

Comments on the Society of the Spectacle

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1988

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In memory of Gerard Lebovici, assassinated in Paris on 5 March 1984, in a trap that remains mysterious.¹

“However critical the situation and circumstances in which you find yourself, despair of nothing; it is on the occasions in which everything is to be feared that it is necessary to fear nothing; it is when one is surrounded by all the dangers that it is not necessary to dread any; it is when one is without resources that it is necessary to count on all of them; it is when one is surprised that it is necessary to surprise the enemy himself.” Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*.²

¹ For more on the assassination of Gerard Lebovici, see Jean-Francois Martos, *Words and Bullets: the Condemned of the Lebovici Affair* (1984), and Guy Debord, *Considerations on the Assassination of Gerard Lebovici* (1985). Note that in his letter to Editions Anagrama dated 7 June 1989, Debord explains that “ambush” is not the word he would use to translate *un guet-apens* because “I have employed the word that evokes banditry, the style of the *hampa*,” that is to say “the underworld.” If one could be trapped in such a thing, one might use the word “hit”: Lebovici was assassinated in a (gangland) hit.

² Guy Debord’s epigraph is taken from the first European translation of *The Art of War*, by the Jesuit JJ.L. Amiot (1782). The best available English translation, by Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford 1963), does not include this passage. [*Malcolm Imrie*] And so we have translated directly from Debord’s French.

I

These comments are sure to be promptly known by fifty or sixty people; a large number given the times in which we live and the gravity of the matters under discussion. But then, of course, in some circles I am considered to be an authority. It must also be borne in mind that a good half of this elite that will be interested will consist of people who devote themselves to maintaining the spectacular system of domination,¹ and the other half of people who persist in doing quite the opposite. Having, then, to take account of readers who are both attentive and diversely influential, I obviously cannot speak with complete freedom. Above all, I must take care not to instruct just anybody.

The unhappiness of the times thus compels me, once again, to write in a new way. Some elements will be intentionally omitted; and the plan will have to remain rather unclear. Readers will encounter certain lures, like the very hallmark of the era. As long as other pages are interpolated here and there, the overall meaning may appear just as secret clauses have very often been added to whatever treaties may openly stipulate²; just as some chemical agents only reveal their hidden properties when they are combined with others. However, in this brief work there will be only too many things which are, alas, easy to understand.

¹ This might sound meglomaniacal, but it is a fact that, in the early 1970s, the French “Socialist” Party used the situationist demand “Change Life” as one of his campaign slogans. (See *Theses on the SI and Its Time*, thesis 37.) For more on the “Socialist” Party’s recuperation of the situationists, see NOT BORED! review of Jacques Attali’s *Noise*.

² In the initial agreement that formed the the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949, there was a secret clause that required that, before a nation could join NATO, it must establish its own national security service capable of “Civil Emergency Planning,” that is, of “intervening effectively [...] in the event of external socialist aggression or internal political upheavals.” Sometimes called “Operation Stay Behind,” this massive network consisted of secret bases, arms caches, recruitment centers and paramilitary cadres drawn from trusted anti-communists (mostly neo-Nazis, mafiosi and right-wing special operatives). The French branch of this network was called *Rose des Vents* (“Rose of the Winds”). Up until 1974, when the conspiracy was revealed, the same name (*La Rosa Dei Venti*) was used in Italy; after 1974, the Italian part of the network was called *Glaudio* (a two-sided Roman sword) and worked out of the “P2” Masonic Lodge. See footnotes [11] and [23].

II.

In 1967, in a book entitled *The Society of the Spectacle*, I showed what the modern spectacle was already in essence: the autocratic reign of the market economy, which had acceded to an irresponsible sovereignty, and the totality of new techniques of government that accompanied this reign. The disturbances of 1968, which in several countries lasted into the following years, having nowhere overthrown the existing organization of the society from which it springs apparently spontaneously, the spectacle has thus continued to reinforce itself, that is, to spread to the furthest limits on all sides, while increasing its density in the center. It has even learned new defensive techniques, as powers under attack always do. When I began the critique of spectacular society, what was particularly noticed — given the period — was the revolutionary content that could be discovered in that critique; and it was naturally felt to be its most troublesome element. As to the spectacle itself, I was sometimes accused of having invented it out of thin air, and was always accused of indulging myself to excess in my evaluation of its depth and unity, and its real workings. I must admit that others who later published new books on the same subject demonstrated that it was quite possible to say less. All they had to do was to replace the totality and its movement by a single static detail on the surface of the phenomenon, with each author demonstrating his originality by choosing a different and all the less disturbing one. No one wanted to taint the scientific modesty of his personal interpretation by interposing reckless historical judgments.

Nonetheless, the society of the spectacle has continued to advance. It moves quickly for in 1967 it had barely forty years behind it, though it had used them to the full. And by its own development, which no one took the trouble to investigate, it has since shown with some astonishing achievements that it is effectively just what I said it was. Proving this point has more than academic value, because it is undoubtedly indispensable to have understood the spectacle's unity and articulation as an active force in order to examine the directions in which this force has since been able to travel. These questions are of great interest, for it is under such conditions that the next stage of the conflict in society will necessarily be played out. Since the spectacle today is certainly more powerful than it was before, what is it doing with this additional power? What point has it reached, that it had not reached previously? What, in short, are its present lines of advance? The vague feeling that there has been a rapid invasion which has forced people to lead their lives in an entirely different way is now widespread; but this is experienced rather like some inexplicable change in the climate, or in some other natural equilibrium, a change about which ignorance knows only that it has nothing to say. What is more, many see it as a civilizing invasion, as something inevitable, and even want to collaborate. Such people would rather not know the precise purpose of this conquest, and how it is advancing.

I am going to outline certain *practical consequences*, still little known, that result from the spectacle's rapid deployment over the last twenty years. I have no intention of entering into polemics on any aspect of this question; these are now too easy, and too useless. Nor will I try to

convince. The present comments are not concerned with moralizing. They do not propose what is desirable, or merely preferable. They simply record what is.

III.

No one today can reasonably doubt the existence or the power of the spectacle; on the contrary, one might doubt whether it is reasonable to add anything on a question which experience has already settled in such draconian fashion. *Le Monde* of 19 September 1987 offered a felicitous illustration of the saying, ‘If it exists, there’s no need to talk about it,’ a fundamental law of these spectacular times which, at least in this respect, ensure there is no such thing as a backward country.

That modern society is a society of spectacle now goes without saying. It will soon be necessary to remark those who do nothing remarkable. One loses count of all the books describing a phenomenon which now characterizes all the industrialized nations yet equally spares none of the countries which have still to catch up. What is so droll, however, is that all the books which do analyze this phenomenon, usually to deplore it, must sacrifice themselves to the spectacle if they’re to become known.

It is true that this spectacular critique of the spectacle, which is not only late but, even worse, seeks ‘to make itself known’ on the same level, inevitably sticks to vain generalities or hypocritical regrets; just as vain as the clowns who parade their disabused sagacity in newspapers.

The empty debate on the spectacle — that is, on the activities of the world’s owners — is thus organized by the spectacle *itself*: everything is said about the extensive means at its disposal, to ensure that nothing is said about their extensive deployment. Rather than talk of the spectacle, people often prefer to use the term ‘media.’ And by this they mean to describe a mere instrument, a kind of public service which with impartial ‘professionalism’ would facilitate the new wealth of mass communication through *mass media* [English in original] — a form of communication which has at last attained a unilateral purity, whereby decisions already taken are presented for peaceful admiration. For what is communicated are *orders*; and with great harmony, those who give them are also those who tell us what they think of them.

The power of the spectacle, which is so fundamentally unitary, a centralizer by the very weight of things, and entirely despotic in spirit, frequently rails at seeing the constitution under its rule of a politics-spectacle, a justice-spectacle, a medicine-spectacle and all the other similarly surprising examples of “mediatic excess.” Thus the spectacle would be nothing other than the excesses of the mediatic,¹ whose nature, unquestionably good since it facilitates communication, is sometimes driven to extremes. Often enough society’s bosses declare themselves ill-served by their media employees: more often they blame the plebian spectators for the common, almost bestial manner in which they indulge in mediatic pleasures. A virtually infinite number of supposed mediatic differences thus serve to dissimulate what is, on the contrary, the result of a

¹ The French here is *le médiatique*. Though “mediatic” is not commonly used in English, we have consistently employed it because Debord’s text is so insistent on its use: a different meaning from the standard and relatively limited meaning of “media” is clearly intended.

spectacular convergence, pursued with remarkable tenacity. Just as the logic of the commodity reigns over capitalists' competing ambitions, or the logic of war always dominates the frequent modifications in weaponry, so the harsh logic of the spectacle controls the abundant diversity of mediatic extravagances.

In all that has happened in the last twenty years, the most important change lies in the very continuity of the spectacle. This has nothing to do with the perfecting of its mediatic instrumentation, which had already reached a highly advanced stage of development; it means quite simply that the spectacle's domination has succeeded in raising a whole generation molded to its laws. The extraordinary new conditions in which this entire generation has effectively lived constitute a precise and sufficient summary of all that, henceforth, the spectacle will forbid; and also all that it will permit.

IV.

On the theoretical level, I only need add a single detail to my earlier formulations, albeit one which has far-reaching consequences. In 1967 I distinguished two rival and successive forms of spectacular power, the concentrated and the diffuse. Both of them floated above real society, as its goal and its lie. The former, placing in the fore the ideology grouped around a dictatorial personality, had accompanied the totalitarian counter-revolution, Nazi as well as Stalinist. The latter, driving salaried workers to freely operate their choice upon the great variety of new commodities that confront them, had represented the Americanization of the world, a process which in some respects frightened but also successfully seduced those countries where it had been possible to maintain traditional forms of bourgeois democracy. Since then a third form has been established, through the rational combination of these two, and on the basis of a victory of the form which had showed itself stronger: the diffuse. This is the *integrated spectacular*,¹ which has since tended to impose itself globally.

Whereas Russia and Germany were largely responsible for the formation of the concentrated spectacular, and the United States for the diffuse form, the integrated spectacular seems to have been pioneered in France and Italy by the play of a series of shared historical features, namely, the important role of the Stalinist party and unions in political and intellectual life, a weak democratic tradition, the long monopoly of power enjoyed by a single party of government, and the necessity to eliminate an unexpected upsurge in revolutionary activity [since 1968].

The integrated spectacular shows itself to be simultaneously concentrated and diffuse, and ever since the fruitful union of the two has learned to employ both these qualities on a grander scale. Their former mode of application has changed considerably. As regards the concentrated side, the controlling center has now become occult, never to be occupied by a known leader, or clear ideology. And on the diffuse side, the spectacular influence has never before put its mark to such a degree on almost the totality of socially produced behavior and objects. For the final sense of the integrated spectacular is that it integrates itself into reality to the same extent that it speaks of it, and that it reconstructs it as it speaks. As a result, this reality no longer confronts the integrated spectacular as something alien. When the spectacular was concentrated, the greater part of peripheral society escaped it; when it was diffuse, a small part; today, no part. The spectacle is mixed into all reality and irradiates it. As one could easily foresee in theory, practical experience of the unbridled accomplishment of commodity rationality has quickly and without exception shown that the becoming-world of the falsification was also the falsification of the world. Beyond a still important heritage of old books and old buildings, but destined to continual reduction and, moreover, increasingly selected and put into perspective according to the spectacle's requirements, there remains nothing, in culture or in nature, which has not

¹ The French here is *spectaculaire integre*. We have consistently translated *spectaculaire* as "spectacular" because Debord's text carefully distinguishes it from "spectacle." It would appear that the author's intention in his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* is to "detourn" the theory he originally presented in *The Society of the Spectacle*.

been transformed, and polluted, according to the means and interests of modern industry. Even genetics has become readily accessible to the dominant social forces.

The government of the spectacle, which now possesses all the means to falsify the whole of production and perception, is the absolute master of memories just as it is the unfettered master of projects that will shape the most distant future. It reigns unchecked; *it executes its summary judgments.*

It is in these conditions that a parodic end of the division of labor suddenly appears, with carnivalesque gaiety, all the more welcome because it coincides with the generalized disappearance of all true competence. A financier can be a singer, a lawyer a police spy, a baker can parade his literary tastes, an actor can be president, a chef can philosophize on the movements of baking as if they were landmarks in universal history. Each can join the spectacle, in order publicly to adopt, or sometimes secretly practice, an entirely different activity from whatever specialty first made their name. Where the possession of “mediatic status” has acquired infinitely more importance than the value of anything one might actually be capable of doing, it is normal for this status to be easily transferable and to confer the right to shine in the same fashion to anyone anywhere. Most often these accelerated media particles pursue their simple orbit of statutorily guaranteed admiration. But it happens that the mediatic transition provides the *cover* for many enterprises, officially independent but in fact secretly linked by various *ad hoc* networks. With the result that occasionally the social division of labor, along with the easily foreseeable solidarity of its use, reappears in quite new forms: for example, one can now publish a novel in order to arrange an assassination. Such picturesque examples also go to show that one should never trust someone because of their job.

But the greatest ambition of the integrated spectacular is still that secret agents become revolutionaries, and that revolutionaries become secret agents.

V.

The society modernized to the stage of the integrated spectacular is characterized by the combined effect of five principal features: incessant technological renewal; fusion of State and economy; generalized secrecy, forgeries without reply; a perpetual present.

The movement of technological innovation has a long history, and is a constituent of capitalist society, sometimes described as industrial or post-industrial. But since its most recent acceleration (in the aftermath of the Second World War) it has greatly reinforced spectacular authority, by completely surrendering everybody to the ensemble of specialists, to their calculations and their judgments, which always depend on their calculations. The fusion of State and economy is the most evident trend of the century; it has at the very least become the motor of the most recent economic development. The defensive and offensive pact concluded between these two powers, the economy and the State, has assured them of the greatest common advantages in every field: each may be said to own the other; it is absurd to oppose them, or to distinguish between their rationalities and irrationalities. This union has also proved to be extremely favorable to the development of spectacular domination, which, precisely, from its formation, hasn't been anything else. The other three features are direct effects of this domination, in its integrated stage.

