

An Illustrated Guide to Guy Debord's 'The Society of the Spectacle'

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Guy Debord's (1931–1994) best-known work, *La société du spectacle* (*The Society of the Spectacle*) (1967), is a polemical and prescient indictment of our image-saturated consumer culture. The book examines the "Spectacle," Debord's term for the everyday manifestation of capitalist-driven phenomena; advertising, television, film, and celebrity.

Debord defines the spectacle as the "autocratic reign of the market economy." Though the term "mass media" is often used to describe the spectacle's form, Debord derides its neutrality. "Rather than talk of the spectacle, people often prefer to use the term 'media,'" he writes, "and by this they mean to describe a mere instrument, a kind of public service." Instead, Debord describes the spectacle as capitalism's instrument for distracting and pacifying the masses. The spectacle takes on many more forms today than it did during Debord's lifetime. It can be found on every screen that you look at. It is the advertisements plastered on the subway and the pop-up ads that appear in your browser. It is the listicle telling you "10 things you need to know about 'x.'" The spectacle reduces reality to an endless supply of commodifiable fragments, while encouraging us to focus on appearances. For Debord, this constituted an unacceptable "degradation" of our lives.

Debord was a founding member of the Situationist International (1957–1972), a group of avant-garde artists and political theorists united by their opposition to advanced capitalism. At varying points the group's members included the writers Raoul Vaneigem and Michèle Bernstein, the artist Asger Jorn, and the art historian T.J. Clark. Inspired primarily by Dadaism, Surrealism, and Marxist philosophy, the SI rose to public prominence during the May 1968 demonstrations during which members of the group participated in student-led occupations and protests. Though the extent of its influence is disputed, there is little doubt that the SI played an active intellectual role during the year's events. Graffiti daubed around Paris paraphrased the SI's ideas and in some cases directly quoted from texts such as *The Society of the Spectacle* and Raoul Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (1967).



The first English translation of Debord's text was published in 1970 by Black and Red Books. The book's cover features J.R. Eyerman's iconic photograph of the premiere of *Bwana Devil* (1952), the first 3D color film. Originally reproduced in *LIFE* magazine, the image captures the film's audience gazing passively at the screen with the use of anaglyph glasses. In the foreground, a besuited, heavy-set gentleman watches the screen intently, his mouth agape. Eyerman's photograph reduces the audience members to uniform rows of spectacled spectators. Although the image encapsulates Debord's contempt for consumer culture, it reductively implies that his work was mediaphobic (Debord later adapted *The Society of the Spectacle* into his first feature-length film by utilizing footage from advertisements, newsreels, and other movies). If we were to judge *The Society of the Spectacle* by Black and Red's cover, we might assume that the book is a straightforward critique of media-driven conformity. Debord's insights however, were far more profound.

The Society of the Spectacle consists of 221 short theses divided across nine chapters. The first thesis reworks the opening line of Karl Marx's *Das Capital* (1867):

Marx: The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities.

Debord: In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation.

By paraphrasing Marx, Debord immediately establishes a connection between the spectacle and the economy. The book essentially reworks the Marxist concepts of commodity fetishism and alienation for the film, advertising, and television age. This concern is encapsulated by Debord's fourth thesis (emphasis my own):

The Spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, *mediated by images*.

Debord observed that the spectacle actively alters human interactions and relationships. Images influence our lives and beliefs on a daily basis; advertising manufactures new desires and aspirations. The media interprets (and reduces) the world for us with the use of simple narratives. Photography and film collapses time and geographic distance — providing the illusion of universal connectivity. New products transform the way we live. Debord's notions can be applied to our present-day reliance on technology. What do you do when you get lost in a foreign city? Do you ask a passer-by for directions, or consult Google Maps on your smartphone? Perhaps Siri can help. Such technology is incredibly useful, but it also *engineers* our behavior. It reduces our lives into a daily series of commodity exchanges. If Debord were alive today, he would almost certainly extend his analysis of the spectacle to the Internet and social media. Debord would no doubt have been horrified by social media companies such as Facebook and Twitter, which monetize our friendships, opinions, and emotions. Our internal thoughts and experiences are now commodifiable assets. *Did you tweet today? Why haven't you posted to Instagram? Did you "like" your friend's photos on Facebook yet?*



