

Guy Debord, 1931–1994

Guy Ernest Debord took his own life on the afternoon of Wednesday, 30 November 1994. He was 62 and knew that he was dying of a form of polyneuritis brought on by his chronic alcoholism. As he remarked in a final letter incorporated into the last film he made, in collaboration with Brigitte Cornand (*Guy Debord, son art, son temps*), this was not a disease contracted as a result of a moment's imprudence: 'On the contrary, it takes a stubborn, life-long obstinacy.' Debord described himself in 1989 as one who 'had written much less than most people who write, but who had drunk much more than most people who drink'.

Born into a bourgeois family that was almost ruined by the crisis of the early 1930s, 'writer, strategic thinker and French adventurer', Debord drifted through adolescence before coming into contact with the Lettrists and COBRA. The Lettrist International was a Dada-like group intent upon a form of cultural subversion and provocation with the everyday environment as its theatre; COBRA (the name derives from Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam, where most members were based) a collective of avant-gardists dedicated to the revitalization of art's revolutionary role. It was from this heady mixture that the Situationist International (SI) emerged in 1957, with Debord as one of its principal theorists. One element in Situationism can be traced back to the Dada–surrealist tradition: the more overtly political element in Debord's work owes much to his brief involvement with Socialisme ou Barbarie, the tiny but influential neo-Trotskyist group founded by Castoriadis in 1949. (Lyotard and Baudrillard, whose work owes not a little to Debord, are only two of its better-known veterans.) The term 'Situationism' involves a reference to Sartre's 'being-in-situation', the implicit accusation being that philosophers have interpreted situations rather than changing them.

Debord did write relatively little and remains a somewhat mysterious figure, often invoked in leftist debates, but rarely centre-stage. His first and most renowned work is *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and many of his later writings are attempts to justify both its theses and the many splits, expulsions and mutual denunciations that punctuated the history of the SI until its final demise in 1972. In his later years, Debord lived in relative seclusion in the Haute-Loire, but continued to snipe at both master-thinkers like Sartre and Lacan and the institutionalized Left. The six films he made are rarely seen outside specialist circles and exemplify a hard-core experimentalism: the first, *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* (1952) consists of white blanks alternating with soundless dark sequences. The final dark sequence runs for twenty-four minutes. A voice-over informs the patient (or frustrated) viewer that the projection was meant to

be preceded by an address from its maker: 'There is no film. Cinema is dead. There can be no film.'

The SI was never a large group, but it did have considerable influence. The Situationist pamphlet *On the Poverty of Student Life* (1967) is often regarded as the text that launched a thousand cobble stones in May '68. It was first published in Strasbourg, where self-declared Situationists had been elected to the students' union council on the maximalist programme of 'Abolish everything'. Other influences are perhaps less expected: the artwork created by Jamie Reid for the Sex Pistols in the Royal Jubilee year of 1977, for instance, owes a direct debt to the techniques of *détournement* developed by the SI, even though Reid cheerfully admits to understanding nothing of Situationist theory. *Détournement* ('diversion', 'subversion', but also 'corruption', as in 'corruption of minors') involves a creative use of plagiarism, and the subtle alteration of the texts of comic books or cartoons to give them a startlingly subversive meaning. It is a helpful reminder that, despite Debord's deep pessimism, Situationism does have its ludic side, as exemplified by Raoul Vaneigem's *Revolution of Everyday Life* (1967).

Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* is an exquisite distillation of Lukács's Marxism and the theories of alienation associated with the young Marx. Debord also draws heavily on the writings of personal favourites such as Machiavelli, Clausewitz and Sun Tse's writings on the art of war. The book consists of 221 numbered paragraphs or theses, honed to a classical perfection that has all the chill eloquence of the aristocrats who stalk through eighteenth-century novels like Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. It is primarily a study of how the accumulation of images – the spectacle – has become more important than the accumulation of commodities. What was once a lived experience now exists as a spectacle unfolding at a distance. The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, the autonomous movement of the non-living. Debord's argument has a lot in common with Marcuse's critique of the one-dimensionality of capitalist society and is equally pessimistic. Ultimately, the spectacle can incorporate even its own subversion: fifteen minutes of fame can be deadly for the would-be subversive. By the end of his life, Debord appears to have reached the conclusion that the only remaining subversives were the militants of Act Up and the so-called *casseurs* – the dispossessed youth who inhabit the grim suburbs that ring Paris, and whose occasional destructive incursions into the city would have certainly delighted the surrealists, who longed to see the Cossacks watering their horses in the fountains of the Place de la Concorde.

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