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**Book**

## The Spectacle 2.0: Reading Debord in the Context of Digital Capitalism

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EDITED BY

MARCO BRIZIARELLI AND  
EMILIANA ARMANO

# THE SPECTACLE 2.0

Reading Debord in the Context of  
Digital Capitalism



# The Spectacle 2.0: Reading Debord in the Context of Digital Capitalism

Edited by  
Marco Briziarelli and Emiliana Armano



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*The spectacle thus unites what is separate, but it unites it only in its separateness*

*(Thesis 29, 1967)*

*Dobbiamo convincerci che oggi, quanto al risveglio del fattore soggettivo, non possiamo rinnovare e continuare gli anni Venti, ma dobbiamo cominciare da un nuovo punto di partenza, sia pure utilizzando tutte le esperienze che sono patrimonio del movimento operaio e del marxismo. Dobbiamo renderci conto infatti chiaramente che abbiamo a che fare con un nuovo inizio, o per usare un'analoga, che noi ora non siamo negli anni Venti del Novecento ma in un certo senso all'inizio dell'Ottocento, quando dopo la rivoluzione francese si cominciava a formare lentamente il movimento operaio. Credo che questa idea sia molto importante per il teorico, perché ci si dispera assai presto quando l'enunciazione di certe verità produce solo un'eco molto limitata.*

*(Ontologia dell'Essere Sociale, G. Lukács)*

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*Marco Briziarelli and Emiliana Armano*

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## CHAPTER I

# Preface: Guy Debord, Donald Trump, and the Politics of the Spectacle

Douglas Kellner

Guy Debord described a ‘society of the spectacle’ in which the economy, politics, social life, and culture were increasingly dominated by forms of spectacle.<sup>1</sup> This collected volume updates Debord’s theory of the spectacle for the twenty-first century and the age of digital media and digital capitalism. We now live in an era, where the digitally mediated spectacle has contributed to right-wing authoritarian populist Donald Trump becoming US president, and Debord’s concept of spectacle is now more relevant than ever to interpreting contemporary culture, society, and politics.

Donald Trump lived the spectacle from the time in New York when as a young entrepreneur and man about town he performed his business and personal life in gossip columns, tabloids, and rumor mills. Trump used PR advisors to promote both his businesses and his persona to eventually become a maestro of the spectacle when his popular TV show *The Apprentice* made him into a national celebrity. Trump ran his 2016 presidential campaign as a media spectacle with daily tweets that became fodder for TV news, and with rallies where he would make outrageous comments that would be replayed endlessly on cable and network news. Trump thus dominated news cycles by creating daily spectacles of political attack, insulting and negatively defining opponents,

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thus helping to construct daily media events through which he was able to define the news agenda.

Hence, I argue that the election of Donald J. Trump in the 2016 US presidential election is the culmination of the politics of the spectacle that was first described by Debord. Explaining the Trump phenomenon is a challenge that will occupy critical theorists of US politics for years to come. My first take on the Trump phenomenon is that Donald Trump won the Republican primary contest and then achieved a shocking upset victory in the 2016 US Presidential Election because he is a *master of media spectacle*, a concept that I have been developing and applying to US politics and media since the mid-1990s.<sup>2</sup> In this study, I will first discuss Trump's use of media spectacle in his business career, in his effort to become a celebrity and reality TV superstar, and in his political campaign out of which he emerged as President of the United States of Spectacle.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Donald Trump: Master of Media Spectacle

I first proposed the concept of media spectacle to describe the key phenomenon of US media and politics in the mid-1990s. This was the era of the O.J. Simpson murder case and trial, the Clinton sex scandals, and the rise of cable news networks like Fox, CNN, and MSNBC and the 24/7 news cycle that has dominated US politics and media since then.<sup>4</sup> The 1990s was also the period when the Internet and new media took off so that anyone could be a political commentator, player, and participant in the spectacle, a phenomenon that accelerated as new media morphed into social media and teenagers, celebrities, politicians, and others who wanted to become part of the networked virtual world and interactive spectacle joined in.

The scope of the spectacle has thus increased in the past decades with the proliferation of new media and social networking like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Skype, and so on, which increase the scope and participation of the spectacle, and make Debord's concept of the spectacle all the more relevant in the contemporary era. By 'media spectacles' I am referring to media constructs that present events which disrupt ordinary and habitual flows of information. These become popular stories which capture the attention of the media and the public, and circulate through broadcasting networks, the Internet, social networking, smart phones, and other new media and communication technologies. In a globally networked society, media spectacles proliferate instantaneously, become virtual and viral, and in some cases, become tools of socio-political transformation, while other media spectacles become mere moments of media hype and tabloidized sensationalism.

Dramatic news events are presented as media spectacles and dominate certain news cycles. Stories like the 9/11 terror attacks, Hurricane Katrina, Barack Obama and the 2008 US presidential election, and in 2011 the Arab Uprisings,

the Libyan revolution, the UK Riots, the Occupy movement and other major media spectacles of the era, cascaded through broadcasting, print, and digital media, seizing people's attention and emotions, and generating complex and multiple effects that may make 2011 as memorable a year in the history of social upheaval as 1968, the year in which events in France decisively shaped Debord's dialectic of spectacle and insurrection, a model still highly relevant today.<sup>5</sup>

In today's highly competitive media environment, 'Breaking News!' of various sorts play out as media spectacle, including mega-events like wars, 9/11 and other spectacular terrorist attacks, presidential elections, extreme weather disasters, or, in Spring 2011, political insurrections and upheavals. These spectacles assume a narrative form and become the focus of attention during a specific temporal and historical period, that may only last a few days, but may come to dominate news and information for extended periods of time, as did the O.J. Simpson trial and the Clinton sex/impeachment scandal in the mid-1990s, the stolen election of 2000 in the Bush/Gore presidential campaign, or natural and other disasters that have significant destructive effects and political implications, such as Hurricane Katrina, the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, or the Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear catastrophe. Media spectacles can even become signature events of an entire epoch as were, arguably, the 9/11 terrorist attacks which inaugurated a historical period that I describe as Terror War.

I have argued since 2008 that the key to Barack Obama's success in two presidential elections is that he became a master of the media spectacle, blending politics and performance in carefully orchestrated media spectacles (Kellner 2009 and 2012). Previously, the model of the mastery of presidential spectacle was Ronald Reagan who everyday performed his presidency in a well-scripted and orchestrated daily spectacle. Reagan was trained as an actor and every night Ron and Nancy reportedly practised his lines for the next day's performance as they had done in their Hollywood days. Reagan breezed through the day scripted with a teleprompter for well-orchestrated media events, smiling frequently, and pausing to sound-bite the line of the day.

In the recent 2016 election, Donald Trump has undeniably emerged as a major form of media spectacle and has long been a celebrity and master of the spectacle with promotion of his buildings and casinos from the 1980s to the present, his reality TV shows, self-promoting events, and now his presidential campaign. Hence, Trump has become empowered and enabled to run for the presidency in part because media spectacle has become a major force in US politics, helping to determine elections, government, and more broadly the ethos and nature of our culture and political sphere, and Trump is a successful creator and manipulator of the political spectacle.

I would also argue that in recent years US wars have been orchestrated as media spectacle, recalling Bush Jr's 2003 Iraq shock and awe campaign for one example. Likewise, terrorism has been orchestrated as media spectacle since the 9/11 attack that was the most spectacular and deadly attack on the US heartland in history. As we know too well, school and mass shootings which can be

seen as a form of domestic terrorism, have become media spectacle with one taking place in 2015 in Virginia on live TV, while the stock market, weather, and every other form of life can become part of a media spectacle. Hence, it is no surprise that political campaigns are being run as media spectacles and that Knights of the Spectacle like Donald Trump deployed the political spectacle to win the presidency.

Trump's biographies reveal that he was driven by a need to compete and win,<sup>6</sup> and entering the highly competitive real estate business in New York in the 1980s, Trump saw the need to use the media and publicity to promote his celebrity and image. It was a time of tabloid culture and media-driven celebrity and Trump even adopted a pseudonym 'John Baron' to give the media gossip items that touted Trump's successes in businesses, with women, and as a rising man about town.<sup>7</sup>

Trump derives his language and behavior from a highly competitive and ruthless New York business culture and an appreciation of the importance of media and celebrity to succeed in a media-centric hypercapitalism. Hence, to discover the nature of Trump's 'temperament,' personality, and use of language, we should recall his reality TV show *The Apprentice* which popularized him into a super-celebrity and made 'The Donald' a major public figure for a national audience. Indeed, Trump is the first reality TV candidate who ran his campaign like a reality TV series, boasting during the most chaotic episodes in his campaign that his rallies were the most entertaining, and sending outrageous Tweets into the Twitter-sphere which then dominated the news cycle on the ever-proliferating mainstream media and social networking sites. Hence, Trump is the first celebrity candidate whose use of the media and celebrity star power is his most potent weapon in his improbable and highly surreal campaign.<sup>8</sup>

Trump represents a stage of spectacle beyond Debord's model of spectacle and consumer capitalism in which spectacle has come to colonize politics, culture, and everyday life, with the chief manipulator of the spectacle in the United States, Donald J. Trump, now becoming president and collapsing politics into entertainment and spectacle. In the following sections, I will discuss how this startling development in the history of spectacle took place.

## 2. *The Apprentice*, Twitter and the Summer of Trump

Since Trump's national celebrity derived in part from his role in the reality TV series *The Apprentice*,<sup>9</sup> we need to interrogate this popular TV phenomenon to help explain in turn the Trump phenomenon. The opening theme music, 'For the Love of Money', a 1973 R&B song by The O'Jays, established the capitalist ethos of the competition for the winning contestant to get a job with the Trump organization, and obviously money is the key to Trump's business and celebrity success. Yet there has been much controversy over how rich Trump is, and so far he has not released his tax returns to quell rumors that he isn't as rich as he

claims, that he does not contribute as much to charity as he has stated, and that many years he pays little or no tax.<sup>10</sup>

In the original format to *The Apprentice*, several contestants formed teams to carry out a task dictated by Trump, and each ‘contest’ resulted with a winner and Trump barking ‘you’re fired’ to the loser. Curiously, some commentators believe that in the 2012 presidential election Barack Obama skilfully beat Mitt Romney because he early on characterized Romney as a billionaire who liked to fire people. This is ironic since this is Trump’s signature personality trait in his business, reality TV, and now political career, which has seen him fire two campaign managers and senior advisors in 2016 and the early days of his presidency (see Kellner 2017).

*The Apprentice*’s TV Producer Mark Burnett broke into national consciousness with his reality TV show *The Survivor*, a neo-Darwinian epic spectacle of alliances, backstabbing, and nastiness, which provides an allegory of how one succeeds in the dog-eat-dog business world in which Donald Trump has thrived, and spectacularly failed as many of the books about him document (see Note 6 below). Both Burnett and Trump share the neo-Darwinian social ethos of nineteenth century ultracompetitive capitalism, with some of Donald Trump’s famous witticisms proclaiming:

When somebody challenges you unfairly, fight back—be brutal, be tough—don’t take it. It is always important to WIN!

I think everyone’s a threat to me.

Everyone that’s hit me so far has gone down. They’ve gone down big league.

I want my generals kicking ass.

I would bomb the shit out of them.

You bomb the hell out of the oil. Don’t worry about the cities. The cities are terrible.<sup>11</sup>

In any case, *The Apprentice* made Trump a national celebrity who became well-known enough to plausibly run for President and throughout the 2016 campaign Trump used his celebrity to gain media coverage through his daily mobilization of political spectacle on the campaign trail. In addition to his campaign’s ability to manipulate broadcast media, Trump is also a heavy user of Twitter and he tweets out his messages throughout the day and night. Indeed, Trump may be the first major Twitter candidate, and certainly he is the one using it most aggressively and frequently. Twitter was launched in 2006, but I do not recall it being used in a major way in the 2008 election, although Obama used Facebook and his campaign bragged that he had over a million ‘Friends’ and used Facebook as part of his daily campaign apparatus. I do not recall, however, previous presidential candidates using Twitter in a big way like Donald Trump, although many have accounts.

Twitter is a perfect vehicle for Trump as you can use its 140-character framework for attack, bragging, and getting out simple messages or posts that engage receivers who feel they are in the know and involved in TrumpWorld when they get pinged and receive his tweets. When asked at an August 26, 2015, Iowa event as to why he uses Twitter so much, he replied that it was easy, it only took a couple of seconds, and that he could attack his media critics when he 'wasn't treated fairly.' Trump has also used Instagram – an online mobile photo-sharing, video-sharing and social networking service that enables its users to take pictures and videos, and share them on a variety of social networking platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Flickr.

Twitter is perfect for General Trump who can blast out his opinions and order his followers what to think. It enables Businessman and Politician Trump to define his brand and mobilize those who wish to consume or support it. Trump Twitter gratifies the need of Narcissist Trump to be noticed and recognized as a master of communication who can bind his warriors into an on-line community. Twitter enables the Pundit-in-Chief to opine, rant, attack, and proclaim on all and sundry subjects, and to subject TrumpWorld to the indoctrination of their Fearless Leader.

Hence, Trump is mastering new media as well as dominating television and old media through his orchestration of media events as spectacles and daily Twitter feed. In Trump's presidential campaign kick-off speech on June 16, 2015, when he announced he was running for President, Trump and his wife Melania dramatically descended the stairway at Trump Towers, and 'The Donald' strode up to a gaggle of microphones and dominated media attention for days with his drama. The opening speech of his campaign made a typically inflammatory remark that held in thrall news cycles for days when he stated:

The US has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems. [Applause] Thank you. It's true, and these are the best and the finest. When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.

This comment ignited a firestorm of controversy and a preview of things to come concerning vile racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and the other hallmarks of Trump's cacophony of hate. Throughout his campaign, Trump orchestrated political theatre and transformed US politics into spectacle, with his campaign representing another step in the merger between entertainment, celebrity and politics (here Ronald Reagan played a key role, our first actor president).

Trump is, I believe, the first major US presidential candidate to pursue politics as entertainment and thus to collapse the distinction between entertainment, news, and politics, greatly expanding the domain of spectacle theorized by Debord. Furthermore, Trump's use of Twitter, Facebook, and other new forms of



digital media, social networking, and interactive spectacle expanded the political spectacle to new realms of digitization, participation, and virtuality described by editors and contributors to this book as Spectacle 2.0. Trump's mastery of the politics of the spectacle was evident in his campaign against Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election.

### 3. The Spectacle of Election 2016

Nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche believed that all social movements are rooted in the herd psychology of resentment which is directed against superior individuals and classes and the state. In particular Nietzsche developed a vitriolic attack on the modern state, finding it to be a 'new idol' that is 'the coldest of all cold monsters,' run by 'annihilators' who continuously lie and lie again. 'Everything about it is false,' Nietzsche claims (1954 [1883]: 160–163). Nietzsche also consistently attacked German nationalism, writing:

If one spends oneself on power, grand politics, economic affairs, world commerce, parliamentary institutions, military interests – if one expends oneself in this direction the quantum of reason, seriousness, will, self-overcoming that one is, then, there will be a shortage in the other direction (1968b [1889]: 62) that is culture, art, religion, and the development of personality.

Trump's followers appear to be a variant of Nietzsche's mass men seething with resentment, while Donald Trump himself is a cauldron of resentment, who has deeply internalized a lifetime of deep resentments, and thus is able to tap into, articulate, and mobilize the resentments of his followers, in a way that Democrats and other professional politicians have not been able to do. Part of Trump's followers' resentments are directed against politicians, and Trump's ability to tout himself as outside of the political system has been a major theme of his campaign and an apparently successful way to mobilize voters. Yet the Donald Trump presidential reality TV show also stumbled, choked, and went into crisis mode with the onset of the annual presidential debates in which the two finalists get to fight it out to see who will convince the audience that they deserve the ultimate prize, the presidency of the United States. In the age of television, and now new media, US presidential debates have been a gladiatorial spectacle in which the opponents try to destroy each other, while the media personalities who moderate each debate try to positively define themselves and avoid gaffes that could negatively impact their image forever. The first presidential debate on September 27, 2016, was a compelling political media spectacle in which the two candidates showed how they were able to make their case for the presidency under conditions of intense pressure and media focus. From

the outset, Trump played to the hilt the authoritarian macho, shouting, insulting Clinton, and trying to dominate the procedure. Clinton, however, ignored Trump's bullying and blustering, made her arguments against him, and presented her positions on the issues.

As the debate progressed, Trump exhibited a loss of stamina, rambled, became incoherent, and was unable to cogently respond to Clinton's sharp attacks on his business record, his failure to pay taxes, his atrocious attacks on women, and his lack of qualifications to be president. Trump's unraveling during the first debate presented the media spectacle of the outsider and macho man, not ready for prime time, and losing the debate to the cool professional and qualified politician, who was able to provide coherent answers to questions, and look presidential while Trump faltered and looked increasingly flustered as the debate went on so that by the end he looked like he lacked stamina and was a choker, accusations that he had made against his Republican rivals in the primaries.

The next morning after what commentators on all sides labelled a disappointing, and even disastrous, debate, Trump went on the offensive, lashing out at the debate moderator, complaining about his microphone and threatening to make Bill Clinton's marital infidelity a campaign issue in a spectacle of desperation. There were estimates that 85 million people had watched the debate live on television, and millions more were re-watching it and discussing it at home, work, and online, making it one of the major spectacles in US political history. Clinton was exuberant, campaigning with Bernie Sanders the next day, and presenting a united Democratic Party on the offensive.

Presidential debates are the ultimate shared media spectacle and it would be interesting to see if Trump could recover and gain the offensive in the coming political debates and in the last weeks of the campaign. At different stages, Clinton and Trump had dominated the presidential spectacle, and anything could happen as the spectacle moved toward its conclusion.

Over the weekend of October 8–9, 2016, media coverage of the campaign was overwhelmed by the spectacle of a videotape of Trump's bragging of his sexual prowess with women that revealed the full extent of his vulgarity, crudeness, and contempt for women. The front page of the *New York Times* featured a full account of Trump's sexual bragging in an October 8, 2016 story: 'Tape Reveals Trump Boast About Groping Women,' and television networks and social networking cites played the footage over and over.

A three-minute videotape was found and endlessly replayed of a conversation of trash talk between Trump and Billy Bush, a minor TV celebrity on *Access Hollywood* and a member of the Bush clan. Trump boasted that his 'star' status allowed him to do what he wanted with women, including married women, telling how, in one case, he 'moved on her like a bitch, but I couldn't get there.' On the whole, sex philosopher Trump asserted that a 'star' like him gets special treatment, and 'You can do anything,' including 'grab them by the pussy.' Displaying his vengeful retaliation, he noted that the married woman who managed to resist his cave man charms wasn't really up to 'The Donald's'

high standards, as he explained: 'I did try and fuck her. She was married. She's now got the big phony tits and everything.'

And so, the media spectacle of the 2016 campaign had devolved into gutter sniping trash talk and Donald Trump demonstrated that, yes, he was an outsider and outside the bounds of decorum, decency, and shame. In a campaign of outrageous sexism, racism, xenophobia, insults, and trash talk would this assault on women and decency finally provoke the viral outrage that went over the top and take Donald Trump into the sewer of filth where even his rabid followers would be loath to follow? Or is this just the way good old boys talk in the locker room, as Trump's surrogates, like thrice-married and serial adulterers Rudi Giuliani and Newt Gingrich insisted? Would the authoritarian populist leader continue to drive his campaign and Trumpite followers forward, or was the spectacle that had created Trump about to devour him?

It turned out, however, that Hillary Clinton would be devoured by media spectacle and her campaign would flounder in the debris of the most explosive media spectacle to drop upon a candidate in recent US presidential history. On Friday, October 29, 2016, FBI Director James Comey dropped a bombshell that is perhaps the most stunning and, for many, outrageous, intervention in a presidential election by a top official of the judicial branch of the government in US presidential history. Director Comey released a letter to twelve Congressmen saying that the FBI had received a collection of emails that the FBI would review to determine if they improperly contained classified information, and that the emails 'appeared to pertain' to Hillary Clinton's email investigation.

Over the past year, the FBI had investigated Clinton's email, and over the summer determined that she was not guilty of any crime concerning her private email server. Many in the FBI and Justice Department were outraged with Comey's rekindling of the Clinton email crisis eleven days before the election. There were immediate leaks to the media that the Justice Department had opposed Comey sending out a letter on an FBI investigation in progress, which was supposed to be secret, and in particular releasing a political bombshell so close to an election when such intervention was specifically prohibited. Further, senior law enforcement officials informed the media that it was unclear if any of the emails were from Mrs. Clinton's private server, and indicated that although Comey said in his letter that the emails 'appear to be pertinent,' the FBI had not yet examined them.

Within hours, other government officials leaked that the email trove in question came from a device shared by Anthony Weiner, a former Democratic congressman from New York, and his then wife Huma Abedin, a top aide of Hillary Clinton. Further, the 'unrelated case,' which Comey had claimed brought the emails to light, involved an FBI investigation into illicit 'sexting' from Weiner to a 15-year-old girl in North Carolina.<sup>12</sup> Trump and his camp were overjoyed by the new bombshell, leading the candidate, who had been complaining that the election was rigged, to concede at a campaign rally in New Hampshire that:

'Maybe, it's less rigged than I thought... Perhaps, finally, justice will be done.' To the cheers of 'lock her up' from his supporters, Trump claimed: 'Hillary Clinton's corruption is on a scale we have never seen before. We must not let her take her criminal scheme into the Oval Office.'

Clinton never recovered from the FBI bombshell and this spectacle blocked her momentum, gave Trump a boost, and played a decisive role in the 2016 US presidential election. Yet there were also revelations just before the election of suspected Russian hacks into the Democratic Party emails, with a release of emails embarrassing to Hillary Clinton, the Democratic National Committee, and Clinton's campaign manager John Podesta, all of which may have turned some voters against Clinton. The alleged Russian interference in the US election was an outrageous scandal that honorable members of Congress and wide sectors of the American people are demanding that the government and media investigate. Indeed, the scandal of Russian interference in the election generated, by March 2017, growing calls for a Special Prosecutor to investigate the ties between the Trump presidential campaign and the Russians, a potential scandal which could well bring down the Trump presidency.

Indeed, on May 17, 2017, former FBI Director Robert Mueller was appointed by the Justice Department as Special Counsel overseeing the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 United States elections, and there are ongoing investigations as well into the Trump-Russian connections by the FBI and several committees of the House and Senate. This spectacle of scandal and corruption could well bring down the Trump presidency and create an abyss of the spectacle hard to predict or envisage. Indeed, as Trump entered into the fourth month of his presidency, his Achilles heel was clearly his connections and those of his highest officials, and a cadre of lower ones, to Russia and its murderous dictator Vladimir Putin and the Russian government. Trump and Putin are both authoritarians who share a contempt for democratic institutions and freedoms, although it was bizarre and not yet explained why Trump had chosen so many rabidly pro-Russian members for his administration, and why Trump had throughout the election and into his presidency spoken so highly of Vladimir Putin. Trump had never released his tax returns, and there was still a mystery concerning the financial ties between his campaign and Russia, as well as concerning connections between the Trump organization and Russia. The Russian hack into the 2016 election, described in detail in my book *The American Horror Show* (Kellner 2017), was perhaps one of the most scandalous foreign interferences in a US presidential election in history, and may unleash the most contentious political spectacle yet to devour a presidential regime. Although there were many other decisive factors in the outcome of the election, including the fact that Clinton ran an uninspiring campaign without a compelling message and the country was suffering from Clinton fatigue, there is no doubt that media spectacle is playing an increasingly important role in US politics, which is now standing on the threshold of an era in which a master of the spectacle, Donald J. Trump stands as President in a presidency

consumed by spectacle, one that might serve as a sacrifice to the politics of the spectacle that destroys its avatars, just as it creates them. Indeed, Guy Debord might be astonished at the extent to which spectacle has come to dominate politics in high-tech supercapitalist societies of the hyperspectacle which it is our fate to suffer.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* was published in English translation in a pirate edition by Black and Red (Detroit) in 1970 and reprinted many times; another edition appeared in 1983 and a new translation in 1994.
- <sup>2</sup> For my concept of media spectacle, see Kellner 2001; 2003a; 2003b; and 2005.
- <sup>3</sup> In *American Nightmare: Donald Trump, Media Spectacle, and Authoritarian Populism* (Kellner 2016), I examine how Trump embodies authoritarian populism and has used racism, nationalism, xenophobia, and the disturbing underside of American politics to mobilize his supporters in his successful Republican primary campaign and in the hotly contested 2016 general election. In a successor volume, *The American Horror Show: Election 2016 and the Ascendancy of Donald J. Trump* (Kellner 2017), I discuss how Trump won the 2016 US presidential election and I describe the assembly of his administration and the horrors of the first 100 days of Trump's reign.
- <sup>4</sup> I provide accounts of the O.J. Simpson Trial and the Clinton sex/impeachment scandal in the mid-1990s in Kellner 2003b; engage the stolen election of 2000 in the Bush/Gore presidential campaign in Kellner (2001), and describe the 9/11 terrorist attacks and their aftermath in Kellner (2003a).
- <sup>5</sup> On the 2011 uprisings, see Kellner (2012).
- <sup>6</sup> On Trump's life and career, see D'Antonio 2015; Blair 2000; and Kranish and Fisher 2016. Blair's chapter on 'Born to Compete,' op. cit., pp. 223ff., documents Trump's competitiveness and drive for success at an early age.
- <sup>7</sup> See Fisher and Hobson 2016.
- <sup>8</sup> For my take on celebrity politics and the implosion of entertainment and politics in US society, see Kellner 2015: 114–134. The best study of Trump, the media, and his long cultivation and exploitation of celebrity is found in O'Brien, 2016 [2005].
- <sup>9</sup> Trump's book *The Art of the Deal*, co-written with Tony Schwartz (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005 [1987]), helped introduce him to a national audience and is a key source of the Trump mythology; see Blair, op. cit., 380ff.
- <sup>10</sup> An excellent study of Trump, his scandal-ridden business career, and his shaky finances is found in O'Brien 2016 [2005].
- <sup>11</sup> Trump 2016, pp 30, 152, 153.

- <sup>12</sup> The story of Anthony Weiner and Huma Abedin, and Weiner's 'sexting' addiction that forced him to resign from Congress and then become disgraced again in a run for Mayor of New York, is told in a documentary film *Weiner*, currently showing on Showtime which became the must-see film of the day for political junkies. Abedin separated from Weiner in August, 2016, when it emerged that Weiner continued to exchange lewd messages with women on social media despite having seen his online misbehaviours destroying his congressional career and his 2013 mayoral campaign.

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## CHAPTER 2

# Introduction: From the Notion of Spectacle to Spectacle 2.0: The Dialectic of Capitalist Mediations

Marco Briziarelli and Emiliana Armano

### 1. Context and Purpose

Sometimes the literary fortune of a book can almost be unfortunate. We think this is the case of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, which on the one hand succeeded where most of our scholarship concerned with the production of critical knowledge tends to fail, by going beyond the constraining walls of academic discourse and inspiring human emancipation. On the other hand, while the idea of the Spectacle has infiltrated the collective imagery, it has most frequently done so through the popularization of its most glaring surface, thus limiting its overall significance.

It is indeed easier to think of the Debordian notion as spectacularly mediated content – such as media images and extravagant events – rather than the general process of mediation that for Debord propels the Spectacle. That is because we do live in a media saturated environment, but to the point in which

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the mediation logic that drives current conditions of life in many societies has gone beyond spectacular images, and is increasingly subsuming more spheres of social life to the total and integral Spectacle: capitalism. This book aims at re-framing Debord's reflections from being linked to an epistemological question that limits the exploration of the Spectacle to the signifying value of technologically mediated content—thus essentially media images and events—and moving it to the much broader ontological plane of the social being, which implies inquiring into the constitutive mediating factors of social relations in a capitalist society.

Thus, we would like to show how the Spectacle vastly exceeds its superficial theatrical stage, and we will accordingly concentrate on a 'deeper' level that was implied in the original Debordian reflection but also not adequately explored by it: the mediation logic of the sphere of production of value which, in the specific contemporary context, translates into labour in its informational guise. Accordingly, the purpose of our edited book is to empirically engage and to theoretically explore the implications of the notion of the Spectacle applied in contemporary capitalist scenarios, and to understand it as the fundamental intersection of transformative social relations, especially in its informational, cognitive and digital forms. Our aim is to engage and test through different perspectives whether a revisited Spectacle – a Spectacle 2.0 – can function as a heuristic tool, a totalizing framework to understand late capitalism and the subjectivities inhabiting it.

Therefore, informed by this perspective, we revisit Debord's notion of Spectacle to critically inquire how in the context of informational capitalism, knowledge workers produce, consume and reproduce value, which are processes of subjectification as well as precarious forms of (digital) labour. In a context in which information and communication technologies have become both powerful holistic metaphors of many contemporary capitalist societies, as well as the terrain in which current forms of valorisation, exploitation of labour, power structures, ideological practices as well as counter-hegemonic social struggles find their condition of possibility, this project intends to recover a concept capable of articulating the complexity of a media saturated social whole – the Spectacle – in order to historicize it, and to provide a varied recollection of empirical engagements with its concrete manifestations.

In order to provide an adequate context for our argument, we will offer in the pages that follow a review of the original Spectacle of late 1960s, its posterior re-visitation of the 1990s, and finally its re-interpretation in the scenario of informational capitalism and more specifically in relation to digital labour. There will then follow a synthetic account of the structure of the book and a brief description of the content of the chapters that compose it.

In this regard, we pose the following hypothesis: the rising prominence of the intersection of information and communication technology and of work and labour constitute one powerful productive and reproductive factor of current capitalism; we refer to such a holistic mediator as the Spectacle 2.0.

Our assumption is that, under the current mode of production driven by information and communication technology, the Spectacle form operates as the interactive network that links through one singular (but contradictory) language, diverse productive contexts such as logistics, finance, new media and urbanism. Moreover, we assume that such a Spectacle form colonizes most spheres of social life by the processes of commodification, exploitation and reification.

As we shall see in a moment, we explore the Spectacle through the dialectical tensions that define its complexity, its ambiguity but also its capability to comprehend large portions of social life. Dialectics and its operationalisation as mediation, is indeed the grand narrative that links the original Spectacle, its integrated update and our understanding of its 2.0 modality. In fact, despite significant differences between these Spectacles, we also consider them in a continuum consistently marked by the processes of commodity fetishism, exploitation of labour and the tendency of capital to subsume social life. From this perspective, the historically different configurations of the Spectacle appear as determinate negations, that is, relative variations of the ratio/weight that each element that forms them plays in the overall totality of the Spectacle.

## 2. Genealogy of the Spectacle

*Society of the Spectacle* is a manuscript written in 1967 by French philosopher Guy Debord, developed in the context of reflections already started during his militancy in the avant-garde movements Situationist Internationale (1957–72) and Lettrism (1952–57), which were both inspired by Dada, Surrealism, as well as the radical political thought of Marx, anarchism and Utopian Socialism. The members of the Situationist movement were united by a common rejection of advanced capitalism and by the objective to revive the link between art, politics and everyday life (Vaneigem 1994). Wark (2013) claims that the Situationists wanted to go beyond the false needs generated by capitalism and create new ones by radically changing everyday practices, thus trying to implement Lefebvre's recommendations (1958) in critiquing *everyday life*.

Guy Debord developed his thoughts concerning the relation between art and politics as a member of Lettrism, an artistic and literary movement originated in Paris 1940s, which was clustered around Isadore Isou. Lettrism advanced the need to radically reform artistic works by providing new solutions to produce literary and visual art, which heavily shaped the production of Situationist material but especially films (Kaufmann 2006). In the early 1950s, a more politically radical faction of Lettrist broke off from the movement to form Letterist International. During this period, some of the foundational spatial concepts of the Situationist perspective such as psychogeography, the theory of *dérive*, as well as the signification practices of *détournement* were developed. Thus, in 1957, in a small town of Northern Italy, Pinot Gallizio, Piero Simondo,

Elena Verrone, Michèle Bernstein, Guy Debord, Asger Jorn and Walter Olmo founded the The International Situationist (Perniola 2013).

Members of the Letterist International such as Debord, philosopher Raoul Vaneigem, painter Constant Nieuwenhuys, writer Alexander Trocchi, artist Ralph Rumney and poet Gianfranco Sanguinetti, formed the movement Situationist International when various groups such as Lettrist International, the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus and the London Psychogeographical Association (and later, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*) converged together in 1957. The foundation of the new organization was announced through the publication of the manifesto *Report on the Construction of Situations*. Then, after several scissions, by the early 1960s the movement shifted from a more artistic tendency towards a more political one, which translated into a focus on the theory of the Spectacle and a Marxist critique of capitalist phenomenologies.

In *the Revolution of Everyday Life*, the other significant text published by the Situationists, Raoul Vaneigem (1967) claims that the radical transformation of capitalism starts from the revolutionising of daily practice that shapes subjectivities as social beings, which are presently degraded into passive objects manipulated by capitalist interests. Contrary to the 'scientific' aspiration of Stalinist Marxism and its alleged positivist objectivity, the critique of economy as the autonomous motor of history carried out by Situationism focused on the subject as a real historic being, with his/her capability to acquire consciousness, with his/her body, aspirations, boredom and desires. As Jappe (1993) points out 'In France more than in any other Western Country, the Communist Party conducted a veritable reign of terror over the intellectuals, successfully silencing any thinking on the Left that did not correspond to its manuals' (Jappe 1993, 50–51). Thus, similarly to the movement *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Debord's critique of everyday life also consisted in engaging empirical reality, which represented for him the new front of the struggle. That is because contemporary Fordist capitalism proved to be capable of providing economic security to the working class, and for this reason, the revolutionary objective was not to establish an open confrontation between work and capital but actually the refusal to work, thus 'never work' (Debord, in Jappe 1993, 99).

The Situationist movement, and in particular, Debord's reflections, represented an attempt to respond to the social economic conjuncture of the period of industrialization and modernization that France experienced during the 1950s and 1960s. The social fabric of the country changed significantly due to migration towards the cities from the countryside, the rising of household income and the rise of consumption and acquisition of home appliances such as TV and washing machines. France's civil society tried to cope with the sudden process of modernisation which in other parts of the continent, such as England and the Netherlands, were happening more gradually. In this sense, Situationist International's interest in urbanism also derived from its fascination with those city spaces that were being radically changed by such an abrupt

process of modernisation and industrialisation. Debord intended to capture capitalism as an integral social process, because as Lefebvre (1958) and Vanegem (1967/1994) have already pointed out, the new arrangement of social life brought by modernisation was rooted at the heart of people's everyday life: new suburban city quarters were now shaped by serialized and standardized life styles; the emergence of supermarkets, touristic resorts that systematically fetishized the idea of traveling and vacationing, fashion streets and commercial centres.

In such a context, as an aspect of its later stage of politicization, the Situationist International also became more consistently present inside the universities, which culminated with the involvement of SI in the events of May 1968, as exemplified by Mustapha Khayaty's pamphlet *On the Poverty of Student Life* and its participation in the occupation of Nanterre and Sorbonne. In this sense, the Situationist movement became particularly active during the cycle of social mobilization in France and Italy of the late 1960s. In his chronicles of the 1968 uprising, Situationist René Viénet narrates how members of the organisation initiated the protest of December 1967 in Nanterre by blocking streets and disrupting university courses. The student riots were quickly backed up by workers and the unemployed, and were (very) indirectly backed up by many workers' strikes.

For Viénet (1968) Gaullism did not create the sense of capitalist crisis in the eyes of the French Marxist Left but the perception of the overwhelming dysfunctional power of capitalism itself, which caused the growth of unemployment especially among youth and the fact that extension of social security created by the welfare state led to a curtailment of salaries. On the one hand, the pronounced development of French industrial economy moved an important portion of the workforce from small unconnected workshops and agricultural fields into giant productive plants such as the automotive firm Renault, which facilitated the concentration, communication and organisation of the working class. On the other hand, French capitalist growth was built on increased pressure in terms of productivity, a repressive kind of development, which applied considerable pressure on workers, who accumulated discontent and frustration.

In relation to such an increasing level of dissatisfaction of the working class, the Situationists were very critical of the institutional left as they reproached the French Communist Party to have taken a very polemic position against the May 1968 protests. It was only when pressured by popular indignation that the party started acting and pushed the main unions to call for a general strike. While the general strike was not meant to support the mobilization but to actually defuse the tension created by the protest and to channel that frustration through the institutional politics of the party, it ended up triggering a wave of factory occupation such as the one of Sud-Aviation in Nantes, the Renault factories at Cléon, at Flins, Le Mans and Boulogne-Billancourt. Those events attracted peasants and small shopkeepers who joined the strike, set up road blocks and helped the

strikers logistically. In fact, by May 20, 1968 an estimated 10 million workers were on strike and the country remained practically paralyzed for several days.

However, by the end of May 1968 the protest lost momentum and popular consent and at the same time on June 23, 1968 Charles de Gaulle won the elections: the revolutionary dream seemed to be over. Kalle (2000) points out how the Situationist involvement during the May 1968 uprisings in Paris, Strasbourg and Nanterre represented both the apogee of their political action and its decline, as the membership started a steady decline after 1968. In fact, while for the Situationist the 1968 events would have ideally developed into a revolution and the triumph of workers councils, it ended up exhausting the energies of the movement, which held its last conference in 1969. By the beginning of the 1970s the group counted a handful of members and finally dissolved in 1972, inaugurating a sense of defeat for the French radical Left.

While in such a climate of revolutionary excitement and expectations the idea of the Spectacle gained force and visibility, one of Debord's earliest references to the notion of Spectacle dates back to the late 1950s. The Spectacle represented the symbolic manifestations of a bourgeois vision of the world, an ideology instrumental to advanced capitalism because it tried to alienate people from their lives through processes of commodification, manufacturing of false desires, and ubiquitous advertising. Thus, for Debord as a founding member of the Situationist Internationale, the project of constructing situations necessarily implied the antagonizing presence of the Spectacle. Such 'situations' constituted practices of 'counter Spectacle', in other words staging temporary settings favourable to the fulfilment of true and authentic human desires (Debord 1958), which were aimed at re-situating people in their own history and environment, therefore repositioning them outside the Spectacle.

In Debord's view, while the Spectacle became more prominent with the development of capitalism – thus becoming particularly apparent only in the last century – its foundation parallels the emergence of Western civilization.<sup>1</sup> Hence, while the Spectacle pre-dates modern capitalism, rising from a historical tendency of Western societies towards the separation of people from their capability of shaping history via mechanisms such as division of labour and abstract of social relations – therefore an inclination towards alienation and several kinds of fetishism – in Debord's view it reaches its apex more recently, in correspondence with the transition from liberal capitalism to corporate/consumer capitalism (Debord 1967):

Whereas in the primitive phase of capitalist accumulation, 'political economy sees in the proletarian only the worker' who must receive the minimum indispensable for the conservation of his labour power, without ever seeing him 'in his leisure and humanity,' these ideas of the ruling class are reversed as soon as the production of commodities reaches a level of abundance which requires a surplus of collaboration from the worker. This worker, suddenly redeemed from the total contempt which

is clearly shown him by all the varieties of organization and supervision of production, finds himself every day, outside of production and in the guise of a consumer, seemingly treated as an adult, with zealous politeness. At this point the humanism of the commodity takes charge of the worker's 'leisure and humanity,' simply because now political economy can and must dominate these spheres as political economy. Thus the 'perfected denial of man' has taken charge of the totality of human existence (Thesis 43).

From this point of view, the Spectacle constitutes an account of the condition of modernity (and the preconditions of post-modernity), explored from philosophical, socio-economic and cultural perspectives. Debord understands such a condition to be essentially of a fundamental loss, a growing separation between people and their humanness. According to such an argument, people's sociability has been substantially deprived by capitalism, and replaced by a kind of instrumental thinking and productive logic that tends to colonize social life by destroying the social fabric, the organic value of popular culture and to replace dialogic human communication with pre-defined models of behaviour, monologues and silence.

Not accidentally, Debord draws from the Marxist conception of alienation (1988) and Lukács' notion of reification (1971) as analytic categories in order to examine the detachment from a variety of 'genuinely' human distinctive features: free conscious activity that is replaced by alienation; fictitious nature arguments that are replaced by real historical process; the social collective that is replaced by individualism; social institutions that are replaced by social solipsism; creativity and sociological imagination that are replaced by 'sameness' in Adorno and Horkheimer's sense (1974); critical thinking that is replaced by unreflectiveness; and people's own authentic desires that are replaced by false ones.

In that respect there are some relevant similarities between Debord's concept of the Spectacle and Adorno and Horkheimer's hypothesis of the culture industry (1974), which we think are worth considering. Both Debord and the Frankfurt-schoolers provide important contributions to the critical analysis of modern capitalism, and in many ways, offer complementary reflections. That is not actually accidental; as Gotham and Krier (2008) observe, there is a clear connection that links Debord, Horkheimer and Adorno. Besides their common drawing on Hegel, Marx, and Lukács, Debord was directly inspired by Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* (1958), who in turn read very carefully the two German critical thinkers and built on their insights, especially on the integration of economy and dominant representations in late capitalism. Moreover, those authors share a dialectical critique of culture according to which, the cultural realm produces both potential opportunities for rebellious, anti-conformist and even revolutionary thinking – as per the case of avant-garde art – but also, when commodified, it generates a terrain of reproduction for conformity, reification and alienation. In this sense, the Spectacle and culture industry describe similar phenomena.



Two aspects that made us lean towards Debord instead of Adorno and Horkheimer are their treatment of the concept of totality and technology. Both Debord and Adorno and Horkheimer embrace the concept of totality in a very qualified way, by distinguishing between its normative and its analytical value. Normatively, they reject a social whole that is essentially ‘untrue’ (thus rejecting the Hegelian teleology) as it produces ‘exploitation, violence and injustice’ to the degree that for Adorno and Horkheimer, when treated as an ontologically affirmative category, totality becomes almost a synonym of totalitarianism and oppression (Jay 1984). Conversely, as a descriptive category, totality explains the integrating capabilities of capitalism to connect and mediate most social phenomena. As Jameson (2009) observes, the concept of totality works for those theorists as a framework to articulate various kind of knowledge rather than being a privileged source of knowledge in its own right.

However, in our view, the overarching narrative and sense of process provided by the synthetic notion of the Spectacle, understood in this essay as a totality, provides a heuristic tool, that is not so explicitly present in the two German critical thinkers. The Spectacle, as enacted and at the same time attended by the spectators, provides a framework of analysis, which more effectively than the notion of culture industry, links the objective and subjective experience as described by Lukács:

Man in capitalist society confronts a reality “made” by himself (as a class) which appears to him to be a natural phenomenon alien to himself; he is wholly at the mercy of its ‘laws’; his activity is confined to the exploitation of the inexorable fulfilment of certain individual laws for his own (egoistic) interests. But even while ‘acting’ he remains, in the nature of the case, the object and not the subject of events (1971, 135).

Furthermore, when it comes to those authors’ treatment of technology, we think that Debord provides a more dialectical view on media that can explain the kind of phenomena we grouped together through the category of the *Spectacle 2.0*. While for Adorno and Horkheimer (media) technology appears as a force to reify, dominate and deceive people, Debord – closer to Marcuse (1964) – tends to regard it as a neutral device that functions regressively or progressively in relation to the specific social relations in which it operates. We think that that such a view delivers a more consonant environment in relation to our effort to depict contemporary ICT-driven capitalism as a dialectical experience that is thus both unity and separation, coercion and exploitation, creative work and exploitative labour.

While, as just noticed, Debord, like Adorno and Horkheimer, rejects Hegel’s normative and teleological aspect of totality, there is definitively much in the theory of the Spectacle of Hegel’s conceptualization of consciousness. In fact, for instance in the context of overwhelming incapacitation of the subject experiencing the Spectacle, a consequential question arises about where



the critical consciousness that produced Debord's essay originates. As Bunyard notices (2011), Debord's narrative clearly echoes the idea of Hegel's unhappy consciousness (1977), according to which consciousness to a certain extent perceives the alienating Spectacle, it intuitively feels the true dialectical unity behind those deceptive representations but without being able to go beyond them. In this sense, while several authors (e.g. Best and Kellner 1997; Jappe 1993) rightly criticize the Debordian representation of the Spectacle because it does not pay enough attention to how those above mentioned contradictions can create moments of ruptures and therefore moment of possible resistance, the context of the Spectacle still logically (and historically, as Debord's hope for the revolutionary potential of avant-garde art or manifestation as Situationism) allows for those interruptions.

The reference to Hegel is not accidental, as Debord seems to theorize the Spectacle within the boundaries of a Hegelian Marxism, according to which the humanist concern with people's capability to make history through conscious and (dialectically) free agency is deteriorated by alienation, reification and a pervasive instrumental logic. In fact, for Debord, the loss of human genuine praxis mostly depends on the depleting quality of its self-reflectivity, thus revolving around the development of consciousness. Consequently, he is also particularly interested in framing the Spectacle as a totalizing form of alienation because it works as functional mediation among subjects, between the subject and its psyche and between subject and object:

The Spectacle's function in society is the concrete manufacture of alienation. Economic growth corresponds almost entirely to the growth of this particular sector of industrial production. If something grows along with the self-movement of the economy, it can only be the alienation that has inhabited the core of the economic sphere from its inception (Thesis 32).

Along the same lines, drawing on the young Marx of the *Philosophic Manuscripts* (1988), Debord considered the Spectacle as the apotheosis of commodity fetishism. Indeed, the Spectacle functions like capital process in Marx, a 'vampire [that] only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks' (1990, 342). In such a context, workers become the stupefied spectators involved in a de-humanizing trade off: while dead labour (as the means of production) comes alive, living labour turns into the dead mechanism of production:

Here we have the principle of commodity fetishism, the domination of society by things whose qualities are 'at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses'. This principle is absolutely fulfilled in the Spectacle, where the perceptible world is replaced by a set of images that are superior to that world yet at the same time impose themselves as eminently perceptible (Thesis 36).

As the passage suggests commodity fetishism in the Spectacle functions as a total inversion of rapports among basic features of human nature: social relations among things rather than people, representation rather than reality, death rather than life. Along the same line of Lukács in his *History and Class Consciousness* and his Weberian critique of modern rationality, Debord describes how the Spectacle is propelled by instrumental logic and its embodiment in the money form, which tend to mediate all social relations:

The Spectacle is another facet of money, which is the abstract general equivalent of all commodities. However, whereas money in its familiar form has dominated society as the representation of universal equivalence, that is, of the exchangeability of diverse goods whose uses are not otherwise compatible, the Spectacle in its full development is money's modern aspect; in the Spectacle the totality of the commodity world is visible in one piece, as the general equivalent of whatever society as a whole can be and do. The Spectacle is money for contemplation only, for here the totality of use has already been bartered for the totality of abstract representation. The Spectacle is not just the servant of pseudo-use, it is already, in itself the pseudo-use of life (Thesis 49). The paradox of such a mediation is that it links and, at the same time, separates those social spheres, as well as tending to depict as natural what is historically determined.

### 3. Foundational Elements of the Debordian Spectacle

In his retrospective reflections on the original Spectacle Debord defines it as 'the autocratic reign of the market economy' (1998, 2). The Spectacle appears as both as a particular capitalist tool to defuse contradictions and pacify the masses and as the general appearance of capitalism. Being both the particular and the general allows the Spectacle to assume multiple forms in different spheres of social life: for instance, it can be found in media, in social relations, in the commodity form, in the working experience and in the constitution of subjects. Furthermore, in its dual nature, the Spectacle is both the Marxian 'base' and 'superstructure.' It is both reality and appearance because while it mostly appears operating on the surface through mediated images, it also operates at the productive foundation and organization of late capitalist societies.

The notion of appearance defines the Spectacle as the ultimate achievement of capitalism in its functioning as representation of life, which is implied in Thesis 1 in the reference to the beginning of *Das Kapital* (1990, 128) 'The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities,' and the opening of the Society of Spectacle '[i]n societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *Spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation' (Thesis 1). The reference to Marx has a key argumentative value as Debord considers the Spectacle as a logical evolution of capital.

The Spectacle theory comprises two main components, which can be synthetically defined as the subjective alienation of consciousness that strives to go beyond the spectacular mediation, and the objective alienation of productive activity and historical praxis. However, the former dimension is way more emphasized than the latter, because Debord considers praxis to be meaningful only within the limits of the subjective capability to achieve it. Moreover, possibly because being more focused on the everyday condition of people, Debord tends to overlook the concrete ways in which capital and labour reproduces the Spectacle. Consequently, as Dauvé (1979) and Jappe (1999) remark, the material production of the Spectacle and its social relations seem to be taken for granted and function as a background of Debord's primal concern for the turning of 'historical thought' (e.g. Thesis 76 and Thesis 77) – i.e. the self-consciousness of historical agency – into 'contemplation' (e.g. Thesis 2 and Thesis 8).

The tension between the subjective and the objective dimensions represents only one of the several dialectical manifestations of the Spectacle. Accordingly, with the purpose to provide a brief account of the complexity of this framework we are considering some of the most significant dimension as a way of exploring the range of phenomena which Debord examines.

### 3.1 *Spectacular Separations and Spectacular Totalisation*

As we have already mentioned, the idea of the Spectacle re-proposes a grand narrative of modernity as a loss of people's sociability. Therefore, as a separation, but also as a spectacular paradox – because such a separation occurs in the historic moment in which there is a highly developed social organization of production – the means of transportation and means of communication connect us more than ever.

There are at least two sections of Debord's essay that explicitly deal with the tension between separation and totalisation: 'Separation Perfected' and 'Unity and Divisions Within Appearances.' Such a tension *de facto* becomes the main theme of the entire book because the power of the Spectacle resides in its capability to present itself as a coherent unity made out of separations. Not by accident, the book almost inaugurates with the following statements: 'Images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream, and the former unity of life is lost forever' (Thesis 2); 'the unity it imposes is merely the official language of generalized separation' (Thesis 3); and 'The phenomenon of separation is part and parcel of the unity of the world' (Thesis 7).

The ubiquitous semantic field defined by 'separation', 'detachment', 'alienation', and 'estrangement' confirms the general negative diagnostics of Debord in relation to not just capitalism but also modernity and the proficiency to bring about a contradictory nature of capitalist society: rational and functional integration of societal elements through a highly colonizing mode of production and the irrational disintegration of the social fabric as well as the unavoidable class confrontations.

