

Notes to Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*

Separation Perfected

But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence...illusion only is sacred, truth profane. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.
—Feuerbach, Preface to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity*

Feuerbach—copy/original—simulacrum—Deleuze and Baudrillard?

Accumulation of spectacles—”All that once was directly lived has become mere representation” (12).
Detached images enter into a common stream—partial aspects of reality congeal into a pseudo-world set apart as object of contemplation/autonomous image where deceit deceives itself—autonomous movement of non-life.

Three aspects of the spectacle—society itself/parts of society/means of unification. This is the place of false consciousness because it is where all consciousness converges—it is merely the official language of generalized separation

Spectacle is a social relationship mediated by images

It is not deliberate—a weltanschauung or worldview transformed into an objective force.

In its totality—spectacle is the outcome and goal of the dominant mode of production—heart of the spectacle's real unreality—celebration of a choice already made in the sphere of production—thus as consummation the spectacle serves as a total justification of the system in form and content. The permanent presence of that justification is due to the fact that “governs almost all time spent outside the production process itself” (13).

Separation—reality/image—Why does the spectacle appear as the apparent goal of social practice? The language of the spectacle is made from signs of the dominant mode of production—these signs are the ultimate end-products of that organization [does this start to sound like D+G and the critique of biunivocalization and linearization that occurs through the triangular nature of Oedipus?]

The spectacle is a product of real activity—we incorporate the spectacular order and lend it support—the reciprocal alienation is the essence and underpinning of society.

A world really turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood.

Spectacle as a visible negation of life—it has invented a visual form for itself [The virtual/visual intersection of Debord and Deleuze?]

The spectacle expresses the total practice of one particular economic and social formation; it is that formation's agenda.

Spectacle as enormous positivity; monopolization of the realm of appearances.

The spectacle globalizes the empire of modern passivity

For the spectacle as perfect image of the ruling economic order, ends are nothing and development is all—though the spectacle only desires to develop itself.

There is an ever-growing mass of image objects [partial objects?], ‘a general gloss on the rationality of the system’ (16).

The spectacle acts as a faithful mirror held up to the production of things and as a distorting objectification of the producers

Being–Having–Appearing to have—individual reality is not, it is only through the social/symbolic order

[Again D+G, but with an inverse emphasis: for D+G, schizoanalysis must focus on group fantasies—precisely the spectacle. For Debord, however, it seems that he's criticizing the gregarious nature of conspicuous consumption as that which forces us more and more into the logic of the spectacle, which entails that we purchase an identity (that is socially legitimated) in the fashion of a consumption of images].

Mere images are transformed into beings; spectacle as opposite of dialogue—representation takes on an independent existence.

So far from realizing philosophy, the spectacle philosophizes reality, and turns the material life of everyone into a universe of speculation (17). [Notice here that Debord produces a common rhetorical (in a non-pejorative sense) move that is usually referred to as a chiasmus—it is the disjunctive power of the genitive!].

Philosophy is at once the power of alienated thought and the thought of alienated power—never been able to emancipate itself from theology. Material reconstruction of the religious illusion—technological version of the exiling of human powers in a world beyond.

The spectacle is the bad dream and guardian of that sleep.

This ability is due to a self-cleavage and self-contradictoriness inherent to modern practice.

Specialization of power at the root of the spectacle. It acts as a diplomatic representative of hierarchical society—it is thus the most archaic form of social power.

One-way communication—social cleavage/division—spectacle as a second Nature that imposes its own law.

Separation and the spectacle—religious contemplation and the social division of labor—power garbed in a mythical order. Ancient society/modern society—spectacle is about what society can deliver—what is permitted, not what is possible—spectacle as a specious form of the sacred—how to reunite the separation? This is the communist question [Excursus: This reminds me of Levinas's reconstruction of a desacralized religion that understands that devious forms of power will persist unless we destroy the violence of the sacred].

Economic system founded on separation—proletarianization of the world

Inactivity is in thrall of production—it is of the rationality of production—within the spectacle, all activity and freedom is banned—'liberation from work' is false.

Isolation underpins technology; all goods proposed by the spectacular system reinforce the isolation.

Spectacle divides the world into two parts—self-representation of the world and superior to the world—it also unites what's separate, but only in its separateness.

The more he contemplates, the less he lives—he recognizes his needs in the images of needs, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires—the spectacle's externality—someone else represents his own gestures to him—the spectator feels at home nowhere.

Workers produce a force independent of themselves—the surplus that is generated by the producers is felt as an abundance of dispossession (23). All time, all space, becomes foreign to them as their own alienated products accumulate. The spectacle is a map of this new world

The spectacle manufactures alienation as its concrete function—if something grows with the self-movement of the economy, it is alienation.

