

## Debord: from spectacle to simulacrum

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### Abstract

Debord's theory about the spectacle was conceived as a critique of the split between image and reality and also as a critique of mediocrity. Its theoretical roots lie in the experience of aesthetic vanguards, in the theory of reification of G. Lukacs and to the reflections of H. Lefévre on everyday life. Later, postmodernism appropriated Debord's legacy to develop, in a different theoretical register, the theory of the simulacrum.

**Keywords:** spectacle, image, reification, artistic communication crisis, simulacrum

The term *society of the spectacle*, title of Debord's most important work, had been widely publicized in the media, and it went so far as to diverge completely from the strict sense that the author attributed to it. It met, thus, the fate of other famous expressions such as *democracy as a universal value* and *ideas out of place*, which have been abusively used, almost like advertising slogans, and have won distant senses and often contrary to the original intentions of their creators.

Debord's case is even serious: what was a sharp critique to capitalist society and to the domination of image came to be understood - implicitly - as an apology of spectacularization promoted by mass media. It is therefore necessary to recover the ideas effectively defended by the author and to the context in which they were born.

One part of the best productions on communication studies was created from reflections on the crisis of culture and art. Authors as R. Williams, U. Eco, T. Adorno, F. Jameson, P. Bordieu and many others are situated in this common field. We can say the same about Debord, who has initiated his career as art reviewer and film director. The crisis of artistic communication and the supremacy of image, thus, have served to set the foundations of theories on the society of the spectacle<sup>2</sup>.

Since 1950, Debord has participated in a group of art critics that called itself "Letterist International" What moved those young contestants was the desire to

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<sup>2</sup> A vigorous study on the theme was conducted by AQUINO, João Emiliano. Fortaleza. Reificação e linguagem em Guy Debord. Fortaleza: Unifor e Ec. Uece, 2006.

*overcome the art*, objective to be achieved through the *self-destruction of modern poetry*. Anselm Jappe sums up the project of the letterists: "the reduction of poetry to its last element, the lyrics. This is a graphic element to be used for bonding and, at the same time, a sound element to be used for the onomatopoeic declamation, thus connecting poetry, painting and music "(Jappe: 1999: 70).

The break of boundaries between the forms of artistic expression was accompanied from the desire to overcome the division between artist and audience, division which condemned the audience to passivity. This challenger movement, in turn, pursued the romantic ideal of overcoming the barriers between art and life. If the self-destructive movement proceeded the vanguard aesthetic experiences, the approximation of art to everyday life, the desire to perform art in life (and thus change the world), has progressively approached Debord to his Marxism comrades. It was no longer an attachment to an aesthetic conception, but the project to accomplish in life the *promise of happiness* in art, to find "a new way of life" <sup>3</sup> (Burger, 1987, 1985).

This movement from aesthetics to politics is reflected in the texts written for the bulletin edited by the letterists from 1954 to 1957, which carried a suggestive title: *Potlach*. This expression, as we know, was popularized by the anthropologist Marcel Mauss in his book *Essai sur le don*. This is a common practice among the aborigines in Australia, which consisted in exchanging valuable gifts among the participants, aiming thereby obtaining prestige, even by means of economic ruin. This extremely generous indigenous ceremonial is a real scandal for the economic reasoning, when focused in the rational calculation, as Weber argued. In the exchange, this reasoning does not exist and who offers does not expect to receive an equivalent amount to what was offered. If the *law of value* regulates the exchange in the capitalist world, among indigenous people is the social prestige that erupts to oppose any consideration of economic order.

*Potlach* was conceived in that anticapitalist spirit: their editions were distributed to people for free, not entering in the commercial plan, because it refused to be a marketable commodity like any other. In the prologue of the book where the bulletin

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<sup>3</sup> Thus, an abyss separates the vanguard artistic conception from the modernist spirit, present in Adorno's work. Peter Bürguer, expert in the issue, has noticed the differences between, in one hand, the vanguardist desire of art immersion in everyday life and, in other hand, the modernist conception interested in protect the art autonomy and its separation of empirical reality. Cf. *Teoria de la vanguardia*. Translator. Jorge Garcia. Barcelona: Península, 1987 e *L'anti-avant-gardisme dans la esthétique de Adorno*. In: *Revue d'Esthétique*, n. 8, 1985). Despite the differences there are similarities between Debord and Adorno when the topic is the characterization of modern society. Interestingly, Debord's work ignored that Adorn, that was only published in France lately. Adorno also ignored the work of Debord or, at least, has never spoke of him.

texts were collected, Debord has remarked that "the strategic intent of *Potlach* was to create certain connections to constitute a new movement, which should be improvised (*d'emblée*) a reunification of the cultural creation of the vanguard and of the revolutionary critique of society "(Debord, 1996: 8).

