

Vincent Kaufmann.**Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry.**

Translated by Robert Bononno.

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Singularity: this is the buzzword of Vincent Kaufmann's study of French Situationist Guy-Ernest Debord. It is repeated at regular intervals and describes life and work, style, legacy, in short, just about everything concerning Debord. Singularity is incomparability and non-sharability, which makes Debord an exemplar impossible to follow, except for the severely deluded. Still, there is no shortage of faux anarchists in Situationist garb ready to perform a memorializing driftwork against the latest model of the society of the spectacle (risk, surveillance, network...). Even established sociologists like George Ritzer pay homage to Debord's critique of the spectacle in the age of hyperconsumption. But Kaufmann's task is to undercut all of this in order to deepen and convolute non-stop renovations of Debord's anti-spectacular praxes, the infamous *dérive* and *détournement*.

Kaufmann ingeniously presents a Debord who had already become the legendary 'Debord' before the fact of May 1968 by backdating his "birth" to 1952. This is pre-Situationist International proper and even marginally Lettrist, a group with whom Debord enjoyed a youthful dalliance of such a short time that, as Kaufmann puts it, "we can hardly speak of a true lettrist period for Debord" (18). Already Debord is slipping from our grasp, and this is a good thing. A scrappy street punk, the anti-Sartre, emerges from the dives of Saint-Germain in 1952 and screens a diabolical film at the Musée de l'Homme called *Howls for Sade*; Debord even failed to show up at the screening. This decisive "unbearable" act of anti-cinema concludes with twenty-four minutes of black screen in total silence. This is, for Kaufmann, the defining moment, the most telling self-portrait of Debord that exists, and there are few to choose from. Kaufmann writes: "his birth certificate is a certificate of disappearance." (26) Kaufmann takes seriously Debord's attitude in his *Mémoires* – autobiography by means of fragments written by others – which deals only with a "golden age" of 1952-53 (though published in 1958). Kaufmann christens the denizens of the "golden age" the "lost children" – soldiers sent on a hopeless mission. Drunken, debauched, delinquent and lost: not even Paris will survive this period as its charms will be ruined by mass culture and its flood of images.

Kaufmann's thesis is put to the test with Debord's far-left masterwork *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Is it, too, a book of loss alongside anti-films and anti-books?

"All that was once directly lived has become mere representation," the second line of *The Society of the Spectacle*, tells us that "life and the world" have disappeared and been supplanted by images, pseudo-events, and the myriad lies of power. Representation separates life from experience. This important book of theory testifies to Debord's rejection of representation in his penchant for authenticity, obscurity, indolence, and dissipation. These values kept Debord unco-optable.

Kaufmann indulges in a cliché: Debord was a poet, not a theorist (despite writing articles titled "Theory of the *Dérive*"). Does this label better correspond to the values of laziness where the end of art announces the beginning of alcohol? Isn't this false dichotomy a residue of spectacularized criticism which precludes poetic theory? Let me put it this way: Debord once called McLuhan the "spectacle's greatest apologist" and McLuhan's critics, too, reject the theorist label, preferring poet instead. Both Debord and McLuhan responded to their eras and were concerned with how authentic communication (intensely, totally participatory) could be realized. "Poetry must be understood as

immediate communication,” thinks Kaufmann (176). The two poles of the poetics of communication: the corporate consultant McLuhan and the “public offender” Debord. Two radically different visions of the ‘co-‘ in communication, both under the sign of poetry. But both thinker-poets, if you like, developed an arsenal of concepts, and accounts of them call into question a distinction between theory and poetry. Anyway, there is some slippage here in as much as Kaufmann eventually thinks of Debord as a theorist of the absent revolution properly caught in classical philosophical paradox: “since a property of the integrated spectacle is that it is totalizing, if not totalitarian, no one could take advantage of the extraterritoriality necessary to criticize it. Yet it is precisely this right of extraterritoriality that Debord assumes... .” (261) The singular supposedly eludes totalizing force. Kaufmann not very convincingly supports this anti-theory position by noting that Foucault and Debord ignored each other (295, n. 7). What about Jean Baudrillard (whose desire to find a way to genuine communication through symbolic exchange intersects with Debord’s project) and Félix Guattari (whose conception of Integrated World Capitalism is a critique of the spectacle for the age of information and anti-globalization)?

Debord’s greatest contributions to theory and method are twofold. The first is the collective *dérive*. The urban drift in small groups capturing shifts in ambience, hence psychogeography. The *dériveur* experiences the texture of a neighbourhood “from within,” without ever coming to the surface of representation. Out of view and, for all intents and purposes swallowed up, the group subjectivity of the drifting collective occupies a milieu and in this way constitutes a kind of “community of desire” (122). Kaufmann nicely parses the therapeutic dimension of the *dérive* as a kind of perambulatory analysis that, done excessively, leads to mental incapacity but which, executed successfully, creates the conditions for the emergence of a new kind of subjectivity that escapes arbitrary separations (of work and leisure, private and public), substituting mobility for sedentariness, the sidewalk for the couch. The second technique, the “pillar of the situationist aesthetic,” (34) was the art of *détournement*, that is, appropriating the weapons of the enemy and turning them against it. The introduction of a detour in form and content engaged elements of gaming and warcraft. For the most part this technique involved modifying – in keeping with Debord’s bellicosity, this is done “belligerently” – existing messages with subversive material designed to “win back the territory of communication that had been lost or confiscated” (162). Here we find the roots of culture jamming. Hence, the famous anonymous graffiti from May 68 (attributed to you-know-who), and the modified cartoons featured in the Situationist International’s journal. Taken together with the *dérive* and applied to an urban space, the city itself is retaken. What sort of action is implied here? Stoned on hash (“discovered through the Maghrebins in the group,” 41), spray (or staple) gun (maybe squeegee) in hand, suitably kitted out in anti-fashion style, ready to regain the Rue Mouffetard from the tourist hordes, one wonders what is to be done for even the market produce is imported and the trash prettified. Isn’t this a game of seduction, too? *Détournements* apply equally well to artifacts and the corruption of minors. (265)

Ludic and strategic, Debord’s vision of the game of life as a war of sorts ends gloriously in loss: “whoever loses (himself) wins” (265). Debord’s love of the catacombs below Paris points forward to the adventures of today’s urban explorers and “infiltrators.” In 1977, Debord even invented a board game, “Game of War,” that was “played on a checkerboard of five hundred squares (25 x 20). There are two opposing armies of equal force, consisting of a number of regiments of infantry, cavalry, and artillery, with forts and arsenals... The goal of each player is to destroy the opponent’s army through various manoeuvres and battles” (268). A student of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, Debord tried to live this war game. At least it has not become a popular parlour game.

Even when he was drawn into the spectacle's sleaze (the "Lebovici affair" reducing even *Le Monde* to tabloid tactics) when his friend, producer, and publisher Gérard Lebovici was murdered, Debord did his best to disappoint, to retain control of his image by refusing, valiantly to the end, the enticements of the enemy.

Kaufmann underlines that Debord's refusal of the Other in his attacks on the spectacle is singular. Debord identified only with himself. Loosely likening this "show of force" to Freud's unverifiable and undeniable hypotheses, while forgetting the Viennese doctor's struggle for recognition, Kaufmann's Debord aspired to "no form of recognition" (275). This makes Debord unforgettable and radical. The fact that Debord "paid a personal price" (275) for his singularity makes him an angel of the avant-garde. After his death in 1994, Debord's ashes were scattered over the Seine in Paris. No memorial; not even an urn. No site for pilgrimages and parties. Perhaps this is his final triumph: Debord refused the spectacle of death.

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