For Debord such a twofold movement towards a fragmentation of both human consciousness and society, and their successive re-integration thanks to the mediating and articulating power of the Spectacle, represents the reason why the Spectacle succeeds as a hegemonic system. In fact, such an organization can afford to create consent over its repressive, coercive and deceptive nature but also, and more importantly, can keep resistance to marginality. For Debord, the reflections about the Spectacle also constitute an occasion for self-reflection for problematizing current critical theory and its tendency to trade theoretical speculation for revolutionary praxis. Such a position should be also contextualized in relation to the influence that essays such as Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* (1970) and Lukács's already mentioned *History and Class Consciousness* (1971) played in Debord's conceptualization. Both perspectives prefigure the Situationist and Debordian invitation to recover the Communist project from its own over-theorized re-presentation, and thus to become a historical movement rather than a theoretical depiction.

Especially for Korsch, the inclination towards the practice of theorization tended to obscure the real goal of Marxism, which should have concentrated on human emancipation and its history-making emancipatory practices. Both Lukács and Korsch (and then Gramsci 1975; and Althusser 1971) suggest a new battleground for political struggle that goes beyond surplus value extraction and is concerned with production and reproduction of social relationships and subjectivities operating at the level of an ideological and culturally material battleground.

The acknowledgement of this new terrain of disputation can be found in Debord's pessimistic considerations about the proletariat becoming consumers of images and ideas on top of being producers of commodities and value. When it comes to production then for Debord the contradiction between fragmentation and unity (i.e. separation and totality) can be understood as one of the necessary cooperations that capitalist production requires (Marx 1990) and the division of labour that prevents workers relating with each other in politically significant terms. Then, the fragmentation generated by division of labour is recomposed by the ruling class's social order that gives organizational coherence to society through its consistent obsession with extracting value and accumulation of capital.

In our view, Debord, with his continuous re-proposing of this tension between unity and separation, sheds light on the peculiar power of late capitalism to integrate all prior forms of separated powers by specialization and/or hierarchy. As we shall see, the tension between 'separation' and 'connection' will remain a central feature of the Spectacle 2.0, which will be re-proposed via digital media in the dialectic between hyper-connectivity and individualized productive practices, online and off-line levels, socialization of work and its privatized monetization. Such all-embracing representation makes all action equivalent and at the same time all of it significantly removed from the chance to 'make history'.

For this reason, the Spectacle constitutes a totalizing mediation: ‘the Spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification’ (thesis 42), which means that the Spectacle appears simultaneously universalized, as a particular historically contingent manifestation, and the mediation that connect all manifestations. Thus, the Spectacle combines at the same time universality, particularity, and singularity. It is a false unity because is only a partial and deformed representation of reality, but its ubiquity makes it into a real tangible environment as the only way people know reality.

As previously mentioned in our comparison with Adorno and Horkheimer, Debord is interested in the explanatory power of the notion of totality. Like Lukács (1971), Debord sought to understand society under the general rubric of a concept able to capture the capability of capitalism to fluidly integrate most aspects of life. Totality then appears as a concept able to grasp the essential, common, structuring nature of each determination within the social whole. While for the author of *History and Class Consciousness*, this central mediation was provided by the commodity form, for Debord the commodity’s increasing domination of society requires a new meta framework that could go beyond such traditional Marxist categories as labour, union organization and the factory. In this sense, the Post-operaist argument of the process of subsumption of labour that extends to life as a whole seems to draw from this body of literature, here represented by Debord, that recognizes the importance of totality as an analytical category.

### 3.2 *Spectacular Reification and Spectacular Lack of History Making: Or the Autonomous Movement of the Non-living*

History making and consciousness of ‘historical time’ is what for Debord is escaping the spectators’ way of living. This kind of anthropological alienation for Debord depends on different modes of production for any historical moment. In this sense, the particularity of contemporary capitalism is that dead labour and technical power have grown so great that they have replaced people as active agents, therefore perfecting the separation, social control and the capability of the Spectacle of mediating social experience. Thus, as we already mentioned, the Spectacle is at the same the triumph of alienated human agency and fetishized dead labour becoming alive. For Debord then, the dominance of the Spectacle does not only rely on alienation but on its capability to appear as a natural and objective phenomenon, the most impressive instance of reified history.

In many ways, Debord builds with the Spectacle a counterintuitive concept of real abstraction as conceptualized by Marx in the *Contributions to the Critique of Political Economy* (1977) as a way to show how commodities’ fetishism becomes exceedingly real in social practices and not just a subjective illusion, which is consistent with Debord’s insistence on the fundamental character of late capitalism to give life to abstract categories and to abstract living forms.

The result, as we have already indirectly suggested, is that together with a persistent material poverty, capitalism, in its spectacular forms, the Spectacle creates existential and cognitive deficiency.

Because of alienation becoming a concrete operating force in social life, the way in which people could take back their history-making capability – thus re-acquiring the condition of historical subjects – critical consciousness had to be incredibly strategic about the particular circumstances in which the Spectacle could be attacked. To this purpose, the several references to Clausewitz's theory of war (1984) revealed how any counter-Spectacle actions had to be fought with quasi militarist strategy, paying particular attention to the highly contextual and contingent validity of any insurgent theory – as the opportunity represented by the so-called French May of 1968. In this sense, the idea of construction of situations represented a way in which people re-appropriated space and time by organized praxis.

As we have already observed, Debord regards the Spectacle in dialectical terms, which is to say that if, on the one hand, the historical tendency towards separation seems to develop progressively (i.e. a perfecting separation), on the other hand the Spectacle also potentially produces a new proletariat movement as well as critical consciousness. Hence, Debord and the Situationist circle envisioned a new form of revolutionary associationism that they linked to the workers' council, a participatory assembly made of local community members and workers. In a Situationist International document, entitled *Preliminaries on Councils and Councilist Organization* the council is defined as 'a permanent basic unit [...] the assembly in which all the workers of an enterprise (workshop and factory councils) and all the inhabitants of an urban district have rallied' (Riesel, 1969). Evidence of such an approach is the way Debord regarded May 1968 social protests: on the one hand, he considered the insurrection positively as the emergence of a chance to re-appropriate history, but on the other, he also recognized in that the capitulation of critical resistance against the Spectacle. As Bunyard (2011) reports, for Debord the defeat of the Spectacle would have meant the self-conscious creation of history by the workers' movements.

In sum, against an exploitative system of dead labour that steals life from people, the taking back the power of making history for Debord derives from a combination of practical and self-reflective consciousness that aims at re-appropriating social space and social time by the constructions of situations.

### 3.3 *Spectacular Mediation and Spectacular Immediacy*

As we just mentioned, the power of the Spectacle in pervading all aspects of social life consists in the capability of mediating all its manifestations, in both thought and action. For Debord, while omnipresent, the Spectacle becomes particularly active and visible in the sphere of commodity consumption, which offer false satisfactions:

Every given commodity fights for itself, cannot acknowledge the others, and attempts to impose itself everywhere as if it were the only one. The Spectacle, then, is the epic poem of this struggle, an epic which cannot be concluded by the fall of any Troy. The Spectacle does not sing the praises of men and their weapons, but of commodities and their passions. In this blind struggle every commodity, pursuing its passion, unconsciously realizes something higher: the becoming-world of the commodity, which is also the becoming-commodity of the world. Thus, by means of a ruse of commodity logic, what's specific in the commodity wears itself out in the fight while the commodity-form moves toward its absolute realization (Thesis 66).

Thus, when the commodity form becomes the central logic for every aspect of social life, its mediation approaches immediacy (thus augmenting reification), that is the apparent condition of not needing any mediations at all. For Debord such a process can be detected in consumer capitalism's tendency to superimpose exchange value over use value:

Exchange value could arise only as an agent of use value, but its victory by means of its own weapons created the conditions for its autonomous domination. Mobilizing all human use and establishing a monopoly over its satisfaction, exchange value has ended up by directing use. The process of exchange became identified with all possible use and reduced use to the mercy of exchange. Exchange value is the condottiere of use value who ends up waging the war for himself #46).

Exchange value, similarly to the critique of Frankfurt Schoolers, marks all commodities by sameness, abstract exchangeability, so that difference is only performative. The consequence is that the 'satisfaction of primary human needs is replaced by an uninterrupted fabrication of pseudo-needs which are reduced to the single pseudo-need of maintaining the reign of the autonomous economy' (Thesis 59). In such a dialectics between mediation and immediacy, Debord understands the compound epistemology of the Spectacle: a two-layer understanding of reality, according to which the deeper level of alienation, separation and reification of the actual world dominated by late capitalism is covered by a superficial spectacular layer in which material social relations are mediated by imaginary ones. As we shall see, the tension between mediation and immediacy will re-propose itself under a different guise in the Spectacle 2.0, for instance through the tension between separation and hyper-connectivity and creative work and alienated labour.

Such a hermeneutic of suspicion, that is distinguishing between surface and deeper layers, is also exemplified by Debord's interests in the urban environment since the Spectacle also mediates the physical environment, where people live:



The society that molds all of its surroundings has developed a special technique for shaping its very territory, the solid ground of this collection of tasks. Urbanism is capitalism's seizure of the natural and human environment; developing logically into absolute domination, capitalism can and must now remake the totality of space into its own setting (Thesis 170).

Urbanism represents for Debord a very tangible document of the Spectacle as alienated praxis. In fact, as per the Marxian notion of labour, for Debord people cannot change themselves without changing the surrounding environment. For Debord, the Spectacle functionally re-configures the cities as venues to facilitate capitalist reproduction and, in doing so 'freezes life' (Thesis 171), thus privileging instrumental space over the genuinely lived one. Urbanism materializes abstraction and separations at all levels, by building 'different kind of grounds' (Thesis 172), by atomizing the individual space of workers (Thesis 173), by relegating public 'manifestations on the street' (Thesis 173), separation among people mediated by mass communication (Thesis 173). Debord claims that the investment of the Spectacle in urbanism can be observed in the fact that for the first time architecture, once dedicated to the elite class, is now aimed at managing the space and time of poor classes (Thesis 174).

Summing up, we have tried to provide a general account of the original description of the Spectacle by examining its multi-layered development and the tensions that characterize it, such as separation and totality, appearance and essence, cognitive and practical alienation. In the next section, we examine how the Spectacle evolves following the evolution of economic and geopolitical orders.

#### 4. Beyond the Integrated Spectacle: From Integration to Subsuming Digitalization

By the end of 1980s, when the ideological polarization of the Cold War was already fading, Debord published an update on his earlier reflections entitled *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. According to this renewed reading, the Spectacle alternatively materialized into two different social imaginary forms (Clark 2015): one concentrated around long term rational planning, state power and nationalist symbolism; the other diffused and operating at the level of individual sphere, mass consumption, and codified patterns of behaviour. For Debord those two historical forms of the Spectacle, that is the diffused capitalist Spectacle and the concentrated 'socialist' Spectacle eventually combined into a new form of Spectacle. The so-called integrated Spectacle (7) originated from the superimposition of the Americanizing diffused Spectacle over the concentrated one (1998, 8) at the end of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union



collapsed. Debord claims that the integrated Spectacle grew stronger compared to its original version: and ‘that the Spectacle’s domination has succeeded in raising a whole generation moulded to its laws’ (1998, 7).

While within the concentrated Spectacle alienated social power was condensed within a ruling body such as a party or a dictator—with whom society is obliged to identify—conversely, within the diffused form power is dispersed across society through the actualization and normalization of conspicuous consumption of commodities, fashions, fads, behavioural models, and images of subjective satisfaction. Yet, whilst the diffused Spectacle is able to take mediation to a higher level through its abundance of commodities, the relative ‘quantitative weakness’ (30) of the concentrated Spectacle’s own mass of commodities precludes it from disseminating its merits and *raison d’être* in this way. Thus, where the diffused Spectacle relies on the dispersal of ‘image-objects’ (31), the concentrated Spectacle tends to present its ruling body as the embodiment of the will, agency and identity of the social whole.

For Debord, the narrative connecting the integrated Spectacle to its original form is one of capitulation because while in his original analysis there were pockets of social life, practices that could remain unaffected by the Spectacle—such as art or the very initiatives performed by the Situationists and avant-garde art—in the *Comments* he claims that the Spectacle has colonized everything. The integrated Spectacle, especially detectable in countries such as France and Italy, could be identified by five principal features: ‘incessant technological renewal’ that continues both mode of production and consumption; ‘integration of state and economy’ produced by state capitalism; ‘generalized secrecy’; ‘unanswerable lies’ created by systematic disinformation that eliminated the critical function of public opinion (pp. 8–10) and an eternal present.

Looking at the news as the Spectacle, Compton considers the aestheticization of everyday life, as ‘the central logic of the Spectacle.’ As Compton (2004) observes, one of the salient aspects of such an integration, which in our view allows the transition into the Spectacle 2.0, is that current manifestations of the Spectacle need to be understood as a result of the practical use of the spectacular commodity, marketed as both production and promotion, that is, as an *integrated* system of production/promotion. In doing so, Compton tries to address some of the shortcomings that the original definition of the Spectacle represented by exploring in more depth the complex unity among various instances of production, consumption, distribution, and exchange. He also replaces the mass society critique narrative of passive individuals he detects in the original Spectacle, with a more nuanced account that recognizes a more active involvement of the spectators.

Along the same lines, Kellner (2005) in the early 2000s offered an updated reading of the Spectacle by advancing the notion of media-driven spectacular events. Media Spectacles can be described as exceptional events that break the daily routine through highly public special events such as the celebration of public rituals

(e.g. the Superbowl; Michael Jackson or Princess Diana's funerals) and therefore legitimate society's core values like the Olympics, 9/11 but also scandals like Bill Clinton's impeachment case. In doing that, Kellner wants to materialize the abstract original account of Debord by offering examples that can be empirically assessed in terms of construction, circulation and function of the Spectacle.

Kellner's engagement is based on the argument that the contemporary Spectacle cannot be understood as an overwhelming hegemonic regime but rather as a space of contestations in which competing forces meet and confront each other. In such a disputed arena, as Phillips and Moberly (2013) notice, electronic media such as video games simulating social life (i.e. Sims, Social life) provide a perfect platform in which the Spectacle and spectators negotiate, more than confront each other, a perception of 'eternal present' in which history has ceased (Marx, 1990, 11–12).

Certainly, Debord was not the only author to explore the ideas of a social and consumer based spectacularization, mass mediation via emerging new means of communication and the construction of a manipulated collective imagery that replaces reality via advertising. We refer to apologetic authors such as Marshall McLuhan and the more radical ones such as Henri Lefebvre and Edgar Morin, who in the years while Debord was developing his ideas, had already elaborated important aspects of the Spectacle. Also relevant is Baudrillard who deals with the representational aspects of capitalism from a complementary perspective. Drawing on Lefebvre and Barthes he stresses the importance of semiotics to deconstruct the commodity form, the notion of value and the importance of media in creating meanings in consumer societies. It is also worth mentioning the work of Romano Alquati, who argued how in late capitalism serialized kind of production colonizes all social life, which for him works like an integrated serialized performance (Working Paper 2003).

While Debord's notion of Spectacle and Baudrillard's theory of simulation are clearly linked, because for instance both are drawn from Lefebvre and intended to critically explore French consumer society through processes of abstraction from reality, they also differ in significant ways. In his seminal book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), Baudrillard emphasizes the process of abstraction in a media saturated society by advancing a theory of simulation 'about how our images, our communication and our media have usurped the role of reality, and a history of how reality fades' (Cubitt 2001, 1), and replaces dialogue with one-way communication. However, Baudrillard moved his analysis away from a political economy centered around production of commodities and Marxist categories such as alienation, deception, commodification and exploitation, and approached it instead through the political economy of signs (1981): according to which a world of commodified objects then turned into a world of signs without material referent, thus a post-modern hyper-reality.

Similarly, in the *Eclipse of the Spectacle* (1984) Crary tries to re-contextualize the Spectacle by looking at the dominance of television as a spectacular commodity and commodity producer. He argues that, since the mid 1970s, TV

passes from being a medium of representation to being the centre of mass distribution and regulation of cultural commodities. In such a shift, Crary, similarly to Baudrillard (1994), considers the boundary between objective and subjective forms, between the Spectacle and the spectators, to be collapsing. The Spectacle for Crary ceases to have a defined content but mediates its own being and transition into a digital Spectacle, a form that produces a consciousness shaped by the programming and logic imported through television and its related politico-economic interests.

Finally, Wark (2013), provides one of the most recent engagements with the Spectacle, when in his *The Spectacle of Disintegration* he offers an alternative understanding of the evolution of the Spectacle. He claims that in the digital era the Spectacle did not disappear but its experience significantly changed, as instead of being perceived as a unified whole, it appears as a fragmented micro Spectacle. Its dis-integration is highly deceptive because, while experienced as a sort of liberation from the intrusive and manipulative aspects of traditional media and tied to the rhetoric of democratization of media production of new media, its reproduction depends on the free labour of the 'spectators'. In fact, those spectacular fragments are frequently not produced by digital platforms but by their users and therefore constitute a representation that is even more pervasive.

Although with its emphasis on media technology and its expansion towards more areas of social life, the integrated Spectacle may be considered a more accurate depiction of current circumstances. In this volume we assume that in the context of contemporary capitalism and the prominence reached by information and communication technologies in such a mode of production, the Spectacle has evolved into a new qualitatively different modality that we define as the *Spectacle 2.0*, which presents both aspects of continuity and ruptures with its previous arrangements. As we have already mentioned previously, we considered that although the Spectacle 2.0 is still founded on the core dialectical tensions defining the original Spectacle, it is reconfigured in such a way that qualitatively deserves a new taxonomy.

In this sense, we believe that Compton, Kellner, Philips and Moberly, Crary and Wark offer us important insights for a definition of the Spectacle 2.0, a Spectacle certainly propelled by a new aesthetics, with a renewed prominence of (new) media, and characterized by interactivity. In relation to that, in the next section we provide our own definition, which is centred on a revived interest in commodity fetishism and the capability of the Spectacle 2.0 to use information and communication technology to subsume social life via productive activities such as digital labour.

## 5. The Emergence of the Spectacle 2.0

We hypothesize the Spectacle 2.0 to be incorporating some of the media and informational language that requires contextualization in a period of history

in which the process of digitalization and the ‘spectacular’ emergence of social media, have significantly changed the scenario compared to the early 1990s. For this reason, in the same way as Debord envisions the Spectacle evolving as a geopolitical context and mode of production, we assume that the trajectory defined by the original Spectacle and its evolution into the integrated one has, on the one hand, maintained its progression in contemporary capitalism; on the other, has also developed in contradictory ways. For this reason, after having provided a designation of the Spectacle 2.0, we will expand its description by exploring its contradictory viewpoints, which simultaneously confirm and problematize the original notion of the Spectacle.

We define the Spectacle 2.0 as both a historicized continuum of the Debordian Spectacle (and its development as integrated Spectacle), as well as a materialist corrective of the Hegelian tendency that positioned the original one too close to the gravitational poles of ‘consciousness’ and its ‘alienation’. Thus, if Debord described a mode of production centred around commodities consumption and mass industrial production, characterized by homogeneity, procedural thinking (Marcuse 1967), disciplinary control and channelled through means of communication such as cinema, TV and Radio, the transition to digital capitalism leads us to the necessity to re-elaborate the notion of the Spectacle as discursive and interactive, but also keeping fundamental elements such as commodity fetishism, commodity as Spectacle and the idea of unity and vision within appearances.

Our understanding of the Spectacle 2.0 builds on Best and Kellner (1999) in terms of interactivity and in relation to digital technologies and new media practices and the productive sphere. While in the original conceptualization the spectator represented the passive actor, recipient of Spectacle agency, passively consuming cultural products, thus being more and more object, the spectator of the Spectacle 2.0 is the interactive subject who socializes through language tools and flexible digital technology, characterized much more ambiguously by initiative, creativity, exploitation and precariousness.

The Spectacle 2.0, as the name suggests, takes cues from the evolution of web media from the first generation (so called 1.0) of bounded environments in which users were constrained in utilizing the products – thus still mimicking many central features of classic electronic media such as TV – into flexible platforms in which previously considered passive audiences have now apparently the agency to participate in the provision of content and the construction of the web environment. Certainly, the Web 2.0 changeover did not happen in a social historical vacuum, but actually reflects the general economic shift from fixed to flexible accumulation (Harvey 1989) and to post-industrial and post-Fordist production, and its tendency to move from an economy selling products to one providing services (Lazzarato 1997). Both the shift in the political economic model of production and the new participatory perspective materialized via web 2.0 based applications have created

a social and cultural milieu allowing the formation and exchange of user-generated content in the social media.

While the features of Web 2.0 media contribute to defining an important aspect of the Spectacle 2.0 in terms of a renewed interactivity, the implications of the Spectacle 2.0 are much broader. First of all compared to the previous one, the Spectacle 2.0 is characterized by an even more extended integration at the social and economic level by comprising both the moment of production and consumption and combining them together into an indissoluble whole. In fact, if the previous Spectacle relied on production and consumption as important but also separated moments and considerable more emphasis was given to the latter, the Spectacle 2.0 appears as the amalgamation of compound practices such as consumptive production and productive consumption.

Such a characteristic leads to another important feature of Spectacle 2.0 that has to do with organization of labour and value production. Thus, while mass production in the original Spectacle mostly revolved around a Fordist model of paid labour, the Spectacle 2.0 revolves around a combination of work, unpaid labour, underpaid labour and paid labour. In other words, the Spectacle 2.0 comprises a much wider range of productive social relations, their combination lead to a highly contradictory scenario in which a wider range of subjectivities operate.

For this reason, we think that our focus on labour can be seen as a materialist account that explains more in detail how both objective and subjective conditions of (re)productions get created. Thus, in order to be able to speak of Spectacle revisited in the current circumstances of informational capitalism we need to consider the specificities of this context in which the processes of digitalization of information have significantly transformed labour processes, which implies the crossing of boundaries between technologies and digital platforms, paid and unpaid, work sphere and leisure sphere, public and private sphere, consumption and production (Neilson & Rossiter 2011). Like many authors of the critical literature that links information and communication realms with capitalism, we essentially ask how the present capitalist mode of production manages to extract value from labour (Fuchs & Fisher 2015) and digital rent (Rigi & Prey 2015)

One of the reasons for our interest in Debord's notion of the Spectacle is that it provides a framework that allows us to use and historicize Marxist analytical and theoretical categories, which have proven exceedingly effective in understanding and criticizing contemporary capitalism as well. In this sense, we previously mentioned that the Spectacle 2.0 also functions as a materialist corrective but that does not necessarily mean we neglect Debord's Hegelian Marxian insights. In fact, the holistic and consciousness driven perspective of the Spectacle, allows us to combine labour theory of value with other important tools that Marxist tradition has produced such as the focus on alienation, rent, reification and mediation, which represents the equally important aspect of digital, knowledge driven labour.

### 5.1 *Spectacle 2.0, Knowledge Work and Devices of Extraction of Value, in Between Digital Rent and Valorization of Subjectivities*

In Thesis 193 of *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord makes reference to economist Clark Kerr and his prediction of industries involving the consumption of knowledge (i.e. arts, tech. and entertainment) that would become the driving force in the development of late capitalist economy. However, while for Debord the task of the various branches of knowledge that are in the process of developing *spectacular thought* is to justify an unjustifiable society and to establish a general science of false consciousness (Thesis 194), we believe that in the Spectacle 2.0 knowledge goes beyond its ideological reproductive function to become the fulcrum of a culturally materialist strategy to produce value.

In order to explore such a development in more detail, we examine the Spectacle in the particular context of knowledge work, a mode of production of value that heavily relies on the mediation of informational and communication technologies. We consider the Spectacle 2.0 still working on the assumption that real and concrete social relations are concealed, but that they do so in more ambiguous ways. For instance, on the one hand, relations among things are still invisible behind the screen of our computer and mobile phones. On the other, as Fuchs remarks (2015), the environment of social media creates the condition for an inverted fetishism in which we see people but not the social relations among commodities that shape those relations.

Part of the Spectacle derived from the paradoxical condition synthesized by the twofold notion of being 'free' (Terranova 2000) ranging from being unpaid, underpaid, socially produced and crowd-sourced (Fuchs 2010; Briziarelli 2014; Bruns 2008). Such a condition may be considered as an amplification of the original Debordian Spectacle, as it seems to have generated a kind of media driven labour that colonizes almost all spheres of social life and it appears to be one of the most powerful exemplifications of the mediating power of the Spectacle. In fact, from the point of view of the entertainment economy, the saturation of social life by mediated images and the fact the same media metaphors are used for labour and leisure (Lund 2014) could be taken as evidence of the pervasive power of the Spectacle to provide reciprocal conceptual and linguistic translation from disparate phenomena. From this perspective, the logic of Spectacle 2.0 can be seen as so pervasive to collapse and blur the traditional Marxist distinction between work and labour, between genuine creative tendencies and their alienated *alter*. Furthermore, as Srnicek (2017) has recently noticed by his notion of 'platform capitalism,' while the digital economic base on which the Spectacle 2.0 seems to be built provides new capitalist modalities of production and consumption (Armano, Murgia, Teli 2017), it also displays old tendencies to monopolization, cost reduction and increased productivity based on workers' exploitation (p. 653).

Therefore, if Debord describes in the section *Separation Perfected* that the, 'Spectacle is a social relation among people, mediated by images' (p. 95), the

Spectacle 2.0 appears as an evolution of such a social relation towards interactivity, which in this volume is explored through the powerful mediation of digital labour and its annexed ideologies. It corresponds to the degree of subsumption of productive practices in which our lives function both as the mediated object and the mediating subject. Thus, it is a Spectacle that revolves around a digital language that socializes this new mode of production driven by new media, maybe even more than ever, in which media are not the host of representation of the Spectacle but (one of) the material terrain on which we live the Spectacle.

The Spectacle 2.0 re-composes objective and subjective forms by combining processes of production of social relations, value and subjectivities. As Baroncelli and Freitas (2011) claim, the current Spectacle is centred around the self-spectacularization of individuals via information and communication technology such as social media, as the personal life becomes entertainment for others to consume and actively used as a basis for production of value. In this sense, we claim that for knowledge workers there is also capital that is being used to reproduce the condition of reproduction of knowledge work. In the context of the Spectacle 2.0, social media are not simply the platform for commodification of life (Wright 2012) but also a platform for the creation of value through unpaid or underpaid knowledge work. Thus, the unified framework provided by the Spectacle allows us to look at the dialectics between the subjective side of forces of production, that is the labourers and media users, and the objective side, that is the means of production and relations of production.

While much of the critical literature on digital capitalism and knowledge work constitutes an invaluable compilation of study of these new forms of Spectacle, we believe that the notion of the Spectacle 2.0 deserves further exploration. The use of both the metaphoric and literal notion of 'rent' are exemplary in order to make sense of the processes of value creation and extraction. The assumption is that since only labour exchanged with salary is considered to be productive, therefore excluding some of what we defined as free labour, then the value created in the context of knowledge work derives from rent-seeking. The Spectacle of free labour allows us to both examine the question of production traditionally linked to labour theory and the question tied to consumption (consumptive production). In doing so, our perspective integrates within the spectacle, the notion of audiences' labour as understood by Smythe (1977) and the production of metadata, which are processed by digital capital assets such as algorithms (Goffey 2008; Fuller and Goffey 2013).

As we have already mentioned, in this engagement with the Spectacle 2.0 we want to pay particular attention to digital labour as one powerful medium of the Spectacle. In fact, we think that labour allows us to reveal the ambiguity of the Spectacles in the same way Marx (1990) considers labour as the archetype of the two-sided nature of capitalism. Labour presents a dual character of capitalism that creates both abstract value that can be quantitatively assessed and concrete value with specific aims that can be qualitatively assessed. In



addition, labour is at the same time the producer of both indigence and wealth in a capitalist environment. Thus, in many ways, labour in its capitalist form has always been ‘free labour’ as free enriching activity and not paid enough, thus approaching gratuity labour. Furthermore, the notion of free labour allows us to capture both the value creation of knowledge work as formal wage workers, producing data and social media users as unpaid and exploited labourers. The Spectacle 2.0, also defined in this specific context as the Spectacle of free labour, shows dialectical aspects associated to the Spectacle and the current forms of valorization.

Accordingly, some of our essays will try to make sense of a reality in which creativity, independence and self-valorization take place in the context of what for Wright (2012) appear as relations of exploitations: the wealth of informational capitalists depends on the inverse interdependent welfare of knowledge workers; who are for the most part excluded from the profit generating conditions.

The Spectacle 2.0 considers digital and knowledge labour as the manifestation of real subsumption of capital (Marazzi 2008) in which surplus value is mostly not produced by prolongation of labour days (which of course finds its limit in the limits of 24 hours) but by technological progress, intensification of labour process (Huws 2016) and neo-industrialization and digital Taylorism (Cominu 2015) in terms of productivity, and its significant re-organization in the context of neoliberalism and post Fordism. However, while being in the Fordist mode of production of real subsumption of labour changed the ratio between living and dead labour, constant and variable capital in favour of the latter, in the context of knowledge work, the appropriation of value from all social life, what previously could be considered as extra-laboral life such as leisure time, thus implies a revision of that ratio in favour of living labour and at the same time (Vercellone 2006), the transference of knowledge from living to dead labour. In this sense, this volume tries to enter into the debate about whether those new forms of subsumption of labour by capital require a new theory of value or not.

## 5.2 *Spectacular Subjectivities*

In the original Spectacle, Debord marginally engages with subjectivities. He sees, for instance, celebrities as the subjective embodiment of those who actually lose their individuality to become signs, a living semiotics of capitalism, a living witness of commodification who, in fact, behave like commodities. Thus, celebrities are, actually, de-humanized subjects:

‘The admirable people in whom the system personifies itself are well known for not being what they are; they became great men by stooping below the reality of the smallest individual life, and everyone knows it’ (Thesis 61).



Compared to such a perspective, we think that the Spectacle 2.0 constitutes a much more articulate stage for a development of subjects, according to which persistent alienating and de-humanizing processes are accompanied by their opposite. Indeed, from this reproductive perspective subjectivities constitute one of the products of the Spectacle 2.0, which, in the original Spectacle, were framed in a narrative of overwhelming psycho-physical subordination, and are thus inadequate to account for the Spectator 2.0.

When it comes to the production of subjectivities we can distinguish between the unpaid subjects involved in digital processes (Huws 2016) and the unpaid subjects using social media (Terranova, 2000). Digitalization makes commodities de-constructible and re-constructible, and commodified individuals are then equally fragmented by distinct representations and understanding of the self, caused by a variety of processes such as management impression strategies both at the moment of production and consumption, self-valorization and division of labour. Subjects experience production as social activity marked by collaboration and emotions (Benski and Fisher 2013; Risi 2012).

Nevertheless, informational capitalism and its reliance on media technology could be considered as the *appearance* of a mitigation (of an *actual* development) of some of the degenerative tendencies of the Spectacle because the role played by new media in informational capitalism could be regarded as a way in which the Spectacle returns to less alienated/abstracted forms of existence. In fact, through social media social life *allegedly* comes back from 'having' – by producing goods and values – to 'being' – by producing subjects as in the case of knowledge workers. From this point of view, a powerful rhetoric both concerning popular and academic discourse (Florida 2006) claims that digital, knowledge labour, thanks to technologies such as social media, has liberated and empowered the worker with creativity, high interaction and a renewed sense of sociability (Arvidsson and Colleoni 2012).

The productive activity of knowledge workers is based on exploitation, informal and affective relations, utopic aspirations, perceived freedom, the will to share, and the undefined boundaries between free time and 'free' labour, which entails being *free* understood as having both expressive freedom and the freedom to enjoy the sociability of affective relations and *free* as gratuity and voluntary unpaid and therefore exploited work as *working for exposure* (Ross 2017). The spectacular precarity of knowledge workers is founded on *connective and relational networks* (Armano 2010), on individual and socially based *online reputation* (Arvidsson and Colleoni 2012), and on the creation of an *audience* (Fisher, 2012) made of 'likes', 'friends', 'followers', in a sort of showcasing (Code-luppi 2015) that provides a measure of appreciation of the individuals in the web. Thus, human experience tends to be repositioned and reframed within a digitally mediated Spectacle that functions according to its own rules. From such a perspective, the Spectacle 2.0 represents the stage where the objective and subjective tensions implied by the contradictory condition of being 'free' are free to move but are not necessarily resolved. In fact, the original dialectics

of separation and unity of the Spectacle remains a fundamental characteristic of the current Spectacle.

We refer to the ambivalent context of the so-called Spectacle 2.0 which produces subjects and a sense of sociability that capitalize on one particularly exemplary product/producer of the Spectacle: knowledge workers. On the one hand, we investigate the productive activity of knowledge workers, which is based on exploitation, informal and affective relations, utopic aspirations, perceived autonomy and freedom, the will to share, and the undefined boundaries between free time and 'free' labour. We refer to situations in which the consumer-user voluntarily and gratuitously participates in the creation of value, propelled by motivation linked to leisure, expression of identity, consumer display (Codeluppi 2007; 2015), through (online) management impression (Gill & Prat, 2008), and by the neo-liberal normative thrust that revolves around the idea of the gift economy (Barbrook 1998; Scholz 2012).

On the other hand, the Spectacle of digital capitalism mediates the ambivalence of free workers/labourers (Terranova 2000; Briziarelli 2014), which entails being *free* both understood as (apparent) expressive freedom and (apparent) freedom to enjoy the sociability of affective relations and *free* as gratuity, voluntary, unpaid, and therefore exploited work. Through free work/labour people organize their life around 'creativity' and self-activation (Armano and Murgia 2013), according to which the hetero-direction logic typical of the Fordist model is replaced by a new sphere of participation, self-promotion of subjective resources (Armano, Chicchi, Fisher and Risi 2014) and self-responsabilization (Salecl 2010).

The combination of those features creates a neoliberal subjectivity (Dardot and Laval 2009), which is both created and at the same time actively reproduced by the very subjects operating in the context of knowledge work. Such subjectivity may live this Spectacle both as alienation and a form of dis-alienation. Drawing on Han (2015), the Spectacle 2.0 may appear as a digital swarm that, as a whole, cannot crystallize but only remains as at the fragmentary and episodic level (an alternative reformulation of the tension between unity and separation of the Spectacle). Thus, it creates an alienating experience in which the subject is subject-of-performance that adds to the picture, but he/she does not actually make it. At the same time, the social interaction occurring in social media may exemplify the condition of dis-alienation through the promise of hyper-connectivity, sociability and transparency.

## 6. Book Structure and Content

Having examined the main questions and themes that propel this project, we provide here a synthetic account of the structure of the book and we synthetically highlight the reason for their relevance. The book begins with the insightful preface from Douglas Kellner that tries to make sense of the notion of the

Spectacle and its re-elaboration via spectacular events, that now appears more interactive, and therefore, more dialectical than in its original formulation, by concentrating on the phenomenon of the recent American election.

Subsequently, the book comprises two main sections: contributions to Part I, 'Conceptualizing and Historicizing The Spectacle' consider the possibility of reviving the notion of the Spectacle in the context of informational capitalism. This section contains essays providing theoretical reflections and definitions of concepts, which resonate with Bunyard's observation (2011) about the Spectacle that can be understood both in natural alignment with the critical political economy typical of Marxian literature as well as a call for its historicization and sympathetic critique.

Vanni Codeluppi inaugurates the first section by providing a genealogy for the Spectacle of 'hypermodern' societies. He utilizes the notion of the Spectacle in order to understand fundamental perspective changes in capitalism from an aesthetic of popular culture as they manifest in artefacts such as movies. Codeluppi claims that the integrating nature of the Spectacle has been facilitated by mediated collective imagery that contributed to aestheticize – therefore creating consent around it – prevailing forms of value production. Then, in the second chapter, Olivier Frayssé notices an important tension in Debord's notion of the Spectacle in relation to productive processes: potentially offering many significant insights but also recognizing that Debord never really dealt with the subject, leaving it in a blind spot. Thus, he attempts to 'historicize and re-territorialize' Debord's Spectacle in the context of digital capitalism by exploring the relationship between Debord's envisioning and current elements of US economy, politics, culture and society and the subjects that inhabit it.

Steve Wright and Raffaele Sciortino use the notion of Spectacle as a lens through which to explore the online relationship between production and consumption, different forms of digital rent, and between 'free activity' and capital's process of valorization and accumulation. The two authors claim that the Spectacle 2.0 should be considered as the representation of a system of total social reproduction. Rosati, in the last chapter of the first part, delivers a theoretical exploration of the Spectacle 2.0 in relation to commodity fetishism, and current relations of production. His essay draws on the arguments developed by Williams on advertising as a magic system and political economy critique of market economy as it appears in Debord's *Comments*. Rosati's chapter argues for how the two perspectives provide a useful historical narrative for understanding the changes which have occurred in the economic sphere since the 1960s.

Contributions in Part II, 'Phenomenology and Historicization of the Spectacle: From Debord to the Spectacle 2.0 of New Media,' deliver empirical cases for a historicization of the Spectacle *vis a vis* the multifaceted context of digital capitalism, and thus show how the Spectacle 2.0 can function as an illuminating perspective to deconstruct specific aspects of contemporary social reality. In the first chapter of this section, Barbara Szaniecki explores the notion of

the Spectacle in the spatial dimension of the city of Rio de Janeiro, in the context of recent years' 'immense accumulation of Spectacles' witnessed in Brazil. She treats such a scenario as a space where spectacular subjectivities are constructed through spectacular events such as the World Cup and the Olympic Games, critically examined in the realm of political economy of media.

Jim Thatcher and Craig M. Dalton reflect on the limits and possibilities offered by big data by inquiring into the processes of separation that subjectivities living in the Spectacle experience when it comes to their digital and geographic information about their lives. Their critical analysis utilizes geographical information system (GIS) as big data characterized by cultural and political representations with contingent value, which offer a potential terrain of contestation. Accordingly, the authors wonder how GIS data can be used in subversive ways in order to construct Situationist experiences that aim at re-appropriating life experiences such as walking around the city. Nello Barile examines the dynamics of the Spectacle 2.0 linked to the hegemony of global trademarks through the logic of selfbranding. Barile focuses on the cognitive exploitation of the consumer, who simultaneously stands as the centre of the universe inhabited by brands and the victims of identity theft enacted by the same brands. Such a process, while originating a few decades ago, has been significantly aggravated in the context of the digital economy.

Chiara Bassetti, Annalisa Murgia and Maurizio Teli discuss the intertwining of different levels of the Spectacle in which knowledge workers are reproduced as subjectivities by discussing their findings of the ethnographic study of role games as the manifestation of the Spectacle 2.0's particular facet of gaming capitalism. Along the same lines, exploring how capitalist Spectacle valorizes playfulness, Romina Surugiu aims at investigating the activity of a 'creative' residence/hub for independent digital journalists/writers in Romania who strive to navigate interstitial positions in relation to the general Spectacle, who are caught between the structural political economic constraints of their field and determination to operate as counter-Spectacle apparatus.

In his chapter, Jacob Johanssen shows how in a British reality show, *Embarassing Bodies*, patients are exploited because they receive no monetary return for their performances and are frequently shamed on camera for the voyeuristic gaze of the audience. The author theorizes the exploited labour on reality television through an updated version of Debord's notion of Spectacle. Finally, Ergin Bulut and Haluk Mert Bal conclude with a message of hope, by offering a study of the 2013 Gezi Uprising in Turkey as an effort to create Debordian situations to oppose the Spectacle enacted by the ruling government by deconstructing its hegemonic representations.

All contributions included in this volume show us how productive the revisited category of the Spectacle really is when it comes to making sense of both the general features and particular aspects of informational digital capitalism. We believe that the present scholarship can open the possibility to develop a stimulating compendium for the critical literature on media studies.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In fact, trying to provide its intellectual history, Crary (2004) claims that the Spectacle finds its origins in Greek philosophical thought, reached its embryonic stage during the European Renaissance, and finally completely established itself in the early twentieth century, with the rampant commodification of space and time, the emergence of electronic media, and the spectacular display of commodities (Benjamin, 2002). Like a Greek tragedy, the Spectacle functions as an interface between the spectator and social reality, a powerful medium with pedagogical and epistemological functions. When subsequently such a representation becomes mediated by the technology of mass communication, the Spectacle expands in scope and meaning, which projects its reach beyond the image and gaze, towards a more embracing perception (Crary 1999).

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## PART I

# Conceptualizing The Spectacle



## CHAPTER 3

# The Integrated Spectacle: Towards Aesthetic Capitalism

Vanni Codeluppi

### 1. Introduction

The 1970s changed the social condition described in the previous decade by Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1977). But it can be said that the ‘integrated spectacle’, mentioned by Debord in the *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (2011), has come true: a model dominated by representations in which the spectacle is totally merged with the social culture, and the individual experience of reality is increasingly filtered by media. A model therefore that we can also call ‘aesthetic capitalism’. The main objective of this chapter is to demonstrate that Guy Debord’s ‘integrated spectacle’ and ‘aesthetic capitalism’ are the results of the intense process of mediatization and aestheticization that started in the 1970s in Western societies. This is a process that originates from the progressive extension of the model of factory production to the whole range of cultural and social experiences of the individuals.

Thus, in order to understand what is happening today, it is probably useful to go back in time and analyse the particular historical phase from which the changes

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currently taking place originated. In this respect, the 1970s were a particularly crucial phase. Our argument in support of this thesis will be based primarily on our analysis of a number of relevant films. In some cases, in fact, films have been able to track the processes of change taking place in the social sphere with a great deal of accuracy. Thus, in the pages that follow we will be examining some films that have a deep connection with the changes which occurred in the 1970s.

We will also, however, analyse that particular decade from a broader perspective in order to highlight its specific nature more clearly. We will thus consider the changes that characterized the 1970s from the point of view of production models as well as of technology and media culture, probably the main force operating in the economic and social processes of contemporary capitalism (Kellner 1995, 2003).

## 2. *Alien* and *Blade Runner*: A New Social Model Emerges

The first film, *Alien*, was directed by the film maker Ridley Scott in 1979 and was in some respects epochal. At the time, what probably struck the audiences most was the lack of prospects for the human protagonists of the story recounted by the film: they were in fact prisoners inside a huge spaceship – that is a micro-society and an effective metaphor of our social life – carrying a fierce, raging monster. The monster-alien seemed to come from the outside but was largely unclassifiable as it had no identity or boundaries and took the shape of the bodies it entered. For this very reason, unlike previous science-fiction films, viewers were made to wonder whether in fact the monster might have come from within the spaceship, in other words, not be entirely an Other or foreign being. Ultimately the film exploited that feeling of shock which comes about when the Other suddenly reveals itself to be an Identical being.

A few years after directing *Alien*, Ridley Scott directed *Blade Runner* (1982). The film occasioned countless discussions primarily due to the extreme care with which it was made at the formal level but also because its atmosphere was consistent with a typically postmodern aesthetic taste where architectural features, furnishings, objects and signs intertwined different periods and expressive styles with great freedom. It should also be noted that *Blade Runner* did not give a realistic representation of the city of Los Angeles, which is a sprawling expanse of bungalows and small, ranch-style homes (Davis 1992, 2006); but if we consider that in our imagination Los Angeles represents the city of fiction par excellence (thanks to Hollywood and Disneyland in particular), it seems clear that a more suitable urban setting for the film could not have been found. This explains why *Blade Runner* was so successful in creating the quintessential model of the postmodern metropolis. It portrayed a metropolis spread out across the territory and without a history, just like Los Angeles.

The strong interest aroused by *Blade Runner*, however, derives principally from the fact that, as David Harvey has pointed out, the events recounted by

the film are centred around replicants, namely human beings who only live for four years but lead a particularly intense life:

The replicants exist, in short, in that schizophrenic rush of time that Jameson, Deleuze and Guattari, and others see as so central to postmodern living. They also move across a breadth of space with a fluidity that gains them an immense fund of experience. Their persona matches in many respects the time and space of instantaneous global communications (Harvey 1990, 309).

Replicants, in other words, can be seen to correspond to that compression of time and space which characterizes today's advanced stage in the evolution of capitalism, where technology has increasingly encroached on individual subjectivity. And within that stage capital has become global and therefore indifferent to the specific needs of communities and local areas. It is no accident that in the film the construction processes used for building the replicants are typically post-Fordist, that is, based on the externalization and the division of working processes allocated to different specialists and different locations. The sophisticated technological eyes of the replicants, for example, are made in a basement belonging to an immigrant of eastern origins in not altogether hygienic conditions – a place therefore quite similar to where today's technologically advanced goods are frequently produced for the world's leading brands (Klein 2010).

What makes *Blade Runner* particularly congruent with the current evolutionary stage of capitalism, however, is above all the dark and grim representation of urban life conveyed by the film. The metropolis of the future is in fact depicted as an extremely dangerous place, a disturbing nightmare where all one can hope for is to manage to survive. What is missing in *Blade Runner* is thus the idea of trust in a positive social model. Individuals are trapped inside the society in which they find themselves – a society undergoing a deep crisis and that has lost the temporal dynamic capable of connecting the present with the past and the future.

And here too, just as in *Alien*, danger lies hidden inside the Other, concealed, that is, in the foreign or different being. But the Other is now exactly the same as us, a replicant that looks just like us, in every possible way. We can therefore no longer trust our own kind, on the contrary, these subjects are all the more dangerous because they are indistinguishable from us. All this comes through even more vividly in the re-edited version of the film directed by Scott in 1992, the so-called 'Director's cut', in which Rick Deckard, the lead character of the film played by Harrison Ford, is tasked with hunting down the replicants but is in turn the object of explicit suggestions that he is a replicant himself. It is therefore no longer possible to define with any accuracy who the Other actually is – the enemy to be fought – and this makes it impossible to have some form of control over him. The resulting human living condition is one in which danger can be found lurking anywhere and takes the form of a generalized threat that is difficult to confront.

*Blade Runner*, alongside *Alien*, is a lucid account of the falling apart of the common social fabric developed from the Fifties onwards that were a distinguishing feature of Western societies during the era of intense industrialization. As Gianni Canova has argued:

Once the brief season of Neo-capitalist optimism was over, and with the crumbling of the illusion that it was possible to absorb every form of otherness thanks to the healthy effects of a technological rationality capable of satisfying needs and levelling or concealing differences, the Western imagination rediscovered – as early as the second half of the 1960s – an abrupt and violent ‘return of the removed’: the Other re-emerged with a shock effect from underneath the shell of a *ratio* weakened and shaken up by the conflicts of the previous decade, and gathered onto itself the persecuting fears of foreignness (2000, 97, our translation).

*Alien* and *Blade Runner* thus provided a clear illustration of the fact that human reason had started to become impotent vis-à-vis the Other. Essentially, what these two films highlighted most of all was the crisis of the Western human being as a subject capable of interpreting and moulding the world according to his will. Previously, in fact, the act of seeing by the human being was viewed as an act of knowledge-acquisition and therefore of dominance over reality, but now we can no longer trust what the eye sees. It is no coincidence that at the beginning of *Blade Runner* we are faced with the memorable full-screen shot of a wide-open blue eye reflecting images of flaring fires rising up from an infernal, night-time Los Angeles. It is a sort of ‘eye-mirror’, that is, an eye that does no more than reflect external reality and no longer belongs to a subject endowed with the ability to act upon it. Hence it is not disturbing to those looking at it. Viewers of the film do not perceive the eye as belonging to someone who is seeing them but as a mirror, simply reflecting an urban space that they are not acquainted with and are thus not engaged by. Then again, it seems to be the eye of one of the many replicants that humans use as tools to explore areas of the Off-world considered as being too hazardous for themselves to venture into. In this sense, it is an ‘eye-prosthesis’ that enables humanity to see even places where it cannot be physically present. If modernity sprang from the Renaissance with the invention of perspective, enabling individuals to establish a viewing point from which they could dominate the world, in today’s postmodern world by contrast the prevailing trend is a lack of distinction between the eye and the reality it is looking at, that is, between the subject and the object of vision. The eye of the replicant shown at the beginning of *Blade Runner* thus constitutes an explicit metaphor of the serious crisis that human subjectivity is going through.

Since the eyes of the replicants are artificial, their dehumanized vision also prefigures the social predominance later acquired by the digital image – that is, an overall image that can be totally independent of the act of vision performed by the human eye. It is a machine-generated image that, as frequently



happens in *Blade Runner*, can easily be manipulated and falsified. And yet it seems increasingly clear that ‘while today the powers of the eye are growing, in actual fact the amount of knowledge acquired is proportionally decreasing. The space of the image can say nothing, or almost nothing, about the world: it is an autonomous entity, with its own laws, its non-Euclidean geometries’ (Bertetti and Scolari 2002, 42, our translation). Previously, photography used to be a document, a proof testifying to the presence of the photographed subject, whereas what is happening now more and more is that the subject tends to exit from the scene and, with it, its own photographic image disappears as well. Nevertheless, the digital image is today operating like a sort of ‘fuel’ for ‘aesthetic capitalism’. The fluidity and the liquidity of the digital bits are the ideal instruments of the processes that create economic value.

Film such as *Alien* and *Blade Runner*, but partly also like John Carpenter’s *The Thing* (1982), David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome* (1983) and James Cameron’s *The Terminator* (1984), can be seen as the result of that period of radical change that characterized the 1970s in the West and which led to a new evolutionary stage of capitalism: ‘biocapitalism’ (Codeluppi 2008). It is certainly the case that Western societies underwent several periods of intense change in the twentieth century. One has only to think of the Twenties and Thirties for example. But the most radical changes that would eventually alter the economic and social structure of the Western world so profoundly arguably occurred during the 1970s. It is significant in this respect that the architecture critic Charles Jencks (1977) has dated the shift from modernity to post-modernity to the early 1970s, 1972 to be precise, making it coincide with the decision to demolish the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in Saint Louis, Missouri – a very effective version of the ‘machine for living in’ conceived by Le Corbusier, the most representative architect of Modernism. The 1970s therefore deserve to be closely examined because many of the roots of the social changes that subsequently developed can be traced to this historical phase.

### 3. The 1970s: From Conflicts to the Network

In the world’s most advanced economies during the mid-twentieth century, so-called ‘white-collar workers’, that is, those employed in management, technical and clerical positions, started to have equal weight as ‘blue-collar workers’, that is, manual labour. Thus, by 1969 Alain Touraine could already talk about ‘post-industrial society’ (1971). It was the subsequent decade, however, that proved decisive for the shift to the post-Fordist model of production. This model radically challenged the traditional Fordist system developed in the United States in the early twentieth century based on large factory assembly lines and on an unqualified, poorly educated workforce yet capable of producing, by means of very simple operations, standard goods available to huge masses of consumers at affordable prices.

With the onset of post-Fordism, the large industrial factory was gradually dismembered and took the form of a network structure geographically scattered across territories and made up of small centres of production as well as a workforce fragmented into many small, increasingly mobile and precarious units. This consequently changed the conception of the factory which, despite the geographical scattering of production, became 'integrated' along the lines of the model developed in the 1960s by the Japanese company Toyota which sought to combine capital and labour into a single production effort. Accordingly, the identity of individuals no longer derived from the fact that they belonged to a particular social class but from their awareness that they were participating in a joint production plan.

