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1978

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New translation by Ken Knabb of the main voice-over soundtrack of Guy Debord's sixth and last film, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978).
The complete script of this film, with illustrations, detailed descriptions of the images, and extensive annotations, is included in Debord's *Complete Cinematic Works* (AK Press, 2003).

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I will make no concessions to the public in this film. I believe there are several good reasons for this decision, and I am going to state them.

In the first place, it is well known that I have never made any concessions to the dominant ideas or ruling powers of my era.

Moreover, nothing of importance has ever been communicated by being gentle with a public, not even one like that of the age of Pericles; and in the frozen mirror of the screen the spectators are not looking at anything that might suggest the respectable citizens of a democracy.

But most importantly: this particular public, which has been so totally deprived of freedom and which has tolerated every sort of abuse, deserves less than any other to be treated gently. The advertising manipulators, with the usual impudence of those who know that people tend to justify whatever affronts they don't avenge, calmly declare that "People who love life go to the cinema." But this life and this cinema are equally paltry, which is why it hardly matters if one is substituted for the other.

The movie-going public, which has never been very bourgeois and which is scarcely any longer working-class, is now recruited almost entirely from a single social stratum, though one that has been considerably enlarged — the stratum of low-level skilled employees in the various "service" occupations that are so necessary to the present production system: management, control, maintenance, research, teaching, propaganda, entertainment, and pseudocritique. Which suffices to give an idea of what they are. This public that still goes to the movies also, of course, includes the young of the same breed who are merely at the apprenticeship stage for one or another of these functions.

From the realism and the achievements of this splendid system one could already infer the personal capacities of the underlings it has produced. Misled about everything, they can only spout absurdities based on lies — these poor wage earners who see themselves as property owners, these mystified ignoramuses who think they're educated, these zombies with the delusion that their votes mean something.

How harshly the mode of production has treated them! With all their "upward mobility" they have lost the little they had and gained what no one wanted. They share poverties and humiliations from all the past systems of exploitation without sharing in the revolts against those systems. In many ways they resemble slaves, because they are herded into cramped habitations that are gloomy, ugly and unhealthy; ill-nourished with tasteless and adulterated food; poorly treated for their constantly recurring illnesses; under constant petty surveillance; and maintained in the modernized illiteracy and spectacular superstitions that reinforce the power of their masters. For the convenience of present-day industry they are transplanted far from their own neighborhoods or regions and concentrated into new and hostile environments. They are nothing but numbers on charts drawn up by idiots.

They die in droves on the freeways, and in each flu epidemic and each heat wave, and with each mistake of those who adul-

terate their food, and each technical innovation profitable to the numerous entrepreneurs for whose environmental developments they serve as guinea pigs. Their nerve-racking conditions of existence produce physical, intellectual, and psychological degeneration. They are always spoken to like obedient children — always willing to do what they're told as long as they're told that they "must" do it. But above all they are treated like retarded children, forced to accept the delirious gibberish of dozens of recently concocted paternalistic specializations, which one day tell them one thing and the next day perhaps the very opposite.

Separated from each other by the general loss of any language capable of describing reality (a loss which prevents any real dialogue), separated by their relentless competition in the conspicuous consumption of nothingness and thus by the most groundless and eternally frustrated envy, they are even separated from their own children, who in previous eras were the only property of those possessing nothing. Control of these children is taken from them at an early age — these children who are already their rivals, who laugh at their parents' blatant failure and no longer listen to their simple-minded opinions. Understandably despising their origin, they feel more like offspring of the reigning spectacle than of the particular servants of the spectacle who happen to have begotten them, and think of themselves as only half-castes of such slaves. Behind the façade of simulated rapture among these couples and their progeny there is nothing but looks of hatred.

But these privileged workers of a totally commodified society differ from slaves in that they themselves must provide for their own upkeep. In this regard they are more like serfs, because they are exclusively attached to some particular company and dependent on its successful functioning, without receiving anything in return; and especially because they are compelled to reside within a single space: the same circuit of ever-identical dwelling units, offices, freeways, vacation spots, and airports.

But they also resemble modern proletarians in the precariousness of their means of support, which conflicts with the continual spending to which they have been conditioned; and in the fact that they have to hire themselves out on an open market without owning the instruments of their labor. They need money to buy commodities, because things have been so arranged that they have no enduring access to anything that has not been commodified.

But in their economic situation they are more like peons, in that they are no longer left even the momentary handling of the money around which their entire activity revolves. They have to spend it immediately because they don't receive enough to save. But even so, sooner or later they find themselves obliged to consume on credit; and the credit they are granted is docked from their pay, forcing them to work even more to free themselves from debt. Since the distribution of goods is totally interlinked with the organization of production and the state, their rations of food and of space are reduced in both quantity and quality. Though nominally remaining free workers and consumers, they are scorned everywhere and have no real possibility of redress.

I am not going to fall into the simplistic error of equating the condition of these high-ranking wage slaves with previous forms of socio-economic oppression. First of all because, if one leaves aside their surplus of false consciousness and their purchase of two or three times as much of the miserable junk that constitutes virtually the entire market, it is clear that they share the same sad life as all the other wage earners of today. It is, in fact, with the naïve hope of distracting attention from this annoying reality that so many of them jabber so much about how uneasy they feel about living in the lap of luxury while people in distant lands are crushed by destitution. Another reason not to confuse them with the unfortunates of the past is that their social position has certain unmistakably modern traits.