Though he is separated from his product, more produces the world in ever detail—thus he is more and more drastically cut off from a life that is his own creation.

The spectacle is the image that arises when capital accumulates to a certain point [This point can be related to D+G's theory of the recording surface—capital miraculates a spectacle that serves as a fetish in the sense that the images of capital come to mediate the molecular flows; moreover, the socius comes to impose means of orienting our bodies in conjunction with the operator-word-images that dominate

our social interactions. More simply put, the BwO is the body without an image—images being that which strives to promote itself from the rank of a principle of induction to that of a principle of organization and that around which the BwO ought to organize itself. It is in this sense that we should understand Oedipus or Oedipal triangulation as a means of imposing an image on the BwO, and when we assert that one pole of the schizophrenic process is the creation of paranoid machines that repel these images from connecting, we truly begin to highlight the schizophrenic process as a means for radically revolutionizing the socius and the forms of social relationship that follow from the logic of its mediation by the spectacle.]

2. The Commodity as Spectacle

The commodity can only be understood in its undistorted essence when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole. Only in this context does the reification produced by commodity relations assume decisive importance both for the objective evolution of society and for the stance adopted by men towards it. Only then does the commodity become crucial for the subjugation of men's consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression...As labor is progressively rationalized and mechanized man's lack of will is reinforced by the way in which his activity becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative.

—Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*

35. The self-movement of the spectacle arrogates to itself everything that in human activity exists in a fluid state so as to possess it in a congealed form—being the negative expression of living value, it has become exclusively abstract value.

36. Commodity fetishism is the domination of society by perceptible and imperceptible images—the perceptible world is replaced by a set of images that is superior to the world yet impose themselves as eminently perceptible.

37. World of the commodity rules over all lived experiences.

38. Commodity form as self-equivalent and exclusively quantitative.

39. However, it is still subject to the qualitative—the spectacle must eventually break the bounds of its own abundance.

40. Development of the forces of production is the real unconscious history that has built and modified the conditions of the existence of human groups—human labor into labor-as-commodity after the 'problem of survival is solved'—Economic growth liberates from the struggle of survival, but we must be liberated from the liberators. An abundance of commodity relations can be no more than an augmented survival.

41. Political economy as the dominant science and the science of domination.

42. Spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life. The whole of labor force as the total commodity must be returned in fragmentary form to a fragmentary individual completely cut off from the active forces of production. The science of domination is then broken down into sociology, applied psychology, cybernetics, and semiology which oversee the self-regulation of every phase of the process.

43. Perfected denial of man—worker transformed into consumer.

44. Spectacle is a permanent opium war—augmented survival itself belongs to the realm of dispossession: it may gild poverty, but it cannot transcend it.

45. Automation, capable of abolishing labor, must conserve labor as commodity—Thus new forms of employment must be created—the rise of the tertiary and service sector and the necessity for reintegrating newly redundant labor—the factitiousness of needs associated with the commodities on offer calls out a whole battery of reserve forces (for the production and satisfaction of the new pseudo-

need).

46. Process of exchange became indistinguishable from utility, thereby placing use value at the mercy of exchange value.

47. Falling rate of use value—real consumer as consumer of illusion—commodity as illusion and spectacle as its most general form.

48. Use value, at once implicit, must become explicit due to the pseudo-justification that a counterfeit life requires.

49. Spectacle as another facet of money, the abstract equivalent of all commodities—the totality of the commodity world is visible in one piece, as the general equivalent of whatever society as a whole can do—spectacle is money for contemplation only—it is the pseudo-use of life.

50. Capital de-centers itself, spreading to the periphery, where it assumes the form of tangible objects—society in its length and breadth as capital's faithful portrait.

51. Economy's triumph as independent spells its own doom because it unleashes forces that must destroy economic necessity. It must replace the satisfaction of primary human needs with a ceaseless development of pseudo-needs—all of which merely point to the pseudo-need of an autonomous economy to continue.

52. Where economic id was, there ego shall be—product of the subject out of the struggle that society embodies.

53. Consciousness of desire and the desire for consciousness constitute the project whose goal is the abolition of classes and the direct possession by the worker of every part of his activity.

Society of the Spectacle 3. Unity and Division within Appearances

A lively new polemic about the concepts 'one divides into two' and 'two fuse into one' is unfolding on the philosophical front in this country. This debate is a struggle between those who are for and those who are against the materialist dialectic, a struggle between two conceptions of the world: the proletarian conception and the bourgeois conception. Those who maintain that 'one divides into two' is the fundamental law of things are on the side of the materialist dialectic; those who maintain that the fundamental law of things is that 'two fuse into one' are against the materialist dialectic. The two sides have drawn a clear line of demarcation between them, and their arguments are diametrically opposed. This polemic is a reflection, on the ideological level, of the acute and complex class struggle taking place in China and in the world.