The underlying causes of all this are manifold. Firstly, we should bear in mind that the youth and workers' struggles of the late 1960s had eroded companies' profit margins and aroused major concerns among entrepreneurs who felt the need to experiment with new production strategies that would enable them to exercise greater control over the workforce. Hence, as Daniel Cohen (2006) has argued, the birth of the decentralized, network enterprise can be interpreted as an instance of the class struggle, in view of the fact that the first companies to be restructured in the United States were those with the most strongly unionized labour forces. Indeed, a major reorganization of the capitalistic system clearly took place during that historical phase that led, once again in the United States, to the loss of 3,400,000 jobs between 1977 and 1986 following the relocation of capital and production processes to areas of the planet such as Asia and Mexico, where greater exploitation of the workforce was possible (Cartosio 1998).

It should also be noted that one of the factors which drove businessmen to seek greater flexibility of production was the intrinsic evolutionary logic of the industrial system – a flexibility, moreover, made possible by the reduction in transport costs and the new availability of the peculiar network structure that distinguishes the way in which computer technologies work. In 1976 the innovative Apple II personal computer model was commercialized and thanks to the introduction of PCs in every office and related digitization, work basically became transformed into an activity of reception, processing and transmission of information. As a result, work itself could be made to resemble information, in other words, it could be made flexible and nomadic.

Developing in parallel with this was the shift towards what various authors have termed 'cognitive capitalism' (Azaïs et al. 2000, Moulrier Boutang 2012), founded on the central role played by the economy of knowledge. This kind of capitalism is far more efficient than that which hinges exclusively on freedom of the market. This is because knowledge is by its very nature a widely available resource and renders obsolete the 'law of rarity' that used to prevail in the age of classical industrial production, according to which the material resources necessary for industrial production were scarce. Most importantly, this new type of capitalism is able to make use of the invaluable tool of the Internet, which gives companies the opportunity to exploit the fruits of cooperation

between different actors and thus to access extremely effectively the resources they need.

Added to all this was also the drive for change caused by the drastic slowdown of the rate of economic development in the world's major advanced countries from 1975, and especially by the heavy economic crisis that set in during the first half of the 1970s. This crisis was particularly shocking to society because it came after a long period of economic development and prosperity. It now became clear that to produce goods which would then almost automatically find the corresponding demand for them was no longer sufficient. Instead, it was necessary to produce not only goods but also consumers; in other words, individuals had to be educated by nurturing their awareness of the pleasure they would be able to gain from consuming. Accordingly, society required all consumers to take personal responsibility in terms of their duty to consume and thus participate in the production-consumption process (Bauman 2002).

A phenomenon probably connected with all this is the development of the personality cult that started to grow throughout the Western world precisely from the late 1960s and which Christopher Lasch has called the 'culture of narcissism' (1981). The feminist movement's challenge to patriarchal society and the different forms of expression of women's emancipation (including female employment, birth control methods, sexual freedom, divorce and so on) led to the disintegration of the traditional family model and to a growth in the level of individualism (Castells 2009b). At the same time, however, the disappointment caused by the failure of the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s to fulfil promises of social change and personal realization gradually turned the original plans for the transformation of society into more modest goals associated with the transformation of every individual's personal image (Code-luppi 2002). This led to a heightened interest in achieving personal health and physical fitness with an explosion of sporting practices such as jogging. From the Eighties onwards, many women also started to practise a variety of physical activities for the first time, leading for instance to the widespread success of aerobics. Consequently, clothes and the human body more generally, gradually became more important in the culture of Western societies during those years – a fact demonstrated for example by the popularity gained in that period by dancing, discos and so-called 'disco music'. It is no coincidence that, following the worldwide success achieved in 1977 by the film *Saturday Night Fever* starring the actor John Travolta, such phenomena have often been grouped under the label of 'Travoltism'.

But the impetus to focus on personal goals found forms of personal realization in the economic domain as well, in terms of both production and consumption. On this subject, the futurologist Alvin Toffler, in his book *The Third Wave* (1980), charted these social changes at the time and theorized on a figure he called 'prosumer' which combines the producer and the consumer into a single entity. During subsequent decades this figure became key for the development of the consumer world. The race towards the personalization of

consumer choices has in fact been a powerful driver of economic development right through to the present time. The growing personalization of consumer choices is not then so much the result of the consumer's independence but above all of a need imposed by the economic system.

Through the figure of the prosumer, the economic system is thus capable of securing flexibility not only of production but also of consumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010, Flichy 2010). It is therefore easier for it to employ everything that consumers generate within society, in other words, to use the work performed inside what might be regarded as a genuine 'social factory'. It is in fact becoming increasingly clear that whereas the operating mechanisms of traditional factories relied on the exploitation of their internal workforce, today's firms accumulate value mostly from the outside, resorting daily to consumers and society at large, using that surplus of innovations, ideas and creativity that individuals produce through their everyday behaviours and experiences (Bifo Berardi 2009, Scholz 2012).

#### 4. From Information to Sensation

In 1967, Guy Debord, who had founded Situationist International in Italy ten years earlier, published *The Society of the Spectacle* (1977) in France. The book launched a radical critique against affluent Western societies and because of this it became a kind of manifesto for the youth uprisings of May 1968. Some years later, in 1988 to be precise, Debord argued in his book *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (2011) that alongside the two traditional forms of spectacular society – namely the 'concentrated spectacle' (typical of totalitarian regimes) and the 'diffuse spectacle' (typical of Western consumer societies) – there had gradually developed the 'integrated spectacle' model. The latter combines the two previous forms with the result that spectacle becomes so predominant in society that nothing else can exist outside of it.

The economic system's ability to 'put to work' today the whole of society relies chiefly on the growing process of spectacularization of daily life and consumption that has become a distinctive feature of today's hypermodern stage of social evolution. In order to take advantage of this situation, companies have to use their brands as a means of communication, that is, as relational tools and independent domains in which producers and consumers can build connections between each other. At the economic level, brands are in fact the more effective the more they are able to develop an identity that is able to act as a centre of social relations. This explains why company brands are becoming so important in the type of culture characterizing today's hypermodern societies.

It is therefore worth taking a closer look at the way in which such brands actually work. Antonella Giardina (2011) has shown that what they essentially seek to do is attribute economic value to the various kinds of expressive forms belonging to their symbolic world. Thus colours, sounds or particular

aesthetic forms are tracked in order to be monetized; at the same time, they also become fundamental tools in the strategy of differentiation that every brand constantly strives to pursue on the market vis-à-vis its competitors. Given the key role played by brands at the social level, this is a clear demonstration of the fact that advanced capitalist societies are increasingly entering a stage that seems to be dominated by aesthetics. It is a stage primarily centred on the ability to stimulate particularly intensely the sphere of human sensibility, namely all those sensations that individuals perceive through their bodies. Moreover, in order to develop, this stage has required aesthetic production to become fully integrated within the process of goods production in general, and hence that the goods-related economic system should undergo the same process of abstraction and *flexibilization*, that is, become part of that regime of variable and constantly moving communication flows which has always been a distinctive feature of the world of aesthetics and social culture.

In order for all this to occur, aesthetics itself has obviously had to be changed as well. According to Andrew Darley (2000), in fact, what we are mainly seeing today is an 'aesthetic without depth' whose chief characteristic is the predominance of style, appearance, form, ornament and sensation rather than meaning and interpretation. This kind of aesthetic had already started to develop during the second half of the nineteenth century thanks to the numerous tools of communication that appeared on the scene at the time (the diorama, the magic lantern, Luna Parks, photography, cinema and so on), but the subsequent advances made by communication technologies contributed significantly to its intensification. Moreover, in view of the high rate of usage by individuals of communication tools characterized by a virtual and constantly moving visual language (cinema as well as television and *mobility media*), Anne Friedberg's (1993) statement made some twenty ago that we are facing a genuinely 'mobilized and virtual gaze' has become increasingly true. Today we can therefore claim that 'The spectator of visual culture is positioned first and foremost as a seeker after unbridled visual delight and corporeal excitation' (Darley 2000 169).

Walter Benjamin (1999) was the first to address the subject of the social diffusion of aesthetics in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, published for the first time in 1936. When he used the term *aestheticization*, however, he explicitly intended to refer to the specific realm of politics. Three years later, in the text *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, the renowned German intellectual showed a deeper awareness of the key role played by the process of aestheticization within the social system. He argued, for instance, that 'The replacement of the older narration by information, of information by sensation, reflects the increasing atrophy of experience' (1999, 155).

Benjamin thus captured vividly the idea of how in capitalist societies sensation gradually takes the place of information. Later in that same essay he posited a precise connection between the sensations experienced by passers-by in the moving crowd of the metropolis and the process of standardized

production in the factory; in a similar way he drew a connection between the latter and the mobilization of vision that characterizes the experience of viewing the cinematographic spectacle:

In a film, perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle. That which determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the basis of the rhythm of reception in the film' (1999, 171).

Capitalism, according to Benjamin, therefore extends the model of factory production to the whole gamut of sensible experiences and does so by applying it not only as an economic model but, in a more subtle way, as a cultural model capable of generating experiences.

As a matter of fact, the subject of the social consequences of the aestheticization process had already been previously addressed by Georg Simmel (Frisby and Featherstone 1997), who believed that the true nature of modern societies could only be grasped if one had a thorough understanding of the social sphere of aesthetics. In other words, the social system could be effectively interpreted by analysing the way in which artistic languages are applied on a daily basis to many different forms of expression (such as fashion, design, advertising and so on). If this was true during the age of Simmel then it is even more valid today, when the immaterial components of the economy and society have undergone more than a century of development. It now also seems clear, however, that in recent years aestheticization has been a prerequisite for the commodification process to be able to develop socially, where the diffusion of aesthetics in everyday life has facilitated the entry of every object, as well as every individual, institution and event, into the circuit of the market and of the consumer world (Assouly 2008, Lipovetsky and Serroy 2013).

## 5. Aesthetics and the Metropolis: The Case of Birmingham

Drawing on the insights of Benjamin and Simmel, Giacomo Ravesi (2011) has illustrated the links in today's advanced societies between the metropolitan experience and media languages. These have developed not only because urban spaces are being increasingly invaded by ubiquitous video screens and media messages but also because a relationship of mutual interpenetration has grown between the city and media. This phenomenon has reached such a scale that it can be argued that 'the image of the contemporary metropolis has now definitively spilled into the "flow" of media communication' (Ravesi 2011, 30, our translation).

But what is interesting about this is the fact that this process of fusion of metropolises within the media flow now circulating in society seems to be driven by that media flow itself. To that extent therefore, this media flow does not simply constitute an aesthetic form to be contemplated, but actually defines

certain organizational criteria governing the ways through which individuals can have their own experience of the world. Yet it does so on the basis of that consumer culture which constantly runs through it and without which it would not be able to function.

This is clearly demonstrated by the case of the city of Birmingham in England. As is widely known, violent inter-racial clashes broke out in certain neighbourhoods of London and other cities across England over several days during August 2011; but the city that was really 'on fire' was Birmingham, Britain's second most populous city with just over a million inhabitants. At the symbolic level, this constituted an odd historical nemesis. The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham was in fact where Britain's most important school of cultural studies since World War II was born and developed (Procter 2004). The school made the spectacular expressive styles of youth subcultures (from the Mods to the Punks) the core of its studies and put forward the most effective theoretical explanation of the underlying reasons for the birth of such subcultures and the way they operated. The golden age of the Birmingham School however lasted from the 1960s through to the 1980s, and it is perhaps no coincidence that the beginnings of its crisis coincided with the petering out of that social energy which, from the Fifties onwards, had led many youths in Britain to develop particularly clamorous and innovative subcultures.

According to the Birmingham School, subcultures represented the response that British youths were attempting to give to the opposing thrusts to which they were being subjected in the peculiar social situation in which they found themselves. Subcultures, in other words, were an attempt to resolve the contradiction felt by young people between on the one hand the kind of Puritanism traditionally embraced by the working class which their parents came from, and on the other the new hedonism put forward by the world of media. In particular, they found that the consumer culture they were beginning to be surrounded by was sparked by the developing economic boom of that time. From this standpoint, the Mods were exemplary. The slang and rituals adopted by members of this subculture made reference to their parents' traditional culture, while the clothes they wore and their musical tastes reflected the image set by affluent young consumers. Subcultures were thus the product of a search for synthesis between the forms of social adaptation developed by parents and those of their children. The subculture was a means of channelling the malaise of Britain's youths in a space that was non-threatening to society and weaker than the potentially destructive energy it might have been charged with. In other words, this malaise was transformed into an opposition that was symbolic in nature but, according to the interpretation put forward by the Birmingham school, nevertheless retained a will to social resistance with the potential to turn it into a political movement of open protest (Codeluppi 2002).

Today, the British subcultures which were the object of the Birmingham School's investigations have become distinctly weaker. In some cases they have



become aware of those practices of absorption within media and commercial circuits that society habitually develops towards them and, in order to escape from these, they have shifted to physical and digital spaces in which they are difficult to see, but by so doing they have become less visible and consequently less powerful as well. More often, however, they have turned 'pop', that is, pure media and consumer phenomena, hardly distinguishable from the flows of messages and products coming directly out of the culture industry. Thus, if the interpretation of the Birmingham scholars is correct, a further element that has been lost is the peculiar ability of subcultures to act essentially as social cushions or 'shock-absorbers' and, as such, to reduce the impact of conflicts between youths and society. And this is one of the fundamental underlying reasons for the clashes that erupted in Birmingham and the rest of England in 2011.

What happened in Birmingham in the summer of 2011 can be explained not only by the weakening of the mechanisms of 'conflict-absorption', but also by the considerable changes that have occurred in the social and economic fabric of this city. Among these we should note the particularly powerful impact of delocalization of industrial production to other areas of the planet and the closing down of major factories such as that of the car manufacturer MG Rover.

A key element to be considered, however, is that since the twelfth century Birmingham had been home to the Bull Ring, the oldest market in England. Today, the area once occupied by the Bull Ring is mostly covered in shops. Symbolically, the location of the once thriving market has been taken up by a large department store that has even adopted its name: the Selfridges Bullring. It consists of a gigantic sausage-shaped construction covered by 15,000 round aluminium mirrors. This striking building, designed by the architectural stars from the firm Future Systems, was constructed in a town centre that had been the object of a vast 'urban clean-up' involving the renovation of historical streets, the creation of new squares and, most importantly, the replacement of traditional shops with global brand stores. There is actually no difference from what has happened to the majority of cities both in Britain and other European countries, where old town centres have been deprived of their very roots and identity – an identity that had been painstakingly built over the centuries, made up of venues, buildings, conduct and rituals which had gradually come to be part of a common cultural heritage.

This has created a vacuum that has progressively been filled by what Boeri (2011) has termed the 'anti-city', namely a flow of energy spreading more and more widely and which by degrees is fragmenting traditional urban society, eliminating differences between centres and suburbs and doing away with the boundaries between the city and the countryside. It is also, however, a flow that is gradually blending with consumer culture, a culture which currently takes virtually identical forms in all Western cities. Yet it is also a fact that individuals have increasingly built their identity upon that particular culture instead of choosing as their point of reference a specific cultural heritage solidly established over time. We only feel we are citizens, it would seem, if we consume.



But while people find that due to the economic crisis they now have little money to spend on their shopping, they nevertheless still feel they have a right to own those goods – goods that they are tempted by daily by shop windows and, most of all, video screens teeming with advertising messages. And, if necessary, they will enforce their right to own such goods even by illegal and violent means – which is in fact precisely what happened in Birmingham and across England in 2011. Otherwise they do not feel like full citizens.

Birmingham has a population of just over one million and, as such, can be compared to many medium-sized cities across Europe. In recent years these cities have frequently undergone the same process of ‘emptying out’ of their town centres and suffered the same crisis of their traditional identities which, in this case too, are being replaced by a process of aestheticization whose main emphasis tends to be on consumer culture.

## 6. Conclusions

From the films we have analysed, we have seen how, during the 1970s, the Western individual and his capacity to interpret and change reality started going through a serious crisis – a crisis reflected particularly by this individual’s inability to trust what his eye can see.

These films have also shown that the processes of change currently taking place in Western societies started in the 1970s, triggered by the development of typically post-Fordist production processes. These involved the externalization and the division of corporate manufacturing stages into different specialist areas and different locations. These production stages centred on manufacturing flexibility and were made possible by the reduction in transport costs coupled with that newly-available and peculiar network structure that characterizes the way information technology works.

Through our analysis of the selected films we have also seen how the 1970s ushered in a process in which immaterial components started to become increasingly pervasive in the economy and throughout society, a trend that has led to widespread aestheticization, that is, the application of the aesthetic dimension, which was once seen exclusively in the world of art, to the goods circulating throughout society and in the sphere of people’s everyday lives.

Finally, we have seen how these phenomena are particularly strong in today’s urban and metropolitan areas, where a process of fusion is taking place with the media flow spreading across the social culture. This flow does not simply constitute an aesthetic form to be contemplated but it also actually defines certain criteria that govern the way in which individuals can experience the world. And, to that end, it relies on the consumer culture that constantly permeates it, and without which it would not be able to function.

Thus, if today we are able to talk about Guy Debord’s ‘integrated spectacle’ and about ‘aesthetic capitalism’, it is due to the process of mediatization and

aestheticization that started in the 1970s and which is so pervasive in the daily lives of present-day capitalist societies; a process that enables firms to create economic value by relying first and foremost on the work performed daily by individuals, namely the countless innovations, ideas and creative contributions they produce every day through their behaviours and experiences.

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## CHAPTER 4

# Guy Debord, a Critique of Modernism and Fordism: What Lessons for Today?

Olivier Frayssé

### 1. Introduction

The advent of the Age of the Internet seems to have vindicated Debord's approach to the life vs the spectacle issue. The multiplication of screens even suggests a *mise en abyme* of the concept as we spend an increasing part of our lives watching merchandise such as smartphones that showcase the world as merchandise, from news to pornography and all sorts of consumer goods and services, and the omnipresent reality of the virtual expresses itself as in 'second life' or 'virtual reality' devices, and Pokemon Go. While, as Christian Fuchs (2015) has shown, the Internet has brought commodity fetishism to unprecedented heights by obfuscating labour processes and class relations further than anything capitalism had done before, Debord's writings pay more attention to the manner in which the labour processes and class relations are hidden than to the realities of these labour processes and class relations, which makes it difficult to use his findings to analyse the changes in labour processes and class relations that have occurred since his death, which coincided with the dawn of the digital age.

To embark on this mission is thus challenging. To begin with, like so many other things, both the Internet and Debord's concepts need to be reterritorialized

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and historicized. Indeed, his book *La Société du Spectacle* was obviously written under the dual sign of the West (US)/East (Soviet Union) dichotomy, including the original distinction between the '*spectaculaire diffus*' and the '*spectaculaire concentré*' on the one hand and the impact of the US 1960s movements and theories on the other hand. His films, notably *La Société du Spectacle* are replete with American references in more than one way, interspersed with French references establishing the depth of US influence, and in this aspect not unlike Gramsci's famous '*Americanismo e Fordismo*' entry in his *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1977), that Debord apparently never mentioned. Neither writer had first-hand knowledge of the United States, where they never set foot (and Debord took pride in his ignorance of English), and both, maybe for that reason, had an innovative approach to the type of model that was coming from the US to Europe at that time.

What this paper will explore then is the relevance and originality of Debord's take on the pre-Internet age, with a focus on the importance of Debord's knowledge of and interest in the United States. Was the spectacle concept pertinent? Is the advent of the Age of the Internet a development of the 'spectacle society'? And, more crucially, does it help us understand the labour regimes of digital workers? We must obviously start with a critical examination of Debord's theories, but that again poses a series of challenges.

The first challenge lies in the exceptional intertwining of Debord's personal life and his productions. An enthusiast of life being there to be lived, Debord was also a charismatic leader preaching by spectacular example and, while he wrote relatively little on paper or screen, he was a relentless autobiographer (from the ironic *Mémoires* collage to *Panegyrique* or *Cette Mauvaise Réputation*, and his numerous interventions to edit his public image). He seldom hid his self behind his pronouncements (although they served to conceal as well), so that the biographical dimension cannot be avoided, lest we miss the praxis that brought him to theorize. Three Debord biographies are worth mentioning: the hagiographic intellectual biography published by Anselm Jappe in 1993, *Guy Debord*, which Debord himself praised; Christophe Bourseiller's *Vie et mort de Guy Debord*, in 1999, well-researched, striving for nuance and objectivity; written by a connoisseur of French radicals and France who is not a great theoretician, it is very reliable when it comes to facts and context. And finally, Jean-Marie Apostolides' *Debord: le naufrageur*, 2015, a thoroughly hostile and well-researched scholarly production based on an extensive study of archives.

## 2. Debord's Theories as Countercultural Productions

One way to look at Debord's theoretical productions is to historicize them, and consider them as products of a countercultural community to which he belonged, and in which he played a major role as theoretician. Debord was the main theoretical force behind anti-Isou Letterism and the Situationist International, and

the main reason why he is remembered and studied is his theories, essentially his use of the notion of spectacle to name and explain the then-existing mode of capitalist domination. Debord's preoccupations have evolved over time, but two traits have remained from beginning to end: a theoretical bent, and the exaltation of praxis. His theories were inseparable from praxis, they were explicitly a theorization and rationalization of his praxis. In his *Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle* of 1988, he presented his 1967 *La Société du Spectacle* book as the last step in a process of critical thinking and revolutionary practice, published at the culminating point of the Situationist International, to serve future subversive forces (Debord, 1992b, 85). Earlier, his discovery of Letterists in Cannes had led him to move to Paris, share their lifestyle, which included hours of 'critical thinking' and talking against everything and everybody outside the group, long before he provided this polemical praxis with something that resembled a theoretical basis. He brutally broke relations with associates long before he formalized exclusion as a cornerstone of the Letterist or Situationist Internationals principles (Bourseiller, 143–144). Debord very likely fantasized sleeping with his half-sister before developing a justification of incest as revolutionary and therefore something to be recommended to the members of his group (Apostolidès 2015a, 202–204, 749–750). He also developed the 'marsupial' theory (Apostolidès 2015 312 seq.) concerning girls, an uncomfortably pressurizing sort of rationale to be used for seduction. Picturing himself as essentially a destroyer, he was to make the Hegelian notion of the negative a central feature of his thinking, the Art of War his lifelong game, and his polemical approach a trademark. A lot of this was also designed to protect – it could be argued – what non-devotees might describe as an indulgent lifestyle, always comfortable and sometimes verging on the luxurious based on greed, sloth, sexual license and even a little violence when it came to power and status (Bourseiller, 136, 207, Apostolidès 2015a, 343), altogether a brilliant rationalizing of a condition now described as perverse narcissism by psychologists.

An attempt at living apart from 'mainstream' culture as a group characterizes voluntary subcultures, which can be more or less tolerated by society and the state, which allocate each subculture its space. When one of these subcultures presents itself as an alternative to the dominant culture for all, and not just the original group members, as an alternative way of life, when it presents a coherent challenge to the dominant culture, the word counterculture, coined by Theodore Roszak (Roszak 1968), is apposite. Debord's theoretical productions were a rationalizing and universalizing of the practices, values and beliefs of what Alice Becker-Ho finally defined as a kind of Gipsy king (Apostolidès, 490–493), holding court for several generations of Bohemians. In the 1960s, there was a simultaneous rise of countercultures in several countries in the West, which resonated with the aspirations of the youth to change the world they were inheriting, and which later influenced the youth in Eastern Europe.

The US and France were the two countries where the youth movement, and the accompanying subcultures and countercultures climaxed at the same time,

in 1968, while interacting with similar explosions all over the developed world. The situation in the two countries was remarkably similar and completely different. In both countries, the countercultural element emerged in the 1950s (Existentialism, Letterism, the Beat Generation) and reconnected critically with pre-World War II oppositions to both capitalism and Stalinism in politics and art (Trotskyism, anarchism, Dadaism, surrealism). In both countries, the countercultures rubbed shoulders with social movements, which to them were evidence that they were right in rebelling against the status quo, and interacted with them to some extent. The differences were quite striking as well, and not only in terms of social makeup, size and degree of centralization, power, or national culture of the two countries. In the US, the 'civil rights' revolution lasted throughout the 1960s, and so did the Vietnam War. The 'Movement' of the youth against imperialism at home and abroad was a real force in the country for several years, generating a measure of democracy. In France, imperialism was defeated as early as 1962 with the independence of Algeria, and the undertaker of the French Empire, De Gaulle, de-democratized the institutions.

As a consequence, France and France's youth looked tranquil until the 'explosion' of 1968, which came as a surprise for almost everyone. The youth movement had developed alongside movements within the 'traditional' organizations of the Left during the Algerian war (1954–1962), and did so with little interest in the French counterculture expressed by Existentialists, Letterists and later Situationists; the youth movements then combated Gaullism after 1962 within the same traditional Left organizations and their radical offshoots (including *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, an organization that Debord joined briefly, and where he did both theoretical work and legwork for a few months), and their influence only picked up speed in 1966, largely in solidarity with the American movement, the unifying theme in France being Vietnam and the civil rights revolution. Some American countercultural themes were also imported, such as sexual liberation. The handful of Situationists, who were genuinely countercultural and revolutionary came out of their practical Parisian isolation by taking over the student organization in Strasbourg in 1966, and also played a significant role in Nantes; they thus had some political impact between 1966 and May 1968, but were just one of many groups, admittedly the one that delivered the biggest bang for the smallest buck and the one which supposedly best represented the 'spirit of May' in the French youth, far beyond the student body (Bourseiller, 440–493; 549–599). The lid put by De Gaulle on expression, sexuality and rebelliousness was blown off and the whole country, freed by the general strike, faced quite a 'situation'.

Debord and the Situationists could feel vindicated in that their immediate liberation mottos were lived up to by many, and also by their understanding that this spontaneous response showed that they had correctly identified the major problem with society. Their very minor role in the events of 1968 left them a small place in history, but their capture of the 'spirit of 68' soon recycled by capitalism, made them icons of the French 70s counterculture, a role Debord



did not care for, hence his dissolution of the so-called Situationist International and his scorn for the 'pro-Situs' that emerged.

### 3. The Genesis of Debord's Theories

It is not without significance that Debord started (and ended) with an aesthetic criticism of capitalism and the society of his times. His rebellion was against falseness, lack of authenticity, the humdrum quality of everything, or rather the lack of quality of almost everything. He lived up to the demands of this rebellious spirit at huge personal costs of self-discipline, with the constant support of psychotropic substances, and principally a methodical, lifelong use of alcohol (for which he substituted tomato juice during the months when he put *La Société du Spectacle* together), which led him to a premature death by suicide. Boredom and slumber were the great enemies of life, and there was no way of defeating them unless one always kept on edge, on the edge, on the fringes and on top of the game.

The pursuit of 'happiness' as a succession of exalted moments was the mission. The motto was to be synthesized as '*jouir sans entraves*', without fetters, which the Situationists proclaimed as a program for May 1968 on the walls of Paris, *jouir* meaning both to enjoy and to have an orgasm in French. This was the exact opposite of the model of everyday 'happiness' through consumption of commodities that reigned supreme everywhere, a US import that had started glutting the French market under the Marshall plan in the 1950s, which also flooded French screens with the Hollywood movies that were to shape Debord's cinematic sensibilities and provide the mine from which most of his cinematographic *détournements* would come.

The way I reconstruct the genesis of Debord's theorizing is by asking three questions that he must have faced, since he answered them. First, what kind of theory can fit a life project that gratifies Debord as an individual and still be a theory, something that has a universal value while remaining valid for this particular, idiotic self? What social group can make it its own and give it a universal dimension though a collective practical activity? Where are the materials to construct one?

The answer to the first question is in the style, aphoristic, surgical, deliberately misleading and demanding a form of subsumption under Debord's unique personality. What is the spectacle? The spectacle is this, but it is also this, and that, and something else too, you idiot, just read my lips, watch my moves, enjoy being tricked. Debord was always the Juggler, or Magician from the Tarot that he used to illustrate his last production (Debord 1998). The answer to the second question is twofold: in reality, successively, the groups that Debord aggregated around himself, the intellectuals that he fascinated, the generations of rebels that found inspiration in his works and his image, and the academics that discuss him; in fiction, the proletariat, because, under the conditions of

‘state monopoly capital’ (the then dominant concept in the French communist and radical circles, not referred to but described in SS 87) associated with the society of the spectacle, the bourgeoisie has renounced ‘all historical life apart from what has been reduced to the economic history of things.’

Debord shares the Marxist and anarchistic visions of the proletariat as the negative of capitalism, and therefore its future death, but, contrary to Marx’s revolutionary predictions based on the growing concentration and pauperization of the proletariat, he never gives any objective reason why the proletariat should be in a position to become a successful ‘pretender to historical life,’ and, since it is the only one, the prospects are rather gloomy, unless one finds a way to shake them out of their spectacle-induced torpor, disgust them from their hard-earned possessions, whose characteristics as values in use Debord negated, and of course demand an immediate end to their labour. Debord seemed to fantasize the proletariat. He saw in the Watts riots of 1965 a rejection of the society of the spectacle by African-American proletarians, on the grounds that the rioters, being precisely those who were excluded from the ‘superopulence’ and Hollywood on account of their race, could but practically negate the commodity as something one has to pay for while (mistakenly) demanding that the spectacle society should fulfil its promises of affluence for all, and affirming their will to live the real life in the process (Debord, 1965). For Debord, a parasitic upstart in the intelligentsia posing as *déclassé* from the bourgeoisie, the proletariat was never anything but a mythical construction empowering him to pass judgment in His name, a convenient God that never cared to realize His essence, since it never succeeded in establishing its reign on earth through the workers’ councils, while giving signs and miracles in the Paris Commune, the Spanish Civil War, the Hungarian revolutions, and so on, and therefore left its various prophets to rule their churches with an iron hand while warring with rival prophets. He was probably not the worst of his kind.

The answer to the third question is probably the more interesting. Debord was an avid and eclectic reader, a self-taught man free from the teachings of the School or the Party(ies), from any form of reverence for existing luminaries, alive or dead, and with a distinct preference for the dead, especially those without posterity (as shown by his editorial work on Baltasar Gracián and others). *La Société du Spectacle* uses a wide array of concepts borrowed, with or without acknowledgment, from a host of thinkers ranging from the Hegel-Feuerbach-Marx-Lukács lineage to contemporary American sociology, Boorstin, Whyte, Riesman: anything except contemporary French thinkers, who were not to be dignified in a theoretical book, where insults did not fit, all the more so since he owed so much to them, especially Henri Lefebvre. All those he quotes or subverts through *détournement* had grasped part of the totality, but Debord synthesizes them by surpassing them, refuting them in part, diverting them playfully, and fundamentally killing them. For Debord was the parricidal parasite. Just as he lived as a parasite of society, off his family (far from poor, although he suggests the opposite in *Panégryrique*), his wives and friends, he lived off

the thought of others and phantasmatically killed them in the process. ‘You, young man, do not despair; for the vampire, contrary to what you think, is your friend. And if you count Sarcopes, who produces scabies, you will have two friends’, as Lautréamont, whom Debord never stopped reading, concluded the first chant of *Maldoror* (Lautréamont 1938, vol. 1 256).

If parasitism is the form, eclecticism is the substance. To produce a theory, one has to be a poet, one involved in poesis, not just praxis, and why not through collage? Collage is an effort at synthesis of a fragmented reality by exposure of the fragmentation. The collage tradition, born with Dada, taken up by the surrealists, re-emerged on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1950s with Burroughs and the Letterists, and the best platform for collage was the cinema, since the crucial part of the production process, editing, consisted of gluing together pieces of film. And since the cinema was the original art of the spectacle society, hiding the process of its creation behind the smooth and slick flicks narratives, the only proper use of the cinema was ‘anti-cinema’, unveiling the truth of the cinematic process as an antidote to the society of the spectacle, in a Brechtian manner.

‘Thou shall never work’, wrote Debord on the walls of Paris in 1953, but that meant ‘thou shall never engage in wage-work’. Collage is hard work, just like parasitism, but it also involves a real production. While the parasitism of society is akin to that of predators, slowly destroying what they parasitise – hence the lifelong fascination of Debord for the ‘dangerous classes’ described by Chevalier (Chevalier 1958), that is, criminals – the parasitism of intellectual productions is more like that of saprophytes, the vegetable organisms that live off decaying matter, provided the matter has been killed or has died, and it can even be a symbiotic relationship, when the guest organism prolongs the life of the host in a modified form, which Debord did with the Hegelian-Marxist tradition.

#### 4. The Society of the Spectacle, a Critique of High Modernism

Let us now take on the central concept of spectacle. The spectacle is a materialized *Weltanschauung* (SS 5) that has made reality recede into it (SS 1), creating from an abstracted part of reality a separate pseudo-world (images detached from life and merged into a stream) that provides an object that can only be contemplated and provides a unified and illusory reality: ‘The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving’ (SS 2), ‘a visible negation of life – a negation that has taken on a visible form’ (SS 10). The spectacle is visible in ‘particular manifestations—news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment’ (SS 6), and ‘presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification’ (SS 3): it is at the same time a ‘model’ for society (SS 6), a separate sector that is ‘the focal point of all vision and all consciousness’ (SS 3), and it also ‘serves as a total justification of the

conditions and goals of the existing system' (SS 4): thus it is the material form of ideology (SS 212), it is even ideology par excellence, since the 'essence' of ideology is 'the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life' (SS 215). At the same time, it is a 'social relation between people that is mediated by images' (SS 4); this social relation is rooted in the mode of production since the spectacle is 'the omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have already been made in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production', and the spectacle is both the 'result and the project' of this mode of production (SS 6).

### 5. High Modernism and High Fordism

What is this mode of production? It is capitalism, of course, whether state monopoly capital in the West or in the East, but the word appears very late in the book (SS 56). The spectacle is a stage of capitalism: 'it is the stage at which the commodity has succeeded in totally colonizing social life' (SS 42). The central concept is not capitalism, but 'the economy'. What about 'the economy'? First and foremost, it is that of developed countries, characterized by 'abundance'. The development of the world market makes it universal, since, 'although this qualitative change has as yet taken place only partially in a few local areas, it is already implicit at the universal level that was the commodity's original standard, a standard that the commodity has lived up to' (SS 39), and 'in the less industrialized regions, its reign is already manifested by the presence of a few star commodities and by the imperialist domination imposed by the more industrially advanced regions' (SS 42). But 'the abundance of commodities—that is, the abundance of commodity relations – amounts to nothing more than an augmented survival' (SS 40), since no one can understand or live the totality of the real world.

What Debord is denouncing there in his own language is what the US counterculture had labelled the consumer society. The labour regime he describes is high Fordism: subject to rigorous disciplines at work, the worker turned consumer in his leisure time is now the subject of the full attention of the specialists of domination: 'At this point the humanism of the commodity takes charge of the worker's 'leisure and humanity' simply because political economy now can and must dominate those spheres as political economy' (SS 43). Since survival is now guaranteed in the industrialized countries, the answer to the perennial question 'how to make the poor work' (Debord, 1992a, 6) includes the necessity of both making them consume commodities equated with goods and consume their leisure time in the spectacle, since it 'monopolizes the majority of the time spent outside the production process', (SSSS 6), away from any will to change the system, as 'the spectacle is a permanent opium war designed to force people to equate goods with commodities and to equate satisfaction with a survival that expands according to its own laws. Consumable survival must constantly expand because it never ceases to include privation, since pseudo-needs are

constantly manufactured (SS 44), while desire is asphyxiated. The economic regime he describes is that of mass production and mass consumption, the 'virtuous' cycle of Fordism and Keynesianism. All these elements of critique were present in the US counterculture, this is what brought Allan Ginsberg to 'Howls' in favour of America three years after Debord's *Howls in Favour of Sade*, his first film.

The reason why Debord is remembered and his book was named the *Society of the Spectacle* is that he added to the understanding of Fordism in its economic, political and social dimensions an understanding of the specific form of ideological domination (in Gramsci's sense) that Fordism used: the spectacle of the commodity. The importance of images in modern life had been observed by Daniel Boorstin, whom Debord credits with describing in *The Image* 'the way the American spectacle was consumed as a commodity' (SS 198). The French translation, by Janine Claude, of what was originally called *The Image, or What Happened to the American Dream*, was published in 1963 by Julliard (Boorstin, 1963), and probably clarified Debord's concept of the spectacle, which he started using in 1960 (Apostolidès 2015, 233), from his understanding of the theatre, notably through Boorstin's use of the word spectacular, while Debord's analysis of the mechanism of capitalist manipulation came from his reading of Vance Packard (Apostolidès 2015, 236). The importance of images of commodities in modern life, starting with the *Arcades in Paris* had been noticed by Walter Benjamin, whom Debord must also have read. Debord also mentions American sociologists Whyte and Riesman, who had reflected on the changes in American society that had resulted from Fordism. Fordism, both on the production and consumption sides appeared as quintessentially American to Debord, as they had to Gramsci, and its consequences for other societies appeared as the 'Americanization of the world' (Debord 1992, 12). That Debord was essentially discussing Fordism is what Gianfranco Sanguinetti, in his Debordian dismissal of Apostolidès (Sanguinetti 2015) says when he ranks the *Société du Spectacle*, together with Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984* as one of the three important books of the twentieth century.

## 6. What Use is Debord in Understanding Digital Work and Labour in the Age of the Internet?

When trying to address the issue of the possible uses of Debord to analyse the situation of knowledge workers in the Age of the Internet and the place of their labour, one is confronted with several difficulties. First, the computer was to Debord a mere extension of the impersonality of the machine, its workings a continuation of the procedural regime of Fordism. Second, and most problematic, he never dealt with the issues of work and labour because he was never in any way interested in them. He had no sense of shame in consuming endlessly the product of the labour of others, and produced a general critique

of the alienation of everyone (except Debord), regardless of class, and never one of exploitation, which would have carried the unthinkable stigma of what he would have called bourgeois, or religious, morality. Debord never cared for actual workers in any way: their living and working conditions, their efforts to better their condition, their efforts to challenge capitalism, their strikes (he went through the great strikes of 1953 in France, that paralyzed the country, writing about strikes ... in Spain), what actually happened in the factories in 1968, none of this ever meant anything to him. When he was involved in a productive enterprise, such as making a film, he played only the demanding and inefficient manager's part and his employees ended up bitter, rejected and sceptical about his abilities (Apostolidès 2015, 395). Work and labour are the blind spots in Debord's work. He never cared for the real processes of alienation and exploitation within the capitalist wage system under Fordism or before, satisfying himself with the general knowledge of the notion of commodity fetishism, thereby turning the concept of commodity fetishism itself into a fetish. Finally, he was never interested in the mechanisms of Fordist labour subsumption, and is therefore irrelevant for a study of post-Fordist labour regimes.

The main Debordian idea that can add to our knowledge of digital work and labour is therefore to be found on the consumption side, more precisely in the mode of distribution. Owning the cheap means of production that suffice to extract value from his labour, self-exploiting himself mercilessly under the strict disciplines of the digital temporality of being logged-in (Huws, 2016), the digital worker also has to market himself (or herself). 'Free digital labour' has to advertise itself. The digital worker has to market his skills and his personality, in turn shaping the latter according to the needs of the market, turning his work and himself into a commodity and selling the package himself. This holds true both of the overwhelming majority of digital laborers who produce lines of code for one tiny segment of a large multinational project or actualize data, of platform workers who provide online and off-line services and depend on their ratings to find gigs, and also of more upscale knowledge workers.

The concept of digital artisan applies in this latter case, while perhaps not in the Barbrook and Schultz (1997) sense. Barbrook, while directly confronting the Californian ideology of the 'virtual class' (Barbrook and Cameron 1995), saw the group of highly skilled knowledge workers as 'the only subjects of history', able to 'transform the machines of domination into the technologies of liberation', a left-wing, European version of what Richard Florida (2002) was to call 'the creative class'. Barbrook and Schultz even planned to organize this class in a (stillborn) European Digital Artisans Network (EDAN). Barbrook hoped that this new class would 'rediscover the individual independence enjoyed by craftspeople during proto-industrialism', while promoting sociability 'within the highly collective institutions of the market and the state'.

When looking back on the lives of artisans/artists in the early years of capitalism – and here Benjamin Franklin's life provides an endless mine of

information – one recognizes striking similarities: ownership of the means of production, complete control of and responsibility for the production process, subjection to market demands as a necessity for survival (with the essential role of credit and marketing platforms), the importance of networking to create a brand image (local respectability, membership in the churches and other associations, recognition and patronage from elite members, etc.). While Marx could construct the figure of the artisan in a somewhat mythical way from the evident contrasts in those departments with the condition of the emerging wage-worker (and that are to a great extent the conditions under which the overwhelming majority of digital workers operate today), the dialectic between autonomy and constraint looks very much the same, under different circumstances obviously. In both cases, the artisan is in charge of realizing both his exploitation (producing value to accumulate his capital, but also value that does not entirely accrue to him, because of the banker, the merchant, and the state, therefore maximizing the exercise of his labour power) and his alienation (partly disregarding his aesthetic tastes, constructing a market-friendly personality).

The great difference here that concerns us is that the knowledge worker as digital artisan cannot sell his labour power or the products he delivers (depending on the type of contract) without producing a spectacle of the merchandise he sells, since his works and himself must be displayed on the screens of potential buyers. This image is alien to him, not only because it is crafted for seduction and subject to the rules of the genre and the platforms, but because it comes to dominate him as an exterior force that makes him conform to it, analyse it, work to change it, in an endless quest for marketability. If the spectacle monopolized 'the majority of the time spent outside the production process' in the 1960s (SS 6), it is now part of the production process itself for digital artisans, in which they strive to produce and sell the spectacle of themselves, in an alienated process of production of subjectivities that is a negotiation between resistance to alienation and subjection to the market disciplines which have replaced Fordist labor disciplines.

This is exactly what Debord did for himself objectively, producing very little, either in terms of books or films, borrowing a lot from others, including enough to build a statue of himself that has endured, and marketing the package of his work and personality in a very efficient way, using all the communication marketing techniques imported from the USA: initially, Isidore Isou gave him access to the market for 'avant-garde products' under Isou's brand (he had to adopt the Letterist signature use of two first names, in this case Guy-Ernest); then he used the positioning strategy later conceptualized by Ries and Trout (Ries and Trout, 1981), constantly making a brand name for himself by opposing it to well-known brand names (Chaplin, Isou, Marx, Sartre, Breton, Trotsky, etc.); finally, when Debord had finally become a brand in its own right, he focused on the positioning away from competition strategy which was dear to his heart from the beginning but that he



could not afford to implement completely in his early days. In the end, having lost both his main client, Lebovici, and his working capacity, he retreated to a market niche, his wife and remaining patrons. All in all, he was in a way a half-willing success in the 'society of the spectacle', and yet an enduring figure of rebelliousness against the 'non-life' that most people have to live, and a caller to action.

## 7. Conclusion

How can we explain the renewed interest in Debord in the 2010s, of which the present volume is yet another indicator? Globalization, and the globalization and 'democratization' of the Internet have made the spectacle of the commodity even more ubiquitous than in Debord's time. The sense of frustration among consumers, which needs to be reinforced perpetually to maintain demand, has been heightened by both the ubiquity of the spectacle and the change in temporalities that the speed of access to images, information and goods has created, fostering impatience. The ubiquity of machines (our computers are machines) and robots questions the notion of humanity itself. Among the reactions to the surfeit of spectacle and the collapse of time, environmentalists and others have pointed in the direction of a 'transition' towards a simpler and slower-paced life, reconnecting with the life vs the spectacle issue, and sometimes engaging in retreat. The latest international academic effort at 'reading Debord', at the end of 2016 (Lebras and Guy) was published in the aptly-named *Frankenstein* series of its French publisher, in the wake of books on Luddism in France, radical ecology, the dematerialization of books, and so on. A similar phenomenon of surfeit has affected the spectacle of politics, with the growth of disengagement, and so on. Turning to Debord for description is thus natural.

But none of this addresses the issue of human beings and mankind achieving the status of 'subjects of history', which was at the heart of Debord's quest. At base level, the choice of the word spectacle by Debord rests on an opposition between passive watchers and active players, which is useful, both in its aristocratic or democratic versions, and in the study of their interaction. As we have seen, he wrote very little about labour and labour processes, never engaged in large-scale organizing, and only made incantatory calls for the surrection of workers' councils. If we really want to do something against 'the spectacle of free labour' and unite with other workers so that we can all become active players, the central issue is organization. Organizing workers in the digital era is a practical task that requires from us academics both participation in organizing, since we are workers, and theoretical work to understand the specificities of the new labour regimes that have emerged and which call for the development of appropriate organization forms.



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## CHAPTER 5

# The Spectacle of New Media: Addressing the Conceptual Nexus Between User Content and Valorization\*

Raffaele Sciortino and Steve Wright

Capitalism is a system of relationships, which go from inside to out, from outside to in, from above to below, and from below to above. Everything is relative, everything is in chains. Capitalism is a condition both of the world and of the soul (Franz Kafka, in Janouch 1971, 151–2).

### 1. Introduction

The 1960s were years of massive social unrest and theoretical innovation. It is now a half century since that time which saw, amongst other things, the appearance of some key texts aimed at deciphering the nature of modern capitalist social relations. From the moment of their publication, Mario Tronti's *Operai e capitale*, and in a different way the French collection *Lire le Capital*, inspired many in their efforts to understand capital, and how best to undermine it. In terms of immediate and wide-reaching impact, however, pride of

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place amongst these pivotal works must be awarded to Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, a book that was translated into nearly a dozen languages in the immediate aftermath of France's May '68 rebellion.

*The Society of the Spectacle* is a work that continues to fascinate, especially in today's Internet age. Nor does it seem a coincidence that, having been overshadowed by the defeat of the post-1968 wave of international struggles, Debord and his fellow Situationists were rediscovered precisely in the 1990s, a decade marked both by the collapse of the Soviet bloc, and the rise of the World Wide Web. While Debord himself died at the very moment that the Web began its ascent, his work has been cited by a range of commentators as a prescient account of a global capitalist order infused by online communication. As John Harris (2012) has argued:

when Debord writes about how 'behind the masks of total choice, different forms of the same alienation confront each other', I now think of social media, and the white noise of most online life. All told, the book is full of sentences that describe something simple, but profound: the way that just about everything that we consume – and, if we're not careful, most of what we do – embodies a mixture of distraction and reinforcement that serves to reproduce the mode of society and economy that has taken the idea of the spectacle to an almost surreal extreme.

Or as the former Situationist Timothy Clark (1998, x) once put it, 'the fact that Debord's imagining of other worlds shares so much with that of his opponents is potentially his imagining's strong point. It is what lets *The Society of the Spectacle* go on haunting the non-world of cyberspace.'

But things are not so cut and dried. It has rightly been pointed out that Debord does not simply conflate the spectacle with 'mass media'; instead, he seeks to draw attention to a system of social relations wherein 'direct experience and the determination of events by individuals themselves are replaced by a passive contemplation of images (which have, moreover, been chosen by other people)' (Jappe 1999, 6). Therefore, the spectacle is 'not a collection of images', but 'rather ... a social relationship between people, mediated by images' (Debord 1995, 12). In elaborating the mechanisms that permit the ongoing rule of capital in the modern world, Debord argues that 'the spectacle is a permanent opium war waged to make it impossible to distinguish goods from commodities, or true satisfaction from a survival that increases according to its own logic' (30). Viewed from this perspective, social media may well offer a critical instance within which to explore these complex border operations in the age of late capitalism. Crucially, this exploration turns on the question of the relationship online between production and consumption, between 'free activity' and capital's process of valorization and accumulation.

Just as the spectacle entails more than ‘mass media’, so platforms such as Facebook entail more than mass media in the traditional sense that we have understood the term. According to one interpretation

Facebook offers promotional agencies the promise of a renewal, a reframed set of relations, interfaces, and engagements with consumers. Social media are key in ongoing efforts to enchant consumers, consumers serially identified as in flight from the abstractions and alienations of modern consumer society and the market, and from traditional advertising as the most visible signature of and locus of consumer modernity and ‘promotional culture’ ... The phenomenon and various experiences of and in Facebook are concurrently intensive and banal, creative and atrophying, as if being fed a minute-by-minute mailshot of Guy Debord’s ‘society of the spectacle’ wrapped in an envelope of Michel de Certeau’s ‘everyday life’ (MacRury 2013, 370–1).

In our view, the specificity of social media, within the broader context of today’s ‘network capitalism’, lies in its ability to combine – economically, technologically, anthropologically – a new form of value appropriation through the free gift of users’ activity, enacted (above all, if not exclusively) within the sphere of their own social reproduction. In reflecting upon the terms of the debate over how social media captures value, we will also explore the extent to which Debord’s perspectives, as laid out in *The Society of the Spectacle*, continue to be useful for understanding what is new – and what on the contrary remains constant – within the process of capitalist accumulation.

## 2. Some Preliminary Thoughts on Debord

In presenting his understanding of the spectacle, Debord (1995, 15) seeks to address the meaning of capitalist domination in terms of *totality*.<sup>1</sup> Seemingly all-encompassing in its domain, the spectacle ‘covers the entire globe, basking in the perpetual warmth of its own glory’. As the second chapter of Debord’s book spells out in some detail, the reign of the spectacle in turn ‘corresponds’ to the commodity form’s ‘colonisation of life’: ‘commodities are now *all* that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity’ (29). In one of the best introductions to Debord’s work, Anselm Jappe (1999, 19–31) makes clear the debt here to *History and Class Consciousness*. In his classic 1923 text, Georg Lukács (1971, 10) asserts that the various specific components of society:

can really only be discerned in the context of the total historical process of their relation to society as a whole ... This dialectical conception of totality ... is the only method capable of understanding and reproducing reality.

In a similar fashion, Debord holds that only by grasping the totality of capitalist social relations can the proletariat hope *to destroy* the latter. Both writers also agree that only one class has the possibility of grasping the totality, given that the proletarian condition underpins capitalist society as a whole. Echoing Marx, Debord (1995, 154) concludes *The Society of the Spectacle* by heralding the unique status of the proletariat as ‘that class which is able to effect the dissolution of all classes’, and thus the dissolution of class society itself.

Jappe (1999, 18) is correct in noting that ‘the relevance of Debord’s thought lies in his having been amongst the first to interpret the present situation in the light of the Marxian theory of value.’ Nonetheless, it is also striking how little attention Debord pays – at least in *The Society of the Spectacle* – to the processes through which that value is generated in the first place. Instead, his focus is upon the ways in which the life of all individuals has become subordinate to the commodity and its logic:

In all its specific manifestations – news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment – the spectacle epitomises the prevailing model of social life. It is the omnipresent celebration of a choice already made in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice ... [that] governs almost all time spent outside the production process itself. (Debord 1995, 13).

