The lesson of Guy Debord

What would be Guy Debord's intellectual heritage? Is there a heritage here? The question seems to imply that Debord has been a French intellectual like many others who have become part of academic curricula; or that he has imposed himself as an author, with a stock of sophisticated concepts, with a work that deserves respectful comments. But for many reasons, this is not really the case. Debord can hardly be considered a French intellectual - whatever model of the "intellectual" one chooses as a frame of reference - and therefore the answer might be that indeed he left no heritage. At least Debord did not behave like most of the well-known intellectuals did: he has never made any attempt to be part of the "milieu" or to be recognized by supposed peers, he kept silent about them, despised them, with almost no exceptions, and hated Sartre as strongly as he could, or at least to the point that Situationism would probably not have been called Situationism if Sartre had not written his endless *Situations*.

That would be Debord's specificity: the refusal to appear on the French intellectual scene, to play a role on this scene (or, to put it in his terms: in this *spectacle*). This is precisely what makes him interesting, what shows in all the forms of expression he has choosen to test (collage, autobiography, theory, film, political activism, etc.). If there is no heritage, there is still a lesson to be kept in mind with Debord's will to escape what Bourdieu might have called the economy of the French intellectual field. And the point of this essay would be to show that this lesson is ultimately a lesson of freedom.

Let's start at the beginning, with his childhood and the usual psychoanalytical remarks required by childhood (very few, I promise). In *Panegyric,* his autobiographical account from 1989, Debord makes the following statement, almost at the beginning: "It is reasonable to think that many things first appear in youth, to stay with you for a long while. I was born in 1931, in Paris. Just then, my family's fortune was shattered by the consequences of the world

economic crisis that had first appeared in America a little earlier; and the remnants did not seem capable of lasting much beyond my majority, which in fact is what happened. So I was born virtually ruined. I was not, strictly speaking, unaware of the fact that I should not expect any inheritance, and in the end I did not receive one"[1].

This is by the way one of the only insights Debord gives us in his childhood, which explains why my psychoanalytical chapter will be very short. Born "virtually ruined", Debord is obviously not ready to leave any (unconscious) inheritance for would-be psychoanalysts of the formerly leading figure of situationism. The childhood chapter is definitely missing here, in accordance with its proclaimed ruin. However one has to ask oneself what an absent heritage might mean in this case, because it is not so much a matter of money - up to his twenties, Debord has never been really poor - than a *symbolic* matter, a family matter. The "ruin" Debord emphasizes - but also covers with a mere financial problem - has more to do with the death of a father when he was five years old, with a mother who has never really taken care of him after the death of her husband and who has had two other children with an already married Italian man before marrying a rich notary in Cannes, kind enough - or old enough - to adopt the two last children of Madame Debord, but not her first son.

This leaves Debord with nothing but his name[2]. At very practical as well as at symbolic levels, he has been literally excluded from the new family of his mother, and left without any heritage[3]. Born in an interrupted family novel, he is a man to whom nothing has been transmitted, his destiny coincides with interruption. This could be a sad story, a melodrama à la Hervé Bazin or the like, but actually it isn't, at least for Debord who never complains about being born "virtually ruined", on the contrary: whenever he mentions this initial "situation", it

[1] Guy Debord, *Panegyric. Volumes 1 & 2*, transl. James Brook and John McHale, New-York, Verso, 2004, p. 11-12.

[2] Take your name and take care of yourself: Debord's family novel could be reduced to such an injunction, and to some extent he has actually answered it, since he has worked his whole life to establish his reputation, his renown (*renom)*. Of course in his case it could only be a bad reputation, a bad name: to whom would he owe a good name?

[3] On this issue, see my *Guy Debord. La Révolution au service de la poésie*, Paris, Fayard, 2001, p. 23-31; translation forthcoming at University of Minnesota Press.

is always with a sense of jubilation or superiority, probably because to be born "virtually ruined" is to be born relieved of any debt, dedicated only to a kind of absolute freedom which he has totally assumed like other people assume precisely a heritage, a social status, a culture or specific values to be transmitted further.