To be clear, Debord did not believe that new technology was, in itself, a bad thing. He specifically objected to the use of perceptual technologies for economic gain. The spectacle, which is driven by economic interest and profit, replaces lived reality with the “contemplation of the spectacle.” Being is replaced by *having*, and having is replaced by *appearing*. We no longer live. We aspire. We work to get richer. Paradoxically, we find ourselves working in order to have a “vacation.” We can’t seem to actually *live* without working. Capitalism has thus completely occupied social life. Our lives are now organized and dominated by the needs of the ruling economy:

The alienation of the spectator to the profit of the contemplated object is expressed in the following way: The more [the spectator] contemplates the less he lives; the more he accepts recognizing himself in the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own existence and desires. – Thesis 30

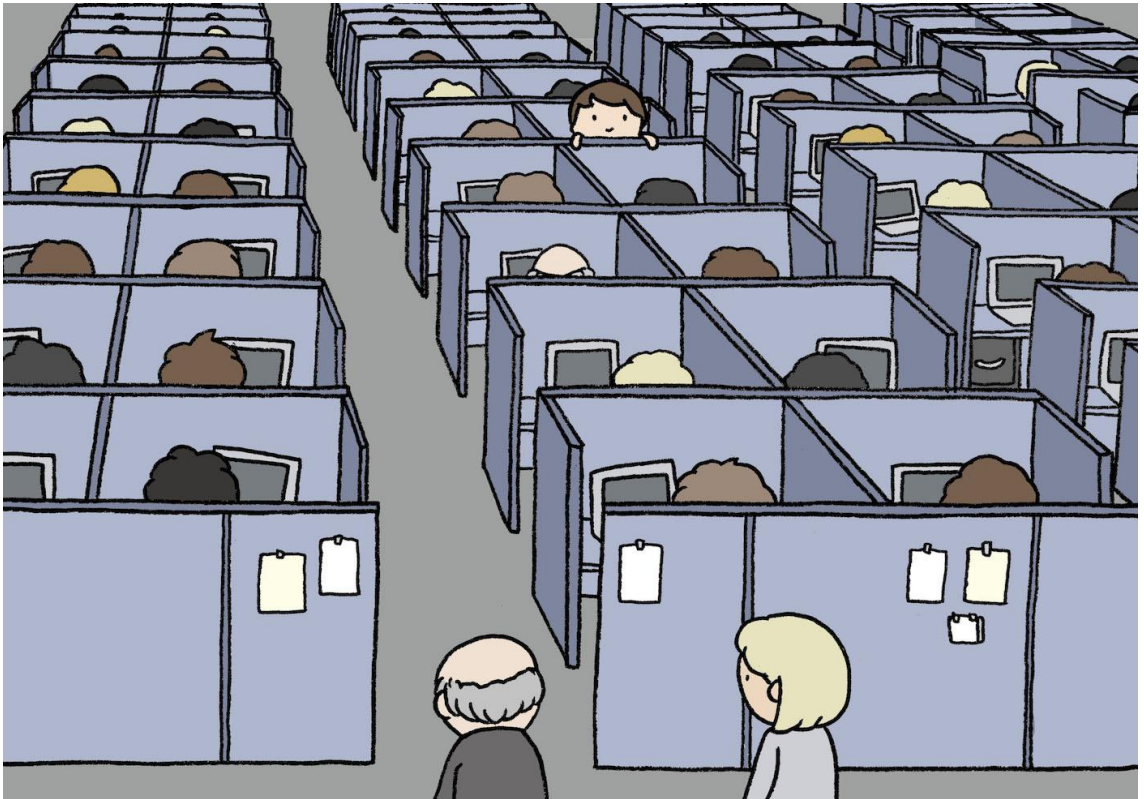
The more his life is now his product, the more he is separated from his life. – Thesis 33

The proliferation of images and desires alienates us, not only from ourselves, but from each other. Debord references the phrase “lonely crowds,” a term coined by the American sociologist David Riesman, to describe our atomization. *The Society of the Spectacle*’s first chapter is entitled “Separation Perfected,” a quality that Debord describes as the “alpha and omega of the spectacle.” Referring to the Marxist concept of false-consciousness, Debord describes how the spectacle conceals the “relations among men and classes.” The spectacle functions as a pacifier for the masses, a tool that reinforces the status quo and quells dissent. “The Spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible. It says nothing more than ‘that which appears is good, that which is good appears,’” writes Debord. “It demands [...] passive acceptance which in fact it already obtained by its manner of appearing without reply, by its monopoly of appearance.”