On the other hand, as the following discussion of explanations concerning the production and/or extraction of value in and around social media makes clear, assuming Debord’s stance of totality carries the distinct advantage of raising fundamental questions about capitalist domination that might otherwise be all too easily overlooked. As we hope to show, there is a price to be paid if the circuit of value is read primarily through what we might call a ‘*Capital* Volume 1’ perspective, which interprets the activities of social media users as yet another moment in the immediate process of production. Doing so, we will argue, means overlooking that in order for capital to valorize itself, many human activities are necessary, not all of which take the form of wage labour. In this regard, to use the words of Jason W. Moore (2014, 38), ‘value works only to the extent that most work is not valued’. Grasping this means, therefore, taking up the perspective of totality championed by Debord, who in his own unique way chose to follow Marx (1981) in the critical exploration of ‘The Process of Capitalist Production as a Whole’.

Debord is explicit that the proletariat cannot be reduced to the waged (let alone productive workers) however they might be defined.<sup>2</sup> More than this, the totalization of the commodity form has now rendered crucial the sphere of social reproduction, in all its articulations. What Marx once had presupposed as a relatively neutral *given* is today posited by capitalist production itself as intrinsic to its very concept. As the extension of commodity fetishism through the mediation of images comes to bedeck all access to ‘reality’, disconnecting

subjects from their vital experience in the process, so the 'spectacle' encompasses the processes of social reproduction. The concrete phenomenology of this is evident all around us: the tendency to reduce experience to digitised images, within which it falls to networked computers to provide the 'social' dimension of life – a world seen rather than lived, in the sense of not being produced by subjects. This is a reality swallowed up by appearance, one wherein appearance becomes the only reality. So-called 'consumer society' thus corresponds to the total commodification of social life. In other words, it is the sphere of 'separate' human activity that the spectacle unifies, albeit as isolated moments: alienated production is overturned into a compensatory sociality through a 'controlled reintegration' (Debord 1995, 172) that revolves around exchange value as the new use value. Here the prospects of survival are increased, even as those of life itself are diminished.

### 3. The Debate Around Value Production in Social Media and its Implications

In the past decade, social media use has become a regular practice for hundreds of millions of individuals. Take Facebook, for example, a platform that can currently boast far more than one billion global 'active users' (Statista 2016).<sup>3</sup> In turn, this level of engagement forms the basis of the corporation's enormous wealth. Back in early 2016, *Fortune* magazine reported that Facebook had surpassed Exxon to become the fourth most valuable firm in the world, while the personal wealth of Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg alone was estimated by *Forbes* in mid-2016 as nearly US\$55 billion (Zillman 2016; Forbes 2016).

If there is clearly more to social media than this particular firm, Facebook nonetheless offers a pertinent instance for considering the relationship between online platforms and valorization. As it stands, various explanations have been offered as to the source of this massive accumulation of capital over the past decade. For those committed in some way to developing the critique of political economy, debates concerning the basis of Facebook's power as a capital have been lively. In the process, quite different positions have been advanced. For example, according to Michel Bauwens (2012), Facebook creates a 'pooling of sharing and collaboration around their platform – and by enabling, framing and 'controlling' that activity, they create a pool of attention. It is this pool of attention which is sold to advertisers'. Assuming a somewhat different stance, Jakob Rigi and Robert Prey (2015, 396) nonetheless agree with Bauwens that it is as advertising-derived revenue that the source of the corporation's wealth can best be grasped: "The money paid by advertisers to media is perhaps best understood as an exchange of rent for hope: the potential of generating greater future sales."

In contrast, the most ambitious argument about the relationship between Facebook and value production has been advanced by Christian Fuchs, whose

approach has the added advantage of seeking to grapple with the labouring performed by users at the site. In his 2014 book *Digital Labour and Marx* and elsewhere, Fuchs insists that there are a number of ways in which this activity is transformed into value for the firm: generating 'sociality' alongside 'data as commodity' that can be sold to advertisers, and in the process creating 'value in the form of online time, that is, labour time' (Fuchs 2014b, 4). Indeed:

The more time a user spends on Facebook, the more data is generated about him/her that is offered as a commodity to advertising clients. Exploitation happens in the commodification and production process (Fuchs 2014a, 276).

Fuchs concludes that *because* 'Facebook labour creates commodities and profits ... It is therefore productive labour' (263). At the same time, this is an unusual kind of productive labour, in that it is

unpaid work ... unpaid workers create more surplus value and profit than in a situation in which their labour would be conducted by regular labour that is paid. One hundred per cent of their labour time is surplus labour time, which allows capitalists to generate extra surplus value and extra profits (119).

In what is certainly his most distinctive line of argument, the merits or otherwise of which readers can determine for themselves, Fuchs (2015: 114) holds that:

the labour Facebook users perform enters the capital accumulation process of other companies in the realm of circulation, where commodities C' are transformed into money capital M' (C' – M'). Facebook users' labour is an online equivalent of transport work – their online activities help transporting use-value promises to themselves. Marx considered transport workers as productive circulation workers. Facebook users are productive online circulation workers who organise the communication of advertising ideologies on the Internet.

So far, we have examined these readings of social media's relation with accumulation in a way that is separated and juxtaposed, rather than one that is able to encompass the capital relation as a whole, including its subjective dimension. Assuming the latter standpoint, we would argue that readings such as Fuchs', for example, treat total capital as simply the sum of individual enterprises, with profit extraction determined at the level of the single firm. As a consequence, they tend to miss the qualitative leap in perspective made possible when matters are considered in terms of systemic reproduction, starting with the redistribution of surplus value amongst 'capitals' themselves (Caffentzis 1990).



At the same time, readings that focus upon the mechanism of rent are able to approximate the heart of the matter, but tend to overlook both the peculiarities of the new forms of value appropriation in an online environment, and the human activities that underlie them (Sciortino 2016). Part of the problem is that this phenomenon is relatively new. More than this, the analytical recognition of the various dimensions involved (whether sociological, or cultural, or 'economic' in a strict sense), entails a given categorical reading of the value form, alongside a given way of reviewing the passage 'from the abstract to the concrete' within the different efforts to grasp the various but intertwined moments of capitalist totality.

Our thesis is that *the specificity of social media, within the broader framework of networked capitalism, lies in combining – economically, technologically, anthropologically – a new form of appropriation of value from elsewhere (rent, with partly new characteristics) together with the free gift of users' gratuitous activity, carried out (above all, but not exclusively) within the sphere of their own social reproduction* (Wright, Armano, Sciortino 2014). Without denying that this is a complex question, wherein different levels of capital's circuit are intertwined and often superimposed, we believe that analysis must not lose sight of the reality that the prevalent business model stems from advertising. As highlighted by a range of authors who likewise assume the perspective of total social reproduction (in particular, Robinson 2015, Frayssé 2015), advertising is based upon the transfer of value from other sectors of capital. More precisely, it is based on a part of surplus value originally produced by industrial capital and turned over, as the *faux frais* of production, to commercial circuits, which then transfer it in turn, under the guise of rent, to the owners of social media platforms.

It is not our intention in this chapter to offer any sustained argument in support of the thesis outlined above. Instead, we wish to subject some heuristic hypotheses to critical discussion, by drawing attention to a series of nodes implicit in our approach. Having said that, it would certainly be useful to develop our thesis further, preferably in the form of a (necessarily collective) militant enquiry – although what that might mean in the context of Debord's 'society of the spectacle' is itself worthy of discussion. For now, we offer three avenues for future exploration.

In the first place, the transfer of value to proprietary social media, primarily through the commercial capital of advertising agencies, is a process made possible by two general conditions. On the one hand, we have the Internet as the organization and intertwining of digital computers, through which operates a peculiar form of automation. This is what Zuboff (1988) called 'informat-ing,' a process that not only tallies the data generated through past actions and transactions but, thanks to the recursive nature of algorithms, transforms such data into information that can support the decision making of those who control social media platforms. It is this that permits, amongst other things, the profiling of users' metadata, and therefore the provision of targeted advertising

spaces. On the other hand, the supply of new enclosed Internet spaces is based on the attraction of users to free services that facilitate the formation of online social communities. It is this expropriation of free gifts exchanged online between users that makes it possible to suck in value from other capitalist sectors in the form of rent. At this point we can note, in passing, how Debord was able to anticipate, starting from an analysis of the totalisation of the capitalist social relation, the tendency towards a particular form of sociality. This is a sociality aimed at integrating within the system individuals who are '*isolated together*': 'the generalized use of receivers of the spectacle's messages ensures that his isolation is filled with the dominant images – images that indeed attain their full force only by virtue of this isolation' (Debord 1995, 122). Here, then, is a potential that 'only' awaits its adequate technology: further proof, against any kind of technological determinism, that social relations prepare the conditions required for technological development, rather than vice versa.

The peculiarity of this enclosure, and the activity of online users bound up with it, are the elements that most demand closer scrutiny. While these have drawn far less attention from most of those who support the 'rent' thesis (and probably deem it 'extra-economic'), they have instead caught the eye of two groups:

- a) some *Capital Volume 1*-style 'workerists' (who at least have the merit of addressing the activity of users, even if they equate the latter too readily with productive labour);
- b) those 'post-workerists' who read it as 'free labour', tossing it into the indeterminate cauldron of the multitude's cooperation, which is presumably generated in turn autonomously from capital.<sup>4</sup>

It is precisely on this terrain that the question becomes evident of the ever-greater entwining of capital's total circuit with the 'circuit' of the proletariat's reproduction, and its consequences for the constitution of the latter's subjectivity. There are a number of reasons why users can themselves be 'used' by proprietary social media platforms. To start with, those human activities that are bound up with social reproduction – of which online sociality is one form, together with care work, education, and other pursuits – have for a long time been subordinated to processes of 'labourfication'.<sup>5</sup> This term refers to the tendency to 'industrialize' such activities by rendering them, in the concrete forms through which they are distributed and organised, analogous to industrial labour (which in turn, as is known, has been notably transformed by processes of digitization, flexibilization etc.), whilst extinguishing their 'artisanal' forms of conception, formation and execution. On the other hand, and as a consequence of this, they can be subordinated to processes that subsume them to 'tele-combined', networked machinery – that is, to the digital codification of vital experience and to algorithmic mechanisms, as every activity of consumption in a broad sense tends towards subsumption. In this aspect too,

the spectacle as understood in Debord's sense has been enormously magnified. Nor does the process seem to be anywhere near completion, although this by no means necessarily entails the immediate equation of all such 'labourfied' reproductive activities with labour that is directly productive of value, or of their products/services with commodities containing value.<sup>6</sup> What the process of 'labourfication' does do, however, is to throw new light on the classic question of the relation between the formal and real subsumption of labour under capital, extending this to reproductive activities, even as various digital means act to blur any clear distinction between direct and indirect control on the part of capital.

In the second place, reference to Marx's theory of rent, being grounded in a reading of capital's reproduction as a whole, is fundamental for interpreting accumulation processes within social media. At the same time, it is also true that this type of rent, far from following familiar and established forms, presents new aspects that demand further scrutiny. In effect, we find ourselves before second-order enclosures that are already human, social constructions, woven together with infrastructural capital and subjected to ongoing technological innovation. In such circumstances, the 'space' offered by advertising as a source of rent needs to catch the attention of a human brain that is inserted in an environment combined with computers and other means fully subsumed to capital. Here it is worth recognizing that proprietary social media themselves make capital investments with the aim not of 'production', but rather of establishing an enclosure from which rent can be drawn. This occurs, on the one hand, through the largely free appropriation of the products of highly qualified 'general' cognitive labour, that develops algorithms and software. While being privatized (that is, appropriated by capitalist enterprises), this labour does not stand in relation to abstract labour time, which means that rather than produce value, it becomes a free gift for capital that in turn permits new enclosures (Verzola 2004; Lohoff 2007). On the other hand, the 'maintenance' labour provided by waged knowledge workers, whose programs process metadata automatically generated by users' activities, allows social media platforms like Facebook to reduce their costs, as well as to better target prospective markets for individual advertisers. In any case, the fundamental novelty here lies in the spaces for rent generation that are nurtured by the peculiar reproductive activities of users: activities that are more than mere survival, as attested in a contradictory way both by the level reached today by what Marx once called 'the social individual', and by the latter's subsumption to the 'spectacle'.

A third node concerns the intimate relationship between the high concentrations of media-based capital online, and the incredible stock market valuations of the leading social media companies. While we lack the space here to address this question at length, it is clear that this matter cannot be critically addressed without recourse to Marx's category of 'fictitious capital' (Goldner 2012). According to the more considered Marxist readings of this phenomenon, 'fictitious capital' is not some 'speculative' outgrowth, but instead the

new norm of capitalist accumulation in a phase more commonly defined as 'neoliberal', closely linked not only to the intermeshing of stock markets and central banks (like the US Federal Reserve), but also to geopolitical dynamics (as evidenced, for example, by the cooperation displayed in the Middle East and elsewhere between social media and the soft power of US imperialism). From this point of view, it becomes impossible to separate the 'parasitic' aspect of rent by counterposing it to the presumably 'healthy' dimension of productive labour and profit.

In conclusion, a critical analysis of social media confirms that reading capital as a fetishized class relation makes it possible to thematize both capital's systemic reproduction and the social reproduction of the proletariat. This is so not simply in the way that the two converge (the subsumption not just of the commodity labour power, but the tendency to subsume all activities to capital, without necessarily reducing them all to productive wage labour), but also in the way in which, by doing so, terrains of contradictions and potential antagonisms are constituted. Our interpretation of Debord hopes to offer a reading that challenges the appearance of an 'integrated spectacle' that holds sway over us all. It does this by understanding that not every commodity has a value, that not every human activity necessary for capitalist accumulation can be reduced to productive labour,<sup>7</sup> and that capital is impelled to reduce socially necessary labour time to a minimum (while persisting and even magnifying itself as measure of wealth). All of this indicates that production based upon value and capital has determinant limits, and that paradoxically these limits increase to the extent that the 'spectacle' is amplified and intensified – without in the last instance expanding accumulation, other than in ways that are transitory and 'fictitious' (if no less real for all that). In this way, it may be worthwhile to return our critical attention to a range of themes expressed by the most interesting and radical currents of the 1960s and 1970s (spectacle, total capital, social factory, socialized worker), while avoiding any false antithesis between the 'iron cage' of a totalized wage relation at one extreme, or the idea of a proletariat that is already fully autonomous 'for itself' at the other.

#### 4. Notes Towards a Conclusion. Against Impotence: Promises and Limits

Certainly, we do not wish to overlook the weaker aspects of Debord's analysis. Amongst other things, his work betrays a certain 'young-Hegelianism' that, much like the 'young' Lukács, too neatly counterposes subject/object and production/passivity. The most problematic features of Debord's critique, however, lie in his dependence upon the categories of class consciousness and false consciousness (which, moreover, are overwhelmed by the processes of the spectacle), along with his undervaluing of any possible self-activation of subjects even within a fetishized world. And while Debord himself was obviously never able

to confront the matter, we also need to consider the implications for his analysis that are raised by the various transformations currently under way on the front of production. Nonetheless, in Debord the constitution of subjectivity as subordinate but also potentially antagonistic, is thematized at the overall level of the social relations of production and reproduction of life under capital, well beyond every factoryist reductionism (something that was widespread in the 1960s, for example within *operaismo*), beyond the merely additive logic of cultural studies, and also against readings à la Foucault in which forms of submission are separated from the trajectory of the value form and the struggle against the latter. Furthermore, in emphasizing the importance of the ambit of social (albeit 'spectacularized') reproduction as the other side of a fragmented and alienated sphere of production, Debord poses, at the centre of humanity's challenges, the node of constructing activities that are *immediately* social ('a mass of new practices ... are seeking their theory' – Internationale Situationniste 1963, 10). Last but not least, the proletariat, understood in a broad sense, remains the potential dissolution of social separation (the task determines the figure/subject), a dissolution that can only occur simultaneously in both the spheres of production and social reproduction (which are in any case increasingly enmeshed).<sup>8</sup> *Since this process entails the decomposition of the old type of class society, moments of dissolution and of reconstruction will likewise be inextricably entwined in the revolutions to come.*

## Notes

\* We would like to thank the editors, Christian Fuchs, and an unidentified reviewer for their comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

<sup>1</sup> It would be worthwhile, on another occasion, to critically assess Debord's reading of totality in light of the work of Camatte (1988).

<sup>2</sup> See also Dyer-Witheford 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Statista 2016 – <http://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>, which defines active users as 'those which have logged in to Facebook during the last 30 days'.

<sup>4</sup> It would be useful to compare these positions, both of which commonly find inspiration in Negri's 1970s thesis of the *operazio sociale*, with debates from that decade concerning money and class composition, given that this was the moment when the majority – but not all – *operaisti* chose to abandon the analytical link between value, production and measure (Wright 2013). It would be equally useful to explore the extent to which this abandonment (touched upon, but not discussed at length, in Wright 2002) helped to determine the subsequent flaws that lie at the heart of so much of post-workerist analysis (Formenti 2011; Wright 2009).

<sup>5</sup> For these concepts, see Alquati (1989, 2000). In the 1960s, Romano Alquati was one of the chief theorists and researchers within Italian workerism.

Creator of ‘militant co-research’ and the concept of class composition, Alquati went beyond that approach, identifying the passage to a new capitalist phase that from the 1980s onwards he analysed as a ‘hyper-industrial society’, characterised by the extension – through the involvement of the cognitive dimensions of human activity combined with new forms of fixed capital – of processes of industrialisation within the activities of social reproduction. An anthology of his writings will be published in 2017 or thereabouts by Verso Press. If nothing else, Alquati’s work suggests that so-called Italian autonomist Marxism is more nuanced and complex than might otherwise be thought based on what has been translated into English to date.

- <sup>6</sup> Obviously this does not mean that reproductive activities cannot be reduced to wage labour *if* they are exchanged with capital (as in fact already occurs for various types of caring and education-related labour) and as such are organised within an enterprise (in Marx’s sense: an independent private producer whose product is not immediately social, but becomes such if and only if it is exchanged on the market and realises its ‘value’). Against this, users of social media directly exchange social experiences without *for now* objectifying these first as a commodity – even if, on the other hand, this takes place in an increasingly ‘industrialized’ environment that could certainly be the prelude to their complete subsumption under capital.
- <sup>7</sup> Far from arguing that only labour that is productive in a capitalist sense is important for both accumulation and the struggle against it, Marx (1976, 644) reminds us that ‘To be a productive worker is therefore not a piece of luck, but a misfortune.’
- <sup>8</sup> Along with Jarrett (2015), an excellent collection of recent reflections concerning social reproduction can be found at Viewpoint Magazine (2015).

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## CHAPTER 6

# Spectacle and the Singularity: Debord and the ‘Autonomous Movement of Non-Life’ in Digital Capitalism

Clayton Rosati

*‘Thus it becomes – money. Illi unum consilium habent et virtutem et potestatem suam bestiae tradunt. Et ne quis possit emere aut vendere, nisi qui habet characterem aut nomen bestiae aut numerum nominis ejus.’ (Apocalypse.)’—Karl Marx, Capital, I, 1867.<sup>1</sup>*

### 1. Digital Capitalism and Apocalypse

The spectacular character of technology in capitalist society, which has always seemed to be a force unto itself, has reached new heights in recent years and demands that we contemplate the self-movement of objects we make. In May 2014, a group of renowned physicists, including Stephen Hawking, did an unusual thing among their lot: they wrote a review of a Hollywood blockbuster—Morgan Freeman and Johnny Depp’s, *Transcendence*. In it, Hawking, et al. warn of the dangers of artificial intelligence (AI) and what has come to be known

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as the ‘Singularity’—uncontrollable technological self-enhancement. The scientists describe, in the most reasonable terms, a potential digital apocalypse:

So, facing possible futures of incalculable benefits and risks, the experts are surely doing everything possible to ensure the best outcome, right? Wrong. If a superior alien civilisation sent us a message saying, ‘We’ll arrive in a few decades,’ would we just reply, ‘OK, call us when you get here – we’ll leave the lights on’? Probably not – but this is more or less what is happening with AI. Although we are facing potentially the best or worst thing to happen to humanity in history, little serious research is devoted to these issues outside non-profit institutes... All of us should ask ourselves what we can do now to improve the chances of reaping the benefits and avoiding the risks (Hawking, et al. 1 May 2014).

More alarmist is a BBC story from the following December titled, ‘Stephen Hawking warns artificial intelligence could end mankind,’ in which Hawking is quoted as saying: ‘Humans, who are limited by slow biological evolution, couldn’t compete, and would be superseded.’ And, in a tabloid *Mirror* story, Logan Streondj, ‘a Canadian tech guru and sci-fi writer’ speculates about the potential *Terminator*-style war between machines and humans (Hamill 1 July 2016). To many, the Singularity represents the coming obsolescence of human beings and their liquidation at the hand of their own creations.

Another version of techno-apocalypse puts human conflict back at its centre. Strangely more alarming (because it seems less far-fetched), the *Independent* (2016) reported that because of AI and nukes, ‘Future war with Russia or China would be ‘extremely lethal and fast,’ US generals warn.’ In this case, we can see more clearly how technologies become mediations of and pressures on existing social conditions, in this case reviving hibernating Cold War panic spasms in the process. Whether *Terminator* or *War Games*, the last three years has seen its share of robot apocalypse press. Most of the ensuing debate between the AI optimists and doomsday preppers revolves around these scenarios: humans on a seemingly-avoidable-yet-inevitable course toward their own extinction via technology.

A recent *Vice* article sees it slightly differently. Thinking of the optimists’ best-case scenario they ask: ‘what if machines take over the world in a good way? No more punching the clock; instead, artificial intelligence would do the dirty work, and people would be free to paint and climb mountains and perform one-man shows about being raised by robots’ (Wagstaff 25 April 2016). But even this ends badly. Drawing on Tim Wu’s critique of what he calls ‘the sofalarity,’ they find pessimism in this utopia: ‘Most people remember the Pixar film *WALL-E* for the adorable robot love story, but it also contains a dystopian vision of humanity. Human beings suck down soft drinks while sitting in hovering recliners, from which they chat on video screens and watch ads for products from a company called ‘Buy n Large.’ Imagined within our current

consumer economy, *Vice* argues that the apocalypse is not ‘that the Cylons will destroy humanity; it’s that we won’t be able to pry ourselves off the couch, Portlandia-style, while watching the Cylons on *Battlestar Galactica*’ (Wagstaff 25 April 2016).<sup>2</sup> Even as work disappears, the consumption demanded by our economy persists. *Alas, it really is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.*

All these scenarios represent a crucial set of constitutive tensions within digital capitalism: between its violence and its engrossing pleasure (including the pleasure of violence), between its extraordinary abundance and its pronounced austerity and struggle for resources, between its unparalleled liberation of human communication and its profound movement towards authoritarianism, between its clear scientific capacity to transform nature for human benefit and its oppressive sense of inevitable apocalypse. But the speculations about AI also take the present social context for granted, as the *natural* – rather than political – environment in which AI and all machines are developed and utilized. From the Singularity to the ‘Sofalarity,’ the extent to which the drama of digital apocalypse is the logical conclusion of class society (including its constitutive drives towards absolute social efficiency and fantasies of master races) remains a question unasked and presents us with a moment to interrogate not technology but the politics of autonomous objects and alienation in capitalist life.

Of course, an attack of the Cylons was not at all what Marx had in mind in his many quips about the abuses of living labour by ‘dead labour,’ his euphemism for machines. Neither is it what he meant in his descriptions of capital as a ‘live monster’ that enslaves and torments its producers. But the AI panic is a useful way into thinking through the capitalist mode of production and its unity of productive forces and social norms of production. Virtually the only mention of capitalism in the context of the development and future of AI are in the many reports of the technologies, promises for future ‘ROI’ – return on investments.<sup>3</sup> In these contexts, Guy Debord’s 1967 manifesto, *The Society of the Spectacle* (SOS) can contribute to a critique of digital capitalism, the latest permutation of what he calls ‘the autocratic reign of the market economy’ (2011, 2). Few have so profoundly captured, condensed, and adapted the Marxian project. Specifically, Debord’s notion of ‘the autonomous movement of non-life’ offers us an important lens to understand contemporary capitalism and to find new ways of understanding ‘spectacle’ in the process (1995, #2).

This short essay explores what many call the rise of the machines in the context of capitalism’s tendency towards impoverishment, autocracy, and war. And, for our world, autonomous machines and panics about the Singularity are crucial elements of the contemporary spectacle. The central struggle of digital capitalism is not (yet) between machines and humans but between social life and its forms of mediation, which *already* – and have for so long – subjugate humans as they provide for their liberation. And, as the AI panic brings into focus, the fate of the world depends on the outcome of that struggle. Below I will discuss how Debord’s spectacle and with it his reference to objects

and especially images as ‘autonomous’ help us better theorize the rise of the machines and digital capitalism. To do this, we must explore the spectacle, not only as a euphemism for mass media, but as capital that demands the autocracy of property, the creation of surplus populations, and, which grows for itself, not for the life of the society that creates it. Subsequently, we will explore Debord’s critical engagement with the politics of human obsolescence and ‘surplus’ people and how this can be extended to AI, the rise of the machines, the Singularity, or some other post-human apocalypse. Lastly, this essay explores the struggle against this bleak future through Debord’s celebration of the revolutionary ‘worker’s council’ and its contemporary quandaries of double agents, bots and trolls. This essay’s reading of Debord’s spectacle approaches its concepts (and puzzles) through the Marxian tradition, against capitalism entirely, not just its media forms. Most importantly, the essay focuses on aspects of Debord’s critique that urge us, within the anti-capitalist struggle, to move beyond ‘who is producing value’ to ‘who controls the economy,’ and then beyond that to a principle of ‘optimal development’<sup>4</sup> for all – a principle of inclusion, not a scenario of extinction. Extinction by Cylon apocalypse is, in many ways, the pinnacle of the spectacle in a sense missed by the Sofalarity. But, to understand why, we must dive deeper into Debord’s critique and the spectacle itself.

## 2. Spectacular Theory and the ‘Autonomous Image’

Narratives of the Cylon apocalypse shock many of our conversations about digital capitalism – usually regarding information access, the transformation of privacy, and so forth – by pulling them back to the raw exercise of power. Most often, the spectacle is described in terms of distraction or ‘bread and circuses.’ In this context, the spectacle is the bearer of the ‘Sofalarity,’ not the *Terminator* or Cylon apocalypse.<sup>5</sup> Debord’s revolutionary, anti-capitalist manifesto for human self-determination is most often seen as an analysis of distraction, bread and circuses, or propaganda and simple ‘false consciousness.’<sup>6</sup> Frequently, in fact, it seems as if readers never make it past the second chapter to his explicit critiques of anarchism, Stalinism, and the like. This is part of a bigger problem in critical theory, a skewed understanding of key concepts like ‘reification,’ ‘fetishism of commodities,’ and ‘capital,’ such that they are unequipped to be read towards a holistic, anti-capitalist struggle for freedom or optimal development. Often, siloed media-centric readings turn Debord’s critique of capitalism into a problem of perspective or reductive mesmerism. But, for a prying reader, the SOS contains a far more sweeping – and militant – critique and proposition, which are often missed in spectacular fashion. Such flattened readings of a Marxian critique of ‘ideology,’ must be put in conversation with the more tangible and practical-political conditions also described in the SOS and in Debord’s other work. This flattening is endemic in much of the interpretation of SOS, where the problem of the spectacle is a problem of thought, of ignorance, of

individual practice. Often, the spectacle becomes a caricature of the Marxian paradigm, read through a caricature of the Frankfurt School's critique of consumer culture.

Take, for example, these comments from a 2012 episode of *The Guardian's* 'Big Ideas' podcast (Walker, 2012): 'If we live in the age of media saturation, and a sense in which even the most intimate parts of our lives have partly been commodified, [...] sold back to us...even the way that we relate to each other, our very understanding of social life and so on, has been so commodified that it's no longer authentic, it's not our own work, it's something that we look at in the spectacle and we sort of draw into our own existences and that's the level of alienation that [Debord's] talking about.' Beyond begging what it means to be 'commodified' or 'authentic,' this presents a one-dimensional reading of the Marxian platitudes that 'the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas' or the economic 'base' determines the cultural 'superstructure.' Here, the spectacle is something like a hypodermic needle, injecting us with ideology or some *Matrix*-style brainwash into an otherwise pure and sovereign individual.<sup>7</sup> And, subsequently, resistance to the dominance of images and loss of real lived experience is theorized in the most tragic ways, read mostly through the *dérive* and *détournement*—as *carnival against capital*.

To be sure, Debord's spectacle must be updated to include Internet propaganda bots, consumer data, and all the new armies of political-economic double agents, leakers, false leakers, and hackers. But, further, what happens when ideologies of 'commodification' become autonomous, Cylons, bent on human extinction?<sup>8</sup> To a large extent this 'false consciousness' reading of spectacle maps onto a truncated (but entrenched) reading of the 'fetishism of commodities,' understood simply as either an irrational attachment to objects or a veil that shrouds the real relations of production and exploitation. Simon During combines both, for instance, here in editorial comments on Raymond Williams:

In a metaphor which goes back to Marx's belief that capitalism makes commodities 'fetishes,' for Williams advertising is 'magic' because it transforms commodities into glamorous signifiers (turning a car into a sign of masculinity, for instance) and these signifiers present an imaginary, in the sense of unreal, world. Most of all, capitalism makes us forget how much work and suffering went into the production of commodities (2007, 411).<sup>9</sup>

Here, the focus on media consumption misses an analysis of what is essential in capitalist society itself and what drives its development into scarcity, famine, war, and perhaps apocalypse. Yet, there are other features of the SOS, namely its (coded or not) engagement with the material conditions of the Cold War, of capital and money, of time and urban planning, and the techniques of self-government. In this section, we will explore specific tensions within the SOS itself. And, we will focus on a different reading of the spectacle, one attached to

a crucial part of the Marxian tradition, reading ‘images’ through the analysis of the historical form of value (money and wages) and capital’s self-movement—the ‘live monster that is fruitful and multiplies’ (Marx 2011, 217). It is here, in the ‘autonomy’ of objects, where an analysis of spectacle and AI apocalypse gets off the ground.

### 2.1 *From Fetish, to Reification, to ‘The Autonomous Image’*

To get from Debord to the rise of the machines, we must carefully unpack the foundations of his spectacle. What is the relationship between spectacle and autonomous machines? In Thesis #2 of SOS, Debord presents us with an ambiguity. And, how we interpret it colours our reading of the rest of the book: ‘The tendency toward the specialization of images-of-the-world finds its highest expression in the world of the *autonomous image*, where deceit deceives itself. The spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of non-life’ [*my emphasis*].

Moving forward, we encounter what seems like a friction between an intuitive reading of spectacle-as-mesmerism and much of what comes later. For instance, the wording of Theses #3 and #5 seem to rub against each other. In #3, Debord describes the spectacle as the ‘locus of illusion and false consciousness.’ Yet #5 changes direction, opposing a reading simply of ‘deliberate distortion’ and demanding we instead contemplate the spectacle as a ‘world view transformed into an objective force’: ‘The spectacle *cannot be understood as an abuse of the world of vision, as a product of the techniques of mass dissemination of images*. It is, rather, a *Weltanschauung* which has become actual, materially translated...’ (#5, emphasis mine). How should we interpret ‘images’ and ‘mediation’ in SOS?

If Debord is suggesting that the ‘autonomous image’ is made up of ‘consumerist fantasies’ that conquer our consciousness by their own volition, we have something quite problematic and analytically deflated by resistant consumption and readings. Or, maybe we simply write it off as poetry. Yet, Georg Lukács’ influence on Debord’s thinking is clear in his development of Marx’s fetishism of commodities through the concept of ‘reification’ (see Jappe 1999). In this context, ‘mediation’ refers not to problems of thought alone but to the broader material context of the capitalist processes of production and exchange: ‘mechanisation makes of [workers] isolated abstract atoms whose work no longer brings them together directly and organically; it becomes mediated to an increasing extent exclusively by the abstract laws of the mechanism which imprisons them’ (Lukács 1972, 90). For Lukács, the separation of social activity and its mediation creates something qualitatively different than the sum of its constituent parts, ‘man’s own activity, his own labour becomes something objective and independent of him, something that controls him by virtue of an autonomy alien to man’ (1972, 87). From the effects of the division of labour

and mechanization, he explains the ‘objective’ *and* ‘subjective’ aspects of that ‘autonomy’ and its subjugation of social life. But, in the prevailing readings of the spectacle, we rarely get a sense of those constitutive ‘objective’ arrangements of things, those things that are both the product of and the limits and pressures on thought and consciousness – the matter and material arrangements of class struggle.

So, from Lukács, what other ‘images’ might Debord be picturing? Marx reminds us that ‘every commodity is a symbol, since, in so far as it is value, it is only the material envelope of the human labour spent upon it’ and money is the universal equivalent among them all (Marx 1992, 94). ‘[T]he spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point where it becomes image’ (#34, emphasis original). More specifically, we might see the ‘autonomous image’ as a not-so-coded reference to Marx’s description of the ‘self-expansion’ of capital. In fact, the ‘autonomous’ movement of society’s alienated products is Marx’s extension and critique of Smith’s and Ricardo’s labour theories of value and his turning of Hegel’s idealist progress of History on its head. Capital is not just wealth but, as David Harvey summarizes, ‘value in motion’ (1982, 71). For Marx, it is the (apparent) *self*-movement of commodities, congealed human labour, and thus, symbols of value that founds his critique: ‘By turning his money into commodities that serve as the material elements of a new product, and as factors in the labour-process, by incorporating living labour with their dead substance, the capitalist at the same time converts value, i.e., past, materialised, and dead labour into capital, into value big with value, a live monster...’ (Marx 2011, 217). If prevailing understandings of the spectacle tend to focus on people’s captivation by media and entertainment, flattening that critique to media alone takes Debord’s work out of the most important contributions of Marxian interrogations of political economy: the critique of capital’s ‘self-expansion’.

## 2.2 ‘Another facet of money’: Capital and Autocracy

The most tepid of the AI debates focus on whether AI will create mass unemployment (Manjoo and Bowers 2011), much as previous forms of automation reduced the amount of necessary labor for early nineteenth century weaving (Marx 1992) or 1980s and 90s auto manufacturing. However, without getting deeper into Debord’s critique of images and mediation, we cannot fully grasp why the Marxian project has always rejected automation as the cause of unemployment and its corollary immiseration. Marx’s critical point was not simply that people created value through labour or even that people struggle over the surpluses of that labour. But, instead, part of what connects Marx’s investigations, from his 1844 notebooks to *Capital, Volume 3*, is the revelation of how value becomes trapped in the commodity form. Thus, while we may find money across a long history of human activity, only within capitalism does it take on the particular function with wage-labour and interest-bearing capital to create



the process that drives capital as a perpetual growth machine. Only within capitalism does the medium of exchange and its metamorphosis into commodities and back (+ *interest*) take on a purpose of its own: *growth*. In Debord's words:

The spectacle is another facet of money, which is the abstract general equivalent of all commodities. But whereas money in its familiar form has dominated society as the representation of universal equivalence, that is, of the exchangeability of diverse goods whose uses are not otherwise compatible, the spectacle in its full development is money's modern aspect; in the spectacle, the totality of the commodity world is visible in one piece, as the general equivalent of whatever society as a whole can be and do. The spectacle is money for contemplation only, for here the totality of use has already been bartered for the totality of abstract representation (#49).<sup>10</sup>

Pushing past a focus only on media and distraction, the SOS pulls us deeper into the Marxian trajectory: 'As it accumulates, capital spreads out to the periphery, where it assumes the form of tangible objects. Society in its length and breadth becomes capital's faithful portrait' (#50). The spectacle can be seen as both the prevailing phenomenal form of social activity and wealth embodied in money, interest and economic growth. And, while we might focus on who has more wealth or who is exploited in production, a less travelled path in this line of thinking is how the circulation of commodities *as capital* dominates collective social activity and its potential, even though we produce that process over and over. So, an era of unemployment, coinciding with intense automation and AI, is not caused by the technologies but by the prevailing form of value.

Marx's early observations on money, in his reading of James Mill, for instance, help put Debord's references into a context beyond mass media or commercial culture: 'The essence of money is not, in the first place, that property is alienated in it, but that the *mediating activity* or movement, the *human*, social act by which man's [sic] products mutually complement one another, is *estranged* from man and becomes the attribute of money, a *material thing* outside man.' Marx continues: 'Owing to this *alien mediator*—instead of man himself being the mediator for man—man regards his will, his activity and his relation to other men as a power independent of him and them. His slavery, therefore, reaches its peak' (1975, 212). If Debord follows Marx in this way, then his critique (and definition) of the spectacle – and with it, his references to 'passivity' and 'contemplation' – is not simply a question of society enthralled by advertising and consumerist messages but rather, society enslaved by the forms of its mutual exchange and made to serve its own product, capital. Emphatically, Marx expounds 'It is clear that this *mediator* now becomes a *real God*, for the mediator is the *real power* over what it mediates to me. Its cult becomes an end in itself' (1975, 212). In the spectacle, we can see this 'cult' of money as part of the lived experience of contemporary capitalism. Already, well before the age of



Cylons and AI, objects dominate the social activity that creates them because of the forms that mediate creation.

### 3. Pseudonature, or the Autonomous Image in Digital Capitalism

If the spectacle, as a mediating image, is ‘money for contemplation only’, characterized by its ‘autonomous movement’, what is it as an element of digital capitalism, or for that matter, the constantly looming Cylon apocalypse? To capture a similar specificity, Georg Lukács explains: ‘we must be quite clear in our minds that commodity fetishism is a *specific* problem of our age, the age of modern capitalism’ (1972, 84). For Lukács capitalism is the historical epoch where the vast social interconnections are objectified and rationalized, ‘reified’. Here, ‘the commodity become[s] crucial for the subjugation of men’s consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression and for their attempts to comprehend the process or to rebel against its disastrous effects and liberate themselves from servitude to the ‘second nature’ so created’ (1972, 86). This concept of nature, and servitude to it, are crucial to understanding Debord’s spectacle. And, within capitalist ‘second nature,’ the threat of human extinction from our own powers begins to take further shape. Debord argues that the expansion of economic power, the development of wage labour and the wealth it created solved the ‘initial problem’ of natural scarcity. But, this historical shift continually recreated the problem of survival at ever-higher levels:

Economic growth has liberated societies from the natural pressures that forced them into an immediate struggle for survival; but they have not yet been liberated from their liberator. The commodity’s *independence* has spread to the entire economy it now dominates. This economy has transformed the world, but it has merely transformed it into a world dominated by the economy. The pseudonature within which human labour has become alienated demands that such labor remain forever *in its service...* (#40).

Through the wage labour system, finance and interest-bearing capital, rent – and the whole subsequent farce of hedge funds, and so on – all efforts to transcend this nature lead back to it; money like weather, determining our fortunes. And, in Lukács’ words, *this* spectacle must have *objective* as well as subjective attributes. In the society of the spectacle, the state constantly represses self-rule – what Hardt and Negri call the ‘becoming-Prince of the multitude’ (2011) – through forms of legal servitude. But class power itself is only part of the story; for, the self-movement of commodities imprisons the poorest waste picker and the most well-meaning tech start up alike (see Birkbeck 1978). Like tainted soil, this second nature of compulsory commodity circulation only allows

certain things to grow. So, when Debord exclaims that this ‘pseudonature [...] demands that such labor remain forever *in its service*’ and therefore ‘[t]he spectacle is not just the servant of pseudo-use – it is already, in itself, the pseudo-use of life’ he is not simply (or *only*) making a curmudgeonly statement about vapid pop music, movies or fashion but instead a very specific critique of reified society and human subservience to their own products via the forms that mediate production. This is as true in the digital epoch as it was in the preceding. If humans are to face subjugation or annihilation by machines, it will be due to this concrete pseudonature, which contains within it subjugation and seeds of annihilation. In the following sections, we will briefly explore four such seeds or ‘moments’<sup>11</sup> in the overall process of digital capital’s expansion, which are part of the new nature built on the ‘autonomous movement of non-life’ in the context of artificial intelligence: rent, finance, commodity capital, and automation. In these moments of pseudonature and pseudo-use of life, the principle of producing scarcity within abundance shows us a pathway within digital capitalism towards a potential Cylon apocalypse.

### 3.1 Digital Imperialism

Debord’s ‘autonomous image’ can apply in a most straightforward way to finance, a key moment in digital capital’s autonomy. And perhaps we can find in Debord echoes of Lenin (1969), showing us that finance is crucial to the imperialist stage of capitalism. In SOS, the autonomous image can clearly be read through Marx when he suggests that finance and interest-bearing capital ‘is a relationship of magnitudes, a relationship of the principal sum as a given value to itself as a self-expanding value, as a principal sum which has produced a surplus-value. And capital as such, as we have seen, assumes this form of a directly self-expanding value for all active capitalists, whether they operate on their own or borrowed capital’ (Marx 1993, 515). The formula for interest-bearing capital ( $M-M'$ ) is the most fetishistic, in Marx’s explanation, as money appears simply to grow on its own, and allow its owners – interested only in quantitative growth – to demand as much. But the chance workings of the market are often full of unacceptable inefficiencies. And, states (like organized crime) often try to rig circumstances in their favour. Debord explains in *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*: ‘It is always a mistake to try to explain something by opposing Mafia and state: they are never rivals. Theory easily verifies what all the rumors in practical life have all too easily shown. The Mafia is not an outsider in this world; it is perfectly at home. Indeed, in the integrated spectacle it stands as the model of all advanced commercial enterprises’ (2011, 67). While Debord emphasizes the unity of the spectacle, one must also recognize the internal struggles (various Opium Wars), through which that unity advances. The extension of financial interests internationally has created an expansion of state espionage and protection rackets serving the autonomous image. Digital technology, often developed in the name of the war on terror – what

Debord describes as the contemporary spectacle's only available enemy – has been leveraged by governments in a war of all against all, ensuring continued unification within spectacular society. The US's NSA was recently exposed for a decade of using its post-9/11 signals intelligence apparatus for economic espionage in Germany, Brazil, France, and elsewhere.

It is not difficult to imagine the spectacular struggles to control the production of nature and impose pseudo-scarcity leading to AI-assisted (nuclear) war. As control of natural resources becomes crucial in the production of machines (including for war), and as national security can become linked to property holdings policed by other nation-states, war over mineral deposits and energy sources loom as ominously now as it did with United Fruit (US in Guatemala) and Anaconda Copper (US in Chile) did in the previous century. AI will develop, like the capitalist food and metals systems, around the politics of investments in key locations and the mechanisms of their defence. But, if acquiring resources is a struggle, converting those resources investments into revenue is as well.

### 3.2 *Autocratic Terrains*

AI, as a tremendous force in production, contains the seeds of a crisis in consumption (demand) – how will companies justify making profits if goods and services cost nothing in labour to make? As with exchange of digital goods and services (entertainment, software, etc.) in the Internet era, control of the infrastructure (means) of both production and consumption will become even more deeply cutthroat, monopolistic, and extortionistic, based only in the historical and prevailing norms of ownership, in the autocracy of large-scale private property. In the current period, relations of rent provide us with a useful comparison to think about what will likely emerge with capitalist AI.

Debord does not discuss rent in *SOS*, but considering Debord's critique through a Marxian lens helps illustrate how the spectacle transforms our world in order to maintain human subjection to our own products. Rent is 'surplus profit' siphoned by a landlord (ground rent) or a specialized producer (monopoly rent). In digital capitalism's current relations of rent we can be rather literal about the spectacle's oppressive 'nature' by looking at aspects of the groundwork and infrastructures of the digital economy. On this second nature, digital capitals constantly construct new forms of pseudo-scarcity. For example, when the Dot-com bubble burst in the early 2000s it was in no small part due to the overproduction of fibre optic and storage infrastructure. Companies sank speculative capital into data centres and fibre with the intention of renting them, as digital landlords and tollbooth owners, to generate shareholder growth through the control of Internet traffic (Townsend 2003). When it became clear that capacity outpaced demand, we witnessed ostensibly the first real estate crisis of the new millennium (Townsend 2003). Like other real estate crises, financial speculation mediated the production of physical environments through the floating signifiers of stocks and paper claims to wealth.

Debord's spectacle can be seen in how the promise of future revenue effectively imposed its own force on the literal shape of our world and its future uses. Even in overproduction there is underdevelopment. With AI, we can expect a similar investment in control of the terrain, the development of nature to serve capital's self-expansion. This can work in the inverse.

The spectacle moving as both rent and finance develops according to its own rules just as clearly in the forms of digital inequality throughout the country and the world. In rural Mississippi and other rural and urban parts of the US, massive digital deprivation exists, due to a lack of infrastructure (Crawford 2013; Eubanks 2015; Gilbert and Masucci 2011). Digital inequality is a persistent story and a crucial example of Debord's autonomous movement of capital. Because of the likely losses or unfavourable revenue prospects, Internet, TV, radio, and cellular providers intentionally underdevelop large swaths of the human community globally (Crawford 2013). And, those experiments in infrastructural penetration into poorer or less dense areas are often tainted by especially cynical *quid pro quos*, like Facebook's offer of 'free' limited Internet 'basics' to rural India, including Facebook. This resulted in protests demanding the full Internet, Net neutrality regulations, and a better offer from Google's 'Project Loon's' Wi-Fi balloons. But the private 'alien' powers, demanding returns on investments are at work in the regular flows of digital traffic. As most things in the neoliberal project that have been part of the fertile terrain for digital capitalism, Internet providers in the wealthiest places work to segment audiences and stratify access to this resource according to private preference and payment capacity, called 'throttling', 'blocking', and 'paid prioritization'.<sup>12</sup> There is no natural scarcity here, only the limits imposed by owners of this pseudonature and the drives of its mediums of production and circulation.<sup>13</sup> One must imagine the rise of the machines to be uneven, to be interested most in growing investments, and least in directly liberating the self-government of life in the world, particularly for those without money. But, no doubt, AI will increasingly be used to gouge everyone, prevent sharing, make resources artificially scarce, and impose autocratic authority over both production and consumption. Debord's spectacle can help us see his crucial conceptualization of inversion, vis-à-vis capital's drive to circulate, which confines and distorts social development. Underdevelopment is structured not (necessarily) out of malice but capital's drive for growth. This is not an unreal world but a world that 'really is topsy-turvy', a 'false' world (#9). The rise of the capitalist machines will form this 'false' world not because machines are somehow 'artificial' or 'inauthentic' but because of their role in capital's inverted relationship to means and ends.

### 3.3 *AI, Wages and Consumption*

The emergent rise of the machines is occurring (and will) primarily to save labour costs, so long as capital's self-expansion is the prevailing condition of

necessity in society. The massive force that artificial intelligence will unleash in production (supply), making goods historically easy to produce and requiring no wages (especially, as machines increasingly re/produce themselves), is potentially costless on the basis of human effort. But it will also, as such, create a crisis for a society accustomed to acquiring its subsistence from wage-labour. And the financial forces that sit behind the above infrastructural distortions of our social geography (that recently imposed expanding poverty and servitude in Greece and collapsed the world financial markets), and that will likely annihilate whole sectors of the labour market, are also drilling down to the individual. Like GoFundMe.com's 'personal fundraising campaigns', Kiva.org and other microfinance sites further embed and personalize capital. Debord's coded 'autonomous image' and its self-movement help us see the relationships between finance and wages. As money limits options for exchange and draws us deeper into wage relations, individuals and families may have more money and experience more deprivation simultaneously (Sen 2000).

Such limits haunt our attempts to resolve this subservience to the spectacle. As starvation threatens South Sudan, Somalia, North-east Nigeria, and Yemen – while Americans throw away half their produce and the world wastes a third of its food – a US-based organization, GiveDirectly, has developed an experiment for a universal wage in a Kenyan village of about 220 people. Using cellular phones and digital identification numbers, residents of the unnamed village will receive \$22 a month for 12 years. The expansion of wages of all sorts has quantitatively effected a supposed massive reduction of world poverty, celebrated by British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson as the 'unadulterated triumph of what you might broadly call western values, technology, culture, and indeed western economic thinking.' Perhaps he is correct and what we have seen in the history of wage labour will no longer be true. Many other countries, including Canada, are also experimenting with universal wage policies. Or perhaps these new experiments only expand the very 'autonomous image' that subjugates social life, trapping it further in the money form of value, wage labour, and the exchange of fetishes within a global money cult, depriving access to other pathways of value and exchange. But, for Debord, the drive of this unification is not simply the combination of state and capital to extend the influence of private powers; it is instead the drive for the spectacle's self-expansion. With the rise of AI, and its subsequent contradictions and crises, we can expect to see crypto-currencies and other new money-based forms proposed as potential resolutions to this inverted relationship.

### *3.4 Consumer Data as Pseudonature*

In the dreaded 'Sofalarity' described by Tim Wu we see an aspect of this topsy-turvy world that we can trace back to Keynesian subsidization of wages – life

exists for the turnover of investments, for capital's expansion. The third key moment of this pseudonature is consumer data, part of commodity capital's costs of circulation, which now form a 'map identical to the territory it is representing' (#31). The costs of circulation are what retailers and commodity sellers spend, in this case on marketing and research, to convert their wares back into money. Important critiques of consumer data and surveillance demonstrate how its collection and utilization rely on accumulation by dispossession (Thatcher, et al 2016), unpaid labour, coercion and exploitation (Andrejevic 2003; 2013). AI is currently and increasingly being developed to read consumers' minds, project their desires back to them, and capture them as consumers for capital's turnover. Debord pushes these critiques further to the core Marxian critique of capitalism. We have seen this spectacular process already at work in filters and profiles, which have over the last two decades, in increasingly granular ways, grouped consumers into psychographic 'tribes' and target populations (see Rosati 2012). This alienation of habits, preferences, fantasies, friendship and professional networks, and so on as private property has notoriously bracketed our lives into bubbles (e.g. Sunstein 2017). But, those bubbles – turned echo chambers – represent the development of the individual as an identity, a natural essence. Here Debord's critique of capitalist nature extends to the use of machines in humans' crucial forms of self-production, which will likely advance as AI advances.

