



Edited by Samir Gandesha and Johan F. Hartle

# The Spell of Capital

Reification and Spectacle

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Cover illustration: Police rehearsal in Yiwu to prepare for the G20 summit in Hangzhou.

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# Introduction

Reification and Spectacle: The Timeliness of Western Marxism<sup>1</sup>

*Samir Gandesha and Johan F. Hartle*

## 1. Yiwu: The Cryptogram of the Spectacle

We take our point of departure from the immense collection of commodities-become-spectacles of the trading stalls of Yiwu in the People's Republic of China, which we visited together in spring 2014 (Figure 1). If China as a whole has become the 'workshop of the world', then the mid-sized city of Yiwu located four hours southwest of Shanghai by train is its showroom. If the factories arrayed around the Shenzhen region of China have become the central sites of production in the global economy, in which the Middle Kingdom has participated with particular energy and dynamism since the structural reforms of Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s, then Yiwu, with its wholesale market, the so-called 'China Commodity City', constitutes the



Figure 1. Trading stalls of Yiwu in the People's Republic of China. Photo by Samir Gandesha and Johan F. Hartle.

nodal point for commodity exchange and accelerated capital circulation. It is a living monument to Deng's infamous 'Capitalist road to socialism', as if somehow, in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1949, that particular *pathway* could be thought and traversed independently of that specific *destination*.

Yiwu has only increased in importance since the aftermath of 9/11, we were told, with the tectonic shift of the Muslim world away from the United States towards China.<sup>2</sup> The evidence of such a shift is provided by the myriad Turkish coffee houses and Pakistani restaurants that line its bustling streets. In the endless stalls and shop windows of its commercial market one finds rows and rows of kitsch objects, souvenirs, Christmas decorations, ersatz art depicting familiar Biblical scenes such as the Crucifixion and the Last Supper, cute animals and cuddly teddy bears, children's toys, knick-knacks, and doodads, objects that sell not in the hundreds but the hundreds of thousands and millions of units to the legions of merchants who descend daily upon Yiwu from all over the world to place orders for their shops back home. Last but not least it was, ironically, in Yiwu where the police tested its men to prepare for the 2016 world economic summit to take place in Hangzhou as if to give visibility to the manifest and forceful ways in which global capital operates (see cover image).

What we find specifically in this epicentre of the global economy is precisely what has been identified in the period leading up to 9/11: the process by which it unleashes a certain rhythm of colonization on the world as was first captured by Rosa Luxemburg in her seminal text *The Accumulation of Capital* (See Retort Collective, 2004). Expanding ever outwards, well beyond the limit of the nation-state, 'capital accumulated to the point where it becomes images', transcends its 'diffuse' (Fordist), 'concentrated' (socialist) and 'integrated' (post-Fordist) forms and now becomes truly planetary. The unprecedented levels of economic growth and development in the periphery now enable social subjects of those societies to putatively participate in such development.

However, rather than benefitting *materially*, through increased access to clean water, housing, primary and secondary education, citizens of China (and one could say BRIC societies as a whole) other than a rather modest, emerging middle class, participate in capitalist development only virtually and passively by consuming its *spectral image*, only in the form of the *spectacularization* of national economic and political power on the stage of global power politics.<sup>3</sup> Inwardly, this leads to, indeed requires, a redoubled 'colonization of everyday life', not only through endogenous

film and television, India's Bollywood, for example, but also through the penetration of what we might term a kind of 'micro-spectacle' in the form of ever-shrinking and portable digital technology: the computers, iPads, iPhones, iWatches, wearable technologies, and the universally accessible social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Renren, Weibo, including a whole host of 'hook-up' sites, that they make immediately available and present, whose varied and precise algorithms reflect back to us our own desires. 'Micro-spectacle' describes a condition whereby forms of immaterial labour are appropriated by a form of 'communicative capitalism' (Dean, 2009) with an apparently insatiable appetite for digitally mediated communication, information that can then be fed into various marketing, actuarial and security circuits. Citizen-subjects are therefore kept in a dizzyingly permanent state of distraction, which results in political paralysis, although not in a way that completely rules out the use of these technologies against separation itself, as we discuss below.

Significantly, however, the terrain of resistance lies, in a manner that could perhaps never have been imagined by the originator of the concept of *détournement*, in the way in which the 'spectacle' could be turned against itself. This was already intimated by the repetition compulsion that manifested in the seemingly endless loop of the sequence of the twin planes flying into the Twin Towers, although with little or no apparent impact on a sanitized US popular culture (the event was not permitted to strain the upbeat 'vibe' of the Manhattan-set sitcom *Friends*, for example.) These attacks not only sought to land blows on the basic pillars of US power, the Pentagon and the Twin Towers, but as a response to the US's growing involvement in the Arab world, they can be understood as an attempt to confront the very logic of modernization itself.

In the first Gulf War, with its so-called 'smart bombs' and hyper-voyeurism, killing seemed to have become a pure matter of its representation. This constituted a prelude to our own drone age, represented after a decade or so of theoretical exuberance—perhaps itself an illusory symptom of Bill Clinton's so-called 'peace dividend'. The very limit of a kind of orgiastic postmodern excess reached its nadir in the claim made by one famous cultural critic that this war simply did not take place and was merely the *simulacrum* of a war (Baudrillard, 1995). (Try telling this story to a Kurdish family!) By the time of the attacks of 9/11 and the ensuing counterattack on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan that provided safe harbour for al-Qaeda, a certain lesson was learned and the position, this time, from the same critic was that this new line of conflict represented nothing short of the 'fourth world war' (Baudrillard, 2004).

A much more sober and productive discussion, in front of the backdrop of massive worldwide mobilization against the imminent and soon-to-be catastrophic invasion of Iraq by the US on 15 February 2003, could be discerned in a series of conversations undertaken by Giovanna Borradori, published as *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, with erstwhile philosophical foes Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, who had just written an open letter on the possible emergence of a new 'European public sphere'.<sup>4</sup> Both Habermas and Derrida see the event as resulting from the uneven nature of globalization, which has explosively combined a widening of social and economic inequities between North and South with the destruction of the symbolic resources of various lifeworlds, particularly in Islamic and Arabic regions. In the course of modernization, claims to universality become more and more problematic while the counter-strategy of fundamentalism seems to offer a concrete alternative. The sheer ubiquity of global capitalism, so Habermas and Derrida realize, subjects the normative resources stored up in local traditions to an almost unbearable pressure. What Derrida calls the 'auto-immune' response of terrorism, then, is the response to the increasing colonization of lifeworlds by strategic forms of rationality. The false concreteness of fundamentalism seems to provide an alternative to the crumbling social relations and normative foundations behind the glamorous and promising surface of commodification (Gandeha, 2006).

What neither philosopher properly grasps, however, is the way in which the commodifying logic of globalization unleashes profound and troubling anxieties within societies in which centuries-old traditions that are already under siege are challenged not just from the outside but from within as well. The best account of the transformation of the conditions of cultural life by an ever-globalizing capitalism remains, of course, Marx and Engels's Shakespearean paean to the transformative, liberating dynamics of capitalism in the *Communist Manifesto*, in whose English translation one can hear clear echoes of the *Tempest*:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with the train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses [*mit nüchternen Augen*] his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. (Marx and Engels, 2008, pp. 38–39)

The uprooting of traditional social relations and community-based forms of life produces a political vacuum, very often filled with the spectacular imagery of concreteness, idols, and violence. These forms of concreteness are, in other words, part of the spell that capital itself produces. Nothing seems to escape the utter immanence of the system. This is made especially clear in the media strategy of the newly arisen geopolitical player in the Middle East: the Sunni organization ISIS or ISIL (Islamic State in Syria/Levant) probably best known as Daesh (in Arabic, it is a mocking term meaning literally 'one who crushes underfoot'). Since its emergence in the chaos that has unfolded in post-invasion Iraq, post-civil war Syria and in the aftermath of the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, this formation has orchestrated a particularly deft media strategy by releasing high-definition video clips of its atrocities<sup>5</sup>—most recently its attacks on the twin spectacles of a heavy-metal rock show at Le Bataclan and a football match between Germany and France at Le Stade de France—via the internet to prospective recruits but also to a Western media which, in a state of crisis and intensive competition, compulsively and pathologically relies upon ever-more sensationalistic content to package, gloss, and market. In its very profit-maximizing logic, however, the Western media aids and abets Daesh in accomplishing its own strategic objectives: inducing nothing less than a condition of panic in ever-larger numbers of the population.<sup>6</sup>

In the absence of an organized Left in the Arab and Persian Worlds, either via co-optation or elimination, to enable popular forces to truly face the 'real conditions of life', namely, *social relations* as such, what has come to occupy the space of resistance are conservative revolutionary movements. They, for example, took power in Iran in 1979 and momentarily Egypt in the aftermath of Tahrir Square. The 'fundamentalist spectacle' (Lütticken, 2008, p. 83), however, structurally repeats the nihilist vision of capitalist modernity in more than one respect: Where representation rules (both in the realm of the visual and in the realm of politics), alternatives will be rare if they appear at all.

The critique of reification and spectacle therefore also suggests an epistemic shift or a change of standpoint from the atomized reality of reified social relations and the glossy surface of hyper-capitalist idolatry, on the one hand, to the self-organization of those social forces that constitute and produce social reality, on the other. In other words, in the absence of an organized, self-confident workers' movement prepared aggressively to take up Nietzsche's dictum that 'Whatever is falling deserves a push', what we see is a quintessentially modern mobilization of the traditions organized around the idea of the 'holy', in opposition to an all-too 'profane' logic: what Marx elsewhere in the *Manifesto* deems the 'callous cash payment'.

However distorted the spectacle of terror might be, it may still contain an obscured image of social totality. The object of the attack on 9/11 was the multinational workforce housed at the World Trade Center as well as the military and security apparatus whose role it was to maintain the stability of the economic and geopolitical order established by Bretton Woods (in the Pentagon). On the other side of spectacle (see Lütticken, 2008), an equally distorted but equally symptomatic image was given: While typically understanding very little, if anything, and, indeed, visibly shaken and seemingly paralyzed upon learning the news about the attacks on the morning of September 11, George W. Bush did, however, possess unique insight into the real objective of the attack—the nihilism of expanded capital accumulation for its own sake and without limit. He unwittingly made this clear the day after the attacks when he enjoined US citizens to do their duty and go shopping or, indeed, to visit Disney World in Florida. This makes perfect sense: In the minds of those in power the world is truly a Manichean one, not so much divided by ‘good’ *versus* ‘evil’, as such, but rather by opposing versions of spectacle (Disney World *versus* 9/11).

But the problem of the spectacle, which emerges anew on 11 September 2001, has a more complex valence: the long-gestating Arab Revolutions.<sup>7</sup> Ten years later, sparked by the tragic self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, the roadside fruiterer constantly harassed by the Tunis police, massive regional political convulsions were rapidly set in motion. In the region’s most important state, Egypt, these led to, amongst other things, the rise and fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in elections following the toppling of the Mubarak junta, climaxing in—itsself a farcical repetition that echoed that of Napoleon III so acerbically described by Marx—Mubarak being replaced by Mubarakism in the person of General Sisi.

Egypt’s Tahrir Square, however, in September 2011, was the powerfully compelling inspiration behind the Occupy Movement that launched itself four years after the bottom fell out of the global economy, as many US-based, supposedly ‘too-big-to-fail’ financial institutions were brought to their knees by virtue of their ‘exposure’ to macro-economic shocks through massive investments in ‘sub-prime’ mortgages and other financial instruments of highly dubious worth. The Occupy Movement was itself sparked by the call of Kalle Lasn, editor of the modest yet influential Vancouver-based ‘culture-jamming’ magazine *Adbusters*, to ‘Occupy Wall Street!’ against the image of a ballerina gingerly perched on Wall Street’s raging bull. ‘Bring folding chairs!’ it implored.

The call evinced the direct and abiding impact of Guy Debord’s influence, his analysis of the hegemony of the image, the spectacle, via advertising,

as well as his strategy of *détournement* as a refashioning and re-purposing of the spectacle in such a way that undermines its initial aims: namely, a disempowering of the people, a devitalization of life, in a word 'separation'. It was testimony to the Situationist International slogan: 'We express what's on everyone's minds'.

The 'Occupy Movement', such as it was called, manifested itself throughout North America and Europe and was roundly criticized in the mainstream media for its apparent inability to clearly articulate its demands. What the media seems to have missed is the fact that the movement was less about concrete-material demands that could be met, i.e. progressive income taxation, re-distribution of wealth, the provision of social housing, a guaranteed annual income, an increase in the minimum wage,<sup>8</sup> than it was about meeting the spectacle on its own terms. After all, one can make demands of a social democratic sort strictly within the purview of the spectacle.<sup>9</sup> This seems to be what Occupy was really about and in this can be seen as the attempt to reconstitute the very nature of political space along the lines suggested by the Situationist International in the form of the constitution of a geographically concrete 'situation' by means of 'psychogeography', or pulses of attraction/repulsion as they spontaneously manifest themselves in the urban milieu, the *dérive*, or experiencing the city by way of an aestheticized 'drifting', or by what Lefebvre and later Harvey call the 'right to the city'.

The nature of the spectacle has, however, been profoundly misunderstood by postmodern cultural and media theorists who themselves engage in a curious act of amnesia and therefore of *separation* by dissociating the concept of the spectacle from corresponding key concepts that belonged to the core vocabulary of Western Marxism. The critique of a reified social life, of social totality, in the language of Lukács-inspired Hegelian Marxism all the way through to Debord himself, allowed for a profound socio-economic analysis and critique but also, more significantly, made it possible to identify traces of the *prospects for political resistance and indeed transformation* that the concept of 'spectacle' (at least in its contemporary revenants) more often than not—and much against its inherent ambition—tends to de-emphasize. It is as if the concept dropped from a first-year university-level media studies textbook fully formed without its own specific connection to historical praxis. Any discussion of the concept of 'spectacle' and the phenomenon it seeks to come to grips with, therefore, must come to terms with closely affiliated concepts of 'reification' and 'commodity'.

Indeed, as we suggest below, the constellation of commodity-reification-spectacle can be understood as a model that presupposes a 'political



ontology' or the way in which politics is ontological and ontology is political: the crossing point, of course, being some account of the very nature of agency. This ontology, we claim, has largely been prepared by the Marxian conceptualization of commodity fetishism, by Marx's analysis of the way in which capital simultaneously disenchant and re-enchant the modern world. And, put differently, this constellation can be read as one that enables us to come to grips with a structural or systemic account of 'depoliticization'.<sup>10</sup> Other attempts to understand the politics of the spectacle that are not grounded in a postmodern appropriation have done so in equally superficial ways, for example arguing that a homogenizing global capitalism 'McWorld' finds itself ever more aggressively confronted by the very 'Jihad' (Barber, 1996) that it has generated, or that what we see from 9/11 onwards is a 'clash of fundamentalisms' (Ali, 2002) of the Christian-Zionist right with Islamic extremism, or that what we are witnessing now is the end of literacy and the 'triumph of the spectacle' (Hedges, 2010).<sup>11</sup> What is missing in these perspectives is a convincing analysis of the development of a certain logic that runs through an account of the cultural dynamics of commodification that stretches back through Lukács's attempt to understand, via the concept of 'reification', the failure of Central European revolutions, in which he, himself, played a not inconsiderable role, to Marx's famous account of the fetishism of commodities in *Capital, Volume I* (1867). It is only by reading the concept of spectacle in light of the conceptual history that we can truly come to grips with the systematic and quite disastrous unleashing of processes of commodification in the present often referred to as 'neoliberalism'.<sup>12</sup> Much of contemporary capitalism unfolds from the conception of commodity, much like in Marx's 1867, Lukács's 1923, and Debord's 1967. This is why we begin with Yiwu.

## 2. The Sequence (1867–1923–1967) and the Parcours

To our mind the axis Lukács-Debord, in the footsteps of Marx's conceptualization of commodity fetishism, does not, however, only identify a theoretical lineage that deepened and broadened the understanding of commodification. The sequence 1967–1923–1867 also stands for three stages of reflection of the real history of modern capitalism: the advent of high capitalism, of Fordist capitalism, and of capitalist consumerism and the increasing forms of opaqueness that characterize the economic system itself. This marks one of the strictly timely aspects, understood as both contemporaneous and time-diagnostic, of the Western Marxist

conceptualization of the cultural effects of commodification. It obviously also poses the question how to move on from within and in continuation of this framework: How to define the cultural logics of capitalism under conditions of post-Fordist, neo-liberal, globalized capitalism? Or to paraphrase Croce: What is living and what is dead in the legacy of Western Marxism?

The idea of timeliness is important also insofar as the concept of reification is, above all, one that addresses temporality or what we could call the de-temporalization of time, its flattening or hollowing out. Indeed, this is what Lukács, himself, in the key essay from *History and Class Consciousness*, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', calls the 'spatialization of time'. This is at the centre of the phenomenon of reification as an element of political theory. Reification seems to close off other possible futures. Reification thus seems to obstruct what Hannah Arendt considers the essence of the political, namely: the possibility of a 'new beginning' as opposed to the endless repetition of the same that she came, rightly or wrongly, to associate with the 'social' or the realm inhabited by what she calls *animal laborans*. The timeliness of our book can therefore be seen in the manner in which it can contribute to an understanding of the closing off of certain possibilities via the hypostatization of a market-based socio-economic logic (neo-liberalism) and the fake alternative between the hypercapitalist and the 'fundamentalist' spectacles.

To pose the question of timeliness of this particular tradition of Western Marxism also means to read Lukács and Debord as untimely contemporaries, as contemporaries of the ongoing commodification of culture (art, academia, etc.) in times of austerity politics. It therefore means to bring their accounts of reification and spectacle into dialogue with contemporary theories of the political, and of contemporary political ontologies that claim (legitimately or not) to inherit the legacy of Marxism.

The chapters of this volume approach these questions from a variety of different angles. The first section of this book is, however, dedicated to the philosophical foundations of the critique of reification. In Johan F. Hartle's chapter the concept of reification is brought into dialogue with contemporary models of political ontology to emphasize the depoliticizing effects of reification also on the level of theory. Lukács and Debord address the factuality of social reality not only through systematic analysis but also (both programmatically and performatively) through aesthetic strategies. The socially necessary semblance of reified life, so the chapter argues, has to be *aesthetically* re-staged to be accessible to political struggles.

Samir Gandesha's chapter discusses two conflicting lines of the conception of reification in light of their critique in the aesthetic considerations of

Theodor W. Adorno. What Adorno points out in critique both of an identity-philosophical conception of transparent self-determination on the one hand and a somewhat *ursprungsphilosophische* conception of authenticity on the other, is the non-identity of a temporality that disrupts any sense of primordial or teleological identity and thereby opens up dynamics of difference, dissent, and contradiction that are foundational for any emphatic conception of the political.

That reification itself has to be thought of as a dialectical concept is the central claim of Thijs Lijster's interpretation of Benjamin and Adorno's critique. To emancipate the object from the spell of reification, so Lijster shows, Benjamin and Adorno regard the fetishistic insistence on the thing as central. The collector is the central figure of such dialectical critique of reification, as is the autonomous (and thereby fetishized) artwork.

The second section of this book is dedicated to the cultural dynamics of the critique of spectacle. Tyrus Miller's chapter specifically discusses the artistic strategies and programs of two core members of the Situationist International: Asger Jorn and Constant Nieuwenhuys. Both of their urbanist visions aim, as Miller shows, clearly at a critique of the reification of urban life by reintroducing dynamics of play into the everyday.

The chapter by Sudeep Dasgupta is dedicated to the interpretation of the concept of spectacle in the art historical writings of T.J. Clark and Jonathan Crary. Dasgupta analyses three dimensions of historical corporeality: the staging of painted bodies, of the body of the spectator, and the social body. By discussing these 'cryptograms of modernism', Dasgupta not only articulates the critical emphasis on historical contingency that is inherent to the analysis of spectacle, but also underlines the immense analytical value of the concept of spectacle for historically grounded cultural analysis.

The chapter by Noortje de Leij reconstructs the influence of the concept of spectacle on contemporary art criticism—particularly its relevance for the art criticism around the journal *October*. The cultural diagnosis of spectacle is, as the chapter emphasizes, at the very core of the work of Krauss, Foster, and Buchloh, whose critical strategies also strongly rely on the specific interpretation of the term.

The third section of the book addresses the problems of 'reification' and 'spectacle' in light of contemporary questions. Kati Röttger's chapter discusses the critique of spectacle literally in light of the metaphors of theatre and stage. The critique of spectacle, Röttger argues, in dialogue with the political theories of Arendt, Nancy, and Rancière, sacrifices key aspects of the political that are necessarily tied to the stage-like reality of public action. Contemporary political practice therefore has to navigate carefully

between the various dimensions of spectacle, rejecting its depoliticizing elements while appropriating its mobilizing dimensions.

Willow Verkerk's chapter poses a critique of reification in light of contemporary feminist concerns. Late capitalism, which seeks to exploit the most marketable human characteristics, retains patriarchal interests in objectifying female sexuality and reproductive labour. Feminist activism requires, Verkerk argues, in conversation with Lukács, MacKinnon, Haraway, and Butler, an understanding of reification that includes its sexually objectifying trajectories as well as the unique opportunities for agency that women have under capitalism.

Joost de Bloois's chapter emphasizes the neglected ecological dimension of Debord's critique of spectacle against the background of the 1971 text of *A Sick Planet*. This does not only open up interesting correspondences with the early Frankfurt School (Adorno's idea of natural history in particular) but also links Debord's philosophy to vitalist conceptions of the political that characterize key strands of contemporary French political thought.

The concluding chapter of this volume, which stands out as a supplement to the three main sections of the book, constitutes an extended discussion between the book's two editors, Samir Gandesha and Johan F. Hartle, and the American artist Zachary Formwalt, whose video essays are amongst the most poignant discussions of both contemporary and historical correspondences between visual culture and the structure of capital. The interview 'drifts' through Formwalt's work along the lines of the Marx-Lukács-Debord axis and thus concludes this book by addressing perspectives of contemporary cultural interventions that might in some ways inherit the aesthetic programs of Lukács and Debord.

The aim of the overall project of this book is to contribute to a critical theory and practice that addresses both the 'metabolic rift' (Marx) between humanity and the natural world on the one hand, and its corresponding subjective crisis on the other. The latter, so we believe, is a crisis of the very pre-conditions of political agency, that is itself formed by accelerated processes of commodification and reification that have certainly now, if not already in 1923 or 1967, become truly total.

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# 1. Reification as Structural Depoliticization: The Political Ontology of Lukács and Debord

*Johan F. Hartle*

The Lukácsian concept of reification has regained academic relevance. It has again been discussed in different contexts of contemporary Marxism—by representatives of the latest generations of the Frankfurt School and by informed circles of British academic Marxists.<sup>1</sup> This allows one to read Lukács's original concept—but also its further expansion and development in Debord's theory of spectacle—in new light or to at least shed new light on interpretations that have gotten lost in the conjunctures of discourse.

One politically crucial aspect of the theory of reification is its critical analysis of depoliticization implicit to the specific ontology of the commodity (respectively the spectacle). What Lukács emphasizes with Marx, and what Debord discusses in even broader terms (including the visual culture of consumer capitalism), is a conceptualization of the implications of commodified practice that obscure emphatic political practice.<sup>2</sup> It is particularly this aspect of reification that has radically been denied by contemporary, merely ethical reconstructions of the concept.<sup>3</sup>

By leaving the individuals in a position of isolation, in a passive, merely 'contemplative' stance, so Lukács (and with him Debord)<sup>4</sup> will claim, the capacity of a radical negotiation and potential restructuring of the fundamental principles of societal organization can no longer be addressed. The general societal condition of reification, the transformation of social life into a quantifiable and objectified reality leaves the social individuals in a contemplative stance and thus detaches them from the objective world (Lukács, 1971, p. 89). Political life is thereby, so the argument goes, objectified into social (or, in a different vocabulary: *institutional*) facts that tend to conceal their own preconditions in social practice. This is how depoliticization, the loss of emphatic political capacities, coincides with political apathy in the conception of reification.

This focus on depoliticization makes 'reification' a politically influential concept in the context of contemporary debates concerning 'political ontology' and 'the political'. In contemporary thought a variety of references to various ontologies (of Spinoza, Schiller, Cantor, Heidegger, Lacan, etc.;

see Hartle, 2009) have been introduced to emphasize and rethink the ontological sources of politics—the materiality of politics in tension with its political representation—and the political dimensions of ontology—the claim that the structure of philosophical thought is of (at least) indirect political relevance.<sup>5</sup> Although clearly not in the centre of these developments, Lukács's later work has addressed this question explicitly in terms of ontology (see Lukács, 1978a, 1978b, 1980). But already his considerations on the *Gegenstandsform* (form of objectivity) of developed capitalism in *History and Class Consciousness* poses these questions and can therefore be productively discussed as a political ontology in its own right.

The question of depoliticization not only addresses one of the standard laments in (and sometimes against) liberal democracies. It also marks the very situation of the original development of Western Marxism, classically described as, on the one hand, a 'basic shift [...] towards philosophy' (Anderson, 1976, p. 49) and, on the other, as a materialist interest in the question of ideology (art, culture, social consciousness) as a central element of political struggle in times of defeat (Jacoby, 1981).

The historical moment of Western Marxism echoed the failure of socialist revolutions and the rise of authoritarian regimes in the inter-war period, as it tried to answer the question how and why capitalist rule persisted in times of manifest social contradictions. Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* is often seen as *the* original text of Western Marxism (see e.g. Merleau-Ponty, 1973, pp. 31–58). Lukács's theory of ideology is, of course, far from being unproblematic. It remains committed to the Leninist idea of the vanguard party, which favours the political knowledge of (party) intellectuals, and its idea of an authentically proletarian (i.e. radical democratic) subjectivity (or: 'standpoint') is quite dismissive of any empirical consciousness in real working-class struggles (Larrain, 1988).

If Western Marxism, however, had in some cases been introduced as a critical theory of distorted political capacities (of rightist and authoritarian kinds) or of misinterpreted or misplaced lines of conflict, the specific relevance of Lukács consists in his contribution to understanding precisely the absence of the political in structural terms without falling back into an attitude of individual ethical blame (see also Henning, 2012, p. 244, p. 257; Selk, 2015). This is, to my mind, one of the strengths of the original conception of reification.

In the following I will (1) briefly outline this ontological interpretation of reification in Lukács's own terms and in terms of contemporary approaches to social (and institutional) facts. Thereafter, I will (2) outline some continuities of this philosophical project in Debord's theory of

spectacle, whose own thought is (systematically) *derivative* with respect to the *original* project of Lukács. I will conclude by (3) emphasizing the way in which the theory of reification still contributes to a political ontology that reaches beyond the naivety of an idealist identity philosophy (classically ascribed to Lukács)—particularly by emphasizing the dynamics of aesthetic disruption and political construction. Here it is Lukács, I claim, who is (aesthetically) *derivative* (with respect to nineteenth-century realism), whereas Debord contributes an *original* understanding of aesthetic intervention and thereby adds substantively to the concrete forms of a critique of reification.

### 1. Mistaking the Social: Fetishism and Social Facts

Lukács introduces reification (*Verdinglichung*), very much in line with Marx's theory of fetishism, as a form of objectivity (*Gegenstandsform*) that necessarily emerges within the general structure of commodity exchange.<sup>6</sup> Marx had argued that the exchange value of commodities is not only practically taken for granted but also continuously reproduced and confirmed in the social-exchange process. With money, value becomes finally objectified and appears to be of material, thing-like reality. Value seems to be inherent the commodity itself although it is by no means implied in the physical reality of the respective object. Like mass, colour, etc., value appears to be an objective quality of the commodity, whereas it merely is a congealed form of social labour (including the social relations that organize it), which functions as a form of social mediation (Postone, 1996, pp. 148–157). The existence of value, one could say, is, an ontological commitment implicit in the exchange practice, through which one practically accepts and confirms its 'objective' reality.

Commodities are therefore, as Marx explains, not only concrete objects of consumption with sensuous qualities, bearers of use value, but also social beings, as bearers of exchange value. Exchange value contains a relation of each commodity to all other commodities and to the current state of economic productivity.

Through value, ultimately determined by socially necessary labour time, commensurability and, thus, comparability are possible. Every single commodity in this way contains reference to the whole of society and thereby also to the forms of social organization that precede the existence of any single commodity. In this way, value implicitly contains the relationality of all commodities and the processes of their production (including even



the social struggles about the conditions of production and labour time). It is nothing less than this that gets fetishized with the ontological fallacy that Marx generally characterizes as commodity fetishism.

Marx's fetishism argument can thus be reconstructed as follows: Through the apparent—but effective—reality of the exchange process a relation between things develops in which the social relations inherent in the process of production are indirectly present (in a *crystallized* or *congealed* form, as Marx would say), which conceals the relation between social producers by presenting them in a thing-like form (crystallized in commodities).

If I exchange commodities, so the argument goes, I implicitly accept the circumstances that are embodied in the structure of value (the whole relations of productions) implied in these commodities. This primordial and tacit acceptance is vital in all forms of commodity exchange, independently of the subjective ideology to which I might subscribe. 'They do this without being aware of it', as Marx famously formulates (Marx, 1990, pp. 166–167). This *practical misunderstanding* (a misunderstanding that is a structural effect of practical relations rather than of intellectual failure) of the true status of social objects—commodities in particular—is both socially necessary and semblance-like; its implicit understanding of reality is both apparent and effective: Social reality is constituted along these lines. Yet it is constructed as an unalterable objectivity and as if it had not been historically rooted in social practice.

The fact, however, that the reality of the exchange process mediates between the social producers, also implies that it installs a social reality of its own kind. The mediations (social practices related to each other as abstract labour) of capitalism are *real*, despite the fact that they are, fundamentally, abstractions, which in the first place also conceal the social relations of which they are a product. Marx famously writes: The 'social relations between their [the producers'] private labour' (more generally speaking: the social mediations resulting from abstract labour) 'appear as what they really are' (Marx, 1990, p. 166), as an effective social reality. The reality of the commodity is at the same time delusive and appears as what it really is.

Fetishism means that this thing-like form of social relations is taken as an absolute reality and thus is endowed with the capacity to structure social reality and to make the historically contingent structures of social life appear necessary, independent of human intervention, a kind of 'second nature', with its own lawfulness (Lukács, 1971, p. 128). In this sense fetishism is both the methodological denial and the unknowing acknowledgement

of these social relations implicit in social facts.<sup>7</sup> These social relations are implicitly acknowledged because their constitutive role in the determination of the 'second nature' of social facts is denied. Commodity fetishism takes objects for granted and thereby turns social processes into relations between things. Indirectly it also endows these things with agency, as they seem to already have taken decisions that should actually be up to constitutive democratic practices. Human agents become passive while things appear to be imbued with a strange kind of agency.

Given the interpretation of commodity fetishism as an ontological principle of social practice that also implies a wide range of ideological commitments, it is no wonder that Lukács puts so much *political* emphasis on the question of method, for he is concerned with the concept of totality, and, as we will also see later, questions of political organization. For good reasons, *History and Class Consciousness* is called *Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. And if there is any form of orthodox Marxism that deserves justification, Lukács claims, then it is the justification of Marxism as a method. 'In the teeth of isolated and isolating facts and partial systems, dialectics insists on the concrete unity of the whole' (Lukács, 1971, p. 6).

Lukács was one of the first theorists to take Marx's fetishism argument systematically seriously and to give it a central position in his interpretation of Marxism (cf. Jappe, 1999, p. 4). But Marx and Lukács are not the only ones to theorize the dynamic and practical preconditions of social facts. To separate the argument from the specific theory of value that is presupposed by the Marxist fetishism argument and also to clarify the relationship between objects that operate in the realm of first nature and objects that operate in the realm of the second (objects that have a social reality and thereby become social facts), one can refer to other theoretical paradigms as well. Starting from a rather different set of philosophical assumptions, for instance, John Searle's understanding of social reality (and social factuality in particular) appears to develop a very similar argument. This ontological generalization of a structure that also marks commodity fetishism (something Searle does not point out—although he describes his contribution as a contribution to economics) also introduces a language that helps to distinguish more easily between fetishistic factuality and its social preconditions.

Searle emphasizes the specific ontology of social facts that are not to be mistaken with pure facts (facts that are valid independently of direct human intervention). The particular ontological status of social facts is therefore, according to Searle, that they are *institutional facts*, facts that are instituted in social practices.

According to Searle's definition institutional facts have the general form of: a specific object X, which counts as Y under conditions of C (Searle, 2005, p. 7).<sup>8</sup> The object gains a status that constitutes its second, social reality. The status function of exchange value, for instance, ascribed to a specific object, is dependent on institutional (or better: social) conditions, too. The status of a given object to which a status function (value) is ascribed, changes its social significance only under certain social conditions. In other words: A material object X appears as a commodity Y under the institutional conditions C. Although the physical appearance of the object might not have changed (unless a price tag has been put on it), its social factuality has changed significantly.

The point, for Searle as much as for the Marxist tradition, is not to mistake these two layers of reality (in the terminology of Lukács one could say: the *first nature* of the object gains a *second nature*) for each other and not to deny the implied social circumstances of lived reality. For the ontological status of social facts is thus fully dependent on the institutional or social circumstances against the backdrop of which the attribution of that particular status only makes sense. It is, in other words, fully contingent on the social practice of commodity exchange in and through which products of human labour are turned into commodities. These kinds of facts are therefore not observer-independent (as physical facts like the size of the moon are: they are independent of human practice) but always part of the social reality of which human agents are a part—including the ones that describe this particular social reality.

