

Remarks on the Spectacle

'The society of the spectacle' is a phrase that has passed, in France, and I suppose elsewhere, into common parlance. The recent death of Guy Debord has had a share in giving to his work of 1967, and to the Situationist trend of the sixties, a reputation as invaluable points of reference; some researchers, who are particularly interested in the history of images and representation, have seen a parallel between the works of Walter Benjamin and Guy Debord, or have thought that they fit into a logical sequence. When a friend recently wrote to me along these lines, I was led to answer him in order to clarify issues which seem to arise from a theoretical misunderstanding. It is these personal reflections that I propose to make available here.¹

Technology and religion, mechanization and spirituality: these are, it seems, the 'rational core' of our century, the decisive issue—and not 'communism or capitalism', 'totalitarianism or freedom', as our dominant intelligentsia have insisted for fifty years. In this respect, Walter Benjamin, as early as the thirties, was ahead of his time. Thirty years later, Debord was still stirring up our philosophical past—the froth rather than the substance. As one might expect, his German precursor adopted a less rhetorical tone, soberly focusing his analysis on the present and on various real objects: photography and panoramas, arcades and tramways, the museums and squares of Paris, and Biedermeier furniture. By contrast, the spokesman of the French *arrière-gardes* took up a prophetic tone as the herald of a new age. What was truly radical in Benjamin's approach was its changing of viewpoints and methods of observation; in the case of Debord, it was rather a *formal* effect, the form of the 'Manifesto', a remake of the posture of the Young Hegelians—the time is here, let us give back to man his own truth, our criticism will carry the revolution to its term.

The Society of the Spectacle, first published in 1967, should really bear the date 1841, the year of the first edition of *The Essence of Christianity*. This is true of both its syntax and vocabulary. Feuerbach provides not only an epigraph for Debord, but a ready-made structure for his argument. Recognition of this plagiarism is a generational matter, and I quite under-

¹ This is the text of a talk given at the conference 'Towards a Theory of the Image' held at the Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht earlier this year. A version of this talk was published in *Débats*, no. 85, May–August 1995.

stand that it escapes the attention of the young. In the early sixties, graduate students and candidates for the *agrégation* who haunted the halls of the Sorbonne, we were all of us Feuerbachians, keen on the style of the 'young Marx'. The disintegration of the old Marx has given his great elder, Feuerbach, an air of novelty. Today the 'young Hegelian' seems 'post-Marxist' though, in conceptual terms, he is actually pre-Marxist. Let us excerpt at random two definitions: the life of societies as an 'immense accumulation of spectacles', and then, 'the spectacle is not a set of images but a social relation between persons, mediated by images...'² For every two phrases in this cult book, one depends on a crib where it is placed opposite a translation of its own argument, but amnesia and the driving of Marx from later minds have erased the translation's left column—with its original passages on money, capitalism, ideology and so on ... lifted from the *Manuscripts of 1844* and elsewhere, which everybody knew at the time.

The originality of *The Society of the Spectacle* was to bring together two banalities, overlaying the 1840s themes of alienation, absolutely unmodified, with 1960s objects—consumer society, culture, publicity. The encounter between the old stencil and the new artefact—or the shadow which it cast—doubtless produced the effect of reality, with existential resonances, but not an effect of real knowledge, bearing new insights. The plagiarism of the style, acknowledged *in extremis*—'plagiarism is necessary', says Debord in fragment 207—made it possible to hide from view the plagiarism of the thought, an old pharmaceutical technique.

God and Ideology Made in the Image of Man

What was it that *The Essence of Christianity* had to tell us? That the being of humanity had *separated* itself from its essence by projecting it onto God, the inverted mirror of actual humanity in which it venerates its own power turned against itself. Furthermore, that this generalized separation engendered religious illusion, an inverted profane content, a negation of the human wherein man affirms as other that which he denies in himself. But also that this illusion will come to an end once humanity, educated by criticism, rediscovers the truth inherent in its illusions, namely its own essence previously alienated in the fantastic form of God or ideology.

What does *The Society of the Spectacle* have to say? That market society has become *separated* from itself by alienating itself in spectacle, the inverted image of social reality, the 'present model of life' in which we venerate our own power turned against ourselves. That this generalized separation has engendered the all-inclusive spectacular, which is 'the real world turned upside-down' and the 'visible negation of life', a negation that, in its turn, subdues living persons for its own purposes. But also that this illusion will come to an end once the 'atomized crowd subjected to manipulations' liberates itself by taking hold again of its own essence, which has been alienated in the fantastic form of spectacle or ideology.