We can extend Lukács here: 'With the modern 'psychological' analysis of the work-process (in Taylorism) this rational mechanisation extends right into the worker's 'soul': even his psychological attributes are separated from his total personality and placed in opposition to it so as to facilitate their integration into specialised rational systems and their reduction to statistically viable concepts' (1972, 88). The spectacular issue is not simply that consumers love X deodorant brand or Y princess movies, but that the reinforcement of pleasures becomes an internal compass leading around other potential directions, aestheticizing desire, and removing it from conflict with other pathways. Pleasure or discomfort 'is not the necessary product of technical development seen as a natural development;' rather it is part of the spectacle, 'the form which chooses its own technical content' among which we might count our 'souls' (#24). Desire grows but it actualizes a false essence, grown in a false nature.<sup>14</sup> And these forms of individuation are only part of the broader conditions of subjection within digital capitalism. Metrics of driving habits, exercise habits, work habits, personal health, etc., are increasingly leveraged against insurance claims, care coverage, and other means of linking cost with individual responsabilization. What Haraway calls 'informatics of domination' (1991, 161) produce a (Pavlovian) behavioral-austerity link, which is the soft-violence of what Marx critiques as 'so-called primitive accumulation' and 'original sin' among the political economists: via data, wealth becomes not about social processes but isolated individual choices.

### 3.5 Automation after Scarcity

If, as much of the economic press (and an occasional physicist) has us worry, work disappears as a correlary to the development of AI, we must understand that this correlation is not its cause. All the above developments lead us back to Debord's problematization of economic productivity in automation, where all the previous conditions of self-movement converge at their highest tension, as most liberatory and most subjugating – freeing us from work without freeing us from wages. Neither Marx nor Debord could have anticipated the growth and intensity of automation in the digital age. My phone already knows the next word I want to text, it transcribes my voice, it reminds me to eat lunch, grade papers, call my grandma. This essay, thankfully, was automatically spell-checked – I would surely have to pay someone otherwise. Machines (as weaving machines or code) are labour-saving devices about which the Marxian tradition is, in fact, optimistic and Utopian. Debord's critique of the *social* forms of scarcity and 'augmented survival' that accompany capitalist abundance and productive capacity captures the frustration of potential abundance and Marx's Utopian spirit. The now-famous 'fragment on machines' in Marx's notebooks hint at a world liberated by machines, no longer subjugated by wage labour and the self-expansion of capital. From mobile apps to pernicious malware bots, we are all utilizing the digital productive forces to save labour. But, for Debord, we live not just in deprivation amid potential abundance (as with food), but also amid the spectacle's direction of the potential itself. Donna Haraway reminds us that machines are part of our nature, not a deformation of our essence. So, let us pose *Vice's* question again, 'what if machines take over the world in a good way?' Would we all be evicted, unemployed, and starving? Or, would we be doomed to the 'sofalarity,' using our universal wage to binge-watch the Kardashians, eat KFC, and drink sugary beverages? If robots have been programmed as agents of spectacle, for class society, and capital's self-expansion, certainly both seem plausible. Donna Haraway perhaps channels Debord's push towards the reversal of our inverted relationship to technology when she writes, 'The machine is not an *it* to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for machines; *they* do not dominate or threaten us. We are responsible for boundaries; we are *they*' (1991, 180). As Debord points out, the *social* conditions of life will determine the kinds of machines we build and how they mediate our relationships.

The above examples of how capital limits and pressures the development social life for the maintenance of class society help us understand the spectacle in a broader sense, as the subjugation of social life to its own products. Debord explains:

[t]he alienation of the spectator to the profit of the contemplated object (which is the result of his own unconscious activity) is expressed in the



following way: the more he contemplates the less he lives; the more he accepts recognizing himself in the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him...' (#30).

To what extent can we find our *non-false* nature beyond the spectacle through the 'cyborg?' If we are to follow Debord, the struggle against the mediation of our lives within a self-expanding system is the only way. But, we seem to be losing that struggle.

#### 4. Malthus and the Cylon: AI, Obsolescence and Digital Capitalism

We have examined the spectacle's subjugation of social life to its own products. Perhaps nothing exemplifies this better than the fear of the Singularity, AI's domination of humans and/or our species' extinction. In this section, we will explore this as a crucial extension of the spectacle and *symptomatic* aspect of digital capitalism. Its analysis is crucial to a Debordian conceptualization of this epoch. Extinction by AI is a projection of the most extreme pseudonature, where society becomes the waste products of its own activity. Humans become not simply poor or jobless but *obsolete*. This spectre is not completely new.

Obsolescence is perhaps a corollary to white supremacy, which has long been a Social Darwinist mythology at the heart of the capitalist project,<sup>15</sup> along with the Eugenics' dreams of breeding an optimally efficient population, no longer burdened by the 'unfit'. Marx scathingly critiqued similar ideas by Thomas Malthus for imagining that humans – particularly in the case of poverty – were stuck with fixed resources and subject to the population limits and competition of other species, whereas it was rather capitalism that demanded and produced poverty (1992). This model of fixed environmentalism, a nature with *surplus people*, is the rotten heart of capitalist AI. In this Malthusian nature, life is only useful to the extent that it can be monetized; and, digital capitalism dreams of mathematical autocracy. To the extent that AI posits human extinction, it invokes a trajectory of thought in which economic logic rationalizes the exclusion, sterilization, cleansing, and subjugation of populations. I hope we find a politics against this false nature as a corollary to Debord's critique of the 'autonomous movement of non-life'.

Post-60s era fiscal discipline, regimes of austerity, and vociferous privatization have produced surplus populations as a matter of principle—*produce value or die*. Digital capitalism, we must recall, grew up in the age of deindustrialization, deregulation, multinational monopolies, trickle-down economics and mass incarceration. This era has wasted life like no other. Emblematically, the



US imprisons more human beings than any other nation. Largely accumulated by the 'War on Drugs', which allowed links between drug trafficking and US anti-Communism in Latin America, prisons are also an industry that bails out deindustrialized communities. America's bonded masses are in essence political-economic prisoners in this sense. While digital capitalism has created an abundance of new communicative forms with soaring stock IPOs, it has also been disposing of living people, from parks, city centres, public housing, or engaging in predatory policing. Beneath the 'autocracy' of capital, those with property rule and profit from the disappearance of others. In this environment where humans are always potential 'waste', it should be no surprise that we imagine a Cylon apocalypse. Democratized as digital capitalism appears, it pongs of autocracy, violence, and extinction. Through the spectacle, we can see the commodity form's old politics of servitude (#40) extended to a new pseudonature of extinction – the ultimate expression of the 'autonomous movement of non-life'.

This false nature implies power and hierarchy. Debord writes of the Keynesian, industrial '60s, 'The oldest social specialization, the specialization of power, is at the root of the spectacle. The spectacle is thus a specialized activity which speaks for all the others. It is the diplomatic representation of hierarchic society to itself, where all other expression is banned. Here the most modern is also the most archaic' (#23). We must be clear that this specialization of power has advanced. Certainly, this is evident in the softest ways with the legal assassination of Napster, tremendous intellectual property fortifications, digital rights management schemes, and other criminalizations of sharing. These are the soft side of digital capitalism's despotism, using state force to maintain the commodity form and its corollary private *right to payment*. But, it is also evident within police agencies spying on and disrupting leftist activists, infiltrating labour actions, and arresting journalists. In the struggle over that *right*, the 'autonomous movement of non-life' is clearly class struggle by another name. National leaders no longer need to pretend that capitalism is inextricably tied to democracy. The new millennium revealed that the aspirations for expansive democracy and despotic, kleptocratic capitalism are bound together around new technologies and contradictory drives for economic expansion. Eight people now control as much wealth as the poorest 50 per cent. 'Poverty' declines but deprivation grows. It seems the Cylons have *already* attacked!

Debord theorized in 1988 that the former world of two spectacles, diffuse (Keynesianism) and concentrated (East Bloc State Capitalism), had given way to the *integrated spectacle*. 'The emergence of this new form is attributable to a number of shared historical features,' Debord specifies, 'namely, the important role of the Stalinist party and unions in political and intellectual life, a weak democratic tradition, the long monopoly of power enjoyed by a single party of government, and the need to eliminate an unexpected upsurge in revolutionary activity' (Debord 2011, 8–9). He goes on to summarize that this new spectacle entails five features: 'incessant technological renewal; integration of state

and economy; generalized secrecy, unanswerable lies; an eternal present' (2011, 11–12). Where spy agencies use their leverage in international trade and hack into SIM Card manufacturers, struggles for this 'twilight world' rage beneath and within the smooth appearance of circulation. What is, in essence, a violent autocratic rule in the name of the market economy has spread like mould across the world's development, corrupting or murdering revolutionary alternatives.

Here, we must not conflate our apocalyptic fantasies with machines themselves. Instead, Debord would have us reclaim the historical project of the dissolution of class society. This requires encoding a consciousness that would never program the spectacle's waste of life, its mathematics of obsolescence, and surplus populations. Instead, this consciousness must encode maximal life, and expansive solidarities. Haraway assembles oppressed traditions within an ancient-futuristic 'Cyborg writing', which 'must not be about the Fall, the imagination of a once-upon-a-time wholeness before language, before writing, before Man. Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other' (1991, 175). Perhaps this is more than solidarity; perhaps it is life itself. Haraway continues, '[w]e have all been colonized by those origin myths, with their longing for fulfilment in apocalypse...Feminist cyborg stories have the task of recoding communication and intelligence to subvert command and control' (1991, 175). To resist the new integrated spectacle we must decode all command and control, particularly those apocalyptic, autocratic, and scarcity-based uses of life, relegating it to survival (or worse), and subordinating it to the pseudonature of capital's self-expansion. Debord expounds, 'Consciousness of desire and the desire for consciousness together and indissolubly constitute that project which in its negative form has as its goal the abolition of classes and the direct possession by the workers of every aspect of their activity' (#53).<sup>16</sup> Debord's manifesto is in fact a call for practice, suggesting that this practical abolition happens in the mythic 'workers councils', 'which must internationally supplant all other power, the proletarian movement is its own product and this product is the producer himself' (#117). In his formulation, the *end* of the autonomous movement of non-life occurs when social activity has itself as its product, not money and exchange-value. So, how?

## 5. Cylon Troll in the Revolutionary Council

Microsoft founder, Bill Gates recently caused a stir by suggesting that we tax robots. Gates, like many, has noticed that despite easing the creation of material wealth, machines within capitalism increase worker productivity and decrease the need for (and cost of) workers. Opponents have suggested that Gates' plan would hinder productivity, confining the economic trickle down of the new robotic age and limiting its benefits. What is striking about Gates' plan and

various other plans, like the universal minimum wage, is that they have yet to fathom a socially exuberant way of un-mediating life, creativity, free time, idleness, reading 'unproductive' books, or listening to music beyond wage-labour and its forms of 'augmented survival'. Sure, we cannot accomplish everything at once. Nevertheless, Debord's radical manifesto, through his emphasis on capital's 'autonomous movement', always keeps us looking forward and, hopefully, wary of dead ends, false flags, and snares. For those pitfalls, Lyotard and many others stabbed at the Marxist project after the failed revolutions of 1968, because 'everywhere, the Critique of political economy (the subtitle of Marx's *Capital*) and its correlate, the critique of alienated society, [were being] used in one way or another as aids in programming the system' (1984, 13). Instead, Debord's writing is interested in holistic freedom, in revolution against the obedience of life to its own products, and against hierarchical society. 'No quantitative relief of its poverty, no illusory hierarchical incorporation,' Debord exclaims, 'can supply a lasting cure for its dissatisfaction, for the proletariat cannot truly recognize itself in any particular wrong it has suffered...but only in the righting of the *unqualified* wrong...the universal wrong of its exclusion from life' (#114). In the Councils, Debord sees society becoming the subject of its own history, with itself and its world as its product, transforming 'existing conditions in their entirety' (#74, #75, #179).

But, twenty years later Debord also warns us, 'the highest ambition of the integrated spectacle is still to turn secret agents into revolutionaries, and revolutionaries into secret agents' (2011, 11). By the late-1980s, having caught glimpses of shadow governments engaging in anti-communist warfare through Iran-Contra (US) and the clandestine intrigue of the 'Years of Lead' (Italy), Debord had a considerably more *cautious* outlook by the end of his life. Fascism has always benefited from its false flags, through its populist infiltration of the 'masses' striving to 'eliminate the property structure' (Benjamin 1968, 241), utilizing the language of socialism, and aestheticizing class frustration. The concentrated spectacle's purges and authoritarian betrayal of the revolution and the diffused spectacle's business unionism represent an infiltration of a metaphorical 'workers council.' After the roll out of neoliberalism, Operation Condor, Iran-Contra, the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Bayer's merger with Monsanto, and the election of a tax dodging reality TV character favoured by white nationalists for US president, we have many reasons to do more than worry about a Cylon troll infiltrating Debord's hopeful form for social liberation. 'Our society is built on secrecy, from the 'front' organizations which draw an impenetrable screen over the concentrated wealth of their members, to the 'official secrets' which allow the state a vast field of operation free from any legal constraint,' Debord warns (2011, 52). But perhaps it is the transparency and dialogue of the Councils, the antithesis of secrets that still offers us hope? If so, and in this digital epoch, it will need guards against bots and avatars that still aim for autocracy, hierarchy, extinction, and the autonomous movement of non-life in all its forms.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Quoting Revelations: [‘These have one mind, and shall give their power and strength unto the beast.’ Revelations, 17:13; ‘And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.’ Revelations, 13:17.]
- <sup>2</sup> Cylons are a race of robots, produced by a race of now-extinct lizard people, are key antagonists in the 1978 TV show, *Battlestar Galactica*, at war with the several colonies of humans.
- <sup>3</sup> E.g., *Investor’s Business Daily* (2016).
- <sup>4</sup> See Marcuse (1991) and Sen (2000) for different approaches to a concept that shares a great deal with Debord’s critique.
- <sup>5</sup> In the former, the human is still central—machines function in relation to human activity—as opposed to the post-human evolutionary fantasies of the latter.
- <sup>6</sup> See Rosati (2012) for a more detailed discussion in a different context.
- <sup>7</sup> Durham and Kellner interpret: ‘Consumers of the spectacle, Debord argues, are separated from the process of production of everyday life, lost in consumerist fantasies, media phantasmagoria, and in our day the transformative media of cyberspace and computer technology. ‘Real life’ is unreal, unglamorous, and boring in this world, while the spectacle is exciting and enthralling’ (2006: 93).
- <sup>8</sup> Or just using us as batteries, as in the *Matrix*.
- <sup>9</sup> Similar examples abound in the *Cultural Studies Reader*, as just one example.
- <sup>10</sup> I have excluded the last sentence to focus on one concept at a time.
- <sup>11</sup> Lack of space keeps me from specifying in detail the key *circuits* of which these moments are a part.
- <sup>12</sup> This is similar to new, disastrous water privatization projects and to pay-for-faster-service schemes in amusement parks, airports, and the Capital Beltway.
- <sup>13</sup> See Loftus (2006) for an analogous example in the privatization of water.
- <sup>14</sup> As Horkheimer and Adorno note, ‘The relentless unity of the culture industry bears witness to the emergent unity of politics’ (2007, 96).
- <sup>15</sup> Like the myth of Sapiens murdering Neanderthalensis, rather than interbreeding.
- <sup>16</sup> We might now replace ‘workers’ with ‘multitude’ or maximalist categories not at risk of productivist chauvinisms.

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## PART II

# **Phenomenology and Historicisation of the Spectacle: from Debord to the Spectacle 2.0**



## CHAPTER 7

# Rio de Janeiro: Spectacularization and Subjectivities in Globo's city

Barbara Szaniecki

### 1. Introduction

*'The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation'*, said Guy Debord in the opening statements of his 1967 book *The Society of the Spectacle*. Today, we can easily say that it is the whole life of the cities where post-modern conditions of production prevail that presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. This is particularly true in Rio de Janeiro. The city has turned 'global' as it has become kind of a 'property' of the Globo group, the largest media conglomerate in Brazil and one of the biggest in the world: real life is actually further and further removed into the realm of representations, which presents an opportunity to strengthen that media corporation.

In recent years, some of the processes of spectacularization of the city once analysed by Guy Debord are not only under the spotlight of the news of the group in their different media outlets, but are also portrayed as having been 'accomplished' by the Globo Group. A new stage in urban monumentalization, for example, gained visibility as early as 2010, with the announcement of the

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creation of two museums to be built in a partnership between the City of Rio de Janeiro Administration and Fundação Roberto Marinho, a family foundation linked to the same business group. In effect, the revitalization of the port area has, as landscape landmarks, the Rio de Janeiro's Museum of Art, the Museum of Tomorrow and the waterfront that stretches from the seacoast Conde<sup>1</sup> to the restored warehouses, ready to host events. It is necessary, however, to consider the transformations that are under way beyond the landmarks of the architectural and urban landscapes.

The creation of the Port's Creative District marks the start of a productive mobilization for the creative city (Landry 1992) and the creative classes (Florida 2002) that implies many processes of eviction from the area on one hand and, on the other, new forms of exploitation in the networks. Thus, new forms of labour (Benkler 2006), often 'free labour', are added to urban spectacle. Customarily, the pace of the urban Rio ['carioca'] way of life has always been set by the schedules of traditional events, such as the New Year's Eve and the Carnival. Now it is submitted to the constraints of staging of mega-events such as the World Cup and the Olympic Games and of working for tourism instead of serving the local population to the point where cariocas are asking themselves whether Rio is a city to 'leave' or to 'live'.

Monumentalization of the landscape is one aspect of the spectacularization of the city, the other one is the productive mobilization of the territories. The first is more related to space by urban planning (Debord, 1992), the second to time, and not only to forms of precarious labour that makes us work 24 hours a day but also depending on the mega-events calendar with its spectacular pseudo-cyclical time (Debord, 1992). The resistance to these processes became an enormous challenge. Can a city escape the total spectacularization process and keep itself as productive and politically democratic?

## 2. From the New Museums to the New Cultural Urban Scenario

As said before, since 2010 the O Globo Group has announced the creation of three new museums. Designed by famous architects, their architectural projects contribute to the construction of the urban space as a scenario, which constitutes a spectacularization of environmental planning (Debord 1992: 130). Two of these museums are situated in the port area: The Rio Art Museum (MAR) and the Museum of Tomorrow. Back then, the important partnership established between the City of Rio de Janeiro Administration and Roberto Marinho Foundation, attracted some attention, but also other aspects stood out. Behind the initiatives, it was possible to notice the intention to give a new meaning to an area considered degraded and also to start a new cycle for Rio de Janeiro as a whole. The intention could not have gone unnoticed by those who had been studying and comparing the Creative Industries to the so-called Culture

Points<sup>2</sup>, cultural experiences recognized by the Ministry of Culture under Gilberto Gil, in order to find the different territorial features and the visibilities of the two models for cultural and creative production and urban planning.

While the creativity organized by some contemporary museums – since the Guggenheim in Bilbao at least – is very much engaged in the effort to mark the landscape with new and immense cultural equipment and, in this case, tends to be aligned with the spectacular representation of the political, economical and media powers, 'Culture Point' is a public policy in dialogue with civil society that seeks to value autonomous organisations that make already existing venues the principal location for the cultural production and social life of their actors. While the creativity organized around these new museums tends to be linked to the spectacle – culture produced by a few and intended for mass consumption – Culture Points are not only *for* people, but are rather *of* people, of citizens organized as productive and political actors, rather than separated as producers and consumers, and politically alienated. This means that its symbolic production resists the spectacle mode and tries to affirm itself as a collective experience, lived more than represented. It is a cultural and creative production that can generate revenue for the players involved in it, but its meaning lies beyond the mere commercial trade. The possibility for a city to escape the total spectacularization process and keep itself productive and politically democratic depends on the ways such production and politics are organized – a result of public-private partnerships or of more autonomous forms – and more specifically on the type of work – employed or self-employed, with or without social welfare assurances, 'free'. Still with no possibilities to provide definitive answers, let us look at the continuity of the processes.

The spectacularization of the carioca landscape followed its course with the inscription of Rio as a World Heritage site for its 'Urban Cultural Landscape'<sup>3</sup> (UNESCO category) and with increasingly explicit actions on the part of O Globo Group. In its 'Marketing Projects' supplement of 19/10/2012, the 'New Centre of Rio de Janeiro' was presented as an urban project of infrastructure and services, financed by real estate and with the goal of attracting corporate, commercial and hotel investment, all crowned by attention to the local cultural heritage. The image shown on the first page of the supplement, with a headline that read 'Wonder Port – Express to the Future will leave from the Port Area' is a collage that brings in the foreground the Museum of Tomorrow (still under construction at that point) done with computer software and, in the background, a mixture of the historical centre (represented by the São Bento Monastery) and modern centre (with Rio's first skyscraper – the A Noite building – and by the first smart building of the city – Rio Branco 1) extracted from photographs. This collage is clearly a construction of a new image for Rio de Janeiro. The city simultaneously seeks to associate itself with cities that have become successful in the process of globalization through a 'revitalization' of its waterfront areas whilst it seeks to distance itself from the primary tourist consumption wave – whether of the Sugar Loaf or the Christ the Redeemer, or from its

beaches and beauties—for the benefit of a Creative Rio. The construction of such an image also seeks to move the city away from the label of unsafe place, given to it for many years, although this could become a mirage if it is done in an arbitrary or authoritarian manner. Or it may become an affirmation of the spectacle, that is, the assertion that the only mode of existence possible in Rio de Janeiro is one in which social relations are insistently mediated by image (Debord 1992, p. 4) – in this case a global urban landscape instead of a singular urban experience.

Barely two weeks had gone by from the publication of the emblematic image of the ‘new city centre’ when, in early November 2012, Globo reported the construction of a Y-shaped pier near Warehouse 2, next to Praça Mauá [Square]. The spotlights were all on, in a barrage of almost daily articles during a month and a half (Szaniecki 2013). The focus of the criticism was on the construction by [company] Companhia Docas do Rio de Janeiro of a pier where ships as much as 70 metres in height could dock, when the building standards set for the area have a 15-metre limitation. The Y-pier would then block the view of São Bento Monastery which is part of the historical heritage of the city, a listed building and, moreover, of the Museum of Tomorrow, built by a partnership between the City Hall and the Roberto Marinho Foundation. Technical arguments (conditions for ship movements and the impact on the surrounding areas), administrative arguments (consultations among the appropriate authorities on the tender and authorization procedures) and economical arguments (overprice in the resource sheet) were rapidly created and used by Globo but none proved to be good enough to justify the non-obstruction of the view of those important cultural elements of the city, centre pieces in the project that aimed at revitalizing the port area. Apparently dissatisfied, Globo then resorted to an aesthetic argument – the impact it would have on the carioca landscape – and on December 17 published a full-page article that challenged the City Hall on that: ‘Controversy at the Docks: How much is the landscape worth? – City Hall changes position on the Y-pier and produces a torrent of criticism from architects.’ To press the City Hall, Globo mobilised the opinion of several specialists, until it finally achieved its goal, that is, the non-construction of the Y-pier.

Needless to say that, if the public authorities were pressed, the population was not even consulted at all on the processes that concerned them, such as the eviction of dwellers and the installation of a cable car service in the region. The Museum of Art of Rio opened in 2013 and the Museum of Tomorrow opened in 2015. The urban operation of the Wonder Port came to life with the successive opening of the refurbished Mauá Square, of the Conde Waterfront, and of the VLT (Tram Service). There was much celebration at each opening, but also some anxiety as the Olympic Games neared and the work they required experienced setback after setback. Already branded as the Creative City, with the last touches to the Olympic Boulevard<sup>4</sup>, Rio was all set to live its moment as an Olympic City. According to Riotur (Rio’s tourist authority), the Olympic Boulevard was visited by four million people and it was publicized as ‘an

absolute success'. All the temporalities of the city seem to have been subjected to the single time of consumption: the spectacular time in which the city seems to consume itself (Debord 1992, 133). But, once the Olympic and Paralympic Games were over and once the city administration elections got under way, the contrast was clear for all to see between the success of that spectacle and the unattended needs of the population such as housing, basic sanitation, health, education, and urban mobility. A Wonder Port perhaps but to (or for) whom?

### 3. The Creative Territory: Real Estate Speculation and the Spectacle of 'Free Labour'

So far, we have seen an enormous urban operation under way. Named Wonder Port, it presents itself as a public and private partnership; we were able to learn a little more about the partners involved – the 'stakeholders'. Throughout the days of the Olympic Games they were provided with a spectacular stage to publicize their names and logos in the many sports and cultural activities. This 'spectacular stage' is simultaneously a 'spectacular time' that turns our urban life rhythms into a clocked consumable time and a 'spectacular environmental planning' that turns our urban life spaces into a distant consumable scenario. This is the time and the territory of the mega-events.

According to mainstream media, the Olympic Boulevard was a huge public success but, as the party ended, the population started to ask: what is the legacy of all that? The questions came from movements such as the People's Rio Cup and Olympic Games Committee<sup>5</sup> as much as from the Academy<sup>6</sup>. When looking at the 2016 Olympic Boulevard, many cariocas feel like those who lived in New York's East Harlem borough in the 50s and 60s, as they looked at the lawn that had been planned for them (Jacobs 2003). The question 'Who said we wanted a lawn?' becomes 'Who said we wanted an Olympics Boulevard? A VLT—a tram? A cable car?' A fact stands out, that is that the fundamental player was left outside the public – private partnership (PPP): the organised civil society as well as those not-so-well-organised segments that took to the streets in demonstrations since June 2013, a crowd with a multitude of demands.

Still the spectacle of political representation moved on, unflinching, and, as a mirror, the spectacle of the urban commodification did the same, strictly abiding to their schedules and time frames. '*All that once was directly lived has become mere representation*' as Debord would have said faced with this cycle of mega-events. Although the Wonder Port has two strong anchors in the museums described above, the cultural circuit lies way beyond them. In a leaflet on Culture and Creative Industries<sup>7</sup> published by the Wonder Port in its site, the following equipment items and events are listed: The Valongo and the Empress Docks, The Citizen Action Cultural Centre, The Pretos Novos Cemeteries, the José Bonifácio Cultural Centre, The Spectacle Factory, The Utopia Warehouse, The Afro-Brazilian Incubator, The Bhering Factory, The Flavours

of the Port, The Mauá Agenda – Art in the Conceição [Morro] Hill, and the Port Area's League of Samba Blocks. The list of these items and events at the Wonder Port site probably points to merely a territorial presence, without necessarily meaning their economic inclusion, that is, without meaning that they enjoy the benefits provided by public power or by private companies related to the Wonder Port. And it is quite the contrary, as some not only face hardship to keep their activities going, despite the importance of their traditions or of their most recent innovations, but are eventually appropriated to legitimise the revitalization project. Initiatives that recognize themselves under the umbrella of 'creative industries' probably have attracted greater interest and more funds due to their more direct link with the economy. By 'direct' it is understood that culture has a function that is primarily social and symbolic and, only after that, is economic, while creativity is seen as a renewing element of economies and a revitalizer vector for cities. In the end, it is a rather unequal circle, as regards its players and assets. Once the party was over at the Olympic Boulevard, the question that rises is: how to keep alive the spectacle, the circuit that feeds it and that, in turn, is also fed by it? The Port's Creative District is one of the initiatives born of the discourse that it is necessary to keep on developing that region and the city as a whole after the Olympic Games, although the discourse does not include the discussion of the very sense of what is understood as 'development'.

What is the Port's Creative District? It is an initiative of creative companies of the Wonder Port area, says the definition in Facebook. The official site is down,<sup>8</sup> but Globo informs us that the district gathers tens of companies and hundreds of creative professionals in a partnership with the Port of Rio de Janeiro's Urban Development Company.<sup>9</sup> The CDURP,<sup>10</sup> in its turn, is the administrator for City Hall in the Wonder Port Urban Operation and is in charge of the articulation between the remaining public and private agencies and the New Port Utility.<sup>11</sup> The latter, consisting of construction companies such as OAS, Odebrecht, and Carioca Engenharia, executes the work. The structure of the public and private partnership becomes clearer in the concrete gains obtained by the civil construction industry, but remains shady as regards the intangible and specially imagetical assets the Globo group wants to accumulate from the Wonder Port. Some clues can be found in the special Globo supplement named 'Marketing Projects' published on 27/08/2016. The mix of news and publicity of the Wonder Port described as the 'creative' cradle of Rio<sup>12</sup> is once again illustrated with a paradigmatic image: the shot from above the roofs of old port warehouses reminds us of factories and, looking at them, we have no doubt that they became important but maybe insufficient spaces for the production of shows and events of the Globo group. The creation of the Creative Port District will allow all the port area to become a huge productive territory, of a new kind. Beyond the publicizing of these materials, the participation of companies from the Globo group,<sup>13</sup> and the Roberto Marinho Foundation extends from the production of contents for the museums to the organization and realization of events as Rio Design Week.<sup>14</sup> And here, it is important to split the analysis



of this expanded creative industry of the twenty-first century in Rio de Janeiro into two elements:

### *3.1. At first a 'creative' configuration*

Firstly this 'creative configuration' points to a new opportunity for the city of Rio de Janeiro. But it became possible at the cost of one of the basic items that makes up a territory, a city: housing. In the official words of CDURP, the port area that 'once served as a support area to port operations, of an essentially industrial nature, became idle, growing empty spaces and leaving many buildings under-used or abandoned'. This discourse on the 'urban emptiness' denies the fact that many people used to live there and finds an echo in the words of some creative actors when they say that, for the area not to 'die' after 19:00, people should be brought in to live there.<sup>15</sup> And these words are often legitimized by the Academy. When approaching the 'power of place' (Florida 2002, 215), for example, Richard Florida wonders what leads people to choose to live and work – to cluster – in some places. The reasons listed and commented on by Florida are: strong job market, lifestyle, social interaction, diversity, authenticity, identity, and quality of the place. Do you want strong job market, lifestyle, social interaction, diversity, authenticity, identity, and quality of the place? Visit us, consume, or even move to Rio de Janeiro. This is the recipe to attract tourists and the creative class that enchants private and public powers by valuing the benefits but without mentioning the losses imposed by the process to the local population. The consequences for the city's population are severe: some get in while others leave, some stay while others are evicted. The 'creativity', according to the concept of public and private powers that use it, determines not-creative-at-all forms of control of the cities and of their populations. However not all share these perceptions or at least have changed their positions. The President of the Rio Heritage of Humankind Institute (Instituto Rio Patrimônio da Humanidade) and of the City Council for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, Washington Fajardo, recently started to voice his concern, for example, with the risk of 'property facing the new pedestrian boulevard on the Conde Waterfront remain empty with the expectation of a price hike that might never happen and with the resulting deterioration of the renewed neighbourhood'.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, he defended a housing policy – the Local Carioca Programme – for the area. To be implemented, this programme should be approved by the City Chamber of Representatives of Rio de Janeiro, but may not necessarily have the support of those who in recent years were evicted from their homes.

We will not go too deeply into the debate but cannot overlook recording the processes of capturing the practices of resistance. For example, it was in 2008 that I came across the Women are Heroes project of French photographer JR in the Providência Hill. Years later, in 2012, during a visit of European researchers to Rio de Janeiro, I got to know the work of the photographer and dweller of

the Providência Hill, Mauricio Hora, who, inspired by JR's project made black and white photographs of those dwellers threatened with eviction by the Rio de Janeiro's Housing Department (SMH). The large-format pictures were posted on the walls of the houses and gave international visibility to the situation. Five years later, JR photographs the passers-by at the Olympic Boulevard and artist Kobra is invited to produce an artwork that measures 3,000 square metres in the same area. Other artists are listed in the site with no mention of contractual relations.<sup>17</sup> Urban art works add value to the 'Wonder Port' brand with no reciprocal benefit apart from the promise of visibility to the artist. While reviewing JR's recent photographs, it becomes clear that urban art perfectly matches a context marked by the abandonment of traditional port activities and by the re-taking of spaces for housing purposes, such as was the case of several occupations<sup>18</sup> of that area. The urban art that used to operate as an alert, showing the presence of dwellers in the houses that were about to be demolished by the SMH in the Providência Hill, now seems to camouflage the evictions on account of the works of the city. This use of urban art reduces the resistance to spectacular urban planning. The immense industry of a new kind is already in full operation in the carioca domain, but the mixture of functions – services and housing – and, especially, the social mix that should mark the 21<sup>st</sup> century metropolis is still a very vague promise.

### 3.2. *And here we reach the second point*

The evictions affect the less privileged classes and not always sensitize the others. It is therefore necessary to also study the new kind of work and often the new kind of exploitation that this twenty-first century type of industry, in its carioca version, realizes. In order to analyse the new kind of work based on knowledge, on culture and on creativity, and its corresponding exploitation and expropriation, in territories and in networks, it would be necessary to retrace the path of an entire counterculture that gained visibility with free software movement and later became generalized with free culture. Richard Stallman is one of the theorists and activists of the first movement and Laurence Lessig of the second. Lessig is one of the founders of the Creative Commons and defender of the flexible distribution of culture goods. For Matteo Pasquinelli, Lessig's free culture is '*an useful critique to the copyright regime and at the same time an apology to a generic digital freedom, at least until Lessig says the evil word: taxation.*' (Pasquinelli, 2012). It was certainly necessary to find mechanisms to reward authorship, but those based on intellectual property seem to favour the rentism that characterises contemporary global capitalism. Despite being innovative, Creative Commons may introduce the economic parasitism presented by Pasquinelli and the ambiguities of 'free' labour introduced by other authors.

To understand this parasitism, one must go back to the very notion of common. In *Commonwealth*, Hardt and Negri bring two distinct definitions:

the first and most traditional is related to natural goods – it is the natural common – while the second is a dynamic notion that involves at the same time the product of labour and the means of future production – it is the artificial common made up of the languages we create, the social practices we establish, the modes of sociability that define our relationships, and so on. This form of common does not submit itself to a logic of scarcity, like the first. Expropriation of this second form of the common is the key to understanding the new forms of labour exploitation. After approaching the two forms of the common – natural and artificial – the authors begin to address different ways of expropriating the common. In traditional industrial production, capital plays an essential role in the process of organization and production. It gathers the workers in the factory, gives them the tools to work together, and provides them with a cooperation plan and enforces such cooperation. In contemporary forms of production, cognitive work and affective work usually produce autonomous cooperation that is not related to the capitalist command, from the more limited circumstances such as telemarketing centres or food services to the freest ones in the creative sector. Capital captures and expropriates value by exploiting what is produced, in a sense, externally to it. Creative work tends to be autonomous. When crossing it, capital becomes even more predatory. We produce ‘free’ work in exchange for promises of visibility. The force of this expropriation is based on this ambivalence.

Gerald Raunig, for instance, questions the idea according to which the degradation of cultural work would take place only by imposed processes, from outside onto the producing subjects (Raunig, 2008). Raunig reverses, one by one, the criticisms made, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, by Adorno and Horkheimer (2002, 94–137), to the cultural industries. In opposition to the culture industries described by those authors, creative industries are not organized as large communication and entertainment companies, but as small business networks by producers of communication, fashion, design, and popular culture, clustered in districts and articulated by networks. Differently from the culture industries, creative industries are ephemeral and based on projects: they are project-institutions that at first emerged based on the rejection of subordinated labour and on self-determination. We find here an important ambiguity: if on the one hand creativity is one's self-creation, on the other hand the continuous demand of the producing subject – of one's creativity, one's intelligence and one's social media – leads to a scenario of precariousness in economical, social-cultural and even psychological terms. Each one depends on one's own creativity to live or survive. Here, according to Raunig, the effective loss of autonomy as predicted by Adorno and Horkheimer does take place. The contemporary worker and especially the creative worker is in reality a self-employed person, with no social protection, who jumps from one project to another, and is many times forced to become a small company or corporate person to be then sub-contracted by mid-sized and large communication and entertainment conglomerates and, in the case of Brazil, also by NGOs and

‘cultural foundations’ that are actually funded by public money converted into private financing, miraculously transformed into a public-private partnership.

We are less and less faced with the old forms of exploitation and increasingly with this ambiguity of the ‘free’ labour that characterises creative industries. Guy Debord said that ‘The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images’ (Debord, 1992) and this is particularly true in the creative economy. It could be said that ‘image’, or rather ‘visibility’, is the currency of exchange between creative actors and some productive forms of organization, media and museums among them. The spectacle takes the form of a promise of ‘visibility’. But the visibility is asymmetric: while one side is remunerated by global flows, the other receives nothing. There is no job, no salary, no contract and even less social protection but only a promise of ‘visibility’ under infinite modalities of labour precariousness. An integrated system of production/promotion (Compton, 2004).

We presented the relation between the large museums described at the beginning of this article and the creative districts with events, from the huge one such as the Olympic Games to the small ones such as the Design Week. Labour related to them may develop ambiguous conditions of submission and freedom, and then generate economic and even existential precariousness. What this huge carioca industry is producing is subjectivity. It is a global subjectivity that, in the case of Rio de Janeiro, corresponds to Globo’s subjectivity. The episode of the Mauá Pier versus the City Hall showed that it imposes itself even upon the government authority. This immense twenty-first century creative industry is a totally integrated system of urban monumentalization, productive clusterization and subjectivity control in the networks that articulates all these dimensions. The creative ‘Global’ city promises to be the absolute realm of contemporary spectacle: Spectacle 2.0. It requires a creative critique and a critical creativity (understanding critique not as a mere reaction and refusal, but creation, autonomy, and an opening of possibilities) that may comprise different kinds of conflicts and dissents.

#### 4. Final Considerations

Just before the Design Week event started (again, ‘organized’ by Globo) some players such as the ESDI – Superior School of Industrial Design, CAPO, the Carioca Design Centre, Matéria Brasil and Ativa Peçaço organized themselves to hold a common event: the Parallel Circuit. Amongst the activities, there was a gathering organized in Praça dos Estivadores<sup>19</sup> [Dockers’ Square] with cultural actors who have been working there for decades, creative professionals recently set up and dwellers of the borough. It is not possible to describe here the entirety of the debate, but we can point that out it was an important exchange between the traditional cultural agents and the new creative actors about their role in today’s processes of urban transformation and a

strong critique from some of them of the spectacular manner with which the Wonder Port refurbished the so-called Historical and Archaeological Circuit for the Celebration of African Heritage – The Valongo Docks, the Suspended Gardens of Valongo, the present Dockers' Square [Praça dos Estivadores] or the former Largo do Depósito, Pedra do Sal, Centro Cultural José Bonifácio and the Pretos Novos Cemetery – leaving aside the carioca building of Afoxé Filhos de Gandhi, which has been there since its foundation in 1951. The contrast between the completely degraded two-floor house and the spectacularized surroundings is clear for all to see. The cultural actors complained of the disregard of the government and also of the use – by the creative actors and the tourists and for merely recreational purposes – of spaces that, for the mainly Afro-descendant community of the area, are spaces of religious life and sometimes of painful memories as is the case of the Valongo docks and the present Dockers' Square but also of practices of resistance as in the case of the samba of Pedra do Sal and of the Afoxé Filhos de Gandhi. For them, what the lack of a refit of the headquarters of the Afoxé shows is that the creation of the Historical and Archaeological Circuit for the Celebration of African Heritage celebrates what is dead and, in a calculative way, keeps aside everyone and everything that resists the process of spectacularization of culture and of the city itself. It is a circuit of an inert and sometimes or somehow impotent memory. However, the Ativa Peçaço #1 gathering seems to have opened, in its own horizontal and plural dynamics, a possibility for commons among actors directly involved in productive and political activities and beyond public-private partnerships and representations and then, who knows, the possibility for a live and resistant memory to endure.

What is the problem with the PPPs (Public Private Partnerships) on which this spectacular urban project is based? The problem is that its rhetoric does not always correspond to a financial and fiscal reality: what is held as 'private' is frequently based on tax exemptions and is therefore, in a certain way, 'public'. The severity of the problem extends further when the PPP-based administration covers the whole city. In this case, the terms become even more significant: we are no longer acting citizens in a common urban space-time, but spectators of partnerships between the public authority and the corporate management, from which we are systematically excluded. The right to the city, and the struggle for it, face processes of urban commodification as Henri Lefebvre pointed out in the 1960s and David Harvey did more recently. However, our point is not to reinforce the polarization between public and private, but to insist on the fact that PPPs do not include common people in their decisions, which leads to an even more complex theme which is the corruption within the very system of representation, where the relations of private interests – chiefly those of construction companies – hand in hand with the interests of public authorities – leads to the exclusion of the citizens. Or rather, it is the exclusion of the ordinary citizens (not only the voter, but citizens in their daily actions) from the PPPs that leads to the corruption of the entire system. Urban commonality is

no abstraction. It can start to be built in a gathering in Dockers' Square between a population that is being gentrified, that is, expropriated not only from their productive space but also from their existential territory on one hand and, on the other, organizations of a creative youth involved in project-companies. It may be created by resistance to different sorts of expropriation. Some of them are more traditional as in the case of the gentrification of the cities, while others are more recent as in the case of the 'free' labour so characteristic of the creative industries, and of which we made some quick analyses.

The brief retrospective from 2010 to 2016 done here, from the first steps of a new project for the city until its effective execution under the conducting of the works that were ended with the Olympic Games, meant to bring a contribution to the reflection on the ambiguities of 'free work', but also on the possibilities of commons (beyond the PPPs) in Rio de Janeiro of the twenty-first century. We saw along these years how a media group makes this city the territory and the network of a monstrous industry of subjectivity, with little capacity for the government to contain it. The theme of the 'Spectacle' is not new, but new are the manners of separation and expropriation, not only of labour but of life itself, which is more and more 'mediated' than actually experienced in its multiple dimensions. Resist what? There is no synthesis or solution, but only struggle.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> To honour Luis Paulo Conde, mayor of Rio de Janeiro from 1997 to 2001.
- <sup>2</sup> <http://outraspalavras.net/posts/rio-dois-projetos-para-uma-metropole-conhecimento/>
- <sup>3</sup> <http://g1.globo.com/rio-de-janeiro/noticia/2012/07/rio-recebe-o-titulo-de-patrimonio-cultural-da-humanidade.html>
- <sup>4</sup> <http://www.boulevard-olimpico.com> e <http://bit.ly/2dgUurc>
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/ComitePopularCopaRJ/?fref=ts>
- <sup>6</sup> <http://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/rio-2016/noticia/2016-08/movimentos-sociais-questionam-legado-dos-jogos-olimpicos>
- <sup>7</sup> <http://www.portomaravilha.com.br/conteudo/portomaravilha/cultura.pdf>
- <sup>8</sup> <http://www.districtocriativo.com.br>
- <sup>9</sup> <http://g1.globo.com/rio-de-janeiro/olimpiadas/rio2016/noticia/2015/08/districto-criativo-do-porto-e-criado-para-buscar-negocios-apos-rio-2016.html>
- <sup>10</sup> <http://www.portomaravilha.com.br/cdurp>
- <sup>11</sup> <http://www.portonovosa.com/pt-br/estrutura-acionaria>
- <sup>12</sup> 'Once refurbished, the Port Area attracts businesses, tourists and dwellers' is the headline in the Globo newspaper of 27/08/2016: [oglobo.globo.com/epaper/viewer.aspx](http://oglobo.globo.com/epaper/viewer.aspx)
- <sup>13</sup> <http://grupoglobo.globo.com>
- <sup>14</sup> <http://eventos.oglobo.globo.com/semana-design-rio/2016/>

- <sup>15</sup> <http://www.rioetc.com.br/muito-prazer/muito-prazer-distrito-criativo-do-porto/>
- <sup>16</sup> <http://oglobo.globo.com/opiniaio/precisamos-falar-de-politicas-habitacionais-19677047> (9/7/2016) e <http://oglobo.globo.com/opiniaio/vender-inteligencia-19484857> (11/6/2016)
- <sup>17</sup> <http://portomaravilha.com.br/noticiasdetalhe/Galeria-arte-urbana-%C3%A9-aberto:4597>
- <sup>18</sup> The occupations: Chiquinha Gonzaga, Zumbi dos Palmares, Quilombo das Guerreiras, and Flor do Asfalto.
- <sup>19</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/events/290977531266724/>

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## CHAPTER 8

# Data Derives: Confronting Digital Geographic Information as Spectacle

Jim Thatcher and Craig M. Dalton

### 1. Introduction – The Spectacle of Data

*‘[W]e are sitting at home, participating in an information economy in which we consume mediated realities from the screen and produce our own mediated realities for the databases’ (Bachler 2013, 32)<sup>1</sup>*

We live in a world in which code, algorithms, and data mediate, saturate, and sustain global capitalism (Graham, 2005). Smartphones, credit card logs, official records, and a variety of other sur- and sous-veillant systems attempt to transform everyday life into a series of quantifiable data sets (Berry 2011). Data generated through quotidian daily practices, such as searching for a nearby restaurant on *Yelp*, is dispossessed from the data creator and linked together with billions of other data points in ways which come to *stand for* the individuals represented by said data (Thatcher et al. 2016).

This is a chapter about critically engaging the data of everyday life – that data created through the daily, mundane use of mobile phones, store loyalty cards, bus passes, and other banal trappings of late capitalist modernity. To do so, we

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first argue that data functions as a commodity in two ways within what we, following Gregg (2014), call the data spectacle. Data is first produced as a commodity, a site for speculative capital investment, and second as the quantified, spectacularised representation of self, reflected back at individuals from the data they generate. The latter is part of the emerging ‘quantified self-city-nation’ (Wilson 2015), an ‘entangled socio-technical mesh through which individuals both come to know and are made known, sorted, and (in)visible to themselves and society’ (Thatcher 2016, 4).

Through data, capital colonizes not only everyday life, but the very representations of the self. To confront this, we argue for a return to one of the earliest psychogeographic practices of the Situationists, the *dérive*. Building on the *dérive* and on the more recent work of the Precarias a la Deriva collective, we propose a data *dérive* as a praxis that begins the reclaiming of time, space, and self from the presentations and representations of the data spectacle.

## 2. The Double Role of Data Within the Spectacle

*The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images. (Debord 1967, Thesis 4)*

One problem with attempts to write definitively of the Situationists is that it was a group organized against such definitives. Contradictions emerge within their thought both intentionally and due to interpersonal conflict and splintering. We do not seek to write a history of the Situationists as several already exist (see, inter-alia, Wark 2011; Plant 1992; Marcus 1989 for various engagements), nor to present our interpretations of Situationist thought as austere, objective truths; what we write is only our partial interpretations thereof. As Wark (2011, 73) notes, within the corpus of the Situationists, everyone has their favorites, ‘champions’ who they hoist out as representative of the whole. Here, our goal is to develop a specific interpretation of the spectacle and how it has come to function through the data of everyday life, first following Gregg’s explication of the scopophilic nature of the data spectacle as a tool for imagining ‘command and control through seeing’ (Gregg 2014, 37 following Halpern 2014), and then extending that idea through the colonization of everyday life through data (Thatcher et al. 2016). We begin with our cobbled together, *detoured* spectacle.

The modern spectacle, for Debord, is ‘the autocratic reign of the market economy which had acceded to an irresponsible sovereignty, and the totality of new techniques of government which accompanied this reign’ (Debord 1998, 2). ‘It is the generalization of private life’ (Lefebvre in Wark 2011, 104) that emerged when the commodity form was ‘no longer something that enters into the sphere of experience in fulfilling particular needs or desires, but has itself become the constituent of the world of experience’ (Chu and Sanyal 2015, 399). Like the culture industry, the spectacle presents continual false choices

as a means of provoking continual consumptive practices (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). For Debord it is also something more, a *totality* in which all life occurs and through which all life is experienced.

For some, like Mitchell (2008), the totality of the spectacle overstates the nuances of lived experience and therefore weakens its conceptual utility, reducing it to an obvious intellectual fetish by which critical theorists may toss water balloons at the armoured tanks of capitalist modernity. *Le Monde* noted this irony of critiquing the spectacle from within its totality in 1987: 'That modern society is a society of the spectacle goes without saying ... What is so droll, however, is that all the books which do analyse this phenomenon, usually to deplore it, cannot but join the spectacle if they're to get attention' (in Debord 1998, 5). However, such views mistake a totalizing tendency for static totality. The point of the spectacle is that it dynamically colonizes and subjugates daily life at all levels of experience and at all times. In so doing, it 'rigidly separates what is *possible* from what is *permitted*' (Debord 1967, *Thesis* 25).

New technological forms, especially for communication and industrial organization, make this possible (Debord 1967, *Thesis* 24), but it is also through the technicity of new technology that the spectacle may be contested. Whilst Rancière correctly observes that 'there is no straightforward road from the fact of looking at a spectacle to the fact of understanding the state of the world' and that the very ubiquity of the detournement of images has muted their power, if it ever existed (Ranciere 2011, 75). He is making an observation which Debord and Constant (Nieuwenhuys) had already realized in the 1960s. Constant's New Babylon accepts technicity, that 'co-constitutive milieu of relations between the human and their technical supports' (Crogan, P. and Kennedy, H. 2009 cited in Bucher 2012, p. 4), as the key means by which to think the 'possibilities of social and technical transformation together' (Wark 2011, 145). The spectacle then emerges through and with technology and must be contested through and with its technicity. With this duality in mind, we turn to Gregg's extension of the spectacle into data.

### 2.1. Data as the Site of Speculative Investment

*The blindness and muteness of the data to which positivism reduces the world passes over into language itself, which is limited to registering those data (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 135).*

Much like *Le Monde's* observation of the banality of the spectacle's totality, it now seems almost quaint to argue that data has become a site for massive speculative investment. Data has become the 'de facto standard through which the world is ordered and understood,' with 'Big Data' emerging as a paradigmatic epistemology through which cities, science, business, and much else can and must be understood (boyd and Crawford, 2012). Sometimes referred to as the

‘fourth paradigm’ for science (Kitchin 2014, 130), at an extreme this approach to knowledge production creates a state of ‘knowing without understanding’ (Andrejevic 2013, 26) wherein ‘numbers speak for themselves’ (Anderson 2008) amidst a naïve ‘pseudopositivist’ understanding of quantification (Wyly 2014, 30).

This hubristic orientation towards a world known totally through ‘Big Data’ has been the subject of many critiques in both the popular and academic presses. New data systems, especially those that link location and temporal information, have been investigated as ‘fixes’ for capitalism’s tendencies towards over-accumulation (Greene and Joseph 2015), their historical entanglement in social physics and geodemographic profiling examined and their role and function as a commodity explored in detail (Barnes and Wilson 2014; Dalton and Thatcher 2015). While much (often digital) ink has been spilled regarding the fallacies and capitalist imperatives at the heart of new data accumulation and analysis regimes (not the least of which is our own), this *recognition* has done little to curb either the generation of said data or its valuation as a commodity. At the time of writing, IBM has estimated that mobile device use generates slightly over five petabytes of data a day (IBM 2013), or roughly the yearly amount of data generated by the Large Hadron collider each week (Dalton et al. 2016). Snap Inc., a single corporation whose application creates, extracts, and analyses data through its use, is currently planning an IPO valuation at around twenty-five billion dollars (Farrell et al. 2016).

