at work and an assertion of the view introduced into history by the Situationists. What most historians described as a “student movement” was ridiculed as such by the SI as early
as two years before events culminated in May 1968. A pamphlet, On the Poverty of Student Life: Considered in its Economic, Political, Psychological, Sexual, and Especially Intellectual Aspects, with a Modest Proposal for its Remedy, was first brought out at the University of Strasbourg in 1966 by elected student representatives, using money from their budget. It soon attracted the nation’s attention. Under the motto, “To make the shame more shameful still by making it public,” the first sentence of the pamphlet makes everything clear: “It is pretty safe to say that the student is the most universally despised creature in France, apart from the policeman and the priest.”

The Strasbourg pamphlet would be reprinted in 1967 in a second edition of 20,000 copies for distribution throughout France. Translations of it had already been disseminated in other large European cities, and the Situationists came increasingly under discussion in the media as the perpetrators of the affair. They may indeed have been the unpredictable fomenters of the unrest, which had spread throughout the country. In any case, Guy Debord’s most famous work, The Society of the Spectacle, came out that year. He would later write that he had wanted the Situationists to have a theory in their hands for the discussions at the time, but naturally the book became even more than this. It was, at the very least, one of the most radical critiques ever assembled of the modern appearance of capitalism—and also of the so-called Communist system of power—derived from its history and rejecting all previous leftist positions, which at one time or another had all claimed for themselves, at least in name, the same philosophical traditions.

The Society of the Spectacle

Divided into 221 theses, Debord’s implacable discussion sets itself up against the ruling conditions and relations like a weapons system that discloses no central site where it can be countered directly. It holds its ground in each single thesis, being as fragmentary as it is unambiguous and definitive, and it compounds itself gradually into a complex texture of meaning. It is the sketch of a comprehensive history, from the beginning to the immediate present, and yet it is a scattered structure without any identifiable center of power. Rather, it is a scenario wherein exchange-value acts as the vehicle of use-value. Desire and passion act as the disappointed lover, making projections onto the commercial assemblyline. They are cheap, like a reality that today squeezes the meaning of life out of an intelligent tube of toothpaste, and tomorrow, out of the criticism of such lies. The

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commodity rules as image, and entraps its participants in hallucinations; it is a media-dominated space full of metaphysical whims and psychological traps where no person involved is allowed to recognize the outlines of his role, and even the voice of a famous politician, acting as an orator of death, calls for his own burial. The spectacle, the image, and delusion—nothing here is so intense as observation, and nothing will be so radically rejected as the spectator’s gaze.

Debord did not enjoy the same appreciation as most French theorists, who, since the mid-1970s, have held seminars in foreign universities, and he would only figure in academic discussion as an exception. Since the translation of his book into several languages, academicians have sought to define or to interpret what he says. Many attempts at explanation have failed, due to the brevity and concentrated form of the book’s contents; only the strategic arrangement of the text allows its discourse to convey its message. It is not that Debord’s book does not allow itself to be criticized either in part or as a whole. On the contrary, for all too long only dogmatic adherents of Debord have held out against ignorance, and, unfortunately, this attitude of “either-or” also controls the present situation, and the mindset of the clearly increasing number of Debord’s followers. He himself was naturally immovable regarding criticism. “I am not someone who corrects himself,” he responded, characteristically, when the new edition of his works was published by Gallimard in 1992.

Comments on the Society of the Spectacle

Let us briefly review the course of events. Debord’s new observations and further remarks, published in 1988 as Comments on the Society of the Spectacle, sought first of all to update history and to name the dissolution of the East-West opposition. Debord had seen these opposing blocs in 1967 under the sway of the spectacle—one that was diffused in the West but concentrated in the East, and whose former features, presented as mutually antagonistic, were now fused into an integrated spectacle—one worldwide system of rule. Debord also made a change in the strategic arrangement of his text. He says at the outset that he may not be able “to speak in total openness”: “Before everything I must take care not to instruct anyone too much. [...] Certain elements are knowingly omitted, and the plan must remain not entirely clear.” Here he is not injecting some of the excitement of modern spy stories, or promoting conspiracy theories in his readings of recent events. Rather, he is sketching a not-so-harmless picture of power and its methods.
Unlike *The Society of the Spectacle*, whose language is rich in images but which also contains gaps left open to interpretation and comprehension, without any special hints, the *Comments* does not rely on gaps, as if they do not want to be blamed for anything. In so doing, they exact too much from current events and become an illustration that loses itself in its task. *The Society of the Spectacle*, on the other hand, was a theory, which in its turn fell apart in order to set itself up again out of each element. It wanted to demonstrate that the attack could once more be taken up, even when only a fragment of the whole was saved.