Had nothing, then, taken place in history and philosophy between 1841 and 1967? Yes, sociology and the invention of electronic images. So one

² Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Detroit 1993. The book is divided into sections and is without pagination.

should write 'society' instead of 'humanity', and 'spectacle' instead of 'ideology'. Except for this detail of phrasing, the 'Situationist' discourse follows word-for-word the tracks of Hegelianism: objectification, separation, negation, reversal, reversal of the reversal. Humanity's liberation will come about through the reuniting of what was separated: the predicate and the subject. These stages are the scansion of a much-heralded odyssey that will see the exit from false consciousness and a return of the self to a tranquil joy, under the 'concrete' form of a democracy of workers' councils: 'the Council in which the theory of praxis regulates itself and beholds its own action'. *Theory of practice*: this appealing syntagma brushes aside trivial mediations—how a theory becomes practical is precisely the problem. This shrinking of contraries speaks of the faith one was able to maintain, ever since the time of that classical German pre-Marxist, in the virtues of strident declarative critical thinking. Practice for the Feuerbachians consisted in reading Feuerbach, who was finally going to deliver man—humanity in general—from his chains. As for Debord, it consisted of reading Debord, and the unrelenting excommunication of non-readers and bad readers, the conspirators of silence or distortion—for aside from a few of the elect, the rest of the world had taken up the call to gag the mouth of Truth. In both cases, it is only following a recognition, a reversal of the reversal, that men will be able to come back down to earth from heaven, overturning their love of God, of ideology, of the spectacle—these are equivalent terms—into a love of active and sentient humanity. In short, the tradition is safe.

This modernist refresher course in an ideological form of argument advanced in the Germany of 1840—but which the human sciences have since relegated to the status of an edifying tale—rests on the idea of a *generic nature*, of man's pre-existent essence. It is difficult these days to be unaware that the nature of man is not to have a nature, and that this lack of origin is precisely at the origin of the making of man, the technogenesis of the human. Essentialist ontologies are obliged to wipe away everything that has been discovered since 1848, as if Darwin, Freud, Pierce, Leroi-Gourhan and Simondon had never existed. The theological postulate of a human 'essence' is an inheritance of the revealed religions for which God created man after his own image, once and for all. It has not stood up well against a number of discoveries, beginning with palaeontology. This postulate still underpins the atheist idealism of the humanist neo-Hegelians who for a century have been announcing the final reconciliation of existence with human essence. Following a hundred others, Debord historicizes the secular tale of the Apocalypse: 'With the *practical disintegration* of this society, ideology—the final *unreason* that blocks access to historical life—must disappear.³ This is the old premise of the end as a return to the origin, here christened 'self-emancipation' or 'councils' democracy'. Generalized autonomy is God come back down to earth and converted to collectivism. This fantasy of immediacy, a workers' Parousia of transparency that the Left Hegelians would have thought simplistic, excludes by its very principle the hard labour of real mediations. It disclaims *political mediation* as a structuring instantiation of collective existence, along with *technical mediation* as a structuring instantiation of the hominization process. Nor does our author ever

³ Ibid., section 214.

speak the language of technology or politics: such silence is typical of the moralist in all ages and climes. He fulminates from afar without taking a look up close. We are at the opposite end of the spectrum from the mediological approach with its long, laborious thought about material mediations.

The error, it seems to me, was in the starting point. Debord and company made the Marxist definition of ideology their own: the inverted reflection of the real appearing on the rear wall of consciousness, as if in a camera obscura. That is why they assumed that one would soon be able to set right a world which goes around with its head where its feet should be. As though, in the final analysis, it was only a matter of a false image hiding our real being from us so, by simply standing the mirror upright, we could correct 'this distorted consciousness of realities' and reappropriate our lost true being. That mirror was the integrated 'spectacular', fused from the 'concentrated spectacular' and 'diffuse spectacular' identified respectively with communism and capitalism. It is precisely in breaking with this specular conception of ideology, or with 'spectacle', that the mediological project is born. Ideology is not the *antithesis* of a body of knowledge or reality—some illusion, misperception or false consciousness—but the form and means of collective organization. It is not a modality of *seeing* but a constraint upon *doing*. That is why one can no longer stick with Marxist idealism, the ultimate platonic avatar, in which ideology is something that passes directly into our heads, and ideas are projected onto screens.

One Society, One Spectacle?

