

Echoes of the Spectacle: Reflections on Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* in the Context
of European and American Youth Culture in the 1960s

Throughout the last four decades, historians, artists, and even scientists have pondered on how and why the so-called 'counter culture' of the youth in America and Europe came into being in the dawn of the 1960s. The American scholar, Theodore Roszak, was perhaps the first to explore the idea of a counter culture of the youth in his text 'The Making of a Counter Culture', published in 1968, and the debate has been flourishing ever since. One might even say that the term 'counter culture' has been inseparably bound up with the decade of the sixties. While it is still difficult to state the definitive reason for the uprising of this richly faceted phenomenon, it may be useful to take a look at the perhaps most radical theorist of the decade, the French writer, activist, and filmmaker, Guy Debord. In 1968, when the Summer of Love of '67 was still gleaming in the distance, and the Woodstock Festival was still to come, Debord published his most famous book *The Society of the Spectacle*. Without suggesting that the book had any *direct* influence on political activists, hippies, diggers or free-lovers of the decade, one does dare to suggest that Debord's spectacular manifesto can be read in such a way that it may explain what went on in at least a part of the 'universal mind' of the 1960s. In other words, it might prove to be an explaining factor to recall what the voice of the book was shouting out in 1968, and perhaps even more importantly, for whom it might have spoken. This essay will focus on the general theories of *The Society of the Spectacle*, as well as on the ideas of the counter culture, as it was expressed by the youth in the late 1960s. Accordingly, I shall attempt to draw a connection between the 'message' of the book and the thoughts and reflections of the youth culture of the 1960s. To sum up in a place of actuality,

and to suggest the continued relevance of Debord's writings, I shall take a brief glimpse on Andy Merrifield's new book *Magical Marxism*, which deals with the connection between Debord's theories and magical realism, as it is expressed in the literature of Gabriel Garcia Márquez. This might help to comprehend the relevance of the sixties as a 'decade of change', as well as the ongoing interest for the writings of Guy Debord.

One could argue that 'disillusion' is a word that rhymes with the general sentiment of many young Americans in the 1960s. Even though history can always be looked at from many different angles, 'disillusion' is a term that contains so wide connotations that it seems appropriate to use it in this context. The Civil Rights protests, demonstrations against the Vietnam War and the uprising of the Women's Movement all had something in common, and one might dare to say that it was a desperate wish for change. Both in Europe and in the States, many young people received a wake-up call that might have been sparked by a feeling of less and less confidence in the decision-making of the authorities. Especially in the States, a part of this new generation had grown up in a society of economic abundance and welfare, and teenagers had never been this privileged before. But the 'fuzzy feeling' of the 1950s was somehow starting to fade, and a generation gap between these 'kids' – now coming of age in a decade where nothing happened in slow motion, but where everything happened in fast forward – and their parents was shaping itself in the margins of the overwhelming historical events of the time. Alongside disillusion, many young people were experiencing a growing feeling of alienation towards the society surrounding them – a society of their parents – and so many teenagers were looking for new ways of understanding the world. 'Alienation' is another word that appears frequently in *The Society of the Spectacle*, and so it is possible that the language of Debord focalizes a 'general' social atmosphere at the time. Inspired by Eastern philosophy, one of the main messages of the hippies was about looking beyond the illusion;

beyond the framework of society, to create something new that would not be infected by capitalism's request to give and take, and take some more. As Timothy Miller puts it in *The Hippies and American Values*: 'The hippies were getting at root matters when, for example, they questioned the very rationality which Western culture has been built' (Miller 4). Surely not everybody could identify with the hippies, or the Beatles, or the miniskirts of Mary Quant, but many people must have noticed that 'something was happening' that had not happened before; a counter culture of the privileged youth was coming into existence.

Guy Debord was born in Paris in 1931, long before the rage of the sixties had begun. In Andy Merrifield's biography *Guy Debord*, he is depicted as being a 'precocious child, insecure and arrogant' (Merrifield 16), neglecting his law school studies at the Sorbonne, while reading extensively the books he himself preferred, and later, 'Dada and Surrealist texts became his staple' (Merrifield 19). In general, Merrifield's description of Debord is that of a youth in revolt, a natural background for a person who would become a harsh critic of society and its pitfalls. As a young man living in Paris in the fifties, Debord took great interest in the writer Isidore Ducasse (known as Lautréamont), and he came to be especially fascinated by the poet and pugilist, Arthur Craven, a character often associated with the Dada and Surrealism movements. As Merrifield puts it, Debord and his friends 'were lost prophets of an age of innocence and *naïveté* and mad, raving ideals' (Merrifield 22). In many ways, Debord's youth in the fifties almost sounds as a precursor of what many young people came to express through the counter culture in the sixties. Accordingly, Debord was in his thirties when the hippies entered the stage, and while sympathizing with the students of the 1968 student revolt in Paris, Debord's participation might have been that of a wise uncle, someone to look up to. In Paris, in 1968, as Merrifield states, 'the spirit of *The Society of the Spectacle* was there, though some had never fully understood it, or even read it' (Merrifield 73). I find it interesting