Although he characterizes the spectacle as a singular and omnipresent “repressive pseudo-environment,” Debord also acknowledges its warring and contradictory nature. “Every given commodity fights for itself, cannot acknowledge the others, and attempts to impose itself everywhere as if it were the only one,” reads thesis 66. As spectators, we regularly experience advertisements for rival products — Pepsi and Coca-Cola, Delta and US Airways, *The X-Factor* and *The Voice*. Often we’re presented with conflicting desires or messages. For instance, a television drama depicting an AA meeting might be preceded by a glamorous vodka advertisement. Such logical inconsistencies are buried by the spectacle’s relentless proffering of goods and imagery. Gradually, we begin to conflate visibility with value. If something is being talked about and seen, we assume that it must be important in some way. “Thus by means of a ruse of *commodity logic*,” writes Debord, “what’s specific in the commodity wears itself out in the fight while the commodity-form moves towards its absolute realization.” Put more simply, our fetishization of images and commodities leads us to overlook the spectacle’s contradictory qualities. “The spectacle, like modern society, is at once unified and divided,” Debord observes. “Like society, it builds its unity on the disjunction.” Debord’s acknowledgement that the spectacle is comprised of competing agents and interests strengthens his critical stance, since it prevents detractors from accusing him of characterizing capitalism as a mindless, monolithic entity.

Debord defines two primary forms of the spectacle — the **concentrated** and the **diffuse**. The concentrated spectacle, which Debord attributes to totalitarian and “Stalinist” regimes, is implemented through the cult of personality and the use of force. The diffuse spectacle, which relies on a rich abundance of commodities, is typified by wealthy democracies. The latter is far more effective at placating the masses, since it *appears* to empower individuals through consumer choice. The diffuse spectacle of modern capitalism propagates itself by exploiting the spectator’s lingering dissatisfaction. Since the pleasure of acquiring a new commodity is fleeting, it is only a matter of time before we pursue a new desire — a new “fragment” of happiness. The consumer is thus mentally enslaved by the spectacle’s inexorable logic: work harder, buy more.

