

“I never saw Guy Debord do the dishes”

An interview with Thérèse Dubrule (aka Mrs. Raoul Vaneigem)

Conducted by Gérard Berréby, Flobecq, 1 May 2012¹

At what age did you meet Raoul Vaneigem?

Kindergarten. Many years later, we were married.

I'd like it if you could speak about the period in which Raoul met Attila Kotányi in Brussels. What do you remember?

A mutual friend, Harry Torrekens, introduced us to Attila. He came from Hungary with his wife, Magda, and their three children. They lived quite miserably in an unfinished building. We sympathized with them and often went there. When they received us, they behaved as if they were wealthy, when in reality things were truly tough for them. Magda faced it all elegantly. She had many human qualities and was intellectually interesting, too.

How was Attila?

Tall, handsome, very gallant, very Old France, kissing the hands of the ladies, quite seriously, and pleasant company. He was a man of great culture who spoke calmly and managed quite well in French. He wore used clothes with the greatest distinction, always kept his jacket on, very dignified, but also very demanding. He had a slightly authoritarian side. In a restaurant, he might send his soup back if it wasn't hot enough for him or his *steak*² if it wasn't cooked the way he liked it. I found that such behavior didn't fit very well with the style of the [other] people in the SI. His behavior towards his wife sometimes shocked me. He wasn't always very nice. He never bothered to give her the type of place that, legitimately, he should have.

Attila's family problems led you to take care of his children.

I took care of Sophie, the youngest daughter. My mother had her for about six months – the task of having two girls at the same time was too difficult – during which she finished nursery school. When she was old enough to go to elementary school, I took care of her on the *weekends*³ from

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² English in original.

³ English in original.

time to time. This arrangement allowed Magda to breathe a little, to enjoy a little freedom. The girl was charming. It was a pleasure to have her around.

Raoul told me than another of Attila's kids had been entrusted to his mother.

Christophe spent a month with Raoul's parents, but he didn't enjoy being in Lessines. The little girl, on the other, was happy there. When my mother went to get her from school, she'd exclaim, "Mother!" as if for her real one. My parents – who had a garden, [and so] fruits and vegetables – also helped out the Kotanyi family in a substantive way. Attila did not work.

Raoul was younger than Attila. What were their conversations like?

Attila came to our place at least one a week, sometimes accompanied by Magda and the children. The discussions essentially concerned politics, literature, music, art and revolution. They were always very serious.

Did Attila speak of the friends he had in Paris, like Guy Debord and the other members of the Situationist International?

I can no longer remember. Moreover, it wasn't through Attila that we met Debord, but through Henri Lefebvre. Raoul had sent him "Poésie et Révolution"⁴ after the publication of his dissertation on Lautréamont in *Synthèses*.⁵

Since you mention the period in which Raoul was studying at the University, could you speak to me about the intrigues concerning his dissertation defense that were afoot?

The dissertation on Lautréamont had been rejected at first by Professor Mortier, under the pretext that some of its contents were too daring. He demanded that those remarks be expurgated if the dissertation were to be accepted on the second try in September. In Belgium at the time, when a student failed the first attempt, he was obligated to retake all of his examinations for the second one, even those that he'd passed. Raoul's dissertation director, Ms. Carner-Noulet, defended him strongly. He obtained an exemption and only had to present his dissertation. Once the passages that had offended the good morals and good thoughts of the times were suppressed, the work was accepted. I remember that, leaving the deliberations, we immediately went to Ms. Carner's place and they discussed them. Thanks to her, the summary [of the dissertation] was published in *Synthèses*.

Later on, you yourselves met Debord?

Yes. Guy came to see us, at the Chat Botté in Brussels, at least once every two weeks. We'd had Ariane, who was several months old. No one could take care of her for us, and so I personally wasn't very free. The discussions went very well. I believe that, outside of the SI and the

⁴ In English here: <http://www.notbored.org/fragments.pdf>.

⁵ In English here: <http://www.notbored.org/ducasse.pdf>.

revolution, nothing else was discussed. If I remember correctly, Michèle never came to the Chat Botté.

Do you have the impression that Raoul accomplished much more, that something emerged in him, after he'd met those [other] young people?

