

From Mapping to Solitude: Aspects of a Debordian Iconography (teaching notes, 1997-1998)

J'ai parlé de la solitude comme acceptation fondamentale. Mais il n'est pas douteux que la solitude est préférable à une action collective compromise. [...] Personne plus que moi n'a consciemment choisi cet éclatement et la solitude corollaire.

Guy Debord to Constant, 3 March 1959

There can be little doubt that Guy Debord held to a position on the historic avant-garde – which for him encompassed a temporal range from Romanticism to Surrealism – which entailed a rejection of Pop and the advanced art of his time – above all the *nouveau roman* – as empty formalism. The harshness of the rejection of the pseudo-avant-garde of the post World War II period has been oft noted if not often acted upon. There can be little doubting the sincerity of Debord's emphatic rejection. Michel Surya, who would take Debord to task for his rejection of the art of his period, notes: “Préfaçant la réédition de *Potlatch*, en 1985, Debord écrivit: “Le jugement de *Potlatch* concernant la fin de l'art moderne semblait, devant la pensée de 1954, très excessif. On sait maintenant, par une expérience déjà longue (...), que depuis 1954 on n'a jamais plus vu paraître, où que ce soit, un seul artiste auquel on aurait pu reconnaître un véritable intérêt.”¹ When Debord comes to organize the iconography of the second volume of his *Panegyrique*, there will be nothing present that, visually, was not already accounted for by the foundation of the Situationist project from 1954 through to 1967 with the publication of *La Société du spectacle*. Indeed, one author, utterly misunderstanding Debord's aims for the iconography of *Panegyrique* (II), argues that this volume is but a tiresome piece of repetition for an increasingly boring pose on Debord's part – the pose of the pessimistic memorialist – a repetition which, we are to understand, adds nothing. In which case, “comment, dans ces conditions, Debord peut-il prétendre, en toute honnêteté, respecter ses lecteurs?”² In one sense, of course, Debord does nothing more than used to be common practice in, say, the Gallimard Pléiade editions – for Cocteau, for Apollinaire etc. – namely, to produce a book of iconography to accompany the *oeuvres complètes*; in another less banal sense, in so doing, what Debord was undertaking was not merely a control of public perception but an exercise in the responsibility of self towards the self. What is striking, however, and what is foregrounded by these two very different passages from Surya and Gonzalvez, is the continuity in Debord's iconography – an iconography that was not uniquely contemporary – though always *modern* – which perforce raises the question of a self-construction *après-coup*. To begin a close attention to Debord's iconography there could be no better starting-point than *The Naked City*, one of the

¹ Michael Surya, “Le Cadavre surfait de ... (Guy Debord et la littérature),” *Lignes*, no. 31 (May 1997): 207-208.

² Shigenobu Gonzalvez, *Guy Debord ou la beauté du négatif* (Paris: Éditions mille et une, 1998), 57.

founding documents of the Situationist International and probably the visual construction more than any other, outside his films, for which Debord is known.

Many “sources” have been given or suggested for Debord’s supposed “map” of Paris, *The Naked City*, 1957, the treatment of which has been predominantly semiotic, but none has arrived at an understanding of how *The Naked City*, and its compendium diptych *Discours sur les passions de l’amour*, 1957, works within Debord’s understanding. *The Naked City* draws upon so many sources – army maps, mélodrame (*Les Vampyres* by Feuillade), Dell Maps - that they should be better approached as templates for what is a document of foundation, not only in the sense that it coincides with and assists in the inauguration of the Situationist International project in 1957, but in the more fundamental sense that it is a commentary upon the foundation of modern French urbanism – which is to say, Paris – under Henri IV and through this implicit reference is made to the office and function of the Grand Voyer (i.e., centralization). In this light we might re-consider the choice of elements made by Debord (Place Dauphine, Trésor, rue d’Anjou, etc.) This is the significance of Gaston Bardet’s *schema* of *La Fusée de la vie ou La dissociation d’éléments originellement conjoints*:

Fig. 1. Gaston Bardet, *La Fusée de la vie ou La dissociation d’éléments originellement conjoints*, schema for Marcel Poëte, *Paris, son évolution créatrice, avec quinze schémas de Gaston Bardet* (Paris: Vincent, Fréal et Cie, 1938 and *Architecture d’aujourd’hui*, no.3 March 1939)

