
Books

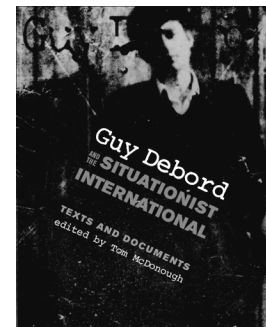
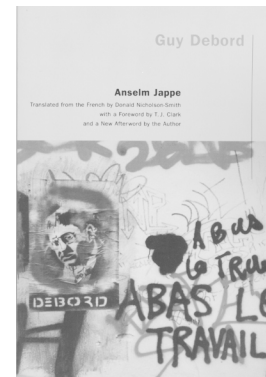
Guy Debord. By Anselm Jappe. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999; 205 pp. \$18.95 paper.

Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents. Edited by Tom McDonough. Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2002; 448 pp.; 113 illustrations. \$44.95 cloth.

“The construction of situations begins on the other side of the modern collapse of the idea of the theater,” wrote Guy Debord in “Report on the Construction of Situations,” the 1957 founding document of the Situationist International (SI) (2002:47). Six years later, the eighth issue of the journal *Internationale Situationiste* featured an editorial entitled “The Avant-Garde of Presence,” proclaiming that the artistic experimentation of the day was not an adequate response: “To the degree that participation becomes more impossible, the second-class engineers of modernist art demand everyone’s participation as their due [...]. They urge us insolently to ‘take part’ in a spectacle, in an art that so *little* concerns us” (144, original emphasis). Still, it would be a mistake to understand Debord’s theories simply as a recent addition to the long history of antitheatrical prejudice. Curiously, even his revolutionary conception of spectacle as “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” ([1967] 1995:12) does not completely exclude theatre. In his 1967 *Society of the Spectacle* Debord praises baroque theatre as “an *art of change* [...] obliged to embody the principle of the ephemeral that it recognized in the world” (134). Debord not only recognized the tectonic shift from a society centered on commodity to one centered on image, but also developed a keen sense for its neuralgic points, such as its intolerance for the passage of time. There is a great deal yet to be learned about the political and artistic potential of the ephemeral from Debord, who as early as 1955 complained about the “exaggerated corpse of Antonin Artaud” (1955).¹ For this last statement alone, if for nothing else, Debord deserves more attention from historians and theoreticians of performance.

Anselm Jappe and Tom McDonough both take an ambitious approach to Debord. Rather than trying to set straight the record about Debord, or to analyze him as a media theorist and ’60s radical, they engage in the important challenge of recontextualizing his work, revealing in the process its astonishing range.

Since 1997, a new biography of Debord has been published in English almost every other year.² This is not as surprising as it may seem given that Debord’s versatility as a political thinker, inventor of new art forms, filmmaker, editor, and avantgarde leader is unrivaled in the period after WWII. His passions and addictions, his catalyzing role in May 1968 in France, his bold gesture of dissolving SI at the peak of its popularity, and his elective obscurity



afterward make him an intriguing subject. His return to the center of public attention when he withdrew his films from distribution in response to French media speculation about the unsolved murder of his friend and publisher Gerard Lebovici in 1984 alone makes a fascinating story. Add his suicide and the posthumous television broadcast of his films and it's easy to see how Debord's life was raw material waiting to be mythologized, narrativized, biographized, and, of course, commodified.

Jappe does not want to take part in selling or saving Debord. His book is a biography of a rare kind: when mentioned at all, the incidents from his subject's life are used only to provide historical context for his ideas. While never forgetting Debord's reversal of the relation between (avantgarde) art and (leftist) politics—instead of art being used as means of revolutionary politics, revolutionary politics becomes artistic means—Jappe scrupulously traces the origins of Debord's political thought, convincingly demonstrating that, apart from Marx and Hegel, Georg Lukács's *History of the Class Consciousness* is the major, though insufficiently acknowledged, source of Debord's analysis of spectacular economy. Though Lukács was published in the aftermath of the Hungarian revolution of 1919, it was obvious that in the spring of 1968 Situationists were following his ideas in espousing the spontaneous organization of revolutionary groups in a manner similar to the role “workers’ councils” played in the Hungarian revolution. Jappe expands this obvious connection to illuminate the ways in which spectacle is inseparable from Lukács's analysis of commodity fetishism. Two moments in this analysis are of particular importance: first, the recognition of the centrality of the idea of reification—defined by Jappe as the “Operation whereby fetishism transforms processes into things” (22)—to Debord's political analysis, and, second, the shift of commodification from space to time. Debord believed that he identified the new revolutionary agent. He held that everyone should make revolution, like art, as professed in the famous Lautréamont plea that poetry should be written by all. The agents of revolution are neither workers nor students because in postindustrial society the means of production is no longer at stake, but time itself, the very fabric of our lives, has been incessantly expropriated and alienated.

Jappe places Debord's theses about society of the spectacle in the context of the extraordinary history of Marxist thought in the 20th century, and proposes his own thesis that “the action of the historical proletariat” climaxed in its successful integration into capitalist society (136).³ Even though unforgivably brief, his comparative analysis of Debord and Adorno⁴ proves that a meaningful corrective of Debord's absolute trust in the immediacy of action can be found in Adorno's warning addressed to “those over-preoccupied with reification” that “the total liquefaction of everything thinglike regress[es] to the subjectivism of the pure act” (141). Debord and Adorno's disagreement about the role of art in postindustrial society merits further exploration, which Claire Gilman undertakes, albeit in passing, in her essay “Asger Jorn's Avant-Garde Archives,” published in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents* edited by McDonough (189–213).

Although a minor point in Gilman's article, this is a major indication of the ways in which Jappe's “biography” and McDonough's anthology complement one another: while Jappe's analysis of Debord's politics is underlined by an acknowledgement of the artistic aspect of his project, McDonough focuses on the artistic aspects of Debord and Situationist International without losing sight of their political goals. McDonough's volume evolved from the special issue of the journal *October* dedicated to Debord (no. 79, Winter 1997). All of the translations and critical articles, save for the editor's introduction, have been replicated and a significant number of important Situationist texts have

been added, which makes this book the most focused and best organized selection of Situationist texts in English. Excellent critical essays include Thomas Y. Levin's seminal essay "Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord," complemented by Giorgio Agamben's brilliant miniature "Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord's Films," essays on Situationists' relation to architecture and urbanism by Libero Andreotti and Tom McDonough, as well as Jonathan Crary's "Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory." In his introduction to the special issue of *October*, McDonough underscored the necessity of "an effective historicization of the movement" (1997:9). He lives up to his own demand: this volume allows us to recognize Debord as one of the most accomplished artist-philosophers of the 20th century. That recognition does not reduce the significance of his political thought but is, to the contrary, inseparable from it.

—Branislav Jakovljevic

Notes

1. English translation available online at *The Situationist International Text Library* <<http://library.nothingness.org>>.
2. Len Bracken's 1997 biography, *Guy Debord: Revolutionary*, is plagued by the pervasive hagiographic tone; Andrew Hussey's 2001 *The Game of War: The Life and Death of Guy Debord* is a biography written with a great attention to detail, which is both its main advantage and shortcoming.
3. The implied analogy with the Situationists is hard to overlook.
4. Jappe's article "*Sic Transit Gloria Artis: 'The End of Art' for Theodor Adorno and Guy Debord*," published in the special issue of the journal *SubStance* dedicated to Guy Debord (1999) is disappointing in that it brings more detailed comparison of their ideas, but repeats verbatim the conclusions on the subject already stated in the book.

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