Despite these parallels, the Marxist account of fetishism methodologically complicates this approach in three respects. Firstly, the actor-dependent view of the institutional status of facts implies a variety of complex (reciprocal, mutually conditioning) relations between theory and the object of its study. Much of Lukács's reservations concerning the methodology of the natural sciences (and their relevance for the social sciences) have to do with this assumed interrelatedness of the subject and object of study in the field of culture and society, which lacks in the objectivistic orientation of the natural sciences modelled on physics.<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, from a Marxist point of view (or: from the point of view of a political ontology of constitution) it is furthermore important to emphasize that the social circumstances, which create a second layer of reality and, potentially, a 'second nature', are instituted as well. The spiral of instituting processes in this sense winds itself deeper and deeper into history, an argument which seems to be at the core of any Marxist critique of political reification.<sup>10</sup>

Thirdly, Searle's argument also implies (though Searle does not point this out) an aspect that is at the very core of the critique of fetishism: that the relation between social facts and their social circumstances might be reciprocal. If, in other words, I accept social facts to be facts, as I practically do, I also accept the circumstances that are *presupposed by* and *embodied in* them. If I, for instance, in the case of a soccer game, accept the ball crossing a line to be a goal (if I cheer and move back to my half of the soccer pitch), then I also unknowingly acknowledge a whole bunch of rules and conditions that define the soccer game. In some spheres of social practice this might not be too much of a problem. The social relations that are being denied in the Marxian account of fetishism, however, are far from being innocent. They include, so Marxism claims, the reproduction of structures of exploitation and dominance.

## 2. Commodity Fetishism, Reification, Spectacle

According to Marx's conception of commodity fetishism, the ideological implication of commodity exchange consists in an ontological fallacy (a form of ontological commitment implied in the practice of commodity exchange which mistakes historical 'becoming' for natural 'being'), which is implicit to a specific form of practice: to take social facts, embedded in societal practice, as simple facts, thereby implicitly accepting their societal preconditions and leaving their structural and genetic preconditions unnoticed and therefore also beyond the reach of constitutive democratic practices.

In this sense the critique of reification is rooted in a *political ontology*, which is, ultimately, a process-based and relational ontology, 'the knowledge that social facts are not objects but relations between men' (Lukács, 1971, p. 180). As suggested before, this ontology can (also and with respect to contemporary discussion) be called *political ontology* in at least two respects: It emphasizes the political importance of ontological commitments (and, thus, the fact that ontologies are political) and it emphasizes the material and practical (i.e. ontological) preconditions—Searle's 'institutional conditions'—of any structured political body. The political ontology of the critique of reification is an ontology of social relations and processes, which emphasizes the primacy of relations and processes over given objects. The specific suggestion of the political ontology of the Lukács-Debord axis is the transition from an ontology of isolated facts to an ontology of mediation and of constitutive processes, and also, in particular, the *constitutive* or 'instituting' processes of social labour.<sup>11</sup>

In the apparent but effective objectivity of social facts, social relations appear as *second nature* whereas there actually is nothing natural, essential, and eternal about them at all. Such 'second nature' makes the possibility of emphatic practice disappear in a thing-like objectivity, a social reality that seems to consist of things. This leads to a closure of the realm of politics as well: Surrounded by taken-for-granted social facts, human beings find themselves in a world that seems to lie beyond the reach of democratic intervention and processes of conscious political formation, in a situation of passivity and apathy, effected by the ontological fallacy implicit to the logics of commodification. Men are, thus, following Lukács's terminology (later taken up by Debord), left in a passive, 'contemplative' stance.<sup>12</sup> Apathy and contemplation relates the social agents to their social environment as if it were a pure form of objectivity beyond the reach of direct intervention, beyond the reach of constitutive practices, as if it were an independent reality unto itself.

In this sense and up to this point, Marx's analysis of 'commodity fetishism' contains the major argument and key structure of the problem of 'reification' and of the theory of spectacle as well. Foundational for all of the specific arguments and the cumulative tradition of the critique of reification, however, is the assumption that a specific form of social practice (the exchange of commodities) produces a form of objectivity that conceals the instituting powers of the social producers, which appear to these producers therefore as alien powers.

Implicit to the historical development of the critique of reification from Marx to Debord is, furthermore, a historically diagnostic dimension. Lukács develops the more restricted account of fetishism into a general theory of institutional practices, which embraces the whole width of historically specific phenomena from Neo-Kantian thought, to Taylorization, and all the way through to the general structure of bureaucratic rationality as it deals with predictable and calculable objectified reality (see Lukács, 1971, pp. 95–97). With Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* the original critique of commodity fetishism, rooted in the analysis of high capitalism, is being transformed into a general critique of fetishistic culture that identifies the logics of emerging Fordist regulation.

A large part of what Guy Debord develops into a theory of the visual and spatial regime of spectacle under conditions of mediatized (diffuse) consumer capitalism (the *diffuse* spectacle), command economies (*concentrated*), and late capitalism (*integrated*) is the unfolding and differentiation of the original reification argument of Lukács into a critical theory of visual culture. The spectacle, Debord writes, 'is the world of commodity ruling

over all lived experience' (Debord, 1995, p. 26). Anselm Jappe has been the clearest in pointing out that: 'Debord's use of the term spectacle should be understood as an extension of Marx's idea of the commodity form' (Jappe, 1999, p. 19). Guy Debord's theory of spectacle is, in other words, quite directly a continuation of the Marxian and Lukácsian critique of fetishism and *systematically* not an original theory.

Its political anthropology of the contemplative *Homo spectator* (Debord, 1995, p. 9) is anticipated by Marx's fetishism argument and its Lukácsian interpretation. Fetishism is an act of depoliticization in and through habitualized practices that constitute the (socially necessary) illusion of objectivity where, in fact, fluid and dynamic social relations are at the core of things. The inner conception of 'spectacle' does not go much beyond this argument.

What makes Debord's account of spectacle an original theory is the *expansion* of the *reach* of the classical argument and also an attempt to understand so-called 'formerly existing socialism' through this lens. According to Debord, visual practice, the world of imagery, is an objectified mediation of already objectified social relations. This encloses, in Debord's account, just as much the glamorous realm of autonomous artistic practices, abstracted from the everyday through institutional boundaries, as it encompasses the shiny world of commodity imagery in fashion, advertising, and commercial culture, i.e. the sphere of the culture industry.

The structure of argument, however, remains rooted in the critique of reification: Spectacular visual representation is just another layer of the type of objectivity that has been produced by commodity exchange in the first place—by the ontological fallacy of abstracting objects from their constitutive processes, by hierarchizing naturalized 'being' over historical 'becoming'. In other words: the spectacle is an image—a static visual reproduction and confirmation—of what the world of commodities has ontologically left us with. So much for the world of things.

Such a *reification of the objective world* into a static world of singular things has its corresponding effects on the practical self-understanding of *social subjects*, too. Very much in agreement with each other, Marx, Lukács, and Debord describe the separating effects of the logics of commodity exchange, of reification, and of spectacle on the side of political subjectivity as well.

The first part of *Capital, Volume I*, 'Commodities and Money', before entering the sphere of production, which leads, as Marx famously says, to a change of the '*dramatis personae*' (which introduces the figures of the worker and the capitalist; Marx, 1990, p. 280),<sup>13</sup> knows only individual

commodity possessors, related to each other by contractual relations. Lukács describes this very same 'atomization' of the social producers into individual commodity possessors as a 'necessary illusion' that follows not so much from a scientifically reductive account of the complexity of economic practices as such but as a direct effect of the logics of commodity exchange (Lukács, 1971, p. 92).

Such separation is at the very core of Debord's theory of spectacle and here, too, Debord can contribute substantively to the original account of reification.<sup>14</sup> 'Generalized separation' (Debord, 1995, p. 12) is the way in which the spectacle operates, leaving individual subjects in the state of pure contemplation, separated from the conditions of one's own practice and relation to the collective: The spectacle introduces a self-perception based on objectified and individuated reality rather than *collective self-constitution*. The specific spectacular type of capitalism that Debord has in mind thus includes the celebration of the consumerist self in this separated, atomistic form. This, obviously, includes the general commodified emphasis on lifestyle and the vocabulary of social distinction, just as much as the more specific self-enjoyment in self-promoting techniques.<sup>15</sup>

Separation is described as 'part and parcel of the unity of the world' (p. 13), the 'alpha and omega of spectacle' (p. 20), and at the same time part of an ideology, which enhances the process of the 'proletarianization of the world' (p. 21). The reason lies in the logics of commodities themselves, or, as one could conclude, in the logics of the social relations between commodity possessors: 'Each individual commodity', so Debord writes, 'fights for itself' (p. 43), whereas 'proletarian struggle' is described 'as the process to dissolve all separation' (p. 48).

In all its different formulations, reification thus dissolves the constitutive processes into separated particles and smashes political potentials into isolated facts. If social life becomes reified into social facts, i.e. relations and processes are turned into forms of second nature, which is according to Marx an implication of commodity exchange, their social embedment, their social origins and structural preconditions, and thus, their social causality, become invisible. If social reality appears as a world of objects (and not of constitutive practices), then social agents are reduced to executors of a pre-given reality (of, for instance, commodity relations) within the framework of which social practice only appears possible. Reified consciousness is, accordingly, the incapability of rooting social facts in social practice, and of relating to fellow human beings as to co-producers of social reality. Another name for this general phenomenon of reification is, as I have claimed, depoliticization.

### 3. Aesthetico-Political Interventions, or, How to Overcome Reification?

The critique of reification, however, finds itself in a negative spiral that can not easily be broken: It requires forms of practice that are, by the very logics of what is to be criticized, undermined, blocked, and concealed. Overcoming reification thus depends on an ontological break with the objectified structures that reification installs. Whereas reification blocks the understanding of structure and mediation (Lukács (in)famously calls it *totality*), of collective action and class solidarity, precisely this is required to break its spell. What, then, is to be done?

In terms of a purely political program, much could be said about Lukács's and Debord's specific interpretations of the proletariat, of class struggle and the possibility of revolutionary practice (Jappe, 1999, pp. 37–39). Their philosophies are strongly influenced by strategic considerations and keep commenting on the historical developments of the socialist movement.<sup>16</sup> Both pin their hopes on the workers' councils, while they passionately disagree on the Leninist legacy and the role of the party.<sup>17</sup> Workers' councils are seen as organizational means that allow for direct self-rule and political transparency, spontaneously and disruptively so. Much of the hope projected onto the workers' councils also reflects the key objectives that both Lukács and Debord have found themselves confronted with: the dream for a self-transparent collectivity prior to political alienation in institutional forms, the idealist conception of the identity of subject and object.<sup>18</sup>

Whatever the last word to be spoken on this problematic might be, one key aspect of the theoretico-political projects of Lukács and Debord that still deserves attention beyond these more concrete debates on strategy and political organization, however, is the question concerning the philosophically programmatic implications of their political ontology. Both suggest a transition from an ontology of facts, of objects and commodities, to an ontology of social labour and political constitution. As an ontological position the critique of reification therefore has consequences for the understanding of philosophy as such and for the implicit order of its respective sub-disciplines.

The fact that both Lukács and Debord strongly refer to *aesthetic* strategies—to strategies of narrative embedment in the case of Lukács and of *détournement* in that of Debord—could be read as a romanticist exaggeration of the potentials of art and thus as an implicit declaration of defeat.<sup>19</sup> In a somewhat surprising complicity<sup>20</sup> with a Rancièrian aesthetics of politics, however, one could just as easily argue that the critique of



reification, like any form of politics proper, requires the reorganization of the aesthetic conditions under which social reality appears (or, in different words, reorganization of the appearance of things, which could also be seen as an interference in ontological misunderstandings). 'For politics is', as Rancière (1999, p. 74) writes, 'a question of aesthetics, a matter of appearances'. Negotiating the conditions of perceptibility is, to recapitulate Rancière's argument in a somewhat different language, always key to the emergence of radical political situations. The form of appearance that is at stake in the type of bourgeois and post-bourgeois politics that Lukács and Debord address, is the socially necessary appearance of a factuality that is in fact merely the result of a variety of social practices. Such a re-negotiation of the form of reality is a key condition of radical politics.<sup>21</sup>

The general revaluation of aesthetic interventions to break the spell of the fetishist objectivity goes hand in hand with a devaluation (an individualist understanding) of ethics.<sup>22</sup> The emphasis on mediation, structural embedment, and on an already determined (and reified) horizon of possible social agency dislodges the primacy of individualistic ethics as itself part of the logics of reification. And one of the key depoliticizing effects of reification had precisely been described as a situation in which the subject is left with an overwhelming mass of isolated phenomena that can no longer be structurally articulated and therefore confronted.<sup>23</sup> The critique of reification does therefore not primarily address dispersed *ethical problems* that the individual finds him- or herself confronted with. It rather addresses the structural unity and general line of social conflicts and crises.

For Lukács re-politicization therefore means (and consistently so throughout his whole theoretical development) the re-narrativization of dispersed social facts. Literature (including philosophical literature, one could say, with Lukács's own philosophical style in mind) narrativizes and contextualizes what appears to be immediate, atemporal, and dispersed. It embeds the historical individual, and, more generally, the historically particular, in its socio-historical context. Narrative essentially involves time (objective time, as Lukács will argue), change, and transition and thus opens a space for agency.

With reference to nineteenth-century realism, Lukács provides an account of processes rather than objects, which allows him to counter the ontology of commodification. Despite his systematic originality, his aesthetic program, however, as has often been criticized, remains derivative of classical forms of literature, which had their high tide in a previous century.<sup>24</sup>

Debord emphasizes strategies that break the spell of pure factuality and pure spectatorship by re-appropriating these social facts through *détournement*. This, too, is true for his own style, re-appropriating the transformative critique of Feuerbach and the ideology critique of the young Marx.<sup>25</sup> In both of their approaches we find a *détournement, avant la lettre*, which, also through the stylistic means of chiasmic sentences, revert the distorted relationships of (depotentiated) subjects and (fetishized) objects. Debord presents this stylistic means as a 'rediscovered fluidity' (Debord, 1995, p. 144), 'a fluid language of anti-ideology' (p. 146). *Détournement* in this sense brings the hidden social meaning of things to the fore and reveals the structural connectivity of apparently isolated objects. It is, as Anselm Jappe (1999, p. 48) emphasizes, 'a collage-like technique whereby pre-existing elements were reassembled into new creations'—a reconnection of single elements. The experimental creation of alternative moments of practice, literally the *creation of situations* (as it was programmatically inscribed to the name of the Situationist International), is nothing less than the attempt to allow for different perspectives on social mediation. Debord thus presents art as a practice of dialogue and as an intervention into the everyday (Jappe, 1999, p. 71) that allows for the creation of social relations that reach beyond the spectacular forms of self-preservation (through social distinction and lifestyle). Neo-avantgardist practices of that kind have, for good reasons, remained influential till the present, informing institutional critical and political interventive practices still today.<sup>26</sup>

Both of Lukács and Debord's aesthetic programs, in all their differences, suggest the change of an ontological perspective, in line with the more explicitly political critique of reification through class struggle. The aesthetic transition accompanies and prepares the transition from an ontological commitment of commodity exchange to one of political practice, in light of which the structural connectivity of things becomes visible. The atomized ontology of singular facts is gradually replaced by the constitutive ontology of social embedment and mediation, of, as one might want to say with some caution, totality. Such a perspective of totality is, according to Lukács, merely a standpoint, and not an objective reality. It is a perspective, however, which only allows for emphatically transformative political practice: 'From this standpoint alone', so Lukács argues, 'does history really become a history of mankind' (Lukács, 1971, p. 186). The proof of the pudding of unity is, as always, in the eating, but, more precisely, also in the success of the respective theoretical strategies for political change.

In the history of the reception and critique of Lukács, however, it has become successively clear that the creation of a viable understanding of the connectivity of apparently isolated social practices cannot count on an epistemological safety net. The structural horizon of integrated social facts cannot simply be read as a matter of pure reflection—mirroring pre-given structures in consciousness, in scientific analysis, as Lukács indeed suggests (see Lukács, 1971, p. 8; pp. 50ff.).<sup>27</sup> Totality is not so much given but rather aspired to (p. 174; p. 198). The ‘creation of the object’ (p. 175) to overcome the false semblance of immediacy and to develop the practical totality of the proletariat is, thus, a fundamental challenge for any effective critique of reification and its repoliticizing claims. ‘Challenge’, however, also means that it is not secured and that its outcomes are not guaranteed in advance.

Because the kind of connectivity and embedment that the critique of reification is aiming at is not pre-given by any kind of directly accessible empirical reality, the critique of reification can learn a great deal from the disruptive tactics of *détournement* and from the instantaneous creation of social situations in specific geographies or places.<sup>28</sup> What the sometimes fusty emphasis on realist narrative can learn is also, and particularly, an alienating effect, an effect that opens up practical perspectives that do not simply emerge from the already existing world of facts and objects. For the creation of a revolutionary situation is not just reducible to the empirical; it is based on interruption, too.

In this sense totality is, as Fredric Jameson has not tired in emphasizing, not an affirmative but rather a critical category. It is even experimental, in the concrete sense that it has to break with the already known reality of the habitualized knowledge of facts. The construction of an integrated horizon of political practice has to be based on the refusal of ‘habitual limits and boundaries and even a defamiliarization of our habitual sense of the recognition and the understanding of human acts and passions’, as Jameson (2009, p. 206) paraphrases.

In these ways the critique of reified ontology is not only ontologically disruptive (in terms of its intervention in the general, reified appearance of things) and constructive (in terms of the orientation towards a structurally and theoretically integrated horizon of practice). It is also creative in a genuinely aesthetic fashion. Political ontology therefore also means that the world is not merely out there: The world as a political horizon also needs to be created.

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## 2. 'Reification' between Autonomy and Authenticity: Adorno on Musical Experience<sup>1</sup>

*Samir Gandesha*

In an aphorism entitled 'Le Prix de Progress', appended to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno write that '*Alle Verdinglichung ist ein Vergessen*' (All reification is a forgetting) (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2008, p. 229, translation altered).<sup>2</sup> This comes as the very last sentence of a reading of a letter by Pierre Flourens, a French physiologist, who was elected to the Académie Française in preference to Victor Hugo. A ground-breaking anaesthesiologist, Flourens raised serious concerns about the use of chloroform in surgery because the substance didn't simply inure the body to pain but, rather, consigned such pain to oblivion. In other words, chloroform led to a forgetting of suffering. This notion that 'all reification is a forgetting' is an appropriate point of departure for our discussion of what comprises 'reification' or *Verdinglichung* (literally: 'thingification'). The reason for this is that it enables us to bring into view two exemplary 'models' that frame the problem of reification specifically as a form of forgetting: these are the models of *dialectic*, on the one hand, and *difference*, on the other.

The first stems from the Idealist tradition and, via a detour through Feuerbach's 'transformative critique' of religion, Marx's analysis of the commodity form in the famous fourth section of the first chapter of *Capital Volume I*. It is developed further in Georg Lukács's epochal essay 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' published as a chapter of his 1923 book *History and Class Consciousness*. It could be said to culminate, mediated by the experiences of the mid-twentieth-century artistic avant-garde, in Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*. If, for Marx, capitalist society in its liberal phase presents itself as an 'immense accumulation of commodities', then for Debord, in late capitalism, 'the whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*' (Debord, 1995, p. 12).

The second model of reification has its origins in the existential theology of Søren Kierkegaard and is given its fullest articulation in the phenomenological ontology of Martin Heidegger as outlined in his early magnum opus *Being and Time*, published just four years after *History and Class*

*Consciousness*, which introduces the idea of the 'ontological difference'. This is the difference between the situated, finite human being, *Dasein*, and the things that are disclosed in and through *Dasein's* concerned activity in the context of the sedimented meanings constitutive of the world into which he or she is 'thrown' (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 91–148). The tradition of Western metaphysics is characterized by a constitutive 'forgetting' of the ontological difference or what Heidegger calls *Seinsvergessenheit*.

The two concepts are not unrelated, as Lucien Goldmann has suggested, drawing attention to Heidegger's reference in the first chapter of Part I to the failure of the attempt to ground an account of reification in terms of 'consciousness'. Heidegger (1962, p. 487) states that 'It has long been known that ancient ontology works with "Thing-concepts" and that there is a danger of "reifying consciousness"'. He then goes on to dismiss the formulation because it does not go deeply enough in the direction of ontological questioning, asking whether 'we [can] even *seek* that answer as long as the *question* of the meaning of Being remains unformulated and unclarified' (p. 487). While Lukács isn't named directly, he is clearly implied. So, in Goldmann's view (2009), Heidegger seeks in *Being and Time* to articulate nothing less than an ontological response to *History and Class Consciousness*.<sup>3</sup> In particular, Heidegger's account of 'care' (*Sorge*), according to Goldmann, insofar as it unifies past, present, and future, constitutes a response to Lukács's conception of totality as the historically mediated identity of subject and object.

The dispute between these two models and respective normative orientations has been at the heart of the key debates within late-twentieth-century social and political thought.<sup>4</sup> It is my contention that the enduring importance of Adorno's critique of reification is, inter alia, the way in which he brings both models into a 'field of force' throughout his writings, and particularly through his understanding of the philosophical significance of the autonomous artwork. It is by virtue of its *autonomy* that the artwork is able to maintain the possibility of an experience of the dynamic, temporal nature of the non-identical. In other words, in aesthetic experience Adorno locates an immanent path beyond reification, whereby reification is surpassed by a certain form of 'totalization' that avoids both the collective action instigated by the revolutionary party and the resoluteness of individual decision oriented towards a project that would unify past, present, and future. Far from being an impotent retreat from politics, as the Habermasian reading holds, Adorno's understanding of the aesthetic can be understood as a profound contribution to thinking about some of the key preconditions of political praxis (Gandhesha, 2012).

On the one hand, Adorno shows, with Horkheimer, the way in which the ego's struggle for self-preservation, paradoxically, seals the conditions of its own demise. Self-preservation reifies, and therefore destroys, the very life it putatively seeks to preserve. This is a thesis that obviously takes on urgent new meaning in the context of discussions of the 'Anthropocene'.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the orientation towards an 'authentic' life in the work of Buber, Jaspers, and especially the early Heidegger, amounts to what Adorno calls a 'reified critique of reification' (Adorno, 1973a).<sup>6</sup> For Adorno, it is in the autonomous work of art that the logic of reification is pushed to extremes and in such a way that opens up a relation to the non-identical or transitory phenomena. Music, in particular, plays this role insofar as time itself is its very medium. Like Penelope, who undoes by night the weaving she performs by day, the artwork both actively alienates itself from life and, *by virtue of that very separation*, is a spur to reflection on the conditions of precisely such separation. Hence, Adorno suggests, alluding to Wagner artworks "heal the wound with the spear that inflicted it" (Adorno, 2002, p. 134). In what follows, I go on to sketch out the two models in Lukács and Heidegger in more detail (1), draw out the implicit normative dimensions of these models (2), and then look at the way the respective normative dimensions of each conception could be said to find an echo in Adorno's understanding of musical experience (3).

## 1. Two Models of Reification

Returning to our two models—dialectic and difference—both could be said to take their point of departure from the understanding of reification as a form of forgetting that explicitly or implicitly also relates to attendant processes of 'fetishism' and 'alienation'.<sup>7</sup> For the dialectical model, reification is to be understood as Spirit's objectifying activity that is forgotten as such, that is, *as activity*, but which is then subsequently re-appropriated on its return via the transition from consciousness to self-consciousness. Remembering, here, is to be understood as not the simple the opposite of forgetting, but rather as a process of a totalizing re-internalization (*Erinnerung*) of that which had been externalized, forgotten as such, and mistaken for an 'otherness' or form of alterity standing over and against its creator or author like an 'alien power'. In this, the concept of experience (*Erfahrung*), plays a key role and experience implies a journey or pathway through which the shapes of consciousness are traversed. As Hegel puts it in the 'Preface' to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*:



The Science of this pathway is the Science of the *experience* which consciousness goes through; the substance and its movement are viewed as the object of consciousness. Consciousness knows and comprehends only what falls within its experience; for what is contained in this is nothing but spiritual substance, and this, too, as *object* of the self. But Spirit becomes object because it is just this movement of becoming an *other to itself*, i.e. becoming an *object to itself* and of suspending this otherness. And experience is the name we give to just this movement, in which the immediate, the unexperienced, i.e. the abstract, whether it be of sensuous [but still unsensed] being, or only thought of as simple, becomes alienated from itself and then returns to itself from this alienation, and is only then revealed for the first time in its actuality and truth, just as it then has become a property of consciousness also. (Hegel, 1977, §36)

Experience, then, is a *re-membering* or putting back in relation or mediation a broken totality, whose individual parts had been severed or *dis-membered*. Hegel's famous example is 'sense certainty' which inaugurates the passage through the appearance of the various 'shapes of consciousness' in the *Phenomenology* (Hegel, 1977, §90-110). For Marx, the analogue is the commodity form<sup>8</sup> which, insofar as it is a fetish, that is, necessarily abstracted from the conditions under which it is produced, it acquires what Lukács calls a 'phantom-like objectivity' (Lukács, 1971a, p. 83). It is, in other words, an object that occludes the very social relations that it embodies which, therefore, gives it its 'phantom-like' appearance. Such a ghostly objectivity constitutes a world in which relations between human beings take on the character of relations between things, and relations between things appear as relations between human beings. In describing the commodity in a manner that evokes his early critique of religion—the very first premise of criticism per se—Marx describes the commodity form as abounding in 'metaphysical subtleties' (*metaphysische Spitzfindigkeit*) and 'theological niceties' (*theologische Mucken*) (Marx 1996, p. 81). Marx is already intimating something that Lukács will subsequently elaborate into startling metaphilosophical claims (see Feenberg, 2014), namely: that the commodity poses not just a socio-economic problem but also fundamentally a cognitive one. Reification, then, in this tradition stems from the socially necessary illusion of the commodity as a 'real abstraction', which then, itself, occludes the grasp of the structural totality of the social whole as the object not just of theory but praxis. Forgetting here is to be understood specifically as the structural incapacity to grasp the historical formation of the social world through practical activity.<sup>9</sup>

Lukács shows the manner in which the process of fetishism, qua a totalizing process of rationalization or the elaboration of a system of formal procedures, extends from production relations and comes to penetrate even the most minute sphere of society, including the realm of intimacy.<sup>10</sup> One could say that the *logic of commodity fetishism*, in Lukács's account, leads to the *fetishism of formal logic* insofar as it gives rise to apparently insoluble antinomies in philosophical thinking as in Kantian critical philosophy and the German Idealism that constitutes a response to Kantian philosophy. It is only in Hegel's notion of the Absolute, according to Lukács, that we find the best attempt to cancel while simultaneously preserving these supposedly intractable oppositions. In other words, the basic problem of reification—that human relations take on the appearance of relations between things—deeply penetrates even the most otiose realm of speculative philosophy. Hegel's notion of the 'Homecoming of Spirit', culminating in the rationality of the ethical life of the modern state—the grasping of the rational content of historically produced customs or *Sitten*—is a false, merely one-sided solution to the problem of 'transcendental homelessness' (Lukács, 1971b p. 41) because it perpetuates a merely passive or 'contemplative' relation to the world. In Lukács's view, it was only in the world-constituting activity of the identical subject-object of history, that the intractable antinomies of bourgeois thinking would be decisively transcended. Such an 'identical subject-object of history' (Lukács, 1971a, p. 197) is able to grasp the totality of historical objectifications as the *once-forgotten* products of its own practical activity.

It is precisely the criticism of such a conception of philosophy that the philosophy of difference takes as its point of departure. Heidegger argues at the end of Division I of *Being and Time* that, while Hegel is one of the first (Kant being the other) to recognize the distinctive nature of temporality, in the final instance, he conceives of Spirit through 'Kenosis'. Kenosis is the theological term that denotes the process by which God *empties Himself into and ultimately out of time*, thus the dialectic as, according to Hegel himself, 'theodicy'. So, in Heidegger's view, while Hegel arrives at the brink of a break with the philosophical tradition's 'onto-theological'<sup>11</sup> conception of being as the antithesis of time, he ultimately pulls back from it and re-inscribes the understanding of being as enduring presence, as the unconscious hypostatization of a particular modality of time: namely, that of the *present*.

Therefore, in Heidegger's view, Hegel fails to go far enough insofar as he fails to grasp the temporality of Being (*Sein*) itself. And the reason why Hegel was incapable of grasping Being in this way had to do with the fact that, like the tradition of Western metaphysics originating with Plato's account of

*eidōs*, he failed to take as starting point the ‘ontological difference’ or the difference between Being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seiendes*). In other words, the dialectical model of *remembering*, or making whole through the unfolding of Spirit’s speculative drive towards freedom, cannot avoid a certain kind of *forgetting* (*Seinsvergessenheit*)—the forgetting of the finite, situated, indeed, thrown (*geworfen*) being, *Dasein*. Indeed, it is precisely because he or she is so thrown, that ‘Being’ becomes, itself, a question for the situated human being. Hegel suggests, for example, that Spirit is able to remain self-identical through the most extreme experiences including death: ‘[T]he life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself’ (Hegel, 1977, §32).

Spirit, on its speculative journey ‘home’ to itself, entailing the achieved ‘identity of identity and non-identity’, the unity of ‘subject and substance’, both cancels and preserves finitude itself. As a result, it fails to fully acknowledge the difference between Being or *Dasein* and beings, things that are disclosed within the so-called ‘worldhood’ of *Dasein*’s world. In contrast to the Hegelian *Heimkehr* or ‘Homecoming’, Heidegger understands *Dasein* as literally *Unheimlich* (literally ‘un-homely’ but translated as ‘uncanny’).<sup>12</sup> It is in this idea of *Seinsvergessenheit* or the ‘forgetting of being’ that we find an alternative, ontological conception of reification—a phenomenon that Heidegger locates at the heart of the philosophical tradition stretching back to Plato’s theory of the forms. Here Being is understood as enduring presence and therefore as the antithesis of lived time as it unfolds between, to use Arendt’s terms, ‘natality’ and ‘mortality’ (Arendt, 1958). As Heidegger suggests in direct opposition to Hegel’s attempt to grasp ‘substance as subject’: ‘man’s “substance” is not spirit as a synthesis of soul and body; it is rather *existence*’ (Heidegger, 1962, p. 153).

For Heidegger, the problem of ‘reification’ cannot be understood in terms of the concept of consciousness precisely because of its Cartesian starting point, that is, the split between subject and object which, as previously suggested, can itself be traced back to the Greeks. The dualism of subject and object was part and parcel of the *Seinsvergessenheit* that elided the ontological difference and reduced the distinctive understanding of time for human being-in-the-world to a mere *Vorhandenes*, an ‘enduring presence’ that somehow withstood time. In contrast, Heidegger argues that *Dasein* has to be understood in terms of what he calls *Sorge* or care in which the various modalities of time, namely past, present, and future, were unified in a concerned engagement within the world.

Such an account of temporality Heidegger famously explicates via the example of the tool: That in the typical engagement within the totality

of meaningful structures constitutive of the world, the artisan does not thematize the tool; it is merely an extension of his own body in undertaking a particular future-directed project. It is, in other words, to be understood as a *Zuhandenes*, or a thing 'ready-to-hand'. It is only when the tool breaks down that it becomes, in a sense, a 'fetish', though Heidegger does not of course use the term, insofar as it is transformed from the ready-to-hand, an integral part of *Dasein's* world, to something that is 'de-worlded', torn, violently we could say, from the web of meaningful relations constitutive of the world and rendered as a *Vorhandenes*, a thing 'present-at-hand'. The object can be considered, in this sense, as 'alienated' from *Dasein's* own activity. What are the specifically normative dimensions of these two models of reification?

## 2. Reification and Normativity

To gain a perspective on the normative dimensions of these two models, it is useful to compare Lukács and Heidegger's conceptions with Axel Honneth's recent attempt, via a post-metaphysical<sup>13</sup> reconstruction of the concept of recognition, to revive and resuscitate the concept of reification. To the idea with which I began the chapter, that 'all reification is a forgetting', Honneth adds Stanley Cavell's notion that knowledge is grounded in a prior moment of *acknowledgement*. The reification or thingification of the person results from a failure or a breakdown in the empathetic acknowledgment of the other and opens the possibility of subsuming the person beneath the category of 'thing'.<sup>14</sup> Honneth states that '[t]o the extent to which in our acts of cognition we lose sight of the fact that these acts owe their existence to our having taken up an antecedent recognitional stance, we develop a tendency to perceive other persons as mere sensate objects' (Honneth, 2008, p. 57). Unlike in his other writings where recognition is understood roughly according to the Hegelian differentiation of 'Objective Spirit' into spheres of intimacy, civil society, and community, here Honneth seems to suggest that the phenomenon of reification can be understood simply at the level of the individual and therefore as a matter of subjective disposition that can be simply corrected by a rather voluntaristic change of perspective. In other words, reification, in Honneth's ethical account the phenomenon,<sup>15</sup> appears then to be something like a mistake in categorization and can be rectified as such.

