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Various Artists

Destroy All Rational Thought [DVD]

US release date: 21 November 2006 (MVD Visual)

UK release date: 29 January 2007

by **John Dover**

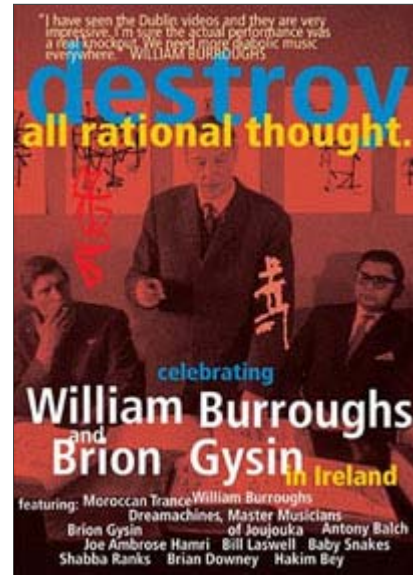
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There is a point during one of the last recorded interviews with William S Burroughs—which features on this occasionally mildly interesting, but mostly infuriating, DVD—where he laments the passing of so many of the 20th century's 'great minds'. His fear is that there will be no-one to take their place; no new innovators, no literary outlaws, no risk takers. Ostensibly this comment refers in particular to his deceased friend, the artist Brion Gysin, who along with Burroughs is the subject of this 'celebration'. Yet when you consider the ongoing fascination with the mid-century decadents of the Beat generation that has lead to a DVD release for this nebulous, amateurish, though no doubt well intended documentary (merely because it has the name of Burroughs attached to it), you can perhaps see his point.

Consisting of a series of 'events' staged in Dublin under the banner 'The Here to Go' shows, and celebrating the Moroccan axis of the Beat fraternity, including exhibitions of Gysin's paintings and live performances by the fabled Master Musicians of Jajouka (introduced to the West shortly before his death by The Rolling Stones' Brian Jones), this strange film suffers from a complete lack of narrative focus, injudicious editing, and slapdash camera work. The big let down for the organisers, one suspects, is that their star attraction (Burroughs) was too ill/old to attend, instead sending his endorsement for the event via a brief video message. Thereafter everything feels like a bit of a let down, though they do their best to whip up enthusiasm for the 'happenings' and for the few (very) minor Beat figures that made the trip to Ireland.

What is depressingly absent throughout is any coherent explanation of what is going on and why. Scraps of text flicker across the screen to introduce various performers, but there is precious little explanation of their relevance to either Burroughs or Gysin and their work. Irish band the Baby Snakes play live on stage, but owing to the dreadful acoustics and poor sound recording technology, a studio version of the same song is dubbed over the top. Who the hell are the Baby Snakes, anyway? On this evidence they're a pretty bog-standard pub rock group. Why are they here? I've NO idea. Looking consistently bemused, The Master Musicians of Jajouka and their cheerleader, the artist Hamri, are ferried around different venues to perform, but their music is barely given any historical context. Hamri was friends with Gysin in Morocco, but there is hardly any discussion of how Gysin went on to produce art that was so defiantly un-Western in both form and content. All of this cries out for some kind of overarching narration but sadly, there is none.

Interspersed with the Jajouka performances we get the usual chaff one would expect at such events: bearded poets sitting cross-legged and reading their insufferably long and poor poetry to seemingly patient souls that are discreetly scouring the room for a nearby exit. The curators of the event have a stab at reading their own work, too, but such is the appalling sound



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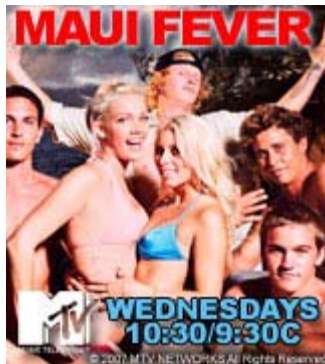
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quality and the presence of incidental music it's mostly impossible to hear any of it. There are no subtitles either, which, given the rough quality of so much of the audio material, makes no sense at all.

The most interesting segments are excerpts from the experimental films made by Burroughs, Gysin, and British director Antony Balch. These are genuinely intriguing, well made and beautifully lit sequences aiming for a visual representation of the literary 'cut-ups' developed by Burroughs and Gysin during their years in Paris. They feature the impeccably dressed, effortlessly sinister Burroughs acting out the role of Flâneur as he shuffles through the subways and streets of the French capital. The precision and expertise of these films only serves to accentuate the shabbiness of the footage of the Dublin events. There is also some good footage of Gysin at work in his studio on one of his massive canvases as he briefly talks about his methods.

If you are already familiar with the work of Burroughs and Gysin this will shed absolutely no further light on either man or their work (though you will get to see lots of people drinking Guinness and listening to Morrocon pipe music, if that appeals). If you aren't, I doubt you will make it beyond the first five minutes of this DVD. In truth there is simply not enough material here to warrant a film at all. Most disappointing is how easy it would've been to delve deeper into the historical reasons for the role of Tangiers as a crucible for artistic experimentation. Carved up into different zones after the World War II, it became a magnet for illicit trades, commen, fading aristocrats, writers and artists who relished the city's permissive culture. Some discussion of this history is essential, especially considering that if you remove the already existing footage of the Balch collaborations, the new material barely runs to half an hour. A full DVD release of those original films would be much more welcome than this ultimately half-assed and shoddy piece of work.



— 5 February 2007

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