In the same period, Debord collaborated with the magazine *Les lèvres Nues*, published by the Belgian Surrealists. Beyond aesthetic subjects, the author faced general issues such as urban planning and also explained his ideas about the *drift* - the random walks to witness the urban life in another perspective. Thus, Debord was giving sequence, in his own way, to the tradition of the vanguard in the practice of ramble, whose nearest references point to Baudelaire's *flanêrie* and to the theories of Walter Benjamin.

Debord's radicalism led him to create, from 1958 on, a new movement, the Situationist International which was known for its agitated participation in the student movement in 1968.

The project to achieve in everyday life the promises contained in art took to the streets. Looking back years later, Debord comments in *The society of the spectacle* that "dadaism wanted to suppress art without carrying it out" (Debord 1997: § 191), while surrealism "wanted to make art without suppressing it" (ibid.). These two art movements, he notes, were contemporaries of "the last stand of the proletarian revolutionary movement" (ibid.), and this failure left them "locked in the artistic field which they had proclaimed the sunset" (ibid.).

The Situationism emerged to state that suppression and realization are inseparable aspects of a single overcoming of art and to say that the integration into the daily life demanded a revolution in the social conditions of existence. Overcoming now is synonymous to achieve - you can hear echoes here of the revolutionary appeal of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* acclaiming to the completion of philosophy.

In the period of the situationist movement are the first formulations about the *society of the spectacle*, as well as reflections on everyday life. On the latter subject, it is worth to remember that the approach occurred between Debord and Henri Lefebvre, their experiences in the *drift* and the close intellectual collaboration between them. Lefebvre was well known for his extensive theoretical work. In 1946 he published the first volume of *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (Lefebvre, 1958) in a

historical moment of great optimism, as the postwar period. At the time of her life with Debord, Lefebvre returned to the subject in a more critical perspective due to the emergence of social control mechanisms, which were already visible, and published the second volume of the work. Debord, in the same period, also wrote articles and gave similar lectures on the subject, once the everyday life, for those who wanted the integration between art and life, should not be thought on Heidegger's perspective, just as the place of *inauthenticity*. The suspicion of plagiarism in the reflections on everyday life, raised by Debord, has poisoned their life together and has ended the friendship between the young rebellious man and the old master.

### ***The spectacle: monopoly of appearance and language of contradiction***

It is no coincidence that the book *The society of spectacle* presents as an epigraph a quote from Ludwig Feuerbach. This Hegelian philosopher became famous with his theory of alienation referred to the religious phenomenon. For Feuerbach, as known, religion is a process of *separation* between man and his attributes, which were transferred to the celestial sphere. His whole philosophy, according to the Enlightenment tradition, seeks the reconciliation of man with himself through the recovery of his attributes which were alienated in the transcendent realm. It is here the starting point of the young Marx in his critique to Hegelian philosophy, which Feuerbach has denounced as a disguised theology: the movement of *inversion*- that movement which descends from heaven to earth, from ideas to material reality.

The phrase chosen by Debord, selected from *The Essence of Christianity*, points out another *inversion* that would be typical to his time (and not just the work's time!): "our time prefers the image to the thing, the copy to the original, representation to reality" (Feuerbach apud Debord, 1997: Chapter I).

Already in the beginning, it is possible to notice the conception that guides Debord: the commitment to perform a critique of alienated appearance of reality. And he does it in the style of the aphorismatic Feuerbach, combining it with the use of *détournement* (detour): a resource used by aesthetics, which consists in the citation of fragments from other works done through a decontextualization of the original (the same procedure is present in *German Baroque Drama*, by Walter Benjamin, who conceived the book as a mosaic of citations and fragments, disposed in a way that they received new meanings). This feature, which gives the text a sense of false familiarity

and an amazing beauty, makes the reading a difficult puzzle, requiring an effort of guessing the original sources.

The first paragraph of the book illustrates the technique of diversion when it glosses the phrase Marx begins *The Capital*: "The whole life of the societies in which reign the modern conditions of production presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has become a representation "(Debord 1997: § 1).

Afterward, he states: "the spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement of non-living things" (ibid.: § 2). In this movement, the image became the ultimate form of reification.

This is about an ingenious extension of the Marxist theory of reification and commodity fetishism. The *illusory objectivity* the German author gave to commodity is recovered to deal with a new moment in the history of capitalism, in which what was a *tendency* in the nineteenth century becomes completely effective.

