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“The Society of the Spectacle”: a Diagnosis of (Post)Modernity  
and Its Challenges<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** This paper critically examines the complexities of contemporary society through the theoretical framework of Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), highlighting how modernity has transformed individuals from passive observers of the world to egomaniacal creators of their own reality, ultimately leading to a sense of alienation and existential unease. Furthermore, the paper elucidates the transition from a state of survival to one of collective psychosis, where the pursuit of abundance and commodification has ensnared individuals within a perpetual cycle of materialism and alienation. Debord’s concept of the spectacle is discussed to demonstrate how it has evolved into a tool for the suppression of genuine human interaction and a mechanism for upholding the prevailing status quo. The pivotal role played by the Situationist International and Guy Debord in confronting this social paradigm is also explored. Emphasis is placed on their concerted efforts to foment change and reignite a sense of enchantment in a world that has forfeited its mystique. In conclusion, the paper acknowledges the enduring relevance of Debord’s insights in the contemporary milieu, positing that rebellious youth, seeking to secure their own freedom, should turn to his works for guidance in addressing the challenges posed by “the society of the spectacle”.

**Keywords:** spectacle; society; Guy Debord; reality; falsehood; alienation; postmodernity

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«Общество спектакля»: диагноз (пост)модерности  
и его проблемы<sup>1</sup>

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**Аннотация.** В статье критически анализируются сложные аспекты современного общества через теоретическую призму труда Ги Дебора «Общество спектакля» (1967). При этом подчеркивается, как современность превратила индивидов из пассивных наблюдателей мира в эгоманьяков, создающих свою собственную реальность, что в конечном итоге приводит

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к чувству отчуждения и экзистенциального беспокойства. Кроме того, в статье раскрывается переход от состояния выживания к состоянию коллективного психоза, когда стремление к изобилию и товаризации вовлекает индивидов в бесконечный цикл материализма и отчуждения. Концепция спектакля, предложенная Дебором, обсуждается как инструмент подавления подлинного человеческого взаимодействия и механизм поддержания существующего статус-кво. Также исследуется ключевая роль, которую сыграли Ситуационистский интернационал и Ги Дебор в противостоянии данной социальной парадигме. Особое внимание уделяется их скоординированным усилиям по стимулированию изменений и возрождению чувства очарования в мире, утратившем свою мистику. В заключении статьи признается неослабевающее значение идей Дебора в современном контексте; утверждается, что бунтующая молодежь, стремящаяся обрести свою свободу, должна обратиться к его трудам за руководством в решении проблем, связанных с «обществом спектакля».

**Ключевые слова:** спектакль; общество; Ги Дебор; реальность; ложь; отчуждение; постмодерность

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

If we attempt to temporarily extricate ourselves from the reality we are entangled in as members of contemporary society, we will be overwhelmed by a horror akin to that experienced by Blaise Pascal when he became aware of the boundless vastness of the universe. It would not be superfluous to apply the words of the French thinker uttered at that time to our situation: “Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m’effraie.”<sup>1</sup> However, the significant difference lies in the fact that Pascal stood as a stranger before an infinity he was not the cause of, so it is not surprising that a fragile being from a galactic province feels threatened when confronted by such a force. What is terrifying is precisely this – feeling like a stranger and threatened by a world one has created for oneself. How did we even get to this point? We must briefly consider the diagnosis of the modern era that Pascal provided at its inception. Terrified by the infinity of the universe that had opened before him, the

modern man transformed into a Cartesian egomaniac, as this seemed easier than accepting that he is a “a lone straw tossing in the whirlwind,” confining himself within the bounds of a world he has created for himself (Njegos, 2016: 26). The incomprehensible unknown was translated into an infinite realm of possibilities, and a biologically feeble being was elevated to a level of omnipotence through the glorification of the mind and its powers. There came a moment in human history when, through the telescope, we peered through the keyhole of the starry vaults. Reflexively turning our gaze back to the earth, frightened by the cold and darkness discovered on the other side, we have not dared to squint back at the heavens through even one closed eye to this day. Thus pinned to the earth, we directed all our strengths and abilities towards it. The paradigmatic figure of the new era became the farmer, who cultivates the land that seems to gladly submit to the metamorphosis performed by a conscious being. The task was clear – to

<sup>1</sup> “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me” (eng.).

adapt a cold and alien world to human needs, warming it to a temperature the skin can endure. Playing with our creative powers, and placing ourselves at the center of this process, we seem to have overplayed our hand. Temporally and spiritually distant from the initial optimism characteristic of the dawn of this project, we are finally able, if we muster the strength, to view its product in the right way.

