

Guy Debord The Society of the Spectacle

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The foundation of every society is the result of an arbitrary act: one of its parts takes control over the rest and (re)makes the world in its own image. Any sort of tribal, theocratic, feudal, political dimension in the history of our civilisation has indeed shaped reality according to its peculiar needs and aims, by means of a system of thought that could justify its permanence in time.

The creation of artificial needs requires a distorted perception of inherent threshold values; otherwise, Debord says, we wouldn't be the well-oiled cogs we're expected to be in the machinery of the system.

The list of our natural needs is indeed quite short: only a few biological functions and a couple of psychophysical drives to be satisfied when necessary, such as sex and sociality. As a matter of fact, it doesn't take much for a human being to survive. Modern society can't afford to accept the concept of 'strictly necessary' though, not after its very existence became anachronistic and even threatening to a world ruled by the market - a world that needs buyers and consumers in order to survive.

What Debord clearly points out is indeed the fake sense of freedom in our choices, the great lie presiding over our lives as consumers - a surrogate freedom that was bestowed upon us as yet another commodity. Even our dirtiest excesses are fed their daily fix of filth by the market; as long as our kinks imply some sort of purchase, we'll always find an industry willing to satisfy them.

a use of the commodity arises that is sufficient unto itself; what this means for the consumer is an outpouring of religious zeal in honor of the commodity's sovereign freedom. waves of enthusiasm for particular products, fueled and boosted by the communications media, are propagated with lightning speed. a film sparks a fashion craze, or a magazine launches a chain of clubs that in turn spins off a line of products. the sheer fad item perfectly expresses the fact that, as the mass of commodities becomes more and more absurd, absurdity becomes a commodity in its own right...

The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life. Not only is the relation to the commodity visible but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world. Modern economic production extends its dictatorship extensively and intensively. In the least industrialized places, its reign is already attested by a few star commodities and by the imperialist domination imposed by regions which are ahead in the development of productivity. In the advanced regions, social space is invaded by a continuous superimposition of geological layers of commodities. At this point in the \"second industrial revolution,\" alienated consumption becomes for the masses a duty supplementary to alienated production.

It is all the sold labor of a society which globally becomes the total commodity for which the cycle must be continued. For this to be done, the total commodity has to return as a fragment to the fragmented individual, absolutely separated from the productive forces operating as a whole. Thus it is here that the specialized science of domination must in turn specialize: it fragments itself into sociology, psychotechnics, cybernetics, semiology, etc., watching over the self-regulation of every level of the process.

The celebrity, the spectacular representation of a living human being, embodies this banality by embodying the image of a possible role. Being a star means specializing in the seemingly lived; the star is the object of identification with the shallow seeming life that has to compensate for the fragmented productive specializations which are actually lived. Celebrities exist to act out various styles of living and viewing society unfettered, free to express themselves globally. They embody the inaccessible result of social labor by dramatizing its by-products magically projected above it as its goal: power and vacations, decision and consumption, which are the beginning and end of an undiscussed process.

A product acquires prestige when it is placed at the center of social life as the revealed mystery of the ultimate goal of production. But the object which was prestigious in the spectacle becomes vulgar as soon as it is taken home by its consumer—and by all its other consumers. It reveals its essential poverty (which naturally comes to it from the misery of its production) too late. But by then another object already carries the justification of the system and demands to be acknowledged.

"political economy considers the proletarian only as a worker" . . . and never considers him "in his leisure and humanity": quotations from the "Wages of Labor" section of Marx's 1844 Manuscripts: "political economy regards the proletarian . . . as nothing more than a worker. It can therefore advance the proposition that, like a horse, he must receive just enough to enable him to work. It does not consider him when he is not working, as a human being." "total denial of man": quotation from the "Private Property and Labor" section of Marx's 1844 Manuscripts: "Thus, although political economy, whose principle is labor, appears to recognize man, it is in fact nothing more than the denial of man carried to its logical conclusion."

Debord continues his profound revelation on how mass media and technology have pacified human behavior while giving evidence of the same present in our daily lives. Despite not giving any clear suggestions on how to deal with this influence into our daily lives, Debord insists that affirmative action is needed if we are to reclaim our lives.

The spectacle comes from the dominant mode of production (modern capitalism). It is the domination of the economy over social life. However, while the language of the

spectacle is the language of the mode of production (consumerism), the spectacle grows until it totally controls the mode of production— My take, anyway.

The spectacle invades social activity and human being. It makes us believe that the spectacle is real life, and once we believe that it is, it becomes the real. The spectacle produces an inversion of reality (the matrix?). The spectacle alienates us from actually being by making us think that being is having. What we think is true, is actually false.

