

On Debord, Then and Now: An Interview with Olivier Assayas

By Brian Price and Meghan Sutherland

Brian Price (BP): When did you first encounter Guy Debord?

Olivier Assayas (OA): I never actually met him. I suppose I was gradually attracted to the ideas. It has to do with France in the 70s, with the ambient of French leftism. That's when I grew up. What is not clearly understood now is that you had different streams [at that time], in the sense that May '68 was not specifically a leftist event. There were some leftist groups that somehow later appropriated the event—like Maoists or Trotskyists—but to the core it was really a libertarian movement. And once you look into it, you can very clearly trace it back to some libertarian opposition to the communist, leftist ideology within the French university at that time.

I was thirteen in May '68. My father had been a militant anti-fascist in Italy when he was a young man, then was close to "Communist" circles in Paris before the Second World War. But when he fled France, because of the anti-Semite laws in 1941, he ended up on the same boat as Victor Serge. Victor Serge was a prominent critic at that time of the totalitarian revolution of the Soviet Union. I suppose that my father became close to him and was certainly influenced by his ideas, which, of course, made him break with his ties to conventional Communism. He was also involved with the Free French [Forces], became a Gaullist, and after that became extremely anti-Stalinian. My mother was Hungarian. Her family fled Hungary once the Communists took over; they left everything behind. There was not much love for the Communist system in my family. My mother is something else. She never really discussed politics. She was not really into politics at all. But I grew up politically concerned, I suppose, but very far from the dominant ideology in France at the time. And here I am talking about the kids. They either had Communist parents who were blind to what was going on. We are talking about years when we had the Gulag—it was just horrible. It was the full totalitarian experience in Russia, and the kids were influenced by what was printed in the Communist press, which was very powerful at the time. These were the years when there was a 20% Communist electorate in France. That's a lot of people. And then those who were not Communist were like post-Communist—Trotskyists or Maoists. Everything kind of blew up when I was a teenager, in May '68. It has nothing to do with Communism, because I can see pretty clearly that all the Communist kids in my school hated it just because their parents hated it. They could only see it from the point of view of strikes, of getting better wages; the whole completely idiotic, reformist Communist trade union system. They were seeing things from a completely archaic point of view. They didn't realize that there was something much more fundamental going on. The whole system was shaking. I had intuitions—of course, I don't think that I would have formulated it that way—but I was kind of close to it. It had something to do with libertarian ideas, but also something else, which was not completely clear to me at the time. I realized, then, that there was a kind of leftism that was basically anti-leftist. So the whole event, of course, put things in motion for everybody. All of the sudden, people tried to build up their own political culture. They tried to understand where they were standing; you had to define yourself, even in terms of high school

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politics. Thanks to the lucidity of my father, I just never got into Communism, but still I felt very much connected to the revolutionary aspect of what was going on. I got more into trying to make sense of what I thought and how I related to what was going on.

The earliest thing that connected me to the ideas of the Situationist Internationale was the anti-Maoist writings published by René Viénet, published in his *Bibliothèque Asiatique* collection. He's an interesting character. He was a Sinologist as a very young man. He started publishing writing that described the totalitarianism of the Chinese Communist system and described the reality of what had been going on during the Cultural Revolution, which of course, was absolute anathema in France at the time. Specifically the books of Simon Leys, *Les habits neufs du Président Mao* [*The Chairman's New Clothes: Mao and the Cultural Revolution*] and *Ombres chinoises* [*Chinese Shadows*]. The leftists were okay to denounce Russian Communism to some extent, but only very carefully. It's not like you could go to some leftist meeting with *The Gulag Archipelago* in your pocket. No way. Discussing China...this is period when you had the films of Antonioni. Antonioni was traveling in China and was filming whatever the Chinese Communists allowed him to see. Naïve western travelers. You also had movies by people like Joris Ivens. There were idyllic notions that Russia was wrong, but China was right. But the horror of it was that when you read about what was going on, it was even worse than what had been going on in Russia in the Stalinist era.