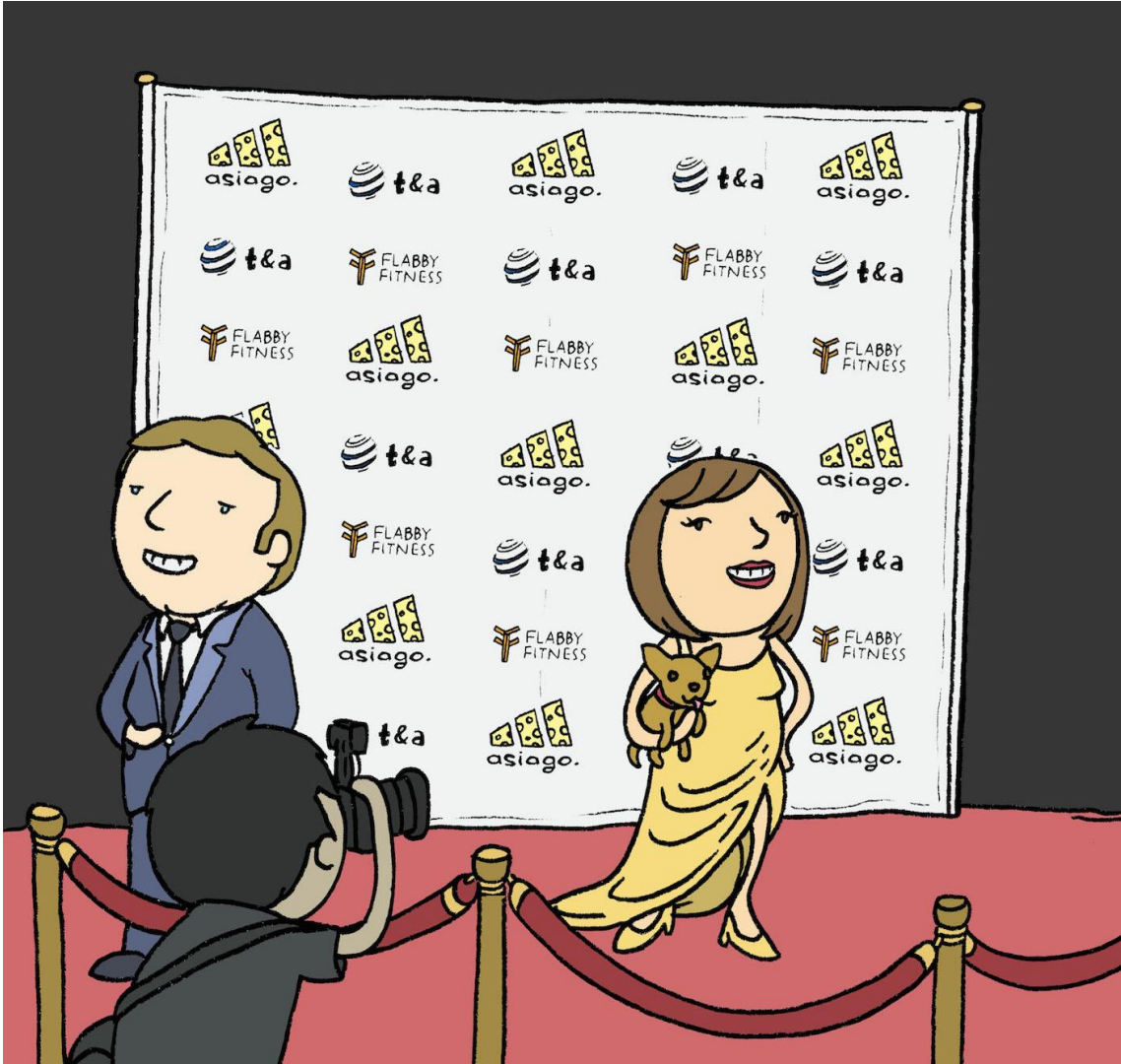


In his 1988 follow-up text, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Debord introduces a third form: the **integrated**. As its name suggests, the integrated spectacle is a combination of diffuse and concentrated elements. Debord bleakly concludes that the integrated spectacle now permeates all reality. “There remains nothing, in culture or nature, which has not been transformed, and polluted according to the means and interests of modern industry,” he writes. Today, the integrated spectacle continues to provide abundant commodities while defending itself with the use of misinformation and misdirection. According to Debord, it does this primarily through the specter of terrorism:

Such a perfect democracy constructs its own inconceivable foe, terrorism. Its wish is *to be judged by its enemies rather than by its results*. The story of terrorism is written by the state and it is therefore highly 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, or in any case more rational and democratic.

Debord’s observation appears particularly prescient today when one compares the amount of media coverage that terrorism receives in comparison to climate change (the latter being the direct consequence of our relentless consumerism). First time readers of Debord’s work may prefer to read *Comments* first, since it is a brisker and more informal read than *The Society of the Spectacle*. Unlike his original text, Debord refers to contemporary events to illustrate his arguments, including the Iran-Contra affair, Manuel Noriega’s dictatorship of Panama, and the sinking of the *Rainbow Warrior*.

Comments also examines the phenomenon of celebrity culture. Debord observes that fame “has acquired infinitely more importance than the value of anything one might actually be capable of doing.” Although *The Society of the Spectacle* largely focuses on broader themes such as alienation, Debord dedicates two extended theses to the subject of “stars.” He is particularly contemptuous of celebrities, branding them the “enemy of the individual.” The star markets a lifestyle of leisure, “compensat[ing] for the fragmented productive specializations that are actually lived.”



As embodiments of the spectacle, celebrities necessarily “renounce all autonomous qualities in order to identify [themselves] with the general law of obedience to the course of things.” Their Individuality is sacrificed in order to become a figurehead of the profit-driven system. After all, celebrities not only peddle commodities, but are commodities themselves. They serve as projections of our false aspirations. For Debord, this makes them less than human:

The admirable people in whom the system personifies itself are well known for not being what they are; they became great men by stooping below the reality of the smallest individual life, and everyone knows it. – Thesis 61

Debord had an equally withering attitude towards the art world. In *Comments*, Debord blithely declares that “art is dead,” describing current artistic practices as “recuperated neo-dadaism.” His conclusion is unsurprising given the anti-art stance he extolled as a member of Paris’ avant-garde scene. His attitude towards art and art history is exemplified by two key passages in *The Society of the Spectacle*:

The affirmation of [art’s] independence is the beginning of its disintegration. – Thesis 186

When culture becomes nothing more than a commodity, it must also become the star commodity of the spectacular society. – Thesis 193

Debord believed that Dadaism and Surrealism marked the end of modern art, describing them as “the last great assault of the revolutionary proletarian movement.” For Debord, art was another phenomenon that had been subsumed by the spectacle. Its commodification reduced art movements into “congealed past culture:”

Once this “collection of souvenirs” of art history becomes possible, it is also *the end of the world of art*. In this age of museums, when artistic communication can no longer exist, all the former moments of art can be admitted equally. – Thesis 189

Debord cites a study by Clark Kerr in which the economist suggested that industries involving the “consumption of knowledge” (i.e. arts, tech, and entertainment) would become the “driving force” in the development of the US economy. It marks another instance in which Debord’s observations appear to parallel our contemporary situation.