Of course. He was much happier. It was, I believe, very stimulating for him – the good fortune of having met Guy. He said he'd finally found an interlocutor who was valuable from the point of view of his ideas, which was something he hadn't found at the Ecole Normale or in Brussels. He could discuss things that he held even more dear than teaching. Yet he was an excellent professor: he performed his role perfectly. He developed very good relationships with his students – a wise dosage [somewhere] between sufficient authority and a certain permissiveness. In the mornings, he wore a leather jacket, which was prohibited within the confines of the establishment, without a tie [which was required] and, then, in the hallway, he'd put on a vest and a red tie that he kept just for his classes. Outside the school's walls, he was friendly with his students. Some of them regularly came to our house. We sometimes found ourselves housing 12 or 15 students – including the bathroom. We had mattresses and cushions on the ground: it was very lively!

In any case, the Ecole Normale was already behind Raoul, given that he'd been dismissed from there. Officially, wasn't he thrown out because he'd had an affair with one of his students?

That was in 1965. I knew the person who denounced him. She was a colleague.

Previously, a malevolent person had circled Raoul's face in a photograph of demonstrators that was published in the newspapers.

Indeed, during the large strikes of 1960-61, a well-intentioned colleague sent the director of the school the photo from *Le Soir* in which you could see Raoul among the demonstrators. At the time, a functionary had the duty of being discrete. But a teacher being associated with striking workers . . . One of Raoul's [other] colleagues ended up getting him for it.

I suppose that the student involved in the liaison with Raoul completely consented to it.

Completely.

And you yourself, I suppose, tolerated this type of act on Raoul's part?

One day, he came home with her. Everything had certainly always been founded on consent. It evolved little by little. It wasn't always very easy.

What work was he doing then?

I believe that he taught for a while at another institution, and then obtained a scholarship from the CNRS⁶ and, after that, I no longer remember.

What impression did Debord make on you the first time you saw him?

I found him cold and distant, but remarkably eloquent, very composed, very reflective, speaking slowly as if each word counted. He could make me uneasy. He had an authoritarian side but he didn't impose his authority. You always had the impression that he was – not walking around with his head in the clouds – but preoccupied with reflecting, holding a finger near one ear, the rest of his hand supporting his chin.

All this and yet very present in the moment?

Yes, without ever letting himself be distracted. He never spoke of his private life, nor of the SI's funding. He was very discreet in all things.

Did this allow a surpassing of the relationships and exchanges that Raoul had had with Attila and Robert Dehoux?

In any case, it was much more intellectual with Attila or Debord than it ever was with Robert Dehoux.

So, Raoul went to Paris more and more often.

Yes. There were more and more meetings. I accompanied him twice. But we had to finance these trips. At one point, Raoul went to the bus and truck station and hitchhiked to Paris from there. And then he began to meet other people.

Apart from the fact that you noted that he was increasingly radiant, what did Raoul say when he returned from Paris from these escapades, these meetings in Paris?

He only thought of one thing: returning there. But he had to earn his bread, too. Did Raoul tell you that, when he was a student, during his vacations, he worked for a week or two in the Durobor glassworks in Soignies? In the end, he gave his pay to his colleagues. He was well grounded in the workers' milieu. The "worker problem" has always been primary for him. The SI didn't change that. He is as at ease with workers as he is with "bourgeois." When we were on vacation in Frespech in Lot-et-Garonne, he helped the local farmers with their harvest. He was interested in crops, farm produce . . . In 1961, we put up a deserter from the Algerian War – a Frenchman, his young wife and their little four-month-old daughter. I had the impression that Guy Debord had asked us to welcome them. They arrived with their little girl, vodka and caviar – that's all. Not a penny. The guy was the son of the French ambassador to Moscow, I believe. For a week, we ate caviar as a spread on sliced bread. At the end of two weeks, we found them a

⁶ The Centre national de la recherche scientifique (National Center for Scientific Research) is a large government-sponsored agency.

small apartment at the center of Brussels and all the SI's sympathizers helped furnish it and give them kitchenware.

Following these meetings [with Debord and the other situs], was the change of life radical for Raoul?