Generalised secrecy stands behind the spectacle, as the decisive complement of all it displays and, in the last analysis, as its most important operation.

The simple fact of being without reply has given to the false an entirely new quality. At a stroke it is truth which has almost everywhere ceased to exist or, at best, has been reduced to the status of pure hypothesis that can never be demonstrated. The false without reply has succeeded in making public opinion disappear: first it found itself incapable of making itself heard and then very quickly dissolved altogether. This evidently has significant consequences for politics, the applied sciences, the justice system and artistic knowledge.

The construction of a present where fashion itself, from clothes to music, has come to a halt, which wants to forget the past and no longer seems to believe in a future, is achieved by the ceaseless circular passage of information, always returning to the same short list of trivialities, passionately proclaimed as major discoveries. Meanwhile news of what is genuinely important, of what is actually changing, comes rarely, and then in fits and starts. It always concerns this world's apparent condemnation of its own existence, the stages in its programmed self-destruction.

VI.

Spectacular domination's first priority was to make historical knowledge in general disappear; beginning with just about all rational information and commentary on the most recent past. The evidence for this is so glaring it hardly needs further explanation. With mastery the spectacle organizes ignorance of what is about to happen and, immediately afterwards, the forgetting of whatever has nonetheless been understood. The most important is the most hidden. Nothing in the last twenty years has been so thoroughly coated in obedient lies as the history of May 1968. Some useful lessons have been learned from certain demystifying studies of those days and their origins; these, however, are State secrets.

In France, it is a dozen years now since a president of the republic, long since forgotten but at the time still floating on the spectacle's surface, naively expressed his delight at "knowing that henceforth we will live in a world without memory, where images chase each other, like reflections on the water." Convenient indeed for those in business, and who know how to stay there. The end of history gives current-day power a pleasant break. Success is absolutely guaranteed in all of power's undertakings, or at least the rumor of success.

How drastically any absolute power will suppress history depends on the extent of its imperious interests or obligations, and especially on its practical capacity to execute its aims. Ts'in Che Hoang Ti had books burned, but he never managed to get rid of all of them. In our own century Stalin went further, yet despite the various accomplices he managed to find outside his empire's borders, there remained a vast area of the world beyond the reach of his police, where his impostures could be laughed at. The integrated spectacular has done much better with very new procedures and this time operates globally. Ineptitude compels universal respect; it is no longer permitted to laugh at it; in any case, it has become impossible to show that one is laughing.

History's domain was the memorable, the totality of events whose consequences would be lastingly apparent. Inseparably, history was knowledge that must endure and aid in understanding, at least in part, what was to come: "a possession for all time," according to Thucydides. In this way history was the *measure* of genuine novelty; and those who sell novelty at any price have made the means of measuring it disappear. When the important makes itself socially recognized as what is instantaneous, and will still be the other and the same the instant afterwards, and will always replace another instantaneous importance, one can say that the means employed guarantee a sort of eternity of non-importance that speaks loudly.

The precious advantage that the spectacle has drawn from the *outlawing* of history, from having condemned the recent past to clandestinity, and from having made everyone forget the spirit of history within society, is above all the ability to cover its own history of the movement of its recent world conquest. Its power already seems familiar, as if it had always been there. All usurpers have wanted to make us forget that *they have only just arrived*.

VII.

With the destruction of history, contemporary events themselves retreat into a fabulous distance, among its unverifiable stories, uncheckable statistics, unlikely explanations and untenable reasoning. For every imbecile who has advanced spectacularly, there are only the mediatics who can respond with a few respectful rectifications or remonstrations, and they are miserly, for besides their extreme ignorance, their personal and professional solidarity with the spectacle's general authority and the society it expresses, makes it their duty, and their pleasure, never to diverge from that authority whose majesty must not be damaged. It must not be forgotten that all mediatics, through wages and other rewards and recompenses, has a master, and sometimes to several; and that every one of them knows he is dispensable.

All experts are mediatics-Statists and only in that way are they recognized as experts. Every expert follows his master, because all former possibilities for independence have been almost been reduced to nil by present society's conditions of organization. The most useful expert, of course, is the one who lies. Those who need experts are, for different reasons, falsifiers and ignoramuses. Whenever individuals lose the capacity to see things for themselves, the expert is there to offer a formal reassurance. Once there were experts in Etruscan art, and competent ones, for Etruscan art was not for sale. But a period which, for example, finds it profitable to fake by chemical means various famous wines, can only sell them if it has created wine experts able to con connoisseurs into admiring their new, more recognizable flavors.¹ Cervantes remarks that "under a poor cloak you often find a good drinker."² Someone who knows his wine may often understand nothing about the rules of the nuclear industry, but spectacular domination calculates that if one expert can make a fool of him with nuclear industry, another can easily do the same with wine. And it is well known, for example, that experts in mediatic meteorology, forecasting temperature or rainfall for the next forty-eight hours, are severely limited in what they say by the obligation to maintain certain economic, touristic and regional balances, when so many people make so many journeys on so many roads, between so many equally desolate places; thus they can only try to make their names as entertainers.

One aspect of the disappearance of all objective historical knowledge manifests itself concerning any personal reputation, which has become malleable and correctable at will by those who control all information, those who collect it and also those — an entirely different matter — who diffuse it. Their license to falsify is thus unlimited. Historical evidence, of which, in the spectacle, one does not want to know, is no longer evidence. When the only fame is that bestowed as a favor by the grace of a spectacular Court, disgrace may instantaneously follow. An anti-spectacular

¹ The French here is *des experts en vins qui entra'neront les caves a aimer leurs nouveaux parfums, plus reconnaissables*. Debord's pun on the two meanings of *caves* — wine-cellars (fem.) and hopeless dupes or suckers (masc.) — is unfortunately lost in English. The word's underworld etymology is instructive. It originally referred to anyone who worked in a legitimate job; hence to someone who did not know how to live; and hence to any kind of dupe. [Malcolm Imrie]

² The proverb is from *Don Quixote*, quoted by the Duchess in her conversation with Sancho Panza (vol. II, book 3, ch. 1). The Spanish is, *Debajo de mala capa, suele haber buen bebedor*. [Malcolm Imrie]

notoriety is becoming something extremely rare. I myself am one of the last people to possess one, having never had any other. But it has also become extraordinarily suspect. Society has officially declared itself to be spectacular. To be known outside spectacular relations is already to be known as an enemy of society.

It is permitted to change a person's whole past, radically modify it, recreate it in the manner of the Moscow trials — and without even having recourse to the clumsiness of a trial. One can kill at less cost.³ Those who govern the integrated spectacular, or their friends, surely have no lack of false witnesses, though they may be unskilled — but what capacity to detect this clumsiness can remain among the spectators who will be witnesses to the exploits of the false witnesses? — or false documents, which are always highly effective. Thus it is no longer possible to believe anything about anyone that you have not learned for yourself, directly. But in fact false accusations are rarely necessary. Once one controls the mechanism that operates the only form of social verification to be fully and universally recognized, one can say what one likes. The movement of the spectacular demonstration proves itself simply by going round in circles: by coming back to the start, by repetition, by constant reaffirmation on the unique terrain where anything can be publicly affirmed, and be made believed, precisely because that is the only thing to which everyone is witness. Spectacular authority can similarly deny whatever it likes, once, or three times over, and say that it will no longer speak of it and speak of something else instead, knowing full well there is no danger of any other riposte, on its own terrain or any other.

For the agora, the general community, no longer exists, nor even communities restricted to intermediary bodies or to autonomous institutions, to salons or cafes, or to workers in a single company; no place where people can discuss the realities which concern them, because they can never lastingly free themselves from the crushing presence of mediatic discourse and of the various forces organized to relay it. Nothing remains of the guaranteed relatively independent judgment of those who once made up the world of learning; of those, for example, who used to base their pride on their ability to verify, to come close to what one called an impartial history of facts, or at least to believe that such a history deserved to be known. There is no longer even any incontestable bibliographical truth, and the computerized catalogues of national libraries are well-equipped to better suppress the traces. It is disorienting to consider what it meant to be a judge, a doctor or a historian not so long ago, and to recall the imperative obligations they often recognized, within the limits of their competence: *men resemble their times more than their fathers*.⁴

When the spectacle stops talking about something for three days, it is as if it did not exist. For it has then gone on to talk about something else, and it is that which henceforth, in short, exists. The practical consequences, as we see, are enormous.

We believe we know that in Greece, history and democracy appeared at the same time. We can prove that their disappearances have also been simultaneous.

To this list of the triumphs of power we should, however, add one result which has proved negative for it: a State, in which one has durably installed a great deficit of historical knowledge so as to manage it, can no longer be governed strategically.

³ On the rewriting of a person's past, after he or she has been assassinated, see Guy Debord, *Considerations on the Assassination of Gerard Lebovici*, and Jean-Francois Martos, *Words and Bullets: the Condemned of the Lebovici Affair*.

⁴ An Arab proverb, dating from the fourteenth century. [*Malcolm Imrie*]

VIII.

Once it attains the stage of the integrated spectacular, self-proclaimed democratic society seems to be generally accepted as the realization of a *fragile perfection*. So that it must no longer be exposed to attacks, being fragile; and indeed is no longer attackable, being perfect, which no other society has been. It is a fragile society because it has great difficulty managing its dangerous technological expansion. But it is a perfect society to be governed; and the proof is that all those who aspire to govern want to govern this one, in the same way, maintaining it almost exactly as it is. For the first time in contemporary Europe, no party or fraction of a party even tries to pretend that they wish to change something important. The commodity can no longer be criticized by anyone: as a general system or even as the particular forms of junk which heads of industry choose to put on the market at any given time.

Wherever the spectacle rules, the only organized forces are those that want the spectacle. No one can any longer be the enemy of what exists, nor transgress the *omerta* that concerns everything. We have finished with that disturbing conception, which was dominant for over two hundred years, according to which society was criticizable or transformable, reformed or revolutionized. And this has not been obtained by the appearance of new arguments, but quite simply because all argument has become useless. From this result we can measure not universal happiness, but the redoubtable strength of the networks of tyranny.

Never has censorship been more perfect. Never has the opinion of those who are still led to believe, in several countries, that they remain free citizens, been less authorized to make themselves known, whenever it is a matter of choices affecting their real lives. Never has it been possible to lie to them with a perfect absence of consequences. The spectator is simply supposed to know nothing, and deserve nothing. Those who are always watching to see what happens next will never act: such must be the spectator's condition. People often cite the United States as an exception because there Nixon came to an end due to a series of denials whose clumsiness was too cynical: but this entirely local exception, for which there were some old historical causes, clearly no longer holds true, since Reagan has recently been able to do the same thing with impunity. All that is never sanctioned is veritably permitted. Talk of scandal is thus archaic. The most profound summing up of the period that the whole world entered shortly after Italy and the United States can be found in the words of a senior Italian statesman, a member, simultaneously, of both the official government and the parallel government called P2, *Potere Due*: "Once there were scandals, but not any more."¹

¹ Although Debord says that the "P" in P2 stands for *Potere* (Power), while other writers say that it stands for *Propaganda* (same in Italian and English), one is definitely speaking of the same organization. Founded in the 19th century, P2 was a "covered" masonic lodge: the identities of its members were not known by anyone, even the Grand Lodge. In 1964, General Licio Gelli — a fascist from the Mussolini days who had been sheltered in Argentina by its dictator Juan Peron — returned to Italy, took charge of P2 and used his extensive connections to establish a network of the various drug mafias and neo-Nazi extremists in Latin America and Southern Europe. After the exposure of "The Rose of the Winds" group in 1974 (footnote [4]), P2 took up the burden of maintaining NATO's "Operation Stay

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx described the State's encroachment upon Second Empire France, then rich with half a million bureaucrats: "Everything became a subject for governmental activity, whether it was a bridge, a schoolhouse, the communal property of a village community, or the railways, the national property and the provincial universities." The famous question of the funding of political parties was already being posed, for Marx noted that, "The parties that struggled in turn for supremacy regarded the taking of possession of this immense State edifice as the main booty for the victor." Yet this may nonetheless sound somewhat bucolic and, as one says, surpassed, at a time when the State's speculations today concern new towns and highways, underground traffic and the production of electro-nuclear energy, oil drilling and computers, the administration of banks and socio-cultural centers, the modification of the 'audiovisual landscape' and secret arms exports, property speculation and the pharmaceutical industry, agribusiness and the management of hospitals, military credits and the secret funds of the ever-expanding departments charged with running society's numerous defense services. But Marx unfortunately remains all too up to date when in the same book he evokes this government, which "rather than deciding by night, and striking by day, decides by day and strikes by night."

Behind" in Italy. In 1982, the existence of P2 itself was discovered. At the time, the lodge counted among its members more than 2,400 people, including former-Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti, the "senior Italian statesman" to whom Debord refers. In 1990, Andreotti was charged with ordering the assassination of journalist Mino Pecorelli; in his defense, Andreotti confirmed and deferred to the existence of Operation Gladio.

IX.

This perfect democracy fabricates its own inconceivable enemy, terrorism. It wants, actually, *to be judged by its enemies rather than by its results*. The history of terrorism is written by the State and it is thus instructive. The spectating populations must certainly never know everything about terrorism, but they must always know enough to convince them that, compared with terrorism, everything else seems rather acceptable, in any case more rational and democratic.

The modernization of repression has succeeded in perfecting — first in the Italian pilot-project under the name of *pentiti*¹ — sworn *professional accusers*; a phenomenon first seen in the seventeenth century after the Fronde, when such people were called ‘certified witnesses.’ This spectacular progress of Justice has filled Italy’s prisons with thousands of people condemned² to do penance for a civil war which did not take place, a kind of mass armed insurrection which, by chance, never actually happened, a putsch woven of such stuff as dreams are made of.