—Red Flag (Peking), 21 September 1964

54. Spectacle and modern society are united and divided, but the unity is grounded in a split—however, the spectacle inverts the image and presents division as unity, unity as division.

55. Struggles between forces to run the same socioeconomic system are passed off as real antagonisms—these struggles actually partake of a real unity.

56. The spectacle is able to portray other politico-economic systems (colonial, semi-colonial, despotic, etc.) as radically distinct social systems, but they are merely sectors under a universal system whose tendency is capitalism.

57. Thus there is a society of the spectacle—this society frames the agenda of a ruling class and offers false models of revolution at the local level—even if the spectacle takes on a local manifestation of totalitarianism, from the global point of view it's all about the worldwide division of spectacular tasks.

58. Though destined to maintain the existing order, the spectacle is rooted in the economy and owes its allegiance to it and not the State.

59. Banalizing trend of the spectacle—pseudo-gratifications that still embody repression. A smug

acceptance of what exists is a purely spectacular rebelliousness wherein dissatisfaction itself becomes a commodity to be reterritorialized.

60. Media stars distill the essence of the spectacle's banality into images of possible roles:

Themselves incarnations of the inaccessible results of social labor, they mimic by-products of that labor, and project these above labor so that they appear as its goal. The by-products in question are power and leisure—the power to decide and the leisure to consume which are the alpha and the omega of a process that is never questioned. In the former case, government power assumes the personified form of the pseudo-star; in the second, stars of consumption canvas for votes as pseudo-power over life lived (39).

61. The individual in stardom's spotlight is in fact the opposite of an individual and the enemy of the individual in himself as well as the individual in others. Kennedy the orator survives himself his speech writer continues to write in the same vein for future presidents.

62. Spectacular abundance and the roles signified by and embodied in objects—vulgar rankings in the hierarchies of consumption with a magical ontological superiority. Youth and age applied to things in capitalism: things rule and vie with each other and usurp one another's place.

63. Spectacular antagonisms conceal the unity of poverty—the spectacle may be concentrated or diffuse depending upon the particular stage of poverty—the spectacle is merely the semblance of harmony.

64. Concentrated form of the spectacle normally associated with bureaucratic capitalism—commodity production is also concentrated in form—the bureaucracy appropriates the totality of social labor and sells back to society its survival. Dictatorship of the bureaucracy must be attended by permanent violence. To quote Debord:

For this figure [the dictator] is the master of not-being-consumed, and the heroic image appropriate to the absolute exploitation constituted by the primitive accumulation accelerated by terror. If every Chinese has to study Mao, and in effect be Mao, this is because there is nothing else to be. The dominion of the spectacle in its concentrated form means the dominion, too, of the police (42).

65. Diffuse form of the spectacle—apologetic catalogue for the grandeur of commodity production in general—the automobile entails a deterritorialization of the old city centers, but also a conservation and reterritorialization of these centers into museums.

66. Each individual commodity fights for itself as though it were alone—the spectacle is the epic poem of this strife. The commodity's becoming worldly turns the world into commodity—thus where particular commodities wear themselves out, commodity as abstract form continues on its way to absolute self-realization.

67. The satisfaction that the commodity in its virtue can no longer supply is now sought in acknowledgement of its value qua commodity. Enthusiasm for particular products—the fad item shows that as commodities get more absurd, absurdity itself becomes a commodity—collecting the commodity's indulgences—the use in evidence here is the use of submission to commodity fetishism.

68. Commodity's mechanical accumulation unleashes a limitless artificiality in which living desire is disarmed.

69. Image of blissful unification of society through consumption—The would-be singularity of an object-commodity can be offered to eager hordes only if it has been mass produced.

70. Continual process of replacement—false gratifications are exposed as objects and means of production change. Each new lie of the advertising industry is implicitly acknowledges the one before.

71. Whatever lays claim to the permanence in the spectacle must change according to the spectacle's foundation—There is nothing dogmatic in the spectacle—it shows itself to have no stable dogma.

72. The unreal unity of the spectacle masks the real unity on which the capitalist mode is based:

What brings together men liberated from local and national limitations is also what keeps them apart.

What pushes for greater rationality is also what nourishes the irrationality of hierarchical exploitation and repression. What creates society's abstract power also creates its concrete unfreedom (46).