Conceiving of spectacle as 'materialized ideology' left Debord's Situationism with no choice other than to erase all historical, social and technological determination, jeering at but essentializing *the* society, *the* spectacle, *the* action, *the* culture. Certainly there is no denying the existence of logical abstractions and positive totalities—theoretical models which synthesize general characters after the assimilation of particular real objects—the theatre, the cinema, video and so on. Yet to encompass everything under the name 'the society of the spectacle' is to partake of the ideological realm or of mythical abstraction, without the prior digestion of substances: it allows one neither to think through the effective realities it designates, nor to criticize to the very roots what it denounces. For where there is no *careful discernment* of the articulations and turning points in the development of a process, no scrutiny of the joints and chinks in the armour, there can be no intellectual *purchase* on the concrete course of things. The notion of spectacle drifts as an entelechy above cultures, an entity lacking all history and economy, without borders or geography. A phantasmagorical notion, colossal and sauntering, it fuels spontaneous faith in the existence of a universal history of the image, of looking, or of recording sound, uniformly imposing itself in every nook and cranny of the so-called 'global village'. Islam is no 'society of the spectacle'—nor is the West, by the way—but for historical reasons that belong to it alone. The billion human beings which constitute it have their own specific 'ideology', their own cultural mediology; this also holds for Buddhism and Confucianism. The interconnectedness of technological networks, far from weakening these religious identities, reanimate and redefine them.

We can see this in Algiers or Teheran, where the audiocassette miniaturises and distributes the calling of the hour of prayer, or the satellite dish resuscitates the ayatollah and imam it was supposed to have put out of business.

Only incarceration within the scholarly mind-set, which diverts one from the object's technological reality, can explain the misunderstanding with which Debord opened his exposition: 'Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation'.⁴ This is not a diagnosis but a commentator's scholium, not an observation but a deduction. And this because, since 1839—which marks the appearance of the first photographic print and thus the year zero of the 'indexical paradigm' that will little by little come to occupy pride of place in all the sectors of social life and artistic genres—we have witnessed an evolution in the other direction. From this time, everything that had been distanced in and by representation has come to be lived directly: the state, parliament, political parties but also pictures, plays, sculpture, films and the written word itself. The index wins out over the symbol, event over ritual, the improvised over the deferred; everywhere presence nibbles away at representation.

With the advent of participatory or interactive communication in groups or en masse—as in rock concerts, sporting events and popular attractions like Disneyland or Poitiers' Futuroscope—the theatrical setting and arrangements, namely the face-to-face relations of scene and public, screen and watchers, are abolished. It is no longer the old connection—the fascination of a passive pole for an active pole. They no longer show us the train arriving at La Ciotat station but put us *in* the train, sit us on pneumatic seats that transmit jolts, just like a railway compartment, to immerse us in the swing of things. When participation thus replaces observation, it is not only cathartic distance that is done away with but the axis of the subject's attention. *Time* comes to define the experience of everything. All is destabilized and made ecstatic. Whereas the spectacle displayed a relatively stable play of forms, our immersion in situation successively effaces the present, puts each instant afloat in tension and suspense—what could possibly happen next?

Just about everywhere, the contemplative ideal of vision is replaced by the search for contact. The device for projection disappears in favour of diffusion or broadcast, distance yields to contiguity, to being connected—plugged or wired; the spectacle's respite, or the aesthetic suspension of time, is cancelled in a culture of constant flux that thrusts the autonomy of forms into a vital duration. Exceptional time is serialized—think of the opposition between the film as an autonomous work and the industrialized soap opera. And, in technological terms, the latest mutation of the spectacle's situation brought to completion by the computer screen, was inaugurated long ago.

A distinction that has received a great deal of disparagement since the turn of the century is that between the sign and the thing, and its demise promoted a general desymbolization. In painting the real bursts directly into the space of the museum: Marcel Duchamp's ready-made. In drama,

⁴ Ibid., section 1.

life bursts onto the scene: Artaud's theatre of cruelty. Within the plastic arts themselves, the public is invited to enter into the work: Dubuffet's *Hourloupe*. Live television broadcasting puts the finishing touches to this crisis induced in the symbol-world's indefinite deferment of presence. But can we not locate its beginning in 1839 with the sudden emergence of the chemically-recorded image as an *indexical* rupture with the symbolic order?

Visual Objects and Visual Ambience

The generalized crisis of representation puts the transcendence of the image at stake: the cinematic image was larger than us, the televisual one smaller. In jeopardy are the majesty of the collective spectacle, now miniaturized and domesticated by television, as well as the very concept of an auditorium, where the spectacle is viewed, as a special ceremonial locale—the disappearance of the neighbourhood movie-house. And perhaps the image as a thing which we really look at is now behind us, with the transition evoked by Serge Daney to the *visual*—an optical background noise, an image that is an ambience but no longer an object. Radio and television bring sound and pictures to our home like water and gas. What was once sacred becomes always available, private and recreational. What was distant becomes tactile; what was a unique and distinct heritage becomes modifiable and pedestrian, as in the optional derision of the video game. In a word, while theorists looked the other way, we jumped over the footlights and broke the frame.