One can remark that interpretations of the mysteries of terrorism appear to have introduced a symmetry between contradictory views, as if there were two schools of philosophy professing absolutely incompatible metaphysical systems. Some would see terrorism as only several blatant manipulations by the secret services; others, on the contrary, estimate that it is only necessary to reproach the terrorists for their total lack of historical understanding.³ The use of a little historical logic permits us to quite quickly conclude that there is nothing contradictory in recognizing that people who lack all historical sense can easily be manipulated; even more easily than others. It is much easier to lead someone to ‘repent’ when it can be shown that everything he thought he did freely was actually known in advance. It is an inevitable effect of clandestine forms of organization of the military type that it suffices to infiltrate a few people at certain points of the network to make many march and fall. Critique, when evaluating armed struggles, must sometimes analyze one of these particular operations without being led astray by the general resemblance that all will possibly share.⁴ We should expect, as a logical possibility, that the State’s security services intend to use all the advantages they find on the terrain of the spectacle, which

¹ A relevant example of an alleged accomplice who “repents” and — in exchange for favorable treatment — turns state’s evidence (becomes a “supergrass”) would be Aldo Tisei, a member of the Palladin organization (see footnote [46]) who murdered Judge Vittorio Occorsio (see footnote [48]).

² On 7 April 1979, the Italian authorities arrested more than 20 left-wing intellectuals, including Antonio Negri. Many more arrests followed.

³ Among those who “see terrorism as simply a number of acts of blatant manipulation on the part of the secret services,” Debord would include Gianfranco Sanguinetti, author of *On Terrorism and the State*, which Debord criticized in his 23 February 1981 letter to Jaap Kloosterman. Among those who “reproach the terrorists for their total lack of historical understanding,” Debord would include Antonio Negri, Oreste Scalzone and other “doctrinaires of ‘armed struggle.’” See footnote [22].

⁴ Another reference to Debord’s critique of Sanguinetti’s *On Terrorism and the State*. Among those “particular operations” to be analyzed, Debord would include those conducted by “Blanqui, Varlan, [and] Durruti,” to whom he refers in the context of the inseparability of “political crime” and “social critique.” See also Debord’s 1980 comments concerning armed struggle in the Basque Country.

has exactly been organized with that in mind for some time: on the contrary, it is the difficulty of glimpsing this which is astonishing, and does not ring true.

Judicial repression's current objective here, of course, is to generalize matters as fast as possible. What is important in this sort of commodity is the packaging, or the labeling: the price codes. One enemy of spectacular democracy is the same as another, just like spectacular democracies themselves. Thus there must be no more right of asylum for terrorists, and even those who have not yet been accused of being terrorists can certainly become so, with extradition being imposed. In November 1978, in the case of a young print worker, Gabor Winter, wanted by the West German government mainly for having drafted certain revolutionary leaflets, Mlle Nicole Pradain, representing the Department of Public Prosecution in the Appeal Court of Paris, quickly showed that the 'political motives' that could be the only grounds for refusing extradition under the Franco-German agreement of 29 November 1951, could not be invoked: "Gabor Winter is a social criminal, not a political one. He refuses social constraints. A true political criminal doesn't reject society. He attacks political structures and not, like Gabor Winter, social structures." The notion of acceptable political crime only became recognized in Europe once the bourgeoisie had successfully attacked previously established social structures. The nature of political crime could not be separated from the diverse intentions of social critique. This was true for Blanqui, Varlin, Durruti. Nowadays there is a pretense of wishing to preserve a purely political crime, like some inexpensive luxury, a crime which doubtless no one will ever have the occasion to commit, since no one is interested in the subject any more; except for the professional politicians themselves, whose crimes are rarely pursued, nor for that matter no longer called political. All crimes and offenses are effectively social. But of all social crimes, none must be seen as worse than the impertinent pretension to still want to change something in this society, which thinks that it has only been only too kind and patient, but which *no longer wants to be blamed*.

X.

According to the basic interests of the new system of domination, the dissolution of logic has been pursued by different, but mutually supportive, means. Some of these means involve the technical instrumentation that has experienced and popularized the spectacle; but others are more linked to the mass psychology of submission.

At the technological level, when the image constructed and chosen by someone has become the individual's principal connection to the world he formerly observed for himself at each place that he could go, one certainly knows that the image supports everything; because within the same image anything can be juxtaposed without contradiction. The flow of images carries everything and it is similarly someone else who governs at will this simplified summary of the perceptible world; he who chooses where the flow will lead, and the rhythm of what should be shown, as a perpetual, arbitrary surprise, doesn't want to leave any time for reflection, and entirely independent of what the spectator might understand or think of it. In this concrete experience of permanent submission, one finds the psychological origin of the general adhesion to what is; an adhesion that the spectator recognizes *ipso facto* as a sufficient value. Beyond what is properly secret, spectacular discourse obviously silences anything it finds inconvenient. It isolates what it shows from its context, its past, the intentions and the consequences. It is thus completely illogical. Since no one can contradict it, the spectacle has the right to contradict itself, to correct its own past. The arrogant attitude of its servants, when they have to make known some new, and perhaps still more dishonest version of certain facts, is to harshly correct the ignorance and bad interpretations they attribute to their public, while the day before they themselves were busily disseminating the error, with their customary assurance. Thus the spectacle's instruction and the spectators' ignorance are wrongly seen as antagonistic factors when in fact they give birth to each other. In the same way, the computer's binary language is an irresistible inducement to the continual and unreserved acceptance of what has been programmed according to the wishes of someone else and passes for the timeless source of a superior, impartial and total logic. Such increased speed and a vocabulary to judge everything! Political? Social? You must choose. You cannot have both. My choice is inescapable. They are jeering at us, and we know whom these structures are for.¹ Thus it is not surprising that children should glibly start their education at an early age with the Absolute Knowledge of computer science; while they still do not know how to read, for reading demands making veritable judgments at every line; and is the only access to the vast areas of pre-spectacular human experience. Because conversation is almost dead, and soon so too will be many of those who knew how to speak.

On the level of the means of thought of contemporary populations, the primary cause of decadence clearly derives from the fact that all discourse shown in the spectacle leaves no place

¹ "They are jeering at us, and we know whom these programmes are for." The French here is, *On nous siffle, et l'on sait pour qui sont ces structures*. Debord is playing on a famous line from Racine's *Andromache*, Act V, Scene 3: *Pour qui sont ces serpents qui sifflent sur vos têtes?* [Malcolm Imrie] That last French phrase means, "Who are those serpents jeering at your heads?"

for response; and logic is only socially formed in dialogue. Furthermore, when respect for those who speak in the spectacle is so widespread, when they are supposed to be rich, important, prestigious, to be *authority itself*, the spectators tend to want to be just as illogical as the spectacle, so as to display an individual reflection of this authority. And finally, logic is not easy, and no one has desired to teach it to them. Drug addicts do not study logic, because they no longer need it, because they no longer have the possibility. The spectator's laziness also that of any intellectual cadre or overnight specialist, who do their best to conceal the narrow limits of their knowledge by the dogmatic repetition of arguments with illogical authority.

XI.

It is generally believed that those who have displayed the greatest incapacity in matters of logic are precisely those who proclaim themselves revolutionaries. This unjustified reproach dates from an age when almost everyone thought with a minimum of logic, with the striking exception of cretins and militants; and in the case of the latter bad faith played its part, intentionally, because it was held to be effective. But today there is no escaping the fact that intense use of the spectacle has, as we should have expected, turned most of our contemporaries into ideologues, if only in fits and starts, bits and pieces. Absence of logic, that is to say, loss of the ability to perceive immediately what is important and what is insignificant or irrelevant, what is incompatible or, inversely, what could well be complementary; all that a particular consequence implies and at the same time all that it excludes — high doses of this disease have been intentionally injected into the population by the spectacle's *anaesthetists/resuscitators*. Protesters have not been any more irrational than submissive people. It is simply that in the former one sees a more intense manifestation of the general irrationality, because while displaying their project, they have actually tried to carry out a practical operation — even if it is only to read certain texts and show that they know what they mean. They have given themselves diverse obligations to dominate logic, even strategy, which is precisely the entire field of the deployment of the dialectical logic of conflicts; but, like everyone else, they are greatly deprived of the basic ability to orient themselves by the old, imperfect tools of formal logic. No one worries about them; and hardly anyone thinks about the others.

The individual who has been marked by impoverished spectacular thought more deeply *than by any other aspect of his experience* puts himself at the service of the established order right from the start, even though subjectively he may have had quite the opposite intention. He will essentially follow the language of the spectacle, for it is the only one he is familiar with; the one in which he learned to speak. No doubt he would like to show himself as an enemy of its rhetoric; but he will use its syntax. This is one of the most important aspects of the success obtained by spectacular domination.

The swift disappearance of our former vocabulary is merely one moment in this operation. It serves it.

XII.

The erasure of the personality is the fatal accompaniment to the conditions of existence that is concretely submissive to spectacular norms, and thus more separated from the possibilities of knowing experiences that are authentic and thus from the discovery of individual preferences. Paradoxically, the individual must permanently repudiate them if he wants to be respected a little in such a society. This existence postulates a fluid fidelity, a succession of continually disappointing commitments to false products. It is a matter of running quickly behind the inflation of devalued signs of life. Drugs help one to conform to this organization of things; madness allows one to flee it.

In all sorts of affairs in this society, where the *distribution* of goods is centralized in such a way that it becomes master — both notoriously and secretly — of the very definition of what could be the good, it happens that certain people are attributed with qualities, knowledge or even vices, all perfectly imaginary, in order to explain in such cases the satisfactory development of particular enterprises; and this with the only aim of hiding, or at least dissimulating as much as possible, the function of various *agreements that decide everything*.

Nevertheless, despite its frequent intentions and its clumsy means to highlight the full stature of supposedly remarkable personalities, current society more often shows quite the opposite, and not merely in what has today replaced the arts, or discussion of the arts: one total incompetent will collide with another; panic ensues and it is then simply a matter of who will fall apart first. A lawyer, for example, forgetting that he is supposed to represent one side in a trial, will be sincerely influenced by the arguments of his opposite number, even when these arguments are as lacking in rigor as his own. It can also happen that an innocent suspect temporarily confesses to a crime he did not commit, simply because he is impressed *by the logic* of the hypothesis of an informer who wanted him to believe he was guilty (see the case of Dr. Archambeau in Poitiers, in 1984).¹

McLuhan himself, the spectacle's first apologist, who had seemed to be the most convinced imbecile of the century, changed his mind when he finally discovered in 1976 that "the pressure of the *mass media* leads to irrationality," and that it was becoming urgent to modify their usage. The thinker of Toronto had formerly spent several decades marveling at the numerous freedoms created by a 'global village' instantly and effortlessly accessible to all. Villages, unlike towns, have always been dominated by conformism, isolation, petty surveillance, boredom and repetitive malicious gossip about the same families. And this also presents the vulgarity of this spectacular planet, where it is no longer possible to distinguish the Grimaldi-Monaco or Bourbon-Franco dynasties from those who succeeded the Stuarts. However, McLuhan's ungrateful disciples are now trying to make people forget him, so as to rejuvenate his early works and, in their turn, develop a

¹ In 1984, seemingly motivated by professional jealousy, certain colleagues of a Dr Archambeau at a hospital in Poitiers caused the death of some of his patients in the operating-theater by reversing the oxygen and nitrogen supplies during resuscitation. Archambeau was eventually acquitted of any blame, but the real culprits were never discovered. [Malcolm Imrie]

career in mediatic eulogy for all these new freedoms to 'choose' at random from ephemera. And probably they will retract their claims even faster than the man who inspired them.

XIII.

The spectacle doesn't hide the fact that certain dangers surround the marvelous order it has established. Ocean pollution and the destruction of equatorial forests threaten the Earth's oxygen renewal; its ozone layer is menaced by industrial growth; radiation of nuclear origin accumulates irreversibly. The spectacle merely concludes that none of these things matter. It only wants to talk about dates and doses. And on these alone, it succeeds at reassuring — something which a pre-spectacular mind would have thought impossible.

The methods of spectacular democracy are of great subtlety, contrary to the brutality of the totalitarian *diktat*. It can keep the original name when the thing has been secretly changed (beer, beef or philosophers). And it can just as easily change the name when the thing itself has been secretly continued. In England, for example, the nuclear waste reprocessing plant at Windscale was renamed Sellafield in order to better allay suspicions, after a disastrous fire in 1957, but this toponymic reprocessing did nothing to prevent the rise in local mortality rates from cancer and leukemia. The British government, as the population democratically learned thirty years later, had decided to suppress a report on the catastrophe which it judged, no without reason, would probably shake public confidence in nuclear power.

Nuclear practices, both military and civil, necessitate a far higher dose of secrecy than in other fields — which already have plenty, as we already know. To make life — that is to say, lying — easier for the sages chosen by the system's masters, it has discovered the utility of changing measurements, to vary them according to a large number of points of view, and refine them, finally juggle them, according to the case, with several figures that are hard to convert. Hence, to measure radioactivity levels, one can choose from a range of units of measurement: curies, becquerels, roentgens, rads alias centigrays, and rems, not forgetting the humble millirads, and sieverts which are worth 100 rems.¹ This evokes the memory of the subdivisions of British currency, the complexity of which foreigners could not quickly master, back in the days when Sellafield was still called Windscale.

One can imagine the rigor and precision which would have been achieved in the nineteenth century by military history, and consequently by theorists of strategy, if, so as not to give too much confidential information to neutral commentators or enemy historians, one habitually reported a campaign in these terms:

¹ See the following passage in *Abyss*, an unsigned essay that appeared in French the August 1986 issue of *L'Encyclopedie des Nuisances* and was translated into English by the ex-situationist Donald Nicholson-Smith:

“How many curies, how many becquerels, were now thrust upon us in order to satisfy our hunger and thirst for knowledge! Not a day would pass without the authorities producing figures purporting to show that the (formerly nonexistent) radioactivity level had dropped considerably and was now “insignificant.” They also worried about how difficult it probably was for us to calculate our chances of survival in so many different units of measurement, and suggested “standardizing the definition of the level at which radioactivity begins to present a threat to human beings” — in other words, pushing that danger level high enough to spare us all those endless calculations.”