For Debord, the simultaneous presence of concentration and dispersion marked a revolutionary strategy at the end of the 1950s. It was at that time constituted by the oppositional double structures of the spectacle—the monolithic East and the anarchistic West. The attendant perspective of negativity disappeared after the union of these antagonistic forces during the 1980s.

### The 1960s

Let us turn back to the end of the 1960s. The twelfth and especially voluminous issue of the Situationist journal appeared a year after the events of May 1968, and contained a detailed account of them in France. It pointed to the SI as the generator of a radically theoretical and practical critique at the heart of the uprising, which in a short time had grown into the largest and fiercest general strike in the post-war period. The workers were finally called back to order and returned to the capitalist system of labor with the help of the Communist Party. No one would have thought that a small revolutionary group like the SI, who in its publications wanted to make itself the mouthpiece of the historical movement and had demonstrated its impressive ability to push ahead the radicalization of desire in societal processes, would in three years no longer exist. But that is exactly what happened.

Guy Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti marked 1972 by being the only remaining Situationists responsible for the text *The Veritable Split in the International*, which made public the disbanding of the SI. In its roughly twelve years of existence the organization had had 70 members, of which seven were women; at its peak it had 20 members at one time, but for the most part it usually had significantly fewer. During his writing of the account of the group’s dissolution, Debord must also have been working on a film version of his book, so that the French public could view his theoretical
work as a film, in 1973. In it, Debord speaks almost the whole 90 minutes, reading what he considers the most important of the 221 theses, while the society of the spectacle manifests itself in muted images, occasionally interspersed with scenes from well-known movies. Just as in the comic strips in the Situationist journal, the actors now appear in a different story, in a conflict, which the protagonists of an unknown life instigate, for their amusement, with the enemies. The film is an extensive, circular dance of images that shows the spectacle as a self-contained cosmos. Everyone is a prisoner of its sphere, a flat shadow on a stage that ceaselessly displays its different views: the production line, a reproduction room, a consumer paradise, the war apparatus, or a promise of happiness, the wheel of life wherein the protagonists—the politician, naked mannequins, automobiles, weapons, or high-rise apartment blocks—are embedded as the performers of an organized, worldwide delusional ensemble, cut off from and uninfluenced by any analysis of their miserable reality and the wretched roles they play. Near the end of the film Debord tries to set the manic succession of images off on a movement of attack, and the images of May '68 make dynamic here the confidence that, in the next confrontation, the destruction will penetrate deeper into the strongholds of power. Indeed the SI was no longer disposed to making progress in such a conflict. Their writings had apparently found a wealthy publisher in Paris, who guaranteed that from now on they would always be on the market. There was also a book program that provided a vehicle for their arguments, but Debord withdrew from the collective and, in this respect, from the open forum.

The consequences of these steps could be seen clearly for the first time in 1978. Debord brought out another 90-minute film, but this time it was only about himself: In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni ("We turn in a circle at night and we are consumed by the fire"). The critique of modern social relations in this film confronts the audience with the assertion that they spend their lives willingly as film extras of their own wretchedness. Debord spares no efforts in finding painful formulae for the representation of this poorly paid job. When the question of what is worthy of discussion is addressed, the focus turns to Debord himself, and goes back to 1952-53, to a Paris that has since vanished. His subsequent activities, the history of the SI or of May '68, are clearly eclipsed by these early years, and the contributions of his friends, with whom he started and continued, are made distant by some blurry souvenir snapshots. It would seem that Debord, in the same blurriness, has already withdrawn his own life from society, which does not "deserve" him. In the end he rejects the company of his friends and everything that a collective project sets against the course of life and its fatal
privatization. He also reduces the richness of collectivity, which can never be sure of its advocates, to an illustrated panorama of his private collection, into which he, as an expert, has withdrawn himself.

