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Cover Story

The Revolution Will Be Staged



by Ed Felien

The Rude Mechs (earlier known as the Rude Mechanicals) attempt the impossible by adapting Greil Marcus' "Lipstick Traces" to the stage. "Lipstick Traces" is not a novel. It is "A Secret History of the Twentieth Century." Marcus shows the interconnectedness of Dada, The French Lettrist movement and Punk Rock as the underground tradition of revolt in the twentieth century. Marcus and the group show how a nonsense act in a small cabaret and a schoolboy prank became a mass movement.

The first character on stage is John of Leyden, a sixteenth century Dutch heretic. He was proclaimed the King of the town of Münster in May of 1534. According to Greil Marcus, "Münster was purified:

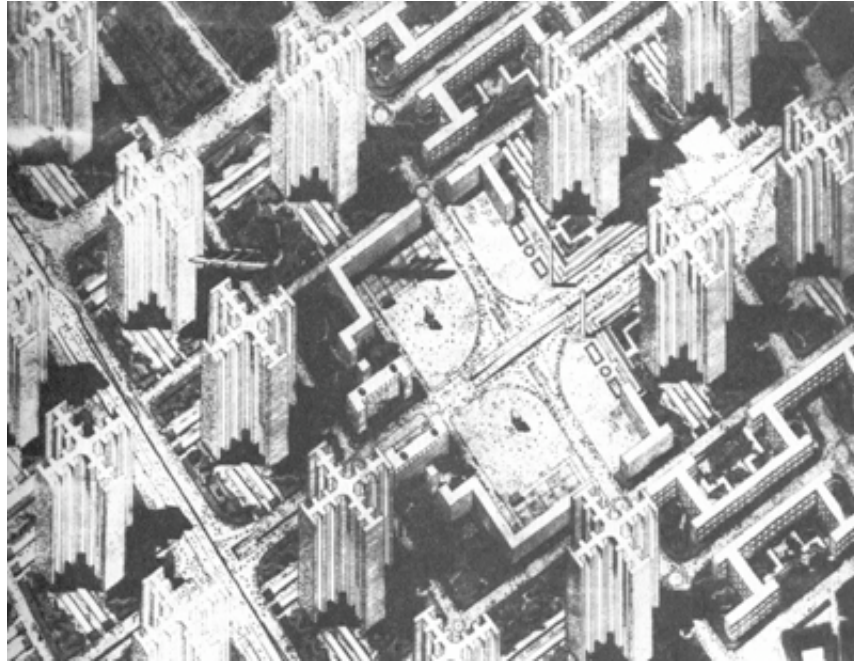
refounded as a community of the Children of God, bound by love to live without sin. All property was expropriated. Money was abolished. The doors of all houses were made to be left open day and night. In a great bonfire, all books save the Bible were destroyed. 'The poorest amongst us,' read a Münster pamphlet meant to subvert the countryside, 'who used to be despised as "beggars," now go about dressed as finely as the highest and most distinguished.' 'All things were to be in common,' John of Leyden said later. 'There was to be no private property and nobody was to do any more work, but simply trust in God.' In every instance the new commandments were enforced with the threat of execution.



The Peasant Wars in Germany [also a great book by Fredrich Engels] began almost a hundred years before John of Leyden. They were as much an attack on feudalism and the absolute power of kings and petty princes as against the Catholic Church. The utopian vision was to establish the kingdom of God on earth. Different visionaries had different visions, but they led to generally the same conclusion: a rejection of the absolute power of feudalism and the Catholic Church and the establishment of a primitive kind of communism. And their rebellions led to the same results: a counter-revolution by the local feudal lords that re-established absolutist law and order. Four hundred years later John Lydon changed his name to Johnny Rotten, and the Sex Pistols preached a revolutionary gospel that sounded surprisingly familiar to those earlier epiphanies. The Rude Mechs only tease us with a taste of John of Leyden. They move quickly to 1916 and Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich. A performance of three men marching in different directions in militant confusion all speaking at once captures the image that refugee artists must have had of the nations of Europe marching into the slaughter of World War I.

"What is culture?" they ask. "Art is a trick," they answer. The art of dada was to give us outrage and doubt. Speaking nonsense serves to alienate language. Marcus says, "There, in 1916, an experiment was performed in which the language by which the war was justified was destroyed. In the story dada told, this destruction was a necessary preliminary to the discovery of a language so plain the very act of speaking it would grind one's teeth down to points."

Then, Johnny Rotten appears singing on a revolving jukebox spun by a character in a death mask. It is menacing. "The Germans are coming!" "The Germans are here!"



The action cuts to a sentimental tune. People exhausted, dancing, bored. And someone tells us we need “a different story from the one we’ve been hearing all of our lives.”