“The preliminary phase involved a series of engagements in which, from our side, a strong advance force made up of four generals and the units under their command, met an enemy force of 13,000 bayonets. In the subsequent phase, a fiercely disputed pitched battle developed, in which our entire army advanced, with 290 canons and a heavy cavalry of 18,000 sabers; the confronting enemy alignment comprised no less than 3,600 infantry lieutenants, 40 captains of hussars and 24 of cuirassiers. Following alternate failures and successes on both sides, the battle can finally be considered inconclusive. Our losses, somewhat lower than the average figure one habitually certified in combats of comparable duration and intensity, were perceptibly superior to those of the Greeks at Marathon, but remained inferior to those of the Prussians at Jena.”

After this example, it is not impossible for a specialist to gather some vague idea of the forces engaged. But the conduct of operations is assured of remaining below all judgment.

In June 1987, Pierre Bacher, deputy director of installations at Electricite de France, revealed the latest safety doctrine for nuclear power stations. By installing valves and filters, it becomes much easier to avoid major catastrophes, like cracks or explosions in the reactors, which would affect the entirety of a ‘region.’ Such catastrophes are produced by excessive containment. Whenever the machine looks like its going to blow, it is better to decompress gently, showering only a restricted area of a few kilometers, an area which on each occasion will be differently and haphazardly extended depending on the wind. He discloses that in the past two years, discreet experiments carried out at Cadarache, in the Drome, “have concretely showed that the rejected matter — waste gas essentially — doesn’t surpass several units period thousand, at worst one per cent of the radioactivity in the power station itself.” Thus a very moderate worst case: one per cent. Formerly, we were assured there was no risk at all, except in the case of accidents, which were logically impossible. The experience of the first few years changed this reasoning as follows: since accidents are always possible, what must be avoided is their reaching a catastrophic threshold, and that is easy. All that is necessary is to contaminate little by little, in moderation. Who would not agree that it is infinitely healthier to limit yourself to an intake of 140 centilitres of vodka per day for several years, rather than getting drunk right away like the Poles?

It is indeed a shame that human society should encounter such burning problems just when it has become materially impossible to make heard the least objection to commodity discourse, just when domination — quite rightly because it is shielded by the spectacle from any response to its fragmentary and delirious decisions and justifications — *believes that it no longer needs to think*; and truly no longer knows how to think. Would not even the staunchest democrat have preferred to have chosen more intelligent masters?

At the international conference of experts held in Geneva in December 1986, the question was quite simply whether to introduce a worldwide ban on the production of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), the gases which have recently and rapidly made disappear the thin layer of ozone that protects this planet — one will remember — from the harmful effects of solar rays. Daniel Verilhe, representing Elf-Aquitaine’s chemicals subsidiary, and in this capacity part of a French delegation firmly opposed to this ban, made a sensible point: ‘it will take at least three years to develop substitutes and the costs will be quadrupled.’ As we know, this fugitive ozone layer, so high up, belongs to no one and has no market value. This *industrial* strategist could thus show his

opponents the extent of their inexplicable disregard for economics by an appeal to reality: “It is highly dangerous to base an industrial strategy on environmental imperatives.”

Those who long ago began the critique of political economy by defining it as “the final denial of humanity” were not deceived.² One still recognizes this trait in it.

² It was Marx who defined political economy as “the final denial of humanity.” [*Malcolm Imrie*]

XIV.

It is sometimes said that science today is subservient to the imperatives of economic profitability, but that has always been true. What is new is that the economy has now come to openly make war on human beings, not only on our possibilities for life, but also those of survival. Against a great part of its own anti-slavery past, scientific thought has chosen to serve spectacular domination. Until it got to this point, science possessed a relative autonomy. It thus knew how to understand its own portion of reality and thus it made an immense contribution to increasing the means of the economy. When the all-powerful economy became mad — and these spectacular times are nothing other than that — it suppressed the last traces of scientific autonomy, both in methodology and, by the same token, in the practical conditions of activity of its ‘researchers.’ No longer is science asked to understand the world, or to improve any part of it. It is asked to instantaneously justify everything that happens. As stupid in this field, which it exploits with the most ruinous thoughtlessness, as it is everywhere else, spectacular domination has cut down the gigantic tree of scientific knowledge in order to make itself a truncheon. So as to obey this ultimate social demand for a manifestly impossible justification, it is better not to be able to think too much, but rather, on the contrary, to be well trained in the comforts of spectacular discourse. And it is actually in this career that the prostituted science of these despicable times has, with much good will, deftly found its most recent specialization.

The science of lying justifications naturally appeared with the first symptoms of bourgeois society’s decadence, with the cancerous proliferation of the pseudo-sciences called ‘human’; yet modern medicine, for example, had once been able to pass for useful, and those who eradicated smallpox or leprosy were other than those who basely capitulated in the face of nuclear radiation or chemical farming. One quickly remarks that medicine today, of course, no longer has the right to defend the health of the population against a pathogenic environment, for that would be to oppose the State, or at least the pharmaceuticals industry.

But it is not only by what it is obliged to keep quiet that current-day scientific activity avows what it has become. It is also by what it has the simplicity to say very often. In November 1985, professors Even and Andrieu at Laennec hospital announced that they had perhaps found an effective cure for AIDS, following an experiment on four patients which had lasted a week. Two days later, the patients having died, several other doctors, less advanced or perhaps jealous, expressed several reservations as to the professors’ precipitate haste in registering what was only the misleading appearance of victory — a few hours before the collapse. Even and Andrieu defended themselves nonchalantly, affirming that “after all, false hopes are better than no hope at all.” Their ignorance was too great for them to recognize this argument was a complete denial of the spirit of science and had historically always served to cover up the profitable daydreams of charlatans and sorcerers, long before such people were put in charge of hospitals.

When official science has come to such a pass, like all the rest of the social spectacle that, beneath its materially modernized and enhanced presentation, has only revived the ancient tech-

niques of fairground mountebanks — *illusionists, barkers and stool-pigeons*¹ — it is not surprising to see which great authority takes up Magi and sects, vacuum-packed Zen or Mormon theology. Ignorance, which has served the established authorities well, has also always been exploited by ingenious ventures on the fringes of the law. And what better moment than one where illiteracy has become so widespread? But this reality in its turn is denied by another display of sorcery. From its inception, UNESCO had adopted a very precise scientific definition of the illiteracy that it strove to combat in backward countries. When the same phenomenon was unexpectedly seen to be returning, but this time in the so-called advanced nations, rather in the way that the one who was waiting for Grouchy instead saw Blucher join the battle², it sufficed to bring on the Guard of experts; they carried the day with a single, irresistible assault, replacing the *term* illiteracy [*analphabétisme*] by *illettrisme* [unlettered-ism]: just as a ‘false patriot’ can opportunely appear to support a good national cause. And to ensure that the pertinence of this neologism was, among pedagogues, carved in stone, a new definition was quickly passed — as if it had always been accepted — according to which, while the illiterate was, one knew, someone who had never learned to read, the unlettered in the modern sense is, on the contrary, someone who had learned to read (and had even learned *better* than before, the more gifted official theorists and historians of pedagogy coolly testified), but who had by chance immediately forgotten. This surprising explanation might have risked being more disturbing than reassuring, if, by ignoring the fact that it was deliberately missing the point, it didn’t have the cleverness to avoid the first consequence that would have come to anyone’s mind in more scientific eras: the recognition that this new phenomenon merited being explained and combated, since it had never been observed, nor even imagined, anywhere, before the recent progress of damaged thought, where explanatory and practical decadence go hand in hand.

¹ The French here is *illusionnistes, aboyeurs et barons*. Baron, a word still in common use, refers to a trickster’s accomplice, planted in the crowd, who helps to dupe others either by raising objections which the trickster can easily refute, or by pretending to buy whatever is on offer. This was also the nineteenth-century meaning of “stool-pigeon,” although the word is now used in a different sense. I cannot find a modern English equivalent, though some American meanings of “stooge” might be adequate. [*Malcolm Imrie*]

² The battle is Waterloo, the “one,” Napoleon. The allusion is to Victor Hugo’s description of Waterloo in his poem “L’Expiation”: seeing the battle was going badly for the French, Napoleon summoned the Imperial Guard to enter the fray. [*Malcolm Imrie*]

XV.

More than a century ago, A.-L. Sardou's *New Dictionary of French Synonyms* defined the nuances which must be grasped between *fallacious*, *deceptive*, *impostrous*, *seductive*, *insidious*, *captious*; and which taken together constitute today a kind of palette of colors with which to paint a portrait of the society of the spectacle. It was beyond the scope of his time, and his experience as a specialist, for Sardou to distinguish with equal clarity the related, but very different, perils normally expected to be faced by any group devoted to subversion, following, for example, this progression: *misled*, *provoked*, *infiltrated*, *manipulated*, *usurped*, *inverted*. These important nuances have never appeared to the doctrinaires of 'armed struggle.'¹

Fallacious [*fallacieux*], from the Latin *fallaciosus*, skillful at or accustomed to deception, full of deceit: the termination of this adjective is equivalent to the superlative of deceptive [*trompeur*]. That which deceives or leads into error in any way is deceptive: that which is done in order to deceive, abuse, throw into error by a design intended to deceive with artifice and imposed display most fitting to abuse, is *fallacious*. *Deceptive* is a generic and vague word; all the genres of signs and uncertain appearances are *deceptive*: fallacious designates falsity, deceit, studied imposture; sophistic speech, protests or reasoning are *fallacious*. The word has affinities with impostrous [*imposteur*], seductive [*seducteur*], insidious [*insidieux*] and captious [*captieux*], but without equivalence. *Impostrous* designates all forms of false appearances, or conspiracies to abuse or injure; for example, hypocrisy, calumny, etc. *Seductive* expresses action calculated to take hold of someone, to lead them astray by artful and insinuating means. *Insidious* only indicates the act of artfully laying traps and making people fall into them. *Captious* is restricted to the subtle act of surprising someone and making him fall into error. *Fallacious* encompasses most of these characters.

¹ A reference to Italian writers such as Antonio Negri, Oreste Scalzone, Franco Piperno, Lanfranco Pace, and Paolo Virno, among others.

XVI.

The relatively new concept of disinformation was recently imported from Russia, along with many other inventions useful in the management of modern states. It is always openly employed by a power, or, consequently, by the people who hold a fragment of economic or political authority, in order to maintain what is established; and always in a *counter-offensive* role. Whatever can oppose a single official truth must necessarily be disinformation emanating from hostile or at least rival powers, and must have been intentionally falsified by malevolence. Disinformation would not be simple negation of a fact which suits the authorities, or the simple affirmation of a fact which does not suit them: that is called psychosis. Unlike the pure lie, disinformation — and here is why the concept is interesting to the defenders of the dominant society — must inevitably contain a degree of truth but deliberately manipulated by a skillful enemy. The power that speaks of disinformation does not believe itself to be absolutely faultless, but knows that it can attribute to any precise criticism the excessive insignificance which is in the nature of disinformation, and of the sort that it will never have to admit to a particular fault.

In short, disinformation would be the bad usage of the truth. Whoever issued it is culpable, whoever believes it is stupid. But who precisely would this artful enemy be? In this case, it cannot be terrorism, which is in no danger of ‘disinforming’ anyone, since it is charged with ontologically representing the grossest and least acceptable *error*. Thanks to its etymology and to contemporary memories of those limited confrontations which, around mid-century, briefly opposed East and West, concentrated spectacular and diffuse spectacular, today the capitalism of the integrated spectacular still pretends to believe that the capitalism of totalitarian bureaucracy — sometimes even presented as the terrorists’ base camp or inspiration — remains its fundamental enemy, just as the other would say the something about it, despite the innumerable proofs of their alliance and profound solidarity. In fact, all the established powers, despite several genuine local rivalries, and without ever wanting to spell it out, continually remember what one of the rare German internationalists after the outbreak of the war of 1914 managed to recall from the side of subversion and without great immediate success: “The principal enemy is in our country.” In the end, disinformation is the equivalent of what was represented in the discourse of social war in the nineteenth-century as ‘dangerous passions.’ It is all that is obscure and threatens to oppose the unprecedented happiness that this society offers to those who trust it, a happiness that is worth more than various insignificant risks and disappointments. And all those who *see* this happiness in the spectacle agree that one should not haggle over the price; everyone else is a disinformant.

The other advantage derived from denouncing a particular instance of disinformation by explaining it in this way is that there is no suspicion that the global discourse of the spectacle might contain the same thing, since it can designate, with the most scientific assurance, the terrain where one recognizes the only disinformation: all that can be said and that will displease it.

It is doubtless by mistake — if it isn't a deliberate decoy — that a project was recently set in motion in France to officially place a label on mediatics 'guaranteed free of disinformation': this wounded certain professionals of the media, who still like to believe, or more modestly would like it to be believed, that until now they had not actually been censored. But the concept of disinformation must obviously not be used *defensively*, still less in a static defense, strengthening a Great Wall or a Maginot Line, that must absolutely cover a space from which disinformation is supposedly prohibited. There must be disinformation, and it must be something fluid and potentially ubiquitous. Where spectacular discourse is not under attack, it would be stupid to defend it; and the concept would wear out extremely fast if one were to try to defend it against all the evidence on points which ought on the contrary to be kept from mobilizing public opinion. Moreover the authorities have no real need to guarantee that any particular information does not contain disinformation. And they do not have the means to do so: they are not respected to that extent, and would only draw suspicion on the information concerned. The concept of disinformation is only good for counter-attack. It must be kept in reserve, then instantaneously thrown into the fray to drive back any truth which has managed to arise.

If sometimes a kind of disorderly disinformation threatens to appear, in the service of particular interests temporarily in conflict, and threatens to be believed, becoming uncontrollable and thus opposing itself to the concerted work of a less irresponsible disinformation, there is no reason to fear that in this one finds other manipulators who are more expert or more skilled: it is simply because disinformation now deploys itself *in a world where there is no longer room for any verification*.