My take: Traditional Society = living/being, Modern Society = having/consuming under the development of capitalism, Postmodern Society = Appearing, situations. Even though many people don't believe postmodernism started until at least the 70s and this book was written in the 60s, some do believe postmodernism started after WWII. That could be the case here.

The spectacle is not a collection of images, but social relationships among people that is mediated by images. We relate to each other based on the products we consume. Individualism is demonstrated through the brands we wear and the products we consume.

The spectacle presents itself as good for society, unchangeable (capitalism is the only way to organize society), and inaccessible in the manner that you could never hope to grasp it and change it if you wanted to (the economy is too hard for you understand, let the experts take care of it or we can't help the crises).

Human beings are subjugated to the spectacle by the economy (capitalism) because the economy is developing for itself. Mass marketing tactics, establishing brands, creating demand for products that we really don't need in order to make a profit.

Modern western society/capitalism breaks reality down via rationalized specialization. The spectacle also presents itself to people via specialized images, which makes it almost impossible for most people to actually see reality for what it is.
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The spectacle is dominated by specialized, hierarchical (economic) power, similar to how other societies have been organized in the past. It bans all expression that isn't consumption (my take). But the fact that, at its root, it is similar to other organizations of society's past, even though it is modern, it is simultaneously archaic.

The spectacle is essentially the ruling economic class using its totalitarian methods to demonstrate how great it is. The consumption of images from the spectacle becomes a second nature that dominates everything. It obscures the fact that relations are between humans and classes (commodity fetishism).

Mass media is mediated through the powers that be that run the spectacle

(government/economic heads) and is unilateral in a way that it communicates to us what to think and believe in order to keep the spectacle going.

The spectacle produces isolation (narcissism, lack of cooperation and trust, etc.). All technology is based on isolation: TV, computer, cell phone, etc. \"Lonely crowds\" like sitting on break with co-workers, but everyone is on their cell phone.

The spectator is alienated by profit of production. The more he contemplates life, the less he actually \"lives\" according to the spectacle (depression can set in). The more he simply accepts recognizing himself the way the spectacle/economy would like him to, the \"happier\" he is, but the less he actually understands his existence and desires.

My take: work, the more I do my meaningless job, the more \"happy\" I am and productive I feel. But I also feel empty and not in control of myself. The more I don't do my meaningless work, the more depressed I feel. Also the more free. Almost like I need that harness of \"productive work\" to help my self-esteem.

alienation of the spectacle makes sure that the gestures (any action or movement) is not man's himself, but are really those of another who is representing them to him (advertising). My take: you are not free, therefore every way in which you believe you are expressing yourself, you are actually expressing yourself not freely, but in a way in which corporate interests want you to live and express yourself so that they can make profit and you can feel \"happy\" and like an individual. Buying Nikes, makeup, etc.

Basic Marx, in that every worker is alienated from their own labor, as it goes to the producer who sells it in order to make a surplus. This makes up the entirety of the spectacle, as every one is alienated from their labor.

Alienation grows deeper and deeper as the spectacle/economy creep deeper into our every day lives.

Man produces more and more of the world, but has less power because he is constantly being separated further from his actual being.

When we are alienated in every aspect of life, we become separated from real life. We are no longer in control of our actions, and when we do try to become aware of real life or explore our alienation we become depressed and begin to feel there is no way out, as the system has created immense pressures to keep us locked in. We are also alienated from others by economic transactions and glowing screens, leading to \"lonely crowds.\" This invasion of the spectacle aims to kill of solidarity and collectivism, leading to an individualistic world in which everyone competes and trusts no one.

People in consumerism see images of things for them to buy and they go and buy things and the reality that the world makes becomes what they are about. Regardless if the people have the money or not they can get credit and pay for it with money they don't have. This idea of credit for everyone helps the people with power to attain more money and power. The more technology progresses the easier it becomes to enhance the consumer society and move into new market areas and continue to move forward with the new way of life in America and the world. It is a theory that our society is dominated by images and characterizes and drives our consumer society. The images we see are seen through various methods such as Advertisements, television and other media outlets along with banners and signs. Debord states that "the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image." (34) This relates to ties between money and the spectacle or images. Advertisements and other methods of getting images out there require money to produce and get out to public. When a product is wanted by the public it then is consumed and helps the upper-class and more powerful people to gain wealth to continue to flood our mind with consumerism. With this money and social control over the mass population there is control by institutions. With constant pressure to buy certain products Debord states "the spectacle is a permanent opium war waged to make it impossible to distinguish goods from commodities."

