

HOWLS FOR GUY DEBORD

On March 1, the Film Society of Lincoln Center screened a retrospective of Guy Debord's films at New York's Walter Reade Theater, the first time that most had been officially shown in this country.

The films included *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* (*Howls for Sade*), Debord's first feature. *Hurléments* consists exclusively of a blank white screen (while the voices of Debord and his Lettrist comrades intone an intentionally disjointed script) interspersed with a black screen (during which the soundtrack is silent). The film famously ends with twenty-four minutes of complete darkness and silence.

In 1952 the film was a provocation. Its first Paris screening was shut down after twenty minutes, the second caused a furious audience to riot. (Debord and partner Michèle Bernstein were in the cinema balcony with bags of flour to dump on people below; Bernstein later recalled that they themselves probably left before the end, seeing no reason to stick around during the final period of black.) A London presentation several years later was nearly as raucous. Angry audience members leaving the first screening begged those waiting for a second showing to leave, creating an atmosphere so charged that the waiting audience—believing anything causing such outrage *must* be worth seeing—became even more desperate to get in.

Hurléments is one of those films more frequently described than experienced. There seemed to me good reasons for this, quite aside from the fact that the film was impossible to see for many years. The English translation of the script can be easily found. Once one has read the script and “got” the film's basic concept, what more could there be? And how can one recreate a scandal when the whole story is already known? Why replay a role that an audience had already played fifty years earlier? I thought the film would be essentially a gimmick, and probably unwatchable (I assumed I would go out to the lobby during the final twenty-four minutes of black). But this was likely the only opportunity I would ever have to see *Hurléments* projected with a large audience. I wondered what might happen.

The film starts with several minutes of text, spoken over a white screen. There's a brief summary of essential dates in

film history, including those of Debord's birth and the premiere of *Hurléments*, then a short disclaimer: “Just as the projection was about to begin, Guy-Ernest Debord was supposed to step onto the stage and make a few introductory remarks. Had he done so, he would simply have said: “There is no film. Cinema is dead. No more films are possible. If you wish, we can move on to a discussion.” Then follow several fragmentary statements, including “Happiness is a new idea in Europe” (Saint-Just) and, pointing forwards toward ideas that would be central to Debord's later activity with the Situationist International, “The art of the future will be the overthrow of situations, or nothing.”

When the screen suddenly goes black and silent, it creates a palpable shock. There is a very strong sense that Debord is saying, “Here's what I think, now it's your turn to respond.” At a minimum, to formulate a mental response. And there is a very strong pull to respond publicly, out loud. I started wondering whether I should say something during the twenty-four-minute silence at the end, perhaps something like, “Here's some space in which we have a chance to talk. Maybe we could talk about how we came to be here?”

The first silence doesn't last very long, and is followed by some more spoken text. But after a while, the silences grow to several minutes. In addition to questioning my own responses and whether I should speak out, I start becoming hyperaware of all the sounds in the auditorium: the sixty-cycle hum from the sound system, people's rustlings, the several conversations which have quietly started up in different parts of the theater (two people on the front left side are particularly loud). The occasional scratch or splice in the black leader has a shocking effect.

This hyperawareness is quite fascinating, but as I'm becoming absorbed by it someone who seems to be associated with the theater (the manager?) walks over to the two people near the front and loudly tells them to be quiet. They say something back, and the manager starts saying something about this not being the place to talk. One of the two people loudly suggests an anatomical impossibility. The manager says that if people won't be quiet he'll call theater security and have them taken out. At this point, a man sitting on the other side of the theater calls out, “Do you really think an attitude of reverential silence is the best way to approach this film?” I call out, “The film creates a situation. Of course we should react to it!”

There's relative quiet for a while, then someone says something and a woman loudly tells him to be quiet, to go outside if he wants to talk. I call out that I'd like to make a different proposal, that we all talk about what brought us to this theater and why we're interested in Guy Debord. No one responds to this. Trying a different tack, I suggest that we should all hold our breath and see who lasts longest. Silence. A minute later a security guard appears standing at the right side of the auditorium.

