"GUY DEBORD MADE VERY LITTLE ART, but he made it extreme," says Debord of himself in his final work, Guy Debord, son art et son temps (Guy Debord: His Art and His Time, 1995), an "anti-televisual" testament authored by Debord and realized by Brigitte Cornand. And there is no reason to doubt either aspect of this judgment. While Debord has been known in the English-speaking world since the 1970s as a key figure in the Situationist International and as a revolutionary theorist, it is only in the past decade that his work as a filmmaker has surfaced outside France. One reason is that, in 1984, following the assassination of Debord's friend and patron Gerard Lebovici and the libelous treatment of both men in the French press, Debord withdrew his films from circulation. Though the films were not widely seen even in France, four of them--by the time they were withdrawn--had been playing continually and exclusively for the previous six months at the Studio Cujas in Paris, a theater financed for this purpose by Lebovici.

The communique issued by Debord soon after Lebovici's death reads: "Gerard Lebovici having been assassinated, to the applause of a joyful press and a servile public, the films of Guy Debord will never again be projected in France." Three years later, in a letter to Thomas Levin, Debord amended this to: "I should have said: Never again anywhere."

So things stood until shortly after Debord's suicide in 1994. By prearrangement with Debord, CANAL+ presented a program on January 9, 1995, consisting of Guy Debord: His Art and His Time, coproduced by CANAL+ and the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, and two earlier films, La Societe du spectacle (The Society of the Spectacle, 1973) and Refutation de tous les jugements, tant elogieux qu'hostiles, qui ont ete jusqu'ici portes sur le film <<La Societe du spectacle>> (Refutation of All Judgments, Whether in Praise or Hostile, Which Have Up to Now Been Brought on the Film "The Society of the Spectacle," 1975). In 2001 the Venice Film Festival presented a retrospective of Debord's films using partially restored prints. In 2003, RAI 3 broadcast the work with Italian subtitles. There have been other screenings, but it was only in 2005 that the films were again projected in Paris.

As interest in the Situationist International and Debord has grown, the absence of Debord's films has been keenly felt. And while unauthorized versions based on the French and Italian broadcasts have circulated in the interim, there have been no authorized copies of high quality in distribution. Until now. After an absence of more than twenty years, Debord's work has recently been made accessible to the public. At the request of Debord's widow, Alice Debord (better known as Alice Becker-Ho, theorist of the "dangerous classes" and intimate of the SI), Gaumont has produced, under the direction of filmmaker Olivier Assayas, a stunningly beautiful DVD box set--Guy Debord: OEuvres cinematographiques completes. The title recalls the collection of film scripts originally published by Editions Champ Libre in 1978.

The three-disc set (each volume with its own deluxe jacket containing the disc and a short brochure) includes
Debord's six films in chronological order, his collaborative video with Cornand, two mordantly ironic trailers, and a volume of documents related to the films. The achievement represented will have an immediate impact on the perception of Debord's work within France. And later, outside it. The works likely to receive the most immediate and lasting attention are The Society of the Spectacle and In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni (1978).

The Society of the Spectacle is a feature-length film essay—Debord's own adaptation of his renowned work of cultural and political history and theory. Debord not only speaks about the spectacle—he himself reads the incisive voice-over that occupies most of the sound track—but redirects the spectacle's own weapons against it, a strategy the Situationists call detournement. Debord puts into service feature films from "East" and "West," newsreel footage, ads that look like soft-core porn, and soft-core porn that looks like ads. He makes innovative use of subtitles and intertitles to problematize reception. For the spectacle, as Debord reminds us, "is not a collection of images, but a relationship among people mediated by images." In the highly distilled and allusive reflections presented and in their presentation, a complex critical apprehension of the relationship between image and text, individual and society is produced.

In The Society of the Spectacle, Debord also speaks as a contemporary historian, offering reflections on May '68 as revolutionary practice and as universal history. He makes an account of successes and failures. He speaks with the gravity of Herodotus and the scope of Hegel to distill sociological insights worthy of Marx, and he does it by means of an elegantly allusive rewriting—the detournement—of their very texts.