His circle of friends changed very quickly.

Was he increasingly more and more absent from home?

Yes, of course.

How was that for you?

I was happy for him, but the solitude got worse for me.

Perhaps because he was a man . . . Raoul had the opportunity to do something different . . . while you remained tied down by family obligations.

Objectively, I think so. At the time, someone had to remain home [with Ariane].

Yet we know that, other than Michèle Bernstein,⁷ there were virtually no women involved in the situationist movement.

Yes, because Dominique⁸ wasn't an active member . . .

There was perhaps – shall we say – a slightly macho side [to the SI]. We can see this is an almost caricatural way with Attila: the phenomenon was perhaps less [widespread] in the following generation, but it was still pronounced.

It certainly existed. Household tasks for the SI almost exclusively fell upon the women. I never saw Guy Debord do the dishes or Raoul take the garbage out. Due to the forces of things, he's had to change a great deal! At the time, under the pretext of the equality of the sexes, he saw no reason for a man to stand back and let a woman go before him. Today, he is truly gallant! Raoul's father was truly very macho. When he came home from work, he'd say to his wife,

⁷ What about Jacqueline de Jong? “Such a small contingent of women seems to have encouraged a persistent misrepresentation of the SI as a men's club. But not only does this overshadow the fact that even this small contingent compares favourably with the [numbers of] female participants in numerous other avant-garde groups, it also downplays the contributions of Bernstein and de Jong . . . [who] had considerable influence and effectiveness within the SI, despite the overwhelming dominance of certain male members, notably Debord.” Frances Tracey, “The Situation of Women,” *Constructed Situations: A New History of the Situationist International* (Pluto Press, 2014).

⁸ This would appear to be Dominique Lemaître – there's a photograph of her elsewhere in Raoul Vaneigem and Gérard Berréby, *Rien n'est fini, tout commence*.

“Woman – my slippers!” When Raoul got his diploma, we located his father on the place de Brouckère in Brussels, and he sent me back for the reason that he wanted to celebrate the event with his son alone. Raoul had to react to that . . . Likewise, when we went to visit his parents, Raoul’s mother greeted him by combing his hair and untying his shoes.

And all the young people lived without any restraints? Drinking and talking abundantly?

Yes, every moment was precious. In the tiny place on the rue Saint-Martin,⁹ the evenings went on until the early morning. It was very enlivening, very fruitful.

You slept at Michèle and Debord’s place?

Above the apartment was an attic, which is where we slept. The winter of 1962-63 was terrible. It was freezing cold. Everything was frozen solid. The only toilets were out of order, frozen solid. You had to go to the bar at the corner to relieve yourself.

Did you also know René Viénet?

Yes, I knew him in Brussels. Raoul had met him in Paris and then he came to Brussels. I can tell you this amusing little story about Viénet. We left – Raoul, Ariane and I – to take a plane to Paris because it was cheaper than leaving from Brussels, and Viénet proposed to put us up. For lodgings, he’d found a completely empty apartment – no chairs, no bedding. Viénet had simply placed a few pillows on the floor. That evening, he said to us, “I’d like to invite you out to a restaurant.” And so we went to a small, working-class Chinese restaurant. We ate with chopsticks, which obviously wasn’t easy for my two-and-a-half-year-old daughter. Then, at the end of the meal, Viénet says to Raoul, “Can you pay? Because I’ve no money at all.” And *he* was the one who had invited *us*! Nevertheless, I found this all very amusing.

What was he like? Did he distinguish himself through his sense of humor?

He was very open, very loud, tall, handsome, likeable. He was convinced the revolution was taking place. As for a sense of humor – certainly, he didn’t lack one but, whatever else he was, he never risked passing unperceived.

How did the conference in Antwerp go? Do you participate in it?

Beyond the many meetings that were held at our place, I didn’t often have the opportunity to participate in the others. Thus it was fortunate that I was finally able to be immersed in the milieu of the SI, which was larger then than at other times. I keep excellent memories of it.

The discussions lasted all day . . .

. . . and a good part of the night, too. All at the Chat Botté, where classical music played constantly. Sometimes, at the end of the night, we would sing revolutionary songs, sea songs,

⁹ The location of the apartment shared by Guy and Michèle in Paris.

