

## **Debord and the Postmodern Turn: New Stages of the Spectacle**

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"But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, fancy to reality, the appearance to the essence, ... illusion only is sacred, truth profane. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness,"

Ludwig Feuerbach.

"There is no doubt for anyone who examines the question coldly that those who really want to shake an established society must formulate a theory which fundamentally explains this society, or which at least quite seems to give a satisfactory explanation,"

Guy Debord

The afterlife of the ideas of Guy Debord and the Situationist International is quite striking. Economics, politics, and everyday life is still permeated with the sort of spectacle that he described in his classical works, and the concept of "spectacle" has almost become normalized, emerging as part and parcel of both theoretical and popular media discourse. Moreover, Situationist texts are experiencing an interesting afterlife in the proliferation of 'zines and Web sites, some of which embody Situationist practice. The past decade has been marked by a profusion of cultural activism which uses inexpensive new communications technology to proliferate radical social critique and cultural activism. Many of these 'zines pay homage to Debord and the Situationists, as do a profusion of Web sites that contain their texts and diverse commentary. Situationist ideas are thus an important part of contemporary cultural theory and activism, and may continue to inspire cultural and political opposition as the "Society of the Spectacle" enters Cyberspace and new realms of culture and experience.

In this article, we will accordingly update Debord's ideas in formulating what we see as the emergence of a new stage of the spectacle. We will first delineate Debord's now classic analysis, indicate how it still is relevant for analyzing contemporary society, and then offer Baudrillard's critique that the concept of spectacle has been superseded by a new regime of simulation in the advent of a new postmodern stage of history. We acknowledge the insights and importance of this Baudrillardian analysis, but argue that simulation and spectacle are interconnected in the current forms of society and culture. We then offer an analysis of what we theorize as the new stage of "the interactive spectacle" that provides both new forms of seduction and domination, and new possibilities for resistance and democratization. At stake are formulating categories adequate to representing the transformations of contemporary society and devising a politics adequate to its challenges and novelties.

## The Situationists: Commodification, Spectacle, and Capitalism

"The commodity can only be understood in its undistorted essence when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole,"

Georg Lukacs (1971: 86).

"The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life. The relation to the commodity is not only visible, but one no longer sees anything but it: the world one sees is its world. Modern economic production extends its dictatorship extensively and intensively,"

Guy Debord (1967: #42).

In the shift from 19th century competitive capitalism, organized around production, to a later form of capitalism organized around consumption, media, information, and technology, new forms of domination and abstraction appear, greatly complicating social reality. Lukacs (1971) was the first neo-Marxist theorist to develop a theory of this later moment in social development (although he wrote before the conjunction of consumer/media/information society). Similarly, Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Benjamin, and others associated with the Frankfurt school traced the gradual bureaucratization, rationalization, and commodification of social life. They described how the "culture industry" defused critical consciousness, providing a key means of distraction and stupefaction, and they developed the first neo-Marxist theories of the media and consumer society (see Kellner 1989a).

We interpret the emergence of Guy Debord and the Situationist International as an attempt to update the Marxian theory in the French post-World War Two conjuncture -- a project that was also deeply influenced by French modernist avant garde movements. Debord and his friends were themselves initially part of a French avant garde artist milieu that was shaped by Dada, surrealism, lettrism, and other attempts to merge art and politics (see Marcus 1989; Plant 1992; and Wollen 1993). Unorthodox Marxists like Henri Lefebvre (himself at one time part of the surrealist movement and creator of a critique of everyday life) influenced Debord, as did groups like "Socialism or Barbarism" and Arguments, both of which attempted to create an up-to-date and emancipatory Marxist theory and practice. Rapid modernization in France after the second world war and the introduction of the consumer society in the 1950s provoked much debate and contributed to generating a variety of discourses on modern society in France, inspiring Debord and others to attempt to revitalize the Marxian project in response to new historical conditions and aesthetic and theoretical impulses. [1]

Yet the Situationist revision developed significant differences from the classical project and new motifs and emphases. Whereas traditional Marxism focused on production, the Situationists highlighted the importance of social reproduction and the new modes of the consumer and media society that had developed since the death of Marx. While Marx focused on the factory, the Situationists focused on the city and everyday life, supplementing the Marxian emphasis on class struggle with a project of cultural revolution and the transformation of everyday life. And whereas the Marxian theory focused on time and history, the Situationists emphasized the production of space and constitution of society.

Debord and the Situationists can thus be interpreted as an attempt to renew the Marxian project under historically specific conditions. Their program was to reinvigorate Marxian revolutionary practice and to supplement Marx's critique of capital and the commodity, attempting to trace the further development of the abstraction process inherent in commodity production. Influenced by Sartre and his concept that human existence is always lived within a particular context or situation and that individuals can create their own situations, -- as well as Lefebvre's concept of everyday life and demand to radically transform it -- Debord and his colleagues began devising strategies to construct new "situations" (see the 1957 Debord text in Knabb 1981: 17ff.). [2] This project would merge art and everyday life in the spirit of the radical avant garde movements and would require a revolution of both art and life.

Interestingly, some of the Situationist aesthetic projects anticipated postmodern culture, -- such as the emphasis on pastiche and quotation and the collapsing of boundaries between high and low art, and art and everyday life -- though Situationist practice was always geared toward a revolutionary transformation of the existing society -- both bureaucratic communist and capitalist ones. [3] From a more strictly theoretical perspective, Debord and his colleagues synthesized Marx, Hegel, Lefebvre, and Lukacs (whose *History and Class Consciousness* had been translated into French in 1960 by the *\_Arguments\_* group) into a critique of contemporary society published in Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* in 1967. Politically, Debord and the Situationists were deeply influenced by the council communism promoted by the early Lukacs, Korsch, Gramsci, and a tradition taken up in France by both the Socialism or Barbarism and *\_Arguments\_* groups. [4] This tradition was radically democratic, emphasizing the need for workers and citizens to democratically control every realm of their life from the factory to the community and influenced Debord and the Situationist's positive ideal.

