

# HISTORY AS SWISS CHEESE

BY LEWIS SHINER

*Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20th Century*, by Greil Marcus (Harvard University Press, 1989 hardcover, 496 pages, \$29.95)

You can't defend yourself against something you can't see. H. G. Wells' madman Griffin knew it, and so did the Invisible Kid (of the eponymous movie) when he went to check out the girls' locker room. It's the same with ideas.

Or, to put it another way: say twentieth-century culture is a piece of Swiss cheese. Here's a book about the holes.

A SPECTER IS HAUNTING our culture. In *Lipstick Traces*, Greil Marcus connects the dots of Dada, Situationism, and the Sex Pistols, and comes up with a rough outline of the beast (in much the way that the townspeople pelted Griffin with flour). Its name is Anarchy, and as society locates and lops off one head here, another pops up over there. Consciously or not, artists on the fringe of society seem to return over and over to many of the same themes: the limitations of language, life as a "spectacle," denial of the future.

These can all be seen—or rather not seen—as disappearances. Meaning, which is to say content that relates to us, right now, has disappeared from language. "Everything that was directly lived," says Situationist Guy Debord, "has moved away into a representation" (Marcus, p. 98). It has become a mere "situation"; in Marxist terms, it has become commodified. Our society has become so obsessed with the future—living on cultural as well as monetary credit—that the present has all but disappeared. Extreme measures are required to make us *be here now*.

One such measure is the music of the Sex Pistols. Marcus quotes Mod guitarist Pete Townshend's description of listening to the Pistols: "What immediately strikes you is that *this is actually happening*. This is a bloke, with a brain on his shoulders, who is actually saying something he *sincerely* believes is happening in the world" (p. 1).

Marcus sees the Pistols as nihilistic—in the best possible sense of the word, of course: "as a sound, it seemed to make no sense at all, to make nothing, only to destroy" (p. 64). Yet this sort of destruction is the ultimate act of faith. "Whatever had been made had to be unmade, and then made anew" (p. 247). The long road that led him to write *Lipstick Traces* began with a quote from Isabelle Anscombe's 1978 book *Punk*: "Punk must be willing to reject itself as it becomes established, to be open to change and to forgo the profits. It is a mode of anarchy as much as the Dadaist 'Cabaret Voltaire' at the end of the First World War" (p. 197).

In fact Marcus finds historical precedents for punk all the way back to the 14th century Brethren of the Free Spirit, through the Paris Commune of 1871, Dada, Lettrism, Situationism, and the French student uprising of May, 1968. This “mystery of spectral connections” (p. 4), an “unacknowledged legacy of desire, resentment, and dread” (p. 18) is the clear lamination that binds his intricately nested digressions.

Sometimes he is guilty of the sin of which he accuses the Lettrists, “so caught up in their own vision that it can explain anything to them.” The grand structure of the book, even after two readings and copious notes, was difficult for me to make out. But then why should this surprise me? What Marcus has done is to trap a cultural binding force between the covers of a book. This force immediately begins to attract other ideas to it: O.B. Hardison, Jr.’s, *Disappearing Through the Skylight: Culture and Technology in the Twentieth Century*; a novel by William Wiser called *Disappearances*; Marx’s “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844”; the Sex Pistols’ one studio album, *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here’s the Sex Pistols*, which in 1977 seemed to me to be nothing but noise, but thirteen years later grounds me solidly in the here and now and clearly foreshadows much of the music I loved in the 1980s.

In fact, this sort of subjective reaction seems most appropriate here. As in reading Kafka (an early proponent of absurdism who would not be out of place in Marcus’ book), the full weight of the narrative only hits home when you begin to take it personally. If I had the months and months that it would require, I would love to formulate an even more idiosyncratic response, to present this review in the form of a comic strip/collage using photos, xeroxed text, *detournee’d* comics (pirated comics with subverted word balloons), and plenty of alternating solid black and solid white panels in homage to Guy Debord’s riot-provoking non-film, *Hurllements en faveur de Sade* (Screams for de Sade). It would look like Andre Bertrand’s *Le Retour de la colonne Duritti* (illustrated in *Lipstick Traces*), one of the first blows struck in the student riots of May, 1968.

But this collage review doesn’t exist. It is yet another invisible text, bound, like so many other invisible ideas, to *Lipstick Traces* by lines of ideational force.