The social practice of men, after all, "split into reality and image" (ibid.: § 7). And the spectacle, the author warns, "is not a set of images but a social relation among people mediated by things" (ibid.: § 4). The omnipresence of image requires the *monopoly of appearance*, producing a false impression of a unified world, a world transformed into *simple images*, which consecrates the "vision as a privileged sense" (ibid.: § 18)

The references to Feuerbach and Marx form the starting point of the theory of society of the spectacle. From the first author, Debord updates the idea of religious inversion, the split between the real man and his attributes that nowadays, however, found "their material reconstruction." From Marx, he recovers the division between "the fetishist appearance of pure objectivity" (ibid.: § 24) and the contradictory relationship between individuals and social classes. But the division that splits the social life is disguised by the spectacle, "which reunites what is separate, but reunites it as a separation" (ibid.: § 29). Reconnecting (this is, as we know, the original meaning of the word religion) the separate, the spectacle manifests itself as a secularized form of religion in which the followers worship the image itself, the commodity, the estranged work of men

The most uninformed reader can notice that Debord is not dazzled by the spectacle, but its persistent critic. One of his films, by the way, is called *Critique of separation*. And it is not another commitment of the author. On the aesthetic level, as we have already seen, he tried to integrate art and life, fighting perceptions of art as a separate sphere. For the same reason, he has criticized the boundaries between the various forms of artistic expression, demanding their reunification. In theorizing about the spectacle, he denounced the opposition between image and reality by attacking its cause: the reduction of concrete human work in the indifferent abstract work in creating value - that abstraction which then are spread into every pore of human sociability . In terms of practical policy, he criticizes the separation between state and civil society, between conception and execution, claiming, with the situacionists, the thesis of self-management. This is the way to fight the spectacle, "the separate power developing in itself" (ibid.: § 25)

This consistency between aesthetic concept and social theory allowed the author to act before other theorists when he connects culture and material life. In the 1940s, Adorno had pointed the emergence of cultural industries - the extension of market logic to the fields of cultural production. Debord, asserting that the culture was becoming a *commodity star of spectacular society* (ibid.: § 193), has prophetically detected the imbrication of culture and commodity, which still was not on the theoretical horizons of Adorno. Forty years later, Frederic Jameson gained international notoriety when it he recovered this idea and saw

a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life – from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself – can be said to have become “cultural” in some original and yet untheorised sense (Jameson, 2000: 74).

This very brief presentation of some of Debord's ideas is sufficient to repel any *media centrist* interpretation on the spectacle. The mass media are just "the superficial manifestation" (ibid.: § 24) of a deeper phenomenon; and the image, "the simplified summary of the sensible world," makes possible "to juxtapose anything without contradiction". The real existing relations in the split world of men do not allow us to take the study of media as an object endowed with its own autonomy and even less, as McLuhan wanted, allow us to intend understanding the media as something that develops itself and determines the development of social life. Debord did not lose sight that the technique is only a *moment* of social relations.

Plus: the media, as part of the technological apparatus, is not a neutral entity. So in a posterior text, *Comments on the society of the spectacle*, Debord faced against the worshipers of the media by saying:

the meaningless discussion on spectacle - that is, on what do the owners of the world - is organized by the *spectacle itself*: the highlights are the great features of the spectacle, to say nothing about its use. Instead of spectacle, they prefer to call it the realm of media. With that, they want to designate a single instrument, a kind of public service that would manage with impartial "professionalism" a new wealth of everyone's communication for mass media, communication that would have finally reached the one-sided purity, in which the decision already taken is quietly admired. (ibid.: § 3).

Not coincidentally, Régis Debray searched to clearly define his project of creating a mediology of Debord's ideas, noting that he had never mentioned this author, except as a "counterexample" (Debray, 1985)<sup>4</sup>.

## **Spectacle and simulacrum**

In contrast to the prudence of Debray, postmodernism, on the contrary, recovered the theory about the spectacle, but at the expense of a radical reversal of its original meaning. In Debord, fetishism is a transient and reversible phenomenon. Its appearance in history, as a result of the process of complete commodification of social life, shuffled the relationship between sign and referent. Until then, the literary realism, the philosophy and the humanities could assert the rights of referential language. The mimesis then met its apogee. But the complete reification, the realm of abstraction and image - of the spectacle, as Debord wanted - put into crisis the harmonious coexistence between sign and referent.

The struggle for a new art and for a new society led Debord to foresee the tendency to glorification of image predicted by Feuerbach, and which has been dramatically developed. The *critique of the separation* dialogues with an overcoming of the terms isolated by the reification. Postmodernism, on the other hand, preferred to fraternize with the existing one. Therefore, the critical theory of spectacle gave place to the confirmation of the simulacrum.

One example of such postmodern appropriation of the theory of the spectacle is the work of J. Baudrillard, who Debord knew for a long time. Baudrillard worked as assistant to Jean Hyppolite, the great interpreter and translator of Hegel's work in

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<sup>4</sup> Debray's article opens this journal issue entirely dedicated to his work.

courses attended by Debord. The two authors have lived in a France marked by the hegemony of structuralism, and they sought to assert their own ideas opposing to that hegemonic power.