In his own study on Paris, *Naissance et méconnaissance de l’urbanisme*, Bardet will reconstruct Moreau’s plan for the embellishment of Paris, laying out the elements along the Seine as intended, but never accomplished by Moreau:

Fig. 2. Gason Bardet, *Plan général du cours de la seine par Louis Moreau, en 1768*, from Bardet, *Naissance et méconnaissance de l’urbanisme: Paris* (Paris: SABRI, 1951)

with, in the backgorund,

Fig.2b Patte, *Monuments érigés en France à la gloire de Louis XV*, 1756

from which it is clear that the axis of the Seine has always controlled the disposition of public monuments (and therefore power) in Paris – so obvious is this fact that no one has ever observed that in Debord’s supposed map of Paris there is no Seine, and no way in which the Seine could reasonably be “inferred”:

Fig. 3. Guy Debord, *The Naked City* (screenprint), 1957.

(Indeed, the primary situating of Debord’s “Plans psychogéographiques” should be conceived in terms of counter-plans – in the way in which today we have come to speak of counter-monuments – the legibility of which is in no small part constrained by the

tradition of Patte and Moreau.) Where the culturalist Poète, as is acknowledged by Aldo Rossi, will see the street as the kernel of urban generation and identity, Le Corbusier, whom Debord and the Situationists will characterize as extensions of a police state for his desire to suppress the street, will desire order and a tabula rasa:

Fig. 4. Le Corbusier, *Place pour une oeuvre de sentiment moderne*, Urbanisme (Paris: G. Crès et Cie, 1925).

Where Le Corbusier will use an aerial photograph of Paris to observe:

Fig. 5. Le Corbusier, *Est-ce une vue du septième cercle de l'enfer de Dante? Non, hélas, c'est le gît effroyable de centaines de milles habitants. La ville de Paris.* *Urbanisme*, 1925,

Debord, in his last and autobiographical film, will take a comparable aerial view of Paris (the Left Bank) and instead see in it creativity, the creativity of a generation:

Fig. 6. Guy Debord, "Il y avait alors, sur la rive gauche du fleuve [...] un quartier où le négatif tenait sa court," film still, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, black and white, 35 mm 1978 (Simar Films; distributed in 1981).

In 1957, Debord and Asger Jorn will collaborate on two unconventional "books," the first, *Fin de Copenhague* followed by the *Mémoires*. In both works, but especially the *Mémoires*, the city, all the more so Paris, is depicted as in movement, as a chamber of echos (of quotations, of memories, of desires), but above all as a light, airy substance permitting of mutual imbrication, the mutual imbrication, that is, of subject and object, person and environment ("un jeu du milieu" as is written in one plate from the *Mémoires* depicting map fragments of the Ile de la Cité), movement brought to the intoxication of touch and sight. To this end fragments of maps are embedded, discovered *implanted* into translucent washes

Fig. 7. Asger Jorn (with Guy Debord), *Fin de Copenhague*, 1957

as are *still photographic* portraits implanted into the fabric and substance of the depicted city

Fig. 8. Guy Debord (with **structures portantes** [i.e., load bearing] by Asger Jorn), *Mémoires*, 1957/58

conveying a movement that can reasonably be described as filmic. This, indeed, is the characteristic movement of the *Mémoires*: that particular form of avant-garde film first explored systematically by Alain Resnais in *Nuit et brouillard* (1955) which consists mainly of *photographic stills*. (Let it not be forgotten that the only legible image in Debord's first film, *Hurlement en faveur de Sade* (1952), is a photographic portrait of himself.)

The rapprochement between city and subject, person and environment that is here being suggested can be appreciated all the more when it is realized that an important aspect of the expressive dimension of the *Mémoires* :

Fig. 9. a) Guy Debord (with **structure portantes** by Asger Jorn), *Mémoires*, 1957/58

derives from a set of little-known ink drawings executed by Jorn in 1957:

Fig. 9. b) Asger Jorn, Ink drawing, 1957, exhibited in Galerie Van de Loo, München, 1963.

c) Asger Jorn, Ink drawing, 1957, exhibited in Galerie Van de Loo, 1963.³

In the same year, the Englishman Ralph Rumney meets Jorn and executes a self-portrait under Jorn's influence in the manner / style of Jorn's ink drawings of 1957:

Fig. 9. d) Ralph Rumney, *Self-Portrait*, 1957. Ink on paper. London: Tate Gallery Archive Collection

which can be aligned with comparable gestural configuration in *Fin de Copenhagen*

e) Asger Jorn (with Guy Debord), *Fin de Copenhagen*, 1957

to suggest the imbrication of subject-portraiture with the experienced movement of the city in terms of filmic dissolution.