Take his education, interrupted after he's got his high school diploma (the *baccalauréat*), in which he was interested only because it was a passport for (more) freedom, a means to live in Paris rather than in Cannes with "his" family which he succeeded for some time to convince that he had registered at the university. But he never took any class in an university. Worse, he never passed any *agregation* - and how could a French intellectual live without an *agregation*? He does not belong to these many professional state-sponsored state opponents who have not only had a free training from the state, but who often have been paid by the state to go to the *Ecole normale*. He has actually never been trained by anyone, he does not owe anything to one of these masters one is supposed to meet when one chooses to become a French intellectual - in his case, there has never been any master or authority to acknowledge[4]. Debord is born ruined, which means in his case free to pass on nothing, to do nothing with himself. As a man without any heritage, he has decided quite early to exempt himself of any transmission or tradition duty, at whatever level you take it. No real work, no employment, no family, no school: one of the main features of the situationist group will precisely be that it has never been a school[5]. And one of the reasons why Debord did not keep working with the *Socialism ou Barbarie* group is that he did not have any interest in the

[4] More exactly, he has always chosen himself whom he wanted to learn from: Lautréamont, the young Marx, the Cardinal de Retz, Clausewitz, etc. He has chosen his masters, his (intellectual) family, his lineage.

[5] The situationist group and more precisely the way Debord was leading it has often been described as *Stalinist* because of the many exclusions that occurred in its history. However, with the ongoing publication of Debord's correspondence, it becomes obvious that these exclusions had little to do with Stalinism. Most of the time they were means for Debord - as well as other members of the group - to retake their freedom, to withdraw from any kind of pedagogical or tutorial relationship, and they were means to force the "victims" to assume their own freedom rather than to have them live a revolutionary life by proxy. See for instance the following letter: "La pratique de l'exclusion me paraît absolument contraire à l'utilisation des gens: c'est bien plutôt les obliger à être *libres seuls* - en le restant soi-même - si on ne peut s'employer dans une liberté commune" (*Correspondance*, vol. 2, septembre 1960 - décembre 1964, Paris, Fayard, p. 156)

lessons of true Marxism taught by Castoriadis and Lyotard to their young followers. There are also very explicit letters on this issue[6].

Deprived of any inheritance, Debord has dedicated himself to interruption and rupture, which is probably the minimal prerequisite for a revolution, or at least for a consistent and radical avant-garde position. He has specialized in breaking off (over the years with almost everybody), in not being followed, in not owing anything to anybody. The last sentence of his last movie - *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* - seems very significant in this regard: "For me there will be no turning back and no reconciliation. No wising up and no settling down[7]". Let's also mention here Debord's last book, *Des Contrats*, published a few weeks after his death[8]. The title means "Contracts" as well as "About contracts". The book consists only of the publication of three contracts passed between Debord and his friend and film producer Gerard Lebovici (who has been murdered ten years earlier, for still mysterious reasons). These contracts refer to the last films made by Debord, produced and financed by Lebovici. They are remarkable because they are totally unbalanced, Lebovici owing everything to Debord (especially money), whereas Debord has almost no obligations. The last contract is actually about a film on Spain for which Debord has been paid, but that he has never made and probably never even intended to make.

