

Guy Ernest Debord (1931-1994),  
*The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967

Theorist, artist, philosopher, filmmaker,  
writer.

1950: Member of the Lettrist International (a  
postwar, neodada, anti-art organization  
consisting of intellectuals and students) in  
Paris.

1957: Self-proclaimed leader of the  
**Situationist International**.



General beliefs of this movement revolve round a rejection of subjectivity and personality, as the 'free individual' is unable to flourish within the corrupted framework of society. As a result of modern capitalism and industrialization, everyday life is limited by 'the scarcity of free time' and has become 'a colonized sector' reserved for the privileged → no individual fulfilment. SI aimed at creating 'a superior organization of the world' that would enhance in people 'a sense of self-consciousness of existence'.

American author Greil Marcus on the situationists:

'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 ordinarily took place without consciousness' (Marcus 5).

According to Guy Debord himself, SI was an artistic avant-garde group that contributed to theoretical as well as practical sides of a new revolutionary contestation already in motion.

1967: Publication of *The Society of the Spectacle*

The book is structured as a sort of manifesto and consists of 221 theses, compiled into 9 chapters. Debord is obviously influenced by the political philosophy of Marx, as well as 20<sup>th</sup> century Existentialism, mainly Sartre. One might say that one of the sentences in thesis 1 sums up the main point of the entire book:

'All that once was directly lived has become mere representation' (Debord 12).

Debord argues that the history of social life can be viewed as a downgrading from

being → having → appearing

This is due to the fact that the commodity has 'completed its colonization of social life'. Relations between commodities have supplanted relations between people. Thus, nobody notices that they are living a 'non-existence'; relying not on reality, but on a *reflection of reality* (hence the photography 'J'aime ma caméra', which Debord used in one of his movies, illustrating the idolization of what is mere reflections, images).

Hence, according to Debord, what we inevitably *see* in the world is a mere reflection of ideologies.

### **What is the spectacle?**

*OED* definition: A specially prepared or arranged display of a more or less public nature (esp. one on a large scale), forming an impressive or interesting show or entertainment for those viewing it.

Professor Jonathan Crary defines it as being ‘the imposition of an illusory unity into a more heterogeneous field’ + ‘a totalizing and monolithic concept that inadequately represents a plurality of incommensurable institutions and events’.

Debord talks about two kinds of spectacles. 1) a concentrated model 2) a diffused model. It is the diffused model of the spectacle that flourishes in the United States – in the form of an (omnipresent) abundance of commodities.

The spectacle is ubiquitous and functions as a never-ending present; nothing ‘lasts’, everything is constantly replaced by something new (consumerism). This circular movement creates a space where past and future simply cannot exist, and the ‘spectator’ is thus living in an encircling illusion that is constantly regenerating itself.

‘Society is the embodiment of particular worldviews but is presented as a natural environment, as a terrain for (and not *already* a expression of) ideology’ (Gilman-Opalsky).

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Bibliography and suggestions for further reading:

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