### The Society of the Spectacle Revisited

"When the real world changes into simple images, simple images become real beings and effective motivations of a hypnotic behavior. The spectacle as a tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly), naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs; the most abstract, the most mystifiable sense corresponds to the generalized abstraction of present day society,"

Guy Debord (#18).

Debord's analysis of contemporary capitalism developed Marx's analysis of commodification to its latest stage, which he described as "the becoming-world of the commodity and the becoming-commodity of the world" (#66). For the Situationists, the current stage of social organization is a mutation in capitalist organization, but it is still fully accessible to a Marxist interpretation. Beneath the new forms of domination, there is "an undisturbed development of modern capitalism" (#65). Also influenced by Gramsci (1971), the Situationists saw the current forms of social control as based on consensus rather than force, as a cultural hegemony attained through the metamorphoses of the consumer and media society into the "society of the spectacle." In this

society, individuals consume a world fabricated by others rather than producing one of their own.

Paraphrasing Marx's opening to *Capital*, Debord said: "In the modern conditions of production, life announces itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles" (#1). The society of the spectacle is still a commodity society, ultimately rooted in production, but reorganized at a higher and more abstract level. "Spectacle" is a complex term which "unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena" (#10). In one sense, it refers to a media and consumer society, organized around the consumption of images, commodities, and spectacles, but the concept also refers to the vast institutional and technical apparatus of contemporary capitalism, to all the means and methods power employs, outside of direct force, to relegate subjects passive to societal manipulation and to obscure the nature and effects of capitalism's power and deprivations.

Under this broader definition, the education system and the institutions of representative democracy, as well as the endless inventions of consumer gadgets, sports, media culture, and urban and suburban architecture and design are all integral components of the spectacular society. Schooling, for example, involves sports, fraternity and sorority rituals, bands and parades, and various public assemblies that indoctrinate individuals into dominant ideologies. The standard techniques of education which involve rote learning and mechanical memorization of facts presented by droning teachers, to be regurgitated through multiple choice exams, is very effective for killing creativity and choking the spirit and joy of learning. Currently, the use of video technologies in the classroom can reinforce this passivity and creates a spectacularization and commodification of education, with TV "news" punctuated with ads by corporate sponsors, such as the Whittle Corporation's Channel One which is made available in thousands of schools across the U.S. Of course, contemporary politics is also saturated with spectacles, ranging from daily "photo opportunities," to highly orchestrated special events which dramatize state power, to TV ads and image management for predetermined candidates.

For Debord, the spectacle is a tool of pacification and depoliticization; it is a "permanent opium war" (#44) which stupefies social subjects and distracts them from the most urgent task of real life -- recovering the full range of their human powers through revolutionary change. The concept of the spectacle is integrally connected in Debord's formulation to the concept of separation, for in passively consuming spectacles, one is separated from actively producing one's life. Capitalist society separates workers from the product of their labor, art from life, and spheres of production from consumption, which involve spectators passively observing the products of social life (#25 and #26). The Situationist project in turn involved an overcoming of all forms of separation, in which individuals would directly produce their own life and modes of self-activity and collective practice.

The spectacular society spreads its narcotics mainly through the cultural mechanisms of leisure and consumption, services and entertainment, ruled by the dictates of advertising and a commercialized media culture. This structural shift to a society of the spectacle involves a commodification of previously non-colonized sectors of social life and the extension of bureaucratic control to the realms of leisure, desire, and everyday life. Parallel to the Frankfurt School conception of a "totally administered" or "one dimensional" society (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972; Marcuse 1964), Debord states that "The spectacle is the moment when the

commodity has attained the total occupation of social life" (#42). Here exploitation is raised to a psychological level; basic physical privation is augmented by "enriched privation" of pseudo-needs; alienation is generalized, made comfortable, and alienated consumption becomes "a duty supplementary to alienated production" (#42).

The shift to a "bureaucratic society of controlled consumption" (Lefebvre 1971 and 1991) organized around the production of spectacles can be seen as the exploitation of use value and needs as a means of advancing profit and gaining ideological control over individuals. Unlike early capitalism, where the structural exigencies lay in the forceful exploitation of labor and nature, and in defining the worker strictly as a producer, the society of the spectacle defines the worker as a consumer and attempts to constitute the worker's desires and needs, first creating then exploiting them. In this sense, Debord claims that use value was resurrected as a referent of production: "In the inverted reality of the spectacle, use value (which was implicitly contained in exchange value) must now be explicitly proclaimed precisely because its factual reality is eroded by the overdeveloped commodity economy and because counterfeit life requires a pseudo-justification" (#48). It is not that exchange value no longer dominates, but that use value is now deployed in an ideological way that exploits the needs of the new consumer self.

The spectacle not only expands the profits and power of the capitalist class, but also helps to resolve a legitimation crisis of capitalism. Rather than vent anger against exploitation and injustice, the working class is distracted and mollified by new cultural productions, social services, and wage increases. In consumer capitalism, the working classes abandon the union hall for the shopping mall and celebrate the system that fuels the desires that it ultimately cannot satisfy. But the advanced abstraction of the spectacle brings in its wake a new stage of deprivation. Marx spoke of the degradation of *being into having*, where creative praxis is reduced to the mere possession of an object, rather than its imaginative transformation, and where need for the other is reduced to greed of the self. Debord speaks of a further reduction, the transformation of *having into appearing*, where the material object gives way to its semiotic representation and draws "its immediate prestige and ultimate function" (#17) as image -- in which look, style, and possession function as signs of social prestige. The production of objects simpliciter gives way to "a growing multitude of image-objects" (#15) whose immediate reality is their symbolic function as image. Within this abstract system, it is the *appearance* of the commodity that is more decisive than its actual "use value" and the symbolic packaging of commodities -- be they cars or presidents -- generates an image industry and new commodity aesthetics (see Haug 1986).

