



## Comments on the Society of the Spectacle

*Guy Debord, Malcolm Imrie (Translator)*

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This is a seminal text in cultural theory and an essential pocket handbook for situationists wherever they may be.

## Comments on the Society of the Spectacle Details

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## Nathan says

I read this whilst in New York for the election, and some of Debord's observations, from over 20 years ago, are still scarily appropriate.

These may lose some impact or seem unnecessarily hyperbolic when taken out of context, but here are some highlights:

"The manufacture 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 circularity of information, always returning to the same short list of trivialities, passionately proclaimed as major discoveries." (p. 13)

"Ineptitude compels universal respect; it is no longer permitted to laugh at it." (p. 15)

"For every imbecility presented by the spectacle, there are only the media's professionals to give an answer" ... "The most useful expert, of course, is the one who can lie." (pp. 16–17)

"There is no place left where people can discuss the realities which concern them, because they can never lastingly free themselves from the crushing presence of media discourse" (p. 19)

"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" (p. 20)

"self-proclaimed democratic society seems to be generally accepted as the realisation of a fragile perfection." (p. 21)

"...in contemporary Europe no party or fraction of a party even tries to pretend that they wish to change anything significant. The commodity is beyond criticism..." (p. 21)

"Such a perfect democracy constructs its own inconceivable foe, terrorism ... compared with terrorism, everything else must be acceptable, or in any case more rational and democratic" (p. 24)

"people who understand nothing of history can readily be manipulated" (p. 25)

"permanent self-denial is the price the individual pays for the tiniest bit of social status" (p. 32) (and that was written 15 years before Facebook).

I could go on, but you get the gist.

I feared this would be a bit of a 'rebellious teenager's bible', but there are some very pertinent observations. It is, however, unnecessarily ambiguous at points, and leaves the reader with very few solutions, or any optimistic roadmap. There is also, at this stage in my life, not much I didn't already know or feel deep down.

Nonetheless, another excellent weapon in my arsenal of understanding how this crazy world works.

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### **Graham says**

oh man, this is so much better than the Society of the Spectacle. In The Society of the Spectacle Debord had kind of a naive optimism going on. This, on the other hand, is a wonderfully pessimistic critique of capitalism. Essentially claims that capitalism has absorbed all of its alternatives. There are no other options. We are all fucked. But the best part? Well, that would be Debord hinting to us that we still need to make the fuckers pay. Even if winning is impossible it is still worth it to try and destroy it all. I'm not sure exactly what his reasoning is, but I suspect it has something to do with sweet revenge.

It should also be noted that where the Society of the Spectacle was pretentious and somewhat unoriginal(what did Debord say that Marx had not already stated?), this book is very straight forward and free of confused hipster jargon. One gets the sense that Debord actually believes what he is saying this time and the conclusions he comes to are absolutely horrifying.

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### **Chris Balz says**

Some interesting updates to the general theory laid out in "Society of the Spectacle". Expanding on his earlier ideas about "vacation", the late Debord notes the trend toward constant travel serving as the primary mark of an individual's membership in the elite class.

This is a good 1990s-era update to the older work from the 1960s. We're lucky to have it since Debord passed on a few years later. The book provokes us to ask, "has much changed?" and also to ask what we can do to break out of the society of the spectacle.

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### **R Reddebrek says**

A very important commentary on our society, especially the section on terrorism. I personally recommend reading this before tackling Society of the Spectacle, despite or rather because of it being a follow up.

Debord grew to regret the deliberately opaque and jargon heavy language he used for Society of the Spectacle, partly because it lead to him being often misunderstood despite the books popularity. As such the text is much less jargon heavy and more direct helping to ground the reader in his writing style and references.

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### **David says**

;(  
such a resigned text

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### **Jim Robles says**

How timely for the age of Trump Tweets. We cannot say we were not warned. A very good read indeed.

From the article below: :“The Society of the Spectacle” is still relevant today. With its descriptions of human social life subsumed by technology and images, it is often cited as a prophecy of the dangers of the internet age now upon us. And perhaps more than any other 20th-century philosophical work, it captures the profoundly odd moment we are now living through, under the presidential reign of Donald Trump.”

We can only hope that, again from the article below: "The unfolding of national protests and marches, and more important the return to local politics and community organizing, may well succeed where the anarchic spasms of 1968 failed, and shatter the spell of the spectacle."

Four stars for this one. Although it is prescient on some aspects, it is purblind on others.