This push towards a flat, quantified rendering of the world in numbers is hardly new (Foucault, 2008; Scott, 1998), but as the growth in both the size of new data systems and their valuation continues unabated, these new systems, and the epistemological orientation towards the world they entail, move towards a new societal totality. Gregg (2014) connects one aspect of these new systems with a new form of the spectacle, what she terms the data spectacle. Drawing on Halpern (2014), Gregg (2014, 37) suggests that the data spectacle emerges from the ‘aesthetic pleasure and visual allure of witnessing large data sets at scale.’ A modernist ‘visual rhetoric’ produces this scopophilic pleasure in which data requires only ‘the indication of potential to achieve veracity’ (Gregg 2014, 39, 40). Studying the professional world of Big Data engineers and conferences, Gregg correctly sees a future data spectacle built around the ‘fantasy of command and control through seeing’ (*ibid.*, 37). Such Big Data visualizations and systems seek to produce a world in their own image rather than simply interpret an existing one (Kitchin et al. 2015). In their leveraging of massive interlinked data sets, they offer a disembodied, apparently omniscient god’s eye view of that world (Haraway 1991; Kingsbury and Jones, 2009). While this desire and its limitations have precedents, *what is new* are the types of data being leveraged and the scales at which these systems operate.

Gregg’s article seeks to advance ‘an ethical data economy,’ one that understands both ‘the assembly of data and its capacity to act on our behalf’ (2014, 47). She admits that her own vision of the data spectacle is ‘certainly more

optimistic than my reference to Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* would imply' (2014, 39) and firmly situates her data spectacle within the visual fantasies of top-down command and control that ideologically underpin such presentations of 'Big Data.' There are overlapping structural and affective similarities to these modernist fantasies and their accompanying scopophilic pleasures with the creation and use of maps.<sup>2</sup> However, due to this focus, Gregg's definition of the data spectacle remains incomplete. By rooting the data spectacle in a top down performance by and for engineers and other elites, Gregg's spectacle misses the scalability of the data spectacle and the fact that it is increasingly situated and embodied (Wilmott 2016, 4). The 'data of everyday life' (Thatcher 2016), when produced in situated practice, collected in bulk, synthesized together, algorithmically analysed, and served back into everyday practice gives rise to the 'quantified self-city-nation' (Wilson 2015). The data spectacle is just as much about the mediation of everyday lived experience as it is any Big Data dashboard or algorithm. The quotidian nature of the data that constitutes much of the data spectacle serves as the second move for our definition.

## 2.2. The Colonization of Everyday Life in Data

*We have thus moved beyond the theorization of our mobile devices as a type of prosthetic to our bodies ... but instead have to conceive of our devices as absolutely integral to the very foundations of embodied space in the digital age (Farman 2012, 46)*

In the latter half of her piece on the data spectacle, Gregg attempts to understand the 'work that data does on our behalf' and puts forth the concept of *data sweat* as a means of moving past the data shadow and the 'ocular-centric ideas of information sovereignty' it entails (Gregg 2014, 38, 45). Whether data sweat or data fumes (Thatcher 2014), Gregg correctly notes the need to move beyond a singular visual metaphor by which Big Data visualizations function. Something more is occurring with respect to the data created by and through the quotidian practices that have developed around smart-device use (Ash et al. 2016).

On the one hand, 'the linked data about the individual comes to *stand for* the individual who created it' as the 'individual that capital can see' (Thatcher et al. 2016, 9). This is the epistemic leap from data to individual that lies at the heart of Big Data's mythology, it is the scopophilic pleasure of top-down control through the data spectacle, and it is the hubristic claim of numbers speaking for themselves. On the other hand, this digital individual of modelled consumptive patterns is not simply reflected back at the person it (re)presents, but rather tracks, shapes, and delimits the very options presented to and actions taken by said person. Ostensibly pleasurable experiences and notional advantages are offered in exchange for the production and extraction of their data.

As previously private moments and decisions, such as what restaurant to visit or which potential sexual partner to contact, are mediated via data producing and capturing technologies, daily life becomes further colonized by capitalist interests (Thatcher et al. 2016). The data generated by such actions is then fed back into analytic systems which algorithmically shape what options will be presented to the person the next time (s)he makes use of the service (Graham 2005). This process creates howling feedback loops through which lived experiences are channelled and collected in pursuit of smooth, predictable consumption (Thatcher 2013; Wilson 2012).

This howling feedback loop, by which data is created through an action that is then fed into the system to influence future actions, is part of late capitalism's 'corporeal corkscrewing inwards' (Lohr 2012; Beller 2012, 8). Not only does the data economy spring as a site for speculative capitalist investment, a potential 'fix' for systems of overaccumulation (Leszczynski 2014; Wilson 2012; and elsewhere), but also as individuals come to know, are made known, sorted, rendered visible (or not) to both themselves and others (Thatcher 2016). This entangled mesh expands across scales and suffuses quantification and capital imperatives into previously private times and spaces (Wilson 2015). It is the sleek, predictable, inexorably *better* world promised by this socio-technical milieu (Morozov 2014) that has colonized daily life.

Our definition of the data spectacle, then, recognizes it as a totalizing ideology, one built upon a series of myths in which the world can (and is) rendered flat, smooth, and calculable; one where the pursuit of ever-larger datasets is both inexorable and always productive of better interpretations, better understandings of the world. But, in the ways that this spectacle accumulates and is created through the data of everyday life, in the ways that it is made scalable, embodied, situated, and partial (Wilmott 2016), it is always open to contestation through that 'co-constitutive milieu' of humans and their use of the technologies they create. While there are other ways to break apart the seeming totality of 'Big Data' (See, for example, work on data assemblages as in Kitchin 2014, Kitchin and Lauriault 2014, and elsewhere), it is through the Situationist practice of the *dérive* that we find the ability to 'attack the 'enemy' at his base, within ourselves' (Trocchi 1964 in Marcus 1989, 173), to begin to contest that 'corporeal corkscrew inwards.'

### 3. Drifting Towards Data

*Now the city would move like a map you were drawing; now you would begin to live your life like a book you were writing (Marcus 1989, 166)*

In the 1950s, as Paris prepared for yet another top-down infrastructural redesign, Debord and other Situationists developed and deployed the method of *dérive* (drifting). Drawing from Ivan Chitchevlov and the inhabitants of post-war Saint-Germain, the Situationist *dérives* meant to study 'the colonization of

everyday life at the heart of empire' (Wark 2011, 22). It was a rigorous, methodological praxis through which '[t]he city would no longer be experienced as a scrim of commodities and power' but rather as the means of achieving an 'epistemology of everyday time and life' (Marcus 1989, 164). Specifically, they developed the *dérive* as a radical approach to understand urban psycho-geography: the structure of cities in their continuities of ambience, nexuses, connections and barriers (fig. 1) (Debord 1955; 1956; Khatib 1958). The *dérive* was an 'active type of *flâneurship* whereby the formerly aristocratic walker was transformed into a conscious, political actor' (Flanagan 2008, 3).

Unfortunately, the *dérive* had almost no effects on the material redevelopment of the Parisian landscape in the late 1950s. Its importance, though, lies not in the failed restructuring of Paris, but as a critical method – the *dérive* involves an active frame of mind, sensitive to and engaging with the lived city as driving and shaped by the processes of capital. It was an approach to 'provoke critical notice of the totality of lived experience and reverse the stultifying passivity of the spectacle' (Plant 1992, 60). While it may have failed at achieving the latter in any structural way, the importance of the *dérive* as method is clear in the multiple subsequent psychogeographical investigations (Bonnett 1992; Pinder 1996; Bassett 2004; Wood 2010). Given that Debord saw his theory of the *dérive* as necessarily incomplete, we propose a data *dérive* as an extension of two branches of Situationist-influenced thought and praxis: First, the modified drifting of Precarias a la Deriva, and second, the colonization of everyday life by data that has come to function as the data spectacle. Our data *dérive* synthesis is a means of becoming aware of and confronting 'data doubles' (Haggerty and Ericson 2000) and, in so doing, examining that 'negative space between an individual and their digital representation' (Dalton et al. 2016, 4).

Precarias a la Deriva (Precarious Women Adrift), is a feminist radical collective based in Spain. The purpose of their work is to better understand the circumstances of and build situated resistances and radical solidarities among precarious women workers on the margins of traditionally male, union-centered jobs and labour organizing. This kind of work often involves women labouring in temporary jobs, part-time work, and per-hour contracts, working in domestic circumstances, telemarketing, food service, healthcare, advertising, education, prostitution, and research. Given that such labour tends to be decentralized is often unregulated, how is it possible to resist? 'What is your strike?' (Precarias a la Deriva 2003). The *dérive* offers a critical way to engage such spatial and social issues. 'We opted for the method of the drift as a form of articulating this diffuse network of situations and experiences, producing a subjective cartography of the metropolis through our daily routes.' (*ibid.*)

Unlike the Situationist *dérive*, often practiced by privileged men and lacking a destination, Precarias' drifting works from each member's situated position. 'In our particular version, we opt ... for a situated drift which would move through the daily spaces of each one of us, while maintaining the tactic's multisensorial and open character' (*ibid.*). A member of the collective would lead





Fig. 1: Precarias a la Deriva showing their drift with domestic workers through the workers' everyday lives in Madrid. *Precarias a la Deriva*.

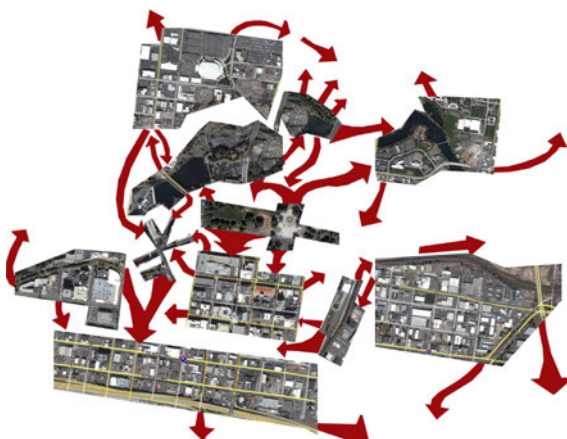


Fig. 2: A situationist-inspired map depicting the results of the dérive method in Spokane, WA. *Jenny Cestnik*.



a group of drifters through her daily practices and work. As a group, all would reflect on and talk about conditions and resistances along the way. By travelling along and engaging in discussions and co-interviews, drifters could better understand each other's situations and forms of labour, making it possible to share coping mechanisms and building mutual radical awareness and solidarity. 'Thus, the drift is converted into a moving interview, crossed through by the collective perception of the environment.' (*ibid.*; Precarias a la Deriva 2006).

The work of Precarias a la Deriva brings a sensitivity to people's situations and practices, in particular social production, to the *dérive* frame of mind. Such a *dérive* is not limited to the environment of the city, but also includes the multitude of people and relations that constitute it through practice. Debord noted that the 'most fruitful numerical arrangement' for the *dérive* consisted of small groups. Precarias a la Deriva integrate the standpoint and experiences of a drifter's everyday life directly into the small group's drift itself. Their *dérive* is about coming to know the spaces of labour and the (often invisible) lives of those who work in them. Where Sadler (1999, 98) suspects the first *dérives* were also moments for dialectical discourse, Precarias a la Deriva makes this function explicit. Furthermore, where Debord and Sadler both see the *dérive* as functioning best when groups are composed of the like-minded, Precarias a la Deriva opens the *dérive* as an act for the forming of shared radical subjectivities. By following member/workers, Precarias a la Deriva makes legible their lived experiences and resistances.

The data *dérive* we propose builds from Precarias a la Deriva's version of the *dérive* in such a way as to confront and counter the data spectacle. It does so by combining exploration of environments with an investigation of the radical alternative possibilities hidden within the contexts of our daily (digital) lives. The key theoretical move for the data *dérive* is a recognition of the separation between the depth and nuance of an individual's lived experience and the data produced by those experiences. In other words, the data *dérive* confronts the data spectacle by attuning its participants to the epistemological leap between individual and data and, in so doing, it creates spaces for radical contestations of capitalism's colonization of ourselves. There is no strict form for a data *dérive* and, like Debord's *dérive*, we do not view this guide towards it to be a definitive or final statement; however, we can think of several ways a data *dérive* might occur, and in defining it as precisely as possible we hope to inspire more.

#### 4. Drifting Through Data

*O, gentlemen, the time of life is short! ... An if we live, we live to tread on kings. (Shakespeare, Henry IV as quoted in Debord 1967)*

To better know the roles which data play in our lives and to possibly identify radical alternatives, even if only temporary solidarities or resistances, the data

dérive requires an examination of data. Further, if it is to contest the data spectacle and the corporeal corkscrew of late capitalism into our lives, the commodification of previously private times, places, and actions, then it also requires an examination of data that appears to *stand for* an individual. To work from a particular person's situation and due to privacy concerns, we recommend that data dérives use the data of a participant. What this might entail, then, is an exploration of the contours of one of the dérive member's data history. Take for example the digital data of a Google Maps Timeline, which, when given permission, will track and make available the complete movement history of a mobile phone.<sup>3</sup> Although these maps strive for accuracy, they are often of a point-to-point nature, capturing where an individual has spent time, rather than the specific courses they took to get from place to place.

Figure 3 represents a partial day in one of the authors' lives. As can be seen, Jim appears to have driven in a path that leads through parks, buildings, and even a residential liberal arts campus in a path between a coffee shop and back. From this, Google correctly infers that Jim likes coffee and, specifically, likes that coffee shop. As an author, Jim can testify that he does like their coffee, though even without that statement, the data is sufficient for the purposes of both targeting ads at him and selling his amalgamated digital personality to other advertisers (Dalton and Thatcher 2015). This is only part of the data spectacle's rendering of Jim on that day. A data dérive might confront this rendering by traversing the route specified, but this time actually walking across and around the buildings and parks which were obviously never part of the original route. In this way, dérive participants might better understand the spaces of their lives as filled with different ambiances, swirls, and psychogeographical effects that exist within the actually existent environment. Further, while doing so, the drifter whose data is being followed can and should conduct a dialogue with other participants over what spaces, what moments, were selected as destinations within the data. *Why this coffee shop and not that? Why a right turn here and a left there? How is that coffee shop important to your productivity? Given the geographical distribution of your labour, what is your strike?*

As geographers, we focus our example upon spatial data and the spatial experience. Drawing from psychogeographical praxis, this makes sense, but it is not to imply that the data dérive must use spatial data or involve moving through space. Debord noted the possibility for a 'static-dérive' and this is certainly possible with data. The data of everyday life need not be spatial, for example an individual might download their entire Facebook history and decide to drift through it – exploring, asking, and answering about the state of their life in relation to the data. The point that cannot be removed, though, is that in order to confront the data spectacle, the data must be the data that has come to stand for an individual within it. Our data dérive, and we are not so arrogant as to think that our methods are the only ones possible, is aimed at confronting the data that continually attempts to define individuals and shape their lives in myriad seen and unseen ways. It is a confrontation with the 'quantified self – city – nation.'

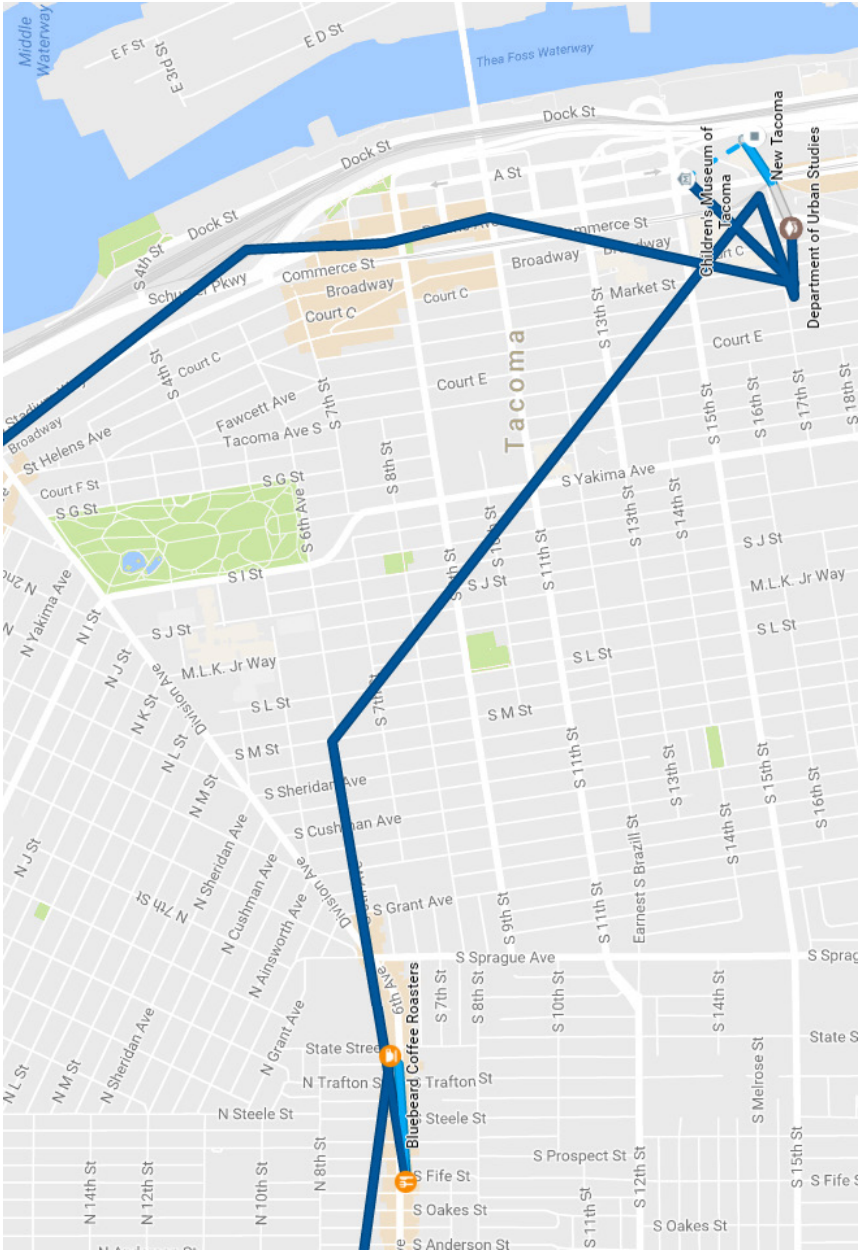


Fig. 3: Thursday, September 1, 2016.

Confronting something so personal can be a terrifying and intimidating process. We do not control and certainly do not fully know what data exist within the estimated 1,500 data points Acxiom has collected on hundreds of millions of individuals (Singer 2012). What is revealed may be unpleasant or difficult to face, it may be wrong or embarrassing. But, as Trocchi writes in 1964, we must ‘attack the ‘enemy’ at his base, within ourselves’ (in Marcus 1989, 173). On the one hand, such discomfort and danger was always a part of the *dérive*, a disorienting, at times inebriated, and exhausting affair. On the other hand, as a method for producing intersubjective awareness and alliances, it is necessary to acknowledge that not all individuals exist with the same privileges amidst the data spectacle. We are able to release Figure 3 because of our relatively privileged position, because the knowledge of what coffee shop Jim attended and what parks are near his office does not endanger him in any way. This is not true for all data about all individuals. As Flanagan (2009, 206) writes, the ‘drift’ for many ‘is not one of exploration or privilege, but a search for a place to sleep or for labour.’ *Precarias a la Deriva* grapples with this uneven relation and makes it a source of potential understandings and alliances. It is for this reason that we read our *dérive* through their development of the method. We call for a data *dérive*, for resisting the data spectacle, for confronting the gap between an individual and the data that stands for them, for creating spaces of critique, and we view it as only one of potentially many.

(To be continued ...)

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> We begin each section with a brief epigraph to both introduce the discussion and to highlight the wealth of critical thinking around digital technologies and data. In some sense, they are intended as inspiration for theoretical drifting akin to the flexibility espoused by Lyotard in his later works.
- <sup>2</sup> While it has been impossible to fully address critical cartography in this chapter, for various explorations of the affective, structural, state, and data-based biases and powers found in the production and uses of maps, see, inter-alia, Harley (1989), Godlewska (1989), Wood (1992), Schulten (2001), Pickles (2004), Parks (2005), Pavlovskaya (2006), Sieber (2006), Kitchin and Dodge (2007), Proven (2009), Rose-Redwood (2015) and elsewhere.
- <sup>3</sup> Many users may have this ‘feature’ turned on unsuspectingly. Regardless, it can be found at: <https://www.google.com/maps/timeline>

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## CHAPTER 9

# Branding, Selfbranding, Making: The Neototalitarian Relation Between Spectacle and Prosumers in the Age of Cognitive Capitalism

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### 1. Introduction

This chapter analyses the process of consumers' cognitive exploitation in which they simultaneously stand at the centre of the universe peopled by global brands and the victim of a sort of identity burglary. This process already became visible during the 1990s with a revolutionary approach of companies to communication and advertising (Klein, 2000), but it became even more powerful recently with the emergence of a new digital economy based on the centrality of UGC (User Generated Content). The first idea of a total exploitation of the consumer comes from the world of global brands that implemented a process of fetishization of the consumer's experiential field (Barile 2009), which was somehow prepared during the 1990s, many years before the development of the so-called Web 2.0. We could state that the positive idea of a productive consumer has

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been first theorized by Toffler (1979), then adopted by the global corporations during the 1990s as a rhetorical principle, finally implemented as a concrete integrated environment (digital+real) with the innovation of social media. It was only after that moment that the Web 2.0 became the tool to exploit the user's emotional capital (Illouz 2007) as well as other abstract categories such as the 'social' (Lovink 2011) or the amateur's creativity (Keen 2007). Adopting the same democratic rhetoric of the global brands in the 1990s, the digital economy has come to be able to make a full cognitive exploitation of the users. If in the 'industrial world the social brain is modelled by standardized acts of physical production...cognitive capitalism is all about the standardization of cognitive processes, and mental activity cannot be detached or diverted by the flow of information' (Berardi 2013, 11). However, the emphasis on the standard is not the fundamental aspect of this 'object' because, as we will investigate, cognitive capitalism is even more interested in the qualitative dimension.

Debord's notions of spectacle, very powerful and inspiring for the reasons here discussed, covers only a part of the further capitalistic development and must be integrated with other approaches that have been elaborated during his period or even older, but are somehow more useful to describe the contemporary transformation of cognitive capitalism. Considering that cognitive capitalism can just be considered as 'one of a number that have tried to politically inflect the colourless notion of the knowledge or information economy' (Terranova 2013, 46), this paper will discuss three fundamental models to understand the evolution of this system and the relation between imaginary, power and consumption.

The first model is the timeliness of Debord's notion of spectacle (1970) and its relationship with commodities and fetishism. The second model is Bateson's double bind (1972) that can be adopted to analyse the hegemony of global brands since the moment of its peak of world visibility during the 1990s. The third one is Foucault's 'ritual of confession' (1978) that will be more useful to examine the selfbranding strategies at the time of Web 2.0. Between these three models there are similarities and differences. For example, all of them are based on a sort of metonymic relation between the totality and the parts. According to Debord, the radical evolution of the capitalistic society moves from the centrality of the goods to the centrality of the spectacle which can be considered as a new and more impactful 'general equivalent', so that 'in the spectacle the totality of the commodity world is visible in one piece' (49). Bateson's double bind reflects on the controversial relation between the child and the mother, that we can apply to the general relation between the consumer and the brand where the brand is basically a total world of meaning surrounding completely the consumer experience. The third model is also based on a metonymic configuration since Foucault's confession is a device in which 'the dominant agency does not reside within the constraint of the person who speaks but rather within the one who listens and says nothing; neither does it reside within the one who knows and answers but within the one who questions and is not supposed to know' (Foucault 1978, 61–62). Notwithstanding the similarities of their structures,

these three models are able to describe different ages of cognitive capitalism, especially the evolution from a totalitarian role of consumption to a neototalitarian dimension (Barile 2012). With the expression of 'neototalitarian' I consider that the form of spectacle moves from a totally strategic orientation (as in Debord's reflection) through a more tactical and mimetic approach in which the spectacle pretends to be more authentic than real life. This is why the Debordian powerful intuition of the spectacle as the real essence of power and consumption must be developed through other theoretical models that are able to manage the cognitive and emotional dimensions of consumption.

If in the case of the global brands the cognitive exploitation of the prosumer is still more rhetorical and played on the side of the communication campaigns, in the case of selfbranding, analysed as confession, the exploitation is extended, to the entire cycle of social life so that, as Debord probably forecasted, there is no distinction anymore between image and reality, or a better description today, between digital and real. In fact, selfbranding is not just a technique of self-presentation via social media, but it is a more complex strategy based on the transformation of emotions as a competitive resource in the global market of identities (Barile 2012). Therefore, what follows after the aforementioned third stage, based on the contemporary productive and participative emancipation of the makers (Gauntlett 2011), could be considered as a new form of over-exploitation in which production is externalized into the consumption. The cognitive hegemony of global brands at this stage could be empowered by a hyper-sophisticated storytelling.

The contemporary world of communication is ruled by two main trends. On the one hand, global brands will shift their scope to the direction of real content providers, producing even more elaborated examples of storytelling (McStay 2016). On the other hand, the overlap and integration between the virtual and the real in the so-called end of digital dualism (Jurgenson 2011), made possible by the Internet of Things (IOT) and other DIY devices such as Arduino, could create a new alliance between physical objects and their symbolic meanings. If those two processes are generally considered as positive and creative, their intersection could make possible a world of ultra-exploitation in which consumers, persuaded to play the role of active prosumers (Toffler 1979; Jenkins 2006), would be the physical producer of the commodities, while also cognitively completing every narration connecting the products and the brands.

## **2. One Step Back: The Actuality of Debord's Definitions of Spectacle, Consumption and Commodities**

The actuality of Debord's theoretical framework is somewhat controversial. In fact, although his vision of the structure of the spectacle society is defined during the era of the broadcasting media system, or in other words a strategic conception of the spectacle. At the same time his Situationist intuitions, which

has influenced some specific subcultures such as the punk experience as Malcom McLaren used to admit, can be considered one of the first examples of a tactic movement against the strategic structure of the market. The critique of the spectacle is regaining its relevance in media studies today because of two main reasons: a) the fact that several theoretical models elaborated to describe the mass media and mass society are today applied to the new world of social media, b) the fact that the so-called Critical Internet Studies are re-launching the neo-Marxist approaches to understand the so-called Web 2.0 (Fuchs 2009).

In his analysis of the role of consumption, Debord re-discusses the Marxian notion of fetishism of commodities, considering them as the main example of the domination of society through spectacle. In fact, commodities are not just material and 'perceptible' things but mostly immaterial and 'imperceptible.' The cognitization of commodities starts with Marx's idea of the obliteration of social inequality but becomes much more evident in Debord's triumph of the spectacle, in which the power of the imaginary replaces and dominates the simple physical features of the goods. Of course, Debord was not always right about the relationships between spectacle, consumption and consumer alienation. In fact, he argued that 'the loss of quality so obvious at every level of the language of the spectacle...the commodity form is characterized exclusively by self-equivalence it is exclusively quantitative in nature: the quantitative is what it develops, and it can only develop within the quantitative' (Thesis 38). This statement sounds like an old representation of a simple dystopian world in which the logic of quantity sacrifices the quality. Nevertheless, in the end this is not what happened to our societies. Our contemporary world attests to a resurrection of quality everywhere: not just in the emergence of new consumptions related to a more pleasant lifestyle, but also in the logic of qualitative data analysis that is able to penetrate the intimate sphere of the consumer and to extract the main qualitative information about his/her preferences, tastes, feelings etc. At the same time, Debord made a convincing argument about the direction of the process of globalization in the consideration that the 'commodity's original standard [...] is a standard that it has been able to live up to by turning the whole planet into a single world market' (Thesis 39). However, even in this case his criticism was still projected against the 'standard' that used to be the main ghost of the mass society. Although we still have standards in the cultural or technological consumptions, like the TV formats or the operative systems and so on, they are modular and most of the time they can interact with the ideographic characteristics of the consumers.

In Thesis 42 Debord pointed out how the 'spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life', which is a sort of bright intuition of what the global capital has created between the 1980s and 1990s under the sustenance of neoliberal ideology. The colonization of everyday life by commodities, and by global brands later, has been detected by other social scientists like Baudrillard (1970) who talked about 'profusion', a process that I consider as the clear representation of the

complete overlap between consumption, brands, and everyday life during the 1980s. For Debord, this process was already working with 'the advent of the so called second industrial revolution' (Thesis 42), so that 'alienated consumption is added to alienated production as an inescapable duty of the masses'. Notwithstanding he was talking about a totally different economic regime that was still organized around the physical production, the symbolic power of the commodities was already able to extend itself to the total amount of the life cycle, so that the 'entirety of labour sold is transformed overall into the total commodity' (Thesis 42).

More actual and contemporary than the notion of 'spectacle domination', that changed meaning with the techno-cultural change, is Debord's definition of 'détournement'. According to one of the tips he gives to his followers in the famous guidelines he wrote with G. J. Wolman, and more recently recalled by Mario Perniola: 'the main difference between the artistic and the situationist détournement is that the arriving point of the first one is still an artwork with his peculiar artistic value, while the arrival point of the second one is [...] the negation of the art' (Perniola 1998, 22). Détournement is not just a tactic against the bourgeois system of art, it is also the attempt to create a link between the intellectual and the people through consumer culture. This is why Debord and Wolman (1956) argue that 'the distortions introduced in the détourned elements must be as simplified as possible, since the main impact of a détournement is directly related to the conscious or semiconscious recollection of the original contexts of the elements'. The aim of finding a simply, conscious or semiconscious understandable meaning for the common people, is the theoretical trap that makes possible the further re-exploitation of those products from the system of art or from the system of consumption or in a word, from the spectacle society. This is very similar to what happened during the 1970s with the punk *Great Rock'n'Roll Swindle* or during the 1990s with the culture jamming that was completely counter-exploited by the world of global brands. As we will see in the next section, the destiny of the détournement is to be re-configured and re-used by the spectacle, so that its aim is a sort of epic fight against windmills.

### 3. The Second Model Explaining Cognitive Consumption: The Double Bind

The Debordian co-presence of both a strategic and tactical notion of spectacle is something that we find, more powerful and controversial, when observing the culture of 1990s. On the one side this period is characterized at the same by the complete triumph of globalization, driven by the cognitive power of global brands. On the other side, we see the affirmation of a global tactical and creative form of protest against that power (Klein 2000). If the no global movements adopted a sort of neo-situationist style of communication, fighting

against global brands, as in the case of ad busters and the movement of culture jamming (Dery 1993), the response of global brands was the shift from a strategic level of their campaigns to a more tactical, intercepting and imitating the grassroots creativity. The increasing dependence of the consumer on the brand, and the impossibility to solve the cognitive contradiction between the strategic and tactical approach, can be explained with Gregory Bateson's 'double bind' model (Bateson 1972; Barile 2009).

The communication model of the double bind, which is established between a source (one or more) that sends messages and a recipient in the role of the victim, produces identity issues in a subject that has difficulty recognizing the same boundaries of his ego. It is not simply about the paradoxical dimensions of the ego but has its own particular existential significance. For this reason, the double bind model can be applied to a wide range of social situations and behaviours: from religion, art, politics, to the consumption sphere. In consumption, this happens clearly in the increasingly cognitive relation that the consumer has with brands. They vaguely promise to all a world of happiness, which potentially accommodates any individual, but at the same time they dramatically select their own target through barriers that are not only economic. The trial of escaping from the global brands double bind produced several movements struggling for the rights of consumers during the 1990s. The galaxy of consumerism includes a wide array of organizations, associations, NGOs and informal groups operating to defend more universal values.

Paradoxically at the exact moment when the citizen loses his political weight in favour of the new identity called 'consumer', the protection of his rights becomes an issue of paramount importance. The famous campaigns against Monsanto, McDonald's, Nike and so on express this renewed civil awareness acting on a global scale and give pressure from below thanks to the new aggregative capacity and grassroots organisation offered by the web. Monsanto was the more conspiratorial and the more dangerous, because of its capillary penetration into everyday life with the bio-chemical innovation. McDonald's became the icon of the degeneration of the system as in the London Green Peace campaign. At the same time, other brands like Nike responded to this movement by changing communication strategies. The turning point of the new communication is undoubtedly the formidable campaign 'Obey your Thirst' by Sprite (Klein 2000) trying to beat the myths of a hedonistic consumption and reaffirm the centrality of the person instead of the bombastic promises of seductive lifestyle: 'the image is zero, thirst is everything'. Obey your thirst.

The zeroing of the brand symbolic capital serves to create a vacuum that must be filled by the consumer that is invited to return to the real sources of his experience, to the practical needs of his 'real' life, to affirm his personality in the new communication space offered by the brand. Only one problem: the authenticity of a hyper-gassed and sweet soft drink in no way can satisfy the need of thirst.

The brand goes down from the pedestal from which it usually pontificates, to entertain a friendship or familiar relationship with the consumer, but, at the same time, the consumer feels this movement as a double interference in his life. In fact, the brand tries to give up its position of advantage only in the rhetoric of communication, as also happened in another major initiative of the same period that operates on the same issue but with very different purposes. I'm referring to Diesel's ad campaign named 'Brand zero', which is able to regenerate the brand's symbolic capital through a neo-situationist approach coming from counterculture phenomena such as culture jamming.

Once again, the concept of 'zeroing' realizes a breaking position in which the brand itself calls into question its authority to the whole system in which it is inscribed. The 1997 campaign is based on the representation of big billboards designed in a retro style, showing the glittering promises of the old American dream while in the background there are real contemporary ruins (from the suburbs of New York to the Palestinian banned places). The same technique, which will return in the 2000 campaign with the pseudo country rock star called Johanna Zychowicz and in 2001 with Africa (Barile 2009), is clearly borrowed from the language of subvertizing and Adbusters and perfectly imitated by the brand. While the double bind proposed a different model to describe the interdependence between brands and consumers, the neo-situationism movements like culture jamming are looking for an exit strategy from the cognitive power of global brands. This phenomenon recalls somehow the subversive Situationist practices against the spectacle, as in the case of my friend Joey Skaggs, considered as the father of the movement (Dery 1993).

During the punk era, the entire subculture was prepared for a total exploitation operated mostly by the music industry. Not just Julian Temple's *Great Rock'N'Roll Swindle* (1980), but also Derek Jarman's *Jubilee* (1978) with his iconic scene of the 'impresario' Borgia Ginz: the human personification of the conspiracy against youth, mixing the acronyms of power (BBC, CBS, CIA, KGB) with the cannibalization of punk authenticity. The spectacular exploitation of the subcultural capital (styles, symbols, values etc.) generates a counter-reaction that is already prepared to be over exploited by the system. Something similar happened with the co-opting of Afro-American's style made by the fashion brands in the 1980s (Klein 2000), even if that subculture was less confrontational than punk. During the 1990s we are witness to a paradoxical process of a total exploitation of new generation's values and practices by global brands just when there are no longer well-defined subcultures. In place of the subcultures there is a world-wide multitude, fragmented in strong local intensities but unable to interact programmatically with other counter-powers (Negri & Hardt 2001). At the same time, this new critical approach has already been re-functionalized into the strategic communication of the global system (from cool hunting to guerrilla marketing) that re-uses the same principle to produce innovation that can be sold to the new consumers.



#### 4. The Third Model Explaining the Evolution of Cognitive Consumption: The Ritual of Confession

Many years before the development of a post-Fordist reflection on cognitive capitalism, Debord already defined some crucial aspect of this process, especially when he argued that the capitalistic accumulation has reached a state of 'abundance' so that a surplus of 'collaboration' of the workers becomes necessary. From the centrality of the workers in the process of economical exploitation, the system creates the centrality of consumption so that 'once work is over, they (the workers) are treated like grown-ups, with a great show of solicitude and politeness, in their new role as consumers' (Thesis 43). The idea of a centrality of consumption and at the same time of a 'polite' total exploitation of the consumer, was already there, ready to be elaborated in the future development of the system. At the same time, the idea of a spectacular subjectivity must be integrated with a model that complete the process of the alienation through spectacle with an active production of the authenticity and of the reality of the self (Foucault 1978).

During the 1990s the symbolic interdependence between business and the alternative public contexts increased. Notwithstanding, there are some apparent conflicts between them. I use the term 'interdependence' not to represent a reconciliation between the giants of multinational capitalism and antagonistic cultures but just to underline how they share the same needs to innovate communication as exemplified in the so-called non-conventional marketing (tribal, guerrilla, experiential etc.). The double bind is based on a paradox: on the one hand, it helps to rethink the relationship between brands and consumers in a more democratic way, putting brands on the same levels of consumers to free them from the previous subordination. On the other hand, the brand, by adopting a more subtly empathic style, strengthens its relationship with consumers while also exploiting their world of experience as in the so-called 'experiential marketing' (Schmitt 1999). This process became even stronger when the Web 2.0 gave to the global brands the possibility of a permanent presence in the consumer's life as well as the possibility of completely customized and tactical communication. The innovation of the Web 2.0 implemented the new relation between brands and consumers that was formalized during the 1990s in a concrete digital environment.

If during the 1990s the power of web marketing was very limited, the shift to the new web determined the possibility for redesigning the brand strategies from the bottom. The combinations between the social media innovation and the brand strategies tried to implement what the rhetorical language of advertising described during the 1990s as an active or productive consumer. This combination can be defined 'branding 2.0' and it aims to create user generated brands from the examples of User Generated Content. In other words, the new strategies tried to 'open', customize and redesign innovation as a grass root process but also to add an experiential and emotional value to their activities



(Maringer 2008). For this reason, to understand some aspects of the so-called branding 2.0 we should integrate the model of 'double bind' with Foucault's model of the ritual of confession. In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Michel Foucault examines the analytical report, the 'disposed operative part of the confession' (58). Originally considered as a tool to extract the truth from the sinner, it turned into a mechanism of production of truth and 'authentication' of the individual, transforming the western man into a 'beast for confession'. The process started a long time ago since when '...the confession became one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth. We have singularly become a confessing society' (59). From the initial pedagogical purpose by the religious institution, confession turns into a more general cultural process revealing the truth of pleasure.

After Foucault, the emancipation and secularization of the ritual of confession becomes the main trait of the post-television spectacle and becomes a narcissistic mirror when the media-consumption system enhances the values of leisure and hedonism (Illouz 2007). Illouz emphasizes how the origin of the confessional society must be detected in a pre-mediatic age. In fact, she describes four main periods in which the idea of a therapeutic use of the communication is defined: the first one is the early Fordistic development, the second one is time of the counter-cultural movements such as Feminism and Ecology; the third one is the age of the confessional TV talk shows; the fourth one is the age of web dating and more generally of social networks. In other words, the emotional ontology is the idea that emotions can be detached from the subject for control and clarification. Such emotional ontology has made intimate relationships commensurate, that is, susceptible to depersonalization, or likely to be emptied of their particularity and to be evaluated according to abstract criteria. This in turn suggests that relationships have been transformed into cognitive objects that can be compared with each other and are susceptible to cost-benefit analysis (Illouz 2007, 36).

This process is not just limited to the ancient perspective of a full commodification of an intimacy turned into an external commodity and regulated by the logic of exchange. It is also about the primacy of the quality over the quantity, of what is still not completely available on the market. This is why, very perceptively Lovink (2011) quotes Illouz to introduce the idea of selfbranding. Because it is not just about a strategy to promote people's image, but also to give them a sense of depth or to produce an effect of a third dimension that in the past was not required by the system (instead of the classic bidimensional men in the mass society).

From the twilight of the broadcasting era to the rising of a new media ecosystem re-organized around the Web 2.0 (Barile 2012), confession turns into a technology interacting with the deep emotional world of the user, that in the meanwhile belongs to the prosumer (Jenkins 2006). The contemporary issues about Big Data and privacy (boyd & Crawford 2012) are today the field of a new battle between the needs of a prosumer's self-promotions through the selfbranding

strategies (Lovink 2011), and the quali-qualitative exploitation of their life through the data analytics. Going back to Debord's reflection on the process of automation we can figure out how today the recommendation algorithms are not just a tool used by the system to orient the user's choice but also a complex device that is able to automatize the user's taste (Barile & Sugiyama 2015).

Even though Illouz's notion of 'emotional ontology' (2006) already blurs the borders between the world of things and the immaterial world, her perspective is still too much animated by a tension that tries to preserve the fundamental distinctions between reality and virtuality. The word 'ontology' applied to the domain of emotion means basically a process of reification that turns emotion into a new currency, or a commodity able to be exchanged and circulated in the communicational circuits. What is missing in this perspective is the older and as well fundamental role of things that were fetishized a long time before the advent of digital communication. The world of things, even the one produced by industrialization, was already the place of an emotional investment by the consumers (Baudrillard 1968; Douglas & Isherwood 1979). It is not just the Marxian or Debordian fetishism of commodities, the former referring to the disguise of an unequal relation of power and the latter referring to the imaginary behind the products, but is also a double investment (Barile 2009) that generates a circular movement: from the consumer through the commodities to the imaginary (emotional investment on things), from the imaginary through things to the consumer (implementations of roles, situations, experiences). The new social media domains and their interaction with the physical world has implemented something similar, as in Illouz's notion of emotional ontology, but it is even more visible in the recent extension of the libertarian ideology of the Internet to the world of things, trying to build a new vision that is concerned with the makers' movement.

## **5. The Integration Between Bit and Atoms: From the Automation of Everything to the Destiny of Makers**

Debord's discourses on the centrality and the 'polite' exploitation of the consumer by the system are also related with another fundamental innovation that from that period arrives to our times, generating a huge revolution in the production and consumption policies. This is the 'automation, which is at once the most advanced sector of modern industry and the epitome of its logic, confronts the world of the commodity with a contradiction that it must somehow resolve: the same technical infrastructure that is capable of abolishing labour must at the same time preserve labour as a commodity and indeed as the sole generator of commodities' (Thesis 45). With this reflection Debord closes the circle of the total exploitation of producers/consumers, and at the same time, enlightens the mythical possibility of a society liberated from heavy work, as in the dream of few post-industrial theorists. Many of those topics are regenerated

by the contemporary debate on the so-called fourth industrial revolution, including the process of automating many aspects of our everyday life and the so-called movement of makers.

Today robotic functions are increasingly relevant to our everyday life. Although the notion of social robots tends to trigger the idea of autonomous machines such as humanoid and zoomorphic robots, it can be extended to include information and communication devices. The implications of the deepest penetration of mobile ICTs in everyday life through the proliferation of technologies as well as the cogent effect of software and new applications controlled by algorithms demonstrates how mobile ICTs such as smart phones have the power to shape, and furthermore, to 'automate' our emotions and taste (Barile and Sugiyama 2015). If in Debord's conception there was still a separation between the automation as a physical process and the cognitive dimension of the spectacle, the automation today of every process (even creative and emotional) is the axial principle of the contemporary spectacle. Notwithstanding, there is still a sort of dialectic between a strategic vision going tactic (the algorithms penetrating our everyday life) and the reversed movement of a tactic becoming strategic (Arduino, makers, open design, co-creation etc.).

For a couple of years, the theme of 'making' has inspired public debate around the collective idea of a radical transformation of contemporary capitalism. The speculative transformation may be capable of changing the unfair global production landscape and bringing about a new system in which auto-production and free exchange of ideas and artefacts finally triumph. This approach, which comes in a moment when the informational economy and diffused knowledge are taking over, suggests a return to a more 'concrete' and practical approach to our actions and to reality in general. The main protagonist of this era is a new kind of artisan not just ousted by machine, like in Debord's prediction, but freer to express his 'embodied knowledge' through digital innovation. This is how the 'computer-assisted design might serve as an emblem of a large challenge faced by modern society: how to think like craftsmen in making good use of technology' (Sennett 2009, 44).

'Making' in this context can be understood as an object, an aim, a way of solving a problem, a virtue or a practical endeavour, or a tangible and measurable result. The term here calls for a strict interpretation, tied to practicality, although without the severe tone that the same may assume when pronounced under the circumstances of any regime trying to justify its absolutism with 'facts'. The innovations we are seeing originate from a new global sensibility, capable of magnifying the creative contribution of new technologies and means of communication, rather than simply focusing on their public reception. In this context we can place machines, such as 3D printers, and pieces of hardware, such as Arduino, that allow a facilitated, artisanal approach to complex themes like manufacturing and robotics. This appears to be the third revolution of capitalism. David Gauntlett, one of the main scholars of the Makers movement defines 'making' as the ability to tie connections.

Making is connecting because you need to connect things together (materials, ideas, or both) to make something new; making is connecting because acts of creativity usually involve, at some point, a social dimension and connect us with other people; and making is connecting because through making things and sharing them in the world, we increase our engagement and connection with our social and physical environments (Gauntlett 2011).

The changing paradigm we face undermines many basic pillars of modern culture, industrial society and the way in which we conceive of politics. The Cartesian approach once considered standard for many disciplines, implying a distinction between rational analysis and practical creation, is now subverted by the 'learning-by-doing' concept, key to the Makers movement. The physical creation of highly innovative objects is even revolutionizing the way we learn: Gauntlett writes about a practice that evolves from 'sit comfortably and listen' to 'make and build'. The former is the result of traditional educational systems, generalist media and related policies; it implies a disjunction between learning, practical experimentation and the production of artefacts. The latter initiates a new era where knowledge is built and transferred through participation, shared experiences and active involvement of different communities.

The Makers movement is being popularized thanks to technological achievements that seriously undermine the contraposition between a digital and a physical world towards the final overcoming of the 'digital dualism' concept (Jurgenson 2011). For this reason, another key player in this landscape is the Web 2.0 which, as Gauntlett (2011) tells us, cannot be untied from the practice of the Makers movement since, in some ways, the former has been a reference for the latter.

The combination of rapid manufacturing technologies and control systems is deeply changing the notion of production, distribution, consumption, creativity, sharing, automation, and so on. It appears to be shaping a neo-artisanal world, where new technologies may lead us to the most advanced frontiers of customization and reach a new shape of capitalism.

In the very moment in which an object is created, a series of intimate connections are tied between the product and the creator so that his or her emotional capital (Illouz 2007) somehow lives in the artifact. The new craftsmanship involved in the participatory environment of FabLabs improves sharing of this capital and thus emotional connection between people, objects and their environment. The passion that drives participants is the same that guides the objects' realization; these factors help us to see in Makers the most advanced manifestation of the core capital of the 2.0 universe: *amateurs* (Keen 2007). Amateurship is the emerging value of our age and is key to understanding a new form of *cognitive delocalization*, which is taking over the *geopolitical delocalization* we have experienced during the last decades. The new capitalism does not delocalize geographically, exploiting different working standards throughout

the world, but rather shifts the role of the producer to the consumers, taking advantage of the productive vein shining in the eyes of the new craftsman: the same vein which, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, fostered the creation of tons of digital contents.

In the discussion of motivations in chapters 3 and 4, we saw that people often spend time creating things because they want to feel alive in the world, as *participants* rather than viewers, and to be active and recognized within a community of interesting people. It is common that they wish to make their existence, their interests and their personality more visible in the contexts that are significant to them, and they want this to be *noticed*. The process of making is enjoyed for its own sake, of course: there is pleasure in seeing a project from start to finish, and the process provides space for thought and reflection, and helps to cultivate a sense of the self as an active, creative agent. But there is also a desire to connect and communicate with others, and – especially online – to be an active participant in dialogues and communities (Gauntlett 2013).

The opposition between the ‘viewer’ – protagonist of the old spectacle society – and the ‘maker’ as the protagonist of a new participative and dis-alienated society, sounds too enthusiastic. Unfortunately, some of the connections tied by Gauntlett between ‘making’ and other key concepts of capitalism (such as social, cultural and emotional capital) may be subject to some perplexities in the minds of critical readers. In particular the ability to produce and share freely everything everywhere could subjugate ideas, relations and contents produced by Makers in the same way that, for Marx, work has been subjugated to capital. As in the title of Formenti’s book (2011), this could make us all ‘*Happy and Exploited*’.

Seen through this lens, the revolution could be a simple extension, applied to the producer-consumer structure, of classical geopolitical delocalization processes that have distinguished rich countries from poor ones. Better named as *multi-localization*, this process could be a new way to externalize the production in the hand of the consumers, instead of the low paid workers in the emerging countries. If the creative invention and physical production is in the hands of *prosumers* spread throughout the globe, the global brands could be the ‘simple’ management of communication through symbols and cognitive strategies. It is not new, in fact, about the ideal of brands as content providers, as producers of immaterial concepts based on complex narrative structures and inflamed storytelling, as we have seen in the practice of widespread media.

Although what the chapter discussed about the Makers movement is nothing more than a remote hypothesis today, some big brands such as Nike and McDonald’s have already started to understand the potential of the Makers wave, and 3D printers are appearing in sale locations. There is the risk that the spontaneous creative potential of the crowd maybe subjugated under the cognitive influence of the brand. At the moment, the process of appropriation is mainly limited to the means of production and applied only in promotional services and merchandising. However, everything suggests that a further

development may lead to an incorporation of ‘making’ practices into the world’s most powerful brands, as has already happened with the subculture of 1970s, the neo-situationist movements of the 1990s and with the user’s experience of the Web 2.0. The subsumption of the tactic action (makers) under the force of the strategic power (the corporations) relaunches Debord’s *détournement* on another level; as a Dadaist possibility to design unfunctional or uncanny devices, able to resist the process of subsumption. On the other hand there is the optimistic option of a positive dialogue with the system in the trial of creating a sort of parallel circuit in which the exploitation could be less oppressive than in the standard marketplace. In this second option the Debordian totalitarianism of consumption must be completed with a new model in which the system not just standardizes and commodifies human sociality and emotion but also encourages their production. A neototalitarian system that incentivizes the production of authenticity as its main resource.

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## CHAPTER 10

# Tin Hat Games – Producing, Funding, and Consuming an Independent Role-Playing Game in the Age of the Interactive Spectacle

Chiara Bassetti, Maurizio Teli, Annalisa Murgia

### 1. Premise: The Age of the Interactive Spectacle

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord (1967/1994) describes a society in which the human capabilities of being and having have been subsumed by representation, as the main trait of the society of the 1970s from which Debord was writing. Practically, Debord was referring to information and propaganda, advertising, and leisure consumption as the main forms through which the spectacle, the domain of representation, manifests itself as the dominant model for social life (*Thesis 6*). With such a reference, Debord was stressing how the spectacle is separate from the reality of life, and wraps it with representation. Nevertheless, the relation of separation between the reality of life and the representation of the spectacle is a dialectic one, with ‘reality

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emerging in the spectacle and the spectacle being real' (*Thesis 8*). The spectacle is therefore a specific historical moment (*Thesis 11*), the main production of society (*Thesis 15*). Any social reality is represented, and it appears only outside of itself (*Thesis 17*). The spectacle, in all its practical forms, is a self-reflective monologue of the existing order, essentially unilateral communication organised to preserve the role of the current ruling class (*Thesis 24*). In Debord's view, even the world of 'culture' and the academic disciplines that define themselves as 'critical', like sociology, are part of such a monologue, as they detach their theoretical discourse from the reality of lived experience (*Theses 180, 196, and 197*).