While spectacles like Roman bread and circuses have long distracted the masses and celebrated state power, the society of the spectacle has more immediate origins in 19th century capitalist society organized around commodity spectacles and consumption. As Walter Benjamin argued (1973, discussed in Buck-Morss 1989), the commodity-phantasmagoria of the spectacle began in the Paris Arcades in the 19th century which put on display all the radiant commodities of the day. Department stores soon appeared in Paris and elsewhere which exhibited commodities as a spectacle and soon became coveted temples of consumption. Sears catalogues offered customers entrance to commodity paradise and companies began using images and advertising to market their wares, creating a society where images offered fantasies of happiness, luxury, and transcendence (see Ewen and Ewen 1983).

By the 1920s, advertising had become a major social force and films were celebrating affluence and consumer life-styles, but the depression of the 1930s and World War Two prevented the consumer society from developing. After the war, however, the consumer society took off in the United States as returning soldiers came back with money in pocket to start families and to buy all the new products offered and promoted on radio and television. Life in the suburbs was centered on consumption and new shopping malls gathered together a diversity of department stores and specialty shops in an environment scientifically designed -- right down to subliminal messages in the Muzak -- to promote consumption. The 1950s was thus the era of the rise of the society of consumption in the United States and by the 1960s the U.S. began to appear in France with new "drugstores," shopping malls, and a proliferation of consumer goods and services. It is this era that is thus theorized in Debord's and the Situationist International classic analysis of the society of the spectacle.

### Spectacle and Simulation: Baudrillard versus Debord

"Abstraction today is no longer the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory ... it is the map that engenders the territory,"

Baudrillard (1983a: 2)

Jean Baudrillard was deeply influenced by Debord and the Situationists. Both theorized the abstraction involved in the development of the consumer and media society. For both, the electronic media were a new stage in abstraction where interpersonal relations become technologically mediated. Both saw the media as one-way modes of transmission that reduced audiences to passive spectators; [5] both were concerned with authentic communication and a more vivid and immediate social reality apart from the functional requirements of a rationalized society. For Baudrillard, this entailed a destruction of all media, for their function is precisely to *mediate*, to prevent genuine communication, which, in a strangely Rousseauian metaphysics of presence, he conceived to be symbolic and direct, non-mediated. Debord's conception of media as "unilateral communication" is similar (see #24; #28), though he attempted to devise media practices that would transform the media and thus unlike Baudrillard championed the development of alternative media and use of media technologies against existing society and culture.

And yet despite his similarities with his predecessors, Baudrillard claims that with the new era of simulation we move to a whole new era of social development: beyond Marx, beyond neo-Marxism, beyond the Situationists, beyond modernity. For Baudrillard, we leave behind the society of the commodity and its stable supports; we transcend the society of the spectacle and its dissembling masks; and we bid farewell to modernity and its regime of production, and enter the postmodern society of the simulacrum, an abstract non-society devoid of cohesive relations, shared meaning, and political struggle.

For Baudrillard, postmodernity marks the horizon where modern dynamics of growth and explosion reach their limits and begin to turn inward, resulting in an implosive process devouring all relational poles, structural differences, conflicts and contradictions, as well as "truth," "reality," and even "power." Yet in his early works, *Le système des objets* (1968), *La société de consommation* (1970), and *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981 [1972]), Baudrillard pursued an analysis of commodities and consumer society. Until *The Mirror of Production* (1975), Baudrillard could be described, like Debord, as a neo-Marxist whose project was to retain the basic theoretical framework of Marxism, organized around class and production, while supplementing it to account for the changes in the nature of domination effected by the shift to a society based on mass media, consumption, and what Baudrillard called a "political economy of the sign."

Debord and Baudrillard were doing sociological studies of the new consumer society and everyday life in France simultaneously in the 1960s; both worked with Henri Lefebvre and were part of a similar political and intellectual milieu at the time. Just as Baudrillard was aware of the work of the Situationists, there is evidence they were aware of his, since in one text they denounced him as a "decrepit modernist-institutionalist" (in Knabb 1981: 211). But it seems the Situationists were more an influence on Baudrillard than vice versa. For Baudrillard, the Situationists were "without doubt the only ones to attempt to extract this new radicality of political economy in their 'society of the spectacle'" (1975: 120). At one time, in fact, Baudrillard considered himself a Situationist: "Pataphysician at twenty -- Situationist at thirty -- utopian at forty -- transversal at fifty -- viral and metaleptic at sixty -- that's my history" (1990: 131). Yet he soon rejected the Situationist analysis as itself bound to an obsolete modernist framework based on notions like history, reality, and interpretation, and he jumped into a postmodern orbit that declared the death of all modern values and referents under conditions of simulation, implosion, and hyperreality.

Baudrillard theorizes a cybernetic, self-reproducing society based on consumption, media, information, and high-technology where exchange occurs at the level of signs, images, and information, thereby dissolving Marx's distinction between "superstructure" and "base," as well as Debord's distinction between appearance and reality. Emphasizing contemporary capitalism as a rupture in the old mode of organization, Baudrillard's work was well-distanced from classical Marxists, but much akin to the Situationists, whom he credited for having grasped consumption as the new form of domination. But the early Baudrillard broke with the Situationists on both theoretical and political grounds. He understood contemporary society not in terms of spectacle, but "sign value," rooting the development of the commodity in the structural logic of the sign, rather than vice versa (1981). Baudrillard sometimes spoke of the "spectacle," but only provisionally. He rejected the term for two reasons: because it implies a subject-object distinction which he feels implodes in a hyperreality, and because the Situationists theorize the spectacle as an extension of the commodity form, rather than an instantiation of a much more radical and abstract order, the political economy of the sign, or as the semiological proliferation of signs and simulation models.