that Merrifield uses the word 'spirit' to express the influence of Debord's provocative book. One does not have to emphasize that the 221 theses that constitute the total work are not easily read, and so it is quite possible that many students might have just skimmed the pages, instead of close-reading the whole piece. Perhaps, though, a brief glance on the first pages of *The Society of the Spectacle* might prove to be sufficient to understand the essential points of the whole text. Debord himself stated in 1992: 'it [the theory of the book] testifies to what was the most extreme position taken up during the confrontations of 1968' (Debord 7-8, in the preface to the third French edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1992), and so even though the work articulated an extreme (partly Marxist) opposition to the framework of society, the general 'spirit' of the book is likely to have matched the sentiments of young Europeans and Americans who were looking for mouthpieces to express their smouldering mood of rebellion.

In the first thesis of the book, Debord writes: 'All that once was directly lived has become mere representation' (Debord #1). As mentioned above, I would argue that it is possible to read a few lines of the book, and still grasp the overall idea of the text as a whole, of course adding a bit of enterprise when reading. In other words, when trying to comprehend what Debord is actually saying, it is highly important to keep the fire of one's own imagination burning (a point that I will return to, when contemplating the ideas of Andy Merrifield's *Magical Marxism*). Thus, the sentence quoted above, which Debord has deliberately placed in the first thesis of his book, puts into words something very complex and yet very essential about modern society and life in general, namely that life as we *see* it is not life as it *is*. What we do see, is 'an immense accumulation of *spectacles*' (Debord #1), and these spectacles do not reflect reality – they reflect ideology. According to Debord, this ideology is promoted by advanced capitalism. Professor of political science, Richard Gilman-Opalsky, explains this point into more detail: 'The shared world that we live in is the material realization of a

particular ideology, it is ideology materialized. This is precisely what makes society a spectacle – society is the embodiment of particular worldviews but is presented as a natural environment, as a terrain for (and not *already* an expression of) ideology' (Gilman-Opalsky 120, from the essay 'Why New Socialist Theory Needs Guy Debord'). One might say that this type of environment 'deceives' the senses of the people living in it. Furthermore, Debord argues that the 'particular ideology' dominating society is regenerating itself constantly through the government and the mass media, both institutions encouraging consumerism and the philosophy of more-wants-more. Debord reflects on this philosophy as a collection of ideas that never stands still, and therefore it becomes impossible for the spectator to gain a critical position towards it. How can one be critical about something that essentially is part of everything, and therefore is impossible to fix with the eyes?

So far, it has hopefully become clear that what Debord argues is that the spectacle occupies 'space', in the sense that it is ubiquitous. Economy dominates every aspect of modern life, and so the spectacle transforms everything into a commodity, even people. In other words, it occupies the space of the mind, both the collective and the individual mind. But the spectacle also governs 'time'. Debord argues that people living in the society of the spectacle are living in a 'never-ending-present' which functions as a replacement of both the memory of the past and the anticipation of the future. The high speed of modern times, implemented as a result of industrialization, and now generally perceived as the inevitable circumstance of modern life, pushes the boundaries of past, present and future, and promotes this 'never-ending-present' as a *space of time* that has lost memory and is instead in a constant phase of renewal. Thus, citizens of the society of the spectacle will always just be contemplating, as opposed to penetrating the system. They are given no chance to meditate upon the construction within they live, and therefore they do not notice their own partaking in building it. As it is expressed

in the book 'Guy Debord and the Situationist International', a collection of texts and documents collected and edited by Tom McDonough, it is frequently mentioned that Debord considers everyday life to be limited by 'the scarcity of free time', and that free time in turn constitutes a 'colonized sector', reserved for the privileged. In short, one might even say that time in itself has become a commodity; something one is not given for free.

