

Like Oil on Fire¹

“May those who do not know learn, may those who know love to remember.” –
Henault²

Madame de Sevigne’s *Letters*,³ which were not intended to be published, are the first example in France of a private correspondence that became a “literary oeuvre.” One must say that, for this to happen, it was necessary to *sweeten* them, and that her granddaughter and her granddaughter’s son-in-law burned the entirety of her letters so as to efface all traces of their original contents. It was only two centuries or so after her death that the letters of Marie de Rabutin-Chantal were reestablished in a *non-Masperized*⁴ edition, that is to say, in their initial truth, thanks to recovered copies.

More recently, and to remain within artistic practice, someone at a university⁵ placed into the archives of the Tate Gallery a fake letter, allegedly by a certain painter, and did this so as to authenticate a fake painting, a Giacometti in this instance, for an auction.

In the same way, but at a greater level, the archives of the KGB continue to produce strange news and surprising documents about highly esteemed people, generally thought to be exempt from this or that ignominy. It is in this fashion that the neo-Stalinists (in their repented or recycled versions) attempt to make their own original ignominies forgotten by circulating the idea that, in the final analysis, everyone has dirty hands. The *ad hoc* revelations about George Orwell, communicated in 1996 by the *Guardian*, come from this perspective.⁶

If none of these misadventures can befall the present correspondence, this is not – to only cite the first reason – because all of the conventions of such “literary genres” have, fortunately, long ago come to ruin; it is, above all (and this reason naturally goes for the others), because I publish this correspondence with Guy Debord *during my lifetime*.

To avoid a tardy edition is to know to not limit myself to the necessary historical testimony, at a time when *Debordology* in its integrated stage rages everywhere – it is enough to see behind which microphones, before which cameras, in which newspapers, in brief, from

¹ Jean-François Martos, preface (dated September 1997) to *Correspondance avec Guy Debord*, Le fin mot de l’Histoire (Paris: 1998).

² Charles-Jean-François Henault (1685-1770), a French historian.

³ Marie de Rabutin-Chantal (1626-1696) was widowed at the age of 26. She spent her life raising and educating her children. In the 1670s, she maintained a steady correspondence with her daughter and cousin: a total of 1,100 letters were preserved.

⁴ A reference to Editions Maspero, which bowdlerized some of the texts that it published by deleting passages that did not suit its politics.

⁵ Between 1986 and 1996, John Drewe falsified hundreds of provenances, so as to sell fake paintings made by John Myatt. Supposedly 60% of all works attributed to Giacometti are actually forgeries.

⁶ On 11 July 1996, the *Guardian* (a British paper) reported that, in 1949, Orwell offered a blacklist of “crypto-Communists” and “fellow travelers” to a secret, anti-Soviet unit in the Foreign Office.

which cesspools those who today cite Guy Debord openly or in a roundabout way and, in every instance, after having deliberately ignored him until then, but always with the same goal.

To intervene in the present also offers the not negligible advantage of stirring up many, still-critical subjects. And, beyond the obvious fact that a correspondence is its own goal, these letters objectively constitute a kind of connection with the diverse manners of perturbing even more such a miserable epoch as this one.

One is never so well served as by oneself. If it was only in 1932 that one could begin to read in French the correspondence between Marx and Engels, the reader will be less noticeably impatient this time. As I am involved in this project, the reader can be sure of its contents: the risks of virtual writing, like its quite real rectifications, have not been run here. Besides, the current state of decay of publishing means that publishers are less and less adequate, when they are not frankly dubious; it is often judicious to self-publish each time that this is possible.