There are more bits of text, increasingly fragmented, and more and longer blacks. After ten minutes or so the security guard, obviously bored out of his mind, walks out behind the stairs and a moment later there's a ray of light as the entrance door opens and closes. I call out that the police have left the auditorium. General approval.

But that's pretty much it. I'm feeling a lot of adrenaline and really working hard to figure out how to spark some kind of participation. I'm wishing I'd looked at the script before coming, because I don't remember what the last line of text is, and I don't want to start something only to have a white screen and some more of Debord's text come along. I also can't remember the film's exact length, so my efforts to time it aren't helpful.

Finally, we're at roughly the sixty-minute mark, and it's been black for several minutes. I call out, "Doesn't *anyone* have something they want to say?!" General laughter, and someone calls out, "Why don't you say something?" I say that I've already spoken several times; this should be a chance for everyone to speak. A man near the center aisle calls out, "Why don't we sing a song?" There's no initial response, so I call out, "What do you want to sing?" No real response, so I ask, "What's your favorite song?" He has some trouble with this question, and he (or someone else) eventually suggests the "Internationale." But no one seems to know the words. He then suggests "Born in the USA"; some other people object, but others are Springsteen fans so we all sing the chorus. No one seems to know any verses, however. There's a pause. The only song I can think of is the final verse from "Solidarity Forever," so I offer to sing it. No one objects, so I sing: "In our hands is placed a power greater than their hoarded gold, / Greater than the might of armies, magnified a thousand-fold. / We can bring to life a new world from the ashes of the old / For the union makes us strong / Solidarity forever . . ."—adding after the end, "but we all know how Debord felt about unions." Someone says that it takes nerve to sing out loud, and I reply, "No, it's easy to do stuff in the dark!"

The man in the aisle asks if he can sing a Spanish song. He does so, it's a quiet, rather moving song. When he's fin-

ished, I ask him to translate. He says he can't, pauses, then says it's a song about childhood, a lullaby, a song about how a child sees various things. Things that only make sense when you're a child.

At this point, a security guard and I think another person from the theater (it's so dark it's almost impossible to see) go up to him and tell him he has to leave. Immediate indignation from the rest of the audience. I yell that we've all been talking, it's not fair to focus on one person. Someone else says, "If he's thrown out we'll all walk out!" I call out, "What is the official Film Society of Lincoln Center position on how people should respond to this film?!" Someone else suggests we take a vote on whether the person should be ejected; another yells "Should he be ejected?" and lots of people answer "No!" The person who suggested the vote says, "See? We don't want him ejected," but others object saying we need a fair vote, on principle there should be an opportunity for people to vote "yes." So we vote again, but no one votes "yes." Meanwhile, the theater people have been negotiating, and they offer that the man can stay as long as he talks more quietly. He offers to sing something quiet, maybe "Killing Me Softly"? I call out "NO! If he's going to sing that he *should* be thrown out!" General laughter.

Shortly thereafter, there's a brief blink and I notice that the film is apparently over (it's hard to tell, since the screen was black both before and after). Someone asks, "What's going to happen now?" A man up front says, "They're going to play the film again!" Which was the funniest comment of the evening.

Afterwards, on the way out of the theater, I passed a young couple that had been sitting in back of me during the screening. We fell to talking, and the man said it was the most amazing experience he'd ever had at a film, he'd had no idea what was going to happen and how he should react, he was amazed how difficult it was mentally to challenge the convention that one shouldn't talk in a movie theater, but he had strongly felt that he should *do* something.

Hurlements is usually described as alienating, but that wasn't its effect at all. It played as a challenge to the audience to involve themselves; the result was a warm pulling in, not a cold pushing away. I felt intoxicated after leaving the theater, and realized that, damn it, Debord succeeded. He had created a situation, one that was still potent fifty-seven years later.

ZACK WINESTINE has directed two feature films, *States of Control* (1997) and *Caravan/Prague* (2007), and several shorts, including *On Some Consequences of a Passage by Guy Debord* (1983). He is currently writing a book about theories of passionate moments.