Warhol promised his public an ironically democratic fifteen minutes of fame; Debord refused even that. His next film, Refutation, followed dialectically from the reception of the previous one. Debord uses his twenty minutes to demystify the print-media reception of his film The Society of the Spectacle. He deploys the powerful weapons of cinema and his own hybrid strategies against both his would-be supporters and detractors. Just as the unidirectional discourse of press monopolies admits of no reply from beyond the landscape they control, Debord's use of a means unavailable to his critics is a strategic counterattack on a terrain deliberately chosen, where they could not even appear. When literary journalists would annex the territory of broadcast television and attack his book The Society of the Spectacle on a talk show, Debord would counterattack using the precise means used against him. In Guy Debord: His Art and His Time, the subtle re-presentation of these media pundits suffices through blank irony to expose the shallowness of their pretensions to critique and to dismiss something they admit they have not even completely read.

Debord's next film after Refutation was his second feature-length work, In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni. (The title is a menacing Latin palindrome that might be rendered: "At night we walk in circles and are consumed by fire.") The critique continues and the personal dimension deepens. He begins: "I will make no concessions to the public in this film." Debord then profiles the moviegoing public and mercilessly assaults their consumerist servdom and deluded beliefs in their own mastery. The only merit he claims for his film will be revealing this condition to the audience; he represents this bitter but estimable service by ironically comparing himself, through visual counterpoint, to both Robin Hood and Zorro. He proclaims that he justly merited the hatred of his time and would have been angry in such a society to have received other treatment. He expresses pride at having made films which proved that, in the midst of such vacuity, a response beyond silent complacency was possible.

Debord reflects on the spectacle and its evolving form and on his own attempts to destroy it. He becomes by turns General Custer, Prince Valiant, Larcenaire (from Les Enfants du paradis), Major Geoffrey Vickers (Errol Flynn in The Charge of the Light Brigade), even the devil (from Les Visiteurs du soir). He celebrates the Paris he knew, before it was destroyed by commodity culture: "a city so beautiful that many preferred to live there poor than to live rich anywhere else." Long traveling shots of the architecture of Venice executed for this film from boats passing along the canals offer a continuous ground for the sun's reflections on the water and for Debord's reflections on crime, on mortality, on friendship. Friendship—its costs, its joys, and the loss of it—is a major theme here, a theme explored in every one of his films. For the bonds of friendship, whether they endure or
endure but a short while, offer the only alternative to the institutionalized isolation of the spectacle.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Debord creates an image of the youth he spent in the cafes of Saint-Germain-des-Pres, a composite of documentaries, comics, still photographs, features, and his own earlier work. The Café des Poètes of Jean Cocteau's Orphée becomes part of a continuous space that includes the Rouge-Gorge of Les Enfants du paradis, the taverns where Prince Valiant encounters wayfarers from mysterious and distant lands, and the cafes seen in the exploded views of Debord's Sur le passage de quelques personnes a travers une assez courte unite de temps (On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time, 1959). He reflects with pleasure on the sensation of the passage of time and concludes, finally, "Wisdom will never come." Uncompromising, singular, and alone as when the film began.

Debord's final feature-length work, Guy Debord: His Art and His Time, is a testament in the mode of François Villon. An icy clarity recalls Debord's autobiographical text Panegyric, but with a more advanced, third-person sense of detachment from all he has lived and will soon leave behind. The voice-over commentary, which plays such a strong role in Debord's other work, is absent; he intervenes verbally only infrequently, in the form of intertitles. His major strategy in creating an "anti-televisual" work is the blank irony, which devolves from the simple quotation of a careful selection of the horrors and stupidity that are the fabric of television. This will likely remain his most hermetic work outside "the hexagon," as the elements from which it is constructed--fragments of televised "reality"--are either unknown or have different resonances outside France. But footnotes will come--as they did for Villon--and in any case, this is more than a simple and horrendous sottisier. There is a steady accumulation of evidence interwoven with links to Debord's personal history: his friendships, his loves, his travels, his exiles. It is an assemblage that allows us to see the world through his eyes, as realized in understated fashion by collaborator Brigitte Cornand.

