

The Society of the Spectacle

Guy Debord

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ZONE BOOKS · NEW YORK

1994

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611 Broadway, Suite 608

New York, NY 10012

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Originally published in France as *La société du spectacle* in 1967 by Buchet-Chastel. This English language translation published by arrangement with Editions Gallimard © 1992.

Printed in the United States of America.

Distributed by The MIT Press,
Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Debord, Guy, 1931-

[*La société du spectacle*. English]

The Society of the Spectacle/by Guy Debord

p. cm.

Translation of: *La société du spectacle*.

ISBN 0-942299-80-9

1. Social psychology. 2. Proletariat. 3. Social classes. I. Title.

HN291.D413 1990

302--dc20

89-39940

CIP

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- 33 THOUGH SEPARATED FROM his product, man is more and more, and ever more powerfully, the producer of every detail of his world. The closer his life comes to being his own creation, the more drastically is he cut off from that life.
- 34 THE SPECTACLE IS *capital* accumulated to the point where it becomes image.

II

THE COMMODITY AS SPECTACLE

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

– Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*

- 35 THE SELF-MOVEMENT of the spectacle consists in this: it arrogates to itself everything that in human activity exists in a fluid state so as to possess it in a congealed form – as things that, being the *negative expression* of living value, have become exclusively abstract value. In these signs we recognize our old enemy the commodity, which appears at first sight a very trivial thing, and easily understood, yet which is in reality a very queer thing, abounding in meta-physical subtleties.
- 36 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.
- 37 THE WORLD THE SPECTACLE holds up to view is at once *here* and *elsewhere*; it is the world of the commodity ruling over all lived experience. The commodity world is thus shown *as it really is*, for its logic is one with men’s estrangement from one another and from the sum total of what they produce.
- 38 THE LOSS OF QUALITY so obvious at every level of the language of the spectacle, from the objects it lauds to the behavior it regulates, merely echoes the basic traits of a real production process that shuns reality. 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.
- 39 DESPITE THE FACT that it excludes quality, this development is still subject, qua development, to the qualitative. Thus the spectacle betrays the fact that it must eventually break the bounds of its own abundance. Though this is not true locally, except here and there, it is already true at the universal level which was the commodity’s original standard – a standard that it has been able to live up to by turning the whole planet into a single world market.
- 40 THE DEVELOPMENT of the forces of production is the *real unconscious history* that has built and modified the conditions of existence of human groups (understood as the conditions of *survival* and their extension): this development has been the basis of all human enterprise. The realm of commodities has meant the constitution, within a natural economy, of a surplus survival. The production of commodities, which implies the exchange of a variety of products among independent producers, was long able to retain an artisanal aspect embodied in a marginal economic activity where its quantitative essence was masked. Wherever it encountered the social conditions of large-scale trade and capital accumulation, however, such production successfully established total hegemony over the economy. The entire economy then became what the commodity, throughout this campaign of conquest, had shown itself to be – namely, a process of quantitative development. The

unceasing deployment of economic power in the shape of commodities has transfigured human labor into labor-as-commodity, into wage-labor, and eventually given rise to an *abundance* thanks to which the basic problem of survival, though solved, is solved in such a way that it is not disposed of, but is rather forever cropping up again at a higher level. Economic growth liberates societies from the natural pressures occasioned by their struggle for survival, but they still must be liberated from their liberators. The *independence* of the commodity has spread to the entire economy over which the commodity now reigns. The economy transforms the world, but it transforms it into a world of the economy. The pseudo-nature in which labor has become alienated demands that such labor remain in its service indefinitely, and inasmuch as this estranged activity is answerable only to itself it is able in turn to enroll all socially permissible efforts and projects under its banner. In these circumstances an abundance of commodities, which is to say an abundance of commodity relations, can be no more than an *augmented survival*.

- 41 THE COMMODITY'S DOMINION over the economy was at first exercised in a covert manner. The economy itself, the material basis of social life, was neither perceived nor understood – not properly known precisely because of its “familiarity.” In a society where concrete commodities were few and far between, it was the dominance of money that seemed to play the role of emissary, invested with full authority by an unknown power. With the coming of the industrial revolution, the division of labor specific to that

revolution's manufacturing system, and mass production for a world market, the commodity emerged in its full-fledged form as a force aspiring to the complete colonization of social life. It was at this moment too that political economy established itself as at once the dominant science and the science of domination.

- 42 THE SPECTACLE CORRESPONDS to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life. It is not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see – commodities are now *all* that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity. The growth of the dictatorship of modern economic production is both extensive and intensive in character. In the least industrialized regions its presence is already felt in the form of imperialist domination by those areas that lead the world in productivity. In these advanced sectors themselves, social space is continually being blanketed by stratum after stratum of commodities. With the advent of the so-called second industrial revolution, alienated consumption is added to alienated production as an inescapable duty of the masses. The *entirety of labor sold* is transformed overall into the *total commodity*. A cycle is thus set in train that must be maintained at all costs: the total commodity must be returned in fragmentary form to a fragmentary individual completely cut off from the concerted action of the forces of production. To this end the already specialized science of domination is further broken down into specialties such as sociology, applied psychology, cybernetics, semiology and so

on, which oversee the self-regulation of every phase of the process.

