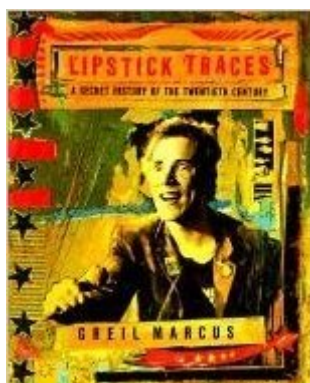


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# Lipstick Traces: A Secret History Of The Twentieth Century



## Synopsis

Greil Marcus, author of *Mystery Train*, widely acclaimed as the best book ever written about America as seen through its music, began work on this new book out of a fascination with the Sex Pistols: that scandalous antimusical group, invented in London in 1975 and dead within two years, which sparked the emergence of the culture called punk. "I am an antichrist!" shouted singer Johnny Rotten--where in the world of pop music did that come from? Looking for an answer, with a high sense of the drama of the journey, Marcus takes us down the dark paths of counterhistory, a route of blasphemy, adventure, and surprise. This is no mere search for cultural antecedents. Instead, what Marcus so brilliantly shows is that various kinds of angry, absolute demands--demands on society, art, and all the governing structures of everyday life--seem to be coded in phrases, images, and actions passed on invisibly, but inevitably, by people quite unaware of each other. Marcus lets us hear strange yet familiar voices: of such heretics as the Brethren of the Free Spirit in medieval Europe and the Ranters in seventeenth-century England; the dadaists in Zurich in 1916 and Berlin in 1918, wearing death masks, chanting glossolalia; one Michel Mourre, who in 1950 took over Easter Mass at Notre-Dame to proclaim the death of God; the Lettrist International and the Situationist International, small groups of Paris--based artists and writers surrounding Guy Debord, who produced blank-screen films, prophetic graffiti, and perhaps the most provocative social criticism of the 1950s and '60s; the rioting students and workers of May '68, scrawling cryptic slogans on city walls and bringing France to a halt; the Sex Pistols in London, recording the savage "Anarchy in the U.K." and "God Save the Queen." Although the Sex Pistols shape the beginning and the end of the story, *Lipstick Traces* is not a book about music; it is about a common voice, discovered and transmitted in many forms. Working from scores of previously unexamined and untranslated essays, manifestos, and filmscripts, from old photographs, dada sound poetry, punk songs, collages, and classic texts from Marx to Henri Lefebvre, Marcus takes us deep behind the acknowledged events of our era, into a hidden tradition of moments that would seem imaginary except for the fact that they are real: a tradition of shared utopias, solitary refusals, impossible demands, and unexplained disappearances. Written with grace and force, humor and an insistent sense of tragedy and danger, *Lipstick Traces* tells a story as disruptive and compelling as the century itself.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Marcus ( *Mystery Train* ) believes that rock songs of groups like the Sex Pistols filter into mass consciousness and subtly influence everyday speech and thought. His underlying premise is that pop culture, like radical protest, is capable of altering history. He traces a common thread presumed to link the rebelliousness of punk rockers, medieval religious heretics, the Dada antics of Tristan Tzara and Hugo Ball, the films of the anarchist group Situationist International and the anti-bourgeois ravings and graffiti of the lettrist movement in post-war Paris. Marcus contrasts what he sees as the spurious pop revolt of Michael Jackson with Elvis Presley and the Beatles, "who raised the possibility of living in a new way." This deliberately meandering tour of countercultural high and low roads is illustrated with rock posters and handbills, news clippings, photographs, protest art. In this version of history, Little Richard's glossolalia has direct ties to the pre-Christian Essenes. Rock critic Marcus is consistently entertaining even if he doesn't prove his thesis.

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Acclaimed rock reviewer/author Marcus ( *Mystery Train* , LJ 4/1/75) offers up a fascinating thesis: that modern consciousness is to a great extent shaped by events or documents "insignificant" of themselves but collectively very important indeed, perhaps even definitive. While spending much of its time on the impact of the Sex Pistols, this is not purely a "rock-music" book--along the way one encounters various ranters, Dadaists, nihilists, whatever--even Theodore Dreiser. If it lacks the rigor demanded of academic historiography, Marcus's book is still great popular culture, and academic historians would do well to be interested. Meanwhile, the cross-referential treatment gives a seeming (at least) validity that sheer facts wouldn't to the idea of a "secret history" that permeates

unobtrusively and yields more meaning than many would like to believe.- Robert E. Brown, Onondaga Cty. P.L., Syracuse, N.Y. Copyright 1989 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Terrific, indescribable, indispensable contribution to cultural history. If you're at all interested in where "today" came from, check out this fabulous item.