The xxiv discussion of how Prohibition empowered, and expanded the influence of, the Mafia is prescient on how our drug laws have created the cartels.

See xxix for thoughts on how we are driven by technology.

xxx failed to see how technology would enable the ability to watch everywhere all the time.

xxxx. "Going from success to success, until 1968 modern society was convinced it was loved." Did Debord sleep through the First and Second World Wars? Was he oblivious of the Frankfurt School?

I found this one in:

The Opinion Pages. -- Trump and the ‘Society of the Spectacle’  
by Robert Zaretsky. -- THE STONE FEB. 20, 2017  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/20/opinion/trump-society-spectacle.html>

I downloaded a .pdf file from <http://libcom.org.libcom.org/files/Co...>

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### **Philip G says**

The struggles we face today to combat assaults on democracy are not new, but the pointed criticism and speculation on the future of “media as spectacle” is terrifying when we see what has become of modern political discourse and the talking head / opinion based “news” we see more often than simple facts & current events. This piece and its original are as timely as ever.

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## **Sean A. says**

i thoroughly 'enjoyed' this book so much as one can 'enjoy' such a probing analysis of the total daily misery we are subject to. debord famously called this misery 'the spectacle' in his 1967 work 'society of the spectacle', though it's been called society, capitalism, the totality, 'the media', 'the state' (according to anarchists), 'biopower' and even 'civilization/leviathan' (by freddy perlman and primitivists). so what's new with the spectacle in this book vs back in 1967? well here, debord makes a striking comparison between the spectacle and the mafia, shows how when some say 'the media' they mean the spectacle, various recuperation has been intensified (the most oblique of all arguments cus here debord deals with some of what would become his readership, so-called revolutionaries) and so forth.

i'm personally surprised it took myself so long to stumble upon this book since i was so touched and enthralled with society of the spectacle and found it more nuanced and relevant for modern american capitalism/spectacular culture than a lot of so-called radical shit being written to this day. also i can't help but wonder what such a hard-edged analysis of the spectacle would look like in 2012. certainly tiqqun/invisible committee has tried hard, and while i really love some of that stuff and am at least entertained in a weird subcultural way by all of it, it just doesn't resonate with me quite as fabulously as debord's books do. ah well!

so what would debord say about a review of his book 'comments on the society of the spectacle' by a boho-anarchist nobody on goodreads from a computer in a collective house in st. louis, america? who knows, tho probably, in his best vein nothing nice, but here is one of my little contributions to the spectacle nonetheless while at other times trying doggedly to break its spell.

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## **????? says**

Much more pessimistic than he was when he first published the Society of the Spectacle 20 years before, in this follow-up Guy Debord gives his abstract ideas a more concrete form and ends up with the conclusion that there's no escaping the spectacle, if anything it can only grow stronger and more dominant. No wonder he suicided a few years later.

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## **Esteban says**

Frente a un libro de crítica cultural de hace unas décadas (este de 1988, el ensayo original de 1967) es fácil formular todos los cambios que ocurrieron en tono de reproche. "¡No vio venir Internet! ¡No previó las redes sociales!" Así suele sonar la voz del que no distingue a un crítico de un *early adopter*. Es cierto, las tecnologías de comunicación de 1988 no hacían viables las estrategias de réplica, victimización, *sousveillance*, *crowdsourcing* ni censura descentralizada que ahora son ubicuas. Esa distancia histórica permite en cambio ver cómo y por qué envejece un ensayo sobre los efectos, digamos, fenomenológicos de la comunicación. A Debord le ocurre algo típico de los intelectuales públicos y muy común entre graduados de humanidades: identifican a las posibilidades sociales, políticas e intelectuales abiertas por una tecnología con sus manifestaciones más inmediatas. Cuando Debord afirma que "(l)a desaparición de la personalidad acompaña fatalmente las condiciones de la existencia sometida a las normas espectaculares y, de este modo, cada vez más alejada de la posibilidad de conocer experiencias auténticas y, por eso mismo, de descubrir sus preferencias individuales" uno encuentra un contraste brutal con el clima contemporáneo. Pero, ¿tiene eso una importancia tan grande? La condición del usuario final de un medio siempre es alienada en algún grado.

Un análisis de su mundo de vida (por usar una jerga fenomenológica algo anticuada) no tiene porque señalar una salida. La falta de atención a la técnica podía disculparse en 1988, teniendo en cuenta la gran centralización de los medios tradicionales. Una obra actual de este tipo, sin embargo, debería estar más atenta a la infraestructura técnica y menos seducida por la ideación paranoica que estos *Comentarios*.