These are the main arguments of *The Society of the Spectacle*, put forward already in the first thesis. The rest of the book, however, explains and discusses how this type of society has developed through the misrepresentation of history, time and the relations between people. The latter is perhaps the most important factor of the book. Debord states over and over again that the most critical aspect of modern society is that relations between commodities have supplanted relations between people, thus meaning that people to a certain extent treat each other as if they were objects of different currencies. According to Debord, this is what happens in a society that is built upon the separation of people into different classes. Modern society has not rejected feudalistic structures, only converted them into a system of classes, where the bourgeois is in power. 'The bourgeois', as Debord states, 'came to power because it was the class of the developing economy' (Debord #88), and the proletariat, which constitutes the majority of society, has nothing to say because it has no influence on the economy besides producing the actual commodities 'in silence', so to speak. The solution towards decentralizing power is not to be found in an attempt of the proletariat to achieve the same 'position' in society as the bourgeois. In contrast, the proletariat must position itself outside the discourse of 'the system', and seek other ways of gaining a voice. As Debord says, 'the proletariat will never come to embody power unless it becomes the class of consciousness' (Debord #88). This is due to the fact that the reality that the 'spectacle' offers has nothing to do with reality itself. As mentioned before, the spectacle is a representation, an image really,

and if society is to be changed, it has to be inverted first. The representation put forth by the spectacle must be acknowledged as that: a *representation* of reality, and nothing more. The proletariat must accept this construction, and then invert it. Guy Debord was particularly fond of the concept of *détournement*; especially in the sense of inverting the dominating discourse (of advanced capitalism); turning it against itself. *Détournement* became a key word within the Situationist International, the movement Debord helped to establish and proclaimed himself leader of in 1957 in Paris.

It is relevant to take the Situationist International into consideration in this essay, for as a movement they might have inspired others to an extent that Guy Debord was unable to on his own. Accordingly, Debord did not participate in the May-Days in Paris on his own, but came together with other members of the SI. As with the writing of Debord, the fundamental ideas of the movement might seem slightly opaque and at times contradictory, but American author Greil Marcus' description of the SI makes a good starting point: "They were an attempt to fashion a new version of daily life – a new version of how people organized their wishes, pains, fears, hopes, ambitions, limits, social relationships, and identities, a process that normally took place without consciousness" (Marcus 5, from 'Guy Debord and the Situationist International' by Tom McDonough). One could argue that this quotation neatly bridges Debord with the counter culture of the youth in the 1960s, a concept I shall attempt to narrow down on the following pages.

First of all, the phrase 'counter culture' covers various different meanings, and the concept needs a historical context to settle down in before anything else. In the 1960s, one could argue, various counter cultures were appearing all over America and Europe. Thus, the ground was well prepared for the growth of a counter culture of the young, white and economically privileged. As mentioned in the beginning of this essay, it seems very difficult to

pin down the actual reasons for the revolts of the young, the hippies etc. It seems inadequate to look at certain events, such as the students protests at Columbia University in 1968, the Human Be-In in San Francisco in 1967, or some of the various demonstrations against the Vietnam War, because all of these events were somehow only expressions of something supposedly 'larger', a 'spirit', to use Merrifield's word, of the time. Even today's popular TV show 'Mad Men', a series about America in the 1950s and 1960s, seen through the eyes of the 'mad' New York advertisement man, Don Draper, exemplifies that the counter culture of the sixties can only be grasped in fragments of music, colors, noise and especially (TV) images. As Debord himself noted, we perceive history through images, and one could argue that that is exactly what TV shows such as 'Mad Men' is trying to do today. But to emphasize my point about a fragmented perception of the youth culture (and one might say that every aspect of the perception of history depends on a partly flawed, or fragmented view), one could refer to Jefferson Airplane guitarist Paul Kantner's comment on the sixties: ' [...] the bands, I think, as well as artists, as well as poets, as well as creators of furniture for that matter, reflected the chaos, or whatever was swirling around us' (from the movie 'The Doors Live in Europe 1968'). This 'chaos, or whatever was swirling around' was to a great extent revealing to people their capability to decide *who* was physically and mentally in power, as well as to question the whole concept of power. Thus, Debord and the SI's theory of inversion of culture, politics and discourse definitely echoes the youth culture's discovery of how the authorities and those in power could easily be challenged. Lead singer in The Doors, James Douglas Morrison, writes in one of his poems, entitled 'Power':

'I can make the earth stop in
its tracks. I made the

blue cars go away.

I can make myself invisible or small.

I can become gigantic & reach the

farthest things. I can change

the course of nature.

I can place myself anywhere in space or time.

I can summon the dead. I can perceive events on other worlds,

in my deepest mind,

& in the minds of others. I can

I am' (from 'Wilderness', poems 1966-1971).