Those familiar with the three features from their clandestine circulation will find the most profound revelations in the three almost completely unseen if not utterly unknown early films (grouped together on the disc titled "Contre le cinema"): Hurlements en faveur de Sade (Howlings in Favor of Sade, 1952), On the Passage, and Critique de la separation (Critique of Separation, 1961). Howlings never had more than a handful of screenings, mostly in the 1950s. On the Passage was screened at Cujas while it was open, from October 1983 to April 1984, but was otherwise seen only in a few private screenings until Venice. And this is the first access anyone--except close associates of Debord's--has had to Critique, because, according to Assayas, it was never shown publicly until the Venice Film Festival in 2001, and even then not fully restored.

If one needs proof, Howlings will show that what art Debord did make, he made extreme: It consists entirely of either clear or opaque leader. While other films have been made using only clear and black leader--notably Peter Kubelka's Arnulf Rainer (1958-60) and Tony Conrad's The Flicker (1966)--each is, by comparison, an orgiastic feast for the senses.

Howlings holds for many the mythic status of Warhol's Empire (1964), the silent black-and-white portrait of the Empire State Building, shot over six hours then slowed down in projection to eight hours, during much of which the "star" remains hidden in darkness. Since most people who have heard of Empire have never seen it, it represents a film-historical idea rather than an experience. For those of us who have, the film has provided an opportunity to reflect on cinematic and real space, boredom and attention, film and the construction of consciousness, and the possibilities for ecstasy in the endgame of late capitalism.

While something similar might be said of Howlings as an experience or as a myth--and in its absence several groups have tried to re-create it as a performance--the effect of experiencing the "original" is at once more compact and more expansive. Howlings seeks not simply to uncover the basic elements of cinema and cinema spectatorship; it seeks to utterly annihilate the cinema as we know it, using and misusing the cinema's own devices. It is explicitly an "anti-film." Warhol withdraws from expressive subjectivity by reductively imitating the processes of cinematic reification: He sets up the camera, turns it on, and appears only to reload it at
mechanically predetermined intervals. Debord focuses exclusively on a part of the apparatus that references the visual unconscious of cinema--the clear and opaque leader normally relegated to the margins of the filmmaking and viewing process.

Howlings begins with a burst of countdown leader, then clear leader floods the screen with white light; we hear guttural ejaculations of Lettrist sound poetry, citations from legal statutes, letters, books, and feature films, affectless fragments of everyday conversations,

and intellectual observations by Debord. Opaque leader leaves us suddenly in a darkness, which is not so much the inchoate swirling grain from which cinema is perpetually reborn, but a palpable, eerie void. Debord achieves this remarkable effect by splicing optical track (which gives the white screen and audio) to what appeared to Assayas to be blank perforated magnetic tape--used at the time for sound editing--which is utterly opaque when passing through the gate of a film projector and utterly silent when passing through the optical sound head of a film projector. It appears, according to Assayas, that Debord never made prints but only projected his 16-mm original the few times the film was shown in the 1950s.

This effect is difficult if not impossible to reproduce when film prints are made. Optical sound tracks always have a snap-crackle-pop, and prints never have enough density to erase the borders of the frame. The new digital copy of Howlings radically minimizes these problems and actually corrects a "deficiency" of the original: Because the sound track of a 16-mm film is physically offset by twenty-six frames--about a second ahead of the picture--there is no way to achieve exact synchronization of white screen with speech and the erasure of the frame with silence without making a copy, so when Debord's film was originally projected, each passage of sound would start about a second after the screen went to white and would overlap for about a second with the black that would follow. While filmmakers might argue that this "correction" changes the original experience of the film, it does bring the current version into conformity with Debord's script, which is explicit on this point.

Accordingly, this electronic version represents the first time the work would have been screened according to Debord's design--were it not for one small problem: Seven of the last twenty-four minutes of silence and darkness specified in the script have gone missing. While seventeen minutes of silence and darkness will suffice for most people "to get the idea," it's as much a matter of experience as concept. And even conceptually, twenty-four is a "magic" number for filmmakers, because sound film runs at twenty-four frames a second and Debord specified the exact length of this passage each time the script was published.

No one involved in the DVD project was aware of this problem. Inquiries to Assayas resulted in the discovery that a technician at Gaumont had been misled by a mislabeling of the master film-to-tape transfer. This could be considered an almost metaphysical blemish on the extraordinary labor to bring this effectively invisible work to a wider public.