Among the load of ineptitudes on the subject, I pick out at random – from *Le Monde* for 16 March 1997, under the signature of a certain Jacques Buob – the following. “Jacques Chirac, who has kept the same communications advisor, Jacques Pilhan⁷ (joining him, in addition to his son, Claude, is the Secretary General of the Élysée Palace, Dominique de Villepin), is involved in the same type of political spectacle. (...) Here is the method of Pilhan, the child of Guy Debord and Jacques Seguela. It is: refuse the initiative to the media, do not leave to them the choice of place, moment, or subject; create effects of expectation and curiosity, (...) For him, like a good ex-situationist, the image is the important thing.” This clumsy insinuation that a putative “ex-situationist” is counseling Jacques Chirac obviously does not hold up for a second. It suffices to consult the precise and complete table of the personnel of the SI in *The Situationist International*, published by Jean-Jacques Raspaud and Jean-Pierre Voyer through Editions Champ Libre in 1972. But was not Guy Debord himself previously denounced as the secret inspiration for François Mitterand, as an agent of the KGB, and as a member of the CIA? And was not his book *The Society of the Spectacle* condemned as being “the secret guide of the conduct of all governments constituted since its publication” (*Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of “The Society of the Spectacle”*)? A pessimist-moralist has pleasantly affirmed, “it is unbelievable that the perspective of having a biographer has not made anyone renounce having a life.”⁸ It is necessary for all this *seguire il suo corso, e lascia dir le genti*?⁹ One can have many detractors and one can even be assassinated by four bullets in the head in the basement of a parking lot, like Gérard Lebovici.¹⁰

I do not doubt for an instant that one is perfectly justified in reacting every time that one estimates it to be useful or necessary. “All the nonsense of metaphysics is not equal to an *ad hominem* argument” (Diderot). *Ad hominem* critique is at the heart of the strategic intention of “*Cette mauvaise réputation . . .*” (Gallimard), a book against his detractors by which Guy

⁷ Pilhan (1944-1998) was an advertising executive and François Mitterand’s communications advisor. In 1981, he teamed up with Jacques Séguéla (a pro-situationist ad exec) to produce political slogans.

⁸ Martos was once the “official” biographer of Guy Debord. He authored *History of the Situationist International* (Editions Gérard Lebovici, 1989 with Debord’s help).

⁹ “Follow your own road, leave the talking to the people” in Italian. Dante’s *Purgatory*, 5:13, as paraphrased by Karl Marx in the 1867 preface to *Das Kapital*, Volume I.

¹⁰ Martos is thought to be the author of the anonymous pamphlet about Lebovici’s murder titled *Words and Bullets: The Condemned of the Lebovici Affair* (August 1984).

Debord (in 1993) aimed to torpedo certain foreseeable consequences. In it, he affirmed, by way of reference to Georgina Dufoix,¹¹ “in the final analysis, it is not difficult, if one thinks about it with sufficient vigilance, to radically suppress in advance – thanks to such backfires – many worse possibilities that would otherwise be abandoned to calumny.”

Ad hominem critique is also utilized at great length in this *Correspondence with Guy Debord*. In several cases, the same people find themselves publicly pinned in “*Cette mauvaise reputation . . .*” but this is, unlike an epistolary dialogue that progresses over time, the kind of formulation that suits the public at large.

In the same way, but necessarily more implicitly, the attentive reader will doubt that some individuals or some aspects of the era evoked in this or that letter inspired certain passages or are reflected in certain conclusions in *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. I will deliberately remain vague where this is concerned: even today, it is necessary “to especially be careful not to be too instructive to just anyone.”¹²

Finally, I have often ascertained that the abandonment of the *ad hominem* critique is the prelude to the abandonment of all critique, when it is not the sign of a subsequent transformation of this or that subversive who is displayed as a renegade. Those who would above all like to avoid application of this critique to themselves, who still have something to defend in the spectacle, have never been at pains to justify this initial abandonment (this moderate extremism opposes its sense of measure against that which is excessive, the seriousness of its pseudo-objectivity, to “superficial” attacks or “personal questions”). But what would radical critique be without *ad hominem* argument? These people have preferred to forget that “theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon it demonstrates *ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But, for man, the root is man himself” (Marx).¹³

The beginnings of the situationist adventure were especially met with silence; at best, its excesses were accused of madness. From 1968 on, the phenomenon began to be taken seriously: confusionism and calumny were then acceptable, as was a growing surveillance. . . . What about today? The extreme disaster in which spectacular democracy has plunged us, by confirming even more clumsily Guy Debord’s conclusions, has in large part convinced the enemy of the truth of his judgments. The dominant system, which navigates by sight, would love to have use of such a strategic sense, which it lacks so much. At the same time, it is necessary for the dominant system to intensify the jamming of critical theory, by banalizing it, by parceling it out, by falsifying it and sterilizing it.¹⁴ Because the system knows that the situation has never been so objectively

¹¹ A French Socialist politician (born 1943), Dufoix was charged in 1993 with manslaughter due to her negligence in the detection of blood contaminated by HIV. A verdict of “responsible, but not guilty” was handed down in 1999.

