

Consumed by night's fire

The dark romanticism of Guy Debord

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Guy Debord is a time bomb, and a difficult one to defuse. And yet people have tried. And they are still trying. They try to neutralize him, to water him down, to aestheticize him or to deny his originality. It never works. The dynamite is still there, and it might explode in the hands of anyone who picks it up and tries to render it inoffensive.

Here is a very recent example published in a collection edited by Philippe Sollers.¹ Apparently Debord is no more than a 'literary dandy' writer with a dazzling style: 'All that remains of him is literature.' In his works, 'the ethic is reabsorbed into the aesthetic'. How can one integrate a revolutionary book entitled *La Société du spectacle* into this asepticized approach? It's quite simple. You just ignore it. It is not really worthy of interest because, being an 'impersonal theoretical work', it is not written in the first person singular. What is more, it is too marked by turns of phrase and a lexicon borrowed from the young Marx and Hegel, and they mar the beautiful style. 'When he abandons the great Germans, it shows in his style. For the better.' The author of this essay would rather refer to Rivarol and Ezra Pound than to Marx and Hegel. For stylistic reasons, no doubt.

Others, by contrast, refer only to the book Debord published in 1967, or rather to its title, and reduce its theses to a banal critique of the mass media. What he called the 'society of the spectacle' is not, however, simply the tyranny of television – that most superficial and immediate manifestation of a deeper reality – but the whole economic, social and political system of modern capitalism (and its bureaucratic copy in the East). It is based upon the transformation of the individual into a passive spectator who watches the movement of commodities, and events in general. This system separates individuals from each other thanks to,

among other things, a material mode of production that constantly tends to re-create everything – from cars to television – that generates isolation and separation. The modern spectacle, wrote Guy Debord in one of those superb formulations he was so good at finding, is 'an epic poem' but, unlike the *Iliad*, it does not sing 'the arms and the man'. It sings 'commodities and their passions'.²

It may be a truism, but these days it has to be pointed out with some force: *Guy Debord was a Marxist*. A profoundly heretical Marxist, no doubt, but also a profoundly innovative one. He was open to libertarian insights, but he still claimed to be a Marxist. His analysis of the society of the spectacle owes a lot to Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, which had already made the transformation of human beings into spectators who watch commodities moving of their own accord a central part of the theory of reification. Like Lukács, Debord sees in the proletariat an example of a force that can resist reification. Through practice, struggle and activity the emancipating subject breaks the contemplative mood. From that point of view, the workers' councils that abolish the divorce between product and producer, between decisions and execution, are the radical antithesis of the society of the spectacle.³

In the face of all the neutralizations and castrations, the important thing to remember is that Guy Debord's books – which will still be remembered a hundred years from now – were written by someone who regarded himself as 'a professional revolutionary working in the cultural field'. Under his influence, situationism, that dissident wing of surrealism, fused the best traditions of workers' council communism and the libertarian spirit of anarchism into a movement designed to bring about a radical transformation of

society, culture and everyday life. It failed, but the imaginary of '68 derived some of its most audacious dreams from situationism.

Guy Debord is open to criticism. This aristocratic spirit was trapped into a haughty solitude. He admired the baroque, and cunning political strategists such as Machiavelli, Castiglione, Baltasar Gracian and the Cardinal de Retz. He made the preposterous claim that he was the only free individual in a society of slaves. But it has to be recognized that, unlike so many of his generation, he was never prepared to reconcile himself to the existing order to things in any way.

One of the things that makes Debord's writings so fascinating is their *irreducibility*, their darkly romantic sheen. When I speak of romanticism, I do not mean – or not simply – a nineteenth-century literary school, but something much greater and much more profound: the great tradition that protests against modern capitalist-industrial society in the name of the values of the past. It begins in the mid-eighteenth century with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, runs through German *Frühromantik*, symbolism and surrealism and is still with us. This is, as Marx himself noted, a critique that follows capitalism like its shadow from the day it was born to the day it dies (oh, happy day). Like a structure of feeling or a world-view, romanticism runs through every domain of culture: literature, poetry, the arts, philosophy, historiography, theology and politics. Torn between its nostalgia for the past and its dreams of the future, it denounces the devastation wrought by bourgeois modernity: the disenchantment of the world, mechanization, reification, quantification and the dissolution of human communities. Despite the constant reference to a lost past, romanticism is not necessarily retrograde; in the course of its long history, it has taken both reactionary and revolutionary forms.⁴

Guy Debord belongs to the utopian and subversive tradition of revolutionary romanticism that goes from William Blake to William Morris, from Charles Fourier to André Breton. He never ceased to denounce and deride the ideologies of 'modernization', and was never afraid of being accused of being 'anachronistic'. 'When "being absolutely modern" became a special law proclaimed by the tyrant, the one thing the honest slave feared above all else was being suspected of being attached to the past.'⁵

Nor did he ever hide the fact that he felt a certain nostalgia for pre-capitalist forms of *community*.