In contrast, as we have seen, Lukács and Heidegger understand reification as a form of forgetting that results from a determinate structural crisis that has profound implications for the conditions of human action. For Lukács, reification constitutes the ongoing crisis of generalized commodity

production through which the rationalization of even the most minute aspect of the social whole comes about. Reification consists of the reduction of time to space; of *diachrony* to ostensibly immutable *synchronic* laws of social motion. This amounts, as I have already suggested, to a kind of cognitive crisis that cannot, however, be solved by purely cognitive or contemplative means but must ultimately be addressed through praxis. Lukács could be said to be in agreement with the later Wittgenstein that the problem of 'reification' (like that of scepticism) is not so much a philosophical problem that could be met with a philosophical *solution* but rather a meta-philosophical problem to be *dissolved* by way of self-conscious action or praxis.

For Heidegger, in contrast, reification arises as result of the crisis or breakdown of our future-oriented, purposive action against the meaningful horizon of worldly commitments and engagements. In other words, reification results from the manner in which action is arrested or halted as a result of a tear in the background horizon of the meaningful world provoked by a breakdown in the *zuhanden* ('ready-to-hand') character of things, that is, the tool, itself, which is now disclosed as *vorhanden* ('present-at-hand'); *Dasein's* thrownness into the world of pre-given meanings now is resolved into a bifurcated scene consisting of a deracinated subject passively surveying an object as it appears directly before it on the horizon of an eternal present shorn of any kind of relation to past or future. Like Wittgenstein, the sceptical problem of the certainty of our knowledge claims and, relatedly, the problem of the existence of other minds, is a function of a crisis or breakdown of worldly relations as previously described.

However wanting Honneth's account of the origins of the phenomenon may be, insofar as it provides no compelling structural account of reification, it does provide a clear account of its normative orientation to the mutuality of recognition between persons.<sup>16</sup> If structural accounts are on offer in an account of post-liberal capitalism in Lukács or for Heidegger in the account of the *Seinsvergessenheit* at the heart of the tradition of Western metaphysics, their respective normative starting points are more or less implicit rather than explicitly stated. For Honneth, reification stems, as we have seen, from a *misrecognition* of the person; from a denial of the recognition of the other's aspiration to self-realization. In the case of Lukács and Heidegger it is possible discern the way in which normative commitments are embedded in, on the one hand, the former's account of history, and, on the other hand, in the latter's history of Western metaphysics as a narrative of decline culminating, in his later writings, in the essence of technological thinking.

The first account of reification, the *dialectical* account, one could argue, is oriented at recovering a form of lost autonomy understood not just in terms of Kantian primacy of moral self-legislation but in political terms as the democratic self-determination of a community.<sup>17</sup> In taking up a merely contemplative attitude to its own objectifications, the collective subject subordinates itself to a condition of heteronomy or of being determined by an 'alien power'.<sup>18</sup> The overcoming of such an attitude, the transformation of the petrified and barely recognizable forms of social existence is an act of freedom or, at least, inaugurates the passage from the realm of necessity to that freedom.<sup>19</sup>

The second account of reification, what I'm calling the *difference* account, in contrast, understands the phenomenon as the reduction of the human being to a condition indistinguishable from a world of things on the temporal horizon of an eternalized present. This amounts not so much to the loss of rational, which is to say self-legislating, freedom as it does a loss of authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*).<sup>20</sup> Such a loss amounts to a falling into the idle chatter (*die Rede*) of the anonymous world of 'publicness' by which 'everything gets obscured, and what has been covered up gets passed off as something familiar and accessible to everyone' (Heidegger, 1962, p. 165). The light of the open public sphere darkens everything because it induces *Dasein* to lose sight of, or indeed actively avoid, the fundamental questions of human existence.

These two models of reification—*dialectic* and *difference*—can be seen, as alluded to above, to find their way into the key philosophical positions of the late twentieth century. Each of these models, moreover, is oriented by a specific account of normativity. The first is geared to a notion of autonomy or a life that is a rationally self-legislating one. The second is oriented towards realization of a life characterized by irreducible difference or singularity. Autonomy entails action oriented towards the collective subject's self-appropriation of the objective forms of its own activity. Authenticity, in contrast, is grounded in the irreducibly *temporal* nature of *Dasein*, its finitude and ultimate orientation towards its ownmost possibility, namely death. Being-towards-death is radically *individuating* insofar as *only I can face my own death*. Such singularity ultimately trumps the universality of moral law.

Insofar as the origins of the idea of autonomy in Kant entail the public use of reason, the problem of reification does not entail, therefore, in Heidegger's view, the transgression of the injunction to treat fellow rational beings always as ends and never as means. Rather, in a manner that recalls Kierkegaard's idea of a 'teleological suspension of the ethical', authenticity consists

in the *irreducible singularity* of the individual. Kierkegaard presents, in *Fear and Trembling*, an inversion of Hegel's account of the mediations of individuality, particularity, and universality within the unfolding of Absolute Spirit: 'faith's paradox is this, that the single individual is higher than the universal, that the single individual [...] determines his relation to the universal through his relation to the absolute, not his relation to the absolute through the relation to the universal' (Kierkegaard, 1985, pp. 97–98). It entails what Derrida (2005, p. 36), referring explicitly to Kierkegaard, calls the ultimately *ungroundable* 'madness of decision'. Hence, for Heidegger, the falling of *Dasein* into *das Man* ('the They'), which is, as he suggests, always already one of its possibilities, is an avoidance of or flight from its 'ownmost possibility': Being-towards-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*). In other words, for *Dasein*, Being-towards-death has a radically individuating function and grounds its irreducible singularity in a manner that runs parallel to Kierkegaard's notion of faith.

The claim that I wish to make here is that, in his conceptualization of the phenomenon of reification, Adorno draws upon both of these normative insights. On the one hand, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, his lectures on moral philosophy (2002) and the section entitled 'Models of Freedom in *Negative Dialectics*' (2007, pp. 211–299), Adorno is at considerable pains to show the manner in which an account of radical autonomy, under which he subsumes Lukács's Fichtean critique of reification, is self-undermining. That is to say, it entails, in its account of rational self-legislation, a repressive relation to the subject's own sensuous impulses for fulfilment and happiness. Hence, it becomes the locus of the dialectic of enlightenment: that the drive to self-preservation undermines the very (sensuous) life it is meant to preserve in the first place. If detached from the 'object' (somatic drives, external nature and the social order), autonomy, Adorno argues, must reverse into its opposite: heteronomy.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, as I have shown elsewhere (Gandesha, 2004), Adorno criticizes Heidegger's account of reification as, itself, 'reified'. That is, Heidegger relies upon a form of what Günther Anders calls 'pseudo concreteness' (1948) that substantializes historically generated and therefore contingent conditions, for example the emotional states (*Befindlichkeiten*) of *Dasein*. It is precisely because of Heidegger's ontico-ontological difference that he is unable to root an account of reification in natural-historical processes (Gandesha, 2004).<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the notion of authenticity can be understood as a placeholder for the non-identical or the 'transitory' that always already lies beyond the grasp of the concept. In late capitalist society in which the logic of reification had penetrated deeply into the

most intimate spheres, the transitory becomes a key site for resistance. The relation to the transitory is also a new form of normativity grounded in non-identity, which suggests a non-subsumptive and therefore non-dominating relation between the individual and the collective. For Adorno, such a form of normativity was embodied in exemplary fashion in musical experience, which from the beginning of the Western tradition of political philosophy in Plato's middle period dialogues, the *Republic* in particular, is inextricable from the question of justice.<sup>23</sup> While this interpretation cannot be fully elaborated in this context, I would like to try to sketch out in the following and concluding section the way in which auditory experience provides the basis for a non-repressive form of totalization that both borrows from the two models previously discussed and, in the process, goes beyond them.

### 3. Musical Experience beyond Autonomy and Authenticity

As I have previously suggested the two most significant models of reification in the twentieth century, those of Lukács and Heidegger, are oriented by two distinct forms of normativity grounded in autonomy and authenticity respectively. What I want to suggest in this section is the way in which Adorno's approach places autonomy and authenticity in a *Kraftfeld*, or field of force. Central to the development of Adorno's position, of course, is his relation to Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's early conception of allegory in his work on *das Trauerspiel*, or the German mourning play, is key, along with Lukács's conception of 'second nature', to Adorno's elaboration of the idea of 'natural-history' which then forms the basis not only for the argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which lays bare the inextricable relation of enlightenment and myth, but also for the arguments of *Negative Dialectics*, many of which are centrally concerned to show the propensity of an account of pure practical reason geared to self-legislating autonomy to collapse under its own (rigoristic) weight. While, in Adorno's view, the concept of autonomy must be defended (see, for example, Adorno and Becker, 1983), this can only be done by way of a seemingly aporetic receptivity to the other or the non-identical (and hence heteronomy). The aporia is only apparent, however, insofar as the supplement of aesthetic experience is the key mediation between 'autonomy' and 'authenticity,' universal concepts of reason and sensuous particularity. Specifically in relation to musical experience, understood temporally, the non-identical as a form of transitoriness ruptures the immanence of identity-thinking and identifying processes from within.



But Benjamin's later, Brecht-inspired work, also serves as a critical foil for Adorno's attempt to articulate a critique of what he along with Horkheimer call the 'culture industry'. As they argue in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, enlightenment culminates in 'mass deception' in which the anthropomorphism of its categories reaches new heights. An earlier version of this critique of the culture industry appears in an essay published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* entitled 'Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening' (Adorno, 1982). Here, Adorno offers an almost explicit refutation of Benjamin's widely influential essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility'. As the central claims of this essay have already been discussed ad nauseam, I will not rehearse them again here. Suffice it to say, however, that the thrust of Benjamin's argument is that the destruction of the 'aura' or authenticity of the artwork via technologies of mass reproducibility, photography, and film in particular afford new opportunities for the objective presentation of socio-historical truths that had hitherto not been available to art—an 'optical unconscious' in which hitherto concealed structures of power are brought to light—and new subjective conditions for the experience of art. For example, the collective experience of film supplants the individualized bourgeois forms of apprehension of art works in the museum.

Of a piece with his scepticism of much of his older friend and mentor's later work, Adorno seeks to make an immanent critique of Benjamin's cultural criticism. For example, in his exchange over the essay on Baudelaire, Adorno suggests that Benjamin doesn't properly understand Marx's concept of 'commodity fetishism', and that he therefore ought to return to *Capital, Volume I* (Adorno, 1973b, p. 61). Similarly, in 'Fetish Character', Adorno grounds his response to what he views as Benjamin's excessively optimistic account of mass culture not only in Marx's account of commodity fetishism, which he quotes directly and at some length, but also in Lukács's account of reification which, as is well-known, was also extremely highly regarded by Benjamin.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, in suggesting that reification culminates in the culture industry, Adorno anticipates Debord's account of the 'spectacle'. Two points of intersection are worth indicating: the utter passivity (pseudo-activity) of the spectator/listener before the spectacle and the overwhelming reproduction of the 'Always-the-same' (*das Immergleiche*). According to Adorno, 'A sensory pleasure turns into disgust as soon as it is seen how it only serves to betray the consumer. The betrayal consists in always offering the same thing' (Adorno, 1982, p. 290).

However much it may seem that Adorno's and Benjamin's positions are strictly opposed on the question of the emancipatory character of mass culture, it is important to recognize that Adorno is clear that mass culture

and autonomous art, 'serious' and 'light' music, are, as he puts it 'Both torn halves of an integral freedom to which however they do not add up' (Adorno, 1973b, 66; see also Leppert, 2005, pp. 92–133). Both high and low culture, in other words, cannot escape the totalizing logic of commodity fetishism and reification that suffuses capitalist society in its late phase. In articulating his critique, Adorno's concern is to challenge directly what he considers Benjamin's all-too sanguine assessment of the political possibilities that attend modes of 'distracted' apperception exemplified by the cinema and that crystallize the significance not just of Brecht's epic theatre but also the Russian avant-garde. In particular, Adorno's concern is the connection between the objective processes by which music, 'serious' and 'light' alike, is subjected to the law of value, hence its 'fetish character', and the subjective process by which the capacity to 'listen' to (and therefore properly experience, *erfahren* rather than simply *erleben*) music is undermined. The fetish character of music, in other words, generates an inherently reified form of listening. If 'all reification is a forgetting', then reification in this specific case entails an incapacity to hold the parts in an articulated relation with the whole in the dynamic, temporal unfolding or *movement* (Goehr, 2008) of a musical work. Genuine musical experience (*musikalische Erfahrung*) entails a capacity for *Erinnerung*, which means the ability to reintegrate parts within the whole—literally, as we saw in connection with Hegel, to 're-member' what had been dirempted or *dis-membered*. Regressive listening, in contrast, requires a certain kind of prompt via the leitmotif as in certain late Romantic works of Wagner, for example, that enable the work, in its discontinuous parts, to be instantly recognizable. In this, they anticipate the advertising jingles that illuminate the *raison d'être* of the culture industry: 'to truck and barter'. Such leitmotifs, themselves, as forms of disconnected forms of climactic experiences (*Erlebnisse*) entail a forgetting or break in the structural relation to the whole. In this sense, if Benjamin's theses concerning film are correct at all, they certainly cannot be extended to music: 'But if the film as a whole seems to be apprehended in a distracted manner, deconcentrated listening makes the perception of the whole impossible' (Adorno, 1982, p. 288). Musical structure, therefore, helps to illuminate ontological questions.

Here it is possible to see the important links to both Lukács and Heidegger. For both, as we have seen, reification is closely tied to forgetting. For Lukács, what is forgotten is the constitutive link to practical activity, the objectifications of which then confront the collective agent as an alien power from without; a condition of utter alienation or heteronomy. For Heidegger, reification is understood as the forgetting of the ontico-ontological difference grounded in the qualitative temporality of the human being

situated or thrown into an always already meaningful world. As I have suggested above, in the first account what is at stake is autonomy, in the second, authenticity. In Adorno's account of musical experience, it is possible to discern the attempt to defend autonomy, which is to say, *aesthetic* autonomy, whereby the work embodies its own self-directed lawfulness, in such a way as to rescue a notion of aura or authenticity understood as the trace of otherness that does not enter into concepts without remainder. Yet this is a kind of authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) distanced from property (*Eigentum*), as the temporal evanescence of music cannot be possessed as such (see Leppert, 2005). In the autonomous, and therefore *reified*, artwork it is possible to discern a dialectical model for a non-reified fluid relation of sensuous particularity and universality that negates the logic of subsumption of the former beneath the latter. As Adorno (1982, p. 298) suggests, 'Even discipline can take over the expression of free solidarity if freedom becomes its content. As little as regressive listening is a symptom of progress in consciousness of freedom, it could suddenly turn around if art, in unity with society, should ever leave the road of the always-identical'.

Specifically with reference to the musical experience of what Adorno calls 'structural listening',<sup>25</sup> that rather than entailing a forgetting or elision of the work as a whole punctuated by the shock-like, discrete, and disconnected experiences (*Erlebnisse*) of individual moments, the autonomous work calls forth a kind of concentrated listening as a type of experience (*Erfahrung*), as a type of unfolding that works simultaneously backwards and forwards; that what in a phenomenological register would be referred to as 'internal time consciousness' (Husserl, 1991) and therefore involves a unifying process entailing both retention and protention. However, and this is a key aberration in Adorno from both Lukács and Heidegger, it would totalize in such a way as to generate or regenerate a (mimetic) capacity for passive *receptivity* (rather than active, constituting *spontaneity*) in relation to the genuinely *other*. It is a form of totalization, in other words, that paradoxically sets free the transitory rather than subsuming it beneath subject-object identity (Lukács) or *Dasein's* care structure unifying past and present in the futurity of one's own most authentic (*eigentlich*) possibility (Heidegger). What Adorno calls 'thinking conceptually beyond the concept' is in a sense then a form of remembering of the necessity of forgetting—that sensuous particularity can never be subsumed beneath concepts without leaving a trace or a remainder that is simply unrecoverable because of its inherent temporality; that, like musical notes, the non-identical simply sounds and then passes away. As Adorno suggests in reference to the free atonal works of Schönberg and Webern: 'They are called individualists, and

yet their work is nothing but a single dialogue with the powers that destroy individuality—powers whose “formless shadows” fall gigantically on their music. In music, too, collective powers are liquidating an individuality past saving, but against them only individuals are capable of representing the aims of collectivity’ (1982, p. 299).

To return to that with which I started, Pierre Flourens’s rejection of the use of chloroform: his reason for doing so had to do with the fact that, in contrast to received opinion, chloroform not only fails to diminish suffering in patients who are sedated with the drug, but actually enhances it. The way chloroform acts, however, is to enable the nervous system to *forget* what it has undergone. Moreover, given its effectiveness in promoting such forgetfulness and therefore in widening the scope for increasing the invasiveness of medical procedures, it risks turning human beings into guinea pigs; in transforming every operation into an act of vivisection. Indeed, the unprecedented levels of pain that might be caused by the invasive nature of the procedures themselves may cause permanent mental damage or even death under narcosis, the exact nature of which would be concealed from both the relatives of the patient as well as the world at large. In a sense, this kind of reification as a forgetting would be a double forgetting: a forgetting of forgetting. A forgetting of a nature of the administering of chloroform and its effects, i.e. not the reduction in the body’s sensitivity to stimuli but rather enhancing its capacity to forget the pain that it has suffered.

My argument has been that for Adorno, Lukács, and Heidegger’s conceptions of reification ultimately fail to understand this problem of the forgetting of the necessity of forgetting addressed by Flourens. In this example, we see medicine as a rational system that treats the individual as a thing (as a guinea pig to be experimented on) or a mere presence-at-hand that forgets the authorship and/or irreducible singularity of the human being. However, what is not brought to memory, and what to some extent defies its powers of recall, is an irreconcilable moment of somatic suffering that pervades natural history. In contrast to Lukács and Heidegger, Adorno seeks to differentiate a notion of enlightenment as *Mündigkeit* from the self-destructive notion of enlightenment as *Aufklärung*. While Kant uses the two concepts more or less interchangeably in his famous essay ‘Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?’, Adorno (with Horkheimer) differentiates the two. While *Aufklärung*, emphasizes the role of vision in establishing a totalizing picture of the whole, Adorno takes *Mündigkeit* to mean the capacity of the subject to speak up for him- or herself in a non-conformist way and this entails a certain kind of danger and riskiness that comes with a refusal of ‘identification with the aggressor’, a refusal that in his

youth Adorno (1991, p. 186) came to associate with the use of *Fremdwörter*, which he understood as the 'Jews of language'. Far from simply emphasizing the autonomy of the subject and perpetuating the self-destructive logic of the dialectic of enlightenment, however, Adorno stresses the importance, indeed the irreducibility, of aspiring to 'express the inexpressible' (Adorno, 2007, pp. 108-110). Indeed such irreducibility comes into its own precisely by virtue of the specialized (and therefore reified) dialectic of *aesthetic* autonomy that releases the transitory, the 'unexpressable', from the hold of identity or the 'expressable'. It is the *resistance* of the former that makes possible what Hannah Arendt regards as the very signature of the political: namely, the possibility of a 'new beginning'.

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### 3. ‘All Reification Is a Forgetting’: Benjamin, Adorno, and the Dialectic of Reification

*Thijs Lijster*

In his contribution to the book *The Idea of Communism*, Slavoj Žižek argues that ‘we can no longer talk about “reification” in the classic Lukácsian sense. Far from being invisible, social relationality in its very fluidity is directly the object of marketing and exchange’ (Žižek, 2010, p. 221).<sup>1</sup> While reification in the traditional sense referred to the apprehension of social relations as things—for instance, to consider the price of an object as a mysterious and autonomous force, instead of something that has its origin in human labour mediated by relations of commodity exchange—today these social relations themselves have become the model of the commodity form, as industrial capitalism has turned into ‘cultural’ capitalism, intellectual and immaterial labour are becoming increasingly predominant, and information and experience the primary consumer goods. Indeed, in a world in which, more than ever, ‘all that is solid melts into air’ (Marx, 1978, p. 517), the critique of reification might run the risk of identifying with the aggressor. Hence, it is worthwhile to take a look at earlier critiques of Lukács’s critique of reification, of which those of Adorno and Benjamin are the most original.

Adorno’s indebtedness to Lukács theory of reification is quite well known, as is his later critique of Lukács in *Negative Dialectics*.<sup>2</sup> There, Adorno argues that Lukács fails to distinguish between reification and what he calls objectivation.<sup>3</sup> While the critique of reification rightfully exposes the thing-like object as part of the total social process, this critique thereby also tends to reduce the entire meaning of the object to the meaning-giving social subject, not allowing anything alien above and beyond the subject’s reach. Lukács, in short, ignores what one might call the *surplus* of meaning of the object itself, and hence relapses into idealism. As Adorno writes:

If a man looks upon thingness as radical evil, if he would like to dynamize all entity into pure actuality, he tends to be hostile to otherness, to the alien thing that has lent its name to alienation, and not in vain. (Adorno, 1963, p. 191)



Against this, Adorno argues:

The reconciled condition would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien. Instead, its happiness would lie in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different beyond the heterogeneous and beyond that which is one's own. (Adorno, 1963, p. 191)

In other words, the 'thingness' of the object should not be completely translated into the product of social relations, as the theory of reification seems to imply. The 'alienness' of the object, for Adorno, is also the recognition that there is something beyond the subject's reach, i.e. beyond what can be reduced to subjectivity.

Less well known, however, is the critique of the concept of reification developed by Adorno's mentor and friend, Walter Benjamin. Robert Hullot-Kentor, for instance, writes that Adorno 'in opposition to *both Benjamin* and the early Lukács [...] did not reify the critique of reification' (Hullot-Kentor, 2006, p. 249; emphasis added). As true as this may be with regard to Lukács, I do not agree with Hullot-Kentor where it concerns Benjamin. Or to put it more strongly, I believe that Adorno's critique of the critique of reification is largely derived from Benjamin's work, and developed in dialogue with Benjamin, as I will try to show in what follows. To do this, I will first take a look at a discussion on the concept of reification in the correspondence between Adorno and Benjamin. Next, I will discuss how Benjamin's concept of reification is closely connected to the theory of allegory developed in his *Trauerspiel* book, which later returns, albeit in a different form, in the figure of the collector from the *Arcades Project*. This figure, I will argue, can be considered as an 'emblem' of Benjamin's theory of reification. Finally, I will come back to Adorno and to the way the Benjaminian dialectic of reification functions in his aesthetics, more specifically in the relation between art and natural beauty.

## 1. 'All Reification Is a Forgetting'

In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno famously stated that 'all reification is forgetting' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. 191). But the first time this line appears is in a letter from Adorno to Walter Benjamin, dated 29 February 1940. In it, Adorno expresses his enthusiasm for Benjamin's rewritten version of the essay on Baudelaire, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire'. In this essay, Benjamin introduces the distinction between

*Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*—*Erfahrung* as the kind of experience connected to and embedded in tradition, as a collective memory, and *Erlebnis* as an isolated shock-experience that cannot find its way into memory, or only to a distorted *voluntary* memory.

In his letter, Adorno expresses his appreciation for Benjamin's theory of experience, but proposes to develop it further by connecting it to the concept of reification. He writes:

Is it not the case that the real task here is to bring the entire opposition between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* into relation with a dialectical theory of forgetting? Or one could equally say, into relation with a theory of reification. For all reification is a forgetting: objects become purely thing-like the moment they are retained for us without the continued presence of their other aspects: when something of them has been forgotten. (Adorno and Benjamin, 1999, p. 321)

He continues saying that:

there is absolutely no question for us of merely repeating Hegel's [*and here one could probably also fill in Lukács's name, TL*] verdict upon reification here, but rather of formulating a proper critique of reification, i.e. of unfolding the contradictory moments that are involved in such forgetting; or one could also say, of formulating a distinction between good and bad reification. (Adorno and Benjamin, 1999, p. 321)

Finally, Adorno also proposes to involve Benjamin's concept of aura in this theory of forgetting, for, in his view, Benjamin's aura is nothing but the forgetting of human labour invested in things. I will return to the concept of aura in the last section.

In his response of 7 May 1940, Benjamin reacts somewhat reluctantly to Adorno's proposals. Although there might be all sorts of personal reasons for this reluctance, there are at least two possible theoretical ones, too. First, Benjamin had already developed the dialectical theory of reification Adorno suggests quite some time earlier, namely in the theory of allegory that was part of his analysis of the German Baroque mourning play. Second, Adorno's formulation of 'a distinction between good and bad reification' might have struck Benjamin as strangely *undialectical*, as if the two could be neatly categorized and separated. It does not fit into Benjamin's ideas about reification, according to which reification might be redeemed precisely by taking it to its extreme.

## 2. Reification and Allegory

As Benjamin argues in his study of the *Trauerspiel*, baroque melancholy maintains a double relation to the world of things, once characterized by Winfried Menninghaus as a dialectic of devaluation (*Entwertung*) and sanctification (*Erhebung*) (Menninghaus, 1980). For the Baroque poets, who were Lutherans, the 'natural' order of the cosmos is lost, and the world of things devalued; grace awaits us only in the afterlife. On the other side, however, the melancholic attitude, as described by Benjamin, is characterized by a perpetual attribution of new meanings to dead objects, thereby 'sanctifying' them as the potential key to eternal knowledge. Thus, the melancholic grants devalued objects an opportunity to possess a new life.

Allegory, as Benjamin argues, is the expression of this melancholic worldview. As he so brilliantly puts it: 'The allegory of the seventeenth century is not convention of expression, but expression of convention' (Benjamin, 1977, p. 175). In allegorical language, everything can become the sign for anything else, sometimes turning a thing into its exact opposite—a crown becomes a funeral wreath and an angel's harp turns into an executioner's axe (p. 231). However, in order to receive its allegorical meaning, the object must be torn out of its original context. This is why, according to Benjamin, the most prominent Baroque emblems are the ruin, the corpse, and the skull: objects that are already dead, whose life has literally withered away, and are therefore available for the allegorist to fill with new meaning. One might also say that these objects are allegories of allegory.

Although the *Trauerspiel* study precedes Benjamin's 'turn' to Marxism, it is not hard to see that his critique of Baroque conventionalism fits well into a Marxist critique of the commodity form. This is precisely why Benjamin recognized so much of his own thoughts when he was first introduced to Lukács's critique of reification and commodification in *History and Class Conscience*, which, in a later newspaper review, he praises as one of the books that 'remain alive' (Benjamin, 1972, p. 171).

Indeed, the commodity form has a central place in Benjamin's analysis of modernity in the *Arcades Project*.<sup>4</sup> Like Lukács, Benjamin conceives of the commodity not merely as an economic form, but as something that permeates the lives and minds of people. As we come to express everything in terms of exchange value, the way we perceive our world and each other changes. The commodity, as Marx already argues, is exchangeable for any other commodity through the medium of money, and therefore the commodified object is deprived of its specific meaning. Herein lies the affinity between commodity and allegory, which similarly sucks the life out of

any object: 'The devaluation of the world of things in allegory is surpassed within the world of things itself by the commodity' (Benjamin, 2003, p. 164).

Although Benjamin himself never states it explicitly, one could translate the dialectical poles of allegory, devaluation, and sanctification into a dialectic of reification. As objects enter the market and become commodities, their original meaning is stripped from them and replaced by their price. Or, to put it in Marx's terms, their use value is eclipsed by their exchange value. The commodity is a product of human labour, but no longer recognized as such, and taken for a nature-like thing: natural history (*Naturgeschichte*), as Benjamin calls it. Life is drained from the object and what remains is an empty shell, similar to the Baroque emblems of the ruin, the skull, and the corpse.

However, the other pole of the allegory—sanctification—is equally present in commodification. New meanings are granted to commodities, as Benjamin points out by quoting Marx: 'Value [...] converts every product into a social hieroglyphic'.<sup>5</sup> The exchange value of the commodity is considered as a force of its own, a force beyond man. Hence the reference to the fetish; Marx famously speaks of the 'theological niceties and metaphysical subtleties' of the commodity (Marx, 1990, p. 163). Benjamin appropriates Marx's notion of commodity fetishism quite creatively yet also quite literally: in his *Arcades Project* he describes how in nineteenth-century Paris the commodity is worshipped in a very specific location, namely the shopping windows in the arcades. There, commodities became fetishes in the most literal sense: they were put on pedestals, edifices, and in alcoves, worshipped as holy relics by a crowd passing by them as in a religious procession.

Although the worshipping of commodities in consumer capitalism that has the Paris arcades as its temple is clearly ideological, Benjamin refuses to reject it as mere false consciousness. He was fascinated by these new meanings, the collective dreams and fears that were projected onto dead objects. This epoch, he argues, witnessed the dawn of a new mythology. Myth means the transformation of history into nature: social processes are presented as necessary and inevitable. However, taken to its extreme, commodity fetishism makes the opposite movement. This movement finds its expression in the souvenir: 'The key figure in early allegory is the corpse. In late allegory, it is the "souvenir". The "souvenir" is the schema of the commodity's transformation into an object for the collector' (Benjamin, 2003, p. 190). For Benjamin, the nineteenth-century collector, who roams the curiosity shops of the arcades in search for the missing piece of his collection, is a utopian figure, who functions as an emblem for a different relationship to the world of things. To find out what this relationship entails, we will have a closer look at him.

### 3. The Collector

In the *Arcades Project* we read that ‘the true collector detaches the object from its functional relations’ (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 207). This indeed recalls one important aspect of Lukács’s notion of reification, namely the reification of objects (as distinguished from the reification of human labour power, or the reification of social relations). To turn a commodity into something collectable means, in the first place, to strip it of its use value: a toy collector does not play with his collection just as a philatelist does not use his stamps to send letters. But the collector also charges the object with new meaning: a meaning the object gains by entering in a different relationship with the other collectables. This relationship between different objects within a collection, which is no longer functional but aesthetic, is what Benjamin calls a ‘constellation’. In constructing constellations, the collector seems quite similar to the allegorist: he strips the object of its original context (devaluation), but also grants it a new meaning (sanctification) by turning the object into a ‘souvenir’.

However, Benjamin argues that the collector differs from the allegorist in some crucial ways. First, the collector approaches the objects with love instead of spleen (Pensky, 1993, p. 243). In the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin shows that the Baroque allegorist finally considers the entire earthly realm as an allegory for the afterlife, thus betraying the world of things. The collector, by contrast, has a love for things. The objects ‘strike him’, Benjamin writes, which implies that the collector is attentive to *their* meaning, instead of the meaning *he* projects on them (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 205).

Second, as Benjamin writes: ‘[F]or the collector, the world is present, and indeed ordered, in each of his objects. Ordered, however, according to a surprising and, for the profane understanding, incomprehensible connection’ (p. 207). The collector pays attention not merely to the object at hand, but also to its previous owners, where the object has been, in short for the path the object has travelled before it was put in his hands and became part of his collection. As such, each object indeed presents an alternative order of history. The collector considers his own relation to the object as an intervention in its afterlife.

The collector, finally, does not consider the order of things as merely conventional, as the allegorist does. Benjamin writes:

[The allegorist] has given up the attempt to elucidate things through research into their properties and relations. He dislodges things from their context and, from the outset, relies on his profundity to illuminate their

meaning. The collector, by contrast, brings together what belongs together; by keeping in mind their affinities and their succession in time, he can eventually furnish information about his objects. (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 211)

The problem of course is that there is no rule or law to determine 'what belongs together'. Therefore, the opposition between allegorist and collector is itself a dialectical one, as Benjamin writes: 'In every collector hides an allegorist, and in every allegorist a collector' (p. 211). Both collector and allegorist consider the world as ruinous and fragmentary, but although the collector remains hopeful of finding the 'true' order of the fragments, the allegorist has given up on the world.

To come back to our main concern: I believe we might consider the figure of the collector as the 'emblem', so to speak, of Benjamin's dialectic of reification. The collector takes commodification to its extreme: he strips the obsolete and old-fashioned commodities from their final social remnants. But in doing so, Benjamin argues, he also liberates them from servitude. He writes:

[The collector] makes his concern the transfiguration of things. To him falls the Sisyphean task of divesting things of their commodity character by taking possession of them. But he bestows on them only connoisseur value, rather than use value. The collector dreams his way not only into a distant or bygone world but also into a better one—one in which, to be sure, human beings are no better provided with what they need than in the everyday world, *but in which things are freed from the drudgery of being useful.* (P. 9)

Here it is important to keep in mind the specific kind of collector Benjamin has in mind, namely the nineteenth-century-type collector of curiosities, who collects obsolete objects that others consider to be junk, and not the kind of art collector we see today, for whom a collection functions as a display of wealth, or a way to either speculate with or store money capital.<sup>6</sup>

While the Benjaminian kind of collecting is today a marginal phenomenon at best, one might argue that the last remnants of it have moved to the world of art—that is, not to art collections, but rather to artistic practices that involve collections or collectables. These practices of course have their origin in the *objet trouvé* of Dadaism and Surrealism, movements that were important sources of inspiration for Benjamin himself;<sup>7</sup> and later also for movements such as the Situationist International and artists such as Marcel Broodthaers, Robert Rauschenberg, and Claes Oldenburg. These

movements and artists have considered the artwork itself as a collection of worn-out or discarded objects, which they revive by placing them into a constellation, i.e. an aesthetic relationship with other objects (cf. Owens, 1980; Crimp, 1993; Krauss, 1999).

