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Search Wikipedia Search
Donate Create account Log in

The Society of the Spectacle

20 languages
Article Talk
Read Edit View history Tools

Contents hide

(Top)
Summary
Degradation of human life
Mass media and commodity fetishism
Comparison between religion and marketing
Critique of American sociology
Authenticity, plagiarism, and Lautréamont
Translations and editions in English
1983 edition
See also
Notes
References
Further reading
External links

Appearance hide
Text
Small
Standard
Large
Width
Standard
Wide
Color (beta)
Automatic
Light
Dark

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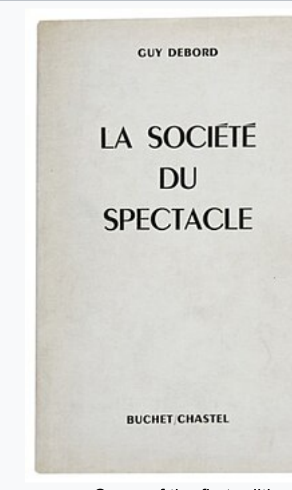
This article is about the book. For the film, see The Society of the Spectacle (film).

The Society of the Spectacle (French: *La société du spectacle*) is a 1967 work of philosophy and Marxist critical theory by Guy Debord where he develops and presents the concept of the Spectacle. The book is considered a seminal text for the Situationist movement. Debord published a follow-up book *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* in 1988.[1], along with a movie *The Society of the Spectacle*.

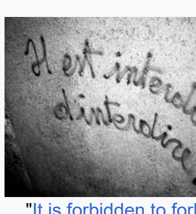
The Society of the Spectacle



Cover of the first edition

Author	Guy Debord
Original title	*La société du spectacle*
Translator	Donald Nicholson-Smith
Language	French
Subject	Spectacle
Published	1967 (Buchet-Chastel, in French) 1970 (Black & Red, in English)
Publication place	France
Media type	Print (Hardcover, Paperback)
Pages	154 (1994 Zone Books edition)
ISBN	0-942299-79-5 (1994 Zone Books edition)

Part of the Politics series on the
Situationist International



"It is forbidden to forbid"

Concepts [show]
People [show]
Works [show]
Organizations [show]
Related articles [show]

Anarchism portal
Socialism portal
Communism portal
Politics portal

V · T · E

Summary [edit]

The work is a series of 221 short theses—each containing one paragraph—in the form of aphorisms.

Degradation of human life [edit]

Debord traces the development of a modern society in which authentic social life has been replaced with its representation: "All that once was directly lived has become mere representation."[2] Debord argues that the history of social life can be understood as "the decline of *being* into *having*, and *having* into merely *appearing*."[3] This condition, according to Debord, is the "historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life."[4]

The spectacle is the inverted image of society in which relations between commodities have supplanted relations between people, in which "passive identification with the spectacle supplants genuine activity". "The spectacle is not a collection of images," Debord writes, "rather, it is a social relation among people, mediated by images."[5]

In his analysis of the spectacular society, Debord notes that the quality of life is impoverished,[6] with such a lack of authenticity that human perceptions are affected; and an attendant degradation of knowledge, which in turn hinders critical thought.[7] Debord analyzes the use of knowledge to assuage reality: the spectacle obfuscates the past, imploding it with the future into an undifferentiated mass, a type of never-ending present. In this way, the spectacle prevents individuals from realizing that the society of spectacle is only a moment in history, one that can be overturned through revolution.[8][9]

In the Situationist view, situations are actively constructed and characterized by "a sense of self-consciousness of existence within a particular environment or ambience".[10]

Debord encouraged the use of détournement, "which involves using spectacular images and language to disrupt the flow of the spectacle."

Mass media and commodity fetishism [edit]

The Society of the Spectacle is a critique of contemporary consumer culture and commodity fetishism, dealing with issues such as class alienation, cultural homogenization, and mass media. When Debord says that "all that was once directly lived has become mere representation," he is referring to the central importance of the image in contemporary society. Images, Debord says, have supplanted genuine human interaction.[2] Thus, Debord's fourth thesis is: "The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images."[11] In a consumer society, fulfillment is pursued not by improving one's self but by having commodities. The spectacle shifts the emphasis from having to appearing.[12] People no longer live for themselves, but to simulate a life that is shown to them.[13] Debord states that the spectacle cannot be understood as a distinct illusion contrasted with a distinct reality, since the spectacle is produced by and informs reality.[14] Where Hegel believed that the false is a moment of (i.e. expressed in) the true, he counters that the spectacle turns this upside-down; the true is expressed in the false.[15][16]

Spectacular advertising depicts not only the commodity but also a world centered on its appreciation.