## 2 LIFE OUT OF BALANCE

Here, we can invite the reader to engage in a thought experiment, similar to the one conducted by our French friend in the seventeenth century. Let us take as a starting point a worker on an assembly line in a large factory in America, absentmindedly repeating the same motions for hours, and slowly distance ourselves from them, casting our gaze over the vastness of that very plant, just one of many in the multitude of such factories. Beyond this production line, our view will quickly meet the lights of a metropolis, its skyscrapers, people bustling underneath, supermarkets, and shopping centers that could accommodate thousands of consumers. If we are fortunate enough to observe this city from a spatial distance under the night sky, we will see car lights passing by at an elusive speed, leaving a trail that more closely resembles a play of lights than the movement of real people in our earthly space and time. For the sake of clarity in illustrating what we are talking about, it would be precious to watch the film by Godfrey Reggio, *Koyaanisqatsi*, whose images present the products of modern human efforts in their full dimension. When we encompass all these images within a whole, if we attempt to bring them to life before us and translate them into a proper experience, we will exhale, bringing us back to the starting point: “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me.”

It should be emphasized once again that such a conscious or unconscious feeling of contemporary people places them in a more unfavorable situation than that of Pascal’s contemporaries. There is nothing more

dreadful than the coldness of one’s own home when a person is nowhere, not even within themselves, at home. Those who are awake to such a feeling cannot reconcile themselves with such a situation because it compels them to make a change. This is why the aforementioned director aptly chooses the title of his film. The word “koyaanisqatsi” denotes a life that is out of balance, i.e., a state calling for a change in the existing way of life. If we look at the events in the second half of the twentieth century, especially the 1960s, we will see that this period was marked by precisely this kind of unrest. Some responded with war, others with the hippie movement, and still, others with peaceful and not-so-peaceful protests. Some fought for human rights, others killed their leaders, and some were in a hurry to leave this planet in search of better spaces that we had not yet ruined. Some authors believe that this general state of affairs was an alarm to governments worldwide that a way must be found to calm the masses, make them more obedient, and willing to maintain the existing order. The method to achieve this was the pacification of people through technology. As we, especially the offspring of the third millennium, are witnessing, the result of this process is the inhabitants of a virtual space whose content is controlled, thereby producing a consciousness that will be obedient, largely unaware of problems, and even less prepared for any form of resistance. We now see a hybrid of the human species in front of us, one that does not think or question but only accepts and consumes content designed to entertain it and distance it from the unbearable situation in which it finds itself.

## 3 GUY DEBORD AND THE SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL

What is the role of Guy Debord and the Situationist International in raising awareness and confronting such a setup? The idea and role of the situationists at that time are well represented in Charles de Gaulle’s televised address in 1968: “This explosion has been caused by several groups who are rebelling against modern, consumerist, technological

society, both the communist one in the East and the capitalist one in the West. These groups do not know what to replace such a society with, but what they enjoy are negation, destruction, violence, anarchy, and waving black flags”.<sup>2</sup> Although more than half a century has elapsed since Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* was published, the fact remains that it is still referred to in criticisms of modern consumer society, and his insights seem more relevant than ever. Michael Löwy, in his work *Morning Star: Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism, Situationism, Utopia* (2009), explains the comprehensiveness of Debord’s insights, warning that it is erroneous to interpret Debord’s “society of the spectacle” merely as the tyranny of television. On the contrary, it represents a much broader ambition that seeks to reveal the economic, political, and social system of modern society as elements of a “society of the spectacle,” which turns individuals into passive observers of the movement of commodities (Löwy, 2009).

It is important to note that Debord never aimed to be a mere theoretician of such a society but to create a movement capable of changing the existing society. Löwy, besides identifying the influences of Hegel, Marx, and Lukács in Debord’s work, also sees him as an author aligned with the romantic approach of Blake, Morris, Fourier, and Breton. The correlation of Debord with Romanticism allows for the fact that even the famous situationists never hid their fascination with earlier forms of social organization. Nevertheless, Debord’s orientation towards the past never implied a Rousseauian desire to return to some previous state. Instead, it served as a driving force to provoke the dismantling of the existing order. According to Löwy, another aspect of Debord’s approach that aligns him with these thinkers is his attempt to “re-enchant” a “disenchanted” world. The method Debord chooses to achieve this is akin

to the path of Mephistopheles, a force that negates everything. Thus, Debord follows the line of destruction and negation of the existing order, often without providing an alternative to pave the way forward.