- 43 WHEREAS AT THE PRIMITIVE stage of capitalist accumulation "political economy treats the *proletarian* as a mere *worker*" who must receive only the minimum necessary to guarantee his labor-power, and never considers him "in his leisure, in his humanity," these ideas of the ruling class are revised just as soon as so great an abundance of commodities begins to be produced that a surplus "collaboration" is required of the workers. All of a sudden the workers in question discover that they are no longer invariably subject to the total contempt so clearly built into every aspect of the organization and management of production; instead they find that every day, once work is over, they are treated like grown-ups, with a great show of solicitude and politeness, in their new role as consumers. The *humanity of the commodity* finally attends to the workers' "leisure and humanity" for the simple reason that political economy *as such* now can – and must – bring these spheres under its sway. Thus it is that the totality of human existence falls under the regime of the "perfected denial of man."
- 44 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. Consumable survival *must* increase, in fact, because it continues to enshrine deprivation. The reason there is nothing *beyond* augmented survival, and no end to its growth, is that survival itself belongs to the realm

of dispossession: it may gild poverty, but it cannot transcend it.

- 45 AUTOMATION, WHICH IS at once the most advanced sector of modern industry and the epitome of its practice, confronts the world of the commodity with a contradiction that it must somehow resolve: the same technical infrastructure that is capable of abolishing labor must at the same time preserve labor as a commodity – and indeed as the sole generator of commodities. If automation, or for that matter any mechanisms, even less radical ones, that can increase productivity, are to be prevented from reducing socially necessary labor-time to an unacceptably low level, new forms of employment have to be created. A happy solution presents itself in the growth of the tertiary or service sector in response to the immense strain on the supply lines of the army responsible for distributing and hyping the commodities of the moment. The coincidence is neat: on the one hand, the system is faced with the necessity of reintegrating newly redundant labor; on the other, the very factitiousness of the needs associated with the commodities on offer calls out a whole battery of reserve forces.
- 46 EXCHANGE VALUE COULD only have arisen as the proxy of use value, but the victory it eventually won with its own weapons created the preconditions for its establishment as an autonomous power. By activating all human use value and monopolizing that value's fulfillment, exchange value eventually gained the upper hand. The process of exchange

became indistinguishable from any conceivable utility, thereby placing use value at its mercy. Starting out as the condottiere of use value, exchange value ended up waging a war that was entirely its own.

- 47 THE FALLING RATE of use value, which is a constant of the capitalist economy, gives rise to a new form of privation within the realm of augmented survival; this is not to say that this realm is emancipated from the old poverty: on the contrary, it requires the vast majority to take part as wage workers in the unending pursuit of its ends – a requirement to which, as everyone knows, one must either submit or die. It is the reality of this situation – the fact that, even in its most impoverished form (food, shelter), use value has no existence outside the illusory riches of augmented survival – that is the real basis for the general acceptance of illusion in the consumption of modern commodities. The real consumer thus becomes a consumer of illusion. The commodity is this illusion, which is in fact real, and the spectacle is its most general form.
- 48 USE VALUE WAS formerly implicit in exchange value. In terms of the spectacle's topsy-turvy logic, however, it has to be explicit – for the very reason that its own effective existence has been eroded by the overdevelopment of the commodity economy, and that a counterfeit life calls for a pseudo-justification.
- 49 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. The spectacle is not just the servant of *pseudo-use* – it is already, in itself, the pseudo-use of life.

- 50 WITH THE ACHIEVEMENT of a purely economic abundance, the concentrated result of social labor becomes visible, subjecting all reality to an appearance that is in effect that labor's product. Capital is no longer the invisible center determining the mode of production. 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.
- 51 THE ECONOMY'S TRIUMPH as an independent power inevitably also spells its doom, for it has unleashed forces that must eventually destroy the *economic necessity* that was the unchanging basis of earlier societies. Replacing that necessity by the necessity of boundless economic development can only mean replacing the satisfaction of primary human needs, now met in the most summary manner, by a ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs, all of which come down

in the end to just one – namely, the pseudo-need for the reign of an autonomous economy to continue. Such an economy irrevocably breaks all ties with authentic needs to the precise degree that it emerges from a *social unconscious* that was dependent on it without knowing it. “Whatever is conscious wears out. Whatever is unconscious remains unalterable. Once freed, however, surely this too must fall into ruins?” (Freud).

- 52 BY THE TIME society discovers that it is contingent on the economy, the economy has in point of fact become contingent on society. Having grown as a subterranean force until it could emerge sovereign, the economy proceeds to lose its power. Where economic id was, there ego shall be. The *subject* can only arise out of society – that is, out of the struggle that society embodies. The possibility of a subject’s existing depends on the outcome of the class struggle which turns out to be the product and the producer of history’s economic foundation.
- 53 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. The opposite of this project is the society of the spectacle, where the commodity contemplates itself in a world of its own making.

III

UNITY AND DIVISION WITHIN APPEARANCES

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

– Red Flag (Peking), 21 September 1964