The confusionist concept of disinformation is pushed into the limelight instantaneously to refute, by the very noise of its name, all critique that has not been sufficiently made to disappear by the diverse agencies of the organization of silence. For example, it could one day be said, should this appear desirable, that this text is a disinformation campaign against the spectacle; or indeed, since it is the same thing, a piece of disinformation harmful to democracy.

Contrary to what is affirmed by its inverted spectacular concept, the practice of disinformation can only serve the State here and now, under its direct command, or at the initiative of those who defend the same values. In fact, disinformation resides in all existing information and as its principal characteristic. It is only named where passivity must be maintained by intimidation. Where disinformation is *named* it does not exist. Where it exists, it is not named.

When there were still conflicting ideologies, which claimed to be for or against some recognized aspect of reality, there were fanatics, and liars, but there were no 'disinformers.'

When it is no longer permitted, out of respect for spectacular consensus, or at least for a wish for spectacular glory, to say truly what someone is against, or equally what one wholeheartedly approves; and when one often meets the obligation to dissimulate a side of what one is supposed to admit that one nevertheless finds to be dangerous for some reason; then one practices disinformation, as if by thoughtlessness or forgetfulness or by *allegedly* false reasoning. And, by example, on the terrain of contestation after 1968, the incapable recuperators who were called 'pro-situs' were *the first disinformers*, because they dissimulated as much as possible the practical manifestations through which the critique that they flattered themselves to have adopted were confirmed: and, not embarrassed by weakening the expression of this critique, they never referred to anything or anyone, in order to suggest that they themselves had actually discovered something.

XVII.

Reversing a famous maxim of Hegel, I already noted in 1967 that “in a world *really inverted*, the truth is a moment of the false.” The years since then have shown the progress of this principle in each specific domain, without exception.

Thus, in an era when contemporary art can no longer exist, it becomes difficult to judge the classical arts. Here as elsewhere, ignorance is only produced in order to be exploited. At the same time the meaning of history and taste are lost, one organizes networks of falsification. It suffices to hold onto the experts and appraisers, which is easy enough, to get things to go through, since in affairs of this kind, as in the others, it is the sale which authenticates all value. Afterwards, it is the collectors and museums, particularly in America, which, gorged on falsehood, will have an interest in upholding its good reputation, just as the International Monetary Fund maintains the fiction of a positive value in the huge debts of a hundred nations.

The false form of taste, and support of the false, deliberately make the possibility of reference to the authentic disappear. One even remakes the true as soon as possible to resemble the false. Being the richest and the most modern, the Americans have been the principal dupes of this commerce of the false in art. And they are exactly the same people who pay for restoration work at Versailles or in the Sistine Chapel. This is why Michelangelo’s frescoes will acquire the bright colors of a cartoon strip, and the authentic furniture at Versailles acquire the brilliant quickness of gilt that will make them resemble the fake Louis XIV suites imported by Texans at such great expense.

Feuerbach’s judgment on the fact that his time preferred “the image to the thing, the copy to the original, representation to reality,” has been entirely confirmed by the century of the spectacle, and in several domains where the nineteenth century preferred to keep its distance from what was already its fundamental nature: industrial capitalist production. Thus it was that the bourgeoisie had widely spread the rigorous spirit of the museum, the original object, precise historical criticism, the authentic document. But today, the artificial tends to replace the true everywhere. At this point, it is fortuitous that pollution due to automobile traffic has necessitated the replacement of the Marly Horses in place de la Concorde, or the Roman statues in the doorway of Saint-Trophime in Arles, by plastic replicas. In short, everything will be more beautiful than before, so as to be photographed by tourists.

The highest point has without doubt been reached by the Chinese bureaucracy’s laughable fake of the great statues of the *industrial army* of the First Emperor, which so many visiting statesmen have been taken to admire *in situ*. Since one could mock them so cruelly, this thus proves that in all the masses of their advisors, there was not a single individual who knew the history of art, in China or anywhere else. One knows that their instructions were quite different: ‘Your Excellency’s computers have not been informed.’ This confirmation that, for the first time, it is possible to govern without any artistic knowledge, nor any sense of the authentic or the impossible, could alone suffice to make us conjecture that the naive dupes of the economy and

the administration will probably lead the world to some great catastrophe; if their actual practice had not already demonstrated that fact.

XVIII.

Our society is built on the secret, from the ‘screen companies’ that shelter from all light the concentrated wealth of their members, to the ‘defense secrets’ that today cover an immense domain of full extra-judicial liberty of the State; from the often frightening secrets of *shoddy production*, which are hidden by advertising, to the projections of variants in an extrapolated future, in which domination alone reads the most probable routes of things that it affirms have no existence, calculating the responses it will mysteriously make. One can make several observations.

There are always more places, in the great cities as in the spaces reserved in countryside, which remain inaccessible, that is to say, guarded and protected from all gazes; which are out of bounds to innocent curiosity, and well-guarded against espionage. Without all being properly military, they are on this model placed beyond all risk of inspection by passers-by and inhabitants; or even by the police, whose functions have long been reduced to surveillance and repression of the most commonplace forms of delinquency. And it was thus in Italy, when Aldo Moro was a prisoner of *Potere Due*¹, he was not held in a building more or less unfindable, but simply impenetrable.

There is always a large number of men trained to act in secret; instructed and practiced only for that. There are special detachments armed with confidential archives, that is to say, with secret data and analysis. And others armed with diverse techniques for the exploitation and manipulation of these secret affairs. Finally, when it is a question of their ‘action’ branches, they can equally be equipped with other means to simplify the problems studied.

While the means attributed to these men specialized in surveillance and influence continue to increase, they also encounter general circumstances that favor them more each year. When, for example, the new conditions of the society of the integrated spectacular have forced its critique to remain really clandestine, not because it hides itself but *because it is hidden* by the heavy stage-management of the thought of diversion, those who are nonetheless charged with surveilling this critique and, if necessary, for denying it, can now employ traditional methods in the milieu of clandestinity: provocation, infiltrations, and various forms of elimination of authentic critique to the profit of a false one which will have been put in place for this purpose.² When the general imposture of the spectacle is enriched with the possibility of recourse to a thousand individual

¹ Strictly speaking, the ex-Premier of Italy, Aldo Moro, wasn’t held prisoner by *Potere Due*, but by the Italian State itself. And so, Debord appears to be making a sarcastic remark, to the effect that there’s no difference between the “parallel” and official governments of the country.

² In the summer of 1968, an Italian neo-Nazi and *agent provocateur* named Mario Merlino succeeded in infiltrating Roman anarchist circles by forming the “XXII March Group,” whose name was a close echo of the “22d March Movement,” the French group from Nanterre that included Daniel Cohn-Bendit and several *enrages* who later joined the Situationist International. One of the first actions taken by the XXII March Group was the destruction of several cars after a demonstration in front of the French Embassy in Rome. The Italian press quickly blamed the violence on the Italian Communist Party.

impostures, uncertainty grows at every turn. An unexplained crime can also be called suicide³, in prison as elsewhere; the dissolution of logic allows inquiries and trials that soar vertically into irrationality, and which are frequently false, right from the start, through absurd autopsies, performed by singular experts.⁴

One has long been accustomed to seeing summary executions of all kinds of people. Known terrorists, or those considered as such, are openly fought in a terrorist manner. Mossad can kill Abou Jihad⁵ from afar, the English SAS can do the same with Irish people,⁶ and the parallel police of GAL with Basques.⁷ Those whose killings are arranged by supposed terrorists are not chosen without reason; but it is generally impossible to be sure of knowing these reasons. One can know that the Bologna railway station was blown up to ensure that Italy continued to be well governed⁸; and what the ‘death squads’ in Brazil are; and that the Mafia can burn down a hotel in the United States to facilitate a *racket* [English in original]. But how can we know what purpose was ultimately served by the ‘mad killers of Brabant’?⁹ It is hard to apply the principle *Cui prodest?*¹⁰ in a world where so many active interests are so well hidden. The result is that, under the integrated spectacular, we live and die at the confluence of a very great number of mysteries.

Media/police rumors instantly, or at worst after three or four repetitions, acquire the unquestionable weight of secular historical proofs. According to the legendary authority of the spectacle of the day, strange characters eliminated in silence can reappear as fictive survivors, whose return can always be evoked or calculated, and *proved* by the mere say-so of specialists. They are somewhere between the Acheron and the Lethe, these dead people whom the spectacle has not properly buried¹¹, supposedly slumbering while awaiting the summons which will awake them

³ A reference to the 15 December 1969 “suicide” of the anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli, who was murdered by Italian police officers during their investigation into his non-existent role in the December 1969 bombing of the Piazza Fontana in Milan. Pinelli later became the protagonist of Dario Fo’s famous play, *The Accidental Death of an Anarchist*.

⁴ A reference to the investigation into the 1972 death of the Italian left-wing publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, who supposedly blew himself up while trying to destroy an electricity pylon.

⁵ In early 1988, Abou Jihad, a Palestinian leader, was assassinated in Tunisia by the Mossad, an Israeli secret service.

⁶ Formed during World War II, England’s “Special Air Service” (SAS) became a paramilitary “anti-terrorist” unit in the post-war years. All through the 1970s and 1980s, the SAS conducted a “dirty war” against the Irish Republican Army.

⁷ Grupo Anti-Terrorista de Liberacion. [Malcolm Imrie] The “Antiterrorist Liberation Group” was a group of hired killers who, under the direction of Spain’s “security” forces and the Ministry of the Interior, hunted down and assassinated suspected ETA terrorists who had fled to or were based in France. Between 1983 and 1987, nearly 30 people were killed, reputedly with the help of the French Civil Guard.

⁸ On 2 August 1980 — the first day of an Italian national holiday — a bomb exploded at the Bologna railway station, killing 85 and wounding over 200 people. Among those eventually implicated in the execution of the massacre was the neo-Nazi Stefano Delle Chiaie.

⁹ *Les tueurs fous de Brabant* was the media’s name for the perpetrators of a series of murders in Belgium in the 1980s. The murders were carried out during a number of raids on supermarkets: on each occasion the gang, armed with military weapons, shot six or seven people, apparently at random, and stole very small amounts of money. Recent newspaper revelations have suggested that the choice of victims may not have been entirely random, and that the murderers may have been linked to right-wing organizations. [Malcolm Imrie] Between 30 September 1982 and 9 November 1985, the “mad killers of Brabant” murdered a total of 28 people. No arrests were ever made. Something similar seems to have taken place in Italy, beginning in June 1976.

¹⁰ Latin for “who profits?”

¹¹ A reference to the hundreds of striking students who were killed by the Mexican army in Tlatelolco, Mexico City, on 2 October 1968. It is thought by some that the bodies were dropped by airplane into the Gulf of Mexico.

all: the terrorist once again come down from the hills, the pirate from the sea; and the thief who no longer needs to steal.¹²

Thus is uncertainty organized everywhere. The protection of domination very often precedes by false attacks, of which the mediatic treatment will lose from view the true operation: such was the case with the bizarre assault by Tejero and his civil guards on the Cortes in 1981, whose failure hid another more modern, that is to say, more disguised *pronunciamento*, which succeeded.¹³ Equally showy, the failure of the French secret services' sabotage attempt in New Zealand in 1985 has sometimes been seen as a stratagem, perhaps designed to divert attention from the numerous new uses of these services, by making people believe in their caricatural clumsiness both in their choice of target and in their modalities of operation.¹⁴ And more assuredly, it has been almost universally accepted that the geological explorations for oil-beds in the subsoil of *the city of Paris*, so noisily conducted in the autumn of 1986, had no other serious purpose than to measure the inhabitants' current level of stupefaction and submission: by showing them supposed research so absolutely contradicted on the economic level.

Power is becoming so mysterious that after the affair of the illegal arms sales to Iran by the US presidency¹⁵, one might wonder who was really commanding the United States, the strongest power in the so-called democratic world. And which devil could thus command the democratic world?

More profoundly, in this world which is officially so full of respect for economic necessities, no one ever knows the real cost of anything which is produced: actually, the most important part of the real cost *is never calculated; and the rest is kept secret.*

¹² The allusion is to Robert Louis Stevenson's "Requiem." But some of the references here are more specific. Debord has pointed out that "the thief who no longer needs to steal," for example, was Francois Besse, the former accomplice of Jacques Mesrine, who has disappeared without trace. [*Malcolm Imrie*] Jacques Mesrine was a notorious French bank-robber who was killed by the police in 1979. Gerard Lebovici re-printed his autobiography, *L'instinct de mort* — which had been banned by the Ministry of Justice — shortly thereafter. For more on Lebovici, see footnote [1].

¹³ On 23 February 1981, Lieutenant-Colonel Antonio Tejero — together with an armed group of 200 officers from the Civilian Guard — stormed into the Spanish Congress of Deputies, which was the lower house of the Cortes. Several hours later, King Juan Carlos held a nationally televised speech, during which he proclaimed his condemnation of the coup and his belief that Spain's "democratic" process (the election of a new Prime Minister) should continue peacefully. At noon, Tejero and his men surrendered without harming anyone. It is thought that the King himself ordered the phony coup as a way of increasing his dwindling power and popularity.

¹⁴ On 7 July 1985, the French secret services blew up the "Rainbow Warrior," the flagship of the Greenpeace Organisation, while it was docked in Auckland Harbour, New Zealand. At the time, Greenpeace was conducting protests against the testing of nuclear weapons by the French government in the South Pacific.

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XIX.