The heirs of linguistic structuralism, "applying to the image the semiotic concept that has opposed to the partisans of an *aspect* that would not be marked in any way by the joints of language" (Sauvageot, 2000: 230). As the debate has been established, it was confronted positions that advocated strict analogies between visual and linguistic codes and those that emphasized the specificity or the autonomy of the visual. In this discussion, Debord and Baudrillard followed their own paths.

For Debord, the image reproduces the highly developed commodity-form, ie, the alienated social practice of men, the relationship between men mediated by things. Then, it is neither to give autonomy to the image and nor to deduce it from the rigid structures of the linguistic code - the abstract objectivism discussed by Bakhtin. Debord criticizes structuralism because he sees it as "an explicit oblivion of historical practice" (Debord 1997: § 196); "the dream that a previous unconscious structure exerts a dictatorship over all social praxis" (ibid.: § 201).

Structuralism adopts the perspective of an "eternal presence of a system that was never created and will never end" (ibid.: § 201), deserving, therefore, to be compared to the publicity by exalting the spectacle and condemning us to passivity before an eternal present that lasts indefinitely. Against the perpetuation of present, the immutability of the structures, Debord states: "it is not the structuralism which serves to prove the trans-historical validity of the society of the spectacle; on the contrary, it is the massive reality of the society of the spectacle that serves to prove the cold dream of structuralism" (ibid.: § 202).

This *submissive thought*, Debord adds, extends to the empirical sociology, which lists data and correlates them statistically, without being able to "know the truth of its own object, because it does not find in itself the criticism that it is immanent" (ibid.: § 197). Against these strict forms of thinking, Debord adopts the *language of the opposition*, the use of dialectics - "the idea that we no longer focus on the search for the meaning of being, but that we rise to the knowledge of dissolution of all we are; and in the movement all separation dissolves" (ibid.: § 75).

The incisive *criticism of the separation* between real life and phantasmagoria duplicated by social theory is not in Baudrillard.

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His work, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, aims to be the death certificate of reality which has characterized, according to him, the modernity and which now has given place to hyper-reality.

Interestingly, Baudrillard makes a connection between Marx and Saussure to try burying, at the same time, Marxism and structuralism. The meeting point between these authors is the existence of the *referent*, the real content that ballasts the sign - the value, in political economy, the meaning, in Linguistics.

The use of machine to replace human work would put an end to political economy as a science. When the production got free from man and from any purpose, it began to rotate around itself and became autonomous. With the loss of human labor, the *referent* of the economy evaporates - the value, the working time as a *measure* that regulates the interchange, the commodity exchange.

In language, it is the same movement: the referent also disappears, allowing the emancipation of the sign. In Baudrillard's words:

released from any "archaic" obligation it might have to designate something, it [the sign] is at last free for a structural or combinatory play that succeeds the previous role of determinate equivalence. (Baudrillard, 1996: 16).

In modern times, the *reality principle* gives place to the ghostly world of the simulacrum, the hyperreality, the neo-realism. Baudrillard says, in *The Consumer Society*: "reality itself is abolished, obliterated, in favor of this neo-reality of the model which is given material force by the medium itself" (Baudrillard, 2007: 133).

Thereafter the primacy of the media began to guide many studies, earning a ghostly empowerment. The social interaction is no longer constituted through social praxis of men - work and language - but as a direct result of the technology, materialized in media. Paradoxically, given the ubiquity of media, human communication itself disappears. Individuals are connected to the network, they are only part of the data flow and are located in the contact terminals. Thus, as F. Rüdiger (2002) has noted, the technical *feedback* ends up taking the place of interaction.

More recent studies celebrate the birth of the *cyborg*, the definitive fusion of man and machine. Thus, subject and object, the traditional poles of the theory of knowledge disappear - and with them the possibility of access to the truth. The theory of

communication, which wanted at first to assert its autonomy, by the same self-centered movement, has decreed its death.

In this new theoretical configuration, as we have noted, the concept of spectacle has been replaced by the phantasmagoria of the simulacrum - the self-referential image, the image that refers to itself in its free arbitrariness in its "random play of signifiers."

Debord, predicting this future use of his ideas, this reversal of the relationships between reality and image, has already warned us that the simulacrum has not become the real world, but it was this dilacerated real world that began performing in the form of spectacle, falsely unifying our perception and imposing the "monopoly of appearance" (Debord 1997: § 12).

The ad libitum use of Debord's ideas and the attempts to tame it cannot resist to the reading of his masterpiece. *The society of the spectacle* - the final chapter on the metamorphosis of commodity fetishism - always invites us to resume the *language of contradiction* and to denounce the phantasmagoria celebrated by those who would condemn us to conformity.

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