Under these assumptions, only by recognizing the centrality of the spectacle, the reality of representations, and the necessity of combining theory with the experience of life, it is possible to organise forms of resistance. Resistance to the prevalence of the spectacle then takes the form of the *détournement*, the dialectical inversion of the existing relations among concepts, applied also to the existing forms of critique (*Thesis 206*). Debord concludes by underlining how through the *détournement*, it is possible to create a critique of the existing culture, the separated one produced by the spectacle, without detaching it from the critique of the existing social relations. In this way, critique reaches a new dialectical unity, by bringing together what the spectacle is separating: culture and social relations (*Thesis 210*).

Debord's analysis was historically situated in the 1970s and it dealt with a world of spectacle based on centralized modes of production of cultural objects, symbolised by broadcasting media like cinema, radio, or television. At the end of the '90s, Best and Kellner (1999) interrogated Debord in light of the emerging electronic media, like 'the computer, multimedia, and virtual reality devices' (10). Best and Kellner stressed how such media were anticipating a new stage of the spectacle, the 'interactive spectacle' (*ibidem*: 9). What differentiates the stage of the interactive spectacle is the relationship between the objects of the spectacle and the subjects of everyday life. If, in Debord's age, the spectator was almost a passive consumer of broadcasted cultural products, in the interactive spectacle, the subject appears as having a wider capability of action. Best and Kellner do not indulge in a naive celebration of interactivity, however. Rather, they foresee how the technical means of production of the spectacle, the interactive media technologies like protocols of computer programs, gain a central role in shaping social relations and the production of the spectacle itself. Indeed, in the Spectacle 2.0, which this book takes as a heuristic tool to understand current capitalist societies, human social lives are both the mediated objects and the mediating subjects (Armano and Briziarelli, this volume) of representation. Emerging from the self-spectacularization played on the discursive and interactive terrain of social media and other ICTs, subjectivities are the products themselves of the spectacle (*ivi*). The present essay is an investigation into the age of the interactive spectacle.

## 2. Producing Counternarratives Today: A Theoretical Reading of Tin Hat Games

The empirical case we discuss in this essay is Tin Hat Games, a small association of independent game designers, producers and promoters. Such an empirical field lies at the crossroads of a multifaceted set of contemporary social phenomena, such as gamification, the role of social critique, platform capitalism, and highly skilled free work – it therefore enlightens their multiple interrelations. Such interrelations take place in the context of the creative industries, one of the loci of production of the spectacle, even in the traditional sense. Moreover, creative industries are the emblem of the ways to relate to the forms of work (Armano and Murgia 2015) that express the ‘spirit’ of the current capitalist model (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999).

It is a capitalist model characterized also (but not only) by forms of gamification, in which the passions of people are put at play through mechanisms derived from gaming, to increase their productivity, thereby mixing the fun experience of gaming with the goal of maximising production (Jagoda 2013). Indeed, this is another form of a model of dispossession, in which economic value gets extracted from people’s life (Harvey 2014). The case of Tin Hat shows how human passions, technological arrangements, and the organization of production are tied together in the contemporary production of the spectacle, in our case a cultural product like a role-playing game, called #UrbanHeroes (#UH).

First and foremost, #UrbanHeroes is a case of countergaming, a way to embed critique of the social landscape and the game industry in the game itself (Galloway 2006). Such countergaming takes place in a social context in which, through what is referred to as gamification, game mechanics and principles are exported to other social domains, often with the declared goal of achieving a boost in productivity or in customer satisfaction (Jagoda 2013). The existence of #UrbanHeroes *per se*, as a form of social critique embedded in a contemporary world of superheroes, can be read indeed as counteracting gamification at a deep level, not by bringing games to other social domains but by bringing social life into the game. Speaking a Debordian language, Tin Hat Games and countergaming practices are dialectically opposing the gamification of life.

Nevertheless, as Jagoda (*ibidem*) highlighted, complicities of countergaming with gamified capitalism are practically unavoidable, and the case of Tin Hat shows that clearly. For example, the counter-action of Tin Hat, including the successful production and distribution of #UrbanHeroes, would not have been possible today without recourse to digital platforms like Facebook and Kickstarter, which are part of contemporary platform capitalism (Scholz 2016; Srnicek 2016; ; Armano, Murgia and Teli 2017). Indeed, contemporary digital platforms act as organizers of forms of social cooperation out of which economic value is algorithmically extracted (van Dijck 2013). In this way, the case of Tin Hat allows for an empirical investigation of the practicalities of the

centrality of (new) media, (unpaid) digital labour, and specific aesthetics in the age of the interactive spectacle.

Moreover, the work of Tin Hat members is non-paid work. Indeed, even if the association is financially healthy – which means that the members can cover almost all the expenses with precedent revenues – Tin Hat is not a source of income for them. To this extent, Tin Hat activities appear as a form of ‘free work,’ and another case of the dialectic between passion and work that characterizes contemporary forms of production (Ballatore, Del Rio Carral and Murgia 2014). The association is composed of friends who share the same passion and who would probably run the association even if they were unemployed. The activities are carried out outside the paid work and during their ‘free time’ showing how forms of collaboration based on shared values (Hearn 2010; Arvidsson and Pietersen 2013) might intertwine with forms of exploitation of platform capitalism (Fuchs 2014). In other words, Tin Hat activities combine countergaming with a work that is ‘free’ in the double sense of being done autonomously and with a high level of passionate commitment, but not paid and/or not providing an income to the members of the association (Beverungen et al. 2013; Chicchi et al. 2014). Thus, Tin Hat members merge a critique of the world of gaming, through their internal work practices, with a critique of society at large, through their products. Yet they are producers of the spectacle, which leaves room for counternarratives, but being still based, at least partially, on neoliberal modes of production.

The case of Tin Hat allows us to show, at the level of a specific, small scale project, how the subjective elements related to biographical experiences and perceived desires constantly intermingle with technological elements and platform capitalism, and these elements contribute to renewed spectacular products, thereby enlightening the functioning of the interactive spectacle.

### 3. The Case Study

Officially funded in 2014, yet at work on its initial project – #UrbanHeroes – since almost two years earlier, Tin Hat is composed of three members: Alex, Matt, and Manuel. Alex is the game creator who started working on the idea when he was 18 years old. He is now 32 and, having withdrawn from a Literature degree, until the beginning of 2017 he worked as assistant manager in a local company run by his father; the two are now trying to open a similar company of their ownership. Matt is the co-author, and collaborates with Alex on the game setting since 2012. He is 34 years old and, with a degree in Media Studies, works as web content editor and social media marketing expert in a local firm, with a fixed term contract. Manuel is Tin Hat art director, and has similarly collaborated on the project since 2012. He is 41 years old, holds a degree in Arts, and has spent 20 years as a graphic designer in various companies either

as self-employed or with standard fixed term positions, the last of which closed at the end of December 2016, thereby leaving him unemployed.

With such a good mix of skills, the team's common ground, besides similarities in formal education, lies in a deep knowledge of the so-called 'geek' – or, less recently, 'nerd' – subculture: that is, of anything that has to do with RpGs, comics, video-games, TV series, and, more generally, the 'pop culture', but also anything that concerns (new) technologies, (hard) sciences, and hacking. The three have known each other for many years, and role-played together – table top and live, as players and scriptwriters – in manifold occasions, collaborating within several gamers associations, attending RpG events all over Italy, and hanging around comics and games conventions for decades.<sup>1</sup>

The first Italian edition of #UH, in black and white, was presented in 2013 at a sector convention – Lucca Comics & Games, the world's second largest – receiving a good public reception but having no luck in the quest for a financial backer. The group decided then to embark on a crowdfunding endeavour on Kickstarter, launching their campaign on April 7, 2014 and being successfully funded – the first Italian project in the considered sector – on May 15, 2014, with a final score of 243 backers who pledged \$16,301. They were thus able to cover the print and shipment costs of the second expanded Italian edition, in colours, and the translation and editing costs for the English one. In spring 2015, they were contacted by one of the main Italian distributors of the sector, who since then has been selling #UH products with very good results. At the Lucca convention of Autumn 2015, with a stand hosted in the distributor's area, Tin Hat presented the preview of their second main product, the board game *Dungeon Diggers*, which was then proposed to the international public, still in its playtesting version, in October 2016, at another huge game convention in Essen, Germany, and at the 2016 edition of Lucca Comics & Games. The board game was then at the centre of a second Kickstarter campaign, aimed at covering production and distribution costs: launched on April 1, 2017, corresponding to the Play Modena convention opening, it successfully closed on May 10, 2017 with €18,249 from 304 backers.

From an organizational and financial point of view, Tin Hat is a VAT-registered non-profit association composed of three members. The members cover expenses with precedent revenues and, when needed, by contributing from their personal accounts with small amounts of money (hundreds of euros, never above 1000), that they gradually regain after sales. None of the three earns anything in terms of revenue sharing. The association account rarely reaches over 1000 euros (this generally happens when revenues are allocated to imminent planned expenses), and the financial year closes with a balanced budget. Tin Hat members run the collective autonomously and as peers. The internal division of labour is loose and underspecified, with large overlapping of competence, frequent co-working, and continuous informal mutual learning (see also Section 4).

### 3.1. Data and Methods

The case being known to one of the authors (Chiara) for some time, she started actual ethnographic research in December 2014. Through a mix of participant observation and cyber-ethnography, she focused (a) on team meetings and ‘backstage’ work practices, (b) on interactions and activities during and around conventions and other events, and (c) on social media campaigning activities and online interactions. Data include field notes, audio, video, and photographic material, as well as the Kickstarter campaign, the #UH website, and the social network pages.

Furthermore, the other two authors conducted an in-depth collective interview with the team members, in order to gain knowledge into their narrative as a team of creative, independent producers. Video interviews released to the media have been considered as well, though obviously as a different self-presentation genre, so to speak.

## 4. Collectively Constructing a Critical Product

#UrbanHeroes is a ‘gritty, superpunk tabletop RpG about superheroes, conspiracy theories, physics and the contemporary pop culture [...] that will grant you the opportunity to play as a posthuman imbued with superpowers living in a cruel, materialistic and dystopian parallel of our own world that will challenge your beliefs and your sense of reality’ (Kickstarter campaign).

The setting rests on a simple premise: in 2008, CERN’s particle collider (LHC) in Geneva exploded, particles Z were liberated and since then – randomly and all over the world – people started to manifest superpowers, ‘or at least this is what they’ve been called, on the basis of a culture in which super-heroes were already present as a concept’ (Alex, video-interview, 12 April 2015). How would our society react to such an event? This is the question that lies at the core of #UH. And that is the vector of the social critique on contemporary capitalist society and its spectacle that its creators purport *via* an extreme realism, in both the game setting and the rules.

The critical viewpoint that #UH conveys – visible in the game *motto*: RIOT NOW – relies on excess, which works as an unveiling mechanism, and is based in the mundane: #UH is superpunk.<sup>2</sup> Earth-Z, the planet where the game is set, perfectly matches our own world, and evolves in time with it. Scientific coherence played a crucial role in the creation of the background story, and plays an important one for the rules. From a formal and stylistic point of view, to be noticed are (a) the rough, excessive, and vulgar style that characterizes the game setting and, in apparent contrast with excess and roughness, (b) the carefully designed and well-finished nature of the creative products (and the same holds for their promotion, see section 5). In a way, both the game *per se*, on the one hand, and the contradictory mixture of overblown trash (game characters, stories, dialogues, etc.) and attended refinement (game rules, graphics,

adherence to facts, etc.), on the other hand, can be regarded as *détournement*, as the overturning of the established relations between concepts, and of all the acquisitions of earlier critique (*Thesis 206*). It is not by chance that Debord assigns a fundamental role to the ‘language of contradiction,’ in which, he claims, cultural critique emerges as unified, in that it dominates culture as a whole and is undetached from the critique of the social whole (*Thesis 211*).

The *détournement* is reflected also in the practices of creation and work that Tin Hat employs. Typically, they work jointly and in parallel at Manuel’s place, called ‘The Mansion,’ where they spend the night<sup>3</sup> after ‘the dinner of the desperate ones’ (everyone brings something, otherwise take-away). Working in co-presence, first of all, allows discussing in detail new ideas as well as the manifold aspects of the creative-products-in-creation; to show each other partial, unfinished works; to try and evaluate together alternatives. Team meetings, furthermore, are characterized by playfulness, irony, self-irony and reciprocal teasing, which are the elements that build up to the *creativity* of the group, to the *quality* of its creations, and to the constant *learning* of its members. Working time is punctuated by facetious interludes – temporary, often only apparent suspensions of work activities – that are easily inserted in the working flow given its multi-tasking, intersecting, and overlapping organization and its fragmented rhythm. In brief, pleasure at work is constructed as a collective practice (Gherardi, Nicolini and Strati 2007; Loriol 2014), fatigue and stress are playfully managed, and all this makes reciprocal critique possible while reducing potential opportunities for conflict.

There is a further issue, that resonates intensely with what Debord called ‘the fluid language of the anti-ideology,’ where quotations from the canonized theoretical authority are banished (*Thesis 208*). Facetious interludes may originate from funny anecdotes and gossiping, or the work-related necessity to check an information, look for examples, search inspiration, and so on. Such an inspiration may spring out something they regard as well-done within the geek subculture, or a scientific news, and yet mostly comes from ‘the most horrific horrors’ of our glocal world. The means to reach the latter is the web, alongside the Facebook group ‘Tin Hat Club’ (on invitation) where fans share ‘horrors’ such as the latest conspiracy theory, or airy-fairy political declaration. The possible objects of critique and mockery – always conducted with an ironic and rough style, also in the ‘backstage’ of team interaction – are innumerable. This is #UH raw material. If it is true that the spectacle masterfully organizes the ignorance of what happens and, immediately after, the oblivion of what we anyway came to know (Debord 1978/1998), then #UH can be seen as a counternarrative, a countergaming example, and ultimately an act of resistance.

Finally, it is worth noticing that the above described context, for team members, requires more innovative skills than those required by their ‘standard,’ ‘official’ work. Albeit in different forms, each of the three finds in Tin Hat both the chance to work with quality standards that seem not allowed in the contemporary production model, too old or too frantic to be able to dwell on the details, and a recognition of their competences and interests. It is indeed their

passion for gaming and for their professional activities that sustains the subjective conditions to engage in the (non-paid) activities of Tin Hat. Therefore, this case study shows one of the main tensions embedded in creative work, namely the fact that workers perform activities in which pleasure and obligation become blurred (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010). Similarly, they have to find a balance between recognition and self-identification, on the one hand, and the need to earn a living, on the other (Huws 2010). In the attempt to interpret this phenomenon, in media studies the concept of *playbor* was introduced (Kücklich 2005), to refer to self-expression and to the valorization of collaborative phenomena, that are however embedded into institutional and technological settings oriented toward capital accumulation (Scholtz 2012). As we are about to see, Tin Hat does not fully escape from such a (glossed over) mechanism.

## 5. Digitally Setting Up an Interactive Spectacle

Tin Hat makes intense use of social media and other digital platforms<sup>4</sup> for promotion, advertising, and public/fandom engagement purposes. The Kickstarter campaign – planned with extreme attention and designed in detail for the aimed target – represented not only the opportunity to increase product quality (given Tin Hat financial conditions), but also equalled the capability to reach a new audience: the US, and more generally international, one.

Even before we knew Kickstarter as a solution, there was already a commitment to translate and try to make it big abroad: choosing the logo, picking up a Bansky, thought for the US and UK [...] We used Kickstarter half as a crowdfunding campaign and half like launching a company [...] According to the data, Kickstarter is the one that offers an international audience, for a project like that Kickstarter is perfect, for a super-heroes concept [...] abroad there's a history of heroes and superheroes. (Collective interview, 15 April 2015)

All in all, the Kickstarter campaign represented the first international avenue for the Tin Hat debut. On the other hand, social media like Facebook have been used both to cultivate social relations, and to foster Tin Hat's reputation as a team of critical and independent, playful and foolish game producers. Such an 'indie' identity, indeed, is staged in the interactive spectacle of posts and comments, which are informal, playful and ironic but also well-finished, both linguistically and graphically – see the following excerpt and Figures 1 and 2.

This is not bullshit for plugging: Manuel is preparing a file for customizing with a 3D printer YOUR personalized mask. What does this mean? Real masks in the real life, *bitches!*



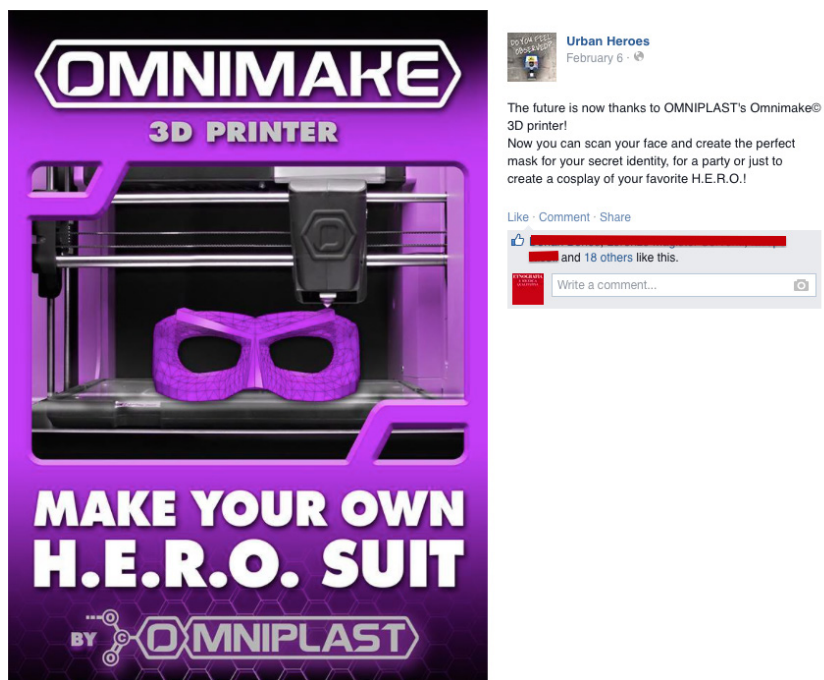


Fig. 1: A picture posted on the #UH Facebook page, with the accompanying caption. *Manuel Strali.*

(The Urban Heroes team does not answer for possible violent acts / robberies / murders committed while wearing the customized masks)  
(6 February 2015, 3:18 PM—translated from Italian)

Irony, moreover, is often coupled with self-irony, in a way that (strategically) builds up to the team identity (and its spectacularization).

From now until PLAY [convention], if you don't hear from us, if the posts will be less frequent, if you will see us wearing human flesh dresses and talking backwards, it will be because we are doing too many things at the same time [...] (4 March 2015, 10:56 AM)

Tin Hat identity equals that of its members. The 'characters' displayed onstage are Alex, Matt and Manuel, who even have, each, a personal logo-portrait designed by the latter (Figure 3). Such characters are not completely 'fictional', but 'based on a true story', so to speak, therefore 'authentic' (Varga 2011). There is no mystery, for instance, about the fact that they all have other 'official' jobs,<sup>5</sup> and a more or less precarious financial condition. Further, the authenticity effect is enhanced by the more or less implicit characterization of team members as, we could say, foolish assholes, although the kind with whom one



Fig. 2: An illustration posted on the #UH Facebook page, with the accompanying announcement. *Artsteady.*



Fig. 3: Logo-portrait of Tin Hat members. *Manuel Strali.*

can sympathize. The fact that people's everyday life is displayed more and more in its mundane details, 'confessed' (Foucault 1980) and staged at the same time, and made the spectacle itself – 'reality emerges from the spectacle, and the spectacle is real', as Debord maintained (*Thesis 8*) – has been a very important success condition of the crowdfunding campaign and the social media one alike.

The objective of cultivating social relations, on the other hand, has been brought about not only through frequent posting and quick replying, but also and especially by creating spaces and opportunities for followers' engagement and active participation, as well as for their mutual interaction in a community-like manner – this is where the spectacle becomes interactive. The Facebook group, for instance, is a 'place' for followers to show and share their #UH-related 'stuff' (e.g., the drawn portrait of a playing character), and to ask questions, comment and discuss with both the game creators and the other players. 'Expedients' aimed at fostering player-to-player interaction and a sense of community are manifold: share your playing-character sheet, post your photos of the convention (they usually represent demo-sessions, Alex or Manuel drawing at the stand, group of fans wearing an #UH t-shirt, etc.), vote for your favourite non-playing-character, publish your sketches (there is a dedicated 'Fan Art' section on the website), and so on. Finally, what one can refer to as the fan made dimension of #UH enters the game setting through the 'Project Z' web-space, where groups of players share detailed 'setting modules' for diverse cities as seen through the dystopic gaze of #UH.

Alex: [...] so that we can create a description of the world done through our players playing sessions [...] Therefore, even a beginner, one who has just approached #UrbanHeroes, and who chooses for instance to play in Manhattan, can connect and see what information are already available about Manhattan [...]

Matt: There's another interesting issue I always suffer about RpGs: when you play on Earth, and the history of our planet is involved, I always suffer the suffocating stereotypisation [...] unless you're from New York, for example, you'll always create a copy of the copy of the copy [...] by connecting these dots you not only obtain a network of

contacts, so that people who don't know each other start doing so, collaborating and maybe playing together – and therefore they enrich themselves one way or the other—but we will also have the opportunity to make use of the direct experience of a network of players, an experience that is for sure higher than our own.

(Video-interview, 12 April 2015)

By leveraging on a well-staged identity, supported by a distinctive communicative style (i.e. a specific aesthetics), Tin Hat has been able to build a community that represents a prime example, we believe, of the interactive spectacle. No doubt mutually enriching, even close social relations have emerged; no doubt people engagement has been huge and has often brought to fruitful collaboration; no doubt such a collaboration has developed through informal interaction and creative ways of doing and organizing activities. Yet such authentic relations are simultaneously staged and made part of the spectacle in order to extract value for the promotion and marketing of the 'indie' creative team and the 'indie' creative product alike (cf. Arvidsson and Colleoni 2012). Moreover, as already mentioned, the counter-narrative elaborated by this small independent gamers' association is almost completely based on the 'free work' of its members, who are required to provide by themselves a source of income and a base level of material security.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

In this essay we have proposed – through the presentation of a case of independent game producers – an analysis of the ambivalences that characterize producing, funding, and consuming in the age of the 'interactive spectacle'. This has brought us to criticize two main assumptions which, in our view, have not yet been debated deeply enough by the scholars studying the emergent forms of work in digital capitalism. First of all, we have shown that the analysis of 'free work' cannot be limited to the spaces of opportunities and satisfaction that it opens for knowledge and digital workers, since subjects experience complex dynamics of valorization of their own lives, and therefore of their own desires and passions. Secondly, we have critically re-read the approaches that consider – in the specific case of game producers – the use of instruments as crowdfunding and social media as a way of production that should also automatically build communities, through horizontalized patterns of communication.

By leveraging on Debord's concepts, we have thus tried to thematize, in the era of the knowledge society and of informational capitalism, the 'degradation of being into having' – produced first and foremost by the valorization of the subjects' existence – and the 'sliding of having into appearing' – produced through the interactive media technologies in the society of the spectacle, in its 2.0 version. The Tin Hat case well exemplifies the whole transition being-having-appearing, not only because its members' longstanding passions are now a constitutive part

of their work, but also for the strong intertwinement of ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ life. The ‘real’ Tin Hat characters often work together in the house of one of them, and their ‘fictional’ characters, those with a logo-portrait who interact with the fans’ community through the social media, are in fact ‘authentic’ and close to the ‘real’ characters.

Furthermore, we have highlighted how subjects at the same time display strategies to re-appropriate their own subjectivity and to criticize the dominant model of production and consumption, through the use of new media. Such re-appropriation is enacted, in the case of Tin Hat, through a Debordian *détournement*, both of the existing culture and of the existing social relations. Concerning culture, Tin Hat operates a *détournement* by bringing a dystopian social life into the #UrbanHeros game, which gives its own representation of social reality, whereas the current culture of gamification goes exactly in the opposite direction, that is, bringing the game into the social life and in particular into the working life, with the aim of using entertainment to enhance productivity. Finally, concerning social relations, the *détournement* happens in the interactive spectacle of the social media, where relations are in this context supposed to be instrumental to the assessment of the reputation of Tin Hat, but they become also mutually enriching and engaging, and create a sense of community.

The construction of social relations in countergaming practices is, indeed, the wealth through which Tin Hat sustains its existence as an independent organization collaboratively managed, even financially, for example through crowdfunding. From this perspective, the established relations, and the construction of new ones, are necessary means of survival in Tin Hat’s experience, and they are cultivated and valued through the re-appropriation of capitalist digital platforms. The practices oriented to the construction of social relations, through the Facebook page or the Kickstarter campaign, are indeed what found the connection between the cooperative practices of Tin Hat and the interactive spectacle, as in these practices the subjectivities of Tin Hat members are both the subjects and objects of spectacularization, through the mediation of contemporary digital platform. In conclusion, social relations themselves become, irremediably, part of the interactive spectacle, that can be read as based, on one side, on mechanisms that extract value from the ‘free’ and self-valorizing practices of individuals, and, on the other, on the instruments – in this case crowdfunding platforms – that encourage people to engage in risky actions while leaving them alone in managing the implications of a possible public failure. The interactive spectacle, therefore, appears—in the analysed case study – as a necessary passage point for contemporary collaborative practices of production, and this holds notwithstanding and almost independently of the critical stances, like countergaming, brought forward by such practices. Tin Hat is then an interesting case to analyse how the tactic of *détournement* can be used in a role-playing game and in the practices of its creation. However, how the passion and the creativity of an independent association can escape the exploitation embedded in the precarious forms of (digital) labour, still needs to be disentangled.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> ‘What associates us all is the passion for role-play games [...] we have accumulated a certain knowledge of the commodities sector [...] we know the milieu very well.’ (Collective interview, 15 April 2015)
- <sup>2</sup> The superpunk surpasses punk individualistic nihilism, and is grounded in displacement intended as an aesthetics that points towards everyday life and mundane social phenomena.
- <sup>3</sup> Once a week, in business-as-usual times, or several days in a row (5 to 8 on average) before convention premieres and the like.
- <sup>4</sup> They have a website with embedded blog for #UH, a page and a group on Facebook for #UH, a page for Tin Hat Games and a ‘Tin Hat Club’ closed group, accounts on Twitter, Instagram and Google+, and a space on Issuu where they share various game-related free material.
- <sup>5</sup> Notice that the presence itself of something labelled ‘official’ calls to mind something else that is ‘unofficial’, ‘off-the-records’, hence (more) authentic.

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## CHAPTER 11

# **‘Freelancing’ as Spectacular Free Labour: A Case Study on Independent Digital Journalists in Romania**

Romina Surugiu

### **1. Introduction**

Using a case study approach (based on non-structured interviews, observations, and thematic analysis of articles) and drawing on Debord’s notion of spectacle, this research aims at investigating the activity of a residence of independent digital journalists/writers in Romania. This residence’s aim is to foster the production of journalistic/non-fictional content, outside the institutions that materialize the dominant world view at the social and individual level (as in Debord’s understanding): mainstream media institutions or editorial houses. The case study ultimately illuminates the two-fold way in which freelancing journalists simultaneously disrupt and reproduce the spectacle as it crystallizes in the journalism field. The members of this group are positioning themselves against the institutionalized materialization of the spectacle. Similar to Situationist intellectuals, they try to create situations that, by the force of critique, undermine the spectacle. Nevertheless, by accepting, in various ways, the financial support of

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the institutions they criticize, these independent journalists contribute to the materialization of the spectacle itself. By their activity as apparently independent critics, they may offer an appearance of legitimacy to the institutionalized system of ideology.

At the end of 2011, Vlad Ursulean, a young journalist working for the mainstream print media, found an abandoned four-room apartment in a heritage building in the old centre of Bucharest, the capital of Romania. He was writing a journalistic report on old buildings filled with squatters and his approach entailed reflecting on the national concern about a potentially devastating earthquake. The four-room apartment, filled with dirt, and with no electricity, heat or hot water, caught his attention. It was part of an old building situated in the heart of the city. He imagined himself occupying it and transforming it into a place for young journalists to gather and to work. He and his friends had grown tired of meeting in coffee shops or cheap restaurants. He found the owner of the building through an Internet search and, after some negotiation, got a cheap rent deal. After several parties held there, including on New Year's Eve of 2012, reality broke into this quiet community of young journalists. The anti-government protests of January 2012, taking place near the building, forced him to get involved. During the night of January 15–16, 2012, while the Romanian police forces were having bloody encounters with the protesters, Ursulean wrote a journalistic report which immediately went viral, generating more comments, views and likes than any other type of news report in the Romanian mainstream media ('The Slumbering Youth Are Throwing Rocks: 'We Are Fucking Angry!'). It was a decisive moment. He committed himself to online writing and to independent journalism. Two years later, he and other journalists who joined his initiative moved their belongings into a bungalow rented on Viitorului (Future) Street in Bucharest. The 'Casa Jurnalistului' (House of the Journalist) concept was starting to take shape.

Journalism and its associated activities have undergone substantial changes over the last 30 years. The common belief, fuelled by the media industry itself and its managers, is that journalism was changed primarily by the off-line to online transition (the technological determinism explanation). However, research on journalists and their working conditions (Deuze 2007; Deuze and Lewis 2016; Deuze and Witchsge 2016; IFJ 2011; Holmes and Nice 2012) yields more refined explanations related to political, economic and social factors that ultimately affect journalism, leading to an end of journalism 'as it is' (for a detailed discussion, see Deuze 2007, 141–170), and to the start of the new condition of 'becoming' (Deuze and Witchsge 2016). Following Deuze (2007), Deuze and Lewis (2013) and Mosco and McKercher (2008), I have focused previously on the changing working conditions of journalists in the digital environment. I have demonstrated how economic factors affect the media in the same way as technological or social factors by creating a work environment that impacts upon journalism: diminishing editorial freedom and/or agency, giving priority to soft subjects that can be easily monetized, blurring the line between

PR, advertising and journalism, and establishing rigid control/surveillance over employees (Surugiu, 2016). One unexplored yet important component of contemporary journalism is independent journalism.

This chapter is based on a case study conducted in 2015–2016, investigating the activity of a residence for independent digital journalists/writers in Bucharest, Romania. My aim is to analyse the results of this case study investigation using a Debordian perspective that takes into account free labour as an emerging feature of present-day capitalism (Terranova 2000; Briziarelli 2014) and the institutionalized materialization of ideology within the *Society of the Spectacle* (Debord 1967/1994).

The following questions are of particular interest:

- 1) How do the inhabitants of this journalists' residence position themselves vis-à-vis the institutionalized materialization of the spectacle within society?
- 2) Does working for free disrupt or reproduce the 'spectacle' as it crystallizes in the field of journalism?

## 2. Several Notes on Contemporary Romanian Journalism

Recent research carried out on 100 Romanian journalists demonstrated that fear is the main concern of the professional body/guild: 'the journalists' fear that tomorrow they may no longer have a job, fear of the end of the month, when one does not know if one is going to get paid, fear of the owner, of politicians, of the authorities' (CJI 2015, 4). The report stresses the economic vulnerability of journalists, the media agenda being captured by political or economic interests, censorship of the media, the lack of media ethics, the de-professionalization of the field, and the diminishing credibility of journalists, are seen as the major characteristics of Romania's national and local media system (CJI 2015).

Moreover, previous research showed that journalists in Romania are sceptical of the possibility of joining trade unions, which remain marginal institutions, unable to counteract the layoffs and salary cuts (Ghinea and Mungiu-Pippidi 2010, 326). Reports on local media underlined the political pressures on journalists and media outlets (FreeEx 2014). Media organizations are also described as being 'profoundly gendered, with the balance favouring the men at the top and women bunched at the bottom of the hierarchal pyramid', as well as unstable, de-professionalized, and less respected by the public (Rovența-Frumușani *et al.* 2017, 181). These are the features of an unstable work environment for journalists, but also for other knowledge workers in the post-industrial society, the key word being precariousness (Mosco and McKercher, 2008). As Hesmondalgh (2013, 261) explains, they sometimes accept poor working conditions in exchange for creative autonomy. Nevertheless, the symbolic reward

of becoming a name in the industry is available only for a limited number of people, while the number of cultural workers is high.

In this complicated economic and social context, young journalists have the most vulnerable position. They are subjected to an ideological pressure to commit to journalism 'as it is' (in Deuze's understanding 2007, 141), without questioning or resisting it. Gollmitzer (2014) also produced evidence for the common acceptance among young journalists of low pay and even no pay (in the case of interns).

As I have previously observed, their discourse on journalism is impregnated by:

... the elements of the contemporary ideology of work: long internships are mandatory for a career, individualism is the key factor of personal success, it is worth being underpaid as long as you work in an interesting and creative environment (such as media), and unions are unnecessary (Surugiu 2016, 195).

One illustration proposed by a young journalist was that of a person who is juggling many dishes (read 'tasks'), and gets more and more dishes in spite of the exhaustion shown. The journalists' forms of resistance against this ideology and the contemporary state of affairs are mostly individual, the 'exit strategy' from mainstream media being one of them (Surugiu 2016, 194). Young journalists leave mainstream media after three or four years and join PR/advertising agencies or other types of institutions. A small segment opts for independent and alternative media outlets, such as Casa Jurnalistului, on which the present case study was conducted. The case study consists of six non-structured interviews (four men and two women), conducted by the author, in Romanian, in October 2015. The number of journalists associated with Casa Jurnalistului was 22 (data available on September 2016).

Following the research design proposed by Creswell (2013), I added to the interviews: (a) personal observations; (b) a thematic analysis of articles (mainly features) published by *casajurnalistului.ro* between September 14, 2015 and September 14, 2016.

The chapter also builds upon previous research by the author on the journalism and media industry in Romania (Surugiu 2016, Surugiu, Lazar, Ilco 2016, Surugiu 2015, Surugiu 2013).

I compared my findings with the results and conclusions of policy papers/reports (CJI 2015; FreeEx 2014; Ghinea and Mungiu-Pippidi 2010; Preoteasa et. al. 2010) and academic works on media and journalism in Romania (Balan et al. 2010; Bădău 2010; Petcu 2005; Surugiu and Radu 2009; Petre 2012; Lazăr 2014; Vasilendiuc and Gross 2012).

My positionality is also worth mentioning. Having a BA in Journalism, I worked as a part-time journalist in 1999–2002, in 2007, and in 2009–2015, experiencing low pay, editorial pressures and institutional constraints. As a member of the Board of Romanian Public Television (2012–2015), I understood

the consequences of political and economic pressure on media institutions. As Associate Professor in the Department of Journalism of the University of Bucharest, I became acquainted with the hopes, doubts and disappointments related to the world of future journalists (both Romanian and international).

### 3. A New Space, in a 'Post-Apocalyptic' Landscape

The key feature of Casa Jurnalistului is the materiality of the space. It is not a virtual community, built around a digital platform, but a 'flesh and blood' community developed around a house, inhabited by several independent journalists. It is a community of reporters and writers that chose to freelance, that is, to produce media content on their own, without being hired by a long or short-term employer. This content is published on *casajurnalistului.ro* or on other independent and even mainstream digital platforms. Besides the platform (*casajurnalistului.ro*) and the commitment to a physical space, the community shares a Facebook page, and uses the virtual environment for work.

The community has an informal leader, who does not want to be considered as such, but who first put into practice the idea of having a material space. According to him, the space was very important for building the community. The trigger to finding an appropriate space was:

... the very corporative, authoritarian medium in which journalists used to work was a stupid thing, because in my opinion journalism is a liberal and ultraliberal profession (...) a versatile one that should not depend on so many things. Although it is performed in an organization, it should not have that (organizational) character. I have not considered what it should look like, but I thought of ancient craftsmen who owned a workshop, where people used to come to ask for an object to be made, like a sword, or in the case of a journalist, something in the nature of Sherlock Holmes stories – people used to come to his house and tell a story... (Interview 6)

The community of reporters and writers has developed around the physical presence of a house. At first, it was a penthouse near the centre of Bucharest and then a bungalow, situated on Viitorului Street (Future Street, in Romanian), also close to the city centre. Several persons actually live in the house, and others participate on a regular basis in editorial meetings and after work parties. The interviewees described the house as being organized as an 'open house' that 'opens minds':

People have formed this habit of coming to visit. There used to be moments when the house was completely open, anyone could enter and hang out for several hours, without any questions from the others

(...). Now the gate (of the courtyard) is closed, but if somebody comes, there is no problem, he/she is let in. On the second floor there is the office, where only journalists can stay, on the firstfloor people live, but the kitchen is open... you can see in the course of an evening all sorts of people there: musicians, IT specialists and so on... (...) The parties organized by Casa Jurnalistului had such an interesting effect. People came because they wanted to meet them (the journalists) and came to meet them, and they got the chance to better understand what they wrote, what they see, how they see, and they (the journalists) got to open minds. (Interview 1).

Asked to explain why they joined the house, the journalists interviewed painted the bleak situation of Romanian media. They all started working in the mainstream media, where they worked for two to four years. They were hired as interns, poorly paid, and treated as interchangeable and ready-to-use items. One interviewee mentioned that during the outbreak of the 'economic crisis' in 2011 his colleagues from the investigation department of an important national newspaper were abruptly re-assigned to write news stories (Interview 2). Another interviewee explained that media outlets in Romania do not financially support journalistic documentation and investigation (Interview 5).

The contemporary media was described as 'a post-apocalyptic landscape' (Interview 1), in which journalists are irrelevant and isolated. Although young, the journalists complained of exhaustion, apathy (feeling blasé) and bitter disappointment. The house was seen as an extraordinary place that 'made sense' and provided the opportunity to hold on to journalism (Interviews 4 and 5). It developed as an 'organic community', filled with energy, an 'endearing and acknowledged mess', and 'cool madness' (Interview 5). 'The house gives you courage. It's a vibe, and an energy that inspires' (Interview 3). The journalists voluntarily accept the precariousness of free labour in Casa Jurnalistului in exchange for agency and editorial freedom. From their point of view, it is better to be precarious and happy to work, than to be in the condition of their colleagues from the base of mainstream media: precarious and alienated.

#### 4. Crowdfunding and Financing the Old 'New' Journalism

The journalists are not paid for their editorial pieces. They work for free. Reporters and writers are not obliged to publish a quantity of articles per day/week/month as it is the rule in the Romanian mainstream media. The topics or subjects are selected by reporters and writers without any editorial constraints or rules.

The only control is related to the actual writing of the editorial piece, that is, textual composition, title and subtitles, quotations and so on. This editorial control is collective. The text is uploaded in a Google document and made available

to all the residents. Afterwards, the text is analysed during editorial meetings. The pressure of this collective editing is described by the journalists as being 'pretty important', 'time-consuming' and stressful for some reporters.

The rules of copy-editing respect the basic American journalistic/non-fictional style: fact-checking, reliable sources, appropriate angle, good quotations and titles, and consistent grammar. Residents acknowledge the strong influence of American gonzo journalism. Besides this, the interviewees declared they were inspired by the reportages of Filip Brunea-Fox (1898–1977), a Romanian reporter who practiced literary journalism and wrote about marginal people.

The thematic analysis of articles showed that the articles belong to literary journalism, considered to be one of the future paths of journalism (Neveu 2014), or a place for mediating the subjectivity of the reporter (Harbers and Broersma 2014). The features published by *casajurnalistului.ro* favour marginal subjects, marginal in the sense of not being covered by the mainstream media, and not being targeted to the general public. The features present stories of drug-addiction, prostitution, extreme poverty. They focus on what one may call the 'periphery of the periphery'. In fact, several interviewees underlined their commitment to these subjects, while one journalist considered the focus on marginal subjects as a weakness of Casa Jurnalistului.

The editorial practice of Casa Jurnalistului shows a strong commitment to quality journalism, usually associated with traditional newsrooms. Journalists deploy complicated working procedures (long reporting hours in situ, in-depth interviewing) to ensure accuracy and credibility. They focus on writing long-form articles, which are expensive to produce and time-consuming. This incredible amount of work is done for free, although *casajurnalistului.ro* has a PayPal platform.

The sum collected by crowdfunding is mainly used for rent and bills. It offers a 'low-cost lifestyle' (*Interview 2*). Its informal leader said that he wanted to keep the funding at a limited level, so as not to permit any slippage that might negatively affect the production of content. Casa Jurnalistului as an institution is not financed by any other entity or structure from Romania or abroad. Nevertheless, its reporters and writers are sponsored by various types of institution that could be grouped as follows:

- a. Romanian mainstream media. They pay a relatively small amount of money per article. One journalist works as a part-time employee for a high-quality Romanian weekly.
- b. International mainstream media. They pay a relatively large sum of money to freelance journalists who are willing to be 'fixers', that is, to arrange a story in Romania (sources, travels, background information, translations).
- c. Nongovernmental structures, financed by important transnational corporations or financial institutions (banks). They offer fellowships in an open competition to freelance journalists on a yearly basis. Journalists from Casa Jurnalistului compete with other journalists for a limited number of

fellowships and prizes that cover the expenses of documenting and writing articles on given topics. The organizers of the fellowships also offer editorial support. The only requirement is to produce a long form story on a topic selected by them. Among the selected topics are: domestic violence, extreme poverty, minority exclusion, the public education system and so on. The residents admit they apply for these fellowships, which can ensure them a small income.

- d. Other individuals who pay them for filming or photo-shooting at private events.

Romanian and international media do not publicly acknowledge the use of content provided by Casa Jurnalistului. However, nongovernmental structures are extremely vocal about their financial support and about their constant collaboration with journalists from Casa Jurnalistului.

I argue that these structures have appropriated Casa Jurnalistului as an epitome of creative writing and use it in their corporate social responsibility (CSR) campaigns for the financing companies. The creativity of young independent journalists is packaged by these structures as a PR object, and used as such in their public communication.

One interviewee explicitly denounced the temptation of using this type of financing, which he described as part of 'an unhealthy relationship' for journalists:

Fellowships, journalism prizes... they are OK, but, in the long term, you risk slipping towards an agenda imposed by NGOs, towards topics that are not necessarily yours. (...) At first it is cool, because it is the main validation when you are at the beginning and you feel disoriented, and you have no idea how to relate to the exterior world and to the public, you are validated. They feed the ego of young writers. (Interview 2).

## 5. What Does Freelancing Stand For? A Debordian Interpretation of Free Labour in Journalism

Debord's writings, published before the massive spread of the Internet, support the thesis that contemporary societal evolutions are not the effect of digitization, but accelerated by it. The seeds of societal transformation were present long before the outbreak of the new technologies of communication. *The Society of the Spectacle*, described by Debord in 1967, resembles the virtual society of the Internet, to which the same definition may be applied: 'a social relationship between people that is mediated by images' (Debord 1967/1994, § 4), holding 'the very heart of society's real unreality' (*idem*, § 5). In the same way as the society of the spectacle exists, the virtual society (of avatars and Facebook



'inhabitants') is not a society of real persons, but of images of the persons, who interact and build social relations with the help of technology.

Moreover, Debord's dichotomy between reality and image has found its illustration in the virtual society. ('The spectacle cannot be set in abstract opposition to concrete social activity, for the dichotomy between reality and image will survive on either side of any such distinction. Thus, the spectacle, though it turns reality on its head, is itself a product of real activity' Debord, 1967/1994, § 8)

The typical yet not unique effort to accommodate the society of the spectacle to the new digital context takes in the media's case the form of digital journalism. The journalists of the digital era no longer consider themselves to be inert components of the media system, because they have the ability to interact with the system not merely as its elements, but as 'conscious' elements. Journalists from the pre-digital era might be included in the classical industrial enterprise model, as workers who do their labour for the benefit of the company, but without the possibility of influencing decisions regarding the company and its means of production. In the light of the digital revolution, the journalist was willing to integrate information technology in his/her work. Journalists hope to acquire the structural ability to create, influence and change the professional field that, in the past, was built from the outside (by the social and political system, and economic institutions).

The journalist of the digital era is presented by the ideological apparatus of technological determinism as a participant in the decision-making of the company to which he/she belongs. (This is the case of all knowledge workers, as Mosco and McKercher (2008) explain.) In this sense, the ideology of technological determinism produced social and professional expectations related to a new type of journalistic agency and power, through the possibility of building a platform and uploading content in an instant. The endless opportunities to get in touch with people, to handle Big Data, to document stories online, and to publish them as soon as they are ready, without the institutional constraints of legacy media, proved to be elements of a well-designed spectacle, meant in Debord's (1988, § VI) terms to 'organize' ignorance and to hide other important societal issues.

The spectacle of digital media takes the shape of an upside-down system, where human relations are distorted by the requirements of the mechanical production necessary for the wide dissemination of information on the Internet. Instead of following the public interest, journalists choose soft subjects, easily monetized with the help of search engine optimization (SEO) techniques.

The established media system has few opportunities to fully integrate young people. Young people agree to participate in the media system by reporting and writing for free during long internships. They invest their limited resources hoping to join the system after they learn the tools of the trade. But the system cannot offer a stable job and a promising career in exchange for all the investment young people make in it.

Previous research (Surugiu 2016; Surugiu, Lazăr & Ilco 2016), based on interviews conducted with mainstream Romanian journalists, showed that journalists have a precarious work life. I argue that this precariousness leads to the acceptance, even embracing of the society of spectacle, which materializes in a continuous and tiring quest for higher circulation figures and audience ratings. As one journalist explains:

I would have wanted an editorial mission: to know why and what is the purpose of my writing, to dedicate time to each story, while they were asking me only 'quantities' and promotion for company's projects... somehow my mission was to make money and this left no room for higher purposes (Surugiu 2016: 193).

In this context, Casa Jurnalistului's commitment to the image and tools of the 'old' profession of journalism and to a revival of literary journalism may be understood as a quest to create a disruptive alternative to the digital spectacle. This alternative comprises a physical space, unmediated meetings, mutual understanding, a cooperative-like organization, and the production of journalistic and non-fiction stories about subjects rejected by mainstream media and in forms avoided by the so-called mass-media. As Kellner (2009, 1) points out, the current corporate media is centred upon 'sensationalistic tabloidized stories which they construct in the forms of media spectacle that attempt to attract maximum audiences for as much time as possible, until the next spectacle emerges.' As an alternative to soft and sensationalistic journalism, Casa Jurnalistului produces long-form articles that belong to the literary journalism domain. These articles are social documents that disrupt the 'spectacle of media' (in Debord's terms). This disruptive trait of Casa Jurnalistului is also present at the organizational level, not only at the content production level. It is illustrated by the decision to keep the crowd funding at a limited level. Another symptom of this disruptiveness is the lack of institutional funding for Casa Jurnalistului as an organization. However, its members, with some exceptions, case by case, peripherally integrate themselves in the institutionalized system of ideology, by applying for fellowships and prizes offered by nongovernmental structures. Young digital freelance journalists search for ways of joining the society of the spectacle, as do their counterparts employed by mainstream media. Their incapacity to resist PR and advertising pressures is the same as in mainstream media. However, the capacity of PR and advertising, as major components of the society of the digital spectacle, to take the shape of genuine journalism is improving at an unanticipated level.

## 6. Conclusions

Casa Jurnalistului is not a brand-new initiative in contemporary society. On the contrary, the concept of 'creative places' within 'creative cities' has been taking

shape for the last 10 to 15 years (Cohendet, Grandadam and Simon 2010; Collis, Felton and Graham 2010). Also, freelance journalism has been a reality from the very beginning of the twentieth century, and literary journalism is also not a novelty. However, my interest in Casa Jurnalistului was motivated by the quest of individuals who voluntarily disrupt capitalism.

The case analysis of Casa Jurnalistului highlights the twofold way in which freelancing journalists simultaneously disrupt and reproduce the spectacle as it crystallizes in the field of journalism. The members of this group are positioning themselves against the institutionalized materialization of dominant world view (presented in the media spectacles of corporate journalism). Similar to Situationist intellectuals, they try to create situations that undermine the spectacle through the force of criticism. This takes the form of accurate reporting of reality, as opposed to construction of media spectacles.

However, they feel tempted by the necessity to peripherally integrate themselves in the institutionalized spectacle, because this peripheral integration is, for them, the only possibility they can conceive of to continue to produce quality journalism. Therefore, by accepting, indirectly, the financial support of the pillar institutions of society (corporations), these independent journalists contribute to the materialization of the spectacle itself. Through their activity, as apparently independent critics and free labourers, they may lend an appearance of legitimacy to the institutionalized system of ideology.

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## CHAPTER 12

# Immaterial Labour and Reality TV: The Affective Surplus of Excess

Jacob Johanssen

### 1. Introduction

Drawing on discussions of neoliberalism, immaterial labour and exploitation of reality television participants, I argue in this chapter that those who appear on reality shows are exploited because they receive no monetary return for their performances. I use the British programme *Embarrassing Bodies* (Channel 4, 2007–2015) as an exemplary basis. I then seek to theorize the exploited labour on reality television through Debord's notion of the spectacle. I argue that in contemporary reality television the spectacle is amplified through affectivity and shaming. This is particularly evident in programmes that are about health and the body, such as *Embarrassing Bodies*. The spectacular labour depicted in such programmes may serve to attract audiences for entertainment purposes, as well as to discipline them so that they remain healthy and productive. *Embarrassing Bodies* is a medical reality show that features patients with common but also very rare medical conditions. The patients are seen by doctors, who also act as hosts of the show, and are then referred to specialists for subsequent treatment. The show is very graphic and patients undress in front of the camera to show their bodies. Operations are also partly broadcast. It is safe to

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say that the show knows no taboos in the showing of genitals, or other regions of the body more commonly signified as ‘embarrassing’.

I end the chapter by turning to how *Embarrassing Bodies* is discussed on Twitter. Social media users often demonstrate an internalized, neoliberal ideology when they shame and dismiss patients. The spectacle is thus actively reproduced by audiences on social media.

## 2. Neoliberalism, Reality Television and Labour

Many scholars (Ouellette 2004; Palmer 2004; Andrejevic 2011; Wood and Skeggs 2011; Gilbert 2013) argue that reality television’s emergence and continued proliferation may be seen in relation to neoliberalism and its development in the West. Reality television formats are a prime example of showcasing neoliberal values of self-responsibility, self-help and self-performance. Allison Hearn (2010) has linked reality television to Hardt and Negri’s (2000, 2004) work on immaterial labour. She argues that the performance of reality television participants is one of individualism, affect and communication that is geared towards the production of an immaterial product: a television programme. What participants do on reality television shows are not only acts of performance but actual labour that contributes to profit harvested by production companies and television channels (Hearn 2010; Andrejevic 2011).