The purpose of this strange book is on the one hand to acknowledge Lebovici's generosity which is beyond any form of contract - it is friendship instead contractual relationship, it is consistent with Debord's life-long taste for *potlatch*, for gift without any counterpart. And on the other hand, its purpose is to show that until the end and beyond Debord has remained free of any duty, obligation or debt, free to transmit nothing (not even a

[6] Especially Debords long resignation letter from the group "Pouvoir Ouvrier" (P.O, which coincides actually with *Socialism ou Barbarie*), where the following statement can be read: "La véritable division dans P.O.- ou ne se développent pas de véritables oppositions politiques - recoupe manifestement une division en deux classes d'âge, mais est en dernière instance indépendante de l'âge: c'est une division inavouée, et même pas utilitaire, entre enseignants et élèves" (*Correspondance*, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, p. 83).

film). It is even possible to consider this little book the last and posthumous chapter of Debord's much more famous *Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes*[9]. Debord's first step in 1952 as a filmmaker was a movie without pictures, *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (*Howlings for De Sade*), with only alternating black and white screens (the last sequence is famous because it lasts 24 minutes and it is black, without any sound). But this last step is even more radical: it is not only a film without pictures but a movie which has never been realized, which has only a strange contractual or more exactly a non-contractual existence, a film replaced, so to speak, by friendship. Why should Debord make a film, transmit something to an audience as long as the friendship with one of the richest men of the French film industry allows him to live the way he wants to live. Friendship prevails over transmission, and of course over schools, teaching, over giving lessons, having followers or building the new worker's party.

Here again, in terms of friendship, the last chapter of Debord's story is consistent with the first one: the first book of Debord, *Memoires* (*Memories*), was the result of his friendship with the painter Asger Jorn, co-founder with Debord of the Situationist International. It came out in 1959, but actually it did not really came out, since it was never sold at this time anywhere, but only given to a few friends who "deserved" to receive it - another form of *potlatch*. A book made with a friend, given to friends only, and moreover a book telling in a very elusive way a story of friendship, the story of the ironic "Internationale lettriste", the first avant-garde group animated by Debord between 1951 and 1953, which has not produced a single book or work and which has maybe therefore realized the old dream of the avant-garde: a perfect coincidence between art and life, or more exactly in this case the absorption of art - and therefore of transmission and representation - into a secret and illicit underground life that will always have the meaning of a golden age for Debord. An age of *désoeuvrement*, as

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[7] *Complete Cinematic Works*, transl. Ken Knabb, Oakland (CA), AK Press, 2003, p. 193.
[8] *Des Contrats*, Cognac, Editions Le temps qu'il fait, 1995.
[9] *Op.cit.*

Blanchot would say, which has to be taken very literally in this case: it is a *désoeuvrement* made of leisure, laziness, drinking, loving, drifting through the old neighbourhoods of Paris, and certainly not of writing books or manifestoes, like avant-garde groups usually do. The first group lead by Debord is a principle of interruption, it is consistent with his will not to transmit anything. Everything has to be lived on the spot, nothing is left for representation and transmission. The lettrist International is a group of lost children, of girls gone on the loose, of deserters and a few little thieves, i.e. people without heritage, people from whom you can't inherit anything[10].

How can we evaluate the radicality of Debord's lettrist or situationist experiences - or any avant-garde experience? In terms of interruption: the radicalism of an avant-garde is determined by its ability to enact interruption and to invent techniques of interruption, like for instance, in the case of the lettrists and later the situationists, the famous technique of *détournement* (diversion, misappropriation, seduction) inspired by Lautréamont (and to some extent by the Dadaists). The radicalism of an avant-garde comes from its ability to escape transmission, its ability to escape authority - since there is no transmission without authority (and probably no authority without transmission)[11]. This is maybe one of the reasons why the lettrist and situationist Internationals have often been described as being exclusively Debord's work (even more than surrealism as Breton's work): in any case, he was the ideal leader for a group devoted to interruption.

The lettrists and the situationists have never accepted anyone's authority and symmetrically they have declined to become an authority for anyone. They have systematically turned down potential followers, which has of course lead not only to

[10] Beyond his *Mémoires*, this period will be remembered by Debord in all his autobiographical books and films, but always in the same elusive way, as if the impossibility to transmit anything about it had to be repeated again and again, as if this impossibility did only work by being repeated. The longest comment on this "golden age" is to be found in his last film *In girum imus nocte et consumimr igni*, where Debord emphasizes also the fact that nobody from this group has ever succeeded to become famous in the society of spectacle.