I was reading George Orwell at that time, *Homage to Catalonia*. A book like *Homage to Catalonia*, somehow, made me understand politics. *Homage to Catalonia* is about how Russian politicians manipulated the Spanish Revolution and how the libertarians resisted—which is slightly more complex because the P.O.U.M were not, strictly speaking, libertarians; they were anti-Stalinist Marxists, with a libertarian aspect. Orwell describes how they were eliminated by the Spanish Communists and how that led to the demise of the Spanish Republic. Orwell describes that so beautifully, so perfectly. The combination of my formative years, reading a lot of Orwell, and reading the anti-Maoist sinology published by Viénet led me to an interest modern cultural radical leftism that was much more connected with the present, with what was going on, with what I sensed was happening. And it was the reading of Viénet that led me to Debord. Viénet is very much a minor offshoot of Debord; ultimately, his anti-Maoist sinology is based on Debord's own writing, which I only discovered later, because a few years before that he had published "*La point d'explosion de l'ideologie en Chine*," [*The Explosion Point of Ideology in China*] which is ultimately the founding essay on the subject.

BP: Had you seen Viénet's films?

OA: Yes. I had no idea of the theory of *détournement* that was behind it. I had no idea where they were coming from, but I just loved them. I saw *La Dialectique peut-elle casser des briques?* [*Can Dialectics Break Bricks?*] Later, I saw *Chinois, encore un effort pour être révolutionnaires* [*China, Another Effort to be Revolutionaries*], which is pretty good, actually, and then *Mao par lui-même* [*Mao by Himself*]. They're very interesting.

BP: Where did you see them?

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OA: They had mainstream runs, in art house cinemas. As you know, in France, there's not such a strict border between the art house circuit and the mainstream. These were movies that were shown in the Quartier Latin, in the same circuit where you would see the films of the Nouvelle Vague. And they were fairly successful. You could see them. That, of course, led me to read *La Société du spectacle* [*The Society of the Spectacle*]. That's also around when the movie *La Société du spectacle* was released. I think it was 1972 or 73. I didn't understand most of it, I suppose, but it embodied the spirit of the time. I just so clearly connected with it. I had dragged my father to see it. I remember walking out of the theater with my father. My father was interested, but had no idea what it was about.

BP: Could you see at the beginning of your career the ways in which Debord, as both a filmmaker and writer, had affected your work?

OA: It influenced me intellectually. Artistically also, but a few years later—we're talking 1981. *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* [*We Spin Around the Night Consumed by the Fire*] was released at that time and I had read over and over the re-edition of the Situationist International booklets. Debord published his *Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes* [*Collected Cinematographic Works*] in 1980, I think, and then I read it. I had not seen the short films. No one had seen them. I had no idea—even remotely—what they looked like. I had read them and I loved them. And at the end, there was a text with a description of the new film. So basically, when it opened, I had already read the whole texts a couple of times. And when I saw the film, for me it was simply one of the meaningful modern works of art I had come across, at any level.

MS: It strikes me that you read these films before you saw them. You generally make narrative films, while the Situationists made a very different sort. Did you start out wanting to adapt these kinds of ideas to narrative cinema? Or did you think of making other kinds of films with them first?

OA: It's complicated to make sense of. It's a long and complex process. I first wanted to be a painter, so I started painting—between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. Really, painting was at the center of my life. But I knew I wanted to become a filmmaker. At that time, I thought I could be both. Most of my painting was abstract and I suppose that in the back of my mind there was a notion that abstraction was for painting and movies were about characters and representing the world as it is, or something like that. But also, when I was twenty-one or twenty-two, when I realized that I could not do both things, I had a crisis. I kept on painting for years. But when I was twenty-one, twenty-two, it just became difficult to deal with both things on the same level and at the same time. And also, I had trouble with painting because I felt too alone. I just couldn't handle, at that age, being alone in my studio, drawing, painting. And it's completely addictive. You start working sometime in the afternoon and all of a sudden it's dawn and you haven't realized it. I was living in the countryside. My father had a house in the countryside. I was cut off from other kids and I thought that painting was cutting me off even more. So, I suppose it was at that point that filmmaking meant running away from abstraction, dealing with real, tangible things—establishing a relation with the real world and not just with ideas and abstraction, even poetic abstractions.