#### 4 SPECTACLE AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR REALITY

The image of reality that Debord paints could be understood, in line with the influences he has received from other authors, as an inverted Hegelianism. The situation we live in could be seen as a re-inversion of the “inverted world.” The consciousness of our contemporaries is turning into a consciousness that enjoys the illusion and wants to spread it throughout all aspects of life until the last glimmer of truth is destroyed. Only such a process would guarantee that the illusion, in its culmination, becomes the only affirmed reality. Accordingly, the process unfolding before our eyes is no longer “progress in the consciousness of freedom,” but the progress of unfreedom in the unconsciousness of it and the enjoyment of this collective unawareness. Thus, Debord rightly observes: “Dans le monde réellement renversé, le vrai est un moment du faux” (Debord, 2010: 2)<sup>3</sup>. In this regard, it is entirely natural that Debord introduces us to the Society of the Spectacle, reminiscent of Feuerbach’s diagnosis of his own time, which he claimed represented an era in which the sign, the copy, and the spectacle are substituted for the signified, the original, and the essence, ultimately leading to the truth constantly eluding us, as illusion is the only thing we encounter and before which we bow in almost religious reverence.

Debord points out that the mere fact that the spectacle wants to present itself to our consciousness as a mere addition or decoration to life confirms the falseness of the reality created by the spectacle. According to Debord, the truth is that the spectacle is actually the

<sup>2</sup> The address is available at:  
[https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/discours\\_de\\_charles\\_de\\_gaulle\\_sur\\_les\\_evenements\\_de\\_mai\\_68\\_paris\\_30\\_mai\\_1968-fr-77c0d5bf-e29b-4f73-97f8-bff6c17d00f0.html](https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/discours_de_charles_de_gaulle_sur_les_evenements_de_mai_68_paris_30_mai_1968-fr-77c0d5bf-e29b-4f73-97f8-bff6c17d00f0.html)

(Accessed 12 July 2024). Translated into English by the author of the paper.

<sup>3</sup> “In a world that is *really turned upside down*, the true is a moment of the false”. Translated into English by the author of the paper.

result and the goal of the existing order, and it is the center from which this order can only be understood. It represents the central phenomenon of contemporary society from which other seemingly unrelated phenomena are understood because it is not only the main product of modern society but is also the form of life imposed on the entire community, which operates under the motto: “ce qui apparaît est bon, ce qui est bon apparaît” (Debord, 2010: 3).<sup>4</sup> According to Debord, the foundations of the “society of the spectacle” should be sought in a worldview that has now come to fruition. Within it, the long-lost unity of life is restored, where everything that was once immediately experienced is now reduced to the level of representation.

Interestingly, as part of this thesis, Debord simultaneously claims that the roots of the problem can be traced back to the time of the emergence of Western philosophy, which puts thought at the service of technical development and aims, according to Debord, to understand every activity as a representation. As an achievement and consequence of such a project that characterizes the development of Western civilization, the essence of the spectacle is revealed – social relations in any form can no longer be realized directly but are always mediated by images. Consequently, Debord suggests that the spectacle should be understood as the opposite of dialogue and as a means in the hands of the existing order, designed to inhibit the consciousness of the workforce or consumers and to prevent any form of direct interaction and communication between individuals. The spectacle thus becomes a machinery that produces alienation, and only alienation ensures a society composed of individuals who will be passive and unaware of their situation, and thus unprepared for any form of resistance. The

individuals making up this society do not have the status of masters over their own lives because the spectacle shapes their consciousness and manufactures their needs and desires according to the demands of the market. It should be noted that the figure of the consumer is simultaneously the figure of the producer, and the spectacle itself is a part of the production process. When these two premises are combined, along with Debord, we can easily conclude that the individual who enjoys the spectacle is akin to a commodity that strengthens its master and the shackles by which the master holds them. Through their own labor, individuals consolidate and maintain a situation where an impersonal and lifeless thing governs over conscious beings, depriving them of the ability to genuinely plan and shape their lives and construct immediate interpersonal relationships. The end result is the creation of a society solely composed of what Debord calls “des foules solitaires” (Debord, 2010: 7).<sup>5</sup>