To refer to this poem is not to say that it explicitly voices a whole generation, but as mentioned above, I would argue that one has to look at bits and pieces of history, when trying to convey the meaning of something as intangible as 'the spirit of the time'. As Andy Merrifield states in *Magical Marxism*, 'it's to do not so much with people connecting spatially as with the time they take to connect humanly, to *feel* the groove of insurrectional resonances around the world and around them' (Merrifield 75-76). Merrifield continues his use of a 'music terminology', when he uses the phrase 'radical rhythms' to define the force that makes people 'come together' and act collectively against or for a political cause. The narrative of Morrison's poem has a feeling of being able to do anything, which includes manipulating with the minds of others, and what is particularly interesting in this context is the ambivalence of the meaning. On the one hand, Morrison 'resonates' the 'feeling' of the rebels of his generation; 'I can do anything' and 'perceive the events of other worlds' (Morrison...) are words clearly coming from a person who is overflowing with a feeling of renewed, almost Emersonian self-reliance. On the other hand, the voice could be that of the spectacle. The spectacle 'can change

the course of nature', because the spectacle itself *appears* to be nature, and so the spectators are fooled to believe that the environment they live in is 'natural', as Gilman-Opalsky puts it, and not constructed. Furthermore, it is beyond doubt that what sustains Debord's spectacle is its quality of invisibility; of invisible, but mighty power. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord mentions two kinds of spectacles: the concentrated model, often present in countries that are subjected to dictatorship, and the diffused model, which mainly operates in America, expressed through a diffused abundance of commodities, or in other words, via consumerism. The diffused model of the spectacle is perhaps the most powerful, simply because it is an ingrained feature of the workings of the system. It appears as an invisible omnipresence in society. Of course, Guy Debord and Jim Morrison were two very different characters, but in some sense their 'extreme' visions of life melt together in the language they choose. Some would even refer to Debord's language as 'poetic', while Morrison was often questioned whether his poems contained political messages. Perhaps this coincidence is only to remind one that it was during the decade of the sixties that a certain expression was repeated over and over again: 'the political is personal, and the personal is political'.

To sum up on this discussion, it seems relevant to take a look on a contemporary writer, who happens to be an 'expert' on the writings of Guy Debord, as well as often connecting different fields of history with each other. In his newly published book *Magical Marxism – Subversive Politics and the Imagination*, Andy Merrifield connects the plot and form of Gabriel García Márquez' novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* with Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*. Both books were published in 1967, and Merrifield argues that García Márquez' invented literary form of magical realism actually suggests a 'healthy' way to deal with Debord's spectacle. 'Magical Realism' Merrifield says, 'draws artistic sustenance from reality, yet converts this reality into a reality *détourned*, into a reality of illusions' (Merrifield 30). He

continues pointing out the possibilities this situation creates for its readers, namely that '[...] we live out this illusory reality ourselves [...]' (Merrifield 30). Thus, Merrifield argues for the agency of the imagination, while hinting to the meaning-wise connection with Debord and the SI's ideas of inverting the (unconscious) norms and habits of society. In other words, the imagination, canalized through writing, is able to change reality as we experience it. This 'belief' seems to reverberate a tendency explored in the 1960s; the realization and afterwards the exploitation of the slippery boundaries between what is real and what is represented. The diggers' self-made 'free frame of reference' is a direct example of how some people truly believed that reality could be changed by a change of mind. Walking through the self-constructed 'free frame of reference', people were given the chance to change their convictions of how society worked, and how one could respond to it (Miller 105-106).

In conclusion, one could start out by rephrasing the words covering the first page of this essay, which is to say that it is indeed impossible to capture and make clear the reasons for the birth of a social 'spirit', an atmosphere or sentiment evolving within a generation of young people at a very short period of time. Various methods of periodization and historicism have rediscovered and, some would say, mythologized the decade of the sixties over and over again, and though these flash backs may at times seem static and even hypocritical, it seems significant to note and reflect on the whole act of (repeatedly) looking back at this decade. In Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, one is offered a description of a general 'state of being' in the sixties, and as Andy Merrifield's new book illustrates, this 'state of being' still to some point resonates the 'conditions of being' today. Thus, it could be argued that reading Guy Debord not only enables one to draw connections with the spirit of the counter culture in the sixties; it may also contribute to clarify some of the reasons for *our* wish to 'stay' with the sixties. Debord offers an analysis of the conflicts of existing as a human being in the 20th

century, but he also suggests a solution for change and encourages a move away from false to real consciousness. These thoughts echo the idealism of the hippies, as well as a great part of the whole generation of young people living in Europe and America in the sixties, and if anything, understanding history is about making connections. Guy Debord may not explain the rise of the counter culture to its depths, but like a shade playing its part in a larger image, he expresses and demystifies parts of a still intangible past, as well as touching upon the present. Reading Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* may leave one with the same feeling that appears when reading a poem: sensing scraps of clarity, while simultaneously realizing the limits of the mind. A great poet of the sixties wrote the line: 'There was preserved in her the fresh miracle of surprise' (Morrison 53), and so, like a poem, a manifesto, or a piece of music, the sixties keep enchanting us. Like a 'fresh miracle of surprise', this past decade might never lose its presence.

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