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Also, to me, the work of Debord was extremely intimidating. Suddenly, it's like you have the work of a genius in front of you and you're very young. You're not going to have the notion to emulate it. It's just something that strikes you. But you want to do something else. It's like all major works of art. They just encourage you to find your own way. It gives you the notion that someone has found his own way and has gone that incredibly far on his own way. So, it's up to you at some point to define your own path and go as far as you can on that path. It's always the relationship I had with artists that I admired: Guy Debord, Robert Bresson. I never tried to imitate Bresson; I never tried to imitate Tarkovsky, even though I worship them as filmmakers. So I suppose it also has to do with my experience of independent cinema—when I started questioning the notion of making film. I knew I wanted to be a filmmaker but I had no idea how you became a filmmaker. I had no idea what was going on really in terms of films. For instance, I worked for *Cahiers du cinéma*. I started writing for *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1980. At the time Serge Daney and Serge Toubiana had seen my first short film. They said “We want a younger writer, we want to change the magazine,” blah, blah, blah”. And then I went to the newsstand and I bought *Cahiers du cinéma* just so I could know what they were talking about.

BP: It's interesting that you started writing for *Cahiers* during Daney's time and that you felt conflicted about being both a painter and a filmmaker but not a filmmaker and a writer, especially in this more politicized moment of the journal.

OA: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Totally—it's something that just happened. To put it as simply as I can, when I decided to make films, I understood that the one thing that was missing was writing. Pretty fast, I understood that to make movies with any kind of control over what I was doing, I had to have some kind of mastery of the written form. I would have to write screenplays. I would have to write dialogues that would make sense and that could be formulated by actors and I could not imagine being the kind of filmmaker that directed someone else's screenplay. To me, that is not what art is about. Basically, I had learned what art was about when I was alone in my room with my box of colors. And I knew that process: you have the box of color, you have the canvas, and it's just you in the middle. And that's what art is about. So I could not imagine somebody else holding the box of colors or holding the brush or whatever. I knew I had to learn how to write. It was a very conscious process. I started taking notes, saying okay, this is my diary. I am going to write here every day. Then, it was really a stroke of luck that I meant Daney and Toubiana at the time because they gave me the opportunity to learn how to write by actually making it some kind of job. It was not paid like a serious job, but it's kind of a serious job.

BP: Did Debord ever come up at the *Cahiers* offices at that time?

OA: No, not at all—not at all. It's one of the reasons I had not read *Cahiers du cinéma* before, because to me they were boring, post-post Leftist, post-Stalinian. I had absolutely no intellectual affinity with them. How could I? They were translating things from Maoist publications. I opened the magazine and it just freaked me out. Jean Narboni is the nicest guy and a very smart man. But at that time he would write editorials discussing the cultural issues addressed by the leader of the French Communist Party, who was a real creep. Why are they wasting their time talking about

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this bullshit? They were publishing pieces by Pascal Bonitzer saying that *Le Maman et la putain* [*The Mother and the Whore*] was a perfect example of petit bourgeois individualism, or whatever. Junk! Junk! Just to go back a little. It's also one of the reasons that when I first started to go into making films I didn't go into abstraction, because I felt that abstraction in cinema was mostly Godardian. Everything around was half-baked Godardism, in one way or another. It became artistically and culturally suffocating. Somehow, the one thing that had been happening in those years, punk rock—The Clash, The Sex Pistols—gave you the notion that you just pick up whatever tools and make something on your own and just get rid of the past. In that sense, I felt that cinema hadn't had its punk rock revolution. That French film culture was too much what I thought I had left behind via the punk rock event. The only way to be radical in cinema at the time was not to be abstract. It was by being figurative. It was by saying fuck you: I'm going to make a real movie with real characters, a real story, and ultimately I can say things through that medium that are stronger than whatever you are not even trying anymore to deal with.