For the first time in history we are seeing highly specialized economic professionals who, outside their work, have to do everything

ceeded in worldly affairs, so I am returning to the southern mountains to seek repose.' "

But no, I can see quite clearly that for me there will be no repose; first of all because nobody does me the honor of thinking that I have not succeeded in worldly affairs. But fortunately no one could say that I have been successful in such affairs, either. It thus has to be admitted that there has been neither success nor failure for Guy Debord and his extravagant pretensions.

It was already the dawn of this exhausting day that we are now seeing draw to a close when the young Marx wrote to Ruge: "You can hardly claim that I think too highly of the present time. If I nevertheless do not despair of it, it is because its own desperate situation fills me with hope."

Preparing an era for a voyage through the cold waters of history has in no way dampened these passions of which I have presented such fine and sad examples.

As these final reflections on violence continue to demonstrate, for me there will be no turning back and no reconciliation.

No wising up and no settling down.

for themselves. They drive their own cars and are beginning to have to personally fill them with gasoline; they do their own shopping and their own so-called cooking; they serve themselves in the supermarkets and in the entities that have replaced railroad dining cars. It may not have taken them very long to obtain their flimsy "professional qualifications," but after they have put in their allotted hours of specialized work they still have to do everything else with their own hands. Our era has not yet managed to supersede the family, or money, or the division of labor; yet one could say that these people have already been almost totally deprived of their practical reality through sheer dispossession. Those who never had any substance have lost it for the shadow.

The illusory nature of the riches that the present society claims to distribute would have been amply demonstrated (had it not already been evident in so many other respects) by the simple fact that never before has a system of tyranny maintained its lackeys, its experts, and its court jesters so shabbily. They work overtime in the service of emptiness, and emptiness rewards them with coinage in its own image. This is the first time that poor people have imagined themselves to be part of an economic elite, despite all the evidence to the contrary. Not only do these miserable spectators work, nobody else works for them, least of all the people they pay. Even their retailers regard themselves rather as their overseers, judging whether or not they are sufficiently fervent in snapping up the ersatz goods they have the duty to buy. Nothing can hide the built-in obsolescence of all their possessions — the rapid deterioration not only of their material goods, but even of their legal rights to the few properties they may own. They have received no inheritance, and they will leave none.

Since the cinema public needs more than anything to face these bitter truths, which concern it so intimately but which are so widely repressed, it cannot be denied that a film that for once renders it the harsh service of revealing that its problems are not so mysterious as it imagines, nor even perhaps so incurable if we ever

manage to abolish classes and the state — it cannot be denied that such a film has at least that one virtue. It will have no other.

This public, which likes to pretend that it is a connoisseur of everything while it in fact does nothing but justify everything it has been forced to undergo, passively accepting the constantly increasing repugnance of the food it eats, the air it breathes and the dwellings it inhabits — this public grumbles about change only when it affects the cinema to which it has become accustomed. And in fact this is the only one of its habits that seems to have been respected. For a long time I have been perhaps the only person to offend it in this domain. All the other filmmakers, even those who are up-to-date enough to echo a few issues already made fashionable by the press, continue to presume the innocence of this public, continue to use the same old cinematic conventions to show it the same sort of distant adventures enacted by stars who have lived in its place — stars whose most intimate affairs it can ogle through the media keyhole.

The cinema I am talking about is a deranged imitation of a deranged life, a production skillfully designed to communicate nothing. It serves no purpose but to while away an hour of boredom with a reflection of that same boredom. This craven imitation is the dupe of the present and the false witness of the future. Its mass of fictions and grand spectacles amounts to nothing but a useless accumulation of images that time sweeps away. What childish respect for images! This Vanity Fair is well suited to these plebeian spectators, constantly oscillating between enthusiasm and disappointment; lacking in taste because they have had no happy experience of anything, and refusing to admit their unhappy experiences because they lack courage as well as taste. Which is why they never cease being taken in by every sort of fraud, general or particular, that appeals to their self-interested credulity.

Amazingly enough, despite all the obvious evidence to the contrary, there are still some cretins, among the specialized spectators hired to edify their fellow viewers, who claim that it is "dogmatic"

evitable price of the conflict. If we have begun to win, it is because the enemy has pushed its mistakes so far.

The most fundamental issue in this war, for which so many fallacious explanations have been given, is that it is no longer a struggle between conservatism and change; it is a struggle over which *kind* of change it will be. We, more than anyone else, were the people of change in a changing time. The owners of society, in order to maintain their position, were obliged to strive for a change that was the opposite of ours. We wanted to rebuild everything and so did they, but in diametrically opposed directions. What they have done is a sufficient negative demonstration of the nature of our own project. Their immense works have led them to nothing but this corruption. Their hatred of the dialectic has brought them to this cesspit.

We had to destroy (and we had good weapons for doing this) any illusion of dialogue between these antagonistic perspectives. Then the facts would speak for themselves. They have.