I think it is a problem the way higher class people use this to improve their fortunes and slowly killing our economy. I agree with Debord on about all of the points he made. I don't find myself caught up in this consumer society for the most part, but I can see how it grips certain people and it gets to the point where it defines them. I believe that Debord dislikes the new society, so I wish he would have come out and said more negative things about the consumerism. The way Debord states individual points rather than a single theory is interesting because he can jump from one point to another without adhering to certain factors.

Debord believes that capitalist economies are different from previous economic forms because the production of commodities is geared toward endless accumulation and profit. In this type of economy, it doesn't matter whether or not something satisfies human necessities; what matters most is how much money you can make off it.

As Debord will explain, the spectacle has become "the integrated spectacle." There has been a qualitative change in its nature. But, for writers such as Guattari & Negri, there has been no such change. They write, "Capitalist and/or socialist restructuring in the '70s has stitched together the old modes of production, redistributing the functions of the players, and reorganizing on a world scale the division of exploitation." While Guattari & Negri suggest a global system of domination that is merely stitched together, Debord envisions one with an increasingly organic unity, in which "diffuse" and "concentrated" spectacles are integrated. What are the new defensive techniques the spectacle has learned in the last two decades? In other words, what is the nature of the NEW situation in which we find

ourselves today? "The society whose modernization has reached the stage of the integrated spectacle is characterized by the combined effect of five principal features," Debord tells us. They are 1). incessant technological renewal; 2). integration of state and economy; 3). generalized secrecy; 4). unanswerable lies; and 5). an eternal present.

One of DeBord's problems with a society that plops its fat collective ass in front of the Tube to live life, as opposed to say, actually going out and living life, is that it engenders an insidious passivity. The spectacle demands "passive acceptance;" it is "the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity." It "keeps people in a state of unconsciousness.

The spectacle demands "passive acceptance;" it is "the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity." It "keeps people in a state of unconsciousness." Cf. this with what Wallace says in everyone's favorite RCF interview: "[TV] admits passive spectation. Encourages it. TV-type art's biggest hook is that it's figured out ways to 'reward' passive spectation. A certain amount of the form-conscious stuff I write is trying—with whatever success—to do the opposite." Similarly, if Wikipedia is to be trusted, DeBord's goal was to "wake up the spectator who has been drugged by spectacular images."

The drug-speak is not an accident. As with Infinite Jest's Entertainments, DeBord's Spectacles have an overall narcotizing effect. Like the enslaving Substance who's only goal is to get you to ingest more Substance, "the spectacle aims at nothing other than itself." "The spectacle is the bad dream of a modern society in chains and ultimately expresses nothing more than its wish for sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of that sleep."

Another consequence of the society of the spectacle is what DeBord calls "a vicious circle of isolation." "From automobiles to television, the goods that the spectacular system chooses to produce also serve it as weapons for constantly reinforcing the conditions that engender 'lonely crowds.'" "Spectators are linked solely by their one-way relationship to the very center that keeps them isolated from each other. The spectacle thus reunites the separated, but it reunites them only in their separateness."

What is the reason that Debord has a deep attachment to the critique of the spectacle? Why does he only pay attention to the negative aspects of (the society of) the spectacle? Why does he not look for the positive and attractive aspects of the spectacle? Is the spectacle destructive as it is attractive? For Debord, is the spectacle so omnipotent that he seems as if he cannot escape its power? The spectacle for him is, as if it is living organism, evolve and develop to the stage where it dominates the whole social lives. It goes through self-division, self-development, self-alienation, self-deception, self-fulfillment, and so on. Every universal event occurs in and with the spectacle. It looks like self-evolving spirit in Hegelian sense but in the form of magical and even diabolic existence. The spectacle might be the

most formidable enemy Debord has been encountered. Due to its monstrous characteristics, he could not help but writing in fragmented aphorism to fight against and within it, to deconstruct it. Thus his radical critique of Hegelian – and earlier Marxist – ideology inevitably takes on the form of aphorism or manifesto.

What makes the spectacle the most problematic being? Debord's spectacle seems to incorporate Benjaminian insight that modern capitalist industrial technology, which enabled mass production and mass consumption, is at the core of the transformation of modern life – perceptual transformation. It has separated reality from image, essence from appearance. It has turned everything into commodity and the real consumers into the consumers of illusion. Even capital, the very material which has been the means of accumulation, is nothing but image: \"The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image\" (passage 34).