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Review: Michèle Bernstein's *All the King's Horses*

Review: Jean-Philippe Toussaint's *Camera* »

There has been yet another resurgence of interest in the early work of Guy Debord and the Situationist International (1957-72) recently. Fortunately, this has lead to the publication of Michèle Bernstein's novel from 1960, *All the King's Horses* by Semiotext(e). Bernstein is known primarily amongst Situationist aficionados as Debord's wife for over fifteen years and secondly as a relatively minor figure within the group, albeit one who helped the group's finances considerably by writing horoscopes for race horses.

All the King's Horses is Bernstein first novel, published in English for the first time following its re-publication in France in 2004. Modeled on her own open marriage with Debord (Geneviève and Gilles instead of Michèle and Guy) and a *détournment* — "the reuse of pre-existing artistic elements in a new ensemble" — of novels like *Dangerous Liaisons* and *Bonjour Tristesse*, the book feels a bit like a season of *Gossip Girl*, with a markedly Parisian, avant garde sensibility.

The narrator claims early in the novel that "novels and paintings follow whichever recipe is convenient at the moment. In any case, there's something to be said for cleverly using the clichés of one's time." Like the characters in *Dangerous Liaisons*, or perhaps more appropriately *Cruel Intentions* (1999), Geneviève and Gilles are engaged in games of seduction, but the malevolence of these works is replaced with a conception of love that is open, playful, and likely influenced by the conception of the *potlatch* so vital to the early SI.

Bernstein's novel certainly isn't groundbreaking and the translator, John Kelsey, claims that even Bernstein herself distanced herself from her novels, considering them to be hack jobs done purely for money. Despite this, the book today should appeal to those interested in the Situationists, not only as a documentation of their scene, but also as a subtle critique of their pretensions and a certain lifestylism from the inside. To a broader audience, it is an excellent example of an intelligent and engaging use of Situationist techniques and the appropriation of pulp and pop forms more generally.

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