[11] See my essay: "Deshéritages", in Yan Ciret (ed.), *Figures de la Négation*. *Avant-Gardes du dépassement de l'art*, Saint-Étienne, 2004, Musée d'Art Moderne Saint-Étienne Métropole, Limites LTD & Éditions Paris-Musées, Art of this Century (catalogue Exposition *Après la fin de l'art* (1945 / 2003)).

accusations of Stalinism, but also to rather funny accusations of elitism - as if an avant-garde group had a kind of democratic duty of accepting everybody. In ay case, this explains the rather fast dissolution of the Situationist International after may 68, although the situationists have never been as famous and as influential as then. I can't avoid to quote here one of the most famous texts of Debord, which has been written in the context of his decision to dissolve the International Situationist in order to escape celebrity and authority: "Never have we been seen mixed up with the business, the rivalries and the frequentations, of the most extreme leftist politicians or the most advanced members of the intelligentsia. And now that we can flatter ourselves with having acquired among this rabble the most revolting celebrity, we will become even more inaccessible, even more clandestine. The more our theses become famous, the more we will ourselves be obscure[12]". This is one of the most striking statement of Debord's will to escape success and transmission, of his will *not to survive himself* - at least as the leader of a group he considers condemned to provide sterile radicalism degrees to its numerous and enthusiastic followers of the post 68 period[13].

Of course, one could argue that obscurity is tactically very efficient for becoming even more famous, and Debord has been suspected sometimes of such after-thoughts. But one has to recognize the fact that Debord has never got any *benefits* from his decision to remain "obscure": he has never had any power or authority anywhere, he has never belonged to an academic institution or to any other institution, he has never been a visiting-professor in the US (not enough diplomas and books for that), he has never become the director of a famous French daily newspaper, like former Maoist or Trotskist activists, he has never become a Premier Ministre like at least one other former Trotskist activist or even a modest *Secrétaire*

[12] *The Veritable Split in the International*, London, Chronos, 1990, p. 76.

[13] However, this will not to survive himself might be a key not only for the understanding of the dissolution of the Situationist International, but also for the understanding of Debord's entire work, which consists from the beginning to the end in traces of a *disappearance*, in the archive of a "non-accountability". In this regard, one has also to emphasize Debord's death: by shooting himself, he has chosen when and how to die, according to his desire for absolute freedom, and by dispersing his ashes in the Seine, his friends are faithful to his will not to survive himself: no traces or monuments left, no tomb, no symbolic transmission of Guy Debord to the next generations.

d'état. And of course he has never become rich. His whole life could be summarized, like maybe Andre Bretons life, by a will not to succeed - which puts his will to obscurity in a very different light.

No transmission, no authority: this refusal also explains, at the artistic level, the central weight of the technique of *détournement* mentioned above (*diversion* of texts, pictures, comics, movies, etc), which is, actually the only artistic technique to some extent inherited - from Lautreamont (Isidore Ducasse) and the Dadaists - by the lettrists and the situationists. The only thing they have inherited is a technique of diversion or misappropriation of cultural heritage, a technique that indeed blurs the question of authority and transmission: who is the author of a diverted text? who does transmit something, and what is transmitted? Régis Debray, who has since committed himself many times to the necessity of cultural transmission or tradition, complained once that *The Society of Spectacle* just repeats or plagiarizes the young Marx - and of course many people repeat or plagiarize Debray's statement. Actually, Debord would probably agree with such a negative judgement, since his purpose has never been to become an original author, i.e. to submit himself to the authority of Marx or a few other masters in order to be recognized later at their heir or peer. The plagiarist, one could say, is more interested in the use value of Marx than in his official exchange value as authority. What can I do here and now, in 1967, with Marx? And for which immediate purpose. i.e. for what kind of revolution is a book like the *The Society of Spectacle* necessary? These have been Debord's questions. For him, theory is a matter of tactics or strategy, as he states in *In girum imus nocte*, where theory is compared to military units sent into more or less desperate struggles. And once the war is over, theory becomes useless. There is no heritage for or from those who have used it when it was time to do so[14].

