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By Stewart Home

Did Guy Debord kill the avant-garde? Two new translations of works by the Situationist *capo de tutti capi* (Complete Cinematic Works and Considerations on the Assassination of Gérard Lebovici) give ample proof of death's regenerative effects, says Stewart Home

Complete Cinematic Works: Scripts, Stills, Documents, Guy Debord, translated and edited by Ken Knabb, AK Press, Oakland and Edinburgh 2003

Considerations on the Assassination of Gérard Lebovici, Guy Debord, translated by Robert Greene, Tam Tam Books, Los Angeles 2001

In an epoch that can only produce mediocre movies like *Lost in Translation*, truly bad film-makers may at last be appreciated. If Edward D. Wood the anti-auteur behind such trash classics as *Plan 9 from Outer Space* currently enjoys the almost dubious honour of being renowned as the world's worst director, Guy Debord remains one of his fiercest rivals for this tin crown. A late-comer to Lettrist cinema, Debord took the use of blank screens and soundtrack silence previously employed by the likes of Isidore Isou and Maurice Lemaitre to its logical conclusion. Debord's first film, the feature length *Screams In Favour Of De Sade*, is a schlock anti-classic from 1952. The film has no images but consists of black stock with silence and white light with dialogue. The final 24 minutes is entirely black and silent. Although Debord offered no fully elaborated theoretical explanation for the production of *Screams*, I believe his intention was to transform cinema into theatre, turning the audience into actors rather than treating them as passive spectators. What's important is what happens amongst the audience when the film is shown, not what is on screen – which in a classical gesture of avant-garde iconoclasm is essentially nothing. After this auspicious debut which may be taken as one of several definitive deaths for the avant-garde (and certainly not the first, for from its late 19th century inception as retro-futurist symbolism, the avant-garde has delighted in endlessly restaging its own death), Debord could only go backwards as a film maker because after *Screams* he had nowhere else to go.

Debord's post-*Screams* movies are visually numbing celluloid collages with bombastic spoken word soundtracks featuring guest appearances from actresses such as Jean-Luc Godard's one-time wife Anna Karina. The ineptitude of this film work demonstrates very well how capitalism destroys human creativity, and Debord's iconoclastic hatred of visual sensuousness might well be taken as evidence that for all his feral talk about the realisation and suppression of art, its realisation was something of which this almost reluctant avant-gardist would remain forever incapable. If as the specialised non-specialists of an alienated world artists are a deformed prefiguration of the communised individual, then the realisation and suppression of art must necessarily entail the spread of unfettered sensuousness both within and beyond the cultural sphere. Communism is a breaking down and overflowing of all the barriers that separate art and politics, philosophy and science etc.; it is the realisation of our species being in all its multifaceted aspects. In other words communism will enable me to be an egotist in the morning, a porn star in the afternoon and a critical critic at night. The iconoclasm of the avant-garde is anti-sensuous and the religious origin of its anti-ocular fury is readily evident to anyone familiar with the Reformation. Communism entails the reconciliation of the rational and the sensual, whereas what Debord – like all avant-gardists – did, is both anti-sensual and pseudo-rational. It should go without saying that Debord is to be valued above all for his flaws, since these illustrate very well the traps that revolutionaries must avoid and therefore a working knowledge of his faults helps us pick our way around such mistakes.

If Debord made bad films, then on the evidence of *Complete Cinematic Works*, Ken Knabb makes even worse translations. Not only is Knabb's latest effort inferior to that of earlier translators of Debord's film scripts, it simultaneously falls below the minimal standards of his own previous work. This can no doubt partially be accounted for by the fact that Knabb claims he was asked to make the new translations by Debord's widow; however, this in no way excuses him for the role he has played in foisting this abomination upon the world. It is curious to examine the way Knabb has retranslated work he'd already rendered into ersatz-English in his *Situationist International Anthology* (edited by Knabb, Bureau of Public Secrets, Berkeley 1981). From the *Anthology* (page 8): 'All aware people of our time agree that art can no longer be justified as a superior activity...'; whereas in *Complete Cinematic Works* this would-be sorcerer's apprentice offers the following new rendering (page 207): 'Every reasonably aware person of our time is aware of the obvious fact that art can no longer be justified as a superior activity...' The earlier translation is not particularly good but the newer version with its extra qualifications and repetitions is far worse. Knabb's renderings are literalistic. In his desperate attempts to achieve accuracy, Knabb sticks too closely to the French structure of Debord's plagiarised prose and misses all its subtleties. And contra Debord, *revolutionaries* know art could never be justified as a superior activity. The various pieces of commentary Knabb has constructed around his translations reveal that his understanding of communism is as deformed as his grasp of the translator's 'art'. In his introduction Knabb writes: 'If we ever get out of this mess...future generations will look back on Guy Debord as the person who contributed more to that liberation than anyone else in the twentieth century.' It is of course a banality that the emancipation of the working class is the task of the workers themselves; and Knabb's bourgeois idealism on this score mirrors that of his guru Debord, who is pushed forward here as a romanticised leader figure. Debord certainly didn't contribute more to 20th century revolutionary praxis than Bordiga, Luxemburg, Gorter and a whole host of others. It is not only pointless but actively counter-revolutionary to engage in the kind of puffing Knabb performs on behalf of his idol.

The factors that led a small but in recent years growing band of western intellectuals to an interest in Debord are complex but one event close to the centre of this tangled matrix was the murder of his patron Gérard Lebovici. Debord's small book *Considerations On The Assassination Of Gérard Lebovici* offers no real insight into the homicide but provides instead endless self-aggrandising reflections on the media coverage that falsely connected its author to this killing. While Debord was clearly mortified by Lebovici's murder, this in no way prevented him from using French media interest in the matter to catapult himself to something approaching the iconic status of fellow founder members of the Situationist International like Asger Jorn and Alexander Trocchi. As a genuine 20th century monster, Debord doesn't hold a light to a 'drug fiend' like Trocchi, but very belatedly he can almost match his Scottish comrade's beat notoriety. For the astute reader *Considerations...* provides curious insights into how Debord achieved this reversal of fortune. *Considerations...* read alongside Knabb's very bad translations actually provides an excellent introduction to Debord, and only partly because Knabb replicates and then magnifies most of Debord's faults. Debord is ultimately a slight figure whether considered politically, intellectually or aesthetically. That said, through death (restaging the death of the avant-garde, his unwarranted association with Lebovici's murder and his own suicide) Debord has succeeded in posthumously projecting himself into the imaginations of various fringe intellectuals as a monster of world-historical proportions. This small achievement is worth scrutinising precisely because it tells us much about the world in which we live.

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