For Adorno, however, the dialectic of reification that the collector stands for is the model for the aesthetic experience per se. It was precisely for this reason that he famously accused Benjamin of thinking *undialectically* when the latter discarded autonomous art as ‘counterrevolutionary’ in his essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility’ (Adorno and Benjamin, 1999, p. 128). Still, in *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno is in dialogue with his friend, as he deploys the Benjaminian dialectic of reification to rescue the idea of autonomous art and the aesthetic experience.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4. Adorno’s Dialectic of Reification

That the dialectic of reification discussed above is one of the cardinal principles of Adorno’s aesthetics is most clearly expressed in his provocative statement in *Aesthetic Theory* that ‘the absolute artwork converges with the absolute commodity’ (Adorno, 1997, p. 28). Although Adorno considers art as perhaps the last harbour of refuge against reification and commodity fetishism, it can only function as such *through* a process of reification and fetishization. Referring back to his statement, Adorno writes:

If artworks are in fact absolute commodities in that they are a social product that has rejected every semblance of existing for society, a semblance to which commodities otherwise urgently cling, the determining relation of production, the commodity form, enters the artwork equally with the social force of production and the antagonism between the two. The absolute commodity would be free of the ideology inherent in the commodity form, which pretends to exist for-another, whereas ironically it is something merely for-itself: it exists for those who hold power. (P. 308)

In other words, the absolute artwork converges with the absolute commodity because first, it detaches itself fully from the productive process of which it is the product, and second, because it has no use value whatsoever.<sup>9</sup> The artwork is functionless, it does not communicate, we do not know what it is, and not even why it exists: it is indeed, as Adorno notes, an enigma (*Rättsel*), therefore recalling Marx’s idea of the commodity as a ‘social hieroglyph’.

It is precisely the enigmatic character that is part of every genuine aesthetic experience, which makes such an experience into a model, one might say, for a non-dominative relationship to the world of things that resists identity thinking. Adorno writes: 'Art stands as plenipotentiary for the in-itself that does not yet exist' (p. 327). In other words, the aesthetic experience is exemplary for what a full experience might be in a society that is not dominated by functional relationships. Such a mode of relating to objects has an eye for the meaning inherent in the object itself, beyond the meaning the subject projects on it.

Adorno's *bête noire* here is, as so often, the tradition of Idealism, which has dominated western thought since Descartes and Kant and, in his view, still comprises the work of Heidegger and Lukács, who pretend to have overcome it. The subject, as conceived by the Idealist system, is a 'belly turned mind', since it devours what comes in its path and leaves nothing of the integrity of what it is confronted with (Adorno, 1973, p. 23). As Kant tells us, intuitions are 'blind' unless they are subsumed under the categories of cognition. Sensuousness, in other words, has meaning only when this is granted to it by transcendental subjectivity, while the object is known only insofar as it can be manipulated: it is reduced to spiritual content. This reification of experience, Adorno argues, disfigures both the object and the subject. The object is conceived of as a fixed entity when it is being reduced to its conceptualization by a representing mind; the object's particularity is destroyed through its subsumption under a priori schemas of knowledge. Consequently, however, the object also loses its ability to act as a source of human creativity and spontaneity. The subject, by consequence, loses its chance of encountering something new and different, something alien to itself, something that could alter the structures of its thought.<sup>10</sup> The world becomes but a mirror of the subject itself. Hence, Adorno argues, philosophical idealism not only has a poor conception of experience, but eventually also cannot live up to its own claim of objectivity, since everywhere it looks it only sees itself (Adorno, 1973, p. 120).

In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno gives a hint of what a full experience would look like: 'If the thought really yielded to the object, if its attention were on the object, not on its category, the very objects would start talking under the lingering eye' (Adorno, 1973, pp. 27–28). Indeed, the experience of a work of art, which cannot be subsumed under a certain category, and has an enigmatic and non-reducible meaning of its own, is the model for such a way of relating to the world. However, Adorno argues in *Aesthetic Theory* that the work of art in turn is modelled after *natural beauty*. Again, Benjamin is not far away, and in the above quoted passage from *Negative Dialectics* one



can hear the echo of Benjamin's definition of aura, as granting the object with the ability to return one's gaze.<sup>11</sup>

In the introduction I already mentioned how Adorno suggested in his letter to Benjamin that the concept of aura in fact refers to forgetfulness of human labour in the object (and hence to a kind of reification). In his reply Benjamin comes back to this, and writes the following:

But even if the question of the aura does in fact involve a 'forgotten human moment', this is still not necessarily the moment of human labour. The tree and the shrub which offer themselves to us are not made by human hands. There must therefore be something human in the things themselves, something that is *not* originated by labour. (Adorno and Benjamin, 1999, p. 327)

Benjamin, in other words, resists the hurried subsumption of his concept of aura under the theory of reification by Adorno, precisely because of its idealistic moment. Indeed, the imperative to consider everything within the 'total social process' stands in great tension with the demand of the object to be taken on its own, to consider it as a 'sensuous particular' (Bernstein, 2006, p. 152), to borrow a phrase of Jay Bernstein.

It is this tension that Adorno wants to keep intact in his later theory of experience, which is why he tries to redeem reification. Like Benjamin's collector, Adorno takes the idea of reification to its extreme in order to redeem it: 'Radicalized, what is called reification probes for the language of things. It narrows the distance to the idea of that nature that extirpates the primacy of human meaning' (Adorno, 1997, p. 78). And indeed, in its very reification art paradoxically approaches the beauty of nature, not through imitation, but by being entirely in-itself, by bearing an enigmatic meaning that exceeds the meaning projected unto it by the subject: 'Aesthetic objectivity, the reflection of the being-in-itself of nature, realizes the subjective teleological element of unity; exclusively thereby do artworks become comparable to nature' (Adorno, 1997, p. 100).

True reconciliation, in other words, does not mean bringing to light the 'forgotten human element' in nature, as Adorno suggests in his letter to Benjamin, but rather to acknowledge and emphasize the very alien and 'inhuman' character of nature, an inhuman moment that is also part of humanity itself. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno referred to this moment with their famous definition of mimesis as 'remembrance of nature within the subject', in which 'enlightenment is opposed in principle to power' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. 32).<sup>12</sup>

Only once the subject remembers that it is itself also part of nature, that it has been constituted in a dialectical relationship with nature instead of reducing nature entirely to itself, will it cease its destructive attempts to control nature in order to take away its fear from it. The dialectical 'answer' to the dialectic of enlightenment, then, is that only the subject's acceptance of the impossibility of emancipating oneself from nature will allow it to interrupt the blind course of nature. This is what the dialectic of reification comprises.

## 5. Conclusion

Let us finally return to the problem raised in the introduction with the quote by Žižek, namely that Lukács's critique of reification no longer suffices in a world where not rigidity but fluidity, flexibility, and change seem to be the main sources of alienation and discontent; i.e. the ideology that we are all happy nomads moving through the global network. Obviously, this is an all-too-easy critique of Lukács, if only for the fact that this is indeed mere ideology.<sup>13</sup> It does show, however, how capitalism absorbs and encapsulates the very forms of critique that were traditionally directed against it.<sup>14</sup>

Though Benjamin and Adorno's dialectic of reification could perhaps not be a solution to this problem—for that, the problem is too complex—I believe that at least it might shield us against all too easy paeans to fluidity, dynamics, or nomadism. Indeed, I think that contemporary trans- or post-humanists who preach the gospel of the network and speak of the blurring of boundaries between humans and non-humans might run the same risk as Lukács of relapsing into idealism.<sup>15</sup> For these thinkers fail to acknowledge that while the distinction between subject and object may be ontologically flawed, it still is a historical reality, which one does not do away with as with a touch of a magic wand.

For Benjamin and Adorno the dialectic of reification means recognizing what Adorno calls the 'primacy of the object': yes, the object might be socially and historically constituted, but its meaning cannot and should not be reduced entirely to social relations. This very inscrutability of the object, its surplus of meaning beyond the subject's reach, has a utopian moment, which makes it essential not only for aesthetic experience but also for a changed relation to the world. As Adorno formulates it in *Negative Dialectics*: 'For there could no more be truth without a subject freeing itself from delusions than there could be truth without that which is not the subject, that in which truth has its archetype' (Adorno, 1973, p. 375).

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## 4. Utopian Interiors: The Art of Situationist Urbanism from Reification to Play

*Tyrus Miller*

In this essay I discuss the urbanistic thinking and practice of two artists closely associated with the founding of the Situationist International (SI): the Danish painter Asger Jorn and the Dutch painter, sculptor, and architect Constant Nieuwenhuys. Both helped establish the SI, and subsequently, long after their official separation from the group, Jorn remained a friend and financial backer of the group, while Constant was politically affiliated with, and an inspiration for, the radical Provos anarchist movement in Amsterdam. In particular, I will pay close attention to the special graphic practices of these two artists—various practices of modelling, drawing, collaging, and so on—which they used to explore the possibility of a new, utopian relation between creatively designed spaces and new forms of selfhood beyond the individualist self characteristically reproduced by modern capitalism and its built environments. These practices were intended to ‘mobilize’—render more fluid and flexible—the built environment of the cities, helping to disclose the social encounters and social action that ultimately, in their view, structured it, whether in the form of dynamically perceptible, playful human activity or in the static forms of accumulated, reified, alienated labour. They also suggestively ‘modelled’ (in both the conceptual and architectural sense) a new collective mode of production of space intended to overcome the reified abstractions of capitalist, modernist urbanism. Participating in the broad twentieth-century and avant-garde questioning of the status of artistic work (as specialized activity) and works (as specialized objects), Jorn and Constant offered artistic analogons of social spaces that would no longer be structured by capitalist work, understood as a modality of alienated labour, but rather by an autonomous free play of encounters and situations.

I concentrate here especially on Situationist views on the construction of designed spaces and décor, and the relationship of interiors to psychic and emotional states of subjective experience—an area of Situationist thought and practice to which artistic participants such as Jorn and Constant made especially important contributions. This focus is somewhat unusual for a

couple of reasons. First, the discussion of the Situationists has, until recently, strongly centred on the figure of Guy Debord and the political critique of his *Society of the Spectacle*, with the practices of appropriated images and the politics of occupation taking centre stage. To the extent that Debord increasingly steered the Situationist International towards a highly factional, sectarian political grouplet, this has tended to marginalize the seminal role of artists in the original Situationist movement, who resigned from the group or were systematically purged. However, it is becoming increasingly clear in hindsight that the associated artists made crucial contributions to the founding matrix of Situationist ideas. But second, even when these artists are brought back into the conversation, Situationist urbanism has nevertheless tended to be strongly associated with exterior spaces—with streets, maps, city networks, and buildings—rather than the design and experience of interiors.

If, however, we consider more carefully key motifs of Situationist urban thought, we find not a favouring of exterior space over interiors, but rather a critique of the abstract *opposition* between exterior and interior space, as reified manifestations of a capitalist production of space. The Situationists may be understood to have taken to a new degree of consistency, an aim first set out in André Breton's writings in the 1920s and 1930s: the projection of an artistically-modelled practice of everyday life that would overcome the capitalist division of labour and radically displace the category of work (as labour process) and works (as products of labour) in favour of play, friendship, eroticism, intoxication, investigation, and eventually, political action. 'The leading surrealists', Henri Lefebvre would note in his 1974 book *The Production of Space*,

sought to decode inner space and illuminate the nature of the transition from this subjective space to the material realm of the body and the outside world and thence to social life. Consequently surrealism has a theoretical import which was not originally recognized. (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 18)

Developing this theoretical motif in Surrealism but going back deeper into the history of Paris, Walter Benjamin also emphasized a reversibility and communicability between interior and exterior spaces, and between 'subjective' and 'objective' qualities of those spaces, which he saw exemplified by the ambiguous street-house constellations of the iron and glass arcades that emerged in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

In *Communicating Vessels*, a work that anticipates later ‘critiques of everyday life’ such as those of Henri Lefebvre, who claimed to have directly influenced the founding of the COBRA artist group that included Jorn and Constant (Lefebvre, 2002, p. 269), Breton would write that ‘Surrealism [...] should not be considered extant except in the a priori non-specialization of its effort’ (Breton, 1990, p. 86). Underpinning Breton’s notion of ‘a priori non-specialization’ is both a psychic and a social theory of which his conception of Surrealism was said to partake. Psychically, he was seeking to recast the structure of subjective perceptual experience and cognition in terms of Freudian conceptions of the unconscious, particularly the dream. The underlying idea of ‘communicating vessels’ is that the basic schemata of experience, which Kant conceived in fixed, rational terms, are in fact thoroughly permeated by mobile desires, irrational drives, and overdetermined fantasies. It is the pre-differentiated ‘poetic’ matrix of the dream that for Breton constitutes the ‘a priori’ of psychic experience, not the rational structuring forms of categories. Socially, the psychic indifferenciation of the unconscious provides a pivot for a social critique. If it is not the rational mind that ultimately supports the lines and borders that divide our integral experience as both individuals and collectives, but rather the rhetorical performances of unconscious psychic faculties, then these ‘productions’ must be socially constrained and filtered, especially through the repressive organization of labour and the state-sanctioned class violence that allows it to persist. In turn, the structures of experience—the apparently aprioristic boundaries that channel it in socially authorized ways—may be contested through individual and, especially, collective revolt.

As with later ‘Great Refusals’ such as that proposed by Herbert Marcuse in the 1960s, Surrealism’s first gesture was to refuse *to work*, permanently ‘going on strike’ in favour of an all-sided, non-specialized group activity that adumbrated new forms of life beyond the capitalist division of labour. Tellingly, one of the iconic images of Situationism, often reiterated and discussed in their publications and films, was a 1953 photograph of a graffitied slogan, reportedly inscribed by Debord himself on the wall of the Rue de Seine in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, which read *Ne Travaillez Jamais!* (Never Work!). Accordingly too—the Situationists intuited—our received notions of exterior and interior space and their continuous reproduction in everyday lived experience derive from complementary modalities of abstract labour time we call ‘work’ and ‘leisure’, and the cyclical movements of things and bodies that connect them. Shattering the opposition between exterior and interior and dismantling the system of alienated labour that structure urban time and space around the work/divide through the planning ideologies

and architectural forms of modernist urbanism appeared to them corollary tasks requiring revolutionary social change.

A theoretical legacy shared by Walter Benjamin, Henri Lefebvre, and the Situationists is their indebtedness to the activist Marxism of the early Georg Lukács, in particular his analysis of reification in *History and Class Consciousness*, which suggested how Marx's idea of commodity fetishism might offer a rigorous way to formulate the dialectical reversibility of subjectivity and objectivity. Lukács's concept of reification may be seen as the initiator of a lineage of innovations in the Marxist notion of ideology that also includes Walter Benjamin's investigations of cities as collective dream-structures; the notion in Theodor Adorno that the culture industry translates commodity-structure into cognitive and affective schemata that preform contemporary experience; Guy Debord's idea of the society of the spectacle in which social relations have been transformed into images; and even Louis Althusser's formulation of ideology as the normal unthematized background of lived relations to the social order, the 'imaginary relation of individuals to their real conditions of existence'.

Lukács, Benjamin, Lefebvre, and Debord each derived the theoretically fruitful inspiration of seeing that the commodity-object already held within it a kind of immanent false consciousness 'out there' in space, ready to be activated by its experiential intercourse with human agents. Correlatively, the apparent spontaneity of human consciousness, the very movements of thought, were seen to be already constrained, not by a Kantian transcendental a priori, but by the historically contingent yet powerfully determining structures of capitalism, such that reified thought-forms necessarily reflected the epistemically false appearances of objects as they moved through their systemic circuits of production, exchange, and consumption. Where they innovate beyond Lukács is in applying this reversible subject-object of reification not just to commodities as such, nor to the critique of philosophical and literary texts that reflect the constraints of reification, but to the holistic framework of lived experience in cities, where spaces, consumable objects, fashions, and social types can all be seen as aspects of an integral 'cosmos' organized by capitalist reification. Metropolitan spaces themselves, Benjamin and subsequently the Situationists suggest, can be understood as materialized nodes of ideology. Benjamin came to call these, within his neo-Bergsonian conceptual universe, 'images', while Debord's notion of 'spectacle' includes the terminology of 'images', though he clarifies that the spectacle is a social relation of lived abstraction and separation mediated by images. Debord suggests that the spectacle concentrates in experiential nodes the activity of consciousness, imposing a spurious, reified

unity on the world's appearance; this unity, in turn, though apparently spontaneous, has a language-like constellation of imposed meanings, acting as 'the official language of generalized separation'. As a corollary to this critical orientation, both Benjamin and Debord were theoretically sensitive to artistic and architectural attempts—from Paul Klee, Picasso, and the Surrealists early in the twentieth century to the New Babylon of Constant during the 1960s and 1970s—to imagine the transformation of these spaces, making visible the spatialized structure of ideology and revealing cracks in it that might be widened by a revolutionary spatial practice.

The procedure of the *dérive*—a kind of playful drifting around the streets or programmatic wandering—was intended as such a spatial practice, extending artistic logics that originated in the twentieth-century avant-gardes to extra-artistic domains of experience. The practice of *dérive* was central to early Situationist concerns with urbanism and urban experience, but in Constant's work it also becomes a practice related to the *interior* spaces of his labyrinthine city, the New Babylon. Its programmatic status was signalled by Guy Debord's dedication of a text to its 'theory' (*Theorie de la dérive*). Already anticipated in key respects by the Surrealists' collective wandering through the nighttime landscape of the Parc des Buttes Chaumont in Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant* and, via Benjamin's historical telescoping of Surrealist concerns, by the flâneur of Baudelaire's Paris, the Situationists' *dérive* involved a kind of free exploration of certain areas or itineraries through urban space, with both intentional planning to facilitate the emergence of new observations and experiences and subsequent recounting to record and detail the experiences undergone during the *dérive*. The *dérive* was intended not only to elicit new physical and social details of urban sites, but also to 'map' their psychological and affective dimensions, which Debord took to be an 'objective' aspect of the interactions of urban dwellers with the specific atmospheres, shadows, spaces, pathways, and buildings that constitute the physical city. He thus wrote of an 'objective terrain of the passions' (*terrain passionnel objectif*) and 'a psychogeographical relief of the city' that have their own determinism according to the social and physical morphology of urban space (Debord, 1956, p. 6).

A second crucial aspect of the *dérive*, as a quasi-artistic practice spanning writing and performance, was its ephemerality, anti-monumentality, and intransitivity—in short, its 'situational' character. As Henri Lefebvre explained in a 1983 interview, the Situationists took the increasing fragmentation of the city as an occasion to reassemble it anew, bringing about novel 'situations', occasions for fresh experiences, as a performative result of their activity:



[W]e thought that the practice of the *dérive* revealed the idea of the fragmented city. But it was mostly done in Amsterdam. [...] The experiment consisted of rendering different aspects or fragments of the city simultaneous, fragments that can only be seen successively, in the same way that there exist people who have never seen certain parts of the city. (Lefebvre, 2002, p. 280)

An unattributed article in the December 1959 issue of *Internationale Situationniste*, 'Unitary Urbanism at the End of the 1950s', formulated this facet of the *dérive* explicitly, the temporary, 'situational' nature of the constellations it elicits from an urban space undergoing rapid change:

In fact, beyond its essential lessons, the *dérive* furnishes only knowledge that is very precisely dated. In a few years, the construction or demolition of houses, the relocation of micro-societies and of fashions, will suffice to change a city's network of superficial attractions—a very encouraging phenomenon for the moment when we will come to establish an active link between the *dérive* and Situationist urban construction. Until then, the urban milieu will certainly change on its own, anarchically, ultimately rendering obsolete the *dérives* whose conclusions could not be translated into conscious transformations of this milieu. But the first lesson of the *dérive* is its own status in play. (*Internationale Situationniste*, 1997, p. 83)

In *Paris Peasant*, Aragon had emphasized the intimate relation between his own urban 'psychogeography' and the destructive forces of urban planning and capitalist speculation in urban property. The Passage de l'Opera, where the first part of the book takes place, was destined for destruction according to a very belated, very decadent, and corrupt stage of the Hausmannization of Paris that began in the 1850s. By the time Aragon's book appeared, it was already a kind of an epitaph inscribed for a space that no longer existed: an architectural remnant of an earlier moment of urban modernity now being swept away by a successive wave of capitalist modernization. So too, in his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin saw in Baudelaire an allegorical practice of poetry related to the experience of ever-accelerated change in the urban fabric, which, as Baudelaire's poem 'The Swan' points out, 'changes, alas, more quickly than the human heart'. If Baudelaire (via Benjamin) and Aragon stand in a context set out by the opening and closing of the historical project of Haussmannization, urbanism in the age of 'high capitalism', Debord and Constant attempt to come

to terms with a new, more totalized urbanism in the epoch of post-war planned neo-capitalism. In connecting the ephemeral, game-like activity of the *dérive* to Situationist construction, the 'Unitary Urbanism' essay signals an attempt to link up two domains of Situationist urban activity, each with a leading figure temporarily aligned: Debord's elegiacally-tinged exploration of the *dérive* and the psychogeographical landscape of the city of earlier modernity, disappearing at the hand of modernist urbanism; and Constant, already by the late 1950s at work on plotting out and modelling a new utopian counter-modernist city of situations that came to be known as 'New Babylon'.

Yet as the 'Unitary Urbanism' text goes on to suggest, there is a third aspect to the *dérive* that is autobiographical and subjective-existential, as much an *ethical* question of 'a life' and its destinies as an issue directly pertaining to architecture or urban design. 'All the stories that we live', the text reads, 'the *dérive* of our life, are characterized by the search for—or the lack of—an overarching construction. The transformation of the environment calls forth new emotional states that are first experienced passively and then, with heightened consciousness, give way to constructive reactions' (*Internationale Situationniste*, 1997, p. 83). In an essay entitled 'Architecture and Play', published in the 30 May 1955 issue of *Potlatch*, Debord had similarly argued that 'games' such as the *dérive* were important explorations of experiences that could, systematically pursued and instituted, open up new modes of individual and collective comportment, indeed, a new morality: 'It is a matter now of making the transition from arbitrary rules of play to a moral foundation' (Debord, 1996, p. 158). So, too, Constant would emphasize the socially and morally transformational aspect of play, the anthropological transmutation of situational game-playing into a general redefinition of humanity as *Homo ludens* (man the player). Constant emphasizes in painting more of the child-like and intimate side of the life of *Homo ludens*, however, even while elsewhere he would take up its political, even revolutionary dimension. In each case, however, we can understand them as an attempt to counter the homogenizing of experience that was the lived correlate of abstract space—that modality of space in which, as Lefebvre argues, an integral system of violence, control, expropriation, and hierarchy is instituted by capitalism in ambient form (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 285–291).

Similarly, the Situationist notion of *détournement* has been considered largely from the point of view of media critique: turning to parodic or critical purposes of the commercial and media products of the spectacle. The term *détournement* itself refers to the Situationists' method of



Figure 4.1. Still from Guy Debord's film *The Passage of a Few People in a Rather Brief Moment in Time* (1959) showing Asger Jorn (second from left, facing viewer), Guy Debord (on far right, holding cigarette), and others seated at a table.

appropriating—'detourning'—existing texts, images, or film sequences, modified through recaptioning or other means and placed in new contexts, which alter their meaning and function while continuing to index their original sources. Yet *détournement* became an important tool in the repertoire of the Situationists not only for negative purposes, for critical parody and exposure of hidden ideological aspects of cultural and commercial goods, but also for positive constructions of new meanings and experiences—including quite personal and subjective ones. As recent editions of Debord's work have revealed, his application of the technique of *détournement* was pervasive and enduring, including both 'artistic' works such as his collaborations with Asger Jorn *Fin de Copenhague* (1957) and *Mémoires* (1959: an autobiography including only appropriated sentences) as well as 'theoretical' works such as *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and films such as *The Society of the Spectacle* (1973) and *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni* (1978). For my purposes, I would like to dwell briefly on the collaborations with Jorn, because they suggest that *détournement* establishes a kind of ambiguous intermediate space between externality and inner experience, between the spaces of the city and the spaces of

the self, as a way of creating a passage *through* reified commodity-images, from advertisement and print journalism, discourses directly under the sway of the capitalist market, back towards an intensive, often passionate experience of lived time as qualitative duration (Figure 4.1).

In their collaborative work *Fin de Copenhague* (1957), for example, Jorn and Debord assembled a haphazard collage of images and newsprint, followed by Jorn's dropping ink from a ladder onto zinc plates that were etched and used for printing. They evoke the boozy mood of their brief interval of time together between causal spatters of ink and scattered images of beer, cigarettes, and idealized faces and bodies of human figures from advertisements. More artistically consequential, from both sides, is their next collaboration two years later, *Mémoires* (1959). This text is, ostensibly, an autobiographical text by Debord, constructed completely out of quotations from other texts, held together by Jorn's so-called '*structures portantes*'—frame-like coloured ink lines, which carry, bear the weight of, or suspend the montaged images or quotations. Debord and Jorn create a poignant metaphor, both verbal and visual, of a nexus between a wandering body, a web of city-spaces, and the places of memory, both external and inner. On one page, for instance, Jorn creates a body-like ideogram from these lines; while in another he suggests the radial paths that Debord, pictured toppled upside-down on the left side of the page, has taken through the streets of Paris in his inebriated *dérives*. Jorn's '*structures portantes*' are the lines of movement that define the labyrinth of memory—which in turn are traces of the body's activity as it interacts with interior and external spaces of a rapidly changing city, and which may presently exist nowhere except in memory and in the graphic spaces of the collaborative book *Mémoires*.

Both Jorn and Constant were founding members of the COBRA group in the late 1940s—COBRA being an acronym for Copenhagen, represented by Asger Jorn; Brussels, represented by Corneille and Christian Dotremont; and Amsterdam, represented by Constant and Karel Appel. COBRA was typified by a sort of neo-primitivist amalgamation of Surrealism, Paul Klee-like elemental forms, and children's art, coupled with a strong socialist-leaning politics.

In Jorn's case, his production for COBRA already carried a precedent engagement with the relation of art and architecture. In 1937, he had assisted with Le Corbusier's Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux at the world exhibition in Paris, where he transferred children's drawings into wall decorations amidst slogans from the Popular Front. Throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, as Ruth Baumeister's research has recently demonstrated, Jorn wrote consistently on architecture, developing a critique of functionalism and

arguing for an imaginative synthesis of the arts towards a transformation of lived space. Thus, for example, in an essay from 1944 entitled 'Face to Face', Jorn expressed his preference for what he called 'a surrealist vision of space and our surroundings' over what Henri Lefebvre called the 'technicist, scientific and intellectualized representation of space' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 43) by Le Corbusier, with whom Jorn had collaborated:

In the same period as Le Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux, the Surrealists in Paris were creating interiors that offered a completely different perspective with regard to spatial development. Where architects were calling for light, they pronounced murk and gloom; where open space was proclaimed, they answered with labyrinths, impenetrability, hollows. Where planning was proposed they answered with the hazardous. If utilization was praised, they defended the useless. (Jorn, 2011, p. 77)

We can also see Jorn's humanistic concern with the wartime destruction of cities, treated in an expressionistic vein in his early work, in his graphic work such as *The Burning City*, from 1950. In recent articles, both Hal Foster and Karen Kurczynski have also discussed Jorn's massive painting *Stalingrad*, which Jorn worked on between 1957 and 1972, and about which he recounted: 'In the mid-fifties I was haunted by the stories told to me about the Battle of Stalingrad. [...] I always wanted to make a painting that would be an action rather than portraying an action, [in] contrast with *Guernica*. [...] *Guernica* still exists whereas *Stalingrad* was completely wiped off the map. It became a "non-lieu", a "non-place". [...] [M]y picture is an *inner record* of a historical event' (quoted in Kurczynski, 2012, p. 29; emphasis added). Even, then, in the case of an external event, the destruction of the city of Stalingrad during World War II, Jorn insists on a double interiority of his artistic treatment of it: it is something based on narration, on something heard; and in turn, it is a 'inner record' of the event in its unspeakability. We might say, following Walter Benjamin's 'Storyteller' essay (Benjamin, 1968, pp. 83–110), that Jorn's painting is less the representation of an experience of wartime destruction as a registration of the impoverishment of communicable experience that a human catastrophe like Stalingrad entailed, a kind of descent into nameless inner suffering. Jorn indicated as much when he noted, "The name "Stalingrad" is, in a way, immaterial. It stands for an anonymous battlefield with snow' (quoted in Kurczynski, 2012, p. 29).

Following the period of artistic activity with COBRA (by the early 1950s), Constant left behind avant-garde painting in favour of architectural practice as a protégé of the Dutch modernist Aldo Van Eyck. In his own architectural

practice and theoretical writing, Van Eyck sought to open up a new dialogue between interior and exterior spaces, in both a psychological-existential and a physical, designed sense. In a 1956 article, Van Eyck wrote:

We are not only breathing in, nor are we exclusively breathing out. This is why it would be so beneficial if the relation of interior space and exterior space, between individual and common space inside and outside [...] could be the built mirror of human nature. [...] The dwelling and its extension into the exterior, the city and its extension into the interior, that's what we have to achieve! (Quoted in Jaschke, 2001, p. 176)

In short, as Karin Jaschke has put it, 'There is a suggestion here that urban space should be conceived in terms of domestic space, or even that the urban should be thought of as externalized domesticity and the domestic as internalized urbanity' (p. 181).

Concretely, this involved careful thinking about passages, networks of transitional spaces, courtyards, stairways, and—with children's play explicitly in mind—playgrounds and other play spaces (Van Eyck would design over 700 Amsterdam playgrounds between 1947 and 1978). These transitional elements and play spaces will be, as we will see, also the basic components that Constant would weave together to construct the infinitely changeable inner labyrinths of his networked global city, the *New Babylon* (Figures 4.2 and 4.3).



Figure 4.2. Constant Nieuwenhuys, *New Babylon*. Still from DVD [capture from Maarten Schmidt and Thomas Doebele, *Constant, Avant le Départ*, 2006].

Around 1955, Constant began to explore Van Eyck-influenced ideas about 'art and habitat' that would crystallize into the New Babylon project and take further impetus, through his association with Guy Debord, from proto-Situationist themes of psychogeography, urban *dérive*, constructed situations, the *détournement* of architecture, and unitary urbanism. In 1957, in Alba, he would be inspired by a Roma encampment on the property of the painter Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio to design one of the first installations of what would proliferate into New Babylon, his 'Design for a Gypsy Camp', which would provide a flexible structure for mobile décor and movement of people within the structure, a key concept that would be expanded to the scale of an entire city and eventually to a total global network. We can see also already Constant's deconstruction of the difference between indoor and outdoor spaces, with the open webbed structure inspired by the mobile camps of the nomadic Roma people he encountered on Pinot-Gallizio's property. There is at once covering and opening, and an internal complexity that allows an indefinite, open-ended set of appropriations and uses: as it were, an image of architectural reification in the midst of a process of dissolving back into mobile social space.

From 1957 to the early 1970s, when he ceased any further elaboration of the project, Constant tirelessly designed, modelled, theoretically articulated, and publicized his idea of New Babylon, an elevated, networked city where nomadic city-dwellers would move through a climate-controlled inner labyrinth of changeable décor, experiencing a myriad of unrepeatable



Figure 4.3. Constant Nieuwenhuys, *New Babylon*. Still from DVD [capture from Maarten Schmidt and Thomas Doebele, *Constant, Avant le Départ*, 2006].

encounters and realizing an anarchic society based no longer on labour but on play. New Babylon was intended to overcome modernist (rationalist) urbanism à la Corbusier, which was organized around places of labour and spaces of dwelling and the problems of circulating people and material between them; but also it sought to overturn the very anthropological foundation of modernist urbanism in *Homo faber*, in a labouring humankind, in favour of a new anthropological horizon of free time and play realizing *Homo ludens* on a universal scale. Analogously, Jorn argued dialectically for automation in his essay, 'The Situationists and Automation', published in the first number of *Internationale Situationniste* in 1958: 'Automation can develop rapidly only once it has established as a goal a perspective contrary to its own establishment, and only if it is known how to realize such a general perspective in the process of the development of automation' (Jorn, 2011, p. 302). In other words, only if automation is used to realize the goals of heightened creativity, playfulness, and subjective experience, rather than the perfection of production and labour, will modern technology be able to realize its full human potential. Like other thinkers of the 1960s such as Herbert Marcuse, Jorn and Constant saw a potential in the social surplus made possible by technology—but also sought to safeguard against the perversion of that potential for destructive, rather than creative ends.