[14] "But theories are only made to die in the war of time. Like military units, they must be sent into battle at the right moment; and whatever their merits or their insufficiencies, they can only be used if they are on hand when they're needed. They have to be replaced because they are constantly being rendered obsolete - by their decisive victories even more than by their patiel defeats. Moreover, no vital eras were neverengendered by a theory; they began with a game or a conflict, or a journey" (*Complete Cinematic Works, op.cit.*, p. 150-151).

Debord's writings and films, in his mind, are made to be used on the spot, transformed immediately in revolutionary action. He is very basically on the side of the immediate, far away from any fascination for the endless and very convenient linguistic mediations to which we are used since we have read Lacan, Derrida or the inevitable Heidegger. He is on the side of the immediate, he has no patience, he does not wait, like any good neurotic scholar, for the death of the master to start to really live. A least, that's the way he represents himself: he always presents or represents himself as being authorized to say what he says only by the way *he lives* or *has lived*, by its ability to realize practically what his discourse implies or postulates, i.e. by his ability to really escape all forms of compromises with the society of spectacle. He speaks up in the name of the unique quality of a life free of any allegiance to the spectacle and its law. I can write what I write because I am what I am. And what I am is not only unique but opposed to everything you all are. Debord's *cogito* is something like *I don't owe you anything, since you are not able to live like I do, since you are not free.*

This *cogito* explains many aspects of Debord's *style*, in a very broad sense. "Style" means the way he writes, but also the way he lives, the way he interacts, if it is possible to speak about interaction in this case, since it is quite unilateral. Debord addresses his readers or the viewers of his films in a very defiant, provocative or even contemptuous style, in a style that disqualifies them as interlocutors. His style is the style of *refutation* (which is the title of one of his last films): I don't owe you anything, especially no further explanations about my works, which anyway have not been made for you. I don't concede you a right to comment my books, positively or negatively, or even to read them, since they have not been made, ultimately, to be read but to be lived, and you don't know how to live, how to be free (and therefore how to read). This is something one can see or more exactly hear not only in a film like *Réfutation de tous les jugements, tant élogieux qu'hostiles, qui ont été jusqu'ici portés sur le film "La Société du Spectacle* (1975), but also in *In girum imus nocte,* as well as in books like *Considérations sur l'assassinat de Gérard Lebovici* or *Cette mauvaise réputation.* The

later Debord has actually spent more time refuting comments about himself, about his books and films, than producing new ideas or concepts. It is as if he had endorsed more and more personally the principle of interruption, which turns out to be also a principle of perfect autonomy, a principle of non-communication and non-exchange.

Speaking of autonomy, it is then no surprise when Debord has committed himself, in the may 68 period, to the support of the most autonomous part of the strikers, those who were rejecting the communist labour unions as well as their little Maoist or Trostkist clones[15]. Just as the strikers should be represented by nobody but by themselves, Debord, in a kind of incorporation of the whole proletariat, equals in his last 20 years the revolution with the defence of his own autonomy, with an endless struggle against any appropriation of what he is by the other, by any kind of other. Owing nothing to anybody, Debord has never conceded to anybody something like a *droit de regard*: what I am is not your business, *cela ne vous regarde pas*[16].