“You’re right. No one loves you!”

Now we’re watching a dada experiment in film. Two members of the audience are sitting behind the director. They’re watching a blank screen. They’re not getting it. Nothing is happening. They ask the director what is happening. The director says, “Nothing.”

“People won’t sit through that.”

“Exactly. Situations are better than art. This is actually happening. You are free to choose.”

“Is that all?”

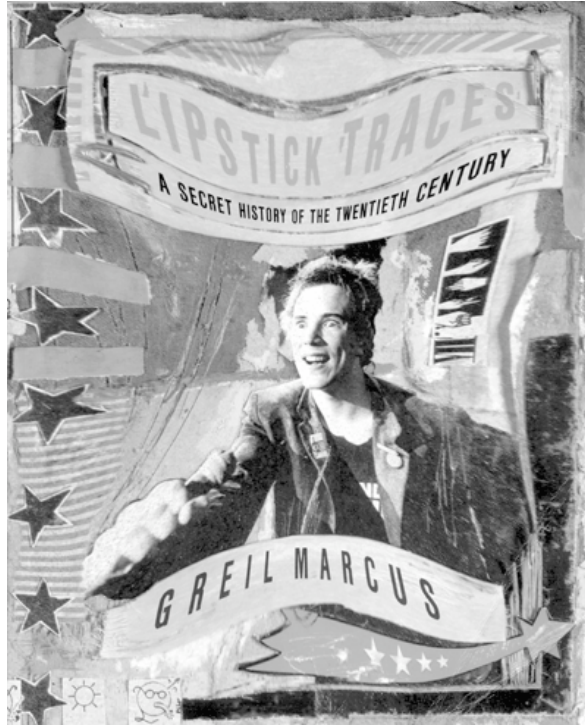
“At the end there is something real.”

The Dadaist psychiatrist, Richard Huelsenbeck, addresses a conference of scholars. He starts by taking off his spectacles, putting a paper bag over his head, drawing circles on it for eyes and a line for a mouth, takes a pencil and pokes out the eyes, then gouges them out with his hands [a part of the Oedipal Complex that is rarely dramatized], then takes out a revolver and shoots the audience. On Easter Sunday at High Mass in Notre Dame in 1950, a Dominican monk ascended the altar and began to read a sermon, “Today, Easter day of the Holy Year, here under the emblem of Notre Dame of Paris, I accuse the universal Catholic church of the lethal diversion of our living strength toward an empty heaven. I accuse the Catholic Church of swindling. I accuse the Catholic Church of infecting the world with its funereal morality of being the running sore on the decomposed body of the West. Verily I say unto you: God is dead.”

At this point the organist drowned him out and Swiss Guards attacked him and his three other Lettrist friends. They ran out, were almost lynched by an angry crowd and were arrested by the police. This was a situation where something really happened. It was blasphemy, a sacrilege, but it was real.

Johnny Rotten says to the audience, “You should never be completely understood.”

“Nothing is true. Everything is permitted,” said the Lettrists.



"I am an antichrist," says Johnny Rotten.

There are two characters played by the Rude Mechs that provide a kind of continuity to the dramatic history lesson. Dr. Narrator seems always on the verge of being horrified, and Malcolm McLaren, who actually ran a sex boutique on King's Road in London and stage managed the Sex Pistols and the New York Dolls, seems to relish the horror and enjoys being a part of the production of it. It is as though Munch's painting "The Scream" was seen from two perspectives: the victim and the perpetrator.

Greil Marcus has written rock and cultural criticism for Rolling Stone, Creem, City Pages and Salon.com. His book "Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes" is a convincing argument that genuine folk music is an angry and defiant scream of white trash and poor blacks that Dylan came to understand after his motorcycle accident in the House of Big Pink in Woodstock. His book "Double Trouble: Bill Clinton and Elvis Presley in a Land of No Alternatives" is a collection of essays that explore the self-conscious mythologizing of Clinton and Presley, and how Clinton was able to parlay that good-old-boy, shit-eating grin into the White House.

Marcus is probably the best writer around on rock and roll and its cultural context. Anyone who loves the music and takes that fun seriously should see "Lipstick Traces." Marcus, when he saw their production in New York, said, "This is the book I set out to write."

The Rude Mechs perform their adaptation of "Lipstick Traces" at the Southern Theater, 1420 Washington Avenue South, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, January 17, 18 and 19 at 8 p.m., and Sunday, January 20 at 2 p.m. Call 612-375-7622 for tickets. Also, Saturday, January 19 at 2 p.m. Greil Marcus and the Rude Mechs will discuss their translation of his book at the Southern. pulse