It has become ungovernable, this wasteland where new sufferings are disguised with the name of former pleasures and where people are so afraid. They turn in the night, consumed by fire. They wake up in alarm and gropingly search for life. And word is getting around that those who have been expropriating that life have ended up losing it themselves.

This civilization is on fire; the whole thing is capsizing and sinking. What splendid torpedoing!

And what has become of me amid this appalling collapse — this shipwreck which I believe was necessary, and which it could even be said that I have worked for, since it is certainly true that I have avoided working at anything else?

Could I apply what a poet of the T'ang period wrote — "On Parting from a Traveling Companion" — to this point in my own history?

"Dismounting from my horse, I offered him the wine of farewell and asked him the goal of his journey. He replied: 'I have not suc-

I see her again, she who was like a stranger in her own town. ("Each of us is a citizen of the one true city; but in your meaning, I am one who passed my earthly exile in Italy.") I see again "the banks of the Arno, full of farewells."

And I too, like so many others, have been banished from Florence.

In any case, one traverses an era like one passes the Dogana promontory — that is to say, rather quickly.

At first, as it's approaching, you don't notice it. Then you discover it as you come abreast of it, and you cannot fail to recognize that it was designed to be seen in this particular way and no other. But already we are passing the cape, and leaving it behind us, and heading into unknown waters.

"When we were young we to a master went, and took great pride in learned argument. But what did all this lead to in the end? We came forth like water and are gone like the wind."

In a space of twenty years you can really live in only a small number of homes. These of mine have all been poor, but they have always been well situated. Those were admitted who deserved to be; the rest were turned away at the door. Freedom then had few other such havens.

"Where are those merry companions of times gone by?" These are dead; another lived even more quickly, until the iron gates of insanity snapped shut.

The sensation of the passing of time has always been vivid for me, and I have been attracted by it just as others are allured by dizzying heights or by water. In this sense I have loved my era, which has seen the end of all existing security and the dissolution of everything that was socially ordained. These are pleasures that the practice of the greatest art would not have given me.

As for what we have done, how could the present outcome be assessed? The landscape we are now traversing has been devastated by a war this society is waging against itself, against its own potentialities. The uglification of everything was probably an in-

to state some truth in a film unless it is also *proved* by images. The latest fashion in intellectual lackeydom enviously refers to whatever describes its servitude as "the master discourse." As for the ludicrous dogmas of its actual bosses, it identifies with them so completely that it doesn't even recognize their existence. What needs to be proved by images? Nothing is ever proved except by the real movement that dissolves existing conditions — that is, the existing production relations and the forms of false consciousness that have developed on the basis of those relations.

No error has ever collapsed for lack of a good image. For those who believe that the capitalists are well equipped to manage with continually increasing rationality our continually increasing happiness and the ever more diverse pleasures of our purchasing power, these figures will appear to be capable statesmen; and those who believe that Stalinist bureaucrats constitute the party of the proletariat will see these as fine working-class mugs. The existing images only reinforce the existing lies.

Dramatized anecdotes have been the building blocks of the cinema. Its perennial characters have been inherited from the theater and the novel, though they act on a more spacious and mobile stage with more directly visible costumes and settings. It is a particular society, not a particular technology, that has made the cinema like this. It could have consisted of historical analyses, theories, essays, memoirs. It could have consisted of films like the one I am making at this moment.

In the present film, for example, I am simply stating a few truths over a background of images that are all trivial or false. This film disdains the image-scraps of which it is composed. I do not wish to preserve any of the language of this outdated art, except perhaps the reverse shot of the only world it has observed and a tracking shot across the fleeting ideas of an era. I pride myself on having made a film out of whatever rubbish was at hand; and I find it amusing that people will complain about it who have allowed their entire lives to be dominated by every kind of rubbish.

I have merited the universal hatred of the society of my time, and I would have been annoyed to have any other merits in the eyes of such a society. But I have noticed that it is in the cinema that I have aroused the most extreme and unanimous outrage. This distaste has been so intense that I have even been plagiarized much less in this domain than elsewhere, up until now at least. My very existence as a filmmaker remains a generally refuted hypothesis. I thus see myself placed outside all the laws of the genre. But as Swift remarked, "It is no small satisfaction to present a work that is beyond all criticism."

What this era has written and filmed is so utterly contemptible that the only way anyone in the future will be able to offer even the slightest justification for it will be to claim that there was literally *no alternative* — that for some obscure reason nothing else was possible. Unfortunately for those who are reduced to such a clumsy excuse, my example alone will suffice to demolish it. And since this gratifying accomplishment has required relatively little time and trouble, I have seen no reason to forgo it.

Despite what some would like to believe, we can hardly expect revolutionary innovations from those whose profession is to monopolize the stage under the present social conditions. It is obvious that such innovations can come only from people who have received universal hostility and persecution, not from those who receive government funding. More generally, despite the conspiracy of silence on this matter, it can be confidently affirmed that no real opposition can be carried out by individuals who become even slightly more socially elevated through manifesting such opposition than they would have been through refraining. We already have the well-known example of those flourishing political and labor-union functionaries, always ready to prolong the grievances of the proletariat for another thousand years in order to preserve their own role as its defender.

