

Elucidation on the Spectacle and Freedom in Capitalism

By Postliterate

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1 — The Spectacle

The general social and subsequently philosophic trend of leftist and leftist-adjacent thought can be summed up in the concept of the Spectacle. From the nihilism of Baudrillard, the schizophrenia of Deleuze and Guattari, the totalitarianism in Marcuse, and the capitalist realism of Mark Fisher, a sort of single, unifying narrative can be traced in them back to the theory of the Spectacle in Guy Debord. Consciously or not, this theory can almost be described as the father of all the others, and may also be the most holistic view of the outcomes of industrial capital.

Debord's Spectacle is, in essence, the transcendence of capital to a state of pure appearance. In the same way pop sci-fi writers used to imagine a machine which could evolve humanity into a being of pure light (implying this was the highest possible stage of evolution), capital has now evolved itself and the world it governs into a planet of only appearance.

Debord is clear that (1) the Spectacle is not merely an excess of imagery, and (2) the Spectacle represents not the image itself, but a social relation between men mediated by images. The Spectacle is a unifying narrative for capital; it acts as both its means and ends and is simultaneously

the total acceptance of itself. Activity turns into mere contemplation, objects turn into symbols, people into flat images, and, at bottom, all of reality into the Spectacle.

The Spectacle is mass-produced, but it is wrong to think it is mass-produced by certain devilish individuals. Indeed, as Marcuse understood so well, a system can be completely rationalized at the individual level and yet generate bizarre realities such as the one we find ourselves in now. The producers as well as the consumers feel they are making the proper choices given their circumstances, and no one feels cheated at this level. The result, however, is essentially the death of truth.

“#9. In a world which really is upside-down, the true is a moment of the false.”

— Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*

2 — The Commodity

Most importantly, however, is that the Spectacle is not an extraordinary thing. By extension, the seemingly unique terror invoked by Baudrillard regarding the end of metaphysics, is also not actually surprising. To really understand the Spectacle is to see how it is already embedded in the commodity-form, in a similar way that Marx observed how class oppression is embedded in the commodity itself.

The commodity is, of course, the single unit of capital, which drives the whole system of capitalism. Contained within its logic is the logic of the whole of capitalism itself.

“A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”

— Marx, *Capital* Vol. 1, Ch. 1, Sec. 4

The commodity already contains the alienation, or separation, which would be crucial to the development of the Spectacle. The commodity is, in essence, the gated object, who exists only insofar as it is isolated from direct use. It represents labor which creates for an alienated purpose, and products which are created for alienated use. Considered even superficially, the commodity represents the specter of capital which governs production and consumption.

This must really be the fundamental problem of capitalism — that is it governed by a force which is inhuman, which is not earthly, and which does not directly concern anyone. Marx may have attacked ideas which were not tied to earthly matters in order to combat religion, but today we particularly do so merely to combat capital itself.

The commodity represents the absence of labor for its own sake, of products for their own use, and therefore of humanity for humanity's sake. "Freedom" is the rallying cry of capitalists still, but it is precisely real human freedom which capitalism must necessarily drive out. Even the most efficient capitalist economy with its vast accumulation of commodities could never grant it.

This basic separation of man from his own craft, from his own materials, and from his own fruit, is thus the embryo from which the most apparent alienation of the Spectacle grows and takes hold. Man is no longer thought to be himself — he merely *owns* himself, like any other object; as such, man is thought to be able to sell himself like any other commodity to willing buyers. Bygone are the times when man could be said to really *be* himself and not merely own himself.

Man *is*, man is not owned, and this being exists for its own sake — this must be the premise of the struggle against capital. The Spectacle must be countered at the fundamental level and not merely in late cultural critiques. From the alienation of the commodity comes the alienation of Spectacle, where man can no longer act, nor study, nor be in reality for its own

sake. A world governed by other-worldly signs and sign-values, images and appearance, must be countered by the assertion of the whole of humanity for itself and not for an alienated purpose.

Capital today represents the reverse of the Borges fable which opens *Simulacra and Simulation*: capital is the map which has made the territory it covers wither away. Capital makes all relational to it, and in doing so, the objects themselves wither away. If capital is, as it is in capitalism, “*the sole politics, the sole universality, the sole limit and sole bond,*” [1] the rest of reality will wither away until only it remains.

“#29... [T]he abstraction of all specific labor and the general abstraction of the entirety of production are perfectly rendered in the spectacle, whose mode of being concrete is precisely abstraction. [...] The spectacle is nothing more than the common language of this separation.”

[1] Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, “Private Property and Labour”