At the beginning of 1988, General Noriega suddenly became known world-wide. He was the unofficial dictator of Panama, a country without an army, where he commanded the National Guard. Panama is not really a sovereign state: it was dug out for its canal, rather than the reverse. Its currency is the dollar, and the true army which is stationed there is similarly foreign. Noriega had thus devoted his entire career — precisely like that of [General] Jaruzelski in Poland — to serving the occupying power as its chief of police. He imported drugs into the United States, since Panama was not bringing him sufficient revenue, and exported his ‘Panamanian’ capital to Switzerland. He had worked with the CIA against Cuba and, to provide adequate cover for his economic activities, had also denounced some of his rivals in the import trade to the US authorities, obsessed as they are with this problem. To the jealousy of Washington, his chief security advisor was the best on the market: Michael Harari, a former officer with Mossad, the Israeli secret service. When the Americans finally decided to get rid of this person [Noriega], some of their courts having imprudently condemned him, Noriega declared that he was ready to defend himself for a thousand years, for Panamanian patriotism and, at the same time, against his own people in revolt and foreigners; in the name of anti-imperialism, he quickly received public approval from the more austere bureaucratic dictators in Cuba and Nicaragua.

Far from being a peculiarly Panamanian strangeness, this General Noriega, who *sells and simulates everything*, in a world which everywhere does the same thing, was altogether a perfect representative of the integrated spectacular, and of the successes that it allows the most varied managers of its internal and international politics: a sort of man of a sort of state, a sort of general, a capitalist. He is the very model of the *prince of our times*¹ and, of those destined to come to power and remain there, the most able to resemble him closely. It is not Panama which produces such marvels, it is our era.

¹ A reference to Niccolo Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, written in Italian in 1512. The following passage from this classic work is clearly relevant to Debord’s discussion of Noriega’s relationship with the CIA:

“I shall remind princes who have seized a new state for themselves by encouraging subversion that they should carefully reflect on the motives of those who helped him. If these were not based on a natural affection for the new prince, but rather on discontent with the existing government, he will retain their friendship only with considerable difficulty and exertion, because it will be impossible for him in his turn to satisfy them.”

XX.

For any intelligence service [*service de renseignements*], on this point in accord with the exact Clausewitzian theory of war, *knowledge* must become *power*. From this these services draw their prestige, their species of special poetry. Whilst intelligence [*intelligence*] has been absolutely chased from the spectacle, which does not permit action and does not say much of the truth about the actions of others, it almost seems to have taken refuge among those who analyze and secretly act on realities. The recent revelations that Margaret Thatcher had done everything to suppress, but in vain, and authenticated by the attempt, have shown that in Britain these services have already been capable of bringing down a minister whom they judged politically dangerous.¹ The general scorn aroused by the spectacle thus, for new reasons, restored the attraction of what in Kipling's day was called 'the great game.'

'The police conception of history' was, in the nineteenth century, a reactionary and ridiculous explanation, at a time when so many powerful social movements agitated the masses. Today's pseudo-opponents are well aware of this, thanks to hearsay or some books, and believe that this conclusion remains true for eternity; they never want to see the real praxis of their time; because it is too sad for their cold hopes. The State isn't ignorant of this, and plays on it.

At the moment when almost every aspect of international political life and a growing number of those aspects that count in internal politics are conducted and displayed in the style of the secret services, with decoys, disinformation and double explanations (one *might* conceal another, or may only seem to), the spectacle confines itself to making known a wearisome world of obligatory incomprehensibility, a boring series of lifeless, inconclusive crime novels. It is true that the realistic direction of a fight between negroes, at night, in a tunnel, must pass for a sufficiently dramatic motive.

Imbecility believes that all is clear when television has shown a beautiful image and commented on it with a brazen lie. The demi-elite is content to know that almost everything is obscure, ambivalent, 'mounted' by unknown codes. A more exclusive elite would like to know the true, hard as it is to distinguish in each singular case, despite all the reserved information and confidences of which it can dispose. This is why this elite would love to know the method of truth, though their love usually remains unlucky.

¹ A reference to British Prime Minister Harold Wilson, who was forced to resign on 16 March 1976, three years before the next scheduled election.

XXI.

The secret dominates this world, and first and foremost as the secret of domination. According to the spectacle, the secret would only be a necessary exception to the rule of abundant information offered on the entire surface of society, just as domination in the ‘free world’ of the integrated spectacular would be restricted to only an executive department in the service of democracy. But no one really believes the spectacle. How then do the spectators accept the existence of the secret that alone guarantees that they cannot manage a world, the principal realities of which they know nothing about, if one were to truly ask them for their opinions on the manner of managing it? It is a fact that the secret doesn’t appear to hardly anyone in its inaccessible purity and its functional universality. Everyone accepts that there is inevitably a small zone of secrecy reserved for specialists; as for the generality of things, many believe that *they are in on the secret*.

In the *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, La Boetie showed how the power of a tyrant must encounter many supports among the concentric circles of individuals who find, or believe to find, their advantage in it. Likewise, many politicians and mediatics who are flattered that no one can suspect them of being *irresponsible*, know many things through their connections and confidences. Someone who is happy to be taken into confidence is hardly likely to criticize it; nor to remark that in all the confidences, the principal part of reality will always be hidden from him. Thanks to the benevolent protection of the cheaters, he knows a few more of the cards, but they can be false; and he never knows the method that directs and explains the game. Thus he immediately identifies himself with the manipulators and scorns the ignorance which in fact he shares. Because the scraps of information offered to the familiars of a lying tyranny are normally infected with lies, manipulated and uncheckable.¹ They are, however, pleased to get these scraps, for they feel themselves superior to those who know nothing. They only know better than the rest so as to better approve of domination and never to actually comprehend it. They constitute the privilege of *first-class spectators*: those who have the stupidity to believe they can understand something, not by making use of what is hidden from them, but *by believing what is revealed to them!*

Domination is at least lucid in that it expects that its free and unhindered management will very shortly lead to a quite large number of major catastrophes of the highest grandeur; and this as much as on ecological terrains (chemical, for example) as on economic terrains (in banking, for example). It has for some time already been in a position to treat these exceptional misfortunes by other means than its habitual handling of soft disinformation.

¹ For example: the relationship between the *Bundesnachrichtendienst* (Federal Intelligence Service, founded after World War II by Richard Gehlen), and the CIA: “The Pentagon absorbed [Gehlen’s] organization in its entirety in the belief Gehlen had an efficient intelligence network stretching right into the Kremlin itself. As early as 1949, an informer in one of the emigre organizations used by Gehlen reckoned that about ninety percent of all intelligence reaching the Americans was false [...] False intelligence from the Gehlen organization to the Americans was a major factor in the rise of the Cold War.” Stuart Christie, *Stephano Delle Chiaie: Portrait of a Black Terrorist* (London, 1984). See recently declassified documents for more information.

XXII.

As to the rising number of assassinations over the last two decades, which have remained entirely unexplained — because, if one has sometimes sacrificed some nobody, it has never been a question of going back to the sponsors — their character of production in series has its mark: patent and changing lies in the official declarations; Kennedy, Aldo Moro, Olaf Palme, ministers and bankers, a pope or two, some others who were worth more than all of them.¹ This syndrome of a recently acquired social disease has quickly spread all over, as if, following the first documented cases, it *descended* from the summits of the State (the traditional sphere for this type of attack) and, at the same time, *ascended* from the underworld, the traditional place for illegal trafficking and protection rackets, where this kind of war has always gone on, among professionals. These activities tend to meet each other *in the middle* of the affairs of society, as if the State didn't disdain from mixing itself up in it and the Mafia elevated itself by attaining it; thus a kind of junction operates there.²

One has heard the occurrence of accidents used to explain this new genre of mystery: police incompetence, stupid magistrates, untimely press revelations, crisis of growth in the secret services, malevolent witnesses, or categorical strikes by informers. But Edgar Allan Poe had already found the certain path to truth, in his celebrated reasoning in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*:

“It appears to me that this mystery is considered insoluble, for the very reason which should cause it to be regarded as easy of solution — I mean for the *outré* character of its features... In investigations such as we are now pursuing, it should not be so much asked ‘what has occurred,’ as ‘what has occurred that has never occurred before.’”

¹ The American President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, supposedly by Lee Harvey Oswald, on 22 November 1963. The former Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro was executed, supposedly by the Red Brigades, on 9 May 1978. (For more on Moro, see footnotes [23] and [44].) The Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme was assassinated by an unknown gunman on 28 February 1986. Pope John Paul I died of a very mysterious heart attack on 28 September 1978, only 33 days after his election. Among “some others who were worth more than all of them,” Debord would surely include his friend and publisher, Gerard Lebovici (see footnote [1]).

² The precise beginning of this confluence might be set in 1942, when — in the aftermath of the mafia's destruction of a luxury cruise ship (the *Normandie*) that, while docked in New York's harbor, was being renovated to serve as a troop-carrier — the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) sought out and received assistance from the imprisoned mob boss Charles (“Lucky”) Luciano. Eventually granted early release from prison, Luciano also helped the ONI negotiate an agreement with the Mafia concerning the invasion of Sicily. On 9 July 1943, the Allies landed on the Italian island flying Mafia colors.

XXIII

In January 1988 the Colombian drug Mafia issued a communique aimed at correcting public opinion about its supposed existence. The greatest requirement of any Mafia, wherever it may be constituted, is naturally to establish that it does not exist, or that it has been the victim of unscientific calumnies; and that is its first point of resemblance with capitalism. But in this particular circumstance, this Mafia was so irritated at being the only one placed in the spotlight that it went so far as to evoke the other groupings that wanted to make themselves forgotten by abusively using it as a scapegoat. It declared: 'We ourselves don't belong to the Mafia of politicians and bureaucrats, nor that of bankers and financiers, nor that of millionaires, nor to the Mafia of great fraudulent contracts, to that of monopolies or oil, nor to the great means of communication.'

One can without doubt estimate that the authors of this declaration have, like all the rest, an interest in emptying their own practices into that vast river of troubled water of criminality and more banal illegalities, which irrigates the whole of present society; but it is also just to agree that here we have people who by their very profession know better than the others what they are talking about. The Mafia flourishes in the soil of modern society. Its growth is as rapid as that of all the other products of the labor by which the society of the integrated spectacular society fashions its world. The Mafia grows along with the immense progress of computers and industrial food processing,¹ with complete urban reconstruction and shanty-towns, secret services and illiteracy.

¹ In 1981, Debord devoted an essay to this subject.

XXIV.

When it began to manifest itself at the beginning of the century in the United States, with the immigration of Sicilian workers, the Mafia was only a transplanted archaism; at the same time, there appeared on the West Coast the gang wars between Chinese secret societies. Founded on obscurantism and poverty, the Mafia at that time was not even able to implant itself in Northern Italy. It seemed condemned to vanish before the modern State. It was a form of organized crime that could only prosper through the 'protection' of backward minorities, outside the world of the towns, where the laws of the bourgeoisie and the control of a rational police force could not penetrate. The defensive tactics of the Mafia could only suppress witnesses, neutralize the police and judiciary, and install as ruler in its sphere of activity the secret that is necessary to it. Subsequently it found a new field in the *new obscurantism* of the society of the diffuse spectacular, then in its integrated form: with the total victory of the secret, the general resignation of citizens, the complete loss of logic, and universal cowardice, all the favorable conditions were united for it to become a modern and offensive power.

Prohibition in America — a great example of the pretensions of this century's States to the authoritarian control of everything, and of the results that ensue — left to organized crime the management of commerce in alcohol. The Mafia, enriched and experienced, moved into electoral politics, commerce, the development of the market in professional killers, and certain details of international politics. Thus, during the Second World War, it was favored by the US government, and helped with the invasion of Sicily.¹ Legalized alcohol was replaced by drugs, which then constituted the star commodity in illegal consumption. Then the Mafia took considerable importance in property dealing, in banking and in high-level politics and the great affairs of state, and then in the industries of the spectacle: television, films and publishing. In the United States at least, it is already in the recording industry, as in every other activity where publicity of a product depends on a quite concentrated number of people. It is easy to apply pressure to them, with bribes and intimidation, since there is obviously quite a great deal of capital and hitmen who can not be recognized nor punished. By corrupting the *disc-jockeys*, one thus decides what will succeed, from equally wretched commodities.

It is undoubtedly in Italy that the Mafia, in the wake of its experiences and conquests in America, has acquired the greatest strength: since the period of its historic compromise with

¹ See footnote [42].

the parallel government², it has found itself in a position to kill magistrates and police chiefs:³ a practice it inaugurated through its participation in the setting up of political 'terrorism.' The similar evolution of the Mafia's Japanese equivalent, in relatively independent conditions, proves the unity of the epoch.

One deceives oneself every time one wants to explain something by opposing the Mafia and the State: they are never rivals. Theory easily verifies what all the rumors in practical life have all too easily shown. The Mafia is not an outsider in this world; it is perfectly at home in it. At the moment of the integrated spectacular, it in fact reigns as the *model* for all advanced commercial enterprises.

² Here Debord makes sarcastic use of the phrase "historic compromise," which was first used to describe the *highly publicized and ultimately unsuccessful* efforts of Prime Minister Aldo Moro to bring the Italian Communist Party into Italy's ruling coalition. Upon this first "compromise," Debord has superimposed another one: the *secret and very successful* compromise reached between the Mafia and the Italian state, which is once again identified with or reduced to "the parallel government" (see footnote [23]). The intent of this superimposition is itself doubled: to underline the point made about false attacks (see footnote [35]), and to suggest the degree of collusion between apparently unrelated and even opposing forces active in the spectacle.

³ To pick two examples among many: Luigi Calabresi, the Police Inspector in charge of investigating various terrorist bombings that took place in 1969, was killed on 17 May 1972; and Vittorio Occorsio, the judge investigating the Italicus train bombing of 1974, was killed on 14 June 1976.

XXV.

With the new conditions that now predominate in the society crushed under the *iron heel* of the spectacle, one knows, for example, that a political assassination finds itself placed in another light; can in a sense be sifted. Everywhere the mad are more numerous than before, but what is infinitely more convenient is that they can be talked about madly. And it is not some kind of reign of terror that imposes such mediatic explanations. On the contrary, it is the peaceful existence of such explanations which should cause terror.