For my part, if I have succeeded in being so deplorable in the cinema, it is because I have been much more criminal elsewhere.

unaware that time does not wait; that good intentions are not enough; and that nothing can be acquired or held on to from a past that can no longer be rectified. The underlying movement that will carry our historical struggles as far as they may go remains the sole judge of the past — insofar as that movement continues to act in its own time. I have managed things in such a way as to prevent any pseudo-continuation from falsifying the history of our operations. Those who eventually do better will be qualified to comment on their predecessors, and their comments will not go unnoticed.

I have found ways of intervening from farther away, while being aware that, as always, the majority of observers would have much preferred that I remain silent. I have long striven to maintain an obscure and elusive existence, and this has enabled me to further develop my strategical experiments, which had already begun so well. As someone not without abilities once put it, this is a field in which no one can ever become an expert. The results of these investigations — and this is the only good news in the present communication — will not be presented in cinematic form.

But all ideas are inevitably vain when greatness can no longer be found in each day's existence — the complete works of the kennel-bred thinkers marketed at this stage of commodity decomposition cannot disguise the taste of the fodder they've been raised on. This is why I spent those years living in a country where I was little known. The spatial arrangement of one of the best cities that ever was, and the company of certain persons, and what we did with our time — all this formed a scene much like the happiest revels of my youth.

Nowhere did I seek a peaceable society — which is fortunate, because I never found one. I am widely slandered in Italy, where I am rumored to be a terrorist. But I am quite indifferent to the most diverse accusations because it has been my lot to provoke them wherever I have roamed, and because I know why. The only thing of importance to me is what captivated me in that country and what could not have been found elsewhere.

On a battlefield King Frederick II of Prussia rebuked a hesitant young officer: "Dog! Were you hoping to live forever?" And Sarpedon says to Glaukos in the Twelfth Book of *The Iliad:* "My friend, if you and I could escape this battle and live forever, ageless and immortal, I myself would never fight again… But a thousand deaths surround us and no man can escape them. So let us move in for the attack."

When the smoke clears, many things appear changed. An age has passed. Don't ask now what good our weapons were: they remain in the throat of the reigning system of lies. Its air of innocence will never return.

After this splendid dispersal, I realized that I had to quickly conceal myself from a fame that threatened to become far too conspicuous. It is well known that this society signs a sort of peace treaty with its most outspoken enemies by granting them a place in its spectacle. I am, in fact, the only present-day individual with any negative or underground notoriety whom it has not managed to get to appear on that stage of renunciation.

The difficulties do not end there. I would find it just as repugnant to become an authority within the opposition to this society as to be one within this society itself; which is not putting it too mildly. I have thus refused to take the lead of all sorts of subversive ventures in several different regions, each more antihierarchical than the others but whose command I was nevertheless offered on the basis of my talent and experience in these matters. I wanted to show that it is possible for someone to achieve some historical successes and yet remain as poor in power and prestige as before (what I have had on a purely personal level from the beginning has always been enough for me).

I have also refused to polemicize about a thousand details with the numerous interpreters and coopters of what has already been done. I had no interest in awarding diplomas in some sort of fantasized orthodoxy, nor in judging among diverse naïve ambitions that would collapse soon enough on their own. These people were

From the very beginning I have devoted myself to overthrowing this society, and I have acted accordingly. I took this position at a time when almost everybody believed that this despicable society (in its bourgeois or bureaucratic version) had the most promising future. And since then I have not, like so many others, changed my views one or several times with the changing of the times; it is rather the times that have changed in accordance with my views. This is one of the main reasons I have aroused such animosity on the part of my contemporaries.

Thus, instead of adding one more film to the thousands of commonplace films, I prefer to explain why I shall do nothing of the sort. I am going to replace the frivolous adventures typically recounted by the cinema with the examination of an important subject: myself.

I have sometimes been reproached — wrongly, I believe — for making difficult films. Now I am actually going to make one. To those who are annoyed that they can't understand all the allusions, or who even admit that they have no idea of what I'm really getting at, I will merely reply that they should blame their own sterility and lack of education rather than my methods; they have wasted their time at college, bargain shopping for worn-out fragments of secondhand knowledge.

Considering the story of my life, it is obvious to me that I cannot produce a cinematic "work" in the usual sense of the term. I think the substance and form of the present communication will convince anyone that this is so.

I must first of all repudiate the most false of legends, according to which I am some sort of theoretician of revolutions. The petty people of the present age seem to believe that I have approached things by way of theory, that I am a builder of theory — a sort of intellectual architecture which they imagine they need only move in to as soon as they know its address, and which, ten years later, they might even slightly remodel by rearranging a few sheets of

paper, so as to attain the definitive theoretical perfection that will assure their salvation.

But theories are only made to die in the war of time. Like military units, they must be sent into battle at the right moment; and whatever their merits or insufficiencies, they can only be used if they are on hand when they're needed. They have to be replaced because they are constantly being rendered obsolete — by their decisive victories even more than by their partial defeats. Moreover, no vital eras were ever engendered by a theory; they began with a game, or a conflict, or a journey. What Jomini said of war can also be said of revolution: "Far from being an exact or dogmatic science, it is an art subject to a few general principles, and even more than that, an impassioned drama."