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### **David says**

Excellent follow up to Society of the Spectacle. Really helps clarify the ideas in the original book. It is especially eye opening to how and why the political climate today is so insane.

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### **David Katzman says**

A must read. Although it enhances your understanding to read *Society of the Spectacle* first, it's not absolutely necessary. SotS is one of the most politically astute grand visions of the social order ever written. Revolutionary. Profound. Enlightening. (And admittedly somewhat difficult in degree-of-esoteric-jargon. But if you can accept not understanding everything, it's worth it.)

Debord was of course French and the original work inspired the student/union workers revolt that occurred in France in 1968. Debord and his fellow movement leaders were called The Situationists or Situationist International. It's rather amazing to think, from the current perspective of a relatively inactive, uninspired and uneducated American society, that an esoteric book of political theory inspired student to lead a mass strike involving up to 11 million workers for two weeks. This was roughly 2/3 of the French workforce. The closest thing that has occurred today is the revolution in Egypt.

The students and workers in '68 were primarily revolting against modern consumerist and technologist society; the movement was anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist. Yes, it was grounded in Marxism, but it was quite opposed to both Communism and Capitalism. They were decidedly anti-Stalinist. Strangely enough, The Situationists married Marxist thinking with avant-garde art.

Debord advocated for businesses and industry to be run by individual workers' councils--the employees run their own companies, not executives or managers. Not a centralized Communist government, but local, autonomous collectives. I think this would certainly be a big improvement over the way our current society is run, but my biggest objection to Marxism has been the presumption that industry should exist at all. I think the unstoppable juggernaut which is global warming demonstrates that processing natural materials on an industrial scale is a suicidal practice. But despite my opposition to industrial product, Debord critique of civilization is invaluable as it demonstrates exactly how our self-destructive behavior is obscured and transformed by "The Spectacle." Interestingly, in this book, the Comments on his original, he does not mention the workers' councils at all.

So, what is the Spectacle? It's not just advertising, television and the media although those are significant tools and aspects of it. The Spectacle is the totality of methods, constructs and communications used in an advanced capitalist society to construct a false reality to mask the real one, the degraded reality created by Capitalism. Baudrillard is a good reference here, see Screened Out, who talks about how our experiences have been "virtualized." All branding, for example, acts as a tool to distract consumers from reality and get them to focus on symbolism instead of concrete reality. Nike represents sports, endurance, overcoming

challenges, grabbing what you want from life, athleticism and through celebrity endorsements, the peak that the body can achieve. The reality is that almost all Nike clothes and shoes are made by poor overworked children and adults in third-world countries who barely survive on poverty-maintaining wages. In another regard, why is one bag intended to carry supplies priced at \$10 and the next one \$500. Because it's Land's End vs. Gucci. An illusion. It gets deeper and deeper the more you look at the illusions that motivate us. The fact that every time we drive our cars we're spewing poison that contributes to global warming. These realities are constantly obscured and obfuscated along with many, many others. Our entire political system is based on falsification of the debate, side issues and distractions. We have dumb and dumber parties to choose from. For a reason...even when you support the lesser of two evils, you're still supporting the system. Obama provided cover and bandaids to a system of control. Trump is pure spectacle and falsification married to aggressive plunder.

This particular book, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, published 22 years after *Society of the Spectacle*, is a thoughtful gloss on the original, updating some thoughts on how the Spectacle has evolved over the years, strengthened its grip on us, and continued to weave a web of lies that is nearly inescapable—because it benefits those who currently control the wealth and power. A valuable book and highly recommended.

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### **Rui Coelho says**

The generalized rebellion of the 1960s forced capitalism to adapt. Twenty-one years after the acclaimed *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord analyses the new capitalist social-form, the Integrated Spectacle.

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### **rhenvar says**

Started like an addendum for tSotS, ended like a suicide note

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### **Mountainroot says**

?να πολ? καλ? και σοβαρ? βιβλ?ο το οπο?ο ?μως η ελληνικ? ?κδοση με χ?λασε.  
Δεν ε?ναι ?μορφα γραμμ?να και επειδ? ?χεις να κ?νεις με βαθι?ς ιδ?ες δεν βοηθ?ει ο τρ?πος γραφ?ς του.

Οπ?τε αν καλ? το βιβλ?ο και οι ιδε?ς του η εκτ?λεση ?ταν πολ? κακ?.

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