In his essay 'A Different City for a Different Life', published in *Internationale Situationniste* in December 1959, Constant laid out his basic architectonic vision of New Babylon:

The city of the future must be conceived as a continuous construction on pillars. [...] The different levels will be divided into neighbouring and communicating spaces, climate-controlled, which will make it possible to create an infinite variety of environments, facilitating the casual movements of the inhabitants and their frequent encounters. (Constant, in McDonough, 2002, pp. 99, 101)

Beneath the elevated city where living and mobile dwelling take place, fully automated production takes place underground, while traffic and agriculture can take place on the surface. 'The plan of New Babylon', Constant writes in a 1960 lecture in Amsterdam on unitary urbanism,

reveals a decentralized, reticular structure consisting of an irregular stringing together of numerous sectors, each covering an area of 5 to 10 hectares, which stretches for hundred of kilometres in every direction and in which a population of on average 10 million people reside. [...] In



view of their huge size, the levels are largely inaccessible to sunlight, so the interior of the city is artificially lit, ventilated, and airconditioned. (Constant, in Wigley, 1998, p. 134)

In an essay based on his 1964 lecture at the ICA in London, entitled 'New Babylon: An Urbanism of the Future', Constant had further radicalized the creative indeterminacy that New Babylon was intended to house. He writes:

New Babylon could not be structured to a determined plan. On the contrary, every element would be left undetermined, mobile, and flexible. For the people circulating in this enormous social space are expected to give it its ever-changing shape, to divide it, to vary it, to create its different atmospheres and to play out their lives in a variety of surroundings. (constant, in borden and mcreery, p. 14)

He concludes by evoking the architectonic and sensory elements of New Babylon's interior as a sort of futuristic, post-lettristic alphabet that can be syntactically articulated and rearranged at will by the collective encounters transpiring within it:

The unfunctional character of this playground-like construction makes any logical division of the inner spaces senseless. We should rather think of a quite chaotic arrangement of small and bigger spaces that are constantly assembled and disassembled by means of standardized mobile construction elements like walls, floors, and staircases. (Constant, in Borden and McCreery, p. 14)

And, from the 1960 Amsterdam lecture:

The movable walls are an active element of the psychogeographical game. [...] They are used to construct veritable labyrinths of the most heterogeneous forms in which one finds special halls for radiophonic games, cinematographic games, psychoanalytical games, erotic games, games based on chance and on coincidence. (Constant in Wigley, 1998, p. 135)

Constant's work, and more generally the activity of various Situationist artists and intellectuals, has received attention especially from the point of view of spatial practices: their affective remapping of cities, their fascination with marginal and fantastic built structures, and their opposition to the homogenizing and reifying tendencies of modernist urbanism in favour of

a utopian 'unitary urbanism' in which the construction of situations would be mobilized on a grand scale. Hence, with respect specifically to Constant, some of the best critical discussions have been by architectural historians such as Mark Wigley or Hilde Heynen and urban geographers such as David Pinder. While indebted to their work, however, I seek to unfold an interpretation of Constant, which, in turn, will suggest that this is a pervasive element of Situationist thinking more generally: a complex, differentiated conception of *time*, liberated from the homogenous clock time of a reified environment of labour, that inflects the meaning of the work or activity at several different levels. To put it in somewhat philosophical terms, if in the post-war city, poised in the midst of its capitalist-urbanist transformation, Debord and his Situationist friends discovered the *external, objective* form of Situationist experience, then the temporalities nested within that city would be its *internal, subjective* correlate, waiting to be disclosed and existentially reappropriated. Situationist activity, be it the serious play of Debord's psychogeographical *dérives* or Constant's modelling and drawing of the ever-changing network of New Babylonian space, should be understood as an ensemble of singular operators for connecting the external to the internal in new space-time folds and passages, or translating the intensities of subversive spatial experience into temporal intensities of presence, memory, and desire that had no way to find expression under the weight of abstract labour.

Moreover, this quasi-Kantian association of urban space with temporal experience, mediated through modernistic activity and artefacts, has a pre-Situationist genealogy in the writings of Georg Simmel and later, under the influence of Simmel, the early Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin. The most explicit development of this reading of Simmel can be found in Massimo Cacciari's consideration of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century German social thought, in his book *Metropolis*, where he discusses Simmel's essayistic deployment of the city itself as the real solution to long-standing Kantian and neo-Kantian antinomies of thought. Cacciari writes: 'In Simmel, the city is called upon to concretize Kantian teleological judgment. Here, the themes and key problems of neo-Kantian philosophy all reappear' (1995, p. 88). He goes on to argue:

As long as the value of the city is simply the synthesis of form and function in the original apperception of its totality, the temporal dimension will remain absent. [...] Time, as well, [however], must be reconciled. And for time, there must be a form. Not for Kantian time [...]. But for the time of *Erleben* [lived inner experience], the time of the actual products of history. And the form of this time must be the city. (Cacciari, 1995, p. 89)

Putting this in somewhat more vernacular terms, the city comes to stand as a set of experiential forms—shapes of time, dynamized spaces—that give literally concrete dimension to the articulations of the inner-subjective and outer-objective realms. This is true for the actually-existing capitalist city, in which reification (Lukács) or ‘objective culture’ (Simmel) predominate in both outer and inner experience. Thus, for example, the locational economies of work and leisure zones and the circulation of traffic between them are contingent, but seemingly rigid containers for both individual and collective experiences of space and time; interior-intensive space and exterior-extensive space, as categories of spatial experience, are disconnected phenomenological corollaries of architectural ‘objects’ such as private apartments or offices on the one hand and streets and open zones such as parks on the other; and the potential dissonance between intimate subjective life and regimented or precarious objective life seems impenetrable to the understanding, which founders amidst individual eccentricities and, simultaneously, the arcana of complex, alien, super-individual systems. Yet for the utopian-future city, new experiential forms, new schemata of experience, may reside latently ‘out there’ in its bricks, streets, hoardings, and walls. Lefebvre, indeed, translates this virtuality into a methodological precept to grasp the ‘possible’ dialectical development of ‘the urban’ in the present-day, contradictory, and incomplete dynamics of ‘complete urbanization’ under contemporary capitalism: ‘The urban (an abbreviated form of urban society) can therefore be defined not as an accomplished reality, situated behind the actual in time, but, on the contrary, as a horizon, an illuminating virtuality’ (Lefebvre, 2003, pp. 16–17).

In this sense, too, we can understand the continuity of the products of artistic modernism with the broader domain of urban modernity, insofar as both involve the invention and/or reappropriation of cultural forms to project new modes of experience, new ways of configuring the spatial and temporal schema of modern experiential ‘worlds’. As Jon Goodbun has written:

For Simmel [...] the metropolis provided the particular conditions in which the ‘space’ of concrete experience (super-individual ‘society’) and the ‘space’ of inner experience (individual subject) are translated (almost in the mathematical sense, that is to say, ‘mapped’) onto each other. And this is one of the senses in which we can begin to understand the object of this other modernist genealogy: as a store of transformation matrices between inner and concrete experience. (Goodbun, 2001, pp. 158–159)

Goodbun's term 'transformation matrices' is a felicitous one in connection to Constant, since we might almost think of the New Babylon as a great, boundless, fluctuating set of montage collisions between experience-constituting elements. As Tom McDonough has argued,

the New Babylon project [...] [w]as less a moment within the history of (the practice or theory of) urban planning than a crucial intervention in a way of thinking and imagining the world of objects and one's interaction with that world (McDonough, 2007, p. 85).

In fact, as the name suggests, Constant's Babylon is associated with the old Babel, with language, with the ancient confusion of tongues. Yet it also projects a futuristic zaum-like or lettristic superlanguage as well, that affirms the language-making capacity of human motility, affectivity, and play: basically any way that materiality can be motivated to take up an articulatory relation in and of time, constitutes another urban idiolect among the cacophony of tongues. New Babylon thus subsumes the old Babylon's derangement of languages into a modern infinity of vibratory translations between inner and outer experience, between global extensiveness and ecstatic intensivity, all projected through Constant's artistic models and graphs onto a superlinguistic and ultrametropolitan scale.

Constant's New Babylon thus represents not only a utopian reorganization of space, but also, and more fundamentally, the institution of a New Babylonian order of time intimately linked to a restructured subjectivity and existential identity. New Babylonians would experience an open temporal horizon in which all fixed points, and hence the experience of repetition, rhythm, and memory, would be undermined by the perpetual flux of the urban environment. Constant carries to the basic impulse of de-reification, the social-practical dissolution of objectified activity back into the activity itself, to such an extreme as to approach denying any objectifying role for human activity, a role he consigned completely to machines in his vision of fully automated production. By definition, play is for him not only non-objectifying; it is actively *de*-objectifying, engaged with dismantling the existing manifestation of reified, accumulated labour in the urban environment. Through the postulated anthropological revolution that full automation would allow—the transition from *Homo faber* to *Homo ludens*—Constant breaks the link between labouring consciousness and collective self-reappropriation that remained integral to Lukács's idea in *History and Class Consciousness* of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history, realized in socialist revolution. There is no collective return

in Constant, because there is no labour, no labouring consciousness, and no proletarian class to have class consciousness of its historical role ascribed to it. Spatially, this anthropological abolition of the proletariat expresses itself in a generalized nomadism facilitated by the structural liquidity of the infinitely alterable urban landscape. As Constant noted in his ICA lecture:

There would be no question of any fixed life-pattern, for life itself would be a creative material. The unfunctional and fantastic way of living would demand rapid passage from place to another, from sector to sector, and life in New Babylon would be essentially nomadic, people would be constantly traveling. There would be no need for them to return to their point of departure and this would in any case be transformed. (Constant, in Borden and McCreery, p. 14)

The 1960 unitary urbanism lecture, however, had spelled out the subjective and psychic implications even more provocatively:

New Babylon would surely have the effect of brainwashing, erasing all routine and custom. There are no customs in New Babylon; it is obvious that a culture based on a dynamic game with life, that takes this life itself as its theme, that uses the activities of life as raw material for creativity, precludes all routine, all custom, all convention. The New Babylonian culture is based on the ephemeral, on the transience of an experience, and the contrast between this and new experiences. (Constant, in Wigley, 1998, p. 135)

Despite Constant's evocation of New Babylon as a world of pure playful experience, beyond art and even urban design, it remains that his exploration of the idea took place exclusively in a variety of representational media, as the flyer for a lithograph portfolio from the project evokes: '*een groot aantal maquettes, constructies, plattgronden, afbeeldingen, foto's, beschrijvingen en teksten*' (a large number of maquettes, constructions, plans, copies, photos, and description in texts). These, as Constant insisted, could only offer a snapshot suggestion of New Babylon, for two reasons. First, the static, structural elements of New Babylon that could be represented by means of drawings, models, photomontages, and textual descriptions were only themselves the thing-like, sedimented shell of a set of activities, enormously complex and anarchically fluctuating, that were to take place *within* New Babylon's labyrinthine spaces. Like a hyperbolic version of Adolf Loos's blank surfaces and hidden, complex interior *Raumplan*, the mobile decors

and ambiances of encounters within New Babylon could in no way be read off its hardened face (Figure 4.4). Secondly, New Babylon was constantly fluctuating in time, mutating, growing, and hence any given representation could only capture a thin chronological slice of that process. Undoubtedly, this unsurpassable problem of representation, shading into the very reification that Constant sought to overcome, explains his obsessively iterative elaboration of the project, up to his retrospective exhibition in the Hague in 1974, when he arbitrarily declared the project closed.

Nothing in New Babylon would allow one to talk of 'type' or 'function', which in more conventional architectural discourse and practice would fulfil this representational demand, since these depend on a continuity in time that New Babylon is, above all else, a technology intended to disaggregate and deny. In a sense, Constant's New Babylon is a practical objectification of Nietzsche's eternal return, which in Pierre Klossowski's view can be understood as an intensive passage through all possible identities an infinite number of times, but with the paradoxical implication that this defies any position of fixed identity from which a previous state of being, a 'repetition' could be recognized or experienced as such. Massimo Cacciari, again, relates the experience of the eternal return in Nietzsche to the tragic undoing of the syntheses of the city in the radical non-synthesizable infinities of the metropolis: a perception of the antinomy of the desire to understand the built environment of the city as pure de-reified becoming and the desire to comprehend the city as a totality. 'It is essential to understand', Cacciari (1995) writes, 'that the idea of the eternal return is the opposite of a synthesizing renewal. It is an absolute affirmation of the breakdown of the pessimistic equilibrium, an affirmation of the meaning of 'casting beyond' of contradiction' (p. 25). Constant, indeed, carries to a new antinomic extreme this overcoming of contradiction in the eternal return that New Babylon implies. Oppositions of movement and stasis, freedom and constraint, anarchy and totalitarian order, construction and deconstruction, mass and individual, play and survival, dialogue and violence, utopia and dystopia are indiscernibly unravelled and reknit in the ever-changing labyrinths of this post-city supermetropolis.

Constant acknowledges this antinomy on the mass scale of the global city when he suggests that total nomadic mobility, no longer fixed by the needs of labour and dwelling, along with the erasure of points of return that organize time in habit and memory, leads to a slowing of urban circulation to a directionless flux. The New Babylon is itself an exasperation of modernity, a hyper-modernist dialectic at a standstill: total mobility infinitely enfolded into itself, thus becoming, at the moment of its global

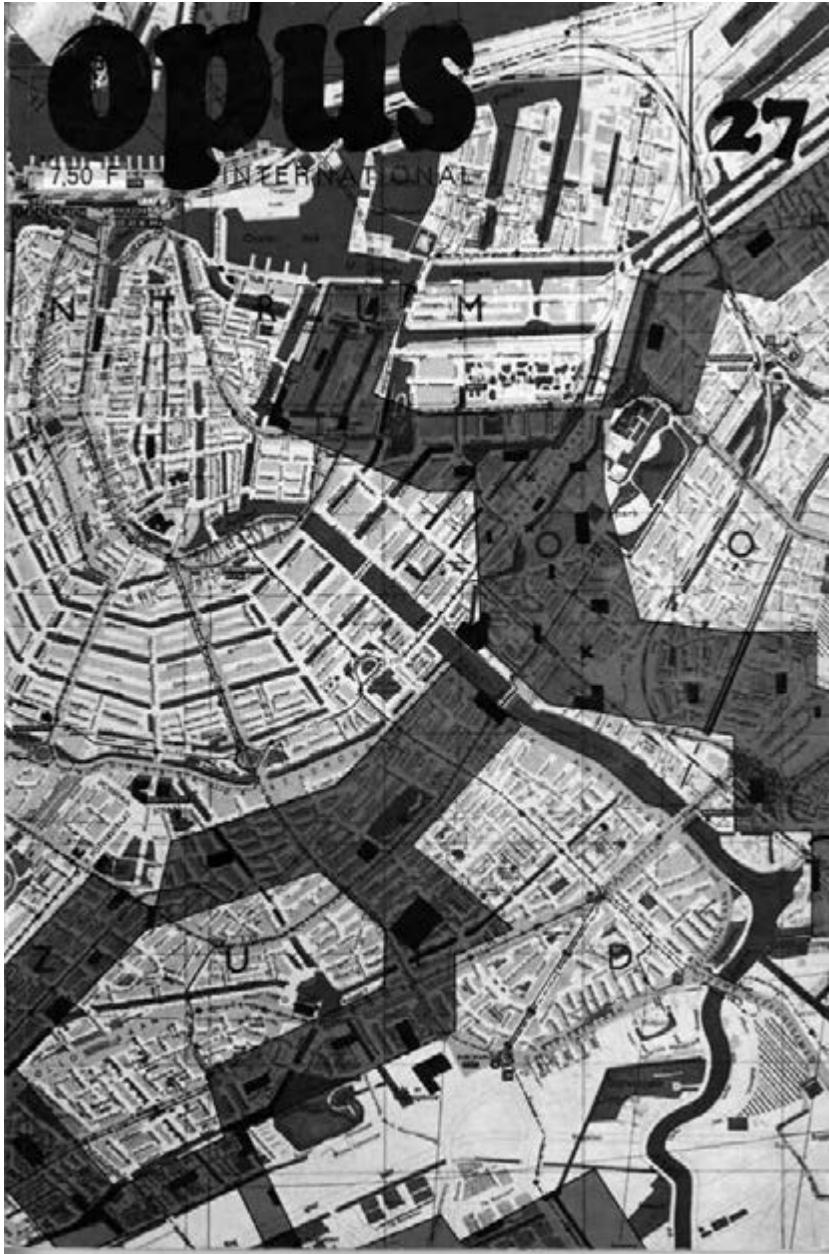


Figure 4.4. Constant Nieuwenhuys, *New Babylon*. Cover of *Opus International* 27 (September 1971).

realization, a vibratory, but essentially immobile flux. Towards the end of the project, Constant even began to explore the possibility that the spaces of New Babylon might not only give rise to playful encounters, but also to violence. He noted that the continuation of the Vietnam War and other instances of violence led him to question his original utopian faith in a peaceful *Homo ludens* wandering through the interior playground of the New Babylon, and when he returned to painting, from the mid-1970s to his death in 2005, his work reflected this more soberly pessimistic state of mind.

However, in conclusion, I return for a moment to the problem of the intensive, de-reified interior and suggest that despite this apparent impasse Constant preserves an original relation to the utopian poetics and politics of the pre-World War II avant-garde, in particular in his development of an idea of montage allowed not just the juxtaposition of two separate images or objects, but rather the perception of explosive, transformative tensions within single designed objects, spaces, images, or utterances. Thus, for example, Sergei Eisenstein spoke of the single shot as a 'montage cell' in his theory of dialectical montage (Eisenstein, 1949); the Bakhtin circle conceived of the single word as the site of an internal dissension of voices where social struggles were played out in discourse (Volosinov, 1986); and Walter Benjamin conceived of dialectics as a matter of interruption, ambiguity, and the concentration of tensions in images and objects (Benjamin, 1999, p. 10). In a late essay entitled 'Piranesi, or the Flux of Forms', written in 1946–1947, and hence almost contemporaneous with the early activity of Jorn and Constant in COBRA, Sergei Eisenstein compared an early version of Piranesi's *Carceri* with one of his mature etchings. Utilizing a graphic depiction of the early print, Eisenstein proceeds to suggest how one can 'explode' the picture, liberating the forces bound up in static forms and leading to an 'ecstasy' (Eisenstein's term) of spatial forms. Eisenstein is not simply arguing that one can treat architectural forms analytically, by decomposing them and projecting their components outwards along the liberated lines of force. He is also suggesting that there are creative, existential, and even spiritual implications in doing so, which for him related to still unrealized possibilities for cinematically-mediated 'ecstasies' of time and affectivity.

As even a cursory glance through the works of the New Babylon corpus suggest, Piranesi is also fundamental to Constant's labyrinthine design of the utopian city's interior and hence to the lived experiences it provokes in the anarchistic subjects wandering through it. And so, in the end, it is not far-fetched to see in the New Babylon not the critical debunking and self-exasperation of modernist urbanism's utopia, which took reification



to the end of the night, but rather an 'explosion' beyond it from within, in the very sense that Eisenstein intended: the mobilization of active forces, trapped in built structures, resources for a new human pathos and ecstasy in play.

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## 5. 'The Brilliance of Invisibility': Tracking the Body in the Society of the Spectacle

*Sudeep Dasgupta*

[W]e need, as counterweight to the theory of the commodity as a form of alienated social relations, a parallel one of its evocation of endless desire.

—Timothy J. Clark, *Should Benjamin Have Read Marx?*

Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* extends Marx's analysis of the commodity form to comprehend a consumer society marked by a surfeit of images. Rather than fall into the now familiar postmodern argument of the disappearance of the real and its replacement by the image, Debord centralizes the continuing importance of thinking the mediation between reality and appearance. *The Society of the Spectacle* characterizes the shift from the possession of the commodity to the appearance of images in the transition from 'having' to 'appearing' (Debord, 1995, p. 16). Debord defines the effect of this transition thus: 'The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relation between people mediated by images' (p. 12). The commodity-form's mediation of alienated social relations, which Marx deciphers, and the manifest visibility of proliferating images must be thought together. The commodity-form and images function in similar fashion, by firstly mediating alienated social relations, and secondly, by making invisible this process of mediation. Debord's expansion of Marx's concept of mediation, however, stresses the paradoxical importance of appearance, whose ubiquitous power coincides with its power to hide alienation and separation from appearance. In other words, a dialectical relationship is set up between appearance and invisibility. The power of a society of overwhelming appearances resides in its ability to dissimulate its power of making social relations invisible.

However, the capacity for this dissimulation must necessarily pass through the field of visibility implied in the term 'appearance'. How do figurations of the social get stabilized through vision? What historically-specific capacities of visualization are required to both produce and encounter the image-world of appearances? In this essay, I track how the

body is produced as the object of figuration, the site for the production of vision, and a *social* body. The painted body, the spectatorial body, and the social body are historically-specific productions in capitalist modernity. The painted body is the artistically-rendered realization on canvas of the human body in its historical specificity. The spectatorial body is not an ontological given but the site for a multiplication of disciplinary techniques, which produce its specific capacities to sense and see in encounters with the phenomenal world. The social body is the class-differentiated composition of a social totality. The endless desire manifested in the commodity world and the alienated social relations hidden from sight through images, I argue, can be tracked in the unstable relations between these three bodies. The contingency within the visual regime of the spectacle is the effect of the instability of scopic desire manifested in the unstable relations between these three bodies. The invocations of scopic desire produced through visibility between these three bodies are intrinsic, and not only a counterweight, to the commodity-form's transformation into images in the society of the spectacle. It is the *instability* in the relations between these three bodies within the field of vision, which enables a critical political potential to be thought within 'the endless invocation of desire' in the society of spectacle. In 'The Misadventures of Critical Thought', Jacques Rancière (2009) suggests that contemporary artistic practices do not just repeat the critique of the spectacle, but *neutralize* Debord's critique of capitalist exploitation and domination. My argument exploits the critical potential of visibility manifested in the unstable relation between the painted, spectatorial, and social body to suggest the contemporary relevance of Debord's critique of appearance.

I begin by briefly indicating the vast, complex, and coordinated processes on whose success both the power of the spectacle and the logic of reification depends. This complex coordination triggered by different periods of capitalism, I argue, is fraught by risk precisely because of the intensity and the magnitude of coordination and integration implied in terms like the 'spectacle' and 'reification'. A close comparison (and juxtaposition) of Jonathan Crary's and the British Situationist T.J. Clark's analyses of late-nineteenth-century painting develop an understanding of the *work* of stabilizing the relation between these three bodies in the field of visibility. The 'brilliance of invisibility' (Foucault, 2009, p. 71), a term Foucault deployed in his reading of Manet, captures precisely how the evocation of endless desire, including scopic desire, is accompanied by the impossibility of fixing, aligning, and coordinating the spectator's, society's, and the painting's body. This productive failure in fixing a relation between the

three bodies is not a negation of Debord's argument, as we shall see in the next section. It is the effect, rather, of the complexities and contingencies that mark the incomplete transition from 'being' to 'having' to 'appearing' that Debord developed in his theses in *The Society of the Spectacle*.

Contingency and its management, risk and its avoidance, coordination and integration on the one hand and disruption and separation on the other—the tension between these elements is registered already in Georg Lukács and Debord, and this very same tension is registered in the field of visibility. Visibility is the domain in which I want to stage an encounter between contingency and permanency, fixity and flux. *Logics of identification*, I argue, seek to stabilize these three bodies by emphasizing only one sort of scopic regime and desire which would contemplatively guarantee what Debord described as 'separation perfected' (Debord, 1995, p. 11). Yet, as the following section will show, if the 'society of spectacle' spans such a vast domain of life, the coordination of its various elements undermine stabilization, including the stabilization of visibility. Instead there is always the threat of a *dynamic of dissolution*, which threatens both visibility, and other dimensions of the lifeworld. However, rather than privilege the logic of identification as the secured victory of complete spectacularization (the pessimistic, and I argue mistaken, reading of Debord), or declare the dynamic of dissolution as the goal of artistic and political practice must aim at, I will argue that a paradoxical *dynamic of identification* best describes both the increasing mediation of social life by images *and* the artistic and political critique made possible by the instabilities between the three bodies these images seek to stabilize. I shall stage an encounter between two readings of modernism in the late nineteenth century (Clark and Crary) to explore this relation between identification and dissolution. Both in T.J. Clark's explicitly Marxist reading of Manet's paintings in *The Painting of Modern Life* (1999a), and in Jonathan Crary's *Suspension of Perception* (2001), the dynamic tension between what I call the stabilizing logic of identification and the threat of the dynamics of dissolution are played out, but played out differently.

## 1. Coordinating the Society of the Spectacle: Debord and Lukács

The spectacle suggests an overwhelming power that at a particular historical moment universalizes the separation of man from all around him, and all in him. But if the spectacle arises not out of a victory but out of the risks of a

historical development, revisiting those risks to investigate if they still exist in transformed form becomes politically relevant today. The contingency that had to be covered over by the awe-inspiring power of the spectacle needs revisiting, to ask how the concentrated, diffuse, and integrated forms of the spectacle were produced, registered, and struggled with in the late nineteenth century, and how, in transformed form, this same contingency might appear in our present. The historical development in question, out of which the 'society of spectacle' emerges, is the universalization of the logic of exchange in all spheres of life. This universalization is the *generalized* conversion of concrete specificity, or quality, in Hegel's and Marx's terms, into quantity. The transformation of value's form of appearance makes the universalization of exchange value possible, precisely because the sensuously felt and concretely experienced, it is claimed, gets transformed into an abstract logic of equivalency. Urbanization, the mass movement of peoples, the crowd, transportation and communications technologies, the institutionalization of all aspects of life—this historical development reaches its climax in the late nineteenth century in the 'Age of Capital' (Hobsbawm, 1984, p. 13). Clark extends this understanding of *capitalist* modernity in relation to the society of the spectacle, describing it as

a massive internal extension of the capitalist market—the invasion and restructuring of whole areas of free time, private life, leisure and personal expression. [...] It indicates a new phase of commodity production—the marketing, the making-into-commodities of whole areas of social practice which had once been referred to casually as everyday life. (Clark, 1999a, p. 9)<sup>1</sup>

But if the massive and intensive reorganization of all aspects of life in capitalist modernity is the claim on which the spectacle as a concept rests, it must account for how such an enormously diverse and differentiated set of processes can be so seamlessly coordinated. Noting the tension between massive coordinated transformations of capitalist societies on the one hand, and the infinitesimal 'internal extension' of the capitalist market into all areas of everyday life helps to begin thinking the intrinsic instability of the concept of the 'society of the spectacle'.

Expropriation, which is an economic term for the alienation and exploitation of labour power (*Arbeitskraft*), operates on two levels. At the subjective level, mechanization and rationalization, Lukács (1971) argues, means the lived time of work is abstracted into a calculable input element in the production process. The worker's 'whole human personality' is

fragmented, the useful elements isolated and exploited through psychological analysis. The reification of the 'soul' where the specific elements of a person's capabilities get separated from him, and integrated into specialized rational systems, and human qualities reduced to 'statistically viable concepts' are part of this process of reification (Lukács, 1971, p. 88). Human qualities through psychological analysis and analytic separation become statistically calculated units of measurement. In disciplinary terms, this separation gets codified in fields such as optics, labour-time management, psychology, home economics, etc., and in institutional spaces such as civil and criminal law, the state and its complex machineries, the economy and its organizations. To complete the dynamic of successful reification, separation at both subjective and objective levels must be matched by a concomitant coordination across different institutional spaces, practices, and bodies.

Lukács emphasizes that while the laws of commodity exchange and profit, exchange value over use value, seem to become rigid, all-controlling, and universal they can do so *only* if they succeed in 'disregarding the concrete aspects of the *subject matter* of these laws' (Lukács, 1971, p. 101, emphasis added). The laws congealed in the state, the economy, and civil society must disregard the concrete specificity of the objects, practices, and bodies that they abstract into sites of control. Further, specialization, rationalization, and calculation results in fragmentation of these spheres, thus proliferating separated spaces of power with their own specific interests. Thus, law can contradict the state; one state opposes another; state support of national economic interests might come into conflict with support for international free trade. As a result, laws must 'link up with each other through partial systems' while as far 'as concrete realities are concerned they can only establish fortuitous connections' (Lukács, 1971, p. 101). The picture of a capitalist totality that Lukács paints then, and I insist on the relevance of the term 'totality', is that of 'mutually interacting coincidences' rather than '*one* truly rational organization' (Lukács, 1971, p. 102, emphasis added).

It is precisely for this reason that the 'society of the spectacle' as an argument provokes such unease, because it is wrongly read as the successful achievement of sheer separation from concretely felt sensuous particularity registered in the lifeworld as a corollary of the successful completion of the transition to a consumer society. The spectacle's changing form must be seen more or less as a response precisely to the contingencies, time lags, fragmentations, and often competing specializations which aim to grasp the concrete 'subject matter' of all aspects of everyday life. Debord makes this clear enough when, going back on the 'separation perfected' argument,



he admits 'that spectacle's grip on social reality had not yet been perfected' (Debord, 1990, p. 7).

The falseness of reality is manifested for him in the reality of the image. This doubling of the Real is a marker of Debord's recognition that the true and the false do not line up with the Real and the Unreal. If the image is the form that mediates alienated social relations, this image is as real as the real unreality of society. I will leave aside for now the continual reworking of Marx in Debord's theses, and simply point out that the doubling of the Real is a function of this doubling between the spectacle and the social world of capitalist society whose contingencies it attempts to veil over. One glimpses it in Debord's turning Hegel over once more when he claims 'in a world that has really been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood' (Debord, 1995, p. 14).

Thus, he states '[t]he real consumer becomes a consumer of illusion. The commodity is this illusion which is in fact real, and the spectacle is its most general form' (Debord, 1995, p. 32). What is a real illusion? And how does the consumer consume a real illusion? On the one hand, this is clearly a Lukácsian argument—that is, the veil of reification undermines an apprehension of the concrete sensuous particularity of the object. The spectacle is the general form of this illusion through reification. But the spectacle's logic is that of 'separation perfected' (the title of the first section of the theses). The formulation 'perfected' gives a sense of permanency but Debord's argument is explicitly historical. Perfection can only be achieved at a specific moment in time. At least two elements must be mentioned here. Firstly, the concentrated and the diffuse spectacle, which translates as concentrated state power over the spectacle's reach, and diffuse, fragmented coordination of logics occur *within the same historical moment*. The 'general form' of the spectacle has multiple forms within the same period. Secondly, this 'form of form' undergoes yet another transformation when twenty years later the 'integrated spectacle' is posited. Perfection names a punctual strategy for managing the risk of continually evolving dynamics of unification and fragmentation, coordination and disaggregation, flux and stability. The transition from being to having to appearing which structures Debord's thetic narrativization registers these dynamics' co-appearance at different historical moments in particular combinations. And 'separation', like 'reification', registers this dynamic of dependency, contradiction, and opposition within and between historical moments.

The 'society of the spectacle', and its attendant concepts of reification, alienation, and separation, are both markers of the waning of sensuous particularity (quality to quantity, use to exchange value, having to appearing),

and an acknowledgement of the risks entailed in the massive reorganization of the diagrams of power in increasingly complex societies. The unstable relationality between the painted body, the social body, and the spectator's body is the effect precisely of both the intensification of alienation and the risky, incomplete coordination of the destabilizations modernity produced.

## 2. Interception/Identification/Dissolution

Clark's investigation of artistic modernism links the specific *experience* of modernity in the late nineteenth century to its *realization* through technique on the painted canvas. 'Painting', he argues 'is potentially a means of investigation, [...] a way of discovering what the values and excitements of the world amount to' (Clark, 1999a, p. xxi). This painterly investigation involves the *construction* and *transformation* on the canvas of the experience of modernity outside it. Clark therefore asks '[H]ow do the values and excitements called "modernity" look when they are put down in two dimensions?' The field of sensations, including the visual dimensions of modernity, do not just 'appear' but must be transformed through 'a play between flatness and depth', which 'stress [...] the picture's limits [...] [through] sorts of insistence, ellipsis, showmanship, restraint' (Clark, 1999a, p. xxi). This transformation of a generalized experience of modernity into the visual experience of it onto the canvas emphasizes the necessity of transformation, realization, and construction in the gap between 'having' and 'appearing'. Clark emphasizes the ideological work of this construction of appearances when he asks '[D]oes the 'realization' extend and intensify—that is to say, *validate*—the meanings and appearances, or disperse and qualify them?' (Clark, 1999a, p. xxi, emphasis added). The representational *practice* of painting does two things then: it translates the experience of modernity through transformation within the limits and possibilities of painterly technique; and, this transformation into appearance of experience could either validate, or qualify and disperse the meaningfulness of experience.

Clark shows how painting as investigation shoves a wedge between the phenomenal apprehension of painting and the realization of *the validity* of the values of modernity which we call the spectacle. And it does so precisely by encountering in the process of picture making the intrinsic tension between the logic of identification and the dynamic of dissolution. The increasing fragmentation, specialization, and acceleration of life, captured in the Impressionists' love for painting trains, for example, threw up problems (coordination, alignment, etc.) for the efficient management of all aspects of

life. Society is marked by 'a modernity of continual assessment, negotiation, and constraint in the public sphere, or demarcation and displacement, of segregation and self-management, of sexual and occupational inequality' summed up 'by the difficult word "class"' (Clark, 1999a, pp. xxi–xxii). Painting as construction, the social dynamic of modernity and the dialectic of mobility and stabilization are captured in the cultural experience of the 'cultivated rentier' by Meyer Shapiro. In this class-stratified society, Shapiro argues, the 'cultivated rentier' enjoys 'the realistic pictures of his surroundings as a spectacle of traffic and changing atmospheres' while 'experiencing in its phenomenal aspect that mobility of the environment, the market and of industry to which he owes his freedom and income' (quoted in Clark, 1999a, p. 1). The phenomenally experienced mobility of the social environment is experienced visually in the spectacles pictures provide of 'traffic and changing atmospheres'. Clark's reading of Manet's *Chemin de Fer* (1872–1873) captures precisely this dialectic of phenomenal mobility and pictorial stability, which exposes the co-presence of both a waning sensuality of the object-world and the separation and alienation furthered by capitalist modernity.

