

*La Dialectique peut-elle casser des briques*  
Can Dialectics break bricks?

by  
René Viénet  
and  
Gérard Cohen

This is a situationist film. This is not a situationist film.

*La Dialectique peut-elle casser des briques* was originally made in 1972; the Situationist International disbanded in 1972. René Viénet was a member of the SI from 1963 until February 1971, when he resigned. As a member of the SI, he wrote on film and its possible uses. His essay entitled “The situationists and the new forms of action against politics and art” appeared in *Internationale Situationniste* #11 (October 1967). He begins by noting: “Up to now, we have stuck principally to subversion through the utilization of forms, categories inherited from revolutionary struggles principally from the last century.” He continues: “I propose that we bring to fulfillment the expression of our contestation by means which proceed with no reference to the past. It is not however a matter of abandoning forms within which we have made battle on the traditional terrain of the surpassing of philosophy, the realization of art, and the abolition of politics; it is a matter of taking through to the end the work of our journal, in areas where it is not yet operational.” He then outlines a new offensive against politics and *serious culture* based on four tactics:

- 1) experimentation with détournement of the photo-roman and porno pictures
- 2) promotion of guerrilla tactics in the mass-media (i.e. seizure of radio and tv situations, pirate radio, etc.)
- 3) the further development of situationist comics and the strategic alteration of public signage
- 4) the realization of situationist films.

His outline for the realization of “situationist films”:

“The cinema, which is the newest and most serviceable means of expression of our era, has been marking time for 3/4 of a century. By way of review, let us say that it has, in fact, become the ‘7th art’ dear to cinephiles, ciné-clubs, PTA’s. Let us state that for our purposes, the cycle has come to an end (Ince, Stroheim, the one and only *L’Age d’or*, *Citizen Kane* and *Mr. Arkadin*, the lettrist films); even if there remain to be discovered at foreign distributors, or in cinemathèques, certain masterpieces, but of a classical and recitative making. Let us appropriate the stammerings of this new writing; let us appropriate, above all, its most achieved examples, the most modern ones, those, which have escaped artistic ideology, even more than American B-movies: newsreels, trailers, and above all advertisements.

“In the service of the commodity and of the spectacle, that is the least that one can say, but free of its means, advertisements have established the basis of what Eisenstein glimpsed, when he spoke of filming *The Critique of Political Economy* or *The German Ideology*.

“I am confident I could make a film of “The decline and fall and the spectacular-commodity economy” in a way which would be immediately comprehensible to the proletarians of Watts, who have no knowledge of the concepts implied in such a title. And this new development of a form will, without any doubt, deepen and exacerbate the written expression of the same problems; this we could verify, for example, by shooting the film *Incitement to murder and debauchery* before publishing the equivalent in our journal, “Correctives to the consciousness of a class which will be the last.” The cinema lends itself particularly well, among other possibilities, to the dismantling of the

processes of reification. Certainly, historical reality can be attained, known and filmed only in the course of a complicated process of mediations, which permit consciousness to recognize one moment in another, its end and its action in destiny, its destiny in its end and its action, its own essence in this necessity. A mediation, which would be difficult, if the empirical existence of the facts themselves, was not already a mediated existence, which takes on the appearance of immediacy, only insofar as the facts have been ripped out of the network of their determinations, placed in an artificial isolation and poorly joined together, in the montage of classical cinema. This mediation has been deficient precisely, and must necessarily have been deficient, in the pre-situationist cinema, which stopped at the point of so-called objective forms, in the taking up of politico-moral concepts, aside from the recitative of a scholarly type with all its hypocrisies. This is more complicated to recognize in reading than to see when filmed and this is only so many banalities. But Godard, the most celebrated of the pro-Chinese Swiss, will never be able to comprehend them. He will be able to recuperate, as is his habit, what has come before—that is to say, in what has come before, to recuperate a word, an idea, like that of film advertisements—he will never do other than to brandish a few novelties taken from elsewhere, a few images, a few star words of the era, which have, without a doubt, a certain resonance, but which, he cannot grasp (Bonnot, worker, Marx, made in U.S.A., Pierrot le Fou, Debord, poetry, etc.). He is, in fact, a child of Mao and Coca-Cola.”