Marc and André's *Chansons de théâtre*.¹⁰ The revolution would take place in all of the domains of everyday life. Amorous relations, the education of children . . . were all part of this revolutionary spirit. Everyone except for Raoul and I smoked a lot. We drank a lot but without falling into drunkenness.

Raoul has told me of some excesses, all the same.

We drank a lot; we made the rounds of the bars – all the while having philosophical discussions, but I believe that no one was truly drunk. Never did anyone go too far because he'd been drinking. But after 1965, they no doubt drank a bit too much.

When we look at the photos from Antwerp, the ambiance seems very joyful. It seems like a nice festival.

The SI's meetings – at the Chat Botté or elsewhere – were always very joyful. It was a festival. Revolution and festival were the twin preoccupations at the heart of the SI. Plus a total absence of calculation. The bourgeois side of relationships was completely effaced. Sharing dominated.

How would you describe revolutionary sexual practices?

Sexual freedom, independence – but not whenever desired – for example, not when Guy Debord was present. Then everything had to be very strict, very dignified. We had more freedom than exists today – a freedom free from the prohibitions and taboos that inundate us today. There were no age limits such as those that contemporary society imposes.

In other words, the sexual practices of adolescents weren't proscribed. It was completely acceptable and not at all objectionable.

Fourier's theories were the order of the day. And if all this was acceptable [in theory], it wasn't always easy in practice. It varied according to the situation, the moment.

When you speak of pedagogy, what do you think about what Ariane experienced as a child, as an adolescent, in this atmosphere, this turbulence?

I believe that she was too young at the time to have precise memories of any of this. She was four when Raoul and I separated.¹¹ That's the age limit for memories. But there remain a number of very amusing things. For example, Raoul calling the church "the circus." So, when we pass by a church, the little one invariably says, "Ah, look! There goes the circus."

Very funny!

Raoul's anti-clericalism was very pronounced. When we were at the Chat Botté one time, the parish priest came by to visit us. Raoul refused to meet him. "God is everywhere." Raoul

¹⁰ Marc Chevalier André Schlessler. Their album *Chansons de théâtre* was released in 1962.

¹¹ In 1965.

retorted, “Perhaps he is, but not here.” Well before his encounter with the members of the SI, while I was in my first year of teaching as an instructor at a Catholic school in Tournai, and while he was a student at the university in Brussels, Raoul wrote me a letter. The mail system was controlled by the director, who personally distributed incoming mail to the professors. On the back of one of his envelopes, Raoul had written, “Down with the calotte.” This caused my contract not to be renewed the following year. What Raoul had done was both charming and immature. There were many such incidents.

Yet it would be interesting to see what has filtered into her mind, without her realizing it.

Yes! Of course she didn’t put her fingers into the electrical outlets or anything like that. Beyond such vital injunctions, she was raised very liberally. She lived just as we did in that pleasant ambiance and participated in everything that interested her. I remember that, one day, Raoul brought his Congolese students back to our place – they had djembes¹² – and we spent the entire evening with them. My daughter adored them. Libertarian practices reinforced the orientations of Dr. Spock in *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*.¹³ The details: instead of a bed, Ariane slept on a mattress on the ground, so, if she wanted to get up during the night, to walk around in the apartment, she could do so easily. Apart from the period in which we met members of the SI, she grew up in an atmosphere full of life – the joy that filled our existence.

These are educational methods, full of permissiveness, which no longer exist or hardly exist today.

Yes, I believe that you can’t do this with just any child.

All this was the reason for the flowering that you’d carried within yourself.

Certainly! At home, revolutionary maxims, interspersed with Chinese ideograms written by Viénet, were posted on all the walls of the guest room. We drew pictures of Lewis Carroll’s Snark everywhere and in all kinds of forms.

All this was passed on to her.

I think that she is indeed quite radiant. No doubt we had good luck. She wasn’t a difficult child. Perhaps she was even a bit too wise. She devoured books and listened to music.

And yet the SI was a very confidential movement that mobilized just a handful of individuals at most.