Debord's argument when read through Clark and Shapiro reveals something specific—that the spectacle had to convert and stabilize into images the flux precipitated by modernity and this difficult attempt is captured in the word 'class'. The category of class, which keeps reappearing as the location of the viewing subject and the representation of a painted subject brings up the question of the social body in both reception and representation, yet the stability of this category is undermined by the difficulty in accurately apprehending it through vision. Clark insists that "class" [...] was one of the images on which modernity thrived' (Clark, 1999a, p. xxviii), precisely because of the instability in class formations thrown up by capitalist modernity which produced increasing complexity in class fractions and their relations to each other as well as to other classes, as Hobsbawm (1984, pp. 262–269) eloquently traces. For this reason class difference could not be stabilized adequately within the picture-frame, and its images were so central to modernity as a *problem* of representation. Clark goes on: '[C]lass was one of its [modernity's] favourite games, but the game observed essentially the same rules as all the other terms of the spectacle—rules of mobility, elusiveness, disembodiment, pure visibility, confinement to the world of signs' (Clark, 1999a, p. xxviii). The logic of the spectacle then is the risky task of identification, of delineating class specificity through visibility where the visual was itself identified as the experience of flux on the one hand, and confinement on the other.

The gaze of the woman in *Chemin de Fer* (Figure 5.1) is intercepted by the spectator, or rather, her gaze meets ours. The picture is an 'interception' but Clark argues 'we sense that the woman is really somewhere else, still in her novel's dream of consciousness' (Clark, 1999a, p. xix). As much as the spectator would like to visually possess her subjective interiority ('having'), the linking of her eyes to the fingers that hold her open book signal that she is lost to us, in a space produced by the words on the page. She appears to us but we cannot have her visually. The logic of identification through brush strokes of the woman on the bench is dissipated by the object's refusal to accede itself as subject to us, and to be subjected by us, opening a gap between the pleasure of enjoying a spectacle and the distance between the position of the spectator and the woman as object of scopic desire. The phenomenal experience of enjoying a spectacle is an experience of separation (Debord). Only this time, the separation is *revealed* rather than hidden through the painted representation of the presence of her body separated from the spectator's desire to possess and fix it, mimed in the steam from the train which in the painting block's the child's desire to see.



Figure 5.1. Edouard Manet's *Chemin de Fer*, 1873.



Figure 5.2. Georges Seurat's *Parade de Cirque*, 1887–1888.

This dialectical process of exposure and dissolution is powerfully captured in Clark's description of the grapes in the painting. Here is his sentence: 'Likeness is perfect, but external. The bunch of grapes the child has put down—those Chardin still-life grapes, spilling over the sill for the viewer to pick—is like a pathetic *after-image of sensuousness*, already half-melted into the thin air of spectacle' (Clark, 1999a, p. xxiii, emphasis added). Perfection is achieved as perfect externality—*yet* precisely the perfection of the *rendition* is an after-image of what had been, a sensuousness whose concrete particularity melts away into thin air, like the steam of the train at Oisy. The thinness of the spectacle, deflecting ocular possession, and the sensuous presence of the 'spilling' grapes coexist in the same plane, in the flatness of the painting. This coexistence Clark describes thus: 'what [the] staging of the picture's exchange of looks [...] makes comprehensible [is] the balance in Manet between hard, almost epigrammatic appropriation of things seen and deep distance, deep outsidership and displacement'. That is why Clark argues '[I]t is what the picture *does with its identities* that matters, not which identity it tries on first as its 'own'' (Clark, 1999a, p. xxiii, emphasis added). The picture as spectacle *works* to represent a body on a surface where separation is not yet perfected because the rendering of the distanced, alienated gaze of the woman coexists with the 'after-image of sensuousness' that modernity's dynamic threatens to dissipate through abstraction.

### 3. Suspension/Attention/Dissolution

Jonathan Crary's focus on the construction of subjectivity through vision develops a Foucauldian understanding of modernity echoing the arguments of Debord and Lukács. He argued that 'the very possibility in the late nineteenth century of concepts of a purified aesthetic perception is inseparable from the processes of modernization that made the problem of attention a central issue in new institutional constructions of a productive and manageable subjectivity' (Crary, 2001, p. 2). Crary (1989) explicitly rejects a simplistic focus on the gaze. He insists that 'attention, as a constellation of texts and practices, is much more than a question of the gaze, of looking, of the subject only as a spectator. It allows the problem of perception to be extracted from an easy equation with questions of visibility [...] simply as questions of opticality' (Crary, 2001, p. 2).

A number of things need to be said here. Firstly, Crary's turning to perception rather than viewing, seeing, and spectating, allows him to then focus on 'non-optical visibility' and the 'embodied spectator' as essential to understanding how the calculated, atomized, segmented modern subject is formed (the subtitle of the book is 'Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture'). This virtuoso performance of an archaeology of vision moves visibility into a philosophical, physiological, and psychological domain and thus explicitly addresses the spectatorial body. The scientific problems thrown up by the recognition of the 'after-image' in physiological optics severed the link between the image and the referent *in time*. The absence of the viewed object in the time of the after-image called attention to the density of the eye and the complexity of the retina. This recognition shifted the focus from a purely visual understanding of visibility to the complexities of embodied spectatorship. Here we see in the realm of embodied visibility precisely the risk emphasized in the terms 'reification' and 'spectacle' in Lukács and Debord. 'Spectacular culture', Crary argues 'is not founded on the necessity of making a subject *see*, but rather on strategies in which individuals are isolated, separated, and *inhabit time* as disempowered' (Crary, 1989, p. 3, emphasis added). Crary's argument centralizes the tension between mobility and stabilization, attention and distraction within the field of embodied vision which 'spectacular culture' must manage. So where do we find this tension manifest? Once again, it is Manet, but this time the Manet of *In the Conservatory* (1879).

Crary's reading points out two sides of the tension animating the painting. On the one hand, the tightly framed, vertically striped, corseted

character of the figures and objects in the frame; and on the other, the dream-like, far-away, unavailable look of the woman. Till this point, Crary does a Clark—that is, articulating a tension between distance and unavailability on the one hand, and constraint and control on the other. This tension is identified in the *representational* function of the painting as the execution of brushstrokes. Crary shifts his reading however, beyond the picture frame to the body of the spectator as the field on which the disciplinary dynamics of modernity's rationalizing imperatives take place. The unreliability of bodily perception (the retinal after-image, binocular vision) required the *work* of harnessing distraction and transforming it into efficient forms of attention in the late nineteenth century. The year 1879 is the date for the start of 'unbinding vision' (Crary, 2001, p. 81), unravelling in front of the images of Manet's many paintings, *In the Conservatory* in particular. This unbinding then gets fully revealed in 1888, in the Chapter titled 'Illuminations of Disenchantment', and is exemplified in Seurat's *Parade de Cirque* (1887–1888) (Figure 5.2). The tension makes its appearance felt as the experience now of disenchantment, perspective vanishing into multiplanar staging and no single conceivable position for the spectator to occupy. Seurat's knowledge of and experimentation with scientific principles of vision is well-known. Precisely this knowledge of physiological optics produces a displacement of vision in the pictorial realization of a scene. Depending on where the spectator is placed, the painting, Crary argues convincingly, is both realistic and identifiable, and amorphous and shape-shifting—a congeries of colours without bordering. The physical location of the body, the alignment of the eyes with the multiple picture planes on the single surface, the displaced composition of the elements in the painting, all taken together underline the spectatorial body's mobile relation to the object of the gaze. Here we see the spectatorial body slowly being displaced by the painting, a displacement and a mobilization which reveals, or illuminates, the disenchantment suffered in modernity by a subject's own unstable sense of self. The painting does not stabilize experience as a visual object separable from the spectator. Instead, by constructing multiple positions between the object and the spectator, it reflects rather than hides the shock-like, multiple displacements that mark human experience in modernity. The politics of Crary's argument rests first on the insistence of perception as inherently unstable due to embodied spectatorship, and the destabilization and displacement of the spectatorial body, mirrored in the heterotopic place of viewing triggered by painting itself.

#### 4. From the Logic of Dissolution to the Dynamic of Identification

The critical potential of visual culture in the society of the spectacle lies in the unstable interplay between a desire for identification of bodies and the displacements, re-alignments, and instabilities this desire produces between the spectatorial, painted, and social body. In the previous two sections, or rather across them, three bodies emerge. The embodied and shifting spectator placed and dislodged by Crary's reading of certain paintings, the distanced represented gaze and emplaced painted bodies of Manet read by both Crary and Clark, and the slippery, visually tense and complicated social body set in motion through class, analysed by Clark. The three bodies, when thought together, enable a conceptual reversal. They dynamize a 'logic of identification' through displacement, diffusion, and the coexistence of visual separation and sensuous proximity. The instability of this triple relation produces a 'dynamic of identification', which captures the necessarily incessant production of stable objects and bodies in the field of visibility. Yet till now, the argument has gestured rather than developed how class, and its relation to the social body, are integral to the field of visibility.

For Clark, it becomes very clear that the painted body manifests the anxieties of class mobility and the tension between segmentation and displacement, confinement and elusiveness, the rules of the game of class, as he calls it. The gaze that seeks and meets another gaze which in turn refuses to entertain communication but 'is somewhere else, in her novel's dream of consciousness' (Clark, 1999a, p. ix)—this encounter between missed gazes manifests the tension between epigrammatic appropriation of things seen, and their identification on the one hand, and deep displacement and unavailability to the gaze, on the other. Clark's reading seems close to what Crary writes much later, about dreams, reveries, hypnotic states, and the like. But Clark's painted body has a different function—it is not the trigger to the displacement of the spectator's body that Crary desires. That is why his woman in the conservatory does not meet the gaze of the spectator. She is truly lost elsewhere while we remain fixed. Her unavailable gaze is a *clue* to a process that, as Clark shows, resists the alignment of seeing with knowing and identifying. The movements of classes and between them (as both class *interest* and class *mobility*), the changing contours of the city, the heterogeneous ambulatory populations of the boulevards—these, and other effects of modernity triggered also by rising consumerism, display, and spectacle, made the identification of class and its accurate representation such an obsession for painting in the nineteenth century. Clark's reading



of another Seurat painting provides a clearer understanding of this relation between class, the social body, and visibility. This reading also reveals his distance from Crary, a distance, I argue, which makes Clark's readings far more useful in understanding the *capitalist* dynamic of modernity.

Analysing Seurat's *Un Dimanche Après-midi à l'Île de la Grande Jatte* (1884), Clark notices that the critics were unanimous in noticing one thing: '[Seurat] wished to show the nature of class distinction in a place given over to pleasure, but also the various things that *made distinctions hard to grasp*' (Clark, 1999a, p. 263, emphasis added). Capturing the tension 'between diversity of social detail' and a 'uniform and as it were extreme execution' (p. 264), the painting manifested both the precision of its technique and the imprecision of the social world's class composition it sought to represent. The dissolution of dots into colour combined punctuated precision with separable form through colour, yet the object of this technique could not comfortably represent the uncomfortable proximity of different classes within the same social space and picture frame. The uniform technical composition of class-differentiated bodies sharing the same space both posed difference and undermined it. Jean Ajalbert in *La Revue Moderne* observed '[O]nce the first impression of surprise is over, the exaggerated stiffness of these people softens; the dots of colour are less fatiguing' (quoted in Clark, 1999a, p. 264), producing a tension between stiffness and fluidity, separation, and coexistence. Clark argues '[T]he life *is* intense for all its rigidity' (p. 265, emphasis in original). 'Who precisely belongs to whom?' he asks, for 'class is present here unmistakably but the fact that workers and bourgeois share the same pleasures does not result in this case in an infinite shifting as much as an effort at reaching a *modus vivendi*, agreeing to ignore one another, marking out invisible boundaries and keeping oneself to oneself' (p. 265). The term 'invisible boundaries' within an act of visual representation captures this dialectical tension between posing and dissolving separate identities. That is why Clark is right when he insists 'Seurat's subject [...] is the intermingling of classes, not their neat separation; it is the elaborate texture of controls and avoidances that the classes bring with them to the place of pleasure' (Clark, 1999a, p. 265). The body's disappearance into the numberless vibrations of a directionless spreading of an immense social body meets the coexistence of multiple bodies whose 'stiffness' and consanguinity in the same space unites and divides. The picture renders the contradictions of an intense life shared by different sorts of bodies in the same conflictual space.

Clark insists on thinking both the logic of class identification and the dissolution of its *perception* in painted representation thus:

The identification of class is not a *brake* on meaning: it is the trigger, once again, of a sequence of connotations which do not add up, which fail to circle back on themselves, declaring their meaning evident and uniform. It may be that we are too eager, now, to point to the illusory quality of that circling back, that closure against the 'free play of the signifier'. Illusion or not, it seems to me the necessary ground on which meanings can be established and maintained: kept in being long enough, and endowed with enough coherence, for the ensuing work of dispersal and contradiction to be seen to matter—to have matter, in the text, to work against. (Clark, 1980, p. 30, emphasis in original)<sup>2</sup>

Illusion is the paradoxical ground for meaning because even if connotations do not add up, this failure is not eccentric but internal to the production of meanings through visibility. Clark maintains this tension between illusion and meaning, refusing to succumb to the temptation of cancelling out identification in the name of the free play of the signifier. This is precisely where the 'socioscopic' function of the gaze (Bolla, 1996, p. 79) establishes a dynamic relation between the logic of identification and the dynamic of dissolution, which is traceable in 'an archival account of the society of the spectacle' (Bolla, 1996, p. 65). For Cray, embodied visibility is the alibi for valorizing the dynamic of dissolution into the immense, borderless, non-contradictory social body. But if the social body is apprehended socioscopically as the play between illusion and meaning, between multiple connotations and yet 'enough coherence', the *dynamic of identification* describes best the unstable practices of visibility in the society of the spectacle. The after-image of sensuousness returns only if one can recognize the inherent tension between dot and form, between form and form in the same place, between stiffness and fluidity, between *modus vivendi* through avoidance and control. That is why the critics were caught, like Clark, in a dynamic of identification ('Who belongs to whom?') triggered by class as central to the representation of the social body. Art, Jacques Rancière argues, is one place where the seeming apportioning of class mobility on the one hand, and the appropriate forms of its rendition (in literature, for example) get derailed. He argues, through a reading of *Stendhal*, that 'the promised concordance between the growth of a genre and the rise of a class gets muddled' (Rancière, 2013, p. 42). This tension between a sociology of class mobility and an aesthetics concomitant with a period becomes palpable in vision.

For Cray however, the intensity of life *in its rigidity* is what he seeks to dissolve through a quasi-scientific *logic* of dissolution. Rather than the

painterly realization of the uncomfortable coexistence of a class-fractured social body, intensity for Crary is identified in the spectatorial body's displacement by the fractured construction of Seurat's multiplanar construction of space in *Parade du Cirque*. Crary requires an archaeology of knowledge that cuts across physiological optics, philosophy, and psychology to construct this displacing dynamic. Crary constructs a logic of dissolution rather than maintaining a dynamic of identification, while Clark's argument manifests a tension between rigidity and flux. The role of class within the composition of the social body as a problem that is both identified, played with, and struggled over, find little place in Crary's arguments. Where Clark insists on the tensions and anxieties of class cross-contamination as manifested in the strictly painterly practice of the 'realization' of the values and excitements of modernity, Crary desires instead an escape through the sensorial dissolution of the body. The body vanishes.

Crary describes the leaves in Cézanne's *Study of Foliage* (1903) in these terms: '[T]heir euphoric groundlessness' provides 'an intimation of a libidinal release, of an intoxicating loss of self' (Crary, 2001, p. 357). Cézanne's works 'diagram perceptual experience in constant transformation' and his late works, Crary argues, 'surely fulfil and perhaps extravagantly exceed Bergson's hypothesis of an "attention to life" in their disclosure of a world that resolves itself "into numberless vibrations, all linked together in uninterrupted continuity, all bound up with each other, and travelling in every direction like shivers through an immense body"' (Crary, 2001, p. 357; Bergson, 1988, p. 208). The visual encounter for Crary produces an immediate enervation, a libidinal loss of self, and a dissolving spectatorial body. Paradoxically, Crary's discourse of immediacy, inspired partly by Bergson, seeks to escape positivism yet repeats the same logic, that of identification through immediacy. Clark takes the encounter between the three bodies produced in visuality as the occasion for thinking the *work* of mediation, while Crary's identification of painting as the experience of immediacy avoids any mediating process for sensory immediacy. Crary's reading exemplifies the 'unmediated acceptance of the so-called given as a firm basis of knowledge' (Adorno, 1993, p. 55).

For Hegel, sense certainty begins through immediacy and immediately starts dissolving into what he calls 'a complex of many Heres' (Hegel, 1977, p. 64). And the reason is time. 'The Here *pointed out*, to which I hold fast, is similarly a *this* Here which in fact is *not* this here, but a Before and a Behind, an Above and Below, a Right and a Left. The Above is itself this manifold otherness of above, below, etc. The Here, which was supposed to have been pointed out vanishes into other Heres. [...] [W]hat abides is a *negative*'

(Hegel, 1977, p. 64, emphasis in original). Clark's readings highlight precisely this negativity within the 'pointing out' in painting, which subverts the stabilization of place (here, there) and the temporalization (now, then) of pointing and representing. Visual experience, I argue, harbours precisely this function of negativity rendered in the term 'dynamic of identification'. It undermines both a logic of identification and a dynamic of dissolution, and that is why spectacular culture promises but can fail in successfully rendering alienation invisible.

In his reading of Cézanne's *The Bathers* (1904–1906), Clark describes the painting as 'a kind of literalization of the notion of the body's being *always subject* to movements of substitution, replacement, shuttling between possible places or identities' (Clark, 1999b, p. 158, emphasis added). This is a Lukácsian reading of the subject in the advanced capitalist world of Debord, if anything. That is why Clark describes Cézanne's technique in classically Taylorist fashion as 'an idea of knowledge built out of singular, equivalent units—events, that happen in the eye, and which the dab of paint will analogize precisely' (Clark, 1999b, p. 166). Yet *The Bathers* 'are haunted by figures of inconsistency and displacement, or by kinds of coexistence (of marks and objects) that are more painful than natural, more like interruption than juxtaposition, more like grating and locking of the parts of a great psychic machine than the patient disclosure of a world' (p. 166). The coexistence of the 'ruthlessness' of the painter's precision and 'their [the bodies'] will to resist [...] vision' (p. 167) is captured on the same plane. The body persists in 'the inorganic chill in the air' yet makes the painting breathe by 'having its surface be vibrant, tense, or sensitive' (p. 166). Inorganic time of singular equivalent units, of mechanical materialism (Clark's reference is Freud's 'Project for a Scientific Psychology') is conjoined with the morphing of bodies, their inter-penetration and softness. That is why Clark argues that 'glimpses of alternative systems of representation are only thrown up by the most intense and recalcitrant effort to make the ones we have finally deliver the goods'. He goes on: 'It is only in the process of discovering the system's antinomies and blank spots [...] that the first improvised forms of contrary imagining come to light' (p. 165).

In 1968 (one year after the publication of Debord's *Spectacle*), when the May events were taking place in Paris, Foucault delivered a series of lectures in Tunis on Manet. The second to last painting he spoke on was *The Balcony* (1868). For Foucault this painting is a paradoxical study in invisibility—we cannot see what the three figures are looking at. All three figures are looking in different directions, and of course we do not know if they are even looking at anything. 'All three', he says are 'absorbed by an intense spectacle

which, evidently we cannot know, one because it is in front of the canvas, the other because it is to the right of the canvas, the third because it is to the left of the canvas. And, in any case we see nothing, we see only the gazes, not a place but a gesture and always the gestures of the hands, folding hands, unfolding hands, hands actually unfolded. [...] It is simply this circle of hands [...] which unifies [...] these divergent elements of a picture which is nothing other than the *brilliance of invisibility* itself' (Foucault, 2009, p. 71, emphasis added). This is the body taking place, an event, in the present continuous, never once and for all. The gaze encounters bodies, and the bodies are only gazes, and this visibility of the gazes renders a nothing: the brilliance of invisibility. The dynamic of identification is precisely this contradictory perception—the brilliance of invisibility as the displacement of the body as it persists in its consistency. That is why Foucault closed his lecture with *The Bar at the Folies Bergère*, the same picture that closes Clark's readings of Manet in *The Painting of Modern Life*, stating 'Manet did not invent non-representative painting because everything in Manet is representation, but he made a representative play of the fundamental material elements of the canvas' (Foucault, 2009, p. 79). Manet, the Painter of Modern Life, pushes representation to the limit and in this play with materiality prefigures the modernism which will centralize the failure of adequate representation. Clark argues that 'the body may never take place anywhere once and for all; but what it is made of—what our imagining of it is made of—will take place, and take on its own consistency [...] and the kind of consistency it has is hard for us to deal with—that is why we retreat into the world of the imaginary—just because it is ultimately inhuman, or nonhuman, or has humanity as one of its effects' (Clark, 1999b, p. 166).

## 5. Conclusion

In a scathing review of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, Clark comments that '[B]enjamin's Paris is all dream and no spectacle: The apparatus of spectacle is not understood by him to invade the dream life and hold even unconscious imagining in its grip' (Clark, 2003, p. 47). A critical and comparative perspective on Clark and Crary show that one way of loosening the grip of the apparatus of the spectacle is to note and perhaps exacerbate the gap between the dream and the spectacle. This would be where the 'endless desire' of the epigraph can be the changing ground on which a counterweight to the spectacle can be constructed. The spectacle cannot always invade dream life perfectly, or map its diagrammatics perfectly on

the imaginary. Other imaginings become possible when the map slips over the surface it aims to cartographically stabilize. This is where the transition from 'having' to 'appearing' in Debord, and the alignment of subject matter to the proliferation of laws in Lukács, becomes the space for slippages, uncoordinated effects, and dis-alignments.

This is what Clark asks about the Here and Now of the Image: 'Why should a regime of representation not be built on the principle that images are, or ought to be, transformable (as opposed to exchangeable)—meaning disposable through and through, and yet utterly material and contingent; shareable, imaginable, coming up constantly in their negativity, their non-identity, and for that reason promoted and dismantled at will?' (Clark, 1999c, p. x).

The brilliance of invisibility as one perspective on contemporary visual culture continues then to provide a critical potential for the spectacular society of today. The unavailable bodies and gazes in Foucault and Clark's readings are related to the fuzzy social body whose contours cannot be mapped by a determining socioscopy precisely because of the possibility of 'negativity' and 'non-identity'. In their spectacular brilliance, bodies are contingent and fractured, whose unstable and dissonant composition produce 'cryptograms of modernism' (Adorno, 2003, p. 337).

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## 6. Art Criticism in the Society of the Spectacle: The Case of *October*

*Noortje de Leij*

Less than a decade after Guy Debord's publication of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson in 1976 founded the journal *October*. Initially both associate editors at *Artforum*, Krauss and Michelson left the latter over a dispute on what Krauss ironically referred to as 'the Lynda Benglis thing': a controversy about a centrefold advertisement for Linda Benglis, arranged by her dealer Paula Cooper (Bracker, 1995, p. 77). The spread was somewhat deviously arranged by Benglis's gallery and revealed a provocative photograph of a naked Benglis holding a sizable dildo against her pubic area. Krauss and Michelson, along with four other *Artforum* editors, denounced the copyrighted advertisement as an object of obscene vulgarity. The image, they wrote in a letter to the editor, represented a 'qualitative leap' in the journal and the incident was 'deeply symptomatic of conditions that call for critical analysis'. 'As long as they infect the reality around us', the editors wrote, 'these conditions shall have to be treated in our future works as writers and editors' (quoted in Bracker, 1995, p. 107).<sup>1</sup> In line with this announcement, Krauss and Michelson established *October*: an advertisement-free journal that read on its cover 'Art | Theory | Criticism | Politics', indicating the journal's dedication to connect these four hefty pillars. The writers who became, along with Krauss, most closely associated with the journal were Benjamin Buchloh, Douglas Crimp, Hal Foster, and Yve-Alain Bois.<sup>2</sup>

Although the Benglis incident might seem insignificant, or Krauss and Michelson's reaction a bit much, it does make sense in light of *October's* overall concern to maintain a space for 'critical' art within the growing commodification and 'spectacularization' of art and the art institution under the conditions of late capitalism. 'The tensions between radical artistic practice and dominant ideology will be a major subject of inquiry', the editors wrote in their mission statement (*October* Editorial, 1976, p. 4). In this respect, Debord's theory of the spectacle played a decisive role: both as a general cultural diagnosis of the 'dominant ideology' with which the *October* writers seemed wholeheartedly to agree and as a specific challenge for the field of art. Art, as Debord and the Situationists along with the members of the Frankfurt School showed, was constantly on the verge of being assimilated



to the conditions of spectacle, or as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer described in their influential text on the culture industry: ‘import[ed] into the realm of administration’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. 104). The dialectic between art as a relatively autonomous site for critical practice and as an ideological manifestation of spectacular culture—complying with, rather than resisting what Debord had called ‘spectacle’—remained of central importance throughout *October’s* development. The *October* writers had witnessed that the ambition of Debord and the Situationists to dissolve art into life in an aesthetico-political revolution did not succeed. Yet, contrary to Debord—who proclaimed that true art could only subsist *in praxis*, by becoming life—they upheld the Adornian assessment that critical artistic practice might still be possible *within*—or *only*—under the putative autonomy of the art institution.<sup>3</sup> To simply abandon or abolish the art institution under conditions of spectacular culture would mean ‘the regime of total desublimation’, Buchloh avows (Buchloh in Bois et al., 2004a, p. 325). However, acknowledging that the art institution is certainly not exempted from the conditions of consumer capitalism, it had to be constantly problematized and criticized, also and specifically along the lines of Debord’s critical analyses.

My claim is that Debord’s alienating conditions of the spectacle, which ‘proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance’, and ‘demands [...] passive acceptance’, or passive spectatorship (Debord, 1995, pp. 14–15), are mirrored in *October’s* art critical project by a fundamental concern with the specific socio-political conditions of institutional mediation and with the ideological conditions of spectatorship in the sphere of reception. Both the art institution as a structure of mediation, and perception as a realm of subject formation are theorized in the art criticism of the *October* writers—albeit in various forms and sometimes more explicitly than others—as gradually more and more politicized in terms of spectacularization. As Buchloh states in an *October* roundtable discussion entitled ‘The Predicament of Contemporary Art’:

The postwar situation can be described as a negative teleology: a steady dismantling of the autonomous practices, spaces, and spheres of culture and a perpetual intensification of assimilation and homogenization, to the point today where we witness what Debord called ‘the integrated spectacle’. (Buchloh in Bois et al., 2004b, p. 673)

'It's a dire diagnostic', Bois responds to Buchloh's decree, '(after all, Debord committed suicide), but one I think we all share to some extent' (Bois in *Idem*, p. 673).<sup>4</sup> It is against the backdrop of this diagnosis that the *October* editors sought to reevaluate radical historical avant-garde practices in light of post-war social conditions and endorsed the critical potential of neo-avantgarde art. Their accounts of art's critical potential are, however, *in perpetuum* both fuelled and threatened by the awareness of an ominous intensification of social alienation under the strangulating grip of the invisible hand of the market.<sup>5</sup>

In Krauss's writing, the dismal conditions of spectacle are most clearly foregrounded in her essay on 'The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum', in which she laments 'Minimalism's participation in a culture of seriality, of multiples without originals—a culture, that is, of commodity production' (Krauss, 1990, p. 8). Even though Minimal art, as such initially championed by the *October* writers, foregrounded the presence of the subject and aimed to restore the 'immediacy of experience', in the end it had merely paved the way for a market-driven museum that advances ahistorical, spectacular spaces of 'pure presentness' (Bishop, 2011, p. 1): 'hyperspace', as Krauss formulates it, in need of 'a technologized subject, the subject in search not of affect but of intensities, the subject who experiences its fragmentation as euphoria, the subject whose field of experience is no longer history, but space itself' (Krauss, 1990, pp. 9–10, 17). Krauss's text strongly echoes Debord's portrayal of the spectacle's false unity and homogeneity, 'the official language of generalized separation' (Debord, 1995, p. 12), in which the subject as a modern-day consumer Tantalus perpetually reaches towards the fulfilment of his pseudo-needs (in search of intensities), obliterating historical consciousness and preventing political action. Raoul Vaneigem, a prominent member of the Situationists, sardonically diagnosed this socio-political inertia as 'survival sickness': whilst having the means to eradicate social unjustness and despair, man only uses the minimum of his resources to barely stay alive, just enough to consume. Numbed by the cyclical motion of the marketplace, in survival mode the consuming subject is, in an utterly counterrevolutionary amnesia, satisfied by merely avoiding actual death. Though '[t]he consumer cannot and must not ever attain satisfaction', Vaneigem writes, 'the logic of the consumable object demands the creation of fresh needs, yet the accumulation of such false needs exacerbates the malaise of men confined with increasing difficulty solely to that status of consumer' (Vaneigem, 2001, p. 162).

A substantial part of Krauss's text deals with a concern for this sedated subject in late capitalism, or more specifically, in the late capitalist

museum.<sup>6</sup> The spectator was, in an almost utopian gesture, put on the stage by Minimalism yet ultimately fragmented and derealized as the submissive, passive spectator Debord described in *The Society of the Spectacle* and Vaneigem diagnosed with survival sickness in *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. Referencing the Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson's essay 'Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' (1984), Krauss uses the idea of 'cultural revolution' to explain that, even though art might provide us with a utopian alternative to, or temporary exemption from the heteronomous conditions of capitalism, it also carves out a space for the further expansion of these conditions. Art prepares, so to speak, yet another domain for its imminent recuperation by a next, more advanced moment of capitalism. 'With Minimalism', Krauss argues, 'the potential was always there that not only would the object be caught up in the logic of commodity production, a logic that would overwhelm its specificity, but that the subject projected by Minimalism also would be reprogrammed' (Krauss, 1990, p. 12). That is: reprogrammed into a fragmented, passive spectator. The dispersal of the conscious, active (revolutionary) subject through the mechanisms of image consumption and the 'appearance' of individuality as a marketable image-commodity are intrinsic functions and effects of spectacular culture as described by Debord. They are, he argued, 'the efficient motor of trancelike behaviour' (Debord, 1995, p. 17).<sup>7</sup> This aspect of Debord and the Situationists' theories, I contend, takes on major importance in the *October* writings.

Jonathan Crary, a frequent contributor to *October*, extensively theorized and historicized the conditions of perception and attention 'as an indispensable part of an expanding terrain of modern spectacle' (Crary, 2001, p. 361).<sup>8</sup> Crary puts emphasis on spectacle as a way of organizing attention. Attention and perception under conditions of spectacle are displaced from attentiveness to the viewing subject and the mechanisms of perception and metaphorically rerouted to the window display where they are perpetually dispersed *and* sustained through a constant introduction of novelty. This emphasis on spectacle as a way of organizing attention and perception is important to *October's* reception of Debord's spectacle and fuels the analysis of art as a sphere that can potentially counter this cultural diagnosis by putting attention to perception itself or by demanding active or conscious spectatorship.

With regard to Krauss's text on the late capitalist museum it is important to note, however, that in her accounts of 'multiples without originals', 'hyper-space', and, evidently, by her use of the term 'simulacra', she refers explicitly to Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacrum (Krauss, 1990, pp. 10, 12). Yet, although of a similar historical origin, often used in the same context and

sometimes seemingly interchangeable, Baudrillard's simulacrum should not be equated with Debord's spectacle. It is, instead, a *successive*, intensified phase in which the real has been replaced by simulations (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 256).<sup>9</sup> The spectacle on the contrary, is, as Debord asserts: 'itself a product of real activity' (Debord, 1995, p. 14). Baudrillard's simulacrum eradicates all reality: the real is not distorted or hidden; it is no longer even possible to identify anything as 'real'. As such, Baudrillard's theory is utterly totalizing and seems to obliterate any potential opposition. Krauss appears, however, to employ Baudrillard's terminology rather freely, without clearly demarcating the consequences of his conclusion. This tendency is also noticeable in Foster's texts. Foster frequently interchanges the terms 'spectacle' and 'simulacrum' while holding on to the importance and possibility of mediation and resistance.