Baudrillard's argument against Debord is that during the phase of political economy theorized by the Situationists in terms of the society of media, consumption, and spectacle, a generalization and complexification of the sign form extended throughout the entire culture and environment

leading to a hegemony of sign value in which commodities are produced, distributed, and consumed for their conspicuous social meaning. The object is converted into a mere sign of its use, now abstract and divorced from physical needs. The whole cycle of production, distribution, and consumption, Baudrillard claims, is transformed into a semiotic system of abstract signifiers with no relation to an objective world. In the imaginary world of sign value, one consumes power or prestige through driving a certain type of car or wearing designer clothes. [6] This is a new stage of abstraction, a dematerialization of the world through semiological (re)processing in which images and signs take on a life of their own and provide new principles of social organization.

Simulation for Baudrillard thus describes a process of replacing "real" with "virtual" or simulated events, as when electronic or digitized images, signs, or spectacles replace "real life" and objects in the real world. Simulation models generate simulacra, representations of the real, that are so omnipresent that it is henceforth impossible to distinguish the real from simulacra. The world of simulacra for Baudrillard is precisely a postmodern world of signs without depth, origins, or referent. As he put it in his travelogue America: "Why is L.A., why are the deserts so fascinating? It is because you are delivered from all depth there -- a brilliant, mobile, superficial neutrality, a challenge to meanings and profundity, a challenge to nature and culture, an outer hyperspace, with no origin, no reference points" (1988: 123-124).

Simulacra are mere signs and images of the real which come to constitute a new realm of experience, the hyperreal. Baudrillard's "hyperreal" is the end-result of a historical simulation process where the natural world and all its referents are gradually replaced with technology and self-referential signs. This is not to say that "representation" has simply become more indirect or oblique, as Debord would have it, but that in a world where the subject/object distance is erased, where language no longer coheres in stable meanings, where originals are endlessly reproduced in copies, and where signs no longer refer beyond themselves to an existing, knowable world, representation has been surpassed. The real, for all intents and purposes, is vanquished when an independent object world is assimilated to and defined by artificial codes and simulation models, as when the events of the social world attain significance through the entertainment codes of mass media or when men and women judge themselves according to conformity to the dominant ideals of masculinity and femininity ideals as largely presented by advertising (the most extreme example being Cindy Jackson, the "Barbie Doll Woman," who had twenty-two different surgical alterations to look just like the figure she worshipped since childhood).

Thus, "hyperreality" signifies a rupture in the notion of the real brought on by techniques of mass reproduction. "Reality" implies something singular, sui generis, a touchstone by which to measure everything else. But in the conditions of reproduction, Baudrillard claims, all this is lost: reality becomes what can be infinitely extended and multiplied in a series, through a reproductive medium. No longer sui generis, it infinitely resembles itself in identical copies. No longer the touchstone of everything, it is confused for its copies or even devalued in light of them. Once, perhaps, sacred, it becomes strictly operational in reproduction, no more unique or definable than any one of the Campbell soup cans or Marilyn Monroe images in Warhol's paintings.

Thus, for Baudrillard, hyperreality is the transmogrification of "reality" within the conditions of

simulation and social reproduction. The Greek prefix "hyper" is appropriate, meaning over, above, more than normal, excessive. For many, the world of media fantasies is more real than everyday life; hyperreal video or computer games are more fascinating and alluring than school, work, or politics (often understandably so); porno videos stimulate sex in abstraction from the problems of real relations with others; and hyperreal theme parks like Disney World and simulated environments are more attractive than actual geographical sites. The hyperreal is thus the death of the real, but, a theological death: the real dies only to be reborn, artificially resurrected within a system of signs, "a more ductile material than [representational] meaning in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalence, all binary oppositions and a combinatory algebra" (Baudrillard 1983a: 4).

In the following analysis, we want to argue that rather than seeing the society of the spectacle and the regime of simulation as two distinct stages in which simulation overcomes spectacle, the two are interrelated in the contemporary social order. Likewise, we believe that sign-value and spectacle are integrated in the contemporary order, as are political economy and semiology. In the following section, we will according, against Baudrillard, indicate that the concept of the spectacle continues to be useful in analyzing contemporary societies, that the spectacle has if anything spread through the economic, political, and cultural realms, reaching down to helping constitute individual identity and subjectivity, and that signs, spectacles, and commodities merge in the contemporary capitalist order. Then, we will argue in the concluding section that we have entered a new realm of the spectacle constituted by a synthesis of Debordian and Baudrillardian concepts. Rather than seeing spectacle and simulation as contrary, we therefore see them as interacting in novel ways and providing important tools to analyze contemporary capitalist society and culture.

### The Spectacle Continues... and Expands

Reflection on the current globalized capitalist system suggest that contemporary overdeveloped societies continue to be marked by Debordian spectacle in every realm of social life. In the economy, more money is spent each year on advertising and packaging which constitutes in the U.S. 4% of the gross national produce (see Kellner 1997). New malls feature ever more spectacular shopping centers and "the malling of America" and the Global Consumer Village exhibit not only a sparkling array of goods and services but high tech entertainment, postmodern architecture, and, increasingly, simulations of famous sites past and present (Gottdiener 1997). The consumer society is now so highly developed that even alternative grocery stores and book stores are organized around the principle of spectacle, dazzling the customer with their display of wares, as with the new 1995 Whole Foods shop in Austin which provides a mesmerizing array of health and gourmet foods from the entire world. Next door there is a Book People, which contains three resplendent stories of books of all types, focusing on the alternative and countercultural. In the midst of this consumer's paradise, the Buddhism section has a rock garden, meditation space, and giant statue of the Buddha, presented as a commodity icon, a god of mass-marketed spirituality.