Today, do we not call *art vivant* everything that denies that it is art and declares that it is lively? Do we not see the live spectacle come to the point of celebrating its own death as spectacle? Stepping across the footlights and fusing auditorium with stage? If 'spectacle' has a meaning—beyond being a catch-all metaphor for 'ideology', 'domination', the 'state' and so forth—this meaning comes to it from the *semiotic break* that governs every system and operation of representation. The map is not the land itself, the actor not the character, the state not civil society, *mimesis* not actual witnessing. At the theatre, it is not the footlights that merely *materialize* the semiotic break; the break was not created alongside them. Indeed, theatrical history ever since the Dionysian orchestra—including the mystery plays performed on cathedral squares, travelling productions put on at trade fairs, court ballets, the royal *entrées*, civic celebrations and carnivals, and the *théâtre à l'italienne*—is the story of how symbolic distancing was gradually achieved. It involved a dual separation: between the audience in the pit and the stage, and between the author and the text. The universal 'happening' brings this separation to a close. There is no retracing of steps for a process this long in the making. The society of the spectacle, which reached its apogee in the century of Louis XIV, has not withstood the harsh attacks, sharper and sharper, of the photographic onslaught. We live out its death agony and undergo its effects on a daily basis. The problem today is not the distance brought about by spectacle but the engulfing, fleshy communions of non-spectacle, by this I mean live broadcasts, the new 'immediacy' [*le live*] and 'performance art'. The transition from film to television, from a device of projection—faithful to theatrical doubling—to one of broadcasting into the home, from *work characterized by deferment* to the *visual documenting of life in real time*, marks pre-

cisely the moment when the image ceases to be a spectacle and becomes a vital milieu, removing the founding difference between the seen and the lived. Beyond this, it would also be pertinent to focus, in the videosphere, precisely on the shift from television as instructor to television as mirror, from the small screen at its origin—which was liturgical and institutional—to the more interactive screen in its present incarnation which aims to transform the watcher into an actor and place one's living-room sofa onto the set.

The Empty Vessel of Spectacle

If '*the* spectacle' is a form capable of encompassing all forms of representation, it is also a container without contents. And if it is a determinate form appropriate to its concrete content, then it is no longer a concept with shock value, but a simple *moment* in the evolution of both the mentality and technology of our culture. Either it applies to human history in general, in which case it is a pompous truism of the *panem et circenses*, dust and vanity, variety—nothing new under the sun since the circus games. Or it is applied to the actual circumstances of the present which would make it appear a bit of a gaffe or a dated wrong turn, a historical curiosity. It is, in all events, presumptuous to claim to have reached a general ethical system or sociology by means of a generic category that mixes together—by night when everything seems grey—theatre, art galleries, film, museums, television, peep shows, virtual environments, silver-based photography, operatic set production and the front pages of newspapers. For man is not 'enslaved' in the same way to each of these spectacles, and each one of them has its way of conveying presence, crossing or creating distance and disembodying itself, its modes of enveloping its subject in space and time, its functions irreducible to one another and dependent on physical and mental universes—let us say 'mediaspheres'—which it is precisely a matter of clearly distinguishing between with the help of new conceptual tools. All theoretical confusions are not equally illuminating. Malraux's, to remain with Benjamin's descendants, was, but this one obscures the mystery that it purports to elucidate.

I know that Debord's thought itself counts for nothing in the obscene uses show-biz makes of it every day. One can pick and chose one's teachers but not one's posterity. There is no longer an executive in advertising or television, a communications consultant, a wannabe in belles lettres, a cultural arriviste, who does not carry around *The Society of the Spectacle* as part of their bandoleer of intellectual passwords. With the chief managers of the 'spectacle' finding a use for it, we hit upon another type of reversal, another dialectical cruelty—the perverse syndrome of aping from which no one escapes. Nobody is immune to the buoyant resilience of capital: the system fortifies itself with those who gainsay it, and gives a friendly slap on the back to those who spit in its face. In his lifetime, Debord refused to play this game, and that in itself is enough to elicit esteem for him as an individual. Professional moralists rarely have a personal moral code. This one did.

Mediologists are not destined for this kind of distinction. They are not there to make the gulf separating the mind from the materially ordinary or vulgar insurmountable, but to explain what is presently unintelligible as

straightforwardly as possible, and to narrow the gulf between clarity and pedagogy. To want to understand the spirit of the age, and be comprehended by it into the bargain: there is in this ambition an aggregate of claims which deontology censures and the history of ideas advises against.

Walter Benjamin, in good health, took his own life at Port-Bou one terrible day in the year 1940. Among great minds his anonymous death gave rise to the same indifference that had greeted his work. Yet though, at that time, the numerous works of this scholar with his rather ungainly prose style had passed by unremarked, his goading and lively shade is still afoot.

Translated by Eric Rauth