Unfortunately, those seven minutes are not all that remains invisible.

The Society of the Spectacle is missing five of Debord's subtitles and shows changes in the quality of the audio and instability in the still images in the film. Refutation also suffers errors in subtitling. The entire sound track of In girum is a second ahead of the picture and there is a kind of stutter between the main titles and the first image. Critique shows very un-Debord-like single-frame stutters and may have incorrectly placed subtitles. All the films suffer from timing that blows out the highlights, eliminating some information that can be seen on the CANAL+ broadcast, which used vintage prints. Only On the Passage and Guy Debord: His Art and His Time completely escape significant technical mishandling. Fortunately, Assayas is now working with Gaumont to address these issues in a second edition. Once technical issues are resolved, we can hope for an English-subtitled version; this first edition is Region 2, PAL, French language only. While the defects are serious enough that this edition cannot be considered definitive, it is not by its technical limitations that this edition should primarily be judged.
Given the lack created by the absence of these films—if that's not too Lacanian—this publication of them should bring due recognition for those who attempted it: Alice Debord for releasing the films, Olivier Assayas for devoting his energy and imagination to overseeing this complex project, and Gaumont for taking on various risks associated with the films. Nor should Asger Jorn and Gerard Lebovici, who originally financed the films, be forgotten.

TWENTY YEARS AGO I argued that Warhol, whose films were then unseeable, occupied by his influence and by his absence a place parallel to that of Debord in film history. The rerelease of Warhol's work in film has inspired some direct imitation, but its historical significance is more complex. Our eyes have been opened not only to the phenomenal range of Warhol's experiments, but also to the vast gulf between Paul Morrissey's Andy-certified Warholisms and the originals that inspired not only Morrissey but two generations of filmmakers in the '70s and '80s: Scott and Beth B, Peggy Ahwesh, Vivienne Dick, and others in New York, and "structuralist-materialist" filmmakers such as Peter Gidal in the UK. The same, I suspect, will be true of Debord as we examine first-hand the nuance and complexity of his achievements to compare them with what followed.

Part of our judgment of Debord and his place in history will be based on his nineteen-minute On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time, one of two films Debord made while a member of the SI. Not surprisingly, it is an exploration of the creation of situations—experimental interactions of people with one another and with places giving rise to new possibilities for human consciousness and liberation. This is Debord's first visual examination of interactions among his friends and the problematics of representing them on film, though Howlings displays an oblique sociology of friendship and references particular friendships.

As we examine Debord's Situationist-era films, we must directly confront "the Godard question." Rene Vienet is typical among the Situationists in viewing Jean-Luc Godard's work as a reductive recuperation of their project and of Debord's work in particular. In "The Situationists and the New Forms of Action Against Politics and Art" (1967), Vienet refers to Godard as "the most celebrated of the pro-Chinese Swiss." In the graffiti of May '68, this became "the biggest asshole among the pro-Chinese Swiss" ("Le plus con des Suisses pro-chinois"). Later in that same text, Vienet further accuses Godard of pillaging the Situationists' work for commodifiable details, but without comprehending the SI's project—the complete overturning of existing conditions: "He can easily recuperate, as is his habit, what came before—that is to say, to recuperate in what came before him a word, an idea like that of [using] commercials—he will never do anything but work small novelties taken from elsewhere, a few images or famous phrases of the era, and which surely have a resonance, but which he cannot grasp (Bonnot, worker, Marx, made in USA, Pierrot le Fou, Debord, poetry, etc.). He is in fact a child of Mao and Coca-Cola."

What did Godard know and when did he know it? As a journalist and film-maker, Godard could have known about Debord's early films through professional contacts, and there is some evidence, both circumstantial (as Vienet implies) and direct (Godard's own testimony) that he was familiar with the writings of the Situationists by 1967. And he does pay brief homage to Debord's Lettrist phase in Histoire(s) du cinema (1988-98). However, since, according to Assayas, there were no reviews of either Critique or On the Passage, outside of Situationist publications Godard couldn't even have read about them, while the earliest film he could have easily seen would have been The Society of the Spectacle (1973). Howlings, however, was notorious even in the mainstream press, so Godard likely had some notion of it. The Situationists certainly thought so.