BP: So often, punk rock of that period is only ever thought of in terms of its nihilism, but you're really talking about its intense creativity, independence and world-making.

OA: Of course, of course! Music had become inconsistent. It had all been about virtuosos playing and art rock—bloated, empty and devoid of relevance. Then all of the sudden you had guys playing two-minute songs about guys on the dole, or just rebelling. You had the feeling of not being lost in the failures of 60s politics. What had started in May '68—hope to change the world, hope of the revolution coming—had come to an end, had become an empty shell. But these guys revived the very notion of facing society and expressing themselves in a way that is relevant, radical. It's like within Hong Kong cinema when you had all those period pieces, all those sword play movies. All of a sudden you have Bruce Lee in the street fighting it out. It's vital. When you're very young, that's what you go for, because it is what's going to drag you wherever you're going.

MS: It's interesting that you emphasize the figurative aspect of narrative, especially in relation to punk and everyday experience, because your films often deal with the abstraction of power in politics. In some ways, they seem to suggest that political relationships are abstract enough, especially as they are lived by the figures on that landscape. *Clean* is about very personal things happening to someone who is also caught up in the abstractions of globalization.

OA: Of course. My vision of politics is informed by Guy Debord. Ultimately, what Debord says is that the reality of oppression—of the power within modern society—is invisible and unformulated. It's a way of understanding the world and not putting politics where movies usually put them. Like some kind of class struggle, which still exists to extremely brutal levels, of course. But the reality of the oppression is not there. That's the visible side of it. The deeper truth of it is invisible and has nothing to do with everyday phenomena. The issue of politics—meaning politics in art—is a way of understanding the subtext of society. It's about having real life characters having to deal with those invisible forces and being determined by them.

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BP: One of the ways in which I see the politics of abstraction in your work is through the creation of a kind of global *dérive*, the way in which your characters drift seamlessly from country to country. They seem to enact a kind of psychogeography.

OA: Yes, yes, yes. It's very interesting that you would say that because the one thing that has had the most influence on me, in terms of Situationist ideas, is very much the notion of the *dérive*—*dérive* within the city, *dérive* within the modern world. It has to do with the way we travel. We move from continent to continent, from city to city, and town to town. This poetic relationship to your surroundings and your trajectory in the modern world is a text that has its own meaning, including in the sense of Walter Benjamin—because it all goes back to that for me, to the *Passages*. In my last few films, I have been looking for some kind of modern version—some notion of a contemporary psychogeography. And I suppose that unconsciously this is what was happening when I was making my first film, *Désordre* [*Disorder*]. Basically, *Désordre* starts in the suburbs of Paris, moves to the center of Paris, then moves to London, then moves to New York.

BP: Along the same lines, the structures of your recent films always strike me as very complex responses to globalization. They neither wholly condemn nor celebrate it. There's also an important sense of cosmopolitanism there, especially in terms of hospitality.

OA: As always, it has to do with the way you use words. One way you can use the word globalization is to say that the world has become unified. The world has become unified and that's a good and a bad thing. It's a bad thing in the sense that it is erasing cultural differences and it is creating populations that have to conform to codes that are alien to them. It destroys the very soul of some cultures. Ultimately, this culture is what Debord called the spectacle. It is a completely alienated, modern form that is taking over without anybody specifically wanting it. It is just happening. Everyone is staring helplessly and just watching it happen, figuring it is happening to others, or something. It is the primitive discourse of the commodity, ultimately—when the whole world becomes hostage to the circulation of commodities. And as always, it is visible in tiny things. When you are traveling and you go to some place in the world, you get to an airport, and from the airport you take a cab, and that taxi takes you to a hotel and at your hotel you sit in your room and turn on the TV. Someone then comes and picks you up, because you have an appointment with someone in an office somewhere. You've been there two days and you never see anything remotely connected to what the country is about, what the country has been about. You have been traveling but you stay in just one place. But the reality is that most of the reality there is gone. Whatever was real there has been neutralized. Whatever is happening is what has been happening on your drive from the airport to the hotel. It's not that you've been missing reality. You've been at the core of reality and it's horrible. That's one side of it.