Entire environments are ever more permeated with advertising and spectacle. Buses can be wrapped with giant and glowing graphics, thus becoming rolling billboards. [7] Whole urban areas, like Sunset Strip in Los Angeles, are illuminated by lasers that flash promotions upon

buildings and environmental administration, where urban sites are lit up by ads on buildings, on high tech billboards, and in the sky, taking the spectacle to new heights (or depths, depending on how you view it). [8]

With cable and satellite television, the spectacle is now so ubiquitous and accessible that one need not even rise from the lounge chair to shop, requiring only a telephone and credit card to purchase a vast array of products from TV home shopping networks. To expand the domain of shopping and profit, advertisers are already creating new malls in cyberspace that will provide virtual shopping environments of the most exotic kind to parade an unbelievable surfeit of products. Indeed, corporations are currently establishing Web sites on the Internet which offer all sorts of visual spectacles in order to entice customers to buy their goods and provide consumer profile information for future advertising and commercial ventures. Like the industrial commodity markets that preceded it, the spectacle has gone global with the proliferation of satellite dishes beaming Western sex and violence to all corners of the globe, and elections from Israel to Russia reduce politics to a battle of image and media spectacle with Hollywood-style media campaigns for candidates intent on selling personalities more than political platforms.

Entertainment is a dominant mode of the society of the spectacle with its codes permeating news and information, politics, education, and everyday life. Newspapers like USA Today fragment news into small stories, illustrated by graphs, charts, and color pictures, while both local and national TV news is saturated by happy talk and human interest stories. Cable TV promises to over 500 channels by the year 2000 and Internet Web sites and new media sites may offer even more infotainment spectacles, as multimedia technologies develop, frightening cybercritic Paul Virilio to imagine an increasingly inertia setting in, as individuals enter virtual worlds through the clicking of a mouse and punching keys (1998).

The info-entertainment society reduces all of its genres from news to religion to sports to the logic of the commodity spectacle. Since the rise of televangelism in the 1980s, religion has been relentlessly commodified with TV evangelists promoting the spectacle of religion to rake in millions of dollars from gullible contributors. Even the Pope himself has become a commodity-machine, a global superstar whose image the Roman Catholic Church recently licensed to sell official Papal souvenirs, ranging from books and posters to watches, sweatshirts, and bottled (holy?) water -- with a Papal Web-page to promote the Vatican's image and to sell their merchandise. Always a major site of the spectacle and a source of capital, religion itself has become packaged as a spectacle commodity with TV religion, religion Web sites, and dramatic increase in religious artifacts ranging from bibles on CD-ROM to Christian rock music videos and CDs.

It appears that professional sports, a paradigm of the spectacle, can no longer be played without the accompaniment of cheer leaders, giant mascots who clown with players and spectators, and raffles, promotions, and contests which hawk the products of various sponsors. Instant replays turn the action into high-tech spectacles and stadiums themselves contain electronic reproduction of the action, as well as giant advertisements for various products which rotate for maximum saturation -- previewing forthcoming environmental advertising in which entire urban sites will become scenes to promote commodity spectacles. Sports stadiums, like the new United Center in Chicago, or America West Arena in Phoenix, are named after corporate sponsors. The Texas

Rangers stadium in Arlington, Texas supplements its sports arena with a shopping mall and commercial area, with office buildings, stores, and a restaurant in which for a hefty price one gets a view of the athletic events, as one consumes food and drink.

It probably will not be too long before the uniforms of professional sports players are as littered with advertisements as racing cars. In the globally popular sport of soccer, companies such as Canon, Sharp, and Carlsberg sponsor teams and have their names emblazoned on their shirts, making the players epiphenomena of transnational capital. In auto racing events like the Tour de France or Indianapolis 500, entire teams are sponsored by major corporations whose logos adorn their clothes and cars. And throughout the world, but especially in the United States, the capital of the commodity spectacle, superstars like Michael Jordan commodify themselves from head to foot, selling their various body parts and images to the highest corporate bidders, imploding their sports images into the spectacles of advertising. In this manner, the top athletes augment their salaries, sometimes spectacularly, by endorsing products, thus imploding sports, commerce, and advertising into dazzling spectacles which celebrate the products and values of corporate America.

In fashion, postmodern couture generates ever more spectacular clothing displays:

In the same way that movies are being judged by the size of their grosses, not whether they make any sense, couture shows are now judged by the size of the spectacle.... Keep your eye on the three-story waterfall at Givenchy [fashion show], and wait for the train at Christian Dior... At huge expense, a spice-filled Souk was recreated, and the lost luggage room had trunks tagged with names like Bing Crosby, Cleopatra and Brad Pitt ("In Paris Couture, the Spectacle's the Thing," *New York Times*, July 21, 1998: C24).

Actual fashion displays reviewed in the article cited above include spectacles like Jean Paul Gaultier's kilt and beaded sweater and colorful beaded floral crocheted jacket; Alexander McQueen's dazzling bias dress and wrap for Givenchy; a tailored zip-front suit with feathers by Versace; a lavish Pocahontas dress, with Navajo patterns, for Dior, and a musketeer boots and gold embroidery at Dior. Thus, in the society of the spectacle, even one's body is supposed to become a spectacle, in which fashion constitutes style as the construction of a spectacular image and conceives of body and identity as projects to be constructed according to the logic of the spectacle.

It appears in the society of the spectacle that a life of luxury and happiness is open to all, that anyone can buy the sparkling objects on display and consume the spectacles of entertainment and information. But in reality only those with sufficient wealth can fully enjoy the benefits of this society, whose opulence is extracted out of the lives and dreams of the exploited. The poor souls who can't afford to live out their commodity fantasies in full are motivated to work harder and harder, until they are trapped in the squirrel cage of working and spending, spending and working -- and increasingly borrowing money at high interest rates. Indeed, consumer credit card debt has sky-rocketed 47% in recent years, as credit cards are easier to get and interest payment rises; the average debt per household is now over \$3,000, up from barely over \$1,000 per household in 1985 (*New York Times*, December 28, 1995: C1). [9]

Where the image and realm of appearance determine and overtake reality, life is no longer lived

directly and actively. The spectacle involves a form of social relations in which individuals passively consume commodity spectacles and services, without active and creative involvement. The popular MTV animated series *Beavis and Butt-Head* provides contemporary examples of such passivity, as the two characters sit in front of television watching music videos and are usually only incited to action by something they watch on television. Their entire vocabulary and mapping of the world derives from the media and they describe media bites as "cool" or "sucks" according to whether the images do or do not conform to dominant forms of sex and violence (see Kellner 1995).