In time-tested comic book fashion, my review would feature plenty of arguments, maybe even fist fights. “I wanted to shape the story,” Marcus says, “so that every fragment, every voice, would speak in judgment of every other” (p. 23). Here’s Malcom McLaren, boutique operator and would-be pop svengali, claiming in *The Great Rock and Roll Swindle* that the Pistols are no more than his mouthpiece. Here’s Johnny Rotten, green-toothed, covered in blood and spittle, proclaiming the Pistols a real band, entirely responsible for their own success. Lettrist Michel Mourre wrote “We would become ruins”; French students scrawled “Soon to be picturesque ruins” on the walls of Paris; a slogan for the Sex Pistols said, “Believe in the ruins.” The famous Sex Pistols flyer showing the Queen with her lips safety-pinned echoes a poster from May of 1968. Where is the truth?

It’s in a box, and a random event has already poisoned it—or not. The Truth has become Schrodinger’s Truth, infinitely contingent. Says Marcus, when the punk band the Slits “said ‘Fuck You’; it meant ‘Why not’” (p. 37).

“Suicide was suddenly a code word for meaning what you said” (p. 67). Words no longer convey the truth. The Dadaists have to stand on the stage of the Cabaret Voltaire and shout nonsense syllables. “Disintegration,” in the words of Dadaist Hugo Ball, “right in the innermost process of creation” (p. 221). Umbah-umbah. The Lettrists compose poems from single letters. Marcus is pursuing “a voice of teeth ground down to points, more suited to manifestos and hit singles than to poems, a near-absolute loathing of one’s time and place, the note held until disgust turns into glee” (p. 195).

TIME OUT. In 1979 I was drumming in a punk band called Reptilikus (or Reptilicus; we didn’t even care how it was spelled). A lot of the nihilism of punk was neither pretty, nor fun, nor in any way transcendent or liberating. You get tired of slipping on the gobs that your audience has spit on the floor (if not at you). The scene here in Austin was pretty good-natured, but in Penelope Spheris’ *Decline of Western Civilization Part One* there is a telling moment where lead singer Lee Ving of Fear “warms up” his audience with an endless homophobic rant. Swastika and skinheads and Dr. Martens boots. A denial of the hippie ideals of peace and love. The cry of the spoiled child: it’s not perfect, let’s smash it.

This too is part of the spectral connection. Guy Debord finally exiled everyone from the Situationist movement except himself. In the 1920s, the original Dadaists “disavowed it almost with the fervor of 1930s Communists damning the god that failed” (p. 202). Lettrist manifestos often have the tone of the frustrated pop star who demands the reward of the artist without being willing to face the discipline.

Still. When I see “Ne Travaillez Jamais” scrawled against a French wall, when I hear Johnny Rotten sing “No future” against another wall, a wall of angry sound, when I see the Grammy Awards turned into a spectacle where rehearsed production numbers replace spontaneous performance, where dialog read from teleprompters replaces speech, where gold-plated trophies replace the achievements which are being “honored,” then I feel my own alienation as well, the “degradation” as Debord describes it, “of *being* into *having*,” which is inevitably followed by the “sliding of *having* into *appearing*” (p. 140), as we only become real when we become part of the spectacle.

Against this, Marcus sets the beauty of the “situation” (the opposite of the spectacle). “Objective acceptance (‘I love that street because it’s beautiful’) could turn into subjective refusal (‘That street is ugly because I hate it’), which could turn into a glimpse of utopia (‘That street is beautiful because I love it’)” (p. 364). Or, as the Lettrists said, “The new beauty will be a beauty of SITUATION, *provisional* and lived” (p. 369). Be here now. No less a light than Paul McCartney was touched by the muse of Situationism in describing the passing of the Beatles: “Nothing in life really stays .... They have to go in order for the next thing to come. You can almost add to the beauty of a thing by accepting that it’s temporary” (p. 398).

This may be the only beauty possible here in the Swiss cheese of the Twentieth Century, the cheese that is more holes than cheese. “In modern society, leisure (What do I want to do today?) was replaced by entertainment

(What is there to see today?) ... It's a good show, but I feel dead: my God, what's wrong with me? ... and so you left each show diminished, with less than you had brought to it. That, the Situationists said again and again, was why the show had to be stopped" (pp.51-52).

The Sex Pistols stopped the pop music show of the 70s. They exploded the corpses of Van McCoy and Edison Lighthouse, revealed the nothingness inside, cleared the way for the provisional and lived music of Elvis Costello and Husker Du and Living Colour. They acted impulsively, thoughtlessly, and at the same time they were just one more outbreak of the inarticulate rage that has swept, like mad Griffin, invisibly through our century. At least it might have been invisible, had not Marcus spotted the footprints of that rage, faint as lipstick traces on a cigarette, and drawn its ragged outline here.

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