Comparison between religion and marketing [edit]

Debord also draws an equivalence between the role of mass media marketing in the present and the role of religions in the past.[17][18] The spread of commodity-images by the mass media, produces "waves of enthusiasm for a given product" resulting in "moments of fervent exaltation similar to the ecstasies of the convulsions and miracles of the old religious fetishism".[19][20]

Debord contends further that "the remains of religion and of the family (the principal relic of the heritage of class power) and the moral repression they assure, merge whenever the enjoyment of this world is affirmed–this world being nothing other than repressive pseudo-enjoyment."[21] "The monotheistic religions were a compromise between myth and history. ... These religions arose on the soil of history, and established themselves there. But there they still preserve themselves in radical opposition to history." Debord defines them as *Semi-historical religions*.[22] "The growth of knowledge about society, which includes the understanding of history as the heart of culture, derives from itself an irreversible knowledge, which is expressed by the destruction of God."[23]

Debord saw the spectacular celebration of commodities as a sophisticated counterpart to the propaganda of bureaucratic systems.

Critique of American sociology [edit]

In Chapter 8, "Negation and Consumption Within Culture", Debord includes a critical analysis of the works of three American sociologists. Debord discusses at length Daniel J. Boorstin's *The Image* (1961), arguing that Boorstin missed the concept of Spectacle. In thesis 192, Debord mentions some American sociologists who have described the general project of developed capitalism which "aims to recapture the fragmented worker as a personality well integrated in the group;" the examples mentioned by Debord are David Riesman, author of *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), and William H. Whyte, author of the 1956 bestseller *The Organization Man*.[24] Among the 1950s sociologists who are usually compared to Riesman and Whyte, is C. Wright Mills, the author of *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*.[25] Riesman's "Lonely Crowd" term is also used in thesis 28.

Authenticity, plagiarism, and Lautréamont [edit]

Because the notion of the spectacle involves real life being replaced by representations of life, *Society of the Spectacle* is also concerned with the notion of authenticity versus inauthenticity, a theme which is revisited in Chapter 8, "Negation and Consumption within Culture". In Debord's treatment, modern society forces culture to constantly re-appropriate or re-invent itself, copying and re-packaging old ideas. Thesis 207 makes this point, rhetorically:

"Ideas improve. The meaning of words participates in the improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. It embraces an author's phrase, makes use of his expressions, erases a false idea, and replaces it with the right idea."[26]

This passage concerning plagiarism is itself directly lifted from *Poésies* by French-Uruguayan author Isidore Lucien Ducasse, better known as the Comte de Lautréamont. In particular, the original French text for both Debord and Lautréamont's versions of the passage are identical: "Les idées s'améliorent. Le sens des mots y participe. Le plagiat est nécessaire. Le progrès l'implique. Il serre de près la phrase d'un auteur, se sert de ses expressions, efface une idée fausse, la remplace par l'idée juste."[27][28]

Translations and editions in English [edit]

See external links for links to read the following editions for free.

- Translation by Fredy Perlman and friends ("Radical America Series", Detroit: Black & Red, 1970; rev. ed. 1977; reprinted by AK Press, 2005).
- Translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Zone, 1994).
- Translation by Ken Knabb (Rebel Press, 2004; PM Press, 2024; Bureau of Public Secrets web edition, continually updated).
- Translation by Ron Adams (Unredacted Word, 2021; Unredacted Word web edition, 2nd ed. 2022)

1983 edition [edit]

The book cover of the 1983 edition is derived from a photograph by the *Life* magazine photographer, J. R. Eyerman. On November 26, 1952, at the Paramount Theatre, the premiere screening of the film *Bwana Devil* by Arch Oboler took place as the first full-length, color 3-D (aka 'Natural Vision') motion picture. Eyerman took a series of photographs of the audience wearing 3-D glasses.

1983 edition of *Society of the Spectacle*

Life magazine used one of the photographs as the cover of a brochure about the 1946–1955 decade.[29] The photograph employed in the Black and Red edition shows the audience in "a virtually trance-like state of absorption, their faces grim, their lips pursed;" however, in the one chosen by *Life*, "the spectators are laughing, their expressions of hilarity conveying the pleasure of an uproarious, active spectatorship."[30] The Black and Red version also is flipped left to right, and cropped.[31] Despite widespread association among English-speaking readers, Debord had nothing to do with this cover illustration, which was chosen by Black and Red.