Viénet concludes: “The cinema can express anything at all, as can an article, a book, a tract or a poster. That is why we must henceforth require that each situationist be capable of making a film, as well as of writing an article (cf. ‘Anti-public relations,’ *IS* #8, p. 59). Nothing is too beautiful for the Blacks of Watts.” The cinema is one medium among many—though a privileged one—for articulating revolutionary insights through détournement, “for dismantling the processes of reification.”

Détournement was variously defined by the SI. It is most simply, “the reemployment in a new entity of preexisting artistic elements.” In “Détournement as Negation and Prelude” (*IS* #3 December 1959) we are referred to Jorn’s detoured paintings, Debord’s film *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps* [*On the passage of several persons through a rather short period of time*], Constant’s projects for detoured sculpture, and Jorn and Debord’s detoured book *Mémoires*. In the “Definitions” section of *IS* #1, (June 1958) we find: “détournement is employed, by way of abbreviation, for the formula: détournement of prefabricated aesthetic elements. Integration of current or past productions in the arts into a superior construction of the milieu. In this sense there can be no situationist painting or music, but a situationist usage of these means. In a more primitive sense, détournement within old cultural spheres is a method of propaganda, which bears witness to the exhaustion and loss of importance of these spheres.” We note in passing that Viénet’s later essay specifically contradicts the letter, if not the spirit, of this definition by calling for “films situationnistes.”

This is a situationist film. This is not a situationist film. We could say, it is “a situationist use of film,” but the contradictions and evolution of his position are of greater interest, than the ahistorical reduction to a canonical orthodoxy. With specific reference to film, Debord and Wolman in *Les Lèvres Nues* #8 (May 1956) published a year or so before the founding of the SI, in “A User’s Guide to détournement” speak of detouring “a sequence from Eisenstein.” They develop their analysis in detail using Griffith:

“The powers of the cinema are so extended, and the absence of coordination of these powers so flagrant, that all films which surpass the poor average can feed infinite polemics between various spectators, or professional critics. Let us add, that only the conformism of these people prevents them from finding charms as enticing and faults as glaring in the films of the latter category. To dissipate this risible confusion of values, let us say that *Birth of a Nation* by Griffith, is one of the most important films in the history of the cinema by the mass of new contributions that it represents. On the other hand, it is

a racist film: it absolutely does not merit being projected in its current form. But its pure and simple interdiction could pass for regrettable in the domain—secondary but susceptible of improvement—of the cinema. It is much better to detourn it in its entirety, without there being any need whatsoever of changing its montage, by means of a sound track which would make a powerful denunciation of the horrors of the imperialist war and of the activities of the Ku-Klux-Klan which, as one knows, persist even now in the United States.

Such a decidedly moderate détournement is nothing more in sum than the moral equivalent of the restoration of old paintings in museums. But the majority of films do not merit anything more than to be dismembered, in order to compose other works. Obviously, this reconversion of preexisting sequences will not go without the concurrent use of other elements: musical, pictorial as well as historical. Since, up to now, all the special effects of history, in the cinema, align themselves more or less with the kind of bufooneries of the reconstitutions of Guitry, one can make Robespierre say before his death: ‘In spite of all the many trials, my experience and the greatness of my task force me to conclude that all is well.’ If Greek tragedy, opportunely revived, serves us on this occasion to exalt Robespierre, let us imagine, in turn, a sequence of the neo-realist sort, before the zinc counter, for example, of a truck stop bar—one of the truck drivers saying seriously to another: ‘Morality was in the books of the philosophers, we’ve put it into the governing of nations.’ One sees what this encounter adds, as it radiates out to the thought of Maxmilien, to a dictatorship of the proletariat.

*La Dialectique* stands as a model—alongside Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*—of détournement in film as conceived in the milieu of the Paris-based SI. The theoretical and technical sophistication of *La Dialectique* compares instructively with such seemingly self-consciously crude works as *The Situationist Life* by Thorsen, a member of the Situationist Bauhaus, started by Nash and a part of the “Second International.” Whatever one may think of the personal or nationalistic aspects of the expelling of the Scandinavian Nashists and the German Spur Group from the SI, the tension between the realization and suppression of art insisted upon by Debord and his partisans in Paris against the privileged position for “art” maintained by the Second International, clearly gives an edge to *La Dialectique*, which is lacking, at least, in the work of the Second International known to me.

