

h-france review

Volume 8

2008

H-France Review Vol. 8 (January 2008), No. 19

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. No republication or distribution will be permitted without permission.

ISSN 1553-9172

H-France Review Vol. 8 (January 2008), No. 19

Vincent Kaufmann, *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry*. Trans. Robert Bononno. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. xix + 345pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8166-4455-1.

Review by Tom McDonough, Binghamton University.

"What need is there to 'draw a portrait' of me?" Guy Debord (1931-1994) asked rhetorically in 1993, only one year before taking his own life. "Have I myself not drawn, in my written works, the best possible one, if the portrait in question could have the slightest necessity?"[1] Indeed, what we might call Debord's autobiographical discretion, his certainty about such a work's absolute *lack* of necessity, was one of his most notorious traits; it was a central tenet of his refusal of the spectacular apparatus of publicity that had come to surround the postwar French intellectual milieu. Hence it should come as little surprise that, since his suicide in 1994, works probing Debord's life and personality have proliferated, as if in a belated attempt to transform him into the intellectual "star" he had so long refused to be. Vincent Kaufmann's *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry* is the most recent — and certainly one of the most ambitious — of such biographical reevaluations of this most discreet of subjects, placing at center stage Debord's very hostility toward the inquisitive gaze of his readers.

Kaufmann's main argument was clearly announced in a brief article that appeared in *Le Monde* before the book's original publication in France in 2001: "[Debord] conceived his books and his films so that there would be literally nothing to repeat. He produced an *oeuvre* that wishes to be irrefutable, an *oeuvre* whose deepest meaning is to refute and at the same time to challenge those who approach it." [2] As Kaufmann later wrote in his book's introduction, Debord "did everything he could to refute the gaze that attempts to identify, to assign, to conform" (p. xvi). That perspective — and the firm conviction that Debord actually *succeeded* in his desire to be "irrefutable"—shapes the entirety of this important biography.

Although subtitled "Revolution in the Service of Poetry" (a typically Situationist reversal of Surrealism's pledge to place "poetry in the service of revolution"), *Guy Debord* could have adopted the venerable legend "His Life and Work" as an equally appropriate indication of its intentions. For Kaufmann, the two terms are identical in the case of this author: "I have suggested that Guy Debord's life was as consistent as his work....His life and work are one, and rarely has the expression made more sense. Rarely have life and work coincided to this extent. This book could have been titled *Guy Debord: His Life and Work*, because they are one and the same thing, because they are part of the same *poetics*" (p. xiii). What were those poetics? Kaufmann uncovers them in the book's first chapter, which is perhaps the most striking in its intelligence. Opening with a discussion of Debord's first three films, and in particular *Howls for Sade* (1952), the chapter relates how a strange figure recurs throughout them: that of the *enfant perdu*, the lost child. This was French military

slang for soldiers sent on reconnaissance missions from which they were not expected to return; Debord adopted it to describe himself and his colleagues of the early fifties, when he had first arrived in Paris. They were lost children, or children of lost time, who devoted themselves to ruin and disappearance. (These terms of loss and waste will recur again and again in Kaufmann's text as keys to Debord's poetics.) For Kaufmann, *enfant perdu* has multiple resonances, signaling not merely his subject's dedication to a sort of reckless expenditure but also his self-fashioning: the "lost child" had no youth; his birth was at age nineteen, upon entering the Parisian avant-garde of Lettrism, upon making his first film. That film was notorious for its uncompromising aesthetic, being entirely devoid of images and ending as it did with an excruciatingly long sequence of silence and darkness. "His birth certificate," Kaufmann writes of Debord, "is a certificate of disappearance, of loss, covered by twenty-four minutes of black screen" (p. 26).

This first chapter is by far the most significant of the book in its implications for reading Debord's life as a whole. Kaufmann here turns the usual view of his subject on its head: for him, the Situationist years were not the crucial heart of Debord's work; rather, that honor lies with the fifties, with his Lettrist years. Kaufmann recounts that era, when Debord frequented the café of "mère Moineau" in Saint-Germain-des-Prés; he writes of his subject's penchants for drinking improbable cocktails, for smoking psychotropic drugs, and for seducing girls (for, in sum, "never working," as Debord himself famously phrased it). All these receive much greater attention in this volume than, for example, his interest in rebuilding Marxism. It was during these years that Debord was able to devote his full attention to his one true concern—style. Throughout his life, in Kaufmann's eyes, Debord's central interest lay in this sort of self-fashioning, even when he appeared at his most theoretical and his most impersonal. Thus *The Society of the Spectacle*, his most important work and his book that most influenced the events of May '68, is paradoxically treated in this first chapter on his early life; "*The Society of the Spectacle*, an apparently impersonal book" was in fact, Kaufmann remarks, "hyper-biographical" (p. 76).[3] This is without a doubt a controversial reading of the significance of Debord, but one that will (perhaps surprisingly) be more familiar to an Anglo-American audience than to a French one, thanks to Greil Marcus's 1989 volume *Lipstick Traces*. [4] Both Marcus and Kaufmann emphasize Debord's desire for perdition amid the labyrinth of existence (a phrase I mean to be read in both its literal and metaphorical senses).