In "Cinema and Revolution" (1969), the Situationists scorn the praise received by Godard for shooting sequences for Le Gai Savoir (1969) in the dark that last so long "they are almost unbearable." The SI calls these strategies "tardily plagiarized and useless as all the rest, this negation having been formulated in the cinema even before Godard began the long series of pretentious false novelties which inspired so much enthusiasm among students in the preceding period." Across the page they insert an item from Paris-Presse from 1957 describing a screening
of Howlings in London that year. They look forward to the time when Debord will make a film version of his own Society of the Spectacle, adding they have no doubt he can do better than Godard.

Debord's On the Passage (whether Godard or anyone else in the Nouvelle Vague knew about it) is a compendium of metacinematic tropes exceeding those often assumed to have originated with the French New Wave: the inclusion of slates as a distancing device, critical interventions in the form of intertitles, visual breakdowns of still photographs, self-reflexive voice-over critique, the blurring of the line between documentary and fiction, clear leader with voice-over and black leader with silence, the cutting of TV commercials and newsreels against staged sequences, the creation of a critical urban psychogeography, the deliberate inclusion of bad takes, and so on. Debord had already mapped out the terrain in advance. A more gossipy irony has On the Passage quoting a soap commercial starring the soon-to-be archetypal Godard heroine and wife of the ‘60s, Anna Karina.

Debord's eighteen-minute Critique of Separation directs its experimental attentions to "the documentary." Debord draws from a catalogue of newsreel footage and book covers, rephotographed photographs, views of Paris and its neighborhoods, and a catalogue of disabused, seemingly off-hand footage of him and his friends in the porous zone comprising the cafe and the street. In Critique Debord makes his first tactical use of subtitles to problematize the receptions of the image and even of his own voice-over critique. He also expands the role of intertitles in an ironic vein ("One of the greatest anti-films of all time!"). Here the focus is the explicit development of the notion of "situations" and the problematics of their representation in film. He makes equally explicit, however, that his interest is not principally in a critique of film, but rather in a critique of existing conditions using film's paradigmatic mechanisms.

The evidence of these early films should finally make clear that Godard's work was not the most innovative in France in the '60s and '70s. But without the information contained in these newly released films by Debord, it may not have been apparent--at least on this side of the Atlantic--until now.

The impact of Debord's feature-length films will probably become evident only over the long term. They have already produced both direct imitations (seemingly based on Debord's scripts)--notably Call It Sleep (1983) by Isaac Cronin and Terrel Seltzer and Are You in a Bad State? (1987) by Larry Law--and inspired leaps (based on unauthorized copies of the films), notably the work of Craig Baldwin and Stewart Home. And while Debord did not invent the feature-length compilation film, his work continues to throw into sharp and critical relief the use of preexisting material. In spite of its invisible ubiquity in the entertainment industry, from the History Channel to America's Funniest Home Videos, the compilation genre is currently little explored in critical fashion outside the realm of "experimental cinema."

"No film," Debord reminds us in Refutation, "is more difficult than its era." Nor is it greater. The appearance of this newly visible body of work from the cinema's second fifty years makes it possible for us to say that Guy Debord contributed something truly extraordinary to his era, even as he attempted to destroy it. Rather than confining these works to some cinematic pantheon, their destructive forces should be honored. They should be experienced, then remembered as powerful currents causing shifts in the course of the river of time--the river into which no one may enter twice.

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RELATED ARTICLE: A Brief Affair

"THE NEIGHBORHOOD HAS REMAINED the same," says the first narrating voice in Guy Debord's 1959 film On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment In Time. "Paris 1952," a title has read,
opening this nineteen-minute montage of buildings in the neighborhood of Saint-Germain-des-Pres, young people drinking and talking in a café, police assaulting demonstrators—and a soap commercial. The film tells the tale of a small group of people, “a provisional microsociety,” who came together to start a revolution, to overthrow a society's "idea of happiness." The revolution was to begin and end in the realm of everyday life—how one spoke and gestured, ate and drank, made friends and made love.