Exchange value and the society of the spectacle have dissolved the human community, which was once based upon a direct experience of the facts, a real dialogue between individuals, and common action to resolve problems. Debord often mentions the past's partial realizations of an authentic community: the Greek *polis*, medieval Italian republics, villages, neighbourhoods and popular taverns. Adopting (implicitly) Ferdinand Tönnies' distinction between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*, he stigmatized the spectacle as 'a society without community'.⁶

I will take the example of one text to illustrate Guy Debord's dark or gothic [*noir*] romanticism – in the sense in which certain English novels of the eighteenth century can be said to be gothic [*noir*]: the script for the film *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni*. At once poetic, philosophical, social and political, the text is a splendid parole. The script itself and the images function as complementaries within the framework of an iconoclastic – in the strict sense of the word – use of classical cinema. The words have an intrinsic value independent of the function of the image. In that sense,



it is significant that, in 1990, Debord republished only the text, not the full screenplay, and simply added a series of footnotes.

The film is made up of quotations from other films, and the text is also full of quotations, some with the sources given (von Clausewitz, Marx and Swift), others without any sources (the Bible, Victor Hugo). Debord deals with them in the way that highwaymen deal with their victims' property. He wrenches the passages he cites out of their context, integrates them into his own discourse and thus gives them a new meaning.

Being a professional provocateur, Debord begins his screenplay with a direct attack on his audience.

The vast majority of his audience consists of the commodity society's privileged wage-earners, the willing victims of the society of the spectacle who cannot tear themselves away from 'competing in the conspicuous consumption of nothing'. That, however, is not his primary goal. He tells how the Paris of the 1950s gave birth to a totally subversive project. The title of the film is a Latin palindrome – 'We wander in darkness and we are consumed by fire' – and its ambiguous imagery sums up the feelings and dilemmas of a group of young people whose slogan was 'reject everything that is commonly accepted'. The group found themselves in the forefront of 'an assault on the order of the world' that foreshadowed May '68. And whilst the enemy was not destroyed, these young fighters still planted their weapons 'in the throat of the system of ruling lies'.⁷ It is not simply its poetic quality, its philosophical originality, its critical rigour or its haughty impertinence that gives the script its fascinating power. It is also the passion and imagination of a mode of thought inspired by the subversive tradition of gothic romanticism.

Like his romantic forebears, Debord has nothing but scorn for modern society: he constantly denounces its 'bad, unhealthy, gloomy buildings', its technological innovations, which are usually of benefit only to businessmen, its 'modernized illiteracy', its 'spectacular superstitions' and especially its 'hostile landscape', which meets 'the concentration-camp requirements of present-day industry'. He is particularly savage about the neo-Haussmanesque and modernizing town planning of the Fifth Republic, which promoted the sinister adaptation of the city to the dictatorship of the car. According to Debord, this policy was responsible for the death of the sun, as the sky over Paris was darkened by 'the false mist of pollution' which permanently darkens 'the mechanical circulation of things in this valley of desolation'. He therefore has no option but to reject 'both the bourgeois and the bureaucratic version of this modern scandal', and regards the 'abolition of classes and the state' as the only solution to its contradictions.⁸

This revolutionary anti-modernism goes hand in hand with a nostalgic glance back to the past – it matters little whether it is the ancient palace of the king of Ou, which has been reduced to ruins, or the Paris of the 1950s, which contemporary town planners have turned into a gaping ruin. A poignant regret for 'beauties that will never return', for periods when 'the stars had not been put out by the rise of alienation', and a fascination with the 'ladies, knights, armour and

amours' of a bygone age runs through the entire text like some subterranean murmuring.⁹

It is not, however, a matter of going back to the past. Few twentieth-century authors have been as successful as Guy Debord in transforming nostalgia into an explosive force, into a poisoned weapon to be used against the existing order of things, into a revolutionary breakthrough into the future. He and his friends initially pursued this quest in the *dérives* – the 'search for a different, baneful Grail', with its 'surprising encounters' and 'perilous enchantments' – that allowed them to grasp once more 'the secret of dividing what was once one'.¹⁰

'Perilous enchantments.' The phrase is important. Whilst the *ethos* of modern civilization is, as Max Weber saw so clearly, *die entzauberung der Welt*, romanticism is above all an attempt – and often a desperate attempt – to re-enchant the world. How? Whilst conservative romantics dream of a religious restoration, gothic romantics from Charles Maturin to Baudelaire and to Lautréamont have, for their part, no qualms about taking the side of Faust's Mephistopheles, of the spirit that always denies.