The history of the Situationist movement (1957-1971), of which Debord would be the principal shaping force, appears in Kaufmann's second and third chapters as an attempt once again to supersede all that the preceding avant-gardes had produced until then. A number of pages are devoted to an analysis of Debord's fascination with wandering — *dérivée*, or drifting, as he called it — through the cities in which he spent time, above all in the Paris of his youth (part of his "art without works"). Throughout his life, as Kaufmann remarks in his introduction, Debord sought out "gambling ...; adventure; unknown waters; the foreign; cities to explore and to lose oneself in, made poetic through their fragility and the absence of traffic" (p. ix). Yet, contrary to conventional wisdom, the author feels that the Situationist episode was not where Debord's particular genius was best revealed. He was compelled to spend too much of his energy preventing the Situationist International — that group of artists and vagabonds — from being corrupted, from mixing with the world of art dealers and the spectacle. The taste for such a supervisory role simply was not in his nature and, excepting the beautifully transient moment of May '68, the Situationist years—with their continual contradictions between the collective and the personal—are depicted here as having weighed on him.

Kaufmann's main thesis, developed in a central section of chapter three, is that for Debord revolution was inseparable from poetry, that for him political action had to pass through poetic expression (pp. 165-78). Kaufmann is particularly insightful regarding the quality of that expression, which in large measure derived from a utopian or Rousseauian tradition of transparency. Revolution is to be the reinstatement of a (now lost) immediate and authentic communication. This tradition constitutes, Kaufmann claims, the primary theme of Debord's thought through the sixties: "In many respects, *The Society of the Spectacle* is a reflection of the fall.... If you begin with the fall, you generally continue falling, at least until you find yourself on the terra firma of primitive society, nomadic and proto-communist, one that has never known the division of labor, or the exploitation and alienation through which the lie is substituted for authentic communication, transparency, and lost innocence" (p. 300 n6). It is in this chapter also that Kaufmann addresses what he understands to be two half-truths regarding his subject. First, he proclaims that Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) was not the kind of ideological and theoretical patron of Debord that this communist intellectual liked to claim. That there was a certain conjunction of concerns (notably, the place of everyday life in the critique of capitalism) between the two of them at the end of the fifties and beginning of the sixties is obvious; however, Kaufmann claims, Debord would have been the same Debord without the old philosopher (pp. 166-72). Similarly, the Situationist epic cannot be reduced to a mere footnote in the history of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, the anti-Leninist and councilist group led by Cornelius Castoriadis. The latter group was too lacking in style, while the former made poetry a necessary component of revolution (pp. 170-72).

The fourth and final chapter is simply titled "Strategy," and covers the period following the break-up of the Situationist International, which had begun to tire Debord. Contrary to typical assumptions, these were particularly active years, at least in terms of publishing. From his earlier engagement, Debord retained not least a very strong interest in military strategy. In his books of this period, he clarified his war-game against society and the references (to historians like Thucydides and students of war like Clausewitz) that allowed him to determine its rules. With his 1988 book, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, he seemed to announce, despite everything, that revolution was no longer possible.[5] "This is the integrated spectacle, from which nothing escapes," writes Kaufmann. "Debord was aware of this, and after trying not only to conceptualize but to make revolution, he became, in a sense, the theorist of its absence" (p. 261). These analyses of the *Comments* are perhaps the least satisfying pages of the entire book; indeed, we might ask whether the theorization by Debord (a convinced Hegelian) in 1988 of the complete victory of the ultimate stage of capitalism, made him a prototype of those who, like Francis Fukuyama, became the ingratiating prophets of the end of history. But Kaufmann is unwilling or unable to pose such critical questions about the later works of his subject. Instead, the book closes on an image of Debord playing his own game until the end, never going back on what he had written or done, tirelessly searching, as Kaufmann describes it, for "a patiently constructed correspondence, the slow but irreversible destabilization of the adversary, who discovers, much too late, that he is playing—and losing—the game" (p. 251).