There is a very significant anecdote told by Debord in *Considérations sur l'assassinat de Gérard Lebovici*. When his friend Gérard Lebovici was murdered, there have been a lot of rumours and insinuations in the press - including as serious newspapers as *Le Monde* - about a possible implication or responsibility of Debord in this murder, which is totally absurd. Even tabloid reporters, from magazines like Paris-Match for instance, started to be interested in Debord and hunted him suddenly for interviews or pictures - you can imagine how successful they have been. But actually, one photograph and only one managed to get a rather blurred picture of Debord, which came out in *Paris Match*. The reaction of Debord was not to sue the magazine, but to send to all the newspapers and magazines a very decent picture of himself,

[15] In May and June 68, Debord and the situationists took actively part in a committee called *Comité pour le maintien des occupations* (CMDO), the purpose of which was to help the workers' spontaneous occupations of the factories.

[16] No coincidence if Debord has called this other who watches and shows everything "society of spectacle". The iconoclastic tradition to which he belongs (see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes.The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley, 1994, University of California Press) has obvious autobiographical roots in his case, or more exactly: it has been *incarnated* in his exemplary life. The seemingly very theoretical proposals of *The Society of Spectacle* has been lived by at least one person.

taken by a friend (although he looks a little bit grumpy on this picture). What's the issue here? By sending his picture to the press, Debord refutes the image of an obscure manipulator involved in mysterious plots, an image which becomes dominant in the press. Moreover he shows that his image belongs to himself. It is a way to deny everybody else a *droit de regard* on himself. You want to see me? You will have to do it on my conditions (intruders cannot peer in his private life, he controls his own publicity).

Paradoxically Debord writes autobiographical accounts or realizes autobiographical films exactly for these reasons: to keep being in control of its own representation, its own image. Take a book like *Panegyric*, written in 1989. If Debord chooses to write an autobiography, it is not because, like many other writers in these years in France, from Marguerite Duras to Philippe Sollers or Robbe-Grillet, he understands that the age of avant-garde elitism is over, that an author has to resurrect after having invested during the sixties and seventies so much energy, belief and hopes in the death of the author - especially if he wants to be invited in TV talk-shows. That's definitely not Debord's problem. It is a way to anticipate on the spectacular, to neutralize it. *Panegyric* means praise without any reservation: what I am is my own business and I am very happy with it, you will have to satisfy yourselves with the facts I have decided to tell[17]. Period. Again, as with the explicit refutation texts, we have here this sense of defiance, this taste for a symbolic or rhetorical conflict Debord keeps to stir up, probably not because he would be paranoid, but much more because of his taste for strategy and for strategy games. Debord has been a great gambling-writer, or writing-gambler.

Why under these circumstances should we read Debord, what would finally be his lesson? Debord's lesson is not a theoretical one, it is not so much about the current state of the world or of capitalist society, about the revolution necessary to destroy this society than about our own desire for revolution, about our subversive imaginary or our subversive alibis.

[17] "In the same way, I believe people will have to rest content with the history I am now going to present. Because no one, for a long time to come, will have the audacity to undertake to demonstrate, on any aspect, the

Debord is the analyst not only of our society, of its spectacular logic - this is probably obvious and by the way explicit, especially in *The Society of Spectacle*, when Debord diverts Freud, but he is also the analyst of what one would call our bad revolutionary faith. After having read Debord, after having spent some time with his films or books - even the less known of them - it is probably a little bit more difficult to believe in our own subversive qualities. What Debord shows is the price one has to pay in order to become revolutionary, he shows it by representing himself as the man who has made no compromises, unlike the rest of humankind. He is an example - and one could say that he draws upon the old rhetoric of exemplarity for this purpose. But at the same time, he is a negative example, an example that cannot be followed - just as he himself has never followed anybody. The last sentence of *In Girum imus nocte* is not "to be followed" but "à reprendre dès le début" (= to be resumed from the beginning): back to the beginning, back to your own desire.

Vincent Kaufmann, University for Business, Law and Social Sciences of St. Gallen, Switzerland

contrary of what I will say, whether it be a matter of finding the slightest inexact element in the facts or of maintaining another point of view on them" (*Panegyric*, *op.cit.*, p. 11).