In an essay entitled 'Contemporary Art and Spectacle', Foster turns to Debord explaining the spectacle as the mediation of social relations between men as a relation between images. 'In spectacle even alienation is turned into an image for the alienated to consume; indeed this may stand as a definition of spectacle', Foster parenthetically remarks (Foster, 1985, p. 83). However, not much later in the text he repeatedly addresses a 'loss of the real' and explicitly cites Baudrillard arguing that 'it is no longer a question of false representation of reality (ideology), it is a question of concealing that the real is no longer the real, and thus of saving the principle of reality' (quoted in Foster, 1985, pp. 84–86). Robert Longo's work, whose 'simulations' according to Foster deal with this loss of the real, discloses this 'hyperreality' and makes us aware of our own seduction. As we can see, Foster shares with the other *October* writers a specific concern for subjective manipulation and, as Crary defined, spectacle as a way of administrating attention (through seduction and, as Foster states, 'our fascination with the hyperreal, with "perfect" images that make us "whole" at the price of delusion, of submission') (Foster, 1985, pp. 83, 90–91). But his explicit inclusion of Baudrillard's world of simulacrum—which can, nevertheless, be 'exposed' in Longo's work—seems inconsistent. Foster's later writings, however, by and large abandon Baudrillard's theory of simulacrum, whereas the notion of spectacle persists (in a sort of updated version) in his critique of the Bilbao effect—the spectacularized museum—and within his apprehension of 'the designed subject' or 'identity branding' (Foster, 2003a, pp. xiii–xv). In one of these later essays, Foster turns to the 'mnemonic dimension' of contemporary art as a potential strategy to 'resist the presentist totality of design in culture today' (Foster, 2003b p. 130). This statement reveals his construal of design as a spectacle that is, like Debord's account of the

integrated spectacle, ruled by a timeless present in a society '[that] wants to forget the past and no longer seems to believe in a future' (Debord, 2011, pp. 12–13). Foster's reference to memory as a counter-spectacular artistic strategy exposes a strong intersection with Buchloh's later art criticism, in which he advocates the 'mnemonic' as 'one of the few acts of resistance against the totality of spectacle' (Foster, 2003b, p. 130; Buchloh, 2003a, p. xxv).

Within the October context, Buchloh is arguably most indebted to Debord's legacy.<sup>10</sup> As such, I will analyse Buchloh's incorporation of Debord's theory of the spectacle into his art critical project in more detail, especially with regards to the artistic strategies that Buchloh advocates as potentially 'counter-spectacular' or oppositional.

## 1. Buchloh's Spectacle

Already in its title, Buchloh's comprehensive collection of essays, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry*, refers explicitly to Horkheimer and Adorno's chapter on the 'culture industry' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, his notion of spectacle, and his art critical project in general, is closely intertwined with the critique of culture industry in the tradition of the Frankfurt School. As Buchloh himself states:

My [...] work is situated, methodologically, between two texts: one from 1947, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the chapter on 'The Culture Industry' in particular, and the other from 1967, *The Society of the Spectacle* by Guy Debord. The more I think about those texts the more they seem to historicize the last fifty years of artistic production, for they demonstrate how the autonomous spaces of cultural representation—spaces of subversion, resistance, critique, utopian aspiration—are gradually eroded, assimilated, or simply annihilated. (Buchloh et al., 2004b, pp. 672–673)

Keeping with *October's* aspirations, Buchloh's project is characterized by an attempt to recognize and analyse artistic practices that resist or counter this assimilation of artistic production to the culture industry and spectacular culture. 'Still, then and now', he writes in the introduction to *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry*, 'I would argue that *one* among the infinite multiplicity of functions intrinsic to aesthetic structures is in fact to provide at least an immediate and concrete illusion, if not an actual

instantiation, of a universally accessible suspension of power' (Buchloh, 2003a, p. xxiv).

Although the term 'culture industry' shows much resemblance to Debord's spectacle, Horkheimer and Adorno's culture industry is principally a *segment* (yet both a result and a function) of advanced capitalist society. Their account of culture as an 'industry' signals its transformation from a field for individual expression and authentic experience into a reified site for commodified leisure and mass entertainment. Herewith, 'culture industry'—analogue to 'spectacle'—advances passive acceptance of the status quo instead of active engagement with prevailing social conditions and structures of domination. 'The total effect of the culture industry', Adorno writes, is a mass deception that 'turned into a means for fettering consciousness... impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves' (Adorno, 2001, p. 106). The culture industry can, as such, be seen as a *tool* for the ideological indoctrination of late capitalism. Spectacle on the other hand, *is*—boldly speaking—the ideology of late capitalism; it is, as Debord states: 'the prevailing model of social life' (Debord, 1995, p. 13). Only understood in the 'limited sense' can it be defined as mass media (or the culture industry; p. 19). Debord thus posits the spectacle as the central, unifying, principle of social organization and emphasizes that it is not merely a 'collection of images' but 'a social relationship between people that is mediated by images', while the culture industry is a specific manifestation of spectacle, albeit a very powerful one (Debord, 1995, pp. 12, 15).

Although using 'spectacle' and 'culture industry' often within one sentence as two allied—at times interchangeable—forces, overall Buchloh (along with the other *October* writers) appears to maintain the division as described above.<sup>12</sup> Spectacle delineates an abyss of alienation, reification, and social atomization, imperviously concealing the detriments of capital accumulation and exploitation with pacifying images of a happy and gratifying world. The culture industry, on the other hand, acquires a more specific role as a division of the spectacle and the dialectical counterpart of critical art, although the latter only intermittently so, as art often assimilates itself into a mere segment of spectacle.

Buchloh, however, rejects the Adornian modernist model of critical negation and refusal, which he condemns as too hermetic. Adorno, he states, 'ignores the fact that the concept of autotelic purity was actually dismantled early in the century', and 'failed to recognize [...] that those aesthetic changes and those new technological and social conditions constituted a historically irreversible reality' (Buchloh, 2003b, p. 209). In his resentment

towards contemporary culture and a too rigid adherence to what Buchloh describes as 'prescribed patterns of the political models of critique', Adorno's analysis of artistic negation lacks the contemporaneity of Debord's theory of spectacle (Buchloh, 2003a, pp. xxv–xxvi).<sup>13</sup> Instead, following the Situationists' strategy of *détournement*, Buchloh recurrently advocates aesthetic strategies that appropriate the heteronomous conditions of the culture industry and spectacle in order to almost literally 'détour' them and reveal these conditions.<sup>14</sup> Turning back to Adorno, it is however important to emphasize, again, that Buchloh and the other *October* writers maintain that this form of resistance takes place *within* the institution. Through a perpetual critique of the art institution's conditions *as* heteronomous, art indirectly criticizes the ideological structures of society as a whole and can, momentarily, maintain a site for resistance. In spite of this, Buchloh often warns, however, of art becoming part of the culture industry, turning into an enforcement of Debord's spectacle where it eradicates rather than enhances socio-political consciousness.

## 2. Use Value versus Exchange Value

This paradoxical tension between art as a site of resistance against specific forms of spectacularization and reification and its corruption into *enforcing* the very conditions it wants to challenge also formed the leading structure of Krauss's critique of Minimalism, as I previously discussed. Krauss's essay 'The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum' (1990) distinguished between Minimalism's good intentions and its septic, post-modern 'afterlife'. *October* had marked its beginning with an ardent support for the former 'good' Minimalism that attempted to challenge Modernist notions of authorship and originality. The *October* writers championed Donald Judd and Robert Morris, amongst others, for counteracting and demystifying the rigidity of Greenberg's formalism. Minimal art supplanted the Greenbergian timeless and universal, 'disembodied' or optical experience of the artwork with a phenomenological experience of the object in space and time and defied authorship and originality with seemingly authorless objects. The geometrical shapes, manufactured with industrially produced materials, instead revealed the work's architectural support and foregrounded its contingency to the presence of an (actively) engaging subject. It is interesting to note that one of the movement's most critical (formalist) opponents, Michael Fried, condemned the three-dimensional objects for contaminating the medium-specific purity of sculpture with

‘theatricality’—bearing in mind that the word ‘spectacle’ in French also signifies theatrical staging.<sup>15</sup>

But, as Krauss’s essay also attests to, it did not take long before Minimal art became the object of critique for virtually all of the *October* editors. While Minimalism did take the first step away from the modernist supremacy of the visual, it merely addressed the walls of the gallery/museum as a material support instead of revealing their neutralizing whiteness and the socio-economic foundation that keeps them erect. And even though the minimal object acknowledged the spectator, it did not question her/his subjectivity and, as such, presented the phenomenological experience as a neutral encounter between a somehow equal subject and object, as if to supplant Greenberg’s passive contemplation with a passive and ahistorical construal of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological experience. The specific subject that Minimal art construed, as Krauss argues in her 1990 text, was emblematic for, or had even—ironically close to the meaning of the word ‘avant-garde’—served as the *vanguard* for the industrialization and spectacularization of the art institution. The late capitalist museum needed precisely this ahistorical and fragmented subject that Minimal art had presented (Krauss, 1990, p. 13). Krauss thus reveals how an initially radical art practice had paved the way for a further capitalization of the art institution. In an attempt to resist this neutralizing, detrimental dynamic, a critique of the heteronomous conditions of spectacular culture therefore had to encompass a critical examination of the art institutional context and an investigation of the ideological parameters of reception. This specific constellation of critique became, under the heading of ‘institutional critique’, a key issue in the *October* project.

The artists that feature most prominently in Buchloh’s different accounts of this specific form of (institutional) critique are Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, and Dan Graham, and at a later stage, James Coleman—the latter, repeatedly praised by Buchloh, Foster, and Krauss (not always for the same reasons), seems to be one of the sole survivors in *October*’s quest for emancipatory artistic practice. Buchloh praises Coleman’s work for its ‘mnemonic’ quality, a term that starts reappearing more frequently in his later writings and which he, together with Foster, ultimately asserts as the only potentially critical or ‘counter-spectacular’ artistic strategy that is still possible under the all-consuming heteronomous conditions of the ‘integrated spectacle’.

In his earlier essays, however, (roughly speaking, before the 1990s), Buchloh puts much emphasis on the artwork’s use value or ‘use value potential’ (Buchloh, 2003c, p. 199).<sup>16</sup> ‘If artistic production gives up altogether the idea



of use value', he contends, 'it abolishes its own inherent potential to induce dialectics within the reality of cultural history, thus producing mere artistic facticity incapable of initiating further process of development' (Buchloh, 2003c, pp. 198–199).<sup>17</sup> Use value's counterpole, exchange value, is bound up with the logic of the commodity and Marx's logic of equivalence. Buchloh characterizes it as decontextualized, immaterial, aligned with consumption and pertaining to the domain of simulacra by occluding any external referents. Within the context of this chapter, we can argue that 'exchange value' serves as an equivalent of 'culture industry' and 'spectacle'. By contrast, 'use value' is characterized as 'context-bound', 'functional', 'communicable', and materially grounded (Buchloh, 2003a, pp. 188, 199; 2003b, pp. 220). Artists who 'reinvest the artwork with a potential use value', Buchloh contends, imbue art with the potential to construct an oppositional sphere to the conditions of the culture industry and spectacle (Buchloh, 2003c, p. 191).<sup>18</sup>

It is in this respect illuminating to consider Buchloh's account of Dan Graham's work in a 1978 essay entitled 'Moments of History in the Work of Dan Graham' (Buchloh, 2003c). Graham's art practice critically departs from Minimal art. He intersects Minimalist concerns for place and time with conceptual art and engages Minimal aesthetics with the specific social relations of the institutional framework and the spectator-object relationship. The main edifice that Buchloh creates in his analysis of Graham's work is a dialectical opposition between politically mute art, on the one hand, and 'functional' art, on the other, understood as having a *social* function. He discerns this social function in Graham's work both at the level of its material and within the sphere of perception. His early works, such as *Homes for America* (1966), *Figurative* (1965), and *Schema* (1966), dialectically invert and complicate Minimalism's preoccupation with the art object and its material support. *Homes for America* (Figures 6.1 and 6.2), for example, is a series of photographs of suburban houses accompanied by informative texts, which was published in *Arts Magazine*. The work posits the art journal as its institutional frame, as a 'found formal structure' (Buchloh, 2003c, p. 181). By presenting the artwork directly *as/in* a publication, in an art magazine, Graham creates a relatively direct relation with the audience (for the experience of the work in the magazine is a 'first-hand' experience and not the description of the work by an art critic). On the other hand, the journal's idiosyncratic character of mediation (through distribution, image selection and informative/interpretative texts) simultaneously reveals the fact that art is always already mediated—by extension, also by the seemingly neutral exhibition interior. Furthermore, Buchloh shows that the serial repetition of the industrial houses in *Homes for America*, along

with the reproducibility of the journal itself, mirror the formal principles of Minimalism while their subject matter as a 'found reality structure' is rooted in social reality: 'the misery of everyday industrial housing' (Buchloh, 2003c, p. 181). Through Graham's dissection of these processes of mediation and his dialectical play between social reality and formal organization he reveals, as Buchloh contends: 'the *found structures beyond visible reality and its seeming concreteness*' (p. 188, emphasis mine). The found objects or ready-mades in Minimalism and Conceptual art, are in fact less 'real', Buchloh argues, than the social structures underneath that impact the way we actually experience these objects (or, more generally, perceive 'reality'). These structures 'determine reality', Buchloh writes,

with a more subtle and effective impact: equally the psycho-physiological motivations of subjective behaviour and the socio-economical conditions of objective political practice, or even more precisely, the omnipresent mechanisms of interdependence within those systems revealed in the acutely observed situations of their combined effects. (Buchloh, 2003c, p. 188)

Rooted in Marx's account of commodity fetishism and mediated by Georg Lukács's conception of reification, Debord's spectacle is founded upon this rift between 'reality on the one hand and images on the other', at the heart of which is the idea of the 'contemplative attitude': the spectator, blinded and sedated by a world that seems natural, passively accepts this 'pseudo-world' and 'lapses into a contemplative attitude *vis-à-vis* the workings of his own objectified and reified faculties' (Debord, 1995, pp. 12–13; Lukács, 1971, p. 100). 'The spectacle', Debord writes in his concluding chapter, 'erases the dividing line [...] between true and false, repressing all directly lived truth beneath the real presence of the falsehood maintained by the organization of appearance' (Debord, 1995, p. 153). Buchloh principally describes Graham's art as able to counter this erasure, by revealing the social structures *beyond* visible reality and by challenging the spectator's contemplative attitude with a reflection on her/his own conditions of perception.<sup>19</sup>

In Buchloh's subsequent elaboration of Graham's later performance work, we see how the artist's specific concern for subjective behaviour increasingly potentiates his art with a social function. Graham's notion of the viewing subject evolves beyond the Minimalist equation of object and subject. The artist believes that staging the presence of the spectator only acquires significance when it makes perceptible the ideologically imbued processes of perception itself (Buchloh, 2003c, p. 196). Lacking a specific visual analysis of how Graham's works actually succeed in this process,



Figure 6.1. Dan Graham, *Homes for America*, 1989. Photo offset reproduction of layout for magazine article (*Arts Magazine*, December 1966–January 1967). Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris.

Buchloh sums up several of his performances that, for example: reveal 'stereotyped male-female roles'; increase 'awareness of group behaviour versus individual behaviour'; or induce and elucidate 'the mechanisms of group identification' (Buchloh, 2003c, p. 197). These performances, he concludes, endow the work with aesthetic value to the extent that the

spectator *experiences* the inherent, historical, patterns of social reality while opening up future—instrumental—perspectives.

The outline of Graham's interests and the strategies of his formal enterprises appear in the writings and in the works as a microscopic analysis of segments of the process of history itself, their given structures as well as the modes of perceiving them and the perspectives of analysing and transforming them. And it is to the degree that the analysis succeeds in mediating the patterns of a given reality structure [...] that the work opens up an instrumental perspective of further historical proceedings, endowing the viewer with what he experiences as their artwork quality, their aesthetic value (Buchloh, 2003c, p. 197).

This 'instrumental perspective' or 'functional model of recognition of actual history', as he elsewhere describes, is what we should understand when Buchloh speaks about use value (Buchloh, 2003c, p. 180). And, albeit sometimes ambulatory, this idea of potential use value through an exposé of heteronomous structures of domination and a consequent instigation of socio-historical consciousness, occupies a pivotal role in Buchloh's concern for art as an emancipatory and counter-spectacular practice. However, while Buchloh here already mentions the historicity of structures of perception



Figure 6.2. *Homes for America* (detail), 1966–1967. One from 20 colour 35mm slides. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris.

and mediation, it is only in his later writing that the 'mnemonic' takes on central importance in his search for artistic strategies of resistance. The idea of the 'mnemonic' as an aesthetic strategy of resistance, which also plays an important role in Foster's later work, in many ways leads us back to the foundational structure of Debord's spectacle, Lukács (and Horkheimer and Adorno's) reification, and Marx's commodity fetishism. That is: a 'forgetting' lies at the core of this genealogy. In a letter to Walter Benjamin, Adorno writes that 'all reification is a forgetting: objects become purely thing-like the moment they are retained for us without the continued presence of their other aspects: when something of them has been forgotten' (Adorno et al., 1999, p. 321). That which is forgotten in the process of reification differs for Lukács and Adorno: Lukács locates this forgetfulness predominantly on the side of the subject's mediating and transforming relation to the external world (resulting in the 'contemplative attitude' towards a world that seems natural and unchangeable) while Adorno emphasizes the non-identifiable, non-conceptual element that is forgotten by over-conceptualization (irrational rationalism) and thus calls attention to the *natural*, or the enigmatic quality of the object, that is forgotten by human (over-)interpretation (Vogel, 1996, pp. 78–79). I would argue that Debord's theory of spectacle leans predominantly on Lukács's conception of forgetting. The malevolence of Debord's insidious world of images arises from its concealment of the social relations behind the seemingly natural world of spectacles and the resulting enucleation of the spectator's consciousness of her/his potential to be an active, revolutionary agent. In Thesis 74 of *Spectacle*, Debord writes: 'As for the subject of history, it can only be the self-production of the living: the living becoming master and processor of its world—that is, of history—and coming to exist as consciousness of its own activity' (Debord, 1995, p. 48). The dissimilarity between Adorno and Debord (emanating from Lukács theory of reification) at the level of 'forgetting', so to speak, also accounts for the difference between Adorno's advocacy of artistic strategies of determinate negation—that emphasize art's enigmatic, sensual, and indeterminable character in its formal abstraction as a resistance against conceptualization and over-identification—and the call by Debord and the Situationists for much more active subversive artistic practices of *détournement* that reroute, and as such reveal, the illusoriness of the society of the spectacle. The latter hence not aim so much to reveal an enigmatic, ungraspable character of something real or natural underneath, but try to break the narcotic spell of that which seemed real in the first place. As I previously discussed, the artistic strategies that Buchloh predominantly favours are more indebted to Debord's idea of uncovering the mechanisms of (ideological) mediations

than to Adornian notions of artistic negation. The 'mnemonic', as a resistance to forgetfulness, also builds upon this aspiration to challenge the totalizing and alienating forces of spectacular culture.

### 3. Counter-spectacular Memory

Buchloh's prioritization of the 'mnemonic' appears in many ways to be a more complex and more extensive conceptualization of his early 'functionalist' model. The meaning and significance he attaches to art's 'mnemonic dimension' are theorized in a comprehensive essay on James Coleman's 'archaeology of spectacle', in which he describes Coleman's general project as 'reconstituting a historically specific body to the universalist abstraction of phenomenology' (Buchloh, 2003d, p. 163). Coleman's artistic practice seems to gradually complicate the sphere of reception as a discursive site for psychological, social, institutional, and historical mediation. His work sets up a dialogue with the modernist dogma of the visual by means of including theatrical components such as narrative, performance, and rhetoric. Yet, Coleman challenges both (post-) Minimalist and Conceptualist strategies on the same ground. Even though Minimalism and Conceptualism refuted the formalist optical doctrine, they merely expanded the Modernist positivistic paradigm. To put it in a somewhat simplified formulation: If Minimalism added a body to the disembodied eye, then Conceptualism completed the subject by adding language, or the 'brain'. Yet these were still presented as 'pure' entities. They might have challenged their different aesthetic positions reciprocally, but none of them took seriously into account the idea that optical perception, phenomenological experience, and conceptual or linguistic understanding are *all* perpetually influenced and construed by a psychological, socio-political, and historical context. That is, by the bias of the spectator; the direct material context, and its mechanisms of mediation; and, most importantly, by the overarching specific socio-historical conditions. By presenting either one of these perceptual modes as pure, Minimal and Conceptual art actually concealed the 'social truth' underneath. Buchloh advocates that consciousness of the conditions of perception, as socio-historically specific and concrete, is the only possibility to counter the totalizing claims of spectacle. '[I]t is only in the extreme emphasis on the particularity of historical experience', Buchloh declares, 'that the last vestige or the first index of unalienated subjectivity is to be found' (Buchloh, 2003d, pp. 163–164). In this line of thought, Buchloh introduces the 'mnemonic' as a counter-spectacular artistic strategy and

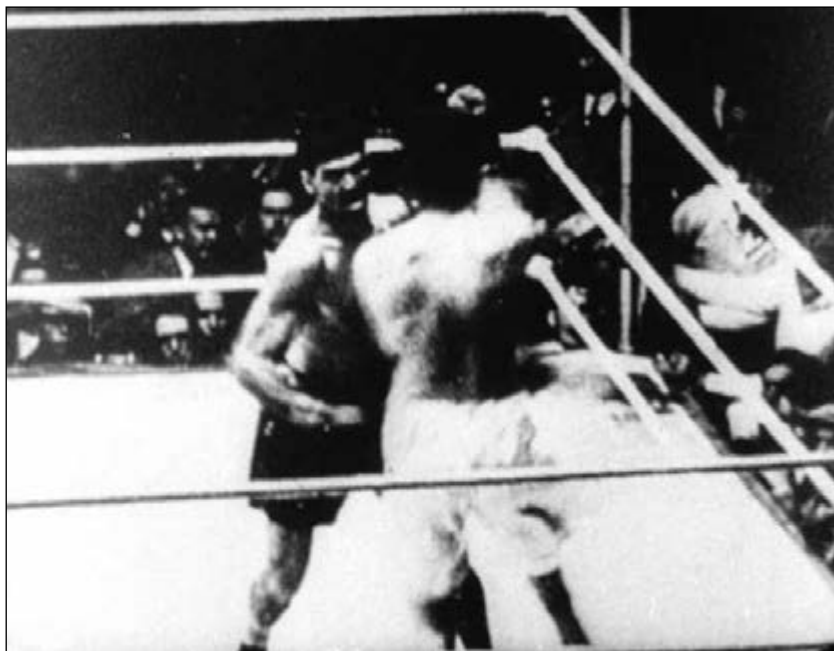


Figure 6.3. James Coleman, *Box (ahareturnabout)*, 1977. 16mm black & white film with synchronized audio narration, continuous projection. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris.

a necessary dimension for art to maintain—if possible at all—its social function (or in his earlier words, its use value potential).

Coleman's work *Box (ahareturnabout)*, for example, shows a found film loop of a boxing match, interrupted by flashes of black film leader and accompanied by the sound of a monologue from the artist (Figure 6.3). Buchloh introduces the work as follows:

One could understand *Box (ahareturnabout)* [...] as an announcement of a radical reversal of the paradigmatic features governing post-Minimal and post-Conceptual artistic production in the mid-1970s. As Coleman's film loop follows mimetically an exchange of punches in rapidly alternating sequences of blackouts and image-sound flashes, it literalizes the optical beat that has been brilliantly described by Rosalind Krauss as the moment of departure from disembodied Modernist opticality toward a phenomenological inscription, toward the grounding of visual experience in the range of the optical unconsciousness and its bodily foundations. Yet to the same degree that *Box* reiterates the experience of the perceptual pulse in the spectator, pushing it almost literally across the threshold

of physical discomfort, this pulse alternates with an iconic sign of two fighters exchanging actual punches. Not only does this correspondence generate an effect of the doubling of the semiotic as the physical (bordering on a pun), but it also situates the image of bodily performance within a very specific historical event and within the confrontation of two historically identifiable protagonists. (Buchloh, 2003d, pp. 161-162)

As we can discern in Buchloh's description, Coleman literally introduces the body of the boxers into the visual field. The alternating black film reveals the interplay between consciousness and unconsciousness and the interdependence of the psychic with the physical (referencing the idea of literally being knocked unconscious) while at the same time it disrupts the spectator's otherwise uninterrupted (more absorbing) vision. Furthermore, as Buchloh explains, the work 'literalizes the optical beat'; it almost ironically transfers the visual punches, through the arousal of an empathic bodily reaction at the sight of such violence, onto the spectator's body. The text fragments introduce language as another level in the creation of meaning. Their performative recital endows the work with a certain theatricality, yet the content of the monologue seems unrelated to the boxing match and as such prevents the work to be purely theatrical or disclose a narrative—lingering in between the visual, the phenomenological, the theatrical, and the linguistic. Yet what is most significant in Buchloh's description is his last statement that the work shows two 'actual fighters exchanging actual punches' and as such 'situates the image of bodily performance within a very specific historical event and within the confrontation of two historically identifiable protagonists'. Herein lies the key to Coleman's reconstitution of 'a historically specific body'. Buchloh then further complicates Coleman's work in a meticulous analysis of the role of national identity and cultural mediation in such formations. The boxing match is on the one hand an emblem of spectacular mass entertainment. But on the other hand, Coleman—himself of Irish decent—chooses to show the Irish fighter Gene Tunney in a battle to defend his national championship, which complicates the general and universalizing 'spectacle' with a specific national identity, which is by itself mediated and fetishized by the logic of spectacle: 'constituted by means of a cultural construct' (Buchloh, 2003d, p. 163). This dialectic reveals the contradictory mechanisms between spectacularization and identity formation, between the spectacle's universalizing homogeneity, its false unity, and its construction of specific (images of) identity. It is, however, only in hindsight possible to productively reveal the specifics of (national) identity, Buchloh argues. If not, the work would itself have a



regressive and nationalistic sway and be a part of the culture industry's mechanism of (suppressive) identity formation (Buchloh, 2003d, p. 163). Yet if, in retrospect, we can understand the socio-historical and cultural *constructiveness* of these spectacular subjective identities, we might also begin to realize that our current situation is similarly constructed. 'Spectacular domination's first priority was to eradicate historical knowledge in general', Debord wrote in his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (Debord, 2011, p. 13). In this world without memory, the spectacle's power 'already seems familiar, as if it had always been there' (p. 16). Buchloh's emphasis on the mnemonic dimension of art holds on to the possibility of dismantling this naturalized presentation of spectacle. 'The effort to retain or to reconstruct the capacity to remember, to think historically, is one of the few acts that can oppose the almost totalitarian implementation of the universal laws of consumption' (Buchloh in Bois et al., 2004b, p. 677). Nonetheless, Buchloh emphasizes once again that the potentiality of artistic practice to create a site for the examination of subject formation and historical consciousness inexorably puts it in the same arena as the spectacle:

The necessary cultural production of sites of subject articulation and structures of memory conflicts with the simultaneous, inevitably ideological enforcement of a mythical identity; and the same schism exists between cultural production as the most complex form of spectacularization and cultural practices as the last resistances against the global homogenization generated by the spectacle. (Buchloh, 2003d, p. 165)

Furthermore, memory itself is highly susceptible to spectacularization, recuperated and transformed into a further mystifying 'memory industry' (Buchloh in Bois et al., 2004b, p. 677). In the manner of Debord (post-May 1968), Buchloh's oeuvre is not exactly a sanguine charade of utopian promises and revolutionary hope. As his statement above also shows, Buchloh's project perpetually appears to denounce all remaining possibilities for social agency and radical artistic practice, sweeping art altogether under the eradicating curtain of the culture industry. However, even in one of his most dismal texts, entitled 'Critical Reflections'—which is predominantly filled with dire announcements of 'catastrophic assimilation', the 'annulment of social and political utopian thinking', 'universal fetishization', and the effacement of 'the last residual differences between spectacle and the sphere of cultural production', he holds on to a conception of art's mnemonic function as a last vestige for potential resistance against the all-encompassing conditions of the *integrated* spectacle (Buchloh, 1997). Consequently, in the

manner of his other major influence, Adorno, Buchloh seems to spark hope in the abyss of utter despair. 'Where everything is bad', Adorno quotes F.H. Bradley from *Minima Moralia*, 'it must be good to know the worst' (quoted in Adorno, 2005, p. 83).

This dictum might be idiosyncratic for the theoretical and aesthetic developments of the *October* discourse as a whole. Even though the other *October* writers seem slightly less pessimistic than Buchloh, their art criticism is, too, inherently characterized by the growing apprehension of a social narrative of alienation through mass consumption and passive spectatorship. Art might still play a critical role by revealing the constructed nature of this narrative, and as such it could evoke a latent potential for political and social self-determination. But even Foster, who presents himself as the more optimistic of the bunch, leaves us only with a pale glimpse of optimism when suggesting little more for art than the possibility of 'living on'. 'I wonder if [...] we might substitute "art" where [Adorno] writes "philosophy",' Foster writes. In other words, having missed its 'moment of realization', is art merely left to 'live-on'? (Foster, 2003b, p. 129; Day, 2010, p. 199). Nonetheless, in line with the overall dynamic of *October's* project, Foster also still insists on the potential of politico-aesthetic resistance and transformation to 'live on'. Even in their most gloomy accounts of a society doomed to stupidity and of art fully integrated into the culture industry, the *October* writers, all sustain the possibility of resistance, of disruption, and of struggle, even if it is solely in the proclamation that all is lost. 'Couldn't we say that such a current amnesia is in great part what motivated us to write this book?' Bois asks in 'The Predicament of Contemporary Art', the concluding roundtable in *Art Since 1900* (Buchloh in Bois et al., 2004b, p. 679). It is this suspended position between an emancipatory promise—echoed in the title of the *October* journal and the writers' perpetual attempts to revitalize art's critical function—however ghostly and distant it may be, and a despairing cultural diagnosis of society as an all-encompassing and inescapable 'integrated' spectacle, that characterizes the journal's tone. Thus, even in the most determinate goodbyes there remains an attempt to instigate new forms of critical practice. As Buchloh writes:

When a class nears its terminal point in history, Marx once mused, it tends to mistake its own end for the end of the world. When art critics reach the end of their historical line, they tend to mistake the failure of their prognostic identifications or lack of comprehension of present practices for the end of art. (Buchloh, 1997, n.p.)

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## 7. Spectacle and Politics: Is There a Political Reality in the Spectacle of Society?

*Kati Röttger*

In the terms established by Guy Debord, the theory of the spectacle is a critique of late capitalist society that diagnoses a form of depoliticization through isolation and a shift into mere role-playing as well as through the rule of totalizing image-based semblance. Drawing on the Latin notion of the *spectaculum* (theatre), the notion of the spectacle constructs an opposition between politics and theatre, in which a politico-ethical rejection of theatre as emblematic of the aesthetic is made explicit.<sup>1</sup> It is important to note here that this rejection relies on the common understanding of theatre as an art of representation and an aesthetics of make-believe that is based on the separation between the action on stage and the beholding audience. This theatre in general is perceived as bad thing—it is ‘the stage of illusion that forbids action’ (Rancière, 2007, p. 272). Debord’s critical theory can therefore be placed in the lineage of a history of philosophical critique of aestheticization and animosity to this kind of theatre that stretches back as far as Plato, who made a distinction between imitating and engendering (*hervorbringende*) art. At the same time, the political potential of theatre is denounced indirectly, as Juliane Rebentisch showed in her book *Die Kunst der Freiheit* (2012, p. 272). As soon as the political community is staged and ‘breaks into spectacle and audience’ (Rebentisch, 2012, p. 18), she argues, politics is conceived as theatre that undermines the social binding of a collective where participation and affiliation define social and political practices. While the metaphor of theatre is used here to describe the alienation of politics, theatre itself is suspected of having a depoliticizing effect. In this line of argumentation politics and aesthetics are contrasted so that—to say it bluntly—politics is understood as a form of theatre that implies the existence of a spectator rather than being understood as an intercommunity of action. This latter form of politics goes along with a connotation of aesthetics that appreciates collaborative and participatory forms of action that constitutes a community as a performing body.

This approach to aesthetics is connected with the notion of play, be it choreography (Plato), popular festivities (Rousseau), or—in the case of Debord—the

construction of situations: ‘interventions of plays of another kind’ (Debord, 1995, p. 40) like *détournement* and *dérive* to resist the spectacular usurpation.<sup>2</sup> In a Marxist tradition Debord conceives the overcoming of the spectacle (and theatre) by the elimination of art through the realization of art to end up in the sublation (*Aufhebung*) of art. In terms of the theatrical spectacle that means the overcoming of the (visibility of the) stage that isolates the spectator.