What passions do we have, and where have they led us? Most people, most of the time, have such a tendency to follow ingrained routines that even when they propose to revolutionize life from top to bottom, to make a clean slate and change everything, they nevertheless see no contradiction in following the course of studies accessible to them and then taking up one or another paid position at their level of competence (or even a little above it). This is why those who impart to us their thoughts about revolutions usually refrain from letting us know how they have actually lived.

But I, not being that type of person, can only tell of "the knights and ladies, the arms and loves, the gallant conversations and bold adventures" of a unique era.

Others may define and measure the course of their past in relation to their advancement in some career, or their acquisition of various kinds of goods, or in some cases their accumulation of socially recognized scientific or aesthetic works. Not having known any such frame of reference, I merely see, when I look back on the passage of this disorderly time, the elements that constituted it for me, or the words and faces that evoke them — days and nights, cities and persons, and underlying it all, an incessant war.

become accustomed to acting in accordance with general probabilities; it is an illusion to wait for a time when one will be completely aware of everything." Despite the fantasies of the spectators of history who try to set up shop as strategists and who see everything from the vantage point of Sirius, the most sublime theory can never guarantee an event. On the contrary, it is the unfolding of an event that may or may not verify a theory. Risks must be taken, and you have to pay up front to see what comes next.

Other equally distant but less lofty spectators, having seen the end of this attack but not its beginning, have failed to take into account the differences between the two stages, and have detected some faults in the alignment of our ranks and concluded that by that point our uniforms were no longer impeccably egalitarian. I think this can be attributed to the enemy fire that had pounded us for so long. As a struggle approaches its culmination, it becomes more important to judge the result than the deportment. To listen to those who seem to be complaining that the battle was begun without waiting for them, the main result was the fact that an avant-garde was sacrificed and completely pulverized in the collision. In my opinion that was precisely its purpose.

Avant-gardes have only one time; and the best thing that can happen to them is to have enlivened their time without *outliving* it. After them, operations move onto a vaster terrain. Too often have we seen such elite troops, after they have accomplished some valiant exploit, remain on hand to parade with their medals and then turn against the cause they previously supported. Nothing of this sort need be feared from those whose attack has carried them to the point of dissolution.

I wonder what more some people had hoped for. The particular wears itself out fighting. A historical project can hardly expect to preserve an eternal youth, sheltered from every blow.

Sentimental objections are as vain as pseudo-strategical quibbles. "Yet your bones will waste away, buried in the fields of Troy, your mission unfulfilled."

From its almost imperceptible beginning you already know that, whatever happens, very soon nothing will ever again be the same as it was.

The charge begins slowly, picks up speed, passes the point of no return, and irrevocably collides with what seemed unassailable: the bulwark which was so solid and well defended, but which is also destined to be shaken and thrown into disorder.

That is what we did, emerging from the night, raising once again the banner of the "good old cause" and marching forward under the cannon fire of time.

Along the way many of us died or were taken prisoner; many others were wounded and permanently put out of action; and certain elements even let themselves slip to the rear out of lack of courage; but I believe I can say that our formation as a whole never swerved from its line until it plunged into the very core of destruction.

I have never quite understood those who have so often reproached me for having squandered this fine troop in a senseless assault, perhaps even out of some sort of Neronian self-indulgence. I admit that I was the one who chose the moment and direction of the attack, and I therefore take full responsibility for everything that happened. But what did these critics expect? Were we supposed to refrain from fighting an enemy that was already on the move against us? And didn't I always put myself several steps ahead of the front line? Those who never take action would like to believe that you can freely determine the quality of your fellow combatants and the time and place where you can strike an unstoppable and definitive blow. But in reality you have to act with what is at hand, launching a sudden attack on one or another realistically attackable position the moment you see a favorable opportunity; otherwise you fade away without having done a thing. The strategist Sun Tzu recognized long ago that "advantage and danger are both inherent in maneuver." And Clausewitz notes that "in war neither side is ever certain about the situation of the other. One must

I have passed my life in a few countries in Europe, and it was in the middle of the century, when I was nineteen, that I began to lead a fully independent life; and immediately found myself at home with the most ill-famed of companions.

It was in Paris, a city that was then so beautiful that many people preferred to be poor there rather than rich anywhere else.

Who, now that nothing of it remains, will be able to understand this, apart from those who remember its glory? Who else could know the pleasures and exhaustions we experienced in these neighborhoods where everything has now become so dismal?

"Here was the abode of the ancient king of Wu. Grass now grows peacefully on its ruins. There, the vast palace of the Tsin, once so splendid and so dreaded. All this is gone forever — events, people, everything constantly slips away, like the ceaseless waves of the Yangtze that vanish into the sea."

The Paris of that time, within the confines of its twenty districts, was never entirely asleep; on any night a bacchanal might shift from one neighborhood to another, then to another and yet another. Its inhabitants had not yet been driven out and dispersed. A people remained who had barricaded their streets and routed their kings a dozen times. They were not content to subsist on images. When they lived in their own city, no one would have dared to make them eat or drink the sort of products that the chemistry of adulteration had not yet dared to invent.