Yes, there were several sympathizers. Clairette Schock and her husband, Robert Dehoux, in Brussels¹⁴. . . Mitsi, who was a neighbor who had participated in the Spanish [Civil] War and regularly received Spanish refugees at her place. Thus we had lots of contacts with refugees –

¹² Hand-held African drums.

¹³ English in original. Dr. Benjamin Spock’s book was first published in 1946.

¹⁴ Cf. Interview with Clairette Schock: <http://www.notbored.org/schock.pdf>.

revolutionaries, obviously! We also went to Spain several times to distribute tracts and clandestinely make contacts in Barcelona and the Balearic Islands. We would meet on the terrace of a bar or on a beach – different places each time so as to pass unnoticed. “I will have such-and-such newspaper in my hands so that you will be able recognize me.” There was also my current husband, Jean-Marie Hoppe,¹⁵ obviously, and a sympathizer, Jean-Michel Hennebert, who regularly came to the Chat Botté and had opened a private university – consisting solely of a Literature and Philosophy Department – on the avenue Louise in Brussels. We must not forget Dominique¹⁶ who came from Paris, either alone or with René. In our sorties, we often went to the Marolles area – the working class area of Brussels – to the little bars owned by Spanish immigrants. There, amongst workers, we spoke of revolution and the Spanish [Civil] War.

How about Robert Dehoux?

Big mouth. If you listened to him, he’d accomplished many things: he was fomenting revolution. I remained skeptical as far as the practical application of such leanings.

Why such reservations about Robert Dehoux?

I found that he wasn’t at the intellectual level of the members of the SI. A little more outlandish, eccentric. His work *Teilhard est un con*¹⁷ – without denying its likeable side – was not at the level of the SI’s documents. This obviously didn’t prevent him from being very lively and likeable.

And among these young people, who would have been the first, in your opinion, to participate in the revolution?

I wonder if it wouldn’t be René Viénet. Surely not Guy.

I think you are right. Viénet had, in addition, anticipated many disagreements that later took place within the group.

Personally, I knew about none of them. I’d experienced the period of good relationships and cordiality. Everything was fine. It was the youthful prime of the SI. Beginning are, in general, always . . .

¹⁵ An archaeologist and art historian at the Université Libre de Bruxelles.

¹⁶ *Interviewer’s parenthesis*: Lemaître.

¹⁷ October 1962, credited to both Clairette Schock and Robert Dehoux. “It is completely excessive to write – as *France-Observateur* did on 7 February 1963 – that the pamphlet by Robert Dehoux, *Teilhard est un con*, reveals ‘connections with the situationists,’ even if we absolutely approve of the title. Robert Dehoux’s autonomy is, nevertheless, obvious, and was recently confirmed by his second work, *Ecce Ego*. It seems that some critics are so accustomed to seeing copyists [*copistes*] feign ignorance of the SI that, when they meet someone who has the good faith to actually cite us and provide the situationist references that appear useful to him, they immediately make him a part of that accursed acronym.” *Internationale situationniste* #9, August 1964.

There was a preceding period, which was very rich and creative, before Guy met Raoul. You knew the second part. In hindsight, what do you think about it all?

I found it was a beautiful period, among the most beautiful in my life, and I'm happy that I lived it.

Did you follow them to Les Trois Fontaines in Beersel, the café where everyone went?

They went on foot to Beersel and drank some Gueuze beer, while I remained at home with the baby. They would also suddenly take the train to Brussels to go to La Mort, L'Enfer or the Feuille de papier doré.

Did you read the [SI's] journal?

I didn't read all of it. But I was the one who typed up the *Traité de savoir-vivre*.¹⁸

What did you think, on the intellectual plane, when you typed up the text or when you spoke to Raoul about it?

I totally agreed with his ideas.

Did you realize that Raoul had written something that would become a cult book for the youth of 1968?

Sincerely? No. I wouldn't have thought that it'd have such an impact.

And were you aware that he was constructing among these [other] young people – although an ultra-minority – important things that would end up breaking walls?

When you do something, it is always with hope – otherwise it's better to lower your arms right at the start.

¹⁸ *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations*, best known in English as *The Revolution of Everyday Life*.