Viénet’s project in film is the heir to a body of nearly twenty years of theoretical reflection and practice by the SI. It is also a product of Viénet’s interest in and knowledge of China. He studied Chinese at the Faculté des Langues Orientales of the University of Paris under the extraordinary Jacques Pimpaneau. Viénet spent time during his student years in the PRC. He was later a researcher at the CNRS and taught Chinese language and history courses at several universities in France from the late 1960s until the late 1970s, when he moved to Taiwan. There, he was involved in various technological, social and cultural exchanges between France, Taiwan and the PRC.

Early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Viénet is back in France but still spends significant amounts of time in Taiwan. He runs Éditions René Viénet among other projects. It has several offerings, including and a biography of 18<sup>th</sup> century feminist and radical Olympe de Gouges, an individual, in whom Viénet might reasonably be expected to take an interest, given the “Sadean” profile (in Angela Carter’s sense) of the women in his films.

In 1976, Viénet made an essay film on China—this time in collaboration with Ji Qing Ming and Al Perreault—called *Chinois: encore un effort pour être révolutionnaires* [*Chinese: a little more effort if you would be revolutionaries* a.k.a. *Peking Duck Soup*], a scathing and brilliantly documented critique of palace revolution as practiced in the so-called People’s Republic of China, which made him the bad conscience of maoists on several continents. The French language voice-over was provided by Pimpaneau, his mentor at the Langues O.

His interests in Reichian sexual and political analysis brought him to make at least one detoured reform school girl film called *Une petite culotte pour l'été* [*A Pair of Panties for Summer*, aka *The Girls of Kamaré*], detourning Norifumi Suzuki's *Horror High School Women – Violent Lynch* and adding a couple of shots of hardcore porn. Other Viénet film titles, such as, *L'aubergine est farcie* [*The eggplant is stuffed*], *Un soutane n'a pas de braguette* [*A cassock has no fly*], remained proposals never realized as the original films they would have detoured, according to Viénet exceeded current standards for violence, which would have made them impossible to distribute in France in the 1970s. Posters were made for *L'aubergine*, but the film was never detoured.

Before starting on his career as a filmmaker himself, Viénet translated and subtitled a Hong Kong film called 殺戒 known in English as *Forbidden Killing*. It appeared in his translation as *Du Sang chez les taoïstes* [*Concerning Blood among the Taoists*]. He has also translated and subtitled several other Chinese language films into French more recently.

Viénet's book, *Enragés et situationnistes dans le mouvement des occupations*, [*Enragés and situationists in the occupations movement*] republished in English by Rebel Press, remains the definitive text both on a documentary and an analytical plane on May '68 by someone who participated in the events.

Finally, there are at least two "original versions" of *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* The first, done in 1972, was a detournement by Viénet, using only French subtitles and leaving the original Mandarin sound track intact, but completely ignoring its content. The film detoured was 唐手跆拳道, (a.k.a. *The Crush* and *Kung Fu Fighting*), released that same year. It is a Hong Kong martial arts film, shot in Korea, starring Pai Piao as master martial artist intervening in a rebellion against the Japanese occupation of Korea, which lasted historically from the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries. Gérard Cohen, a specialist in dubbing films into French, saw Viénet's film and with Viénet's permission assembled a group of like-minded individuals, many of whom became rather well-known film actors in France, to create a version dubbed into French. They took Viénet's subtitles as a starting point, embroidering on them a bit, but, in Viénet's opinion, keeping very much to the spirit of his French-subtitled version. This French dubbed version is the version you will see this evening, presented with newly revised English subtitles.

This is also *my* second version of the second version of the film. Several years ago, I embarked on a translation of the film in collaboration with Nathalie Borgers and with the help of several others. Also in collaboration, Peggy Ahwesh and I painstakingly created an English subtitled version of the film. All this was done without Viénet's help and without his permission, using a sketchy black and white copy obtained by questionable means. If you have seen the film previously with English subtitles, it was likely some descendant of that version. Recently, Mehdi el Hajoui, who was organizing an exhibition of situationist material at Pro Arts in Oakland, California, put me in contact with Viénet himself. After comparing several different versions of the film, I offered to create a new corrected translation, this time using an excellent copy in the proper aspect ratio and in color. This new version was completed *with* Viénet's permission and collaboration, allowing for several corrections and clarifications. I would like to thank him for his extraordinary film, his indulgence of my previous efforts and his collaboration on this new version of the film. Any mistakes or infelicities, which remain, are mine.

—Keith Sanborn