When in 1914, the war being imminent, Villain assassinated Jaures, no one doubted that Villain, though without doubt a somewhat unbalanced man, had believed he had to kill Jaures, because in the eyes of the extremists of the patriotic right who had deeply influenced him, Jaures seemed to be someone who would certainly be harmful to the country's defense. These extremists had only underestimated the tremendous strength of patriotic consent within the Socialist Party, which would immediately push it into "the sacred union," whether or not Jaures was assassinated or allowed the occasion to hold to his internationalist position in rejecting the war. Today, in the presence of such an event, journalists/police officers and well-known experts on the 'facts of society' and 'terrorism' would immediately explain that Villain was well known for having several times sketched out attempted murders, the impulse each time seeing men who, despite the variety of their political opinions, all by chance looked and dressed rather like Jaures. Psychiatrists would attest to this, and the *media*, only attesting to what the psychiatrists had said, would thus attest to, by the same fact, their own competence and impartiality as *incomparably* authorized experts. The next day, the official police investigation would establish that one discovered several honorable people ready to bear witness to the fact that this same Villain, considering he had been rudely served at the 'Chope du Croissant,' had, in their presence, loudly threatened to take revenge on its proprietor by murdering, in front of everyone and on the premises, one of his best customers.¹

This is not to say that, in the past, the truth often or quickly imposed itself, for Villain was eventually acquitted by the French courts. He was not shot until 1936, at the start of the Spanish revolution, because he had committed the imprudence of residing at the Balearic Islands.

¹ Jaures was assassinated in the Chope du Croissant (now the Cafe Chope du Croissant), 146 rue Montmartre, on 31, July 1914. [*Malcolm Imrie*]

XXVI.

It is because of the new conditions of a profitable handling of economic affairs, at the moment when the State holds a hegemonic part in the orientation of production and when the demand for all of the commodities depends strictly on the centralization achieved by spectacular information/promotion, to which all forms of distribution must also adapt, that one sees the imperative demand that networks of influence or secret societies constitute themselves everywhere. It is thus only a natural product of the movement of concentration of capital, production and distribution. Whatever does not spread must disappear; and businesses can only spread with the values, techniques and means of today's industry, spectacle and State. It is, in the final analysis, the particular development that has been chosen by the economy of our era that imposes everywhere the formation of *new personal links of dependency and protection*.

It is precisely here that resides the profound truth of this formula, so well appreciated throughout Italy, used by the Sicilian Mafia: "When you've got money and friends, you can laugh at Justice." In the integrated spectacular, *the laws are asleep*; because they were not made for the new production techniques, and because they are outflanked in distribution by new types of agreement. What the public thinks, or prefers, is no longer of importance. This is what is hidden by the spectacle of so many opinion polls, elections, modernizing restructurings. No matter who the winners are, the amiable clientele will get what's inferior, because that is exactly what has been produced for it.

One only continually speaks of a "State of rights" since the moment that the modern, so-called democratic State generally ceased to be one: it is not by chance that the expression was only popularized shortly after 1970 and exactly in Italy. In many domains, laws are even made precisely so that they may be outflanked by exactly those who have all the means to do so. Illegality in some circumstances — for example, around the global trade in all sorts of weaponry, most often concerning the products of the highest technology — is only a kind of back-up for the economic operation, which will find itself all the more profitable. Today many business deals are necessarily as *dishonest as the century*, and not like those once made within a strictly limited range by people who had chosen the paths of dishonesty.

To the extent that the networks of promotion/control grow so as to mark and hold on to exploitable sectors of the market, there is also an increase in the number of personal services which can not be refused to those in the know and who have not refused their help; and these are not always the police or guardians of the interests and security of the State. Functional complicities communicate at a distance and for a very long time, because their networks dispose of all the means to impose those sentiments of recognition and fidelity that, unfortunately, have always been so rare in the free activity of bourgeois times.

One always learns something from one's adversary. It is necessary to believe that the people of the State have also read the young Lukacs' remarks on the concepts of legality and illegality;

at the moment that they had to deal with the brief passage of a new generation of the negative¹ – Homer said that “A generation of men passes as quickly as a generation of leaves.” Since then, the people of the State have, like us, ceased to trouble themselves with any kind of ideology on the question; and it is true that the practices of spectacular society no longer favor ideological illusions of this kind. Finally, concerning us all, one could conclude that what has often prevented us from enclosing ourselves in a single illegal activity is the fact that we have had several.

¹ The “new generation of the negative” to which Debord refers included the Dadaists.

XXVII.

In book VIII, chapter 5 of *The Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides said, concerning the operations of another oligarchic conspiracy, something that has relevance to the situation in which we find ourselves:

Those who took the floor were of the conspiracy and the speeches that they pronounced had been submitted in advance to the examination of their friends. No opposition manifested itself among the remainder of the citizens, who were frightened by the number of conspirators. When someone tried, despite everything, to contradict them, one soon found a convenient way of making him die. The murderers weren't found and no pursuit was made of those one suspected. The people didn't react and were so terrorized that they estimated themselves happy, even in remaining mute, if they escaped the violence. Believing the conspirators much more numerous than they were, the people felt completely impotent. The town was too large and they didn't quite know each other, so that it was not possible for them to discover what it really was. In these conditions, so shameful were the people that they could not confide their grief to anyone. Thus, one had to renounce engaging in an action against the guilty ones, because it would have been necessary to address oneself either to an unknown person or a person of knowledge in whom one didn't have confidence. In the democratic party, personal relations were everywhere stamped with scorn, and one always asked oneself if he with whom one had business wasn't coniving with the conspirators. There were actually among the conspirators men whom one could never believe that they had rallied themselves to the oligarchy.¹

If history should return to us after this eclipse, which depends on factors still in struggle and thus on an outcome which no one can exclude with certainty, these *Comments* may one day

¹ In Donald Lateiner's revision of Richard Crawley's translation (Barnes & Noble Classics, 2006), pp. 495–496, this passage reads as follows: "However, the Assembly and the Council chosen by lot still met notwithstanding, although they discussed nothing that was not approved of by the conspirators, who both supplied the speakers, and reviewed in advance what they were to say. Fear, and the sight of the numbers of the conspirators, closed the mouths of the rest; or if any ventured to rise in opposition, he was presently put to death in some convenient way, and there was neither search for the murderers nor justice to be had against them if suspected; but the people remained motionless, being so thoroughly cowed that men thought themselves lucky to escape violence, even when they held their tongues. An exaggerated belief in the numbers of the conspirators also demoralized the people, rendered helpless by the magnitude of the city, and by their want of intelligence with each other, and being with means of finding out what those numbers really were. For the same reason it was impossible for any one to open his grief to a neighbor and to concert measures to defend himself, as he would have to speak either to one he did not know, or whom he knew but did not trust. Indeed all the popular party approached each other with suspicion, each thinking his neighbor concerned in what was going on, the conspirators having in their ranks persons whom no one could ever have believed capable of joining an oligarchy; and these it was who made the many so suspicious, and so helped to procure impunity for the few, by confirming the commons in their mistrust of one another."

serve in the writing of a history of the spectacle; without any doubt the most important event to have occurred this century, and also the event that one least ventures to explain. In different circumstances, I believe I could have considered myself greatly satisfied with my first work on this subject, and left it to others to consider subsequent developments. But in the moment at which we are, it seemed to me that no one else would do it.

XXVIII.

From the networks of promotion/control one slides imperceptibly into networks of surveillance/disinformation. Formerly, one only ever conspired against an established order. Today, *conspiring in its favor* is a new and rapidly developing trade. Under spectacular domination, one conspires to maintain it, and to guarantee what it alone would call its progress. This conspiracy is a part of its very functioning.

One has already begun to put in place several means for a kind of preventive civil war, adapted to different projections of the calculated future. These are the ‘specific organizations’ charged with intervening at several points, according to the needs of the integrated spectacular.¹ One has thus foreseen, for the worst possibilities, a tactic that, in a pleasantry, has been called ‘Three Cultures,’ an evocation of a square in Mexico City in the summer of 1968,² though this time the gloves will be off and the tactic will be applied before the day of the revolt. And beyond such extreme cases, it is not necessary, so as to be a good means of government, that the unexplained assassination touches much of the world or returns quite frequently: the sole fact that one knows that its possibility exists immediately complicates calculations in a very large number of domains. It no longer needs to be intelligently selective, *ad hominem*. The use of the procedure in a purely aleatory fashion would perhaps be more productive.

One is also placed in a position to compose fragments of a social critique of *rearing*,³ which would no longer be entrusted to academics or mediatics, whom it is henceforth better to keep apart from the excessively traditional lies in this debate; but a better critique, advanced and exploited in a new way, handled by another, better trained species of professional. In a quite confidential manner, lucid texts are beginning to appear, anonymously, or signed by unknown authors — a tactic moreover facilitated by the concentration of the attentions of all on the clowns of the spectacle, which makes unknown people appear exactly the most admirable — not only on subjects never approached in the spectacle but also with arguments of which the justness is rendered more striking by the calculable species of originality, which comes from the fact that they are *never used, despite being quite evident*. This practice can serve at least as a first stage in initiation to recruit more alert minds, who will later be told a much larger share of the possible

¹ One example would be the “Palladin” organization (also known as “The Guerillas of Christ the King”), which was founded in Spain by ex-Nazi Otto Skorzeny in the late 1960s. Like the GAL (footnote [29]), Palladin was involved in the assassination of ETA separatists who had escaped to France. Other “special [death] squads” include the Bolivian group of ex-Nazis called “The Fiances of Death,” and Stefano Delle Chiaie’s international network, “The Black Orchestra.”

² On 2 October 1968, police opened fire on student demonstrators in Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Mexico City, killing many. During the preceding fortnight, at least fifty more students had been killed during police attacks on strike meetings and the university campus. [Malcolm Imrie] See footnote [33].

³ It is possible that this paragraph and the one that follows it are discussing the *Encyclopedia of Nuisances* (EdN), a situationist-inspired journal founded in 1984 by Jaime Semprun and the ex-situ Christian Sebastiani. For a critique of the *EdN*, and Debord’s role in it, see the text by Jean-Francois Martos and Jean-Pierre Baudet entitled *The Encyclopedia of Powers*.

consequences, if they seem suitable. And what for certain people will be the first step in a career, will be for others with a lower ranking the first degree of a trap in which one takes them.

In certain cases, on questions that threaten to become controversial, it will be a matter of creating another pseudo-critique; and between the two opinions which will thus arise — both foreign to impoverished spectacular conventions — naive judgment can oscillate indefinitely, and the discussion weighing upon them can be renewed each time that it is fitting. Most often this concerns a general discourse on what is mediatically hidden, and this discussion can be strongly critical, and on some points obviously intelligent, yet remaining curiously decentered. The themes and words have been artificially selected, with the aid of computers informed in critical thought. These texts contain certain gaps, quite hard to spot but nonetheless remarkable: the vanishing point of perspective is always abnormally absent. They resemble those *facsimiles* of a famous weapon, which only lacks the firing-pin. This is necessarily a *lateral critique*, which perceives several things with much frankness and exactness, but places itself to the side. Not because it affects some sort of impartiality, because on the contrary it must seem to find much fault, but without ever apparently feeling the need to reveal *its cause*, thus to state, even implicitly, where it is coming from and where it wants to go.

To this kind of counter-journalistic false critique can be joined the organized practice of the *rumor*, which one knows to be originally a sort of wild ransom of spectacular information, since everyone, however vaguely, perceives a deceptive character in the latter and trusts it as little as it deserves. Rumor was at the origin superstitious, naive, self-poisoning. More recently, however, surveillance has begun introducing into the population people susceptible of immediately starting rumors that suit it. Here one has decided to apply in practice the observations of a theory formulated some thirty years ago, and of which the origins lie in American sociology of advertising: the theory of individuals known as ‘trend-setters,’ that is, those whom others in their milieu come to follow and imitate; but in passing this time from spontaneity to well-rehearsed. Budgetary, or extrabudgetary, means have also been released to maintain numerous auxiliaries, besides the former academic and mediatic specialists, the sociologists and police of the recent past. To believe that models known in the past are still mechanically applied is as misleading as a general ignorance of the past. “Rome is no longer in Rome,”⁴ and the Mafia is no longer the underworld. And the surveillance and disinformation services as little resemble the works of the police and informers of former times — for example, the roussins and mouchards of the Second Empire — as current-day special services in all countries resemble the activities of the officers of the Second Bureau of the army’s headquarters in 1914.

Since art is dead, it has become extremely easy to disguise police as artists. When the latest imitations of an inverted neo-Dadaism are authorized to pontificate gloriously in the media, and thus also to slightly modify the decor of official palaces, like court jesters to the kings of junk, one sees that by the same movement a cultural cover is guaranteed for all the agents or auxiliaries of the State’s networks of influence.⁵ Empty pseudo-museums, or pseudo-research centers on the complete works of nonexistent personalities, can be opened just as fast as reputations are made for journalist-cops, historian-cops, or novelist-cops. No doubt Arthur Cravan foresaw this world

⁴ “Rome is no longer in Rome.” The quotation is from a line in Racine’s *Mithridates: Rome n’est plus dans Rome; elle est toute ou je suis.* [Malcolm Imrie] That last phrase in French means, “It [Rome] is everywhere I am.”

⁵ It is said that one of the reasons why Donald Nicholson-Smith’s 1994 translation of *The Society of the Spectacle* was not “authorized” by Debord was the fact that he believed that Zone Books (distributed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology) was funded by the Central Intelligence Agency.

when he wrote in *Maintenant*: “Soon we will only see artists in the streets, and it will take all the troubles of the world to find a single man.” This is indeed the sense of the revived form of an old quip of Parisian hoodlums: “Hi, artists! So much the worse if I deceive myself.”⁶

Things having become what they are, one can now see the use of collective authorship by the most modern publishing house, that is to say, the one with the best commercial distribution. Since the authenticity of pseudonyms are only assured by the newspapers, they can swap them around, collaborate, replace each other, enlist new artificial brains. Their task is to express the lifestyles and thought of the era, not by virtue of their personalities, but because they are ordered to. Those who believe that they are veritably individual, literary entrepreneurs can thus vouch for the fact that Ducasse has had a row with the Comte de Lautreamont, that Dumas isn't Maquet and that we must especially not confuse Erckmann with Chatrian; that Censier and Daubenton are no longer on speaking terms.⁷ It might be best to say that this type of modern author was a follower of Rimbaud, at least in so far as “I is another.”