## 5 FROM SURVIVAL TO COLLECTIVE PSYCHOSIS

What has led us to this state? Guy Debord places the emergence of the “society of the spectacle” within a broader process that can be related to Enlightenment theories of the social contract and the abandonment of Rousseau’s “natural man” through the process of emancipation, accompanying the development of productive forces. This process can be understood as part of what Debord names as “l’histoire réelle inconsciente” (Debord, 2010).<sup>6</sup> Namely, the imagined human of the original communities was motivated solely by the goal of survival, and the mode of production at the time was suited to those aims. Incapable of satisfying all their needs in a world that was harsh due to

<sup>4</sup> “What appears is good; what is good appears”. Translated into English by the author of the paper.

<sup>5</sup> “lonely crowds”. Translated into English by the author of the paper.

<sup>6</sup> “the unconscious history”. Translated into English by the author of the paper.

their physical inadequacy, these early humans initially produced only what was necessary to sustain their biological lives. According to Debord, over time, a “surplus of survival” was created, leading to the emergence of the commodity sector. This moment marked the beginning of economic development, primarily in quantitative terms. Economic growth, as the author interprets, liberated society from concerns about survival but also marked the advent of a new form of captivity. Paradoxically, this time, the figure that was previously called the liberator, the “abundance of commodities,” became the jailer. Following this analysis, we might conclude that something unusual happened in this developmental trajectory. Instead of using the liberation from fear for one's own existence as the basis for qualitative improvement and the meaningful planning of one's life, the liberated individual continues to enhance the quantitative aspect. It appears as if we are caught in a kind of collective psychosis caused by the primordial trauma of the possibility of not surviving in a world that is not the one we create ourselves. Thus, we act like people who are always stockpiling or saving for “a rainy day” or some catastrophe that has not yet occurred, rather than simply living and giving meaning to our experiences. Therefore, it is evident that the production and accumulation of what is produced create a cycle with no way out, reducing human life to mere survival. This outlined scheme and its underlying causes are also supported by Debord's claim that the continuous expansion of the dimensions of consumerist survival is motivated by a permanent “sense of scarcity.” The current state of affairs with the spectacle reaches its maximum because the spectacle is distinct from any other form of product in that it cannot be consumed in the true sense of the word – it can only be observed! The distinctiveness of the spectacle, as Debord masterfully points out, allows us to completely expose the false utility of commodities, while also highlighting

that mere quantitative production and the enjoyment of its products are an entirely wrong and unsuitable use of life for humanity.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Hannah Arendt once said in a letter to Karl Jaspers during the “pandemic” of protests in 1968 that she hoped that a future generation would remember those events in a way similar to how we talk about 1848 (Baehr, 2000). Unfortunately, from this historical distance and geographical proximity, it seems that this wave of rebellion only strengthened the mechanisms of repression, which became more aware of the threat to the existing order. The authorities knew that they might not have the opportunity to suppress such an uprising twice. The real question for us is: why did they succeed in the first place? Many believe that the failure of the youth uprising was primarily due to the fact that they knew the existing system was rotten but were divided on the alternative to replace it. From that perspective, the situationists faced the same problem in their confrontation with what they called the “society of the spectacle”.

Debord clearly conveys to his readers that he wanted to harm that society with his teachings. Time has shown that he didn't succeed in that regard. However, he has left us a rich body of work that helps us understand the “society of the spectacle,” which today seems stronger and more threatening than ever to our ability to think and resist. We dare say that Debord's failure was not because he attacked a construct that had taken over the world practically alone, but because he could not propose anything better than “NEVER WORK”. By urging people not to be content with a passive attitude towards life, reducing themselves to mere consumers of commodities, but to focus on consciously creating life, Debord was indeed close to the idea of a dignified and human existence. The key missing piece was the content and meaning of this new life. Debord was not sufficiently aware that it was not the capitalist mechanism that caused the meaninglessness, but that the meaninglessness allowed the emergence of the

capitalist mechanism. Debord often falls short of being an adequate interlocutor when it comes to providing an antidote to the current situation or identifying its hidden causes. On the other hand, it is difficult to find someone better than him to diagnose the situation we find ourselves in. That is why a new rebellious youth who seeks to secure their own freedom not only through thought but also through genuine active dismantling of the existing order should turn to him.

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