The succession of episodes stretching from May '68 through the 1970s culminated in another phase in the year after the 1978 film. Debord provided another thesis on these events, which, more than any other, drew him to a proposition that up to then he had presumed only cautiously, or had polemically circulated, as being conclusions from some circumstantial evidence.

Gianfranco Sanguinetti and Debord had observed in Italy how a strategy of creating tension was adopted by the state against the forces resistant to the economic system, by deliberately employing terrorist provocation in the form of secret service and neo-Fascist commandos. In this scenario the armed campaigns of the Left—in Italy, as elsewhere in Europe—are of particular importance. They comprised a significant part of the radical forces and permitted their struggle to be taken to a new, unexpected, and harsh scene where they would be seemingly defeated. Debord and Sanguinetti were familiar with the political class and the potential of armed groups. Under the pseudonym “Censor,” Sanguinetti had published his True Report on the Last chance to Save Capitalism in Italy (1975). The book threw the press into confusion, and the author was assumed to be a member of the ruling class, given that he possessed an impressive knowledge of the current problems of capitalism—until Sanguinetti made himself known.

The Moro Abduction

Three years later, together with Debord, Sanguinetti developed a further project, a new disclosure: the analysis of the abduction of Aldo Moro, the head of the Christian Democrats and the architect of the Historical Compromise, who was killed in the spring of 1978. In fact, Debord and Sanguinetti had a falling out over the tenability of their thesis. Debord first published it at the beginning of 1979 in the Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of “The Society of the Spectacle,” while Sanguinetti gave it in detail some months later in On Terrorism and the State. According to that text, the Red Brigades’ action had been directed by the Italian secret service. Debord and Sanguinetti tried to assert what the Red Brigades only discussed defensively and in secret: through its strategy of negotiation, the state had already purloined the hostage from his abductors. (This emerges from the comments of Tonino Loris Paroli and Renato Curcio, the founders of the Red Brigades.) The state
had pronounced a death sentence, and they could only carry it out as the executors of their own defeat.

This unexpected exchange of blows had become possible because those bearing arms and caught up in the logic of armed conflict believed they could at any time, with their finger on the trigger, either intensify their just struggle or defer their power, as they pleased. Far from their previous claims, they wanted to bind the hands of their adversary in person and in direct opposition, while this case was really of a completely different type, since it ceded the center of their own structure with the death of the figure of power. Debord and Sanguinetti countered the craziness of this overthrow with references to manipulation. In their paradoxical counter-scenario at any rate, most of the parties concerned seemed incompetent rather than the subjects of their own actions. Thus their analysis also defends the desire contained in the logic of armed struggle: the still possible success, despite the confusion, of such an abduction. Indeed, there must have been a trail that led directly to the interests of power and authority, via the handwriting of a cold-blooded director. When Debord and Sanguinetti tried to follow this trail in order to topple perhaps a further player, the issue of who exactly did what was for a moment not really clear even to them, and the compelling logic of their plan became lost in a disagreement that eventually ended with the definitive break between Sanguinetti and Debord.

With his thesis on the Moro abduction, Debord put an end to a tendency which, after the disappointing peace of May '68, sought to maintain an exclusive ruthlessness in the escalation of its own operations. Debord had always been on the side of terror, which asserted its combat effectiveness in a dispute with words, and his texts urged—not only metaphorically—illegality and this type of war with prevailing conditions. The year before, he had, on the movie screen, commented on a photograph of Gudrun Ensslin and Andreas Baader, "The best of youth dies in prison."