Debord's sensibility, very early on, is open not only to avant-garde techniques, but at the same time his disposition for the Baroque finds especial poignancy in the painting of Claude Lorrain:

Fig. 10. Claude Gellée (dit le Lorrain):

“Je ne vois guère que ces deux ports à la tombée du jour peints par Claude Lorrain, qui sont au Louvre, et qui présentent la frontière même de deux ambiances urbaines les plus diverses qui soient, pour rivaliser en beauté avec les plans du métro affichés dans Paris.”

Guy Debord, “Introduction à une critique de la géographie urbaine,”
Les Lèvres nues, no. 6, 1955

³ On Asger Jorn and the Galerie Van de Loo, cf. Otto Van de Loo, ed., *Asger Jorn in München: Dokumentation seines malerischen Werkes* (München: Boer, 1996).

- a) *Ulysses returning Chryseis to her Father*. Oil on canvas, 1644. Paris: Musée du Louvre.
- b) *Seaport with setting Sun*. Oil on canvas, 1639. Paris: Musée du Louvre.

(A question that can be pursued is why it should be – since we can consider Breughel’s *Tower of Babel* as used in Debord’s film of *La Société du spectacle* – to painting that Debord and his friends such as Ivain (who calls upon de Chirico) and Jorn (who makes recourse to nature, even if a détourned nature against Constant’s technological practice) make recourse when they wish to convey some important architectural experience?) Throughout his life Debord will hold to this taste which will be so powerful that it will, from beginning to end, be a part of the mis-en-scène of his films; that is to say, that the (Baroque) iconography of Claude – trees, boat, water, reverie – will structure Debord’s approach to the city and environment. Thus from his third film, *Critique de la séparation* (1961) to his final film, *In girum imus nocte* (1978/81), we see a persistent approach to a particular part of the city of Paris – the Ile de la Cité, the Pointe du Vert-Galant, no image is more frequently reproduced by Debord – as though this part of Paris – rich in history and ambiguities – is somehow in a state of suspension (childhood?), a ceasura or interval of separation at the heart of the Paris of motorcars (in the *Société du spectacle* he would cite Mumford, so close through Geddes to Poëte’s school, and later he would cite Louis Chevalier on the *Assassinat de Paris*):

Fig. 11. Guy Debord:

- a) “Restent ces paysages ...,” film still of **La Seine, dans le centre de Paris**, *Critique de la séparation*, black and white, 35mm (Dansk-Fransk Experimentalfilmskompagni), 1961
- b) “Non, nous allons passer la rivière ...,” film still **La Seine et la pointe occidentale de l’île de la Cité**, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*.
- c) “Quant à moi ...,” film still **Tout au long des murs de l’Arsenal de Venise**, *In girum imus nocte....*

These metonymic fragments – the very space of water and air where Debord’s ashes were scattered in 1995 – contain, too, the history wrought by the Paris of the Third Empire, as Debord knew only too well:

Fig. 12. Pierre Lavedan, *Ile de la Cité avant et après Napoléon III*. Diagram (figs. 32 and 33) from, *Histoire de l’Urbanisme: Epoque contemporaine* (Paris: Henri Laurens, 1952).

Not only does this Baroque iconography of Claude enter Debord's mis-en-scene of his films controlling the *depiction* of the city, it is, clearly, part-and-parcel, of the structure of approach to the city-scape when the Situationists begin to think the possibilities of a Situationist city and a Situationist *dwelling*, rather than merely a Situationist architecture, as is made only too clear from the mis-en-page of the photographs depicting the approach to a *site* (*emplacement*) of possible dwelling published in the midst of a collective discussion on the possibilities of unitary urbanism, the description of which photographs could not be more telling:

Fig. 11. d) *Emplacement pour une maison à usage situationniste* (at the central point of the Allée des Cygnes, Paris), *International situationniste*, no.3 (1959): 13. ⁴