Media spectacles are financed by advertisers who in turn pass along costs to the consumers, who are doubly exploited in work and consumption. Consumers pay for the spectacles of entertainment, subsidized by advertising, in the form of higher costs for products. Moreover, the entertainment and information offered is a function of what the culture industries think will sell and that on the whole advances its own interests, producing more desires for its goods and way of life.

The correlative to the Spectacle is thus the Spectator, the passive viewer and consumer of a social system predicated on submission and conformity. In contrast to the stupor of consumption, Debord and the Situationists champion active, creative, and imaginative practice, in which individuals create their own "situations," their own passionate existential events, fully participating in the production of everyday life, their own individuality, and, ultimately, a new society. Thus, to the passivity of the spectator they counterpoise the activity of the radical subject which constructs its own everyday life against the demands of the spectacle (to buy, consume, conform, etc.). The concept of the spectacle therefore involves a distinction between passivity and activity and consumption and production, condemning passive consumption of spectacle as an alienation from human potentiality for creativity and imagination.

The concept also involves distinctions between the artificial and the real, and the abstract and the concrete. Unlike real human needs for creativity and community, commodity needs and spectacles are artificial, with capitalism endlessly multiplying needs for the latest gadget or product line, while creating a fantasy world of imagined self-realization and happiness. In place of concrete events and relations with others, the spectacle substitutes abstract images, commodity fantasies, and relations with technology. The spectacle escalates abstraction to the point where one no longer lives in the world *per se* -- "inhaling and exhaling all the powers of nature" (Marx) -- but in an abstract *image* of the world. "Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation" (Debord #1), which Debord describes as the "philosophization of reality": "The spectacle does not realize philosophy, it philosophizes reality" (#19). By this he means, spectacle and image constitute an ersatz reality, an ideal world of meanings and values to be consumed by the commodity self. The realization of philosophy, as conceived by Marx, entailed the abolition of "philosophy" -- i.e. of an abstract ideology constituted above and against the concrete conditions of social existence -- and the synthesis of theory and practice. For Marx, revolutionary struggle seeks to realize the ideals of the Enlightenment, creating equality, freedom, individuality, and democracy as the form of social life, thus actualizing Western culture's highest philosophical ideals.

The philosophization of reality, on the other hand, separates thought from action as it idealizes

and hypostatizes the world of the spectacle. It converts direct experience into a specular and glittering universe of images and signs, where instead of constituting their own lives, individuals contemplate the glossy surfaces of the commodity world and adopt the psychology of a commodity self that defines itself through consumption and image, look, and style, as derived from the world of the spectacle. Spectators of the spectacle also project themselves into a phantasmagoric fantasy world of stars, celebrities, and stories, in which individuals compensate for un-lived lives by identifying with sports heroes and events, movie and television celebrities, and the life-styles and scandals of the rich and infamous.

Individuals in the society of spectacle constitute themselves in terms of celebrity image, look, and style. Media celebrities are the icons and role models, the stuff of dreams who the dreamers of the spectacle emulate and adulate. But these are precisely the ideals of a consumer society whose models promote the accumulation of capital by defining personality in terms of image, forcing one into the clutches and clichés of the fashion, cosmetic, and style industries. Mesmerized by the spectacle, subjects move farther from their immediate emotional reality and desires, and closer to the domination of bureaucratically controlled consumption: "the more [one] 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 ... his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him" (Debord #30). The world of the spectacle thus becomes the "real" world of excitement, pleasure, and meaning, whereas everyday life is devalued and insignificant by contrast. Within the abstract society of the spectacle, the image thus becomes the highest form of commodity reification: "The spectacle is *capital* to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image" (#34).

Debord emphasizes the super-reification of image-objects as a massive unreality, an inversion of reality and illusion. The spectacle is "the autonomous movement of the non-living" (#2). The actual class divisions of society, for example, are abolished in the spectacle and replaced with signs of unified consumption which address everyone equally as consumers. But, like Feuerbach and Marx, Debord saw not simply the blurring of illusion and reality, but the authentication of illusion as more real than the real itself. "Considered in its own terms, the spectacle is *affirmation* of appearance and affirmation of all human life, namely social life, as mere appearance" (#10). The universalization of the commodity form is to be seen as the reduction of reality to appearance, its subsumption to the commodity form, its subsequent commodification.

Along these lines, there is a remarkable congruence with Baudrillard's key themes, specifically his notions of simulations, implosion, hyperreality, and the proliferation of signs and images in postmodern culture. But Debord was more a good Hegelian-Marxist than a proto-Baudrillardian. Like Marx, as much as Debord emphasized the commodification of reality, he also emphasized the *reality of commodification* and the ability of individuals to see through its illusions and fantasies. Despite the pronounced emphasis on the artificiality of the spectacle, Debord refused to abandon the attempt to interpret and change social reality. Debord peered into the shadows of a reified unreality, but drew back to report and critique what he had seen; there is an implosion of opposites, but the separate poles retain their contradictory identity; illusion overtakes reality, but reality can be recuperated for Debord through a *critical hermeneutics* that sees through appearances, illusions, and fantasies to the realities being masked and covered over. In addition, Debord urged radical practice, the construction of situations, to overcome the passivity of the

spectator.