¹² A quote from Guy Debord’s *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988).

¹³ Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*” (1844).

¹⁴ *Author’s note*: “All Debordians: Léotard, the president, the right and the left, the ministers, the financiers: all Debordified from head to toe. Debord battled against capitalism, Communism, Leftism; we don’t speak of the extreme right; the Church, obviously; the institutions, this goes without saying; revolutionary impostures, they were like a mission; the work, the reputation, the bosses, the popes and the sub-popes, and they all adore him. (...) Today, his thought is reduced to what it denounced. His enemies are predicted by software. There is a desire for a Debord who said everything there is to say. Auto accidents under the tunnel, papal mummeries, serve as lures.

revolutionary, that it must especially avoid any [re]awakening of subversion, and that everywhere there are scattered angry people who only demand to be emancipated from their limits.

“The atmosphere in Gjirokaster¹⁵ is crazy. The popular revolt has been transformed into total anarchy, there is no police, no State, and no rules. The town has become enthusiastic, blossoming, taking part in the game of rebellion” (*Le Monde*, 11 March 1997).

At the time of the disappearance of Alexander the Great, one said (with respect to the Diadochi¹⁶) that, upon the death of the lion, the hyenas divide his empire. There will be nothing of the kind where Guy Debord is concerned, nothing to divide, or to inherit: the hyenas of the spectacle serve themselves badly with the ideas that they recuperate, and precautions have been taken so that they cannot make use of some others. At best, they can still profit for a while from the scattering of negation. The destiny of the theory of the spectacle belongs above all to those who know how to be “of their time”; who seek and experiment with the era; who will individually and collectively recover the ideas of anti-hierarchy, coherence, [and] global contestation; the new men and women who will task themselves with taking up again the old question of self-emancipation and, beyond them even, proletarianized humanity when it undertakes social liquidation, the suppression and realization of philosophy and art.

Certain deaths, one says, shame life. How not to think of Guy Debord, he who knew so well how to render the shame of this life still more shameful by delivering it to publicity? And, for me, “What bounds can Shame, can Moderation, set, For one so dear?” (Horace).¹⁷

The reader will also see in these pages how a friendship begins and how it ends. What also plays out and shows through in this correspondence is, I think, the sense of friendship that Guy Debord had: not a simple political relationship in the traditional meaning of the word, that is to say, removed from the rest of life, but rather a relationship in which each aspect put into play found its truth through reference to the totality of the life that one has chosen; and, finally, this relationship is, naturally, a critique of politics. Then it is only the sensation of the flow of time that can dilute it – wine helps – in the quality of a moment, through the shared passion for a common project. “And only a few encounters were like signals emanating from a more intense life, a life that has not really been found.”¹⁸

I would like to dispel here the unfortunate impression that the reader might be surprised at sometimes ascertaining some lacuna or, rather, a kind of discontinuity in this correspondence. The reader should not imagine it to be truncated in any way: the dialogue continued, obviously, but face to face. And when one has seen each other, what good is writing down what was said?

Thoreau says somewhere that “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” This is what one must ruin. Nothing is eternal, especially the sleep of the masses. Another life, free from all alienation, is possible. As for me, I find it rather exciting to have burned all the bridges so as to advance in a forced march under the cannon of time.

We don’t learn anything from them.” – Francis Marmande, “*Debord d’Abord*” (“Debord Above All”), *Le Monde*, 26 September 1997.

¹⁵ A city in southern Albania, where, in 1997, there were violent anti-government protests in the wake of the collapse of a massive pyramid scheme.

¹⁶ Alexander the Great’s battling successors, circa 323 B.C.E.

¹⁷ Horace, *Odes* 1.24.1-2. *Quis desiderio sit pudor aut modus / Tam cari capitis?*

¹⁸ A quote from Debord’s film *Critique of Separation* (1961).