Really don't care for the writer's style.

Think non-linear. Think connective. This book isn't exactly art history or criticism, it isn't a manual on how to start an artistic revolution, it isn't sociological theory - but it touches on all these. Marcus traces currents of thought and action in musical and artistic "movements" in an illuminating and inspiring way that swings from such 20th century horrors as Nazi death camps to Michael Jackson's "Thriller", although he gets bogged down in the second half with the "lettristes" who really, from his description, don't sound exciting enough to spend so much time on. Okay, letter poetry, sounds stupid, what next? The person this book would be perfect for is the edgy artist who needs some instigation (the person who recommended it to me), intellectual "punk rock" fan (I might qualify), or the anarchist with a taste for literature (who I am mailing my copy to). If you are unfamiliar with the situationists, the sex pistols, the dadaists, European revolutions, etc. then this book is a good starting point. (I'd never heard of Guy Debord but the extensive quotes from "Society of the Spectacle" convinced me to rush out and read that, too.)

Greil's book a gem and gives the very best description of the Dada movement that I've ever read and I'm an artist, and taught on the university level for 25 years. All that plus he's fun to read.

Trying to read some of these other customer reviews forced me into quickly typing this. BE WARNED that Lipstick Traces is not some sub-High School history of Punk Rock just because Mr. Rotten is on the front cover! This is probably one of my favorite all-time books since it opened my eyes to a (secret) history of things that really MUST become common knowledge to all who consider themselves somewhat intelligent & knowledgeable and/or leaning towards what used to be referred to as the "counter-culture" (now "alternative" or "hipster" or any other tag for those that gag on what spectacular society spoon feeds them with a shovel). Greil Marcus takes the Sex Pistols 1st 45 "Anarchy in the UK" as the starting point & free-association hopscotches across centuries of the

hidden & forgotten for what informed the raw scream of that first listen. And though it may seem a tough go on your first dig into its pages (especially in today's A.D.D. world), "Lipstick Traces" rewards you around each corner since you never know where the author will take you next. Starting with the first UK Punks back to the Situationists who took equal inspiration from the Dadaists of the Cabaret Voltaire AND the heretics of the European Middle Ages, most notably the Movement of the Free Spirit - this is often a heavy read that never fails to F#@k with your preconceptions, leaving you sometimes thinking that everything you already know is WRONG! Very few books I've read left me with a similar effect and after rereading it several times (there is so much here that a quick run through just doesn't do it - be forewarned), I've dug deeper into the books of Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle & (especially) Raoul Vaneigem's The Revolution of Everyday Life as well as Dada, the Free Spirit's The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages (Galaxy Books), etc, etc and I'm still digging. This book may change you too if you are the right person who has a deep curiosity for the underside of what stands against "culture"... "alternative" & otherwise! If youth today still reads books, they must read this. As I remember that famous scene in "The Matrix": which pill will YOU take?

I'm still wondering what it is about 'Lipstick Traces' that has so polarised its readers. I don't consider it a great bit of writing/journalism, and I agree, with the benefit of 20/20 rear vision, that the author who wrote this tract in the early 80s might well reconsider the emphasis he'd placed on Johnny Rotten as a perveyor of Dadaist angsty pranks. In the epilogue, he makes clear that the story was very much a personalised view, (stemming from his student days at Berkley in the early 60s) rather than a serious rewrite of history, which gives him some leeway about the provisionality of his own opinion. I enjoyed the stuff on Huelsenbeck, on Debord, on Hugo Ball. I liked the graphic layout and the photos of main suspects & reproductions of 50s & 60s Situationist texts. I feel a more judicious editorial hand might have produced a less repetitive text, though the side alleys were fantastic, nevertheless. Marcus has written tighter, tougher stuff than this & his breathy, blow by blow accounts of Dylan and his sources are wonderful. For more on art visit >rodmooss.com

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