The Society of the Spectacle’s critical longevity can be partly attributed to Debord’s refusal to describe the spectacle’s form. By focusing instead on the spectacle’s ever-shifting qualities, Debord encourages the reader to scrutinize the world around them. It is for this reason that the book is routinely celebrated for its prescience. A contemporary reader can readily apply Debord’s analysis to the fracturing of the media industry, the rise of the internet, or to the use of social media. Note how Debord starts multiple sentences with the phrase “the spectacle is...”:

The spectacle is the other side of money: it is the general abstract equivalent of all commodities. – Thesis 49

The spectacle is nothing more than an image of happy unification surrounded by desolation and fear at the tranquil center of misery. – Thesis 63

The spectacle is absolutely dogmatic and at the same time cannot really achieve any solid dogma. – Thesis 71

Debord's aggressive use of repetition parallels the spectacle's omnipresence and reinforces his critique. It's a clever rhetorical device. Full of pithy aphorisms, *The Society of the Spectacle* reads less like an academic text and more like a manifesto — a call to arms against passive spectatorship. One of the book's most cited passages is the ninth thesis: "In a world which *really is topsy-turvy*, the true is a moment of the false." As with the book's opening sentence, the ninth thesis plays off the work of another philosopher. Debord's aphorism is an inversion of a passage from the preface of Georg Wilhelm Fredrich Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807): "The false is a moment of the true." *The Society of the Spectacle* is littered with both subtle and explicit references to the work of other thinkers. Aside from Hegel and Marx, Debord also references György Lukács, William Shakespeare, Arthur Schopenhauer, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Niccolò Machiavelli. This meta-textual approach places Debord's work into a lineage of celebrated texts whilst also embodying the SI's concept of *détournement*, a term variously translated as "diversion," "detour," "reroute," and "hijack."

The concept was initially devised by the Letterist International (founded by Debord) and later revised by the SI. In a 1957 essay entitled "A User's Guide to *Détournement*" Debord and the artist Gil J. Wolman define the concept as:

The mutual interference of two worlds of feeling, or the juxtaposition of two independent expressions, supersed[ing] the original elements and produc[ing] a synthetic organization of greater efficacy.

The SI championed *détournement* as a means of interrupting the fabric of the everyday — whether it be repurposing old film reels, subverting iconic images or slogans, or devising literature inspired by the works of other writers. The concept bridges the appropriating practices of avant-garde artists such as Marcel Duchamp, with the activist "culture jamming" of groups such as The Yes Men and the Billboard Liberation Front. In subverting and referencing the work of other authors, Debord uses *The Society of the Spectacle* as a means of demonstrating its practical use. The act of *détournement* imbues revered and historicized works of art and literature with new life, thereby overcoming their congealment at the hands of the spectacle. As Debord and Wolman write:

Détournement not only leads to the discovery of new aspects of talent; in addition, clashing head-on with all social and legal conventions, it cannot fail to be a powerful cultural weapon in the service of real class struggle.



The concept of *Détournement* represented the synthesis of many of Debord's ideas, particularly his anti-art and anti-commodity stances. He did however, acknowledge its weaknesses, namely that an act of *détournement* requires the viewer's familiarity with the original, pre-*détourned* subject matter. Debord compensates for this in *The Society of the Spectacle* by preceding each chapter with a prominent quote, thereby alerting the reader to the meta-textual nature of his work. Despite its cultural influence, the concept of *détournement* raises a number of questions. For instance, how does one measure the efficacy of a *détourned* work? Can a *détourned* work be subsumed by the spectacle, and if so, how does one prevent such an action?