The houses in the center were not yet deserted, or resold to cinema spectators born elsewhere, under other exposed-beam roofs. The modern commodity system had not yet fully demonstrated what can be done to a street. The city planners had not yet forced anyone to travel far away to sleep.

Governmental corruption had not yet darkened the clear sky with the artificial fog of pollution which now permanently blankets the mechanical circulation of things in this vale of desolation. The trees were not yet dead from suffocation; the stars were not yet extinguished by the progress of alienation.

Liars were in power, as always; but economic development had not yet given them the means to lie about everything, or to confirm their lies by falsifying the actual content of all production. One would have been as astonished then to find printed or built in Paris all the books that have since been composed of cement and asbestos, and all the buildings that have since been built out of dull sophisms, as one would be today to see the sudden reappearance of a Donatello or a Thucydides.

Musil, in *The Man Without Qualities,* notes that "there are intellectual pursuits in which a man may take more pride in writing a brief article than a thick volume. If someone were to discover, for example, that under certain hitherto unobserved circumstances stones were able to speak, it would require only a few pages to describe and explain such a revolutionary phenomenon." I shall thus limit myself to a few words to announce that, whatever others may say about it, Paris no longer exists. The destruction of Paris is only one striking example of the fatal illness that is currently wiping out all the major cities, and that illness is in turn only one of the numerous symptoms of the material decay of this society. But Paris had more to lose than any other. Bliss it was to be young in this city when for the last time it glowed with so intense a flame.

There was at that time on the left bank of the river — you cannot enter the same river twice, nor twice touch the same perishable substance — a neighborhood where the negative held court.

It is a commonplace that even in periods shaken by momentous changes, even the most innovative people have a hard time freeing themselves from many outdated ideas and tend to retain at least a few of them, because they find it impossible to totally reject, as false and worthless, assertions that are universally accepted.

It must be added, however, when one has practical experience of this type of situation, that such difficulties cease to matter the moment a group of people begins to base its real existence on a deliberate rejection of what is universally accepted, and on total

hard to ignore them — but just as vainly, so great is the power of a truth spoken in its time.

While our seditious intrigues spread across Europe and even began to reach other continents, Paris, where one could so easily pass unnoticed, was still at the heart of all our journeys, the most frequented of our meeting places. But its landscapes had been ruined and everything was deteriorating and falling apart.

And yet the setting sun of this city left, in places, a few glimmers of light as we watched the fading of its final days, finding ourselves within surroundings that would soon be swept away, enraptured with beauties that will never return. We would soon have to leave it — this city which for us was so free but which was going to fall completely into the hands of our enemies. Their blind law was already being relentlessly applied, reconstructing everything in their own image like a graveyard: "O wretchedness! O grief! Paris is trembling."

We would have to leave it, but not without having made an attempt to seize it by brute force; we would finally have to abandon it, after having abandoned so many other things, in order to follow the road determined by the necessities of our strange war, which has led us so far.

For our aim had been none other than to provoke a practical and public division between those who still want the existing world and those who will decide to reject it.

Other eras have had their own great conflicts, conflicts which they did not choose but which nevertheless forced people to choose which side they were on. Such conflicts dominate whole generations, founding or destroying empires and their cultures. The mission is to take Troy — or to defend it. There is a certain resemblance among these moments when people are on the verge of separating into opposing camps, never to see each other again.

It's a beautiful moment when an assault against the world order is set in motion.

who have no weapons. If you don't fall in line with the deceptive clarity of this upside-down world, you are seen, at least by those who believe in that world, as a controversial legend, an invisible and malevolent ghost, a perverse Prince of Darkness. Which is in fact a fine title — more honorable than any the present system of floodlit enlightenment is capable of bestowing.

We thus became emissaries of the Prince of Division — "he who has been wronged" — and undertook to drive to despair those who identified with humanity.

In the years that followed, people from twenty countries entered into this obscure conspiracy of limitless demands. How many hurried journeys! How many long disputes! How many clandestine meetings in all the ports of Europe!

Thus was mapped out a program calculated to undermine the credibility of the entire organization of social life. Classes and specializations, work and entertainment, commodities and urbanism, ideology and the state — we showed that it all needed to be scrapped. And this program promised nothing more than an autonomy without rules or restrictions. These perspectives have now been widely adopted, and people everywhere are fighting for or against them. But back then they would certainly have seemed delirious, if the behavior of modern capitalism had not been even more delirious.

There were indeed a few individuals who were in more or less practical agreement with one or another of our critiques; but there was no one who recognized them all, let alone who was capable of articulating them and developing them in practice. Which is why no other revolutionary endeavor of this period has had the slightest influence on the transformation of the world.

Our agitators disseminated ideas that a class society *cannot stomach*. The intellectuals in the service of the system — themselves even more obviously in decline than the system itself — are now cautiously investigating these poisons in the hope of discovering some antidotes; but they won't succeed. They used to try just as

indifference to the possible consequences.