See also [edit]

- Culture industry
- *History and Class Consciousness*
- Hyperreality
- Vance Packard
- *No Logo*

Notes [edit]

1. ^ Debord, Guy (1998) [originally 1988 in French]. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Imrie, Malcolm. London: Verso. ISBN 978-1-84467-672-9.
2. ^ *a b* Debord (1994) Thesis 1
3. ^ Debord (1967) thesis 17
4. ^ Debord (1994) thesis 42.
5. ^ Debord (1994) thesis 4.
6. ^ For example:
   - from Debord (1977) thesis 19: "The concrete life of everyone has been degraded into a *speculative* universe."
   - from thesis 17: "The first phase of the domination of the economy over social life brought into the definition of all human realization the obvious degradation of being into having" and now "of having into appearing"
   - from thesis 10: The Spectacle is "affirmation of all human life, namely social life, as mere appearance"
   - from thesis 6: "The spectacle ... occupies the main part of the time lived outside of modern production."
   - thesis 30: "The alienation of the spectator to the profit of the contemplated object (which is the result of his own unconscious activity) is expressed in the following way: the more he 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. The externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him. This is why the spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere."
   - from thesis 8: "Lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle"
   - from thesis 16: "The spectacle subjugates living men to itself to the extent that the economy has totally subjugated them."
   - from thesis 134: "Only those who do not work live."
   - from thesis 37: "the world of the commodity dominating all that is lived"
   - from thesis 60: "The celebrity, the spectacular representation of a living human being, embodies this banality by embodying the image of a possible role. Being a star means specializing in the seemingly lived; the star is the object of identification with the shallow seeming life that has to compensate for the fragmented productive specializations which are actually lived."
   - thesis 68
   - from thesis 192: "The critical truth of this destruction the real life of modern poetry and art is obviously hidden, since the spectacle, whose function is to make history forgotten within culture"
   - from thesis 114: in the "intensified alienation of modern capitalism", "the immense majority of workers" "have lost all power over the use of their lives
7. ^ Debord (1977) from thesis 25: "All community and all critical sense are dissolved"
8. ^ Debord (1967) thesis 11
9. ^ Debord (1967) thesis 143
10. ^ Ford (2005, p. 50)
11. ^ Debord (1994) Thesis 4
12. ^ Debord (1994) Thesis 17
13. ^ Debord (1994) Thesis 30
14. ^ Debord (1994) Thesis 8
15. ^ Debord (1994) Thesis 9
16. ^ Debord (1998) Ch. 17
17. ^ from Debord (1977) thesis 20: "The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion."
18. ^ Debord (1967) thesis 25 on the spectacle and the sacred
19. ^ Debord (1977) Thesis 67
20. ^ from Debord (1977) thesis 132: "The masters who make history their private property, under the protection of myth, possess first of all a private ownership of the mode of illusionn: in China and Egypt they long held a monopoly over the immortality of the soul. ... The growth of their real historical power goes together with a popularization of the possession of myth and illusion."
21. ^ Debord (1977) Thesis 59
22. ^ Debord (1994) thesis 136
23. ^ Debord (1977) thesis 182
24. ^ Debord (1977) theses 192, 196-200,
25. ^ Degler, Carl N. (1963). "The Sociologist as Historian: Riesman's "The Lonely Crowd" ". *American Quarterly*. **15** (4): 483–497.
26. ^ Debord (1977) thesis 207
27. ^ Debord, Guy. "La Société du spectacle (Chapitre 8)". *Bibliowiki*. Archived from the original on 2018-07-05.
28. ^ Ducasse, Isidore (2005-11-03). *Poésies* – via Gutenberg.
29. ^ Cover of the brochure that accompanied an exhibition of photographs from *Life* magazine held at the International Center of Photography (New York) and entitled: *The Second Decade, 1946–1955*. Image at Getty Images: [1]
30. ^ Thomas Y. Levin. "Dismantling the Spectacle: The cinema of Guy Debord". *medienkunstnetz.de*.
31. ^ "Eyerman original version". *gettyimages.com*.

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- *Thoughts on Society of the Spectacle* at the Wayback Machine (archived July 13, 2008), free audiobook from the Audio Anarchy project.
- Briziarelli, Marco; Armano, Emiliana, eds. (2017). *The Spectacle 2.0: Reading Debord in the Context of Digital Capitalism*. London: University of Westminster Press. ISBN 978-1-911534-44-0.
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External links [edit]

- 1970 Fredy Perlman translation at Brown University.
- 1977 revised Fredy Perlman translation at *Marxists.org*
- 1994 Donald Nicholson-Smith translation at Situationist International Online, & Monoskop.
- Continually updated Ken Knabb translation at Bureau of Public Secrets. 2014 Ken Knabb edition at libcom.
- 2022 Ron Adams translation at Unredacted Word.
- The following are translations by Fredy Perlman with an unknown publication date: Situationist International Library, Situationist International Archive
- Observations on the English translation of Guy Debord's *Oeuvres Cinématographiques Completes*

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