The Last Years

Debord's withdrawal and his transfer of history to private ownership — from the Lettrists through the Situationists up to the end of the 1970s — experienced still another intensification at the end of the 1980s, which operates in an almost grotesque way and should be read with a certain ambivalence. In 1989 Debord published an unrestricted eulogy of himself, Panegyric. He tells of his pleasures, his observations, and his fancy for them, what the spectacle has left for enjoyment, and compares his own rich literary style to that of the Enlightenment. He talks about things previously
undisclosed, like his origins, his youth, or his experiences of the last few years outside the public eye, all of which, according to him, reflect a rare perfection. Debord completes this itinerary with quiet steps, wherein an unacknowledged vanity is content with its own gratification. Pride even accompanies the consequences of his later actions. It is as if he wants to hunt down, through his own impertinence, the lurking remnants that still abound in large and small hierarchies and non-hierarchies, and to make clear to everyone that they see before them the ideal: Debord, the exception. Whether one understands him or not, and whether one wants to criticize or defend him, he deflects every eloquent approach with this beautiful mirror of his life. His life is private, or "privée" as they say in French, but also, as Debord emphasizes, "deprived." His life is private, and he, therefore, displays it as one of the few that was still kept that way. To this extent there is a complete earnestness behind every phrase, which carries, with his "unrestricted praise," a knowing escalation—neither the praise nor its exaggeration wants to see itself diminished.

On November 30, 1994, Debord put an end to his life. It is irrelevant to speculate whether he might not have done it had he not suffered from an incurable illness. The news of his death brought a dumb sense of futility, in the midst of this life with its false powers. His life simply ended, while everything against which he had risked it continues to exist, with ongoing fuss, misery, and hatred. A week after his death, which had triggered a flood of obituaries in the French press, it was announced that the cable channel Canal+ would broadcast two of his films, following a one-hour portrait, Guy Debord, son art et son temps. In the last two years of his life, Debord had allowed the production of this television film about his ideas. It can be viewed as an illustration of his commentary, and the opening coincides almost perfectly with the second volume of his Panegyric, published in France by his estate in 1997. In the film, Debord returns one last time to Paris, the city where he allowed his ashes to be scattered, and he portrays it as a picture, a backdrop of the environment familiar to him. In a brief five minutes his own life and the works of "His Art," are covered. "His Time" then follows, consisting of a collage of French news reports, in which the views of the recorded world are condensed into everyday camera pans, like a trip through a grinning hell. It is obvious that this pointed emphasis is in vain, for Debord's succession of poisonous truths suffers from the fact that his critique at the end of the 1980s offered no constructive or practical coherence. It also demonstrates how naturally Debord kept his life in a state of radical opposition, how easily he insisted and protested against cynicism, while himself cynically smirking.

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Among the texts published by others after his death, we read accounts of private encounters with him, which, had they been published during his lifetime, would have led Debord to break immediately with their authors. However, we discern in these descriptions the image of a person who could be dealt with in a light-hearted and carefree manner. It was possible to spend time with him and his wife, Alice Becker-Ho, in a relaxed and easy way, drinking and laughing. On the other hand, Debord appears repeatedly as a severe and implacable strategist—a quality that has made his followers and imitators often annoying and humorless. Further, Debord would never have allowed such an image of himself to circulate. Whether by the style of his language or by controlling documents such as photos, which were only released by him, Debord always held the traces of his life firmly in his own hands, passing them on to the public in careful doses, transforming them into a message. For the rest, his linguistic style elicited dubious admiration in France. Today many public figures are ready to cite some of Debord’s sayings, making him into an innovator of French literature. One can even hear, among the guardians of radicalism, such statements as “Debord is dead, so is Che. Now what? Embrace your love and don’t put down your gun.” Such utterances have even come from people who dealt with him directly. Perhaps one can then understand why, not infrequently in his life, he went through irrevocable break-ups and fallings-out. Intimate friends and others have surely experienced how, in the middle of a discussion, a sudden movement affected his orientation, which then could not be reversed. He would begin to turn away; the decision lay behind him—just as eventually he turned his back on life itself, forever.

Hamburg, Germany
Translated by Ronald Helstad

NOTE

1. Original title: Rapporto veridico sulle ultime possibilità di salvare il capitalismo in Italia. Part of this text has been translated into English by Richard Gardner as “What the communists really are” in Semiotext(e), III(3), 1980: 92-95.

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