The other side of it is that it's easier; there is more opportunity for travel, more opportunity for dialogue between cultures and between individuals. It's faster. You write books, you make movies, and it all travels at the speed of light. If you want to write something you can just put it on the internet and it's instantly there and all over the place. All of that is exciting. All that is interesting. And also the communication between all of that is a subject in itself that few artists deal with. One of the reasons I

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have been dealing with that is because is no one else has. There are many great filmmakers in France, but they are just not interested in that. One of the reasons that I have been making international movies is because I think that I have found a space in terms of narration and what the world is today. The globalization of communication is interesting as long as there is not just a uniformity of individuals.

MS: I'm curious: In the context of this discussion of globalization, and also your discussion of the libertarian strains of May '68 and its contradictions, how do you see the political situation in France today, where the gradual rise of liberalism in general has also meant the rise of globalization?

OA: To me, the main issue is the clumsiness of radical thought in France today. It's lost all connection to the modern world. France is stuck on old ideas and has a very poor notion of geopolitics. So, you have this absolutely depressing landscape of some kind of modernist liberalism (in French *liberalisme* is more akin to neo-conservatism and free trade economics) that appropriates anything that is modern. And you have a completely decomposed left or leftism, completely glued to old values, old notions, old issues. Let me give you an example. I could not believe my eyes when I was going through *Cahiers du cinéma* recently. And there is this piece about this interesting movie, *The Lives of Others*. The problem they [*Cahiers du cinéma*] have is that the film is anti-Communist. It is dealing with the Stasi, which is a post-Gestapo system. Yeah, sure, it's kind of anti-communism—depending on how you use the word—where you put the notion of communism! The depressing thing is that the radical movement in France is incredibly conservative. I can't even answer your question. It's just so sad. Anything that was modern in French political thought is gone. It's gone. You have people who are influenced by Pierre Bourdieu. Pierre Bourdieu was a very interesting sociologist, but in terms of politics it's extremely limited. Baudrillard was interesting also, even if I think that ultimately he was just a caricature of Debord. And then I am trying to think of anyone else who would have any kind of influence that would be meaningful, and I can't think of a name.

BP: What about Badiou? He's had an enormous influence on political thought, at least in the States.

OA: I suppose that he's more visible in the states than here.

MS: Maybe so [laughs].

OA: Here, I would not say that he has had any serious influence. Certainly not on me! [laughs]

BP: It seems to me that one of the things we might say about contemporary French philosophy is that politics and philosophy have become separated and also that art, philosophy, and politics have moved away from one another.

OA: Yes, yes, yes, of course. Which is a disaster! They have not moved apart, though. People think that they have, but they never do. It's always politics, art, and philosophy together. If you think that they are separated, it is just bad philosophy, bad art, and bad

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politics. Ultimately, they are always one thing. Now, you have this movement to reform France. If the issue is whether or not to have shops open on Sundays and being able to buy fruit juices and yogurt at eleven o'clock in the evening, I'm all for it! It's unbearable. It has to do with tiny things. But France's industries have modernized—it's happened, so I don't think anything very important will come out of it. The problem is that the French reactionary right wing in power now has free reign because there is nothing in front of them. The socialists are only concerned with being one with the trade unions. The trade unions are about keeping an archaic wage system and benefits for this or that lobby group. It's boring politics. I can't say I feel concerned or involved, even if I can understand them. The basic difference between left and right in France, ultimately, is if people are concerned with helping the most disadvantaged part of the population, which should be the goal, basically, of any decent government. But we're not talking about politics in the broader sense. We're not talking about politics in the sense of how class systems work. Ecological issues should be the number one concern of any government, and yet is not within the scope of French politics—or only in a very minor way. You end up with a ridiculous situation, when Nicholas Sarkozy, for the first time, creates a major ministry of the environment—which is an idea that the Socialists did not even push.