The whole history of spectacular society called for the secret services to play the pivotal role; because it is in them that the characteristics and means of execution of such a society are concentrated to the highest degree. They are always further tasked with arbitrating the general interests of this society, despite their modest title of ‘services.’ There is no abuse here, for they faithfully express the ordinary morals of the century of the spectacle. And it is thus that surveillers and those surveilled set forth on a boundless ocean. The spectacle has made the secret triumph, and must always be in the hands of *specialists in the secret*, who of course are not all of the functionaries who have to different degrees made themselves autonomous with respect to State control; who are not all of the functionaries.

⁶ The French is, *Salut, les artistes! Tant pis si je me trompes*. The old low-life greeting was, *Salut, les hommes*. Debord has substituted “artists” for “men.” [Malcolm Imrie]

⁷ Isidor Ducasse was of course the Comte de Lautreamont. Auguste Macquet (or Maquet), a historian, was one of Dumas Pere's chief literary collaborators. Emile Erckmann and Alexandre Chatrian (1822–99 and 1826–90) wrote several novels and plays together over some forty years, many of them set in their native Alsace. Censier-Daubenton is a Paris Metro station. [Malcolm Imrie] Debord was greatly influenced by Lautreamont, especially his *Poesies* (1870), from which *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) plagiarized the following famous passage:

“Ideas improve. The meaning of words has a part in the improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. Plagiarism takes an author's phrase, uses his expressions, erases a false idea, replaces it with the correct one. </quote>”

XXIX.

A general law of the functioning of the integrated spectacular, at least for those who manage its administration, is that, in this framework, *everything which can be done, must be done*. This is to say that every new instrument must be employed, whatever the cost. New equipment becomes the goal and the driving force of the entire system, and will be the only thing which can notably modify its progress, each time its use is imposed without further reflection. Society's owners indeed want above all to maintain a certain 'social relation between people,' but they must also pursue incessant technological innovation; because such was one of the obligations that they accepted with their inheritance. This law thus applies equally to the services that safeguard domination. The instrument that has been completed must be used, and its use will reinforce the very conditions that favor this use. It is thus that emergency procedures become permanent.

The coherence of the society of the spectacle proves revolutionaries right, since it has become clear that one cannot reform the poorest detail without taking the whole thing apart. But, at the same time, this coherence has suppressed every organized revolutionary tendency by suppressing the social terrains where they had more or less expressed themselves: from trade unions to newspapers, towns to books. In the same movement, one has highlighted the incompetence and thoughtlessness of which this tendency was quite naturally the bearer. And on the individual level, the reigning coherence is quite capable of eliminating, or buying off certain possible exceptions.

XXX.

Surveillance would be much more dangerous had it not been pushed along the path of absolute control of everyone, to the point where it encounters difficulties created by its own progress. There is a contradiction between the mass of information collected on a growing number of individuals, and the time and intelligence available to analyze it, or simply its actual interest. The abundance of material demands summarizing at each stage: much of it will disappear and what remains will still be too long to be read. Management of surveillance and manipulation is not unified. Indeed there is a widespread struggle for a share of the profits, and thus also for the priority of the development of this or that potential in the existing society, to the detriment of the other potentials, which nonetheless, so long as they are all part of the same mix, are considered equally respectable.

One also struggles through play. Each officer is led to over-value his agents, as well as the opponents' agents with whom he occupies himself. Each country, not to mention the numerous supranational alliances, currently possesses an undetermined number of police and counter-espionage services, along with secret services, both State and para-State. There are also many private companies dealing in surveillance, security and investigation. The large multinationals naturally have their own services; but so do nationalized companies, even those of modest scale, which no less pursue independent policies at a national and sometimes an international level. One can see that an industrial nuclear group will fight against an oil group, even though both are the property of the same State and, what is more, are dialectically united by their attachment to maintaining high oil prices on the world market. Each particular industry's security service combats sabotage, and needs to organize it against their rivals: a company with important interests in undersea tunnels will be favorably disposed to the insecurity of *ferry-boats* [English in original] and may bribe newspapers in financial trouble to ensure they mention it on the first possible occasion and without too much reflection; a company competing with Sandoz will be indifferent to ground water in the Rhine valley. One secretly surveils what is secret. Thus each of these organizations, confederated with flexibility around those who are in charge of the *raison of the State*, aspires, for its own account, to a species of private hegemony of meaning. Because meaning has been lost along with the knowable center.

Modern society, which, up to 1968, went from success to success, and was persuaded that it was loved, has since then had to renounce these dreams; it prefers to be feared. It knows full well that "its innocent air will no longer return."¹

Thus, a thousand of conspiracies in favor of the established order tangle and clash almost everywhere, with the overlapping of networks and secret questions or actions always pushed harder; and the process of rapid integration is pushed into each branch of the economy, politics and culture. The degree of intermingling in surveillance, disinformation and special activities continually grows in all areas of social life. The general conspiracy has become so dense that

¹ Debord is quoting from his film, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*. [Malcolm Imrie]

it is almost out in the open, each of its branches starts to hinder or trouble the others, because all these professional conspirators are spying on each other without exactly knowing why, or encounter each other by chance, yet without recognizing each other with certainty. Who is observing whom? On whose behalf, apparently? And actually? The real influences remain hidden, and the ultimate intentions can only be suspected with great difficulty and almost never understood. So that while no one can say he is not deluded or manipulated, it is only in rare instances that the manipulator himself can know he has succeeded. And, besides, finding oneself on the winning side of manipulation does not mean that one has justly chosen the strategic perspective. It is thus that tactical successes can get great forces stuck on bad paths.

In the same network, apparently pursuing the same goal, those who only constitute a part of the network are obliged to be ignorant of the hypotheses and conclusions of the other parts, and especially of their ruling nucleus. The quite well known fact that all information on whatever subject under observation may well be entirely imaginary, or in large part false, or very inadequately interpreted, complicates and renders unsure to a great degree the calculations of the inquisitors; because what is sufficient to condemn someone is not sufficient when it comes to recognizing or using him. Since sources of information are in competition, so are falsifications.

It is in these conditions of its existence that we can speak of a tendency to the falling profitability of control, to the extent that it approaches the totality of social space and consequently increases its personnel and its means. Because here each means aspires and labors to become an end. Surveillance spies on and conspires against itself.

Its principal present contradiction, finally, is that it is surveilling, infiltrating and influencing *an absent party*: that which is supposed to want the subversion of the social order. But where can it be seen at work? Because conditions certainly have never been so seriously revolutionary, but it is only governments that think so. Negation has been so thoroughly deprived of its thought that it was dispersed long ago. Because of this, it is only a vague, yet very worrisome threat, and surveillance in its turn has been deprived of the best field of its activity. These powers of surveillance and intervention are exactly led by current necessities, which command their terms of engagement, to operate on the very terrain of this threat in order to combat it *in advance*.² This is why surveillance has an interest in organizing poles of negation itself, which it will instruct with more than the discredited means of the spectacle, so as to influence, not terrorists this time, but theories.³

² According to Luis Manuel Gonzales Mata, a spy in the employ of the Franco regime: "Agents, when they have no further information to report, invent some; when there are no more outrages to be prevented, they provoke some; when there is no longer any extremist organization to infiltrate, they set some up."

³ Likely candidates for manipulated theories would have to include those advanced by the "doctrinaires of 'armed struggle'" (see footnote [22]); and such "new philosophers" as Bernard-Henri Levy. Note as well that, in his 1975 film, *Refutation of All the Judgments, Pro or Con, Thus Far Rendered on the Film "The Society of the Spectacle,"* Debord refers to "the desolate walls of Vincennes University," and goes on to say: "Within living memory no Vincennes student has ever come up with a single theory. This is no doubt why we are currently seeing some of them advocate 'anti-theory.' What else could they parlay into an assistant professorship in that neo-university?" Debord's dislike of Vincennes theorists was in part a response to their theories, but also to their means of supporting themselves. Michel Foucault "undertook a number of research projects for the Ministère de l'Équipement in the 1970s [...] Many well known sociologists and philosophers participated in research financed by this Ministry, such as Deleuze and Guattari who also undertook contract research [...] Lefebvre points out that recuperation has taken a specific form in the years after 1968 in that technocrats got the critics themselves to work out what would be applicable out of the radical critique. Many Marxists sociologists at this time accepted contracts from State ministries." Eleonore Kofman

and Elizabeth Lebas, translators' introduction to Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Blackwell, 1996). As for "cadrist," it refers to *cadres*, business executives.

XXXI.

Baltasar Gracian, that great connoisseur of historical time, tells us with much pertinency in *El Oraculo manual y Arte de Prudencia*: “Governing, discoursing, everything must be done with purpose. Love when you can, because neither the season nor time wait for anyone.”¹

But Omar Khayyam was less of an optimist. “So as to speak clearly and without parables — We are the pieces of the game that plays the sky; — We amuse ourselves with ourselves on the chessboard of Being, — and then we are returned, one by one, to the box of Nothingness.”

¹ Following Debord’s letter to Editions Anagrama dated 7 June 1989, we have translated this passage directly from the Spanish.

XXXII.

The French Revolution involved great changes in the art of war. It was after this experience that Clausewitz could establish the distinction according to which tactics are the use of forces in battle so as to obtain victory, whereas strategy is the use of victories to attain the goals of a war. Europe was subjugated, immediately and lastingly, by the results. But the theory was not established until later, and was developed unequally. First to be appreciated were the positive features directly brought about by a profound social transformation: the enthusiasm and mobility that lived off the land in rendering itself relatively independent of stores and supply trains, the multiplication of numerical strength. These practical elements found themselves counterbalanced by the appearance on the enemy side of similar elements: in Spain, the French armies encountered another popular enthusiasm; in the vast spaces of Russia, a land they could not live off; after the rising in Germany, numerically far superior forces. However, the effect of a total break in the new French tactics, which was the simple basis on which Bonaparte founded his strategy – which consisted of using victories *in advance*, as if acquired on credit: conceiving manoeuvres and their diverse variants from the start as consequences of a victory that was not yet obtained, but would certainly be at the first onslaught – derived also from the forced abandonment of false ideas. This tactic brusquely obliged an abrupt break with false ideas and, at the same time, by the concomitant play of the other innovations outlined above, found the means to achieve such a break. The newly levied French soldiers were incapable of fighting in line, that is, of keeping ranks and firing on command. They would thus be deployed as sharpshooters and practiced firing at will as they advanced on the enemy. Therefore, firing at will found itself exactly to be the only effective kind, which really operated a destructive use of musketry, which proved the most decisive factor in military engagements of the period. Yet military thinking had universally rejected this conclusion in the century that was ending, and the discussion on the question continued through most of the new century, despite constant examples from the practice of combat and the ceaseless progress in range and rate of fire.

The establishment of spectacular domination is seemingly a social transformation so profound that it has radically altered the art of government. This simplification, which has quickly borne such fruit in practice, has not been fully comprehended theoretically. Old prejudices everywhere contradicted, precautions become useless, and even the traces of scruples from other times still hinder this comprehension, which practice establishes and confirms every single day, in the thinking of quite a number of rulers. Not only are the subjugated made to believe that, essentially, they are still living in a world which in fact disappeared, but the rulers themselves sometimes suffer from the thoughtlessness of still believing in it. They come to believe in a part of what they have suppressed, as if it remained a reality and had still to be included in their calculations. This delay will not last long. Those who have achieved so much so easily must necessarily go further. One must not believe that those who have not quickly understood the pliability of the new rules of their game and its form of barbaric grandeur will durably maintain themselves

like an archaism in the surroundings of real power. The destiny of the spectacle is certainly not to end in enlightened despotism.

We must conclude that a change is imminent and ineluctable in the co-opted cast who manage the domination and, notably, those who direct the protection of that domination. In such an affair, the novelty of course will never be displayed on the stage of the spectacle. It will only appear like lightning, which we know only when it strikes. This change, which will decisively complete the work of these spectacular times, will occur discreetly and, although it concerns those already installed in the sphere of power, conspiratorially. It will select those who will take part part in it on this central requirement: that they clearly know what obstacles they have overcome, and of what they are capable.¹

¹ Because of Debord's use of a series of predictions to conclude his *Comments*, one feels comfortable in mentioning that, just four years after his book was published and in the aftermath of the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, some of the people who would later go on to form the "Project for a New American Century" were trying to convince then-President George H. Bush that the time was right for the USA to take over the world. Though these people (Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, and Donald Rumsfeld, among them) failed to convince him, they eventually succeeded with his son, George W. Bush, who was the self-avowed President of the country on 11 September 2001. Ever since then – with and through America's military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Haiti – the efforts to create a New American Empire have been going full-steam.

XXXIII.

The same Sardou also wrote:

Vainly relates to the subject; *in vain* to the object; *uselessly* without use for anyone. One has worked *vainly* when one has done so without success, so that one has wasted one's time and effort: one has worked *in vain* when one has done so without attaining the intended goal, because of the defectiveness of the work. If I cannot complete my task, I work *vainly*; I am uselessly wasting my time and effort. If the task I have done does not have the effect I was expecting, if I have not attained my goal, I have worked *in vain*; that is to say, I have done something useless...

It is also said that someone has worked *vainly* when he has not been rewarded for his work, or when this work has not been accepted; because in this case the worker has wasted his time and effort, without this at all prejudicing the value of his work, which can be very good.

— Paris, February-April 1988.

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Guy Debord
Comments on the Society of the Spectacle
1988

Retrieved on 2020-03-27 from www.notbored.org
First published in French by Editions Gerard Lebovici, 1988. Translated into English by NOT BORED! August 2005. Two footnotes supplemented or created in July 2007 (footnotes #1 and #60); one new footnoted created in August 2007 (footnote #52). All footnotes by NOT BORED! except where noted.

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