The tiny band—they called themselves the Lettrist International—would practice a new way of life. "The group," the narrator says, "lived on the margins of the economy. It tended toward a role of pure consumption, and most of all, the free consumption of its time." "Its time": The boys and girls of this circle would consume their own days and nights, and finally they would consume their epoch itself. "Let the dead bury the dead and mourn them," Debord had quoted Marx's 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge—it was the epigraph to his first book, the 1958 Memoires, his first attempt to capture the "adventure" he had lived in Paris in 1952—"Our kind will be the first to blaze a trail into a new life." When the members of the LI looked back, they would recognize themselves, but the world would be changed.

"The neighborhood has remained the same": In 1959, as the tired but affecting voices in On the Passage spoke over its silent footage, that meant the revolution begun seven years before had not been made, that nothing had changed. It also meant that the setting of the story—the place where, in his 1978 film In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni, Debord, again looking back, again narrating a collection of mostly found and scavenged footage, this time across 105 minutes, would say, "One felt the earth turn"—was still there. It was still a free field, "a neighborhood where the negative held court," a place where one could seek "a different, evil Grail." It is not there in In girum. In In girum, "Paris no longer exists."

On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time unfolds smoothly, quietly, seductively. As an account of the prehistory of the Situationist International—the prestigious, glamorous, seemingly more daring group Debord and others founded in 1957—the film is, for all its melancholy, suffused with its own glamour: a sense of being in the right place at the right time. When, for a long sequence, Debord simply takes a snapshot of four people who were part of the milieu he is celebrating and pans across the picture, moves in and out of it, he orchestrates the whole of a drama, a story with heroes and perils, traitors and delight. You want to know how the people in this picture got where they are; you want to know where they went. You don't necessarily care who they are.

The tone of the first twenty minutes or so of In girum is so sour, bitter, and malign that it seems cultivated. It's 1978: Almost twenty years have passed since On the Passage was made; the near-revolution of May '68 has come and gone, and so has Situationist International. Debord is a legend and a recluse. A critique of a society's idea of happiness, even a wholesale rejection of it—why bother, when you can vomit? Even the footage Debord is using—scenes from westerns and war movies, from Les Enfants du paradis and a Robin Hood picture—is worthless, he says, just there to make a point. Let the banal bury the banal.

It doesn't work—or rather it works perfectly. In girum has the scope and sweep of a saga, beginning in the moneyed squalor of the present day, then descending into the sewers and catacombs of the past, when everything was possible. The calm, assured, self-satisfied ranter who opens the film—Debord, speaking quietly, as if he is already dead, as if he has come to bury his epoch and himself as well—yields to a man looking back to recognize himself and his onetime comrades as, two decades before, he thought he might. And so, for the next hour and more, the tiny story told in On the Passage is retold, but as an epic.

Those who, in the first years of the 1950s, set out to change life now reappear in the costumes and settings of distant lands and vanished times—and Debord himself as Errol Flynn. He is General George Custer in They Died with Their Boots On, from 1941, when he, Debord, born December 28, 1931, would have been nine; he is Major Geoffrey Vickers in The Charge of the Light Brigade, made in 1936, when he would have been four. "Guy tends to stay with the films of his youth," a longtime friend of Debord's said in 1983, eleven years before Debord shot himself. Debord loves this footage. As it plays on his own screen, he can't turn away from it, and he won't let you.
For nearly eight minutes, the Light Brigade moves through the Valley of Death, their mission, their adventure, their folly--their affair, somehow--more insane with every man who falls. Flynn raises his sword, points it forward, galloping to his doom; as with his Custer he will be the last to fall. Why is Debord telling this story, or turning his own story over to Michael Curtiz and Warner Bros.? You can't really understand precisely how this morally bankrupt, commercially craven, masochistically colonialist footage seals the glory of those four people whose snapshot Debord had explored so delicately years before--but you may understand that you don't get the joke because there is none.

One picture is small, but seems to expand from within itself; another is big, but for all its spectacle seems to contract to its smallest elements. Is that too neat? The title In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni is, after all, a palindrome, but Debord wrote his whole life as a palindrome. As his Memoires began with that 1843 letter from Marx, the memoir that is In girum ends with it: "You cannot say that I hold the present too high; and if I do not altogether despair, it is only because its own desperate condition fills me with hope." The last word rings false; it seems, in the world Debord made in these two movies, like a substitute for a word that was too embarrassing to use, for either Marx or Debord, but closer to the truth: romance.

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