Reality television can likewise mean a relatively cheap way of production for television studios. Particularly the focus on ordinary people who are not professional actors guarantees less money is spent on salaries for the performers (Curnutt 2011). Deery (2014) has similarly argued that the multifaceted aspects of commercialization that surround reality television (cheap production costs, spin-off shows, product placements, websites etc.) have led to precarious conditions for participants:

Then, on-screen participants expect little or no pay and are generally underemployed aspiring actors or lower- and lower-middle-class employees whose casting could be considered a form of outsourcing to cheaper labor (Deery 2014, 20).

She concludes that the majority of reality show participants ‘earn only a small per diem stipend that may not cover loss of wages or other expenses’ (Deery 2014, 21). The same is true for the *Embarrassing Bodies* patients. Apart from the medical treatment and possibly a small fee, they receive no remuneration. The amount of profit that Channel 4 has made from the show is thus in no proportion to the money that is paid to the patients/workers. The question poses itself then, as Andrejevic (2011) notes, whether reality TV participants should be classified as workers or just participants. While such activities may not count as traditional wage-earning labour, they still contribute to the production of a



commodity that generates exchange value. Andrejevic nonetheless argues that they are not exploited in the traditional sense of the wage labour model that Marx developed but in terms of affective and alienated labour that is more difficult to measure (2011, 27–29).

The aspect of exploitation of reality television participants has also been discussed by other scholars but is often only mentioned *in passim* (Brenton and Cohen 2003; Baltruschat 2009; West 2010; de Kloet and Landsberger 2012; Sender 2012). Baltruschat has called the working conditions of reality television contestants ‘highly exploitative’ (2010, 142). In their discussion of the *Idols* format, de Kloet and Landsberger stress that the performances of contestants should be seen for what it is. ‘What is generally considered as fun, leisure and cultural activity very often constitutes free labour based on which different parties generate capital’ (de Kloet and Landsberger 2012, 139). This notion of free labour (Terranova 2000) has also been discussed and conceptualized as ‘immaterial labour’ by the thinkers Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt (2000, 2004) and Mauricio Lazzarato (1996). Broadly speaking, the term designates new forms of labour that go beyond traditional factories and workplaces and stretch into all spheres of life and are not easily recognised as ‘work’. It is the product of the labour process, which is itself material and physical, that is immaterial, such as a feeling of well-being, health or satisfaction (Hardt and Negri 2004, 108). To some extent, immaterial labour is about self-care, self-improvement and re-invention. However, there are some limits to the immaterial labour concept when applied to reality television participants, as Hearn (2010) maintains. While reality television performances are often about the very characteristics that the immaterial labour concept describes: individuality, affect, self-relationality, creativity, their end result is indeed measurable value creation for a television channel (Hearn 2010, 73). In the case of *Embarrassing Bodies*, the participants’ labour on the show is indeed also about affect, individuality, well-being and embodiment but also its process (the sequences with the doctors, the operations, the ‘after’ shots) and yet it creates two things at once: a made-over body that is healthier thanks to medical treatments, as well as an immaterial television product that is broadcast on television and online.

Furthermore, I suggest that the participants are not only exploited in terms of monetary dimensions, they are exposed for entertainment value. They have to work by exposing themselves, talking of their shame and being commented on by the doctors (and audiences), in order to be granted their desired treatment and healing. I explore the specificities of that exploited labour further below by drawing on Debord’s notion of the spectacle.

### 3. Spectacular Labour

Guy Debord argued that in the society of the spectacle, life itself has become reduced to a commodity. The spectacle reduces reality to an endless supply

of commodifiable fragments, while encouraging us to focus on appearances. Our experience and way of living have been downgraded from 'having' to 'appearing'. Everything is about appearances. The society of the spectacle is, for Debord, a society of atomized and isolated individuals who are only united through a common exposure to the same images. The spectacle means that reality is replaced by images (Debord 2006). Contemporary reality television may be regarded as a logical continuum of such spectacle. Reality shows are devoid of any substance but are a mere showcase of form without essence. They stress the visual and emphasize processes of transformation that are exclusively tied to appearance and visibly observable behaviour. Viewers are made to believe that naughty children are turned into obedient and good children (*Supernanny*, Channel 4, 2004–2012), an aspiring entrepreneur is transformed into a successful businessperson (*The Apprentice*, BBC One, 2005–), young people are transformed into superstars (casting show formats), and so on and so forth. The individuals whose transformations we witness are of lesser importance than their *displayed* and *observable* mannerisms, bodily features, actions and styles.

The process from 'having' to 'appearing', that Debord writes of, is best exemplified through reality television. Any reality show promises both the contestants and the audience a spectacular transformation. Something artificially created for the sake of a particular format (e.g. different tasks that feature throughout an *Apprentice* season) ends in a new reality for the contestants. One is the winner and receives the investment, whereas the others have lost. This spectacle of appearance is further heightened in the many beauty reality shows where 'ugly' people are transformed into 'beautiful' ones.

*Embarrassing Bodies* occupies a particular and slightly different position in the spectacle of reality television. It is unparalleled in its graphicness and shameless visibility of bodies. Such an excessiveness of the spectacle is both achieved through the patients' labour/performance and how it is commented on by the doctors. While Debord argued that the spectacle comes to dominate society and reality, 'the spectacle, though it turns reality on its head, is itself a product of real activity.' (Debord 2006, 14). While most reality shows are precisely about unreality, or as Debord might have called them 'society's real unreality' (13), *Embarrassing Bodies* and related shows that feature operations or visible bodily transformations, depict spectacular performances which are nonetheless rooted in reality that go beyond the spectacle's empty pretentiousness of reality. Whereas many reality shows are clearly *not* real but scripted, rehearsed and fake (Andrejevic 2004), medical reality shows feature real operations and observable outcomes. A wound is healed, excess fat is removed, a liver spot is cut out, and so on. We may therefore observe both an excessive and heightened spectacle that is achieved through the participants' labour of talking about their conditions, undressing, showing their bodies but, at the same time, a sense of reality becomes observable that escapes the spectacle's formulaic and sequential dramatization. This, as it were, surplus of the spectacle is particularly

exemplified through the affective display of bodies. The bodies may be turned into spectacle but a quantum remains that escapes representation.

#### 4. Affect as Excess

In the *Comments*, Debord specifically mentioned ‘spectacular medicine and all the other similarly surprising examples of ‘media excess’ (Debord 1990, 6). The ‘spectacle would be merely the excesses of the media’ (7). We can continue and strengthen this line of thought via a focus on affect. Contemporary affect theories generally define affect as having abrupt, excessive, raw and intersubjective qualities. Affect suggests movement, messiness and excess. Bonner has argued that medical reality shows in particular ‘produce an excess of affect’ (Bonner 2005, 106). Similarly, Moseley (2000) has defined reality television as embodying ‘the excessiveness of the ordinary’ (Moseley 2000, 314) such as close ups of body parts that we all have. Misha Kavka has named reality shows a ‘pornographic ‘excess’ of too much visibility’ (Kavka 2009, 164). Its excessive affectivity is arguably the strongest feature of *Embarrassing Bodies* and many other reality shows. It attracts viewers through the very promise of a view into spectacular bodies few have seen before. I will now illustrate how bodies are portrayed. The camera often follows the participants into the operating theatre and shows parts of the surgical procedures in excruciating detail. In one sequence (S3, E9), the patient Claire is seen talking about her large labia that cause her discomfort.

- Claire: Sometimes it’ll be quite painful, erm, I’d have to kind of, put it out the way, otherwise it would pull and it would be sore.
- Dr. Christian: It would get pushed inside and pull.
- Claire: Yeah.
- Dr. Christian: OK.
- Claire: I have really bad dreams sometimes that I, I’m just so sick of it that I end up cutting it off, like it’s really.
- Dr. Christian: You’re dreaming about cutting it off.
- Claire: Yeah and that’s just the thought of that scares me.
- Dr. Christian: Well, the first thing is I really need to have a look. So, let’s go over to the couch here. Come with me, all right, so if you just take those down for me.
- [Claire pulls down her trousers and underwear.]
- Claire: It’s all kind of.
- Dr. Christian: OK, do you tend to tuck them up inside or they go up inside?
- Claire: I try.
- Dr. Christian: So, what we can see is that the right side is definitely much longer, isn’t it? Than the left side and I can see that possibly that might rub on things, be causing the problems that you’re getting. Pop your things back on and we’ll have a chat (SE3, E9, 0.28–1.48).

Later on in the episode, Claire's surgery is shown in close-up shots of the large labia.

For a second, Claire's face is seen and she appears to be unconscious. A long medical tube is inserted into her mouth that is wide open. The dominant colour is the green of the surgeon's clothing and gown that seems to separate Claire's genitalia from everything else. The female surgeon is seen tucking and pulling at the labia (that are zoomed in to an extreme close-up) with medical instruments. The surgeon stretches the excess tissue that fills the screen and skilfully makes cuts and insertions. She pulls at it and moves it until she finally cuts it off. The excess tissue is seen dangling from a pair of tweezers – suspended in a void until it is not visible to the viewer anymore. Blood is oozing out of the wound. It is being absorbed with a white cloth. The wound is being sutured.

In this sequence, the patient's body is rendered a spectacle through a focus on affectivity. What matters is not the subject as such but someone who is shown having a particular condition (i.e. large labia) that can be exploited for entertainment. At the same time, Claire receives the operation for free and one could argue that a symbolic exchange of gifts has taken place. She provides her body to the programme and receives the operation (Baudrillard 1981). However, she has also contributed exchange value to Channel 4 through her bodily condition being shown on the programme. In that sense, the labour does not only consist of the time and money needed by the patient to travel to the filming location, to spend hours on set waiting for her turn to be seen by a doctor, possibly shooting the above dialogue sequence multiple times and then having to wait until she can receive the surgery. Her labour is affective and immaterial and does not result in a tangible product that was produced. Rather, through her condition of having large labia, she has contributed to a particular episode that is broadcast on television and online. As part of the broadcast, Channel 4 is paid by advertisers for air time. Only in combination with the other workers/patients can one episode come together. They should therefore be paid a basic wage that should be calculated according to the overall hours that are spent in relation to the programme (including travel time, shooting, time spent in hospitals). There is thus a distinctive relation between economic aspects tied to exploitation of labour power and ideological aspects that emerge as a result of how that labour is turned into spectacle. While such labour may be difficult to measure and there is always a limit to its representation, as I suggested earlier, we can theorize it further through examining processes of shame and shaming.

## 5. Shame and Sign Value

From a psychoanalytic perspective, shame designates a failure to live up to one's own ideas of the self (Rizzuto 1991). This internalized failure is often caused by others, who have made us feel unable to live up to ideas of what the self should

be. In one episode of *Embarrassing Bodies*, this failure is shown in Karen, who has suddenly developed a lot of acne:

I can't go to work, I can't go shopping. My husband's doing everything at the moment and I just look in the mirror all the time. It's just a nightmare. To me, it's taken Karen away. You know, how I was and, erm, I just don't feel that person anymore (S05, E08, 25.37–25.52).

The condition is represented here as having taken over the whole body. Karen cannot do anything anymore, her husband is doing everything. Her skin condition has 'taken Karen away'. She is seen equating herself with a nothing, an empty subject and her husband with 'everything'. She cannot function anymore and her body has become unproductive for she cannot go shopping or go to work. Her body has lost value and agency. It is the acne that has taken ownership of her body and taken control in a spectacular sense. Her misery is turned into spectacle through being represented on *Embarrassing Bodies*. The above sequence may summarise reality television's obsession with the spectacle and with othering bodies. Karen is not only shown talking about her body, her narrative is interjected with many close-up shots of her face and acne. This unproductive body acquires use value for Channel 4. Through the free labour of performance, it is turned into a spectacle that produces the *Embarrassing Bodies* commodity that is sold to advertisers in the form of air time. The useful body that is marked by shame and a bodily condition, has to produce itself on the show through labour such as speech acts that discuss the condition, undressing, showing of body parts, and so on in order to produce the television programme and, ultimately, to be offered treatment or advice. Karen is thus a worker whose performance contributes to the exchange value of *Embarrassing Bodies*. It is striking that she is seen speaking about herself in purely neoliberal terms. Her body has failed her and she is unable to work. This feeling of being unproductive is related to feelings of shame. Karen represents a subject who has been disciplined into conducting surveillance of her own body. Once any weaknesses are spotted, they need to be rooted out in order to stay healthy and productive. Two other examples may illustrate this further:

- Narrator's voice: 5 years ago, thirty-year-old Trina underwent major surgery; though successful, it left a stomach turning legacy.
- Trina: People stare quite a lot, I manage it, by wearing bigger clothes. It affects with my partner cos, er, I don't like him seeing me naked. [...]
- Dr. Dawn: Trina, come on in, take a seat. How can I help you?
- Trina: I'm here today to talk about my belly, erm, just from scarring, I've got deep scars.
- Dr. Dawn: So, scarring, did you have an operation or an injury to your tummy?

- Trina: Yeah, I had surgery done. I had part of my bowel removed, erm, from colitis.
- Dr. Dawn: What were the symptoms that you were experiencing?
- Trina: Erm, just, erm, being able to control, erm, toilet, having accidents, daily, erm.
- Dr. Dawn: Oh my word, so you were actually leaking faeces, were you?
- Trina: Basically.
- Dr. Dawn: And was there a lot of blood and so on?
- Trina: Yeah (S5, E4: 08.32–10.26).

The above sequence further emphasizes the spectacular affectivity that I described in the previous section. It is not only shown through the body itself but also enacted through dialogue and speech acts by the doctors in particular. It can be seen adding to the patients' shame through focussing on the most embarrassing conditions of a person. Trina is seen saying that people stare at her and that she is further affected by her condition because she does not like to be naked in front of her partner. The gazes of others intensify her shame. Dr. Dawn reacts by asking questions that reinforce shame in Trina. Trina is apprehensive in her answer as the number of 'erms' indicate. She is seen responding by uttering words that do not form a complete sentence. Dr. Dawn replies with a performed shocking reaction: 'Oh my word, so you were actually leaking faeces, were you?' to which Trina merely utters a 'basically'. Dr. Dawn's interrogation continues and she asks if there was 'a lot of blood and so on'. These graphic and highly intimate questions create powerful images in one's mind. Bodies are cast as 'embarrassing' while at the same time being invited on the programme because the show's narrative promises help and thus welcomes bodies back into 'normal' society. Bodies that are out of control are promised to be put in control again. We can see that, unlike most television programmes that deal with the body, *Embarrassing Bodies* is about assigning the body back to a healthy but more importantly, so-called *normal* state. It promises an end to the shameful body. The body is embraced by being allowed onto the programme, by being promised to be healed but also rejected through speech acts (and non-verbal communication) that ridicule or shame it. This focus on shame adds another dimension to the spectacle of reality television. The body is thus not only a worker's body that contributes to exchange value, as outlined, but also exemplifies Debord's discussion in *The Society of the Spectacle* of a shift from 'having' to 'appearing': 'all effective "having" must now derive both its immediate prestige and its ultimate *raison d'être* from appearances.' (Debord 2006, 16). We can see how in the case of reality television, this shift is not quite observable. Reality television designates a tension between exchange value that is generated through labour in the form of profit and sign value (see also Baudrillard 1981) that the workers embody and represent via their different conditions and appearances. In that sense, *contra* Debord and Baudrillard, the appearance is not more important than the use and exchange value. The 'embarrassing' body

needs to have a spectacular appearance (deformed genitals, an observable skin condition, and so on) so that it can acquire a sign value and can be symbolically rendered 'embarrassing' but that appearance must also be true, rather than a mere spectacular semblance. The body on the medical reality show is not simply made to appear in a certain way but is shown as appearing. The appearing body has a real bodily condition. It is that combination of appearance and essence that makes it spectacular. Its sign value makes it accumulate exchange value for Channel 4. The sign value of a particular condition is also underscored by use value for both the patient and the television channel when the patient receives advice and medical treatment. In that sense, something spectacular is transformed into something mundane, banal and 'normal'. Rather than being a spectacle without end, the spectacular body is transformed and afterwards no longer needed. Its sign and exchange values have diminished and a new, differently embarrassing body is needed for the show to continue. To that end, the programme presents a heightened relation between the economic and ideological aspects of contemporary neoliberalism. The patients are shown as embodying both an ideological surplus value and exchange value. They are only allowed on the show because they embody a unique medical condition that can be turned into spectacle. Ultimately, the spectacular body is discarded and abandoned by Channel 4 once it has been transformed into a 'normal' body through surgery or other medical procedures. This process of transformation, representative of any reality television narrative, results in medical treatments for patients but has also implications for audiences.

## 6. Conclusion: Disciplining Bodies

Debord (1990, 2006) argued that the spectacle does not only uphold capitalism's relations of production and guarantees continuing consumption, but it also maintains social order. In this chapter, I have related Debord's ideas to contemporary reality television by arguing that participants on reality shows conduct a form of labour that is exploited for profit maximization by television channels. The workers' bodies on *Embarrassing Bodies* acquire a particular use and sign value that contributes to the overall exchange value of the programme. This is amplified through the show's focus on affectivity and shame. However, affect, as many thinkers argue, is always situated at an intersection of representation, discourse and the non-representational (Kavka 2009). Something always escapes representation, particularly in the excessive visibility of the showing of surgical procedures on the programme. There is thus a limit to the representational ability of the spectacle. While the affectivity of the conditions is both heightened through the doctors' speech acts, it is also rendered into something discursive through naming and explaining of specific conditions. There is thus always an attempt on the part of the doctors to hold and bind the labour of the patients and make sure they are held accountable for their conditions and that they are



healed (as shown in the dialogue extracts reproduced earlier). The body is disciplined and punished through speech acts that ridicule and bring out shame in order to be healed so that viewers are made aware of the symbolic and monetary costs an ill body brings to a (neoliberal) society. In neoliberalism a body *has* to function and work. There is no space for illness or other conditions, let alone embarrassment when it comes to the body. Bodies are normalized and brought back into the stream of productive bodies that make up society. The shock and awe factor of *Embarrassing Bodies* is thus used in order to pacify and discipline both patients and viewers. The patients are made healthy and productive again and through witnessing such a process, viewers are equally disciplined into staying healthy and productive. As a result, one could argue that the ideological goal behind the programme is to show a process that culminates in productive bodies that can get to work again. However, the programme may not only discipline patients and audiences but may also result in an ideological surplus for viewers that comes at the expense of the patients shown. *Embarrassing Bodies* is firmly situated within contemporary digital media. The show has a strong presence on Facebook and Twitter (Bennett and Medrado, 2013). While social media users may not be characteristic of the diversity of the show's television audience, exemplary tweets about the programme are nonetheless telling of how audiences make sense of it. A search for 'embarrassing bodies' on Twitter reveals a majority of Tweets that are dismissive of the programme and make fun of the patients. The show is frequently described as 'disgusting' and Twitter users articulate a disbelief about the subjects who expose their bodies. The show's ideological surplus for audiences, then, may be that they use it to (unconsciously) compensate for their own anxieties about their bodies. The society of the spectacle has morphed into a society of the Spectacle 2.0 whereby subjects are not only appeased and attracted by spectacles, but they proactively police their own and other's bodies through social media. The tweets may thus be seen as articulations of the internalized ideology propagated by *Embarrassing Bodies*. Patients are not only shamed on the programme, but also on social media where atomized and alienated individuals seek to strengthen their own subjectivities through devaluing others.

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## CHAPTER 13

# Disrupting the Spectacle: The Case of *Capul TV* During and After Turkey's Gezi Uprising

Ergin Bulut and Haluk Mert Bal

### 1. Introduction

A series of massive protests across diverse geographies from MENA (Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Turkey, Syria) region to Europe and the US has dramatically shaken up global politics for the last five years. Despite the undeniable differences regarding the causes and respective historical contexts of these events, the uprisings also had commonalities such as the occupation of physical space, deployment of digital media for protest and forming transnational alliances, spontaneity, and horizontality. Western media and mainstream scholarship mostly framed these uprisings as technological revolutions against oriental dictatorships. However they ignored the fact that a significant portion of popular demands revolved around the commons (housing, education, and employment) that were privatized under neoliberal governments. What also emerged as a point of convergence was the use of powerful images to subvert existing regimes and attack what Guy Debord theorized as 'the society of spectacle.' In this chapter, we examine Gezi Uprising's *Capul TV*, which we consider in

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relation to the work of Debord and his theorization of the spectacle, specifically focusing on issues of labour and sustainability, as well as strategy and leadership.

*Capul TV*<sup>1</sup> emerged during the protests at Gezi, which put the final nail in the Turkish media's coffin precisely because its corporatized and censored structure had suffocated the public sphere for some time. Gezi Park Protests initially began at the end of May 2013 as a result of the government's attempt to demolish Gezi Park, located in Taksim Square in İstanbul, and re-construct Taksim Military Barracks (*Topçu Kışlası*), an Ottoman-era military barracks, which was supposed to serve as a shopping mall and residences in place of the park (Hürriyet 2013). Protests, which began as small-scale environmentalist sit-ins in the park, turned into a nationwide series of uprisings when the sit-in was met with severe police response involving tear gas and water cannons (Yardımcı-Geyikçi 2014; Gürcan & Peker 2014). Moreover, mainstream media turned a blind eye to the protests and clashes in Taksim Square, while images and videos of the protests were circulated throughout social media (Smith, Men & Al-Sinan 2015). Consequently, activists and protestors turned towards alternative and citizen-oriented ways of gathering and disseminating information.

Beginning its coverage of events on 6 June 2013, *Capul TV* used Ustream for nine days for its operations straight from the heart of Gezi Park until June 15. Ten days after it started its life, *Capul*'s founders would find out that 1.5 million IPs were following their broadcast. More importantly, eight TV channels relayed *Capul TV*'s Internet broadcast onto their own screens, multiplying the impact and outreach of *Capul TV*. On 24 October 2014, it relocated to its Istanbul studios and opened another office in Ankara. From its inception, *Capul TV* operated online and preferred live streaming as its main broadcasting service. While using Ustream due to urgency within the park during the peak of the protests, they later established <http://capul.tv/> as their website using their own servers. *Capul TV* has since used Twitter to disseminate content and communicate with the protestors, reaching 145,000 followers within one year (it has 180,000 followers today) (Sendika.org 2014). At present, *Capul TV* uses Periscope for livestreaming, YouTube to archive their videos and continue to use Twitter for dissemination, albeit with a different title within the context of a constitutional referendum.

Currently, *Capul TV* Twitter account uses the name *Hayır TV* ('No TV') due to the recent constitutional referendum, which changed Turkey's parliamentary democracy into a presidential one on 16 April 2017.<sup>2</sup> In accordance with the outlet's commitment to resistance and social movements, *Capul TV* activists have called for a no vote in the referendum and declared that they will 'raise the voice of those who resist lies, censorship and dictatorship in the period of referendum' (Sendika.org 2017). As the activist group and the structure is essentially the same and the change in the title appears to be temporary, we will refer to the outlet as *Capul TV* for convenience.

Today, *Capul TV* has a network of activists across the country who volunteer to keep alive what its founders call a 'guerilla media'. This loose network of 'guerilla media' is enabled, *but not led*, by members of *Halkevleri*, a leftist organization with considerable media activism experience through *sendika.org* – a central source of information for labouring classes and the broader coalition of oppositional forces – and *Sendika.TV* – a mobile TV studio that broadcast right from the tents of the 78-day-long Tekel Resistance (Tobacco Workers' Resistance). With its conscious rejection of professional news language, adherence to an amateur spirit, and endorsement of the Internet as a venue for challenging the system (Basaran 2010), *Sendika.TV* experience was crucial – but not quite the same as far as political imagination is concerned – for the future operations of *Capul TV*. Therefore, *Capul TV* relies on existing political organizations and the experience of former media activists but deploys a different language and draws on a different political imagination.

An analysis of *Capul TV* is important not just because of Gezi's nation-wide scale. Gezi was an extraordinary event in terms of its class composition and its use of digital media to disrupt the spectacle. First, despite varying interests, people across different social classes including the industrial proletariat and the contemporary precariat employed in the knowledge sector became unified during the protests. What mainstream media named the 'Y Generation' and the new middle classes – or the new urban proletariat? – experienced the joy of social protest – 'secretion of serotonin' in the words of an activist – for the first time in their lives. Undoubtedly, Gezi had its precursors and we therefore acknowledge the importance of major social protests prior to Gezi. *Tekel* resistance of tobacco workers, protests of ODTU students, closure of Taksim Square to all May Day Parades, police brutality against soccer fans on a weekly basis, the government's intervention regarding alcohol consumption and abortion, pro-secularism protests, and the urban resistance movements against gentrification, primarily that of Emek Movie Theatre, all yielded serious signs as to how oppositional sections of the society were beginning to pose challenges to AKP's (Justice and Development Party) hegemony. Yet, as the hybrid accumulation of oppositional energies it was Gezi that smashed the fear barrier established by the AKP regime where a major national uprising was no more than a dream. Secondly, the protest served as an emotional bridge between the West and the Kurdish East in that some people in the Western parts of the country for the first time experienced police brutality and understood what it means to be silenced by the mainstream media. While this bridge has already collapsed since the peace process with the Kurds came to a halt, Gezi did herald the formation of a new intersectional politics that does take ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and the environment seriously. And ultimately, examining *Capul TV* in terms of politics, leadership, and labour matters since technologically deterministic accounts of social movements still abound and imagine every citizen with a smart phone to be a reporter that can challenge the system.

Drawing on interviews with the founders of *Capul TV* and its activists,<sup>3</sup> we argue that *Capul TV* intervenes in the spectacle society in major ways. First, especially during the peak of the protests, *Capul TV* emerged as a vital source of information on which even more established oppositional channels such as *Halk TV* or *Hayat TV* relied. Second, it relayed street politics highly valued by the Situationists to the general public in a context structured both by spectacle and increasing state control over media. More importantly, *Capul TV* transformed citizens from being passive audience into producers of media.

Therefore, *Capul* experience has gone beyond just practicing subversive humour, which was glamorized by corporate mainstream media during Gezi, thereby erasing the political demands of the protestors and creating yet another spectacle for consumption. By broadcasting programmes that deployed the subversive language of Gezi, *Capul TV* emerged as an open venue enabling any volunteering citizen to make their own shows. Ultimately, *Capul TV* has provided a hive for media activists, teaching crucial lessons as far as the dialectical relationship between technology and political organization is concerned. Regarding the question of organization and sustainability within new social movements, the reality, we contend, does not lie only within horizontality and is not restricted to the vanguard party. This dichotomy has already been overtaken by events on the ground. The reality, we argue, is to be found precisely in the interaction between street organizing and networked politics. In this respect, *Capul TV* has demonstrated the importance of existing political organizations to sustain emerging practices of media activism. At the same time, it revealed how novel ways of media activism find a way out under more liquid forms of leadership that become more visible depending on the momentum of the resistance.

## 2. Spectacle, Strategy and Digital Capitalism

Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* is a scathing critique of a media-saturated consumer society that functions through the immense accumulation of images, subjecting all institutions to the logic of image circulation. For Debord, the spectacle's primary effect is to stupefy subjects by separating the society from the conditions of creatively producing one's own life. Everydayness is at the centre of Debord's critique of the spectacle in that once immersed in the dizzying spectacle, human subjects are no longer able to challenge the passivity promoted by the ever-moving images of the corporate brands. The extent of this separation is such that Debord speaks of a subjectivity that is 'absolutely separated from the productive forces operating as a whole' (Debord 1977/2006, 117, 121). Extending Marx's critique of the commodity form to the realm of leisure and consumption, Debord and the Situationists' contributions to understanding the consumer society cannot be limited to the analysis of consumption, though. Relevant to our present discussion of *Capul TV* is how Debord and the

Situationists approached the question of strategy. Stephen Shukaitis (2014) has discussed how Debord's thinking owes as much to military history and can be understood as 'a form of strategizing that is based around re-articulating a relation between aesthetics, politics and labour' (Shukaitis 2014, 252). Specifically, Debord and the Situationists' approach to strategy is 'to enact conditions under which this strategizing will emerge' (Shukaitis 2014, 253).

Among the Situationist International's (SI) approaches in subverting the spectacle, for example, psychogeography and *dérive*, (Trier 2007; Shukaitis 2014), *détournement* is of particular interest regarding alternative media. *Détournement* refers to 'the rearrangement of preexisting aesthetic elements (or ideas) in new contexts in a way that changes their meaning' in order to produce 'more subversive or antagonistic' meanings (Shukaitis, 258). In other words, *détournement* aims to 'expose and counter alienation' by reversing the spectacle's attempts of 'naturalizing existing reality' (Elias 2010, 824). Indeed, Debord and Wolman refer to 'ultra-*détournement*,' which they define as:

the tendencies for *détournement* to operate in everyday social life. Gestures and words can be given other meanings, and have been throughout history for various practical reasons... The need for a secret language, for passwords, is inseparable from a tendency toward play. Ultimately, any sign or word is susceptible to being converted into something else, even into its opposite. (Debord & Wolman 1956/2006, n.p.)

*Capul TV* demonstrates practices of *détournement* especially in its visuals and in the programme titles which play with the words employed within the dominant discourses that aim to marginalize oppositional figures. For instance, some of the titles of *Capul TV* programmes are *Kızlı Oğlanlı Felsefe* ('philosophy with girls and boys') and *Hadi Ateistler Bunu da Açıklayın* ('come on atheists, explain this, too').

Alternative media, as content 'produced outside mainstream media institutions and networks' (Atton 2011, 15), is a venue in which the legacy of Debord continues to echo. While alternative media are often assumed to be 'small-scale, non-profit organizations' run by volunteers (Pickard 2007, 13), Sandoval and Fuchs argue that 'participatory organization' and 'non-commercial financing' should not be understood as necessary requirements and that the basic criterion must be critical content (2010, 148). In addition, Downing points to the close relationship between social movements and alternative media (2010; 2011). Therefore, while it is possible to come up with more or less expansive definitions, the main pillars of alternative media include a) contrast with and/or opposition to mainstream media through critical content, b) participatory and voluntary media practices and organizational forms c) non-commercial financing, and d) interaction with social movements. As also stated by Yılmaz and Ataman (2015), *Capul TV* embraces alternative media in each dimension. Teoman, a *Capul TV* activist, underlines that '*Capul TV* is alternative not just

in terms of its content but also form... This is the TV of Gezi commune and people should be agents of it.'

As Downing (2007, 8) emphasizes, social movements 'are not constant,' they 'ebb and flow;' so do their media. Accordingly, we understand *Capul TV* as a strategic media hive that rises and goes down depending on the level of political mobilization in Turkey. While Gezi Uprising has withered, *Capul TV* remains as an operating hive from which what Hardt and Negri (2004) call the 'swarms' which can operate in ways reminiscent of Debord's theorization of strategy. Specifically, *Capul TV* emerged as a domain of 'détournement' where existing media forms have subversively been re-appropriated. However, détournement as practised by *Capul TV* is not simply a race to create cleverer messages or images. Rather, we argue that it is more appropriate to define *Capul TV*'s détournement as a practice of 'guerilla media' in that *Capul*'s way of doing journalism, for instance, aimed not only to create alternative messages but also produce propaganda against the regime and therefore agitate both its supporters and enemies to escalate conflict.

*Capul TV* emerged as the appropriate space and praxis to provide a hive for what Hardt and Negri (2012) call the 'mediatized,' the populations whose consciousness is not separated or divided but rather 'subsumed or absorbed in the web.' In a way reminiscent of Debord's spectacle society, Bennett (2012) similarly argues that new media technologies lead to 'personalization of politics.' What perhaps distinguishes the digital moment from Debord's spectacle is that we are constantly interpellated by today's technologies to be active, share, like, and post on the web. Without sounding celebratory and agreeing with the political economic critique of Web 2.0 utopianism (Fuchs, 2014; Andrejevic 2012; Jarett 2016), it is a fact that the infrastructure of digital media does potentially enable – not automatically achieve – passive consumers to become active producers. What *Capul TV* accomplished, then, was to construct the affective network space through which the mediatized were able to exert political and communicative action without disturbing the singularities of the activists who were united to disrupt the spectacle through collaborative media production.

### 3. Gezi and *Capul TV*: Resistance and the Aesthetics of the Mediatized

Understanding *Capul TV* requires us first to investigate the context and the aesthetics of Gezi as a 'situation'. Except for the Kurdish movement's decades-long organized struggle for political autonomy, Gezi has been the most influential political event that has put a major mark in the nation's memory. Its significance can be better appreciated when one considers how Gezi has haunted the political elite in that the President recently called citizens 'little Gezi people' who were protesting the attempts to extract copper and gold in Artvin, Cerat-tepe (Hürriyet 2016).



The strategy of insulting protestors, however, started mid-2013. ‘I am sorry but we will not let a few looters (capulcu) to go there [Taksim Square] and misinform and provoke our people’ were the words President Tayyip Erdogan [PM then] used when he gave a speech (2 June, 2013) at the inaugural event of the new building of the Ottoman Archives (İnternethaber 2013). Erdogan’s way of addressing protestors as ‘capulcular’ was appropriated by the people, who renamed themselves on Facebook with this phrase (capulcu/looter) and immediately opened a Wikipedia entry for ‘chappuller.’ This was but one major tactic of Gezi movement. The larger pool of tactics ranged from using subversive images of popular culture to reappropriation of the political elite’s statements through humorous language and street performances.

In addition, one citizen simply stood in Taksim Square doing nothing to challenge accusations that protests were violent and therefore to criticize the state’s criminalization of every collective activity. Dubbed as ‘the standing man’ this citizen’s act simply paralyzed the police who was bewildered by the immobility of the protestor and therefore could not do anything but attract even more attention to the act itself.

Occupation of the physical space itself undoubtedly was crucial to Gezi’s aesthetics. One memorable moment of this particular act was when citizens crossed the Bosphorus Bridge on foot, where the fans of Turkey’s ‘big 3’ football teams (Besiktas, Galatasaray and Fenerbahce) walked in solidarity. Added to



**Fig. 1:** The standing man protest was much emulated. This mannequin has a white shirt and rucksack like the original figure. *Koraysa / Shutterstock.com.*

occupations were workshops organized regarding issues of gender and sexuality and reappropriating the public space as commons through such practices as plant cultivation.

*Capul TV* itself has deployed similar aesthetics, which represents Gezi's multitudinal aspects. First, *Capul TV*'s name itself is already a reappropriation of



Fig. 2: Supporter with Galatasaray shirt lifts up a Besiktas scarf. The Istanbul United protest united fans of opposing teams. *EvrenKalinbacak / Shutterstock.com.*



Fig. 3: The 'red women' image became a symbol of the movement. *Osman Orsal/Reuters.*

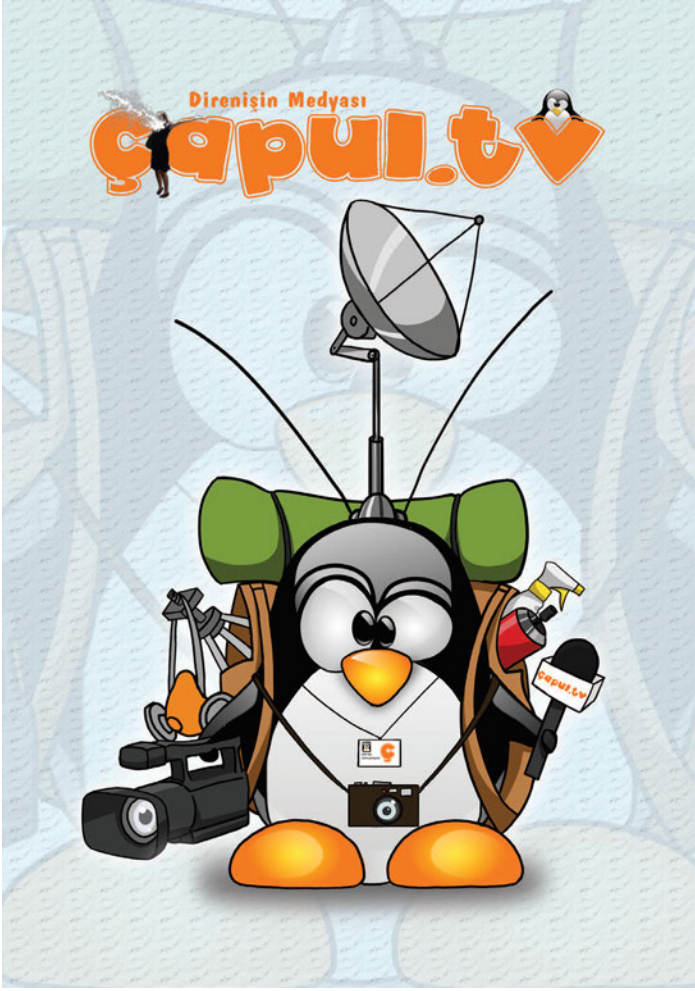


Fig. 4: *Capul TV* logo.

President Erdogan's insult against the protestors. Second, Capul's logo makes two references to Gezi: the red woman, and the penguin. While the 'red woman' – Ceyda Sungur – subjected to intense tear gas from a very close distance became one of the symbols of the movement, the penguin signified the intense censorship of mainstream media that refused to cover the events for three days and instead broadcast a documentary about penguins.

Capul's aesthetics referred to the humorous language of Gezi, as well. A widely watched soap opera (*Öyle Bir Geçer Zaman Ki*), for instance, would be named 'Öyle bir geçer TOMA<sup>4</sup> ki.' A documentary would be named 'Those who

live with tear gas.’ Weather forecast would be renamed as ‘Tear Gas Situation in the Country,’ whereas a soccer game would be titled ‘FC Police vs. Resistance United.’ ‘Who wants to be a millionaire’ would be renamed as ‘Who wants to be a revolutionary.’ The scope of programmes broadcast on Capul TV would cover diverse issues such as precarity of white collar workforce, art and theatre, philosophy, children, and humour.

While these aesthetic aspects of Capul’s resistance are important, its emergent politics and novel strategies to turn citizens into media producers and produce hybrid collectivites under ‘reluctant leaders’ (Gerbaudo 2012) are of primary concern since they enable us to think about questions of labour and sustainability with respect to new social movements. As activist/founder Elif underlined, what foregrounded the logic of these shows was that they were produced voluntarily and with the spirit that the activists owned the studio and *Capul TV*:

Elif: People came and made their shows, just saying that they had an idea. We haven’t asked anyone to do anything. That would be against the nature of *Capul TV*, anyway. Our call was that ‘this is your TV, this is our TV.’

Similarly, Teoman would underline *Capul TV*’s amateur and spontaneous aesthetics:

Teoman: In professional TV, you do not speak but read from the prompter. Both the presenter and the audience are passive. Here, we do not read from the prompter. We want it to be natural like tongue slips or you get angry at something coming from Twitter.

It is this naturalness intertwined with the culture of voluntary labour and its transformative aspects which taught Merve, for instance, to learn Internet broadcasting after ‘only the second time she saw a MacBook’ during Gezi. This is what we focus in the following section.

#### 4. ‘With Our Own Words, With Our Own Media’: Voluntary Labour and the Sustainability of the ‘Guerilla Media’ as Counter-Spectacle

One of the memorable criticisms against police brutality and the mainstream media during Gezi focussed on the fetish for wage labour and our attachment to social status. Specifically, the protestors would invite the police to resign and live with their honour by selling *simit*, a traditional kind of bakery resembling bagel. Similarly, protestors would attack media vans or reporters live on TV and

target them for sticking to their jobs rather than pursuing professional ethics. Since Gezi, many reporters and journalists have been fired. Some quit their jobs not to be part of the system. Ultimately, Gezi gave birth to or promoted different outlets ([diken.com.tr](http://diken.com.tr), [medyascope](http://medyascope.com), [140journos](http://140journos.com)) practising alternative media. What makes *Capul TV* different from other alternative media outlets is its persistent emphasis on voluntary labour in its struggle to enable the spaces through which situations can be enacted.

When *Capul TV* celebrated its first birthday, one of its prominent figures wrote an article and defined *Capul TV* as 'guerilla media.' Defining major news outlets such as CNN International as an organized army, Ali Ergin Demirhan considers *Capul TV* to be 'a guerilla work force.' 'Guerilla does not compete or strive to be like an army. On the contrary, the nature of the relationship is one of struggle', he said. We believe that this analogy regarding 'army vs guerilla' is important. Indeed, guerilla-type formations necessitate the existence of something like 'labour of love.' Labour of love refers to the ways in which one's labour is resistant to commodification and simultaneously quite commodifiable precisely because it is affective and produces 'a sense of community, esteem and/or belonging for those who share a common interest' (Gregg 2009, 209). 'Labour of love' with respect to activism is obviously precarious. However, it does present some advantages as well.

For Duygu, relying on the free labour of activist networks makes one 'free' and the lack of a strict hierarchy terminates the pressure of 'doing a job.' For Teoman, it is about 'realizing yourself through the work you perform.' Özgür adds:

... people to some extent confuse being alternative with being oppositional. Yes, you can be oppositional but there is still wage labour, which structures your position and how you make news. When you are paid, you don't question if your words really have a function. You don't question the work hierarchy.

Activists do not ignore the disadvantages of unpaid labour associated with precarity, either. However, the disadvantages of free labour are not just restricted to economic survival. Özgür and Kerem agree that 'defining tasks' for the volunteers and including them within the 'core group' was challenging in building a 'permanent relationship.'

Despite these disadvantages, Teoman thinks that prioritizing finance or advertising revenues is not the spirit of how one disrupts the spectacle. Rather, donations to Alternative Media Association, which also provides membership fees and a platform for education counselling services (Yılmaz & Ataman 2015, 163), constitute a major financial resource. They also created indiegogo campaigns in the earlier phases of the outlet. Yet, the sustainability of *Capul TV*, the activists collectively emphasized, is based on the continuation of resistance.

That is, *Capul TV* exists as long as street action is out there, underlying the necessity to go beyond the dichotomy of online/off-line activism and media (Cammaerts 2007a) among which the Internet should be 'seen as being embedded in a larger communication strategy, including other media and ways to distribute their aims and goals' (Cammaerts 2007b, 270). And sustaining *Capul TV* relies not on advertising money but 'labour of love':

Sibel: It's like being a revolutionary. It's like asking a revolutionary why she is a revolutionary despite the lack of any return for her labour.

What makes *Capul TV* distinctive, then, in its attempts to disrupt the spectacle is partly its affective networks to which labour of love was central. It not only enabled people to pick the mic and say anything they wanted but also taught the activists how to make videos, conduct interviews, coordinate the broadcasts, provide technical help and ultimately give the resistance a voice and an image. For Aslı, a somewhat informal and loose division of labour in *Capul TV* enables reflexivity for all parties involved and have them question, for instance, the sexist language that was part of Gezi. For Kerem, who provided technical assistance for *Capul TV*, the *raison d'être* was not really about political commitment but 'labour of love' that eased the burden on his comrades:

Kerem: You either need to believe in the cause and say that you'll put your flag on the ground or love the people there. I belong to the latter group. I loved those people since they were my friends. They would have worked for two consecutive days if I hadn't gone there.

Through the interaction of 'labour of love' and *Capul TV*'s conscious strategy to stay away from wage labour and engage with activists through a collaborative pedagogy, Gezi ultimately produced its own media makers:

Merve: Here, I learned how to do montage, print layout, and news production. I learned a lot of technical skills. These are all things you can learn naturally even if you don't study them in college. *Capul TV* in this respect is quite similar to a school. And so are the social relations.

To conclude this section, voluntary labour does not mean there is no division of labour. This division of labour is an informal one and involves everybody to do something 'in line with her labour and experience.' More experienced activists are involved in coordination but this is more of a 'natural leadership, natural coordination.' Mobilization of voluntary labour is especially relatively easier thanks to digital technologies but this convenience does not do away with the issue of materiality regarding how activists organize and resist oppressive structures, which takes us to the question of organization and leadership.



## 5. The 'Hive' Disrupts the Spectacle: Leadership, Strategy and Politics

In terms of organization, the emergence of the so-called leaderless social movements raises questions about the organizational dimensions of participatory media. Questions of leadership in networked social movements and the logic of digital communication are interwoven. On the one hand, scholars such as Castells (2012) and Juris (2005) point to the horizontal, leaderless nature of networked social movements and the various opportunities created by digital technologies to this end. On the other hand, according to Western, the idea of being 'leaderless' is a 'utopian fantasy,' which is an attempt to fill a 'gap' and not a 'sustainable replacement' (2014, 675). Western sees 'disavowal of all leadership' as one of the main reasons for lack of durability within social movements (675). Miriyam Auoragh points to the need for 'organizers, leaders, determination, and accountability' for a revolutionary social change (2012, 534). In the context of the Egyptian movement during the Arab Spring, AlSayyad and Guvenc state that 'such movements are often appropriated by pre-existing and well-organised social or political groups, which have established credibility through grassroots engagements at the urban level' (2013, 12). This is not necessarily a denial of non-hierarchical organizational forms. Instead, Western offers the concept of 'autonomist leadership' which is based on the principles of 'Spontaneity, Autonomy, Mutualism, Networks and Affect' (Western 2014, 680). Autonomist leadership also seem to resonate with the Debordian principle of 'self-abolition of the organizational form' (Shukaitis 2014, 264). The remarks of an activist point to a shift in the mentality of organization:

Aslı: When I say acting in an organized way, I mean leaning towards a division of labour which will speed things up or make them easier... That's why I used phrases of 'being organized' and 'partisanship'... For me, partisanship is something that includes fanaticism, it is something in which various power relations are formed and which I do not think work as much as the organizational consciousness people develop in themselves.

Instead of hierarchies based on top-down organizational discipline or professionalism, *Capul TV* depends on affective attachment of its members through discourses of struggle:

Elif: We don't call what we do journalism. Actually, we claim that we are revolutionaries. We do what is necessary for being a revolutionary. It is not journalism, not professional journalism. Maybe it is in part journalism but it is a mode of struggle. We see it both as an instrument for the struggle and as another space of struggle in terms of the right of people to be informed.

*Capul TV*, as a strategic media hive, also operates within a vast network of alternative media. Within this network, there are experienced activists who already have been volunteers of *sendika.org* and *Sendika.TV*, members of *Halkevleri* throughout various cities (more than 40 cities) in Turkey, Alternative Media Association through which *sendika.org* and *Capul TV* receive donations, and other alternative and oppositional media outlets, for example, *Halk TV*, *Naber Medya*, *Seyri Sokak*, and various contributors who send photos and videos around the world. This network of volunteers, contributors and associates allow *Capul TV* continue to exist as a hive during times in which social movements are in a phase of retreat.

## 6. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have analysed *Capul TV* through interviews with its activists and volunteers in the context of the society of the spectacle. We conceptualize *Capul TV* as guerilla media acting as a hive for a social movement that challenged an increasingly authoritarian political environment in which commodification of public spaces and subjugation of all forms of media had become the norm. *Capul TV*, both as an alternative media outlet and a network of activists, provided a media platform during and after the Gezi Park Protests which enabled citizens as activists and volunteers to voice their ideas, concerns as well as make their own programmes in the studio of *Capul TV*. In terms of resources, *Capul TV* depended on a network of both individual activists and associations which they collaborated with or utilized to raise public awareness and donations. In terms of sustainability and organization, we argue that *Capul TV* goes beyond the dichotomy of a purely horizontal model and the model of a vanguard party and acts as a hive, which closely follows the framework of autonomist leadership. *Capul TV* activists, who are well aware of the fact that the existence and sustainability of their outlet depends on the trajectory of the social movement, enable the necessary conditions for the continuity of *Capul TV*, such as a physical space, a studio, online infrastructure such as servers, and a network of news sources and volunteers. Rather than acting as a vanguard organization with a strictly defined ideological stance, *Capul TV* activists choose to enact an alternative platform which can serve the needs of emerging political subjects in their quest to disrupt the spectacle.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Capul TV* derives its name from ‘*çapulcu*’, which means ‘looter’ in Turkish. At the beginning of Gezi Protests, Turkish President – then the Prime Minister – called the protesters ‘*çapulcu*’ to denigrate them in the public eye. Activists in turn responded by endorsing this phrase, calling themselves ‘*çapulcu*’ and naming the outlet *Capul TV*.



- <sup>2</sup> President Erdogan and the governing Justice and Development Party pushed for a presidential system with the support of the national-conservative Nationalist Movement Party. A constitutional referendum was held on April 16, 2017. The proposed constitutional changes included the abolition of the office of prime minister and designation of the office of president as a strong executive branch. With the proposed changes, the president can remain as a member of his/her political party and has expanded powers to issue executive orders unless there is a law made by the legislation about the same topic, 'to appoint cabinet ministers without requiring a confidence vote from parliament, propose budgets ... appoint more than half the members of the nation's highest judicial body ... to dissolve the national assembly and impose states of emergency' (Soguel 2017). Those against the changes – Republican People's Party, Peoples' Democratic Party, various political parties, NGOs and activist groups from a broad political spectrum including left-wing, socialist, liberal, nationalist and conservative groups – conducted separate 'no' campaigns. Citizens who voted 'no' declared the referendum results illegitimate due to fraud claims. A leading *Capul TV* activist was even detained for five days based on the allegation of 'try[ing] to demonstrate the referendum results illegitimate and stir agitation among the people', revealing once again the limited but powerful impact of a media outlet such as *Capul TV*.
- <sup>3</sup> For this research, we conducted interviews in and outside *Capul TV*'s studio. We have anonymized every *Capul TV* activist who agreed to participate in our research.
- <sup>4</sup> Vehicles used by the police to intervene in protests and demonstrations in Turkey.

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# THE SPECTACLE 2.0

‘A much needed and valuable re-elaboration of a classic situationist concept.’  
Dr Tiziana Terranova, Università di Napoli ‘L’Orientale’, Italy

**T**he *Spectacle 2.0* recasts Debord’s theory of spectacle within the frame of 21st-century digital capitalism. It offers a reassessment of Debord’s original notion of Spectacle from the late 1960s, of its posterior revisitation in the 1990s, and it presents a reinterpretation of the concept within the scenario of contemporary informational capitalism and more specifically of digital and media labour. It is argued that the Spectacle 2.0 form operates as the interactive network that links through one singular (but contradictory) language and various imaginaries, uniting diverse productive contexts such as logistics, finance, new media and urbanism. Spectacle 2.0 thus colonizes most spheres of social life by processes of commodification, exploitation and reification. Diverse contributors consider the topic within the book’s two main sections: Part I conceptualizes and historicizes the Spectacle in the context of informational capitalism; contributions in Part II offer empirical cases that historicise the Spectacle.

All contributions included in this book rework the category of the Spectacle to present a stimulating compendium of theoretical critical literature. In the era of the gig-economy, highly mediated content and President Trump, Debord’s concept is arguably more relevant than ever.

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