Although *The Society of the Spectacle* is recognized as an incisive indictment of the consumerist experience, readers may well reject Debord's assertion that capitalism has inherently degraded our social lives. After all, how can society produce new services and products without some form of industrialization? On this particular point, Debord is unrelenting, arguing that capitalism — having already served our most basic survival needs (the means to food, shelter, etc.) — relies on fabricating new desires and distractions in order to propagate itself and maintain its oppression over the working classes:

The new privation is not far removed from the old penury since it requires most men to participate as wage workers in the endless pursuit of [...] attainment ... everyone knows he must submit or die. The reality of this blackmail accounts for the general acceptance of the illusion at the heart of the consumption of modern commodities.
– Thesis 47

At the heart of Debord's critique is his belief that capitalism is an inherently *uncreative* system. The obsession with profit demonstrably works *against* human interest, especially when it comes to the protection of the environment. In *Comments*, Debord quotes Daniel Verilhe, a representative of Elf-Aquitaine's chemicals subsidiary, who, at a conference regarding a ban of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) argued that it would 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," scoffs Debord.

The most significant criticism that can be leveled at *The Society of the Spectacle* is Debord's failure to proffer any convincing solutions for countering the spectacle, other than describing an abstract need to put "practical force into action." In his final thesis, Debord declares the pressing need for "self-emancipation" from the spectacle:

This "historical mission of installing truth in the world" cannot be accomplished either by the isolated individual, or by the atomized crowd subjected to manipulation, but now as ever by the class which is able to effect the dissolution of all classes by bringing all power into the dealienating form of realized democracy, the council, in which practical theory controls itself and sees its own action. This is only possible where individuals are "directly linked to universal history"; only where dialogue arms itself to make its own conditions victorious." – Thesis 221

In 1994, six years after he described the spectacle as "the most important event to have occurred this century," Debord killed himself at his home in the remote French village of Champot. A life of hard drinking had led to a diagnosis of peripheral neuritis, a debilitating and extremely painful

condition whereby the body's nerve endings burn away. By most accounts, Debord had long since retreated from the French intellectual scene, spending his days drinking with friends and obsessively engaged in games of strategy (Atlas Press republished *A Game of War*, which Debord co-authored with his wife Alice Becker-Ho, in 2008). Andrew Hussey, a biographer of Debord, described his decline as "a slow suicide." In an 2001 article for the *Guardian*, Hussey wrote:

It depressed him in his later years that [his] insight had long since ceased to be a revolutionary call to arms but the most accurate, if banal, description of modern life [...] While Debord's public life was predicated upon his revolutionary intentions, in private he sought oblivion in infamy, exile and alcoholism.



“Of the small number of things which I have liked and done well, drinking is by far the thing I have done best,” Debord quips in his 1989 memoir. “Although I have read a lot, I have drunk more. I have written much less than most people who write; but I have drunk more than the majority of the people who drink.” Indeed, for someone who wrote comparatively little, Debord cast a huge shadow over postmodern theory and discourse. His interrogation of capitalism and visual culture preempted the work of theorists such as Jean Braudrillard and Jean-Francois Lyotard, each of whom dedicated their work to the frenetic and orgiastic world of images in which we live.

Although the ‘spectacle’ has become a clichéd term for the modern condition, there is no denying the richness of Debord’s original text. *The Society of the Spectacle* is littered with tangential lines of enquiry such as the psychological impact of modernist architecture, or the nature of celebrity. Each successive reading unveils another layer of nuance. For instance, take this passage in which Debord reflects upon a quote by the sociologist Joseph Gabel:

The need to imitate which is felt by the consumer is precisely the infantile need conditioned by all the aspects of his fundamental dispossession. In the terms applied by Gabel to a completely different pathological level, “the abnormal need for representation here compensates for a tortuous feeling of being on the margin of existence.”
– Thesis 219

Note the words “need” and “representation.” Ask yourself – what compels us to buy the latest tech gadget? Why do we spill our feelings out on Facebook, in posts that are archived on servers deep underground? Which is more important, the expression of the feeling itself, or the knowledge that it will be documented and *seen* by others? Why do we incessantly take selfies, or record our every moment for posterity? Are we afraid of being a nobody – of being on “the margin of existence?” If you’re concerned with how you *appear*, then are you really *living*? Even now, almost 50 years after its original publication, *The Society of the Spectacle* reads as if it were written for our time:

The spectator’s consciousness, imprisoned in a flattened universe, bound by the *screen* of the spectacle behind which his life has been deported, knows only the *fictional* speakers who unilaterally surround him with their commodities and the politics of their commodities. The spectacle, in its entirety, is his “mirror image.” – Thesis 218



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