### New Stage of the Interactive Spectacle

Thus, we believe that Debord's analysis of the spectacle continues to be relevant, even more so than during the period in which he formulated the term. We also find Debord's epistemology and politics superior to Baudrillard's, but believe that their categories can be articulated, and thus are not antithetical. In this section, we will argue that we are in a new stage of spectacle, which we call "the interactive spectacle," that involves an implosion of subject and object, and the creation of new cultural spaces and forms and new subjects. The stage of the spectacle described by Debord, congruent with Sartre's analysis of the fate of subjectivity in the present age, [10] was that of the consumption of spectacles in which individual subjects were positioned to be compliant and pliant spectators and consumers of mass consumer society and media. In this early stage theorized by Debord and later Baudrillard, the subject sat more or less passively in front of a movie or television screen, or was a slightly less passive spectator of sporting events or commodity spectacles in stores or malls. In this stage, there was domination of the subject by the object, and categories of passivity, seriality, separation, and alienation accurately described the contours of this stage (though the subject was always more active than extreme versions of manipulation theory in the Frankfurt School and Situationist International would indicate, but not as active as later advocates of the "active audience" within British cultural studies and elsewhere would maintain in the 1980s (see the critique of the latter in Kellner 1995 and of the Situationist concepts in Best and Kellner 1997, Chapter Three).

In the stage of spectacle theorized and criticized by the Frankfurt School, Sartre, the Situationist International, early Baudrillard, and others, the media and technology were powerful control mechanisms keeping individuals passive and serialized, watching and consuming, rather than acting and doing. The subject of this new stage of spectacle, by contrast, is more active and new technologies like the computer, multimedia, and virtual reality devices are more interactive. Thus, we would argue that the categories of the transformation of the subject, of implosion of the difference between subject and object, of the creation of new technosubjects and culture is more appropriate to describe this contemporary stage of the spectacle (see our analysis in Best and Kellner, forthcoming). Thus, not manipulation or domination but transformation, mutation, and alteration of the human species itself is at stake in the contemporary moment with the outcome unclear and the future open.

We offer, however, a few speculative thoughts on a condition still unfolding before us. The interaction between subject and object, between individuals and technology, celebrated by some cybertheorists like Turkle and others, exaggerates the interactivity and the break with previous forms of culture. Whereas we are ready to concede a more interactive dimension to the current stage of the spectacle and a more active role for the subject, we see something of a collapse of the distinction between subject and object occurring that has disturbing implications. While we would not go as far as Baudrillard in postulating the triumph of the object in contemporary postmodern culture (see the discussion in Kellner 1989b: 153ff), and believe it is still important to theorize and promote agency, it does appear that there is an eclipse of the subject and growing power of the object in the new cyberspectacles of the present.

For one thing, there is a structuring of the protocols of interaction by computer programs, a monitoring and manipulation of communication and interaction in mainstream media shows, like talk radio and television, or websites and television programs that solicit viewer opinions through fax, telephone, or email. We are thinking here of supposedly interactive mainstream media such as cnn call-in programs or discussion programs that solicit viewers to send in email or fax comments for instant dissemination; msnbc television and websites that contains an interactive component; and websites of media corporations that allow interaction, and discussion. While these are interesting developments in the history of the media, they do not necessarily constitute a democratizing, empowering, or genuinely interactive culture and are continuous in some ways with the media spectacles of the previous stage, although they integrate the consumer and audience in more interesting ways into the spectacle.

In an attempt to further control the benighted couch potatoes of consumer capitalism, for instance, the entertainment industry has invented "interactive TV" -- an oxymoron if there ever was one -- which allows the view to be their own director, to call their own shots, to edit their own videos, or even to project their own image onto the screen (especially enticing with porn videos) to "interact" with the programmed dialogue. Thus, we can now go into the TV, becoming a part of it as it has become a part of us. With every passing day, people become more and more like characters in David Cronenberg's film *Videodrome*, or like the "Television Man" satirized by the Talking Heads:

I'm looking and I'm dreaming for the first time

I'm inside and I'm outside at the same time

And everything is real

Do I like the way I feel? ...

Television made me what I am ...

(I'm a) television man.

Further, Internet technology enables ordinary individuals to make their everyday life a spectacle, with live sex on the Internet (usually for a fee) and even a live birth via Internet on June 16, 1998. Moreover, camcorders, or "Webcams," record and sent live over the Internet the daily lives of new webstars like JenniCam who receives over 60,000 hits a day to watch her go through mundane activities. Or AnaCam can be seen "on her couch (she has no bed), looking bored, eating a pizza, having kinky sex with her boyfriend -- sometimes all at the same time" (*Newsweek*, June 1, 1998: 64). All over the world, individuals are up webcam sites, often charging individuals fees for access (*The Toronto Star*, July 23, 1998: G2). Hence, whereas Truman Burbank, in the summer 1998 hit film *The Truman Show*, discovered to his horror that his life was being televised, many individuals in cyberworld choose to make televisual spectacles of their everyday life.

Virtual reality devices promise to take individuals into an even higher and more powerful realm of spectacle interaction in which one thinks that one really is interacting with the environment projected by the device, be it a war game or pornographic fantasy. So far VR devices have been limited to games like "Dactyl Nightmare," where one dons a "head-mounted display" to fight

other characters and avoid destruction by virtual large winged creatures in a Darwinian battle for survival, or one enters a high tech virtual "movie ride," often based on film characters like *RoboCop*. Some of these experiences might constitute a new level of multi-sensorium spectacles, something like the "feelies" envisioned by Huxley in *Brave New World*.

Of course, such "virtual" and "interactive" technology merely seduce the viewer into an even deeper tie to the spectacle and there is no media substitute for getting off one's ass, for interactive citizenship and democracy, for actually living one's life in the real world. Indeed, advocates of the superiority of cyberworlds denigrate the body as mere "meat" and "real life" ("R L") as a boring intrusion into the pleasures of the media and computer worlds of cyberspace. We would avoid, however, both demonizing cyberspace as a fallen realm of alienation and dehumanization as many of its technophobic philosophical critics (i.e. Virilio, Borgmann, Simpson, etc.), just as we would avoid celebrating it as a new realm of emancipation, democracy, and creative activity.