Kaufmann's *Guy Debord* is, as I have noted, the latest intervention into a burgeoning field of Debord biographies. The most detailed of these is that of Christophe Bourseiller, who should be credited with filling in many of the gaps in our knowledge of Debord's life, particularly regarding his family and childhood prior to his 1951

arrival in Paris.[6] Nevertheless the value of this text is strictly limited: Bourseiller's avoids any interpretation of his subject's life, contenting himself with a straightforward chronicle of events; and he fails to discriminate among his sources, with the result that certain stories he recounts must be regarded with some suspicion. (Moreover, the writing here is plodding, amounting at many points to little more than the stringing together of quotations.) Among the biographies to have appeared in English, that by Andrew Hussey, which makes much use of Bourseiller in order to psychoanalyze its subject, is little more useful than its source.[7] The only text to which Kaufmann's book should be compared, the only work on Debord of similar intellectual ambitions, is Anselm Jappe's *Guy Debord*.

Jappe, an independent scholar born in Germany but resident in Italy, writes of the side of Debord precisely underplayed by Kaufmann—that is, the theoretician of “the society of the spectacle.” He opens with a chapter on the concept of the spectacle (with a section engagingly titled “Must We Burn Debord?”). This is followed by a history of the community around Debord and its influence, from the Lettrist International to May '68, then the “Debord Myth,” plus the spectacle today. He concludes with an appeal for a new critical theory, “so sorely needed at the present time.”[8] Jappe excels where Kaufmann remains largely silent or where his curiosity fails him: on Debord's Marxist echoes, on the place of the theory of exchange or that of Lukács, and on his problematic link to nearby thinkers (Lefebvre, Claude Lefort, Castoriadis, and the members of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*) — exactly where Kaufmann too simplistically denies any link whatsoever. Nevertheless, it may be more accurate to consider these books complementary rather than contradictory: if Jappe devotes himself to Debord the theoretician and practitioner of revolution, Kaufmann is dedicated to Debord the poet, in the broadest sense of the word. They both agree, certainly, on the internal consistency of their mutual subject. Either could have written, as Kaufmann does in his introduction, that “one of the most beautiful aspects of his work is its coherence, which is simultaneously obstinate, discreet, and luminous” (p. xi). They simply might disagree over where that coherence lies.

To my mind, Debord's poetics as presented by Kaufmann is perhaps best described as one of *Weltschmerz*, a mourning for the state of the world and of life. It is an expression of romantic pessimism the author admits to admiring profoundly: “I admire his art of defiance, his belligerent and melancholy poetics” (p. x). Some readers may disapprove of this admiration, and even disagree with some of his characterizations of Debord, but Kaufmann's book is to date one of the most significant contributions to the literature on its subject. Moreover, in its seriousness it helps to elevate Debord to a (deserved, if still contested) place among his French intellectual contemporaries; it is the equal of similar studies of figures such as Foucault or Lacan.[9] Kaufmann's prose, despite occasional repetitions of phrase or material, is lucid and at times even eloquent, and it has been served well by this translation. The book should find readers not only among those concerned with the history and theory of the Situationist International, but more broadly among scholars of twentieth-century French history, the literary and artistic avant-gardes, postwar French literature and intellectual life, and critical theory.

NOTES

[1] Guy Debord, *“Cette mauvaise reputation...”* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), p. 32. All translations from this work are my own.

[2] Vincent Kaufmann, "L'irréfutable," *Le Monde*, Oct. 15, 1999, p. viiii. All translations from this work are my own.

[3] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), tr. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

[4] Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). Kaufmann approvingly cites Marcus at several points, calling *Lipstick Traces* "by far the most original book devoted to the early part of Debord's life and work" (p. 278n5).

[5] Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988), tr. Malcolm Imrie (London and New York: Verso, 1990).

[6] Christophe Bourseiller, *Vie et mort de Guy Debord* (Paris: Plon, 1999).

[7] Andrew Hussey, *The Game of War: The Life and Death of Guy Debord* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001).

[8] Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord*, tr. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), p. 159.

[9] See, for example, Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, tr. Betsy Wing (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991); and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, tr. Barbara Bray (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

Tom McDonough
Binghamton University
tmcdonou@binghamton.edu