Those who had gathered in this neighborhood seemed to have publicly and from the very beginning adopted as their sole principle of action the secret that the Old Man of the Mountain was said to divulge only on his deathbed to the most loyal lieutenant among his fanatical followers: "Nothing is true, everything is permitted." They accorded no importance to those of their contemporaries who were not among them, and I think they were right in this; and if they related to anyone from the past, it was Arthur Cravan, deserter of seventeen nations, or perhaps also the cultivated bandit Lacenaire.

In this setting extremism had declared itself independent of any particular cause and disdained to entangle itself in any project. A society which was already tottering, but which was not yet aware of this because the old rules were still respected everywhere else, had momentarily left the field open for that ever-present but usually repressed sector of society: the incorrigible riffraff; the salt of the earth; people quite sincerely ready to set the world on fire just to make it shine.

"Article 488. The age of adulthood is 21 years; a person of that age is capable of all acts of civil life."

"A science of situations needs to be created, which will borrow elements from psychology, statistics, urbanism, and ethics. These elements must be focused toward a totally new goal: the conscious creation of situations."

"But no one talks about Sade in this film."

"Order reigns but doesn't govern."

"*Gun Crazy*. You remember. That's how it was. No one was good enough for us. And yet … Hailstones striking banners of glass. We won't forget this cursed planet."

"Article 489. An adult who is usually in a state of imbecility or dementia, or who has frequent fits of rage, must be maintained in custody even if he has intervals of lucidity."

"Once again, after all the untimely answers and the aging of youth, night falls from on high."

"Like lost children we live our unfinished adventures."

A film I made at that time, which naturally outraged the most advanced aesthetes, was like that from start to finish; and those pitiful sentences were spoken over a completely blank screen, interspersed with extremely long passages of silence during which the screen remained completely dark. Some, no doubt, would like to believe that subsequent experience led to a more mature development of my talents or intentions. Experience of what — of some *improvement* in what I had already rejected? Don't make me laugh. Why should someone who strove to be so intolerable in the cinema when he was young turn out to be more acceptable once he's older? What has been so bad can never really improve. People may say, "As he has aged, he has changed"; but he has also remained the same.

Although the select population of this momentary capital of disturbances included a certain number of thieves and occasionally a few murderers, our life was primarily characterized by a prodigious inactivity; and of all the crimes and offenses denounced there by the authorities, it was this that was sensed as the most threatening.

It was the best possible labyrinth for ensnaring visitors. Those who lingered there for two or three days never left again, at least not until it had ceased to exist; but by then the majority had already seen the end of their none too numerous years. No one left those few streets and tables where the "highest of time" had been discovered.

Everyone took pride in having sustained such a magnificently disastrous challenge; and in fact I don't believe that any of those who passed that way ever acquired the slightest honest reputation in the world.

Each of us had more drinks every day than the number of lies told by a labor union during an entire wildcat strike. Gangs of police, guided by numerous informers, were constantly launching raids under every sort of pretext — most often searching for drugs or for girls under eighteen. I couldn't help remembering the charm-

sage of this man has cost them. But what does it matter? The names of shipwreckers are only writ in water.

We did not seek the formula for overturning the world in books, but in wandering. Ceaselessly drifting for days on end, none resembling the one before. Astonishing encounters, remarkable obstacles, grandiose betrayals, perilous enchantments — nothing was lacking in this quest for a different, more sinister Grail, which no one else had ever sought. And then one ill-fated day the finest player of us all got lost in the forests of madness. — But there is no greater madness than the present organization of life.

Did we eventually find the object of our quest? There is reason to believe that we obtained at least a fleeting glimpse of it; because it is undeniable that from that point on we found ourselves capable of understanding false life in the light of true life, and possessed with a very strange power of seduction: for no one since then has ever come near us without wishing to follow us. We had rediscovered the secret of dividing what was united. We did not go on television to announce our discoveries. We did not seek grants from academic foundations or praise from the newspaper intellectuals. We brought fuel to the fire.

In this manner we enlisted irrevocably in the Devil's party — the "historical evil" that leads existing conditions to their destruction, the "bad side" that makes history by undermining all established satisfaction.

Those who have not yet begun to live but who are saving themselves for a better time, and who therefore have such a horror of growing old, are waiting for nothing less than a permanent paradise. Some of them locate this paradise in a total revolution, others in a career promotion, some even in both at once. In either case they are waiting to access what they have gazed upon in the inverted imagery of the spectacle: a happy, eternally present unity. But those who have chosen to strike with the time know that the time that is their weapon is also their master. And they can hardly complain about this, because it is an even harsher master to those

As for myself, I have never regretted anything I have done; and being as I am, I must confess that I remain completely incapable of imagining how I could have done anything any differently.

Despite the harshness of the first phase of the conflict, our side tended toward a static, purely defensive position. Our spontaneous experimentation was not sufficiently aware of itself; and since it was confined primarily to its particular locale, we had also tended to neglect the significant possibilities for subversion in the seemingly hostile world all around us. When we saw our defenses being overwhelmed and some of our comrades beginning to falter, a few of us felt that we should take the offensive: that instead of entrenching ourselves in the thrilling fortress of a moment, we should break out into the open, make a sortie, then hold our ground and devote ourselves quite simply to totally destroying this hostile world — in order to rebuild it, if possible, on other bases. There had been precedents to this, but they had been forgotten. We had to discover where the course of things was leading, and to refute that course so thoroughly that it would eventually be compelled to change directions in line with our own tastes. As Clausewitz amusingly remarks, "Whoever has genius must use it — that's one of the rules of the game." And Baltasar Gracián: "You must traverse the paths of time to reach the point of opportunity."