(It should be clear not only that this iconography is due to Debord – it goes back to his *Critique de la séparation* from 1961⁵ - but that it is not Constant. As Constant himself quite recently acknowledged of the Ivain-Debord position on the city: “Because he [Ivain] was working with the material of the existing city and he didn't think of other possibilities [he] was not talking like an architect but as an inhabitant of an existing city, of the use of the city but not of the construction of the city.”⁶) Always, however, what is attested by these fragments and echos is a view of the city as sedimented – it is surely not an accident that Debord's companion Gilles Ivain had written in the manifesto “Formulaire pour un urbanisme nouveau” (1955) that “Toutes les villes sont géologiques” – a view of the city wrought by time and always already existing structures, fragments and implantations. Whence from beginning to end Debord's insistence on the significance and movement and time:

Fig. 13. Guy Debord:

- a) “La sensation de l'écoulement du temps ...,” still photograph, *In girum imus nocte ...*
- b) “En ce sens, j'ai aimé mon époque ...,” still photograph, *In girum imus nocte ...*

One modality of time, that is, of the embodiment of time, that was also consistently important to Debord, and which has been largely neglected, is that texture of time which can only be experienced, become palpable in *solitude*: retreat (**retrait** in French carries a wider and more powerful register), withdrawal must have its architectural form, whence the increased importance of Champot in the Auvergne for Debord:

⁴ *Emplacement* (nm): site, situation, place, spot, seat, ground, plot, piece of ground.

⁵ Cf. Guy Debord, *Critique de la séparation* in *Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes 1952-1978* (Paris: Gallimard 1994), 49.

⁶ Constant, “A Conversation with Constant,” in *The Activist Drawing: Retracing Situationist Architectures from Constant's New Babylon to Beyond*, ed. Catherine de Zegher and Mark Wigley (New York: The Drawing Center and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 24. Of course, it is simply not the case that the Debordian position does not have a view about the construction of the city, but this will be approached in another context.

Fig. 14. “*Sa bibliothèque vaste et précise*,” Phillipe Sollers; photograph of Debord’s library from his cottage in Champot, in the Auvergne, taken from the film by Phillipe Sollers and Emmanuel Descombes, *Guy Debord, une étrange guerre*, 1999.

Fig. 15. Guy Debord, *Champot*, photograph from Guy Debord, *Panégryrique*, tome second (Paris: Fayard, 1997).

It should not, then, be a surprise that in his *Panégryrique* (tome second) he should quote Li Po.

There is, finally, another body, indeed, one might even say, another genre of iconography associated with Debord, what might be termed an iconography of anger and violence. What is telling about this genre of iconography – the riots in Watts, cities aflame, the burnt bodies of lynching – is that it occurs in the collective context of the journal *Internationale situationniste*. In volume of two of his *Panégryrique* – his autobiography – which consists wholly of photographs, Debord reproduces only two such images and both are clearly of Paris 1968 – not of Randers, not of Watts or any other foreign place – and as such indicate a moment of exaltation before the realization of the missed time – *an avant-garde*, he will say, *has only one time in which to realize itself or it will be undone by its time*. What one might say is that the iconography of the City of Violence *is not about ways of living, but of failure*. The form of that failure at a certain moment was nuclear war, hence the telling image of the world in the form of a globe / map of Western Europe reduced to ashes:

Fig. 16. J.V. Martin, *L’Europe 4 heures 30 après le début de la 3e guerre mondiale*, (thermo-nuclear map), *Internationale situationniste*, no. 9 (August 1964): 32.

(The Paul Valéry who famously reported to T.S. Eliot that “L’Europe est finie,” had already observed in his “La Crise de l’esprit,” published at the end of the Great War, that we now know that ashes signify something.) In his *Panégryrique*, published three years after his death, it is not this apocalyptic iconography that Debord will use – no such imagery is to be found in the book – but instead the diction of the scholar-poet Li Po who is cited, underneath a photograph of the Pointe du Vert-Galant: “Tout cela est à jamais fini, tout s’écoule à la fois, les événements et les hommes.” Whence the demand to re-think the living city, the City of Life, which will not be “hiérarchique et esclavagiste,” as Mezioud Ouldamer, drawing upon notes shared with him by Debord, concludes his *Le Cauchemar immigré dans la décomposition de la France* (Éditions Gérard Lebovici, 1986).