The same is true of Guy Debord and his friends, those servants of a negative dialectic who sided with the devil, 'or in other words the historical evil which is leading existing conditions to their destruction'. Living in a corrupt society which claimed to be united, harmonious and stable, their most ardent wish was to become 'emissaries of the Prince of Division'. They wished to be disciples of the 'prince of darkness'. 'After all, it is a fine title; the present system of enlightenment awards none more honourable.'¹¹

Like the romantic poets (Novalis), Debord prefers symbols of darkness to those of an *Aufklärung* that can be so easily manipulated by the ruling class. But whilst the romantics' favourite nocturnal source of illumination was the moon – as in the famous line by Tieck which sums up the literary and philosophical programme of early German romanticism in two words: *die mondbeglantzte Zaubernacht* (the enchanted moonlit night) – the screenwriter of *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni* is more interested in the light of fires: 'This is how a new age of fires was gradually set ablaze; no one who is alive at this moment will see it end: obedience is dead.'¹²

Are the flames already licking at the walls of the spectacular fortress? Can we already see, as Guy Debord thought he could in 1979, the writing on the walls of Babylon: '*Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsim*'? Perhaps. In any case, he was not wrong to conclude: 'This society's days are numbered; its reasons and

merits have been weighed in the balance and found wanting; its inhabitants are divided into two groups, and one of them wants it to die.’¹³

Faithful to the injunctions of gothic romanticism, Guy Debord was a sort of twentieth-century adventurer. But he was a member of a particular species, which was defined in these terms by a manifesto issued by the Internationale Lettriste in 1954. The signatories included ‘Guy-Ernest Debord’. ‘An adventurer is someone who causes adventures to happen, not someone who happens to have adventures.’¹⁴ The maxim could stand as an epigraph for his life.

Translated by David Macey

Notes

1. Cécile Guilbert, *Pour Guy Debord*, Gallimard, Paris, 1996.
2. *La Société du spectacle*, §66; translated into English as *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Zone Books, New York, 1994.
3. Cf. Anselme Jappe, *Guy Debord*, Via Valeriano, Marseilles, 1996. This is probably the best book on Debord to date.
4. For a more detailed discussion of the paradoxical nature of romanticism, see Robert Sayle and Michael Löwy, *Révolte et mélancolie: Le Romantisme à contre-courant de la modernité*, Payot, Paris, 1992.
5. Guy Debord, *Panygérique*, Gallimard, Paris, 1989, p. 83; translated into English as *Panegyric*, trans. James Brook, Verso 1991.
6. *La Société du spectacle*, §154.
7. Guy Debord, ‘In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni’, in *Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes*, Editions Champ Libre, Paris, 1978, pp. 224, 257, 264. A partial translation of *In Girum Nocte*, with an introduction by Lucy Forsyth, appeared in *Block 14*, Autumn 1988.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 193, 202, 212, 220–21.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 217, 219, 221, 255.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 247–9.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 249, 251.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
13. Guy Debord, *Préface à la quatrième édition italienne de ‘La Société du spectacle’*, Editions Champ Libre, Paris, 1979, p. 41; translated into English as *Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Frances Parker and Michael Forsyth, Chronos, London, 1979.
14. ‘Une Idée neuve en Europe’, *Potlach 7*, August 1954, p. 46.

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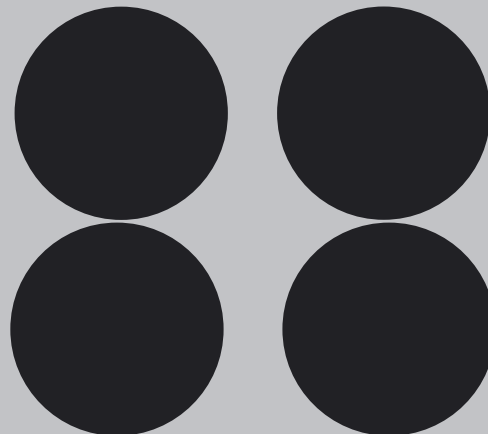
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