But can I ever forget the one whom I see everywhere in the greatest moment of our adventures — he who in those uncertain days opened up a new path and forged ahead so rapidly, choosing those who would accompany him? No one else was his equal that year. It might almost have been said that he transformed cities and life merely by looking at them. In a single year he discovered enough material for a century of demands; the depths and mysteries of urban space were his conquest.

The powers that be, with their pitiful falsified information that misleads them almost as much as it bewilders those under their administration, have not yet realized just how much the rapid pas-

ing hooligans and proud young women I hung out with in those shady dives when much later — the years having passed like our nights back then, without the slightest renunciation — I heard a song sung by prisoners in Italy: "It's there you find those young girls who give you everything; first hello, and then their hand … There's a bell in Via Filangieri; each time it rings, someone has been condemned… The flower of youth dies in prison."

Though they despised all ideological illusions and were quite indifferent to what might later prove them right, these reprobates had not disdained to openly declare what was to come. Putting an end to art, announcing right in the middle of a cathedral that God was dead, plotting to blow up the Eiffel Tower — such were the little scandals sporadically indulged in by those whose ongoing way of life was such a big scandal. They asked themselves why certain revolutions had failed; and whether the proletariat actually existed; and if so, what it might be.

When I talk about these people, I may seem to be making fun of them; but that is not so. I drank their wine and I remain faithful to them. And I don't believe that anything I have done since then has made me better in any way than they were back then.

Considering the overpowering forces of habit and the law, which continually pressured us to disperse, none of us could be sure we would still be there at the end of the week. Yet everything we would ever love was there. Time burned more intensely than elsewhere, and would soon run out. We felt the earth shake.

Suicide carried off many. "Drink and the devil have done for the rest," as a song says.

Midway on the journey of real life we found ourselves surrounded by a somber melancholy, reflected by so much sad banter in the cafés of lost youth.

"Tis all a checkerboard of nights and days, where Destiny with men for pieces plays: hither and thither moves and checks and slays, and one by one back in the closet lays."

"How many ages hence shall this our lofty scene be acted over, in states unborn and accents yet unknown!"

"What is writing? The guardian of history… What is man? A slave of death, a passing traveler, a guest on earth… What is friendship? The equality of friends."

"Bernard, what do you want from the world? Do you see there anything that can satisfy you? … She vanishes, fleeing like a ghost which, having given us some sort of contentment while it remained with us, leaves nothing but disquietude in its wake… Bernard, Bernard, he used to say, this green youth will not last forever."

But nothing expresses this restless and exitless present better than this ancient phrase that turns completely back on itself, being constructed letter by letter like an inescapable labyrinth, thus perfectly uniting the form and content of perdition: *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni.* We turn in the night, consumed by fire.

"One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh, but the earth abideth forever. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose… All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again… To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heavens… a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up; … a time to rend and a time to sew; a time to keep silence and a time to speak… Better to see what one desireth than to wish for what one knoweth not: this also is vanity and vexation of spirit… For what purpose doth a man seek what is above him, he who knoweth not what is good for him during his days on the earth, during the time that passeth like a shadow?"

"No, let us cross over the river and rest under the shade of those trees."

It was there that we acquired the toughness that has stayed with us all the days of our life, and that has enabled several of us to remain so lightheartedly at war with the whole world. And as for myself in particular, I suspect that the circumstances of that time

were the apprenticeship that enabled me to make my way so instinctively through the subsequent chain of events, which included so much violence and so many breaks, and where so many people were treated so badly — passing through all those years as if with a knife in my hand.

Perhaps we might not have been quite so ruthless if we had found some already-initiated project that seemed to merit our support. But there was no such project. The only cause we supported we had to define and launch ourselves. There was nothing above us that we could respect.

For someone who thinks and acts in this manner, there is no point in listening a moment too long to those who find something good, or even merely something worth tolerating, within the present conditions; nor to those who stray from the path they seemed to have intended to follow; nor even, in some cases, to those who simply don't catch on quickly enough. Other people, years later, have begun advocating the revolution of everyday life with their timid voices or prostituted pens — but from a distance and with the calm assurance of astronomical observation. But someone who has actually taken part in an endeavor of this kind, and who has escaped the dazzling catastrophes that accompany it or follow in its wake, is not in such an easy position. The heats and chills of such a time never leave you. You have to discover how to live the days ahead in a manner worthy of such a fine beginning. You want to prolong that first experience of illegality.

This is how, little by little, a new era of conflagrations was set ablaze, of which none of us alive at this moment will see the end. Obedience is dead. It is wonderful to note that disturbances originating in a lowly and ephemeral little neighborhood have ended up shaking the entire world order. (Such methods would obviously never shake up anything in a harmonious society that was capable of controlling all its forces; but it is now evident that our society was quite the opposite.)