We would distinguish therefore between a genuine interactive spectacle and pseudo-interaction. Using Debord's conception of the construction of situations, we would suggest that a creatively interactive spectacle is one that the individual herself has created, whether it be one's website, computer-mediated space such as chat room, or discussion group. In these self or group-constructed environments, individuals themselves create both form and content, using the site and technology to advance their own interests and projects, to express their own views and to interact in the ways that they themselves decide. In pseudo-spectacle, by contrast, one is limited by the structures and power of the usually corporate forces that themselves construct the spectacle in which one is merely a part. Such pseudo-interactive spectacle would include talk radio or television, in which calls are carefully monitored and the institutions can cut off or censor individuals at will; the use of email or fax material in corporate interactive sites which choose which material they publicize, or websites or Internet discussion forums monitored and controlled by corporations or their delegates.

Of course, such distinctions are ideal types, since each individual is constructed in some way or another by the social environment in which one lives and even in the most controlled and structured interaction there is more participation and involvement than in passively consuming television or film images in the solitude of one's own subjectivity. One is never totally free of social influence, all technological-mediated communication is structured to some extent by computer protocols, codes, and programs, and thus both form and content of the construction of all and any situation is socially mediated.

Consequently, this form of interactive spectacle is highly ambiguous. On one hand, it can be a more creative and active involvement with media and culture than television or film watching. While the form of technological-mediated interaction is always structured, limited, coded, and predetermined, especially in interaction with big media corporations, new computer technology allows for creation of alternative cultural spaces that can attack and subvert the established culture. In this new cultural space, one can express views previously excluded from mainstream media and so the new cultural forums have many more voices and individuals participating than during the era of Big Mainstream Media in which giant corporations controlled both the form and content of what could be spoken and shown. Cyberdemocracy and technopolitics is too recent a phenomenon to adequately appraise its possibilities, limitations, and effects, but it

provides the possibility of the sort of subversive politics and the use of the tools of the spectacle against the capitalist spectacle that Debord promoted. Hence, in the Age of the Internet and new technologies, the ideas of the Situationist International continue to be of use in comprehending existing society and culture and challenge us into inventing ways to subvert and transform the capitalist spectacle.

## Notes

1. See the discussions in Poster 1975 on the new forms of Marxian theory in post-War France. Many discussions of Debord and Situationism downplay the Marxian and Hegelian roots of their project; for example, Marcus 1989 and Plant 1992 exaggerate the avant-gardist aesthetic roots of the Situationist project and downplay the Marxian elements.

2. Curiously, although Debord's own notion of the construction of situations seems close to Sartre, the Situationists had a dim view of the illuminary who was the dominant intellectual figure of the time. In "Interview with an Imbecile," which takes to task, deservedly, Sartre's 1964 comments on communism in a *Nouvel Observateur* interview, the Situationists conclude: "The thinker we have been talking about is Sartre; and anyone who still wants to seriously discuss the value (philosophical or political or literary--one can't separate the aspects of this hodgepodge) of such a nullity, so puffed up by the various authorities that are so satisfied with him, immediately himself loses the right to be accepted as an interlocutor by those who refuse to renounce the potential consciousness of our time" (in Knabb 1981: 181). This, we believe, is sour grapes that smacks of the Stalinism that they denounce in Sartre; instead, we believe the kinship between their conceptions of the construction of situations should be perceived.

3. On postmodern art, see Best and Kellner 1997, Chapter 3.

4. Council communism rooted itself in the tradition of Soviets, or workers councils (German: Räte) rather than parties. They opposed the bureaucratization of the Soviet Union and all Marxist-Leninist parties which they thought were hopelessly hierarchical and bureaucratic. In opposition to bureaucratic communism, they championed workers self-activity and self-organization; see the texts of Karl Korsch collected in Kellner 1977 and the discussion in Boggs 1984.

5. Debord's criticism that media communication "is essentially unilateral" (#24) was taken over directly by Baudrillard (1981: 169ff.); Baudrillard's stress on image and semiurgy, the proliferation of signs and images, comes from Debord (#18 and #34); and his notions of "map" and "territory" derive from Debord who wrote: "The spectacle is the map of this new world, a map which covers precisely its territory" (#31).

6. *Wired*, the publication of choice for the digerati who write about information/computer culture and those who consume it, has a monthly feature which under the rubric "Fetish" presents the latest products to satisfy its consumers' technolust. According to *Newsweek* (January 8, 1996: 54-55), the latest lifestyle fetish is designer paint, such as from Stewart, which costs up to \$110 a gallon and comes in hundreds of different shades.

7. See Cliff Gromer, "It's a Wrap." *Popular Mechanics*, June 1998: 112-115.

8. "A 190-foot obelisk, from which lasers flash, is the equivalent of the traditional Las Vegas neon sign (Promoters claim that only two man-made objects can be seen from outer space: The Great Wall of China and Luxor's laser light). The entire Luxor setup is animated and computerized. A light show in front of the hotel focuses on a 60-foot screen of weather. As the sun goes down, the shimmering and luminescent face of King Tut appears in the air, projected against a screen of raindrops from the fountains in front of the sphinx. Through the translucent face of the pharaoh, you can read a distant sign down the strip 'Prime Rib Buffet.'

Even the great beam and its reach skyward, consuming \$1 million worth of electricity annually, suggest wider urban applications. Its designer, Zachary Taylor, foresees using this technology for forming 'a new kind of skyline created by lasers'. Phil Patton, "Now Playing in the Virtual World," *Popular Science*, April 1994: 82.

9. For a recent examination of the incredible level of debt in the United States and its impact on people, see Judilet Schor, *The Overspent American* 1997.

10. See *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (19xx [1960]) which contains Sartre's discussion of seriality.