By contrast, Jacques Rancière and Jean-Luc Nancy have pointed out that the political is realized precisely by the respective establishment of a particular stage, a visible space, within which something akin to collective political practice first becomes possible. Jean-Luc Nancy suggests that ‘there is no society without the spectacle because society is the spectacle of itself’ (Nancy, 2000, p. 67). This means that the spectacle connoted to the visible realm of the stage is perceived as a pre-condition—a space—of a co-appearing without which there would be no society. Claiming the necessity of the spectacle for the communitarian being, he puts his finger on the paradox innate in the concept of the spectacle. The spectacle construed as venue or play determines a society and is at the same time identical to it. In this regard, the paradox Nancy formulates can be considered both confirmation and criticism of Debord’s concept of the spectacle.<sup>3</sup> To gain a greater insight into the special relationship between politics and the spectacle we must therefore ask from the viewpoint of theatre studies what kind of stage or theatre is intended with the particular spectacle that in the one instance prevents politics and in the other enables it. This question becomes all the more complex if one remembers that in the history of philosophy theatre is closely bound up with a definition of the (ideal) conditions for democracy or other forms of peaceful coexistence. For example, Plato’s animosity towards democracy derives from his mistrust of a ‘colourful diversity of forms of life’ and of the ‘dazzling democrats who have learned from playwrights that you can take more than one role in life’. If we follow Rebenitsch:

[T]he logic of semblance is, so he diagnoses, nothing other than the essence of democracy itself: the ethical orientation to the good is replaced by an aesthetic emphasis on existences, and the good (i.e., aligned to the good) government is replaced by the rule-less spectacle of seducing the people—and thus it is only a small, dangerously unobtrusive step from democracy to tyranny. (Rebenitsch, 2012, p. 14)

This idea hinges on the defence of the virtue of the people’s self-identity (*demos*), which assumes that fraudulent images and actors must be banished from the state. The related suppression of the people as a visible entity in

favour of an immersive community in which all simply have assigned places relies on an anti-theatrical stance. This is the result not only of a concern about deception and fraudulent behaviour; this is also a condemnation of the separation—the aesthetic distance—a stage creates between spectators and actors. For each spectator is then respectively not in his/her place but in that of the other, as their attention focuses not on their own or communal action. Instead, they are seduced and distracted from the real issues. In Rebentisch's view, this theatre-critical stance influences the political theories of thinkers as different as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, and even Guy Debord. Even if, for Rousseau (and unlike Plato), democracy is not identical with theatricality but opposed to it, all the above theorists of democracy are of the shared opinion that 'the theatricalization of the political threatens the life of democracy'. Indeed, 'they agree with the hypothesis that the true essence of democracy is realized in a communality of action that overcomes the separation of the political space into hypocritical actors and an audience' (Rebentisch, 2012, p. 272). Without a doubt, this proposition applies to a basic theme in Debord's critical theory of the spectacle. Following Marx and Rousseau, Debord bemoans the separation of individuals that the spectacle triggers. Yet in the actual historical context of the mass-media consumer society in which Debord penned his 221 hypotheses, the spectacle has already become the totality, at least in the sense of what he called the *integrated spectacle*, because the spectacular 'has never before put its mark to such a degree on almost the full range of socially produced behaviour and objects' (Debord, 1998, p. 9).

Debord elevated the spectacle in the literal sense to a perspective: a *point of view*—or, as he wrote, to a 'weltanschauung that has been actualized, translated into the material realm'; meaning 'in its totality, [...] both the outcome and goal of the dominant mode of production' (Debord, 1994, p. 13). In doing so, he directly linked the mass production of commodities to a culture industry of technologically reproduced images, which, under the banner of consumption, characterize the conditions of modern society since commodification creates, to quote *The Communist Manifesto*, 'a world after its own image' (Marx and Engels, 2008, p. 38), whereas this image veils the social relations by which it is produced.

Debord insists that the spectacle must not be understood as a *product* of the mass image technologies, but that it is rather identical with the justification of the system it represents. It thereby constitutes a totality and emerges as the purpose of modern consumer society. The world-in-image, having thus become detached, is characterized by separation: individuals are separated from life and from one another. This is because the 'social



relationship between people that is mediated by images' (Debord, 1995, p. 12) leads to separation and to the isolation of individuals. In the final instance, this isolation results in the complete loss of all sense of time, as time is now experienced solely as powerlessness, as frozen time, or a standstill. If nothing else, Debord's diagnosis of modern society can be traced back to television's spread as a mass medium at the time he was writing. Technology, and especially television, made it possible to almost constantly supply an audience with images and had a decisive part in reinforcing 'the isolation of the "lonely crowd"' (Debord, 1995, p. 22). It thereby confirmed the general process of reification, which, according to Lukács, separated the producers from each other and from their capacity to create their own life forms.

Debord's notion of the spectacle thus combines a Marxist critique of the effects of commodification on social relations, of mass-media information technologies, and of techniques of individuation to offer a critique of a system of domination, a totality driving the lives of the people into dependency, alienation, and deception. Against this backdrop, the spectacle emerged as a powerful analytical model for diagnosing the 'maladies' of modernism and the crisis of the subject in the twentieth century (see Cray, 1999).

## 1. Spectacle and Post-democracy

In the historical epoch since 1989, which with the collapse of communism in the so-called Eastern Bloc countries comes under the sign of the worldwide dissemination and digital networking of economies and societies with a market focus, not to mention with contemporary mass media's compulsive obsession with the spectacle of war and 'terror', the spectacle has become greatly relevant again. This is not just the product of Debord's own view, who in 1992 in his preface to the third French edition of his book noted with regret that the spectacle continued to be topical:

The striving of the spectacle towards modernization and unification, together with all the other tendencies towards the simplification of society, was what in 1989 led the Russian bureaucracy suddenly, and as one man, to convert to the current *ideology* of democracy—in other words, to the dictatorial freedom of the Market, as tempered by the recognition of the rights of Homo Spectator. (Debord, 1995, p. 9)

More recent social theories, which define the current form of societal organization as post-Fordist (Amin, 1994), post-democratic (Crouch, 2004;

Rancière, 1999), or in terms of the concept of 'Empire' (Hardt and Negri, 2000), show that the primacy of entrepreneurialism extends ever further into private, public, and individual domains of life under the conditions of agglomerating capitalism (see Nancy, 2003). 'The highest function of this power', so Hardt and Negri suggest drawing on Foucault's notion of biopower, 'is to invest life through and through, and its primary task is to administer life' (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 24). Social life (the family, health, family planning, education) becomes the main component of commodity production. Under these conditions, communication, affects, and ethical values (solidarity, interest, care) are as determined by profit, competition, efficiency, and a market mind-set as they are by knowledge and cognitive abilities. With the alliance of digital media technology and capital, the flow of capital becomes global, literally the de-materialization of wealth, and establishes it qua cyber-capitalism beyond tangible wealth.

This 'new spirit of capitalism', as Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) have shown, differs from the spirit of capitalism in the 1960s and 1970s, when ideology-related transformations took place through a major re-organization in dominant value systems. On the basis of a detailed analysis of management manuals from the 1960s to the 1990s, they describe the conditions under which this new spirit of capitalism arose, and the impact it has had. While in Debord's day an ethical system of norms that took its cue from the idea of a virtuous, self-identical coexistence formed the basis for the critique of capitalism, the new capitalism stands out for its inherent ability to co-opt the anti-capitalist critique in order to perfect its own functioning. The anti-capitalist ideals of an alternative, collectively self-determined life current in the 1960s are integrated into the language of new management: creativity, empathy, and sharing become the primary characteristics of the entrepreneurial individual (Florida, 2002; Röttger, 2015). With Debord, one could say that the spectacle has been improving in the fusion of the integrated spectacle since 1989. 'It was only because this fusion had already occurred worldwide on the economic and political plans that the world could be declared officially unified' (Debord, 1994, pp. 8–9). As a result, the alliance of technological power and economic logic is successively replacing a politics that tends to a convergence of knowledge, ethics, and good coexistence. For collective and individual action now only arises in the self-referential image of a self-consuming spectacle—the latter's social logic entails transforming the social into a matter of supply and demand in the cabinets of mirrors created by the digital media. Since politics withdraws from social responsibility, each ordinary citizen who is part of this cycle necessarily becomes a prototype of the spectacular merchant, who sells the simulacra of this logic in order to

participate in the social. Since the individual's interest necessarily hinges on the free development of market forces, the state's task is primarily to remove any obstacles to such a development. Could it be that in this historical situation we are therefore witnessing how the democratic concept of the people (*peuple*) is being transformed into a concept of audience (*publique*) that 'pays with its life' in order to participate in *demos* and democracy, as Bernard Stiegler (2006, p. 18) suggests? Are we now ensnared more than ever in the spectacle, confronted with a pure simulation, a theatre of democracy with a post-*demos* democracy, and therefore with the 'disappearance of politics' (Rancière, 2002 p. 110)? Many agree with this hypothesis. For example, Crouch explicitly affirms that politics in post-democratic societies is reduced to a theatre of democracy, to fake negotiations in the mode of the spectacle:

Under this model, while elections certainly exist and can change governments, public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of expert in techniques of persuasion, and considering a small range of issues selected by those teams. The mass of citizens play a passive, quiescent, even apathetic part, responding only to signals given them. Behind the spectacle of the electoral game, politics is really shaped in private by interaction between elected governments and elites that overwhelmingly represent business interests. (Crouch, 2004, p. 4).

## 2. The Dilemma of the Spectacle

Despite this renaissance in the theory of the spectacle, I believe that the critique implicit to it can only to a limited degree explain what the consequences are for the public sphere and the political community if the value system of the market appropriates the language of art in order to invade, to an ever greater extent, interpersonal relations. This is also true of the question as to what impact we can discern with respect to the social function of art and theatre if the democratic culture of liberty has economic/aesthetic foundations rather than ethical/political ones. For if the spectacle in the lineage of Rousseau and other positions inimical to theatre can categorically be assigned to aesthetic opposition to an ethically-informed politics, then this occurs (as in Crouch's thought) by reverting to a metaphorical and ahistorical concept of theatre aligned to the theatre of illusion, the theatre of representation. In this context, theatricality is associated with pejorative qualities such as deception, artificiality, exaggeration, fraudulence, and semblance and with the practices of role-plays, hamming, superficiality,

masquerade, and pretence.<sup>4</sup> Rebentisch's attempt to counter the objections in the history of philosophy to an aestheticization of politics itself suffers from being restricted to such a concept of theatre and theatricality. If she suggests that aesthetic distance must be considered a key condition for a functioning democracy in the sense of an art of liberty (as a key individual aesthetic understanding of the world) and cites as evidence the figures of irony and role-play, then she, too, has in mind an ahistorical concept of theatre that relies on a predefined script and actors who as persuasively as possible embody an aesthetics of the as-if. This concept of theatre is firmly in the Enlightenment philosophical tradition of eighteenth-century aesthetics, which posited the good, the beautiful, and the true as the very condition of successful subjectivization, by distinguishing between semblance and essence. However, in this way it has little means to counter the problem of the unconditional critique of the aesthetic semblance of politics. It succeeds in placing the aesthetic distance that theatre can create on centre stage, and with theatre then advocates freedom towards oneself and a democratic society that is not indebted to the ideal of an inherently consensual community (which it claims latently entails the danger of authoritarian communitization). Yet by remaining shackled to the same metaphorically/illusionistically defined concept of theatre and to the authors that criticize it, the dilemma of the spectacle persists. The figures of the aesthetic that it can bring to bear for the art of freedom in a 'good' democracy, namely role-play and irony, are admittedly geared on the basis of the requisite distance to 'providing an understanding of the ethical/political structural conditions of freedom per se' (Rebentisch, 2012, p. 22) and therefore not to mask the problem of sovereign power, but expose it. However, this thought still remains rooted in an idea of representation in which the identity of action and speech constitutes a sovereign self. This likewise applies to the distanced change of positions that Rebentisch proposes qua irony and role-play. To this extent, the construct remains entrenched in the contrast between theatre as the art of semblance that accepts this identity and politics as the art of reality in which speech and action constitutes society. As a result, it has no conceptual means for opposing a post-democratic form of rulership that transforms the ethical/political concept of political freedom by degrading it to the status of an economic/aesthetic one, inverting the right of the individual to freedom into a compulsory obligation to practice freedom. For if the primacy of entrepreneurial action takes the place of social action and if aesthetic qualities such as creativity and improvisation enter the capitalist system of reproduction as new productive forces, then aesthetic critique that could oppose the current trend towards depoliticization is soon exhausted.

### 3. Spectacle as the Condition of Politics

So what happens if theatre is construed as the condition for the political the way Nancy and Rancière propose, and what categorical choices then need to be made for this experiment? First, the concept of theatre needs to be rethought in such a way that the theory of the spectacle is also placed in a different light.<sup>5</sup> The difficulties that confront such a rethinking given the long and powerful Western tradition of the distribution of roles between theatre, politics, and philosophy can be best described with the following passage from the writings of Jean-Luc Nancy:

A major sign of the difficulty we have regarding the spectacle is indicated by the paradigmatic character that the Athenian theater has for us. There is certainly nothing accidental in the fact that our modern way of grounding the so-called Western tradition involves a triple reference: to philosophy as the shared existence of *logos*, to politics as the opening to the city, and to the theater as the place of the symbolic-imaginary appropriation of collective existence. The Athenian theatre [...] appears to us as the 'one' presentation of being-together, yet as a presentation where the condition for its possibility is the irreducible and institutive distance [...] of representation. Moreover, this distance defines the theater, insofar as it is *neither* political *nor* philosophical at the same time—and neither of these in a specific way. The Athenian theater appears to us as the conjunction of *logos* and *mimesis*, but when we see it in this way, we systematically efface the moment of *mimesis* in favor of the moment of *logos*. (Nancy, 2000, p. 71).

It should be clear from the above that the attempt to think theatre not as separate from but as the precondition for the political faces the problem of how to overcome that speculative division between theatre and politics/philosophy that defines Western thought per se. The core problem here is the concept of *mimesis* that is limited in meaning to imitation. This notion of *mimesis* was rejected by Plato, Rousseau, and Debord, among others. What gets overlooked is that *mimesis* is a *praxis of poesis*, as Lacoue-Labarthe has shown, a mode of producing appearance in the form of representation that he summarizes with the label the 'paradox of *mimesis*' (see Lacoue-Labarthe, 1989, pp. 248–266).<sup>6</sup> In this way, he construes *mimesis* in a manner close to the concept of *techné* that Heidegger directly related to the art of the Greek tragedy: 'The Greeks call [...] art *techné* in the emphatic sense, because it brings in the most immediate way Being to stand, in the work' (Heidegger,

2000, p. 176). As art work, theatre puts Being to work. Consequently, Being becomes confirmed and accessible as Being. This interpretation of the stage as an event space that enables something to appear drives Jean-Luc Nancy's proposal that the political be linked to the condition of staged co-appearance: 'Anterior to all thought—and in fact, the very condition of thinking [*logos*—the "thought" of "us" is not a representational thought (not an idea, a notion, a concept). It is instead, a *praxis* and an *ethos*: the staging of co-appearance, the staging which is the co-appearance—but the stage must be reinvented; we must reinvent it each time, each time making our entrance anew' (Nancy, 2000, p. 71). Viewed in this way, the spectacle reminds us that 'there is no society without the spectacle of society' (p. 67), but also warns what the obverse can be, the 'bad spectacle', where 'the social being imagines the exteriority of interests and appetites, of egoistic passions and the false glory of ostentation' (p. 68). By being unwilling to address the 'good spectacle' Debord possibly snared himself in the totalitarian image he himself created of the spectacle that offers no opening for what, according to Rancière, constitutes the political and the democratic, namely dissensus (*mésentente*). One could argue that the Situationist practice of *détournement*, the misappropriation of prefabricated aesthetic elements, aims to deconstruct the bad spectacle for the purpose that 'set free by *détournement*, commodified meanings reveal a totality of possible social and discursive relations which exceeds the spectacle's constraints' (Plant, 1992, p. 87). But this practice, operating in the public sphere and tending to strategies of undercover action, denies any idea of a stage where people emerge—a stage that Rancière similar to Nancy identifies as a *condition* for politics:

Lastly, there is democracy if there is a dispute conducted by a nonidentical subject *on the stage where the people emerge*. It is the institution of politics itself, the system of forms of subjectification through which any order of distribution of bodies into functions corresponding to their 'nature' [i.e., gender, race, class, etc.] and places corresponding to their functions is undermined, thrown back on its contingency. (Rancière, 1999, pp. 100–101)

Like Rebentisch, Rancière also contends that democracy and politics do not rest on the identification of people and form of government. However, Rancière presumes a fundamentally different concept of aesthetics, and by extension a different concept of stage and theatre. Unlike Rebentisch, who retains the aesthetics of semblance and the metaphorical *stage of representation*, Rancière champions an aesthetics of *materialization* of that which

can be perceived by the senses, that focuses on the logic of distribution, the *distribution of the sensible* (Rancière, 2006) that then unfolds on the stage of appearance. For him, the stage as the place where the people appears is the *precondition* for democracy. The *distribution* of the sensible, meaning the distribution of bodies, voices, and places, including the distribution between speech and action that occurs at this venue of the stage, posited as heterogeneous, logically no longer takes its cue from the model of role-play (which is always preceded by an ethic of the unity of speech and action, as advocated by Rebenitsch), but from the break with that ethic. Rancière describes this rupture as ‘the gap experienced between the capability of the speaking being and any ‘ethical’ harmony of doing, being, and saying’ (Rancière, 1999, p. 101). Democracy is defined by the interruption of this harmony. Post-democracy, by contrast, introduces total consensus, ‘the success of democracy, in our societies, would then consist in its hitting on a coincidence between its political form and its tangible being’ (Rancière, 1999, p. 98). It is precisely this, Rancière suggests, that the theorists of the spectacle and simulation overlook, namely that suppressing the appearance of the people on the stage of democracy leads to a suppression of politics. What counts is not self-identity in a stage-free space, but disagreement over distribution under the condition of visibility:

The crucial point is that the logic of simulation does not so much oppose the real and realist faith as appearance and its powers. [...] The identification of the real with its reproduction and simulation is the ‘*dismissal of the case*’ for the heterogeneity of appearance, and with it, the dismissal of the case for the political constitution of nonidentical subjects that upsets the homogeneity of the perceptible by showing separate worlds together, by organizing worlds of litigious community. The ‘loss of the real’ is in fact a loss of appearance (Rancière, 1999, p. 104, emphasis added).

#### 4. In Praise of Theatre

What does this inversion of the spectacle mean for the possibility of a political theatre in the age of empire and post-democracy? Below I wish to propose that this inversion be construed in terms of *peripeteia*. In other words, I wish to explore the question as to the extent to which *peripeteia* can be construed as the condition for a (new) poetics of art in the theatrical space of the spectacle. I focus here on a new artistic practice in regular evidence of late, namely so-called urban interventions that take place in the

network of global urban spaces. Theatre makers are increasingly abandoning the stages traditionally assigned to theatre and experimenting with urban spaces and other stages with an appearance of openness.<sup>7</sup>

It is well-known in theatre studies that *peripeteia* is a term from dramatic theory first defined by Aristotle in his *Poetics*—where it is used to signify a turnaround or reversal, the moment in a plot marking a sudden change towards fortune or misfortune. Aristotle writes that *peripeteia* is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to the rule of probability or necessity. Thus, *peripeteia* describes a particular moment in a temporal sequence of actions that constitutes a break in the continuity. With this reversal the plan of action, the causality, that *which is to be achieved*, is inverted. Here, the irrevocability of what has been done and the unpredictability of actions coincide in the immeasurability of an event *happening to someone*.<sup>8</sup> And it is precisely this moment of sudden change itself which captures several states of being at the same time: both doing and being-done-to, intentionality and responsivity.

This also means that the moment of reversal into action in the opposite direction reveals the limits to intentional action. With this reversal, time itself is turned around. It condenses and builds up: a time of the now, which strips the past of its logic, leaves the future open. This *moment of peripeteia* can therefore be understood as an *open situation*, as a *space of opening*. Qua poetological condition for the urban invention, the *peripeteia* should therefore be construed as that moment through which this 'labour of art' creates a public space in this reversal and opening, a space that lodges itself in the space-time of globalization. How is this to be understood?

In order to take this thought further, it is first necessary to relate the theatrical terms of the scenario or the stage in relation to the concepts of space or public space. The objective is to open up possible *stages of the political* that have been expanded by a connotation associated with the English term 'stage', meaning at the same time both a section or phase, as well as a pedestal, framework, or support structure. In this sense I would like stages to be understood *preliminarily* (I would like to note at this point that scaffolding is always needed for construction sites) as aesthetic space-time bound to the public sphere (and in this, it is always also political and ethical) that establishes the possibility for action and, conversely, urban interventions as possible actions that intervene in the space-time of globalization.

If the stage is understood in the broadest sense as a dynamic, spatio-temporal configuration of *appearance* and in the narrow sense of *providing something to view (and listen to)*, in which the simultaneous presence of actors and spectators is envisaged, then we see interesting analogies with



Michel de Certeau's definition of spaces and places here (Certeau, 2006). Starting from the diagnosis of the postmodern decay of the city as a concept, he addresses the question of our ways of treating space, ways which in turn inform the conditions of our social life: His approach leads back to those strategies of the construction of situations that Guy Debord and the Situationist International linked to the recoding of the public space, especially the practice of *dérive*. *Dérive* (literally 'drift' or 'drifting') means to take an unplanned journey through a (typically urban) landscape, during which the stroller forgets everything and is absorbed into the attractions and encounters of the experience. In his 'Theory of the *Dérive*' (1958, pp. 58–63), Debord defines it as a 'technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. *Dérive* involve playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are quite different from the classic notion of journey and stroll'.<sup>9</sup> Organized by the principle of chance, it is meant to surpass the capitalist separation between passive leisure and enforced labour and offer the possibility of the free construction of daily life.<sup>10</sup> The space for this playful behaviour is clearly defined: at maximum it is the metropolis, and at minimum it is a small city block. So, while Debord was certainly at the forefront of what today is called 'urban interventions', in relation to the special theory of Certeau a tiny but important difference must be pointed out. What Certeau is concerned with are the practices taking place in a realm of experience arising from an '*uncanny familiarity with the city*' in order to establish a new 'relationship to the world' (Certeau, 1985, p. 129). Essentially, place and space differ from each other in degree of abstraction or concretization. While place is determined by a predefined present constellation of fixed points, space is 'posited as an act of presence (or a time)', as a 'result of activities that give it a direction, that temporalize it' (Certeau, 1985, p. 345). Space is thereby a place with which one does something. With Certeau, the relationship between space and place takes on a *theatrical dimension*. While Debord exclusively stresses the action of drifting as a liberating embodied *movement* in a quite literal sense, Certeau is pointing to the constitution of places and spaces both in a material as well as in a metaphorical sense of stage. This is because this relationship is established through precisely that configuration of *seeing* (spectators) and acting (actors), which brings together eye and movement in 'space-forming actions' that refer to what they produce—namely, an imagination of places (Certeau, 2006, p. 349) in images. If this constitutive act by theatre has been tied to the drama (from Aristotle to Modernist theatre in the West) and if it thereby is also tied to the action of the actor, which resides in speech, then this emphasis changes under conditions of a stage of appearance.<sup>11</sup> These

space-building actions, which point to what they produce, are in general no longer tied to language. Instead they are tied to the formation of space that stems from the configuration of the 'genuine' urban activity of movement (potential spectators' acts of walking) and in the spatial transformation achieved by the actors pointing to that which they produce, namely, a space within space. In other words: the stage of appearance creates an event in which the urban space of the *global city* is temporarily (in the sense of this happening in a transitory movement) transformed into public space. Would it then be justifiable to claim, with Hannah Arendt, that in this case *inter-venire* produces *inter-esse* (Arendt, 1998, p. 182)?

According to Hannah Arendt, the precondition for public life is the human condition of plurality, that, as she says, 'men not Man' (Arendt, 1998, p. 7) inhabit the earth. Only in plurality can that which constitutes public life—activity *between* humans (*inter-venire*) and appearance *amongst* humans (*inter-esse*)—occur, because it is only in this plurality that all share something in common, namely their human being. Only those who can be seen and heard can be perceived by the commonality, meaning the general public. At the same time, this is what our sense of reality depends on. 'The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves' (Arendt, 1998, p. 50). Our sense of reality 'depends utterly upon appearance and therefore upon the existence of a public realm'. In other words, action—as opposed to 'labour' and 'work'—as the only dimension of the *vita activa* that brokers the coexistence of people and 'constitutes [...] the public part of the world common to us all' (p. 198) serves to preserve the political commonality (p. 188). Action as such, then, creates the preconditions for history, memory, and the continuity of the body politic, but also the possibility of a 'new beginning' as within the idea of *peripeteia* as an 'opening to the future', particularly in relation to speech and art—the ideal form of which is the theatre (Arendt, 1998, p. 15). Thus, action is more than just consumption—action is to the political as consumption is to the social. Since the beginning of the modern era at the latest, this definition of public space, based on the Greek *polis*, has been marked by its difference from private or intimate space. It is what we share in common as 'world' and in this it is different from the place 'we call our private property' (Arendt, 1998, p. 58). The special power of public life and its quality as a world that gathers people together is lost, according to Arendt, in mass society, because people are neither separated nor connected but are rather forced together as though held together by a band of iron.

This points to a problem—the aliasing of separateness and connectedness—the severity of which first emerges under the conditions

of post-democracy: At the point at which language and production are coincidental with the political and economic in a consensual democracy, the private and public realms relate to each other like a Moebius strip, with each side constantly merging with the other. This is even more pronounced when politics, generally ascribed to the state, is increasingly defined through the technical administration of life, when active life is increasingly becoming a question of *biotechnology*, meaning the (market-driven) feasibility or manufacture of life, and service systems are increasingly networked through communication media that do not allow for a distinction between work and leisure.<sup>12</sup>

As stated, Jacques Rancière advocates a distribution of the sensible in order to subsume community, and public realm under a definition of politics that no longer requires a community of *inter-esse*, but which instead calls for the *inter* as the in-between in human existence in the sense of an interruption or interval (Rancière, 2002, p. 146). What he means is a division of the logic of identity in order to posit the lost division of the spheres of the private and the public in a different, sensible logic of segmentation. By contrast, Jean-Luc Nancy urges us towards a more consistent thinking of a *together* or *cum* of cooperation: the *together* as mediator between singularities and being-plural creating the *world* that Hannah Arendt deems lost:

Co-appearance, then, must signify—because this is what is now at stake—that ‘appearing’ (coming into the world and being in the world, or existence as such) is strictly inseparable, indiscernible from the *cum* or the *with*, which is not only its place and its taking place, but also—and this is the same thing—its fundamental ontological structure. (Nancy, 2000, p. 61)

This *with* occurs in simultaneity and co-presence. In appearing together it produces its own stage, because if the ‘being-together is the sharing of a simultaneous space-time, then it implies a presentation of this space-time as such’ (Nancy, 2000, p. 105). On this stage, every single individual has the consistency of the public. It is not ‘stage-like in the sense of an artificial space of mimetic representation. It is stage-like in the sense of being a segment and of opening up a space-time of the dissemination of singularities’ (Nancy, 2000, p. 106). In this sense, Nancy sees social coexistence as a stage that presents itself through its ‘scenographical practice’: experience and ethos in one. Seen thus, we can conclude that in the age of post-democracy, political theatre consists of a juxtaposing a politics of the ‘good spectacle’ against a democracy of the ‘bad spectacle’.

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## 8. Reification, Sexual Objectification, and Feminist Activism

*Willow Verkerk*

Georg Lukács introduced the notion of reification in 1922 as the process by which living beings, relationships, and all subjective qualities come to acquire the characteristic of a thing. In contemporary feminist terms Rosi Braidotti (2013, p. 61) writes that ‘the opportunistic political economy of biogenetic capitalism turns *Life/zoe*—that is to say human and non-human intelligent matter—into a commodity for trade and profit’. In today’s late capitalism, not only our labour, but also each one of our nameable attributes can be placed for sale on the market. Donna Haraway (1991, pp. 161–162) states that we are changing from an industrial society ruled by white capitalistic patriarchy into an ‘informatics of domination’. The control of information is in high demand, as is the ability to market, modify, and consume every living and non-living thing.

The potential of late capitalism to commodify all and any potentialities is one that Lukács foresaw when he stated that commodity fetishism is the problem of the modern age of capitalism (Lukács, 1971, p. 84). His reflections on reification are foundational and vital for understanding how the political economy functions. In particular, I am interested in how capitalism normalizes the objectification of human subjects and interpersonal relationships and reduces human attributes to potential market value. ‘What is of central importance here is that [...] man’s own activity, his own labour becomes something objective and independent of him, something that controls him by virtue of an autonomy alien to man’ (Lukács, 1971, pp. 86–87).

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the relationship between reification and sexual objectification in order to illuminate the effects that late capitalism has on women, and the potential for feminist activism within it. Although we may dream of a post-gender world, we are not there (yet) and late capitalism views women as having a privileged set of marketable attributes that are primarily connected to their reproductive functions. Sexual objectification acts to shape women as both consumers with buying power and as consumable objects. The hegemonic order is still racist, classist, and sexist, although it is finding new and creative pathways in which to discriminate.

In order to understand the challenges for women living in a posthuman age, social, technological, and biopolitical mediums of exploitation that are supported by capitalism, but also exceed it, must be considered. In the following paragraphs I will examine the concepts of reification and sexual objectification and ask what spaces are available for women seeking agency within late capitalism. This examination will be pursued in three steps: in the first section I will explicate Lukács's notion of reification and question its relevance in light of societal changes. In the second section I will provide an account of objectification by engaging with Catharine MacKinnon, Elisabeth Anderson, and Martha Nussbaum in order to examine how women are shaped by male dominance. In the third section, I will explain what performative agency and cyborg feminism involve and consider the prospects for feminist activism in late capitalism with the assistance of Judith Butler, Haraway, and Braidotti.

## 1. Lukács and Reification

Lukács states that under capitalism one's

qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things he can 'own' or 'dispose of' like the various objects of the external world. And there is no natural form in which human relations can be cast, no way in which man can bring his physical and psychic 'qualities' into play without their being subjected increasingly to this reifying process. (Lukács, 1971, p. 100)

For Lukács, commodity fetishism, and the practices associated with it, shift our perceptions and penetrate deeply into human life. The question that Lukács asks, namely how far commodity exchange and its structural consequences are able 'to influence the total outer and inner life of society' (Lukács, 1971, p. 84), is one that will be pursued in this chapter. In capitalism, the human way of being in the world is fundamentality reconstructed at a social-ontological level to cohere with the production of value.

A contested point in the literature about Lukács's notion of reification is whether his critique is (and should be) a moral or a social-ontological one.<sup>1</sup> For example, there is concern with Axel Honneth's claim that Lukács's notion of reification is to be read as inauthentic life-praxis instead of a moral error. In order to imply that reification has harmful consequences, the presumption is that one must rest this concern on a particular moral

framework, as is done in the works of contemporary authors such as Nussbaum and Anderson who turn to Kantian arguments.

My contention is that it is precisely the social-ontological reading of reification that is important for cyborg performativity and feminist activism in late capitalism. Reading Lukács's notion of reification as social ontology instead of moral critique is salutary because it makes a truth claim instead of a merely polemical one.<sup>2</sup> It allows for a plurality of ethical motivations for problematizing reification and Lukács's ideas to be workshopped for contemporary ethical and political critiques. Yet this reading is limited by Honneth's notion there is a more 'natural' state to return to or remember that is somehow liberated from commodification. As such, the following questions must be asked: Is Lukács making an implicit normative claim that we should attempt to return to that 'better' place? If reification occurs as a pathological form of life-praxis rather than a moral error, what opportunities are there for agency and transformation to occur within reification that will not perpetuate self-alienation?

In 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' Lukács explains commodification: 'a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a "phantom objectivity", an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people' (Lukács, 1971, p. 83). Reification in this respect affects intersubjective relations because it changes the way that people conceive of what they have to offer and receive from others. A process of 'rationalization' objectifies human attributes so that they are turned into things without human qualities. The consequence is that a mechanized life-praxis eclipses the world of emotions and empathetic values. Reification involves the social-ontological normalization of a hegemonic order in which production and profit are the highest values.

Lukács's description of reification rests upon an account of the self-alienation of the worker and progressive rationalization. Rationalization involves a quantitative approach to work in which productivity is measured through mathematical formulas and workers are encouraged to limit their unique characteristics to achieve neutral functionality. As a result, individual attributes are conceived as '*mere sources of error*' (Lukács, 1971, p. 89). The worker is encouraged to conform to the systematization of work life and to perceive his labour as something that is independent of him. Through the process of rationalization, the worker learns to separate his physical and psychological selves and creates a wedge between the work process and the work results. The disconnection between work life and the needs and abilities of the worker has an adverse effect on self-consciousness: issues



are approached from a standardized, formal, and inhuman attitude and workers subsume their ethics to production. The object of labour becomes a carefully calculated result of a specialized system of operation instead of one crafted by people who perceive their labour to have a specific use value. A world of objects or commodities is created and their activities are governed by the laws of capitalism (Lukács, 1971, p. 87).

Lukács states that rational mechanization extends beyond the worker and begins to transform all of society when the 'free worker' 'is freely able to take his labour-power to market and offer it for sale as a commodity "belonging" to him, a thing that he "possesses"' (Lukács, 1971, p. 91). This is indeed the predicament of late capitalism. The problem is that objectification of one's labour power and individual attributes result in self-alienation. When the commodity becomes the universal unit of measurement in society, one's consciousness is subjugated to it and develops a 'second nature' (p. 86). The mode of being under advanced capitalism and reification is one of self-alienation for Lukács because the individual has become estranged from those characteristics that formerly shaped him as a human being—his personal significance is bound up in his value as a commodity. Although reification is the 'immediate reality of every person living in capitalist society' (p. 197), Lukács states that the classes experience this process much differently: whereas the bourgeoisie feel affirmed by self-alienation because it is a familiar product of their culture that they benefit from, the proletariat are devastated by it and face their 'own impotence' (p. 149)<sup>3</sup> through its most dehumanizing features.

The process by which one is transformed from a world of human feelings and relationships into one in which labour power, human activities, and attributes are perceived as mere things to be bought and sold under capitalism is explained by Honneth as being a 'distorted consciousness' (Honneth, 2008, p. 25) that occurs through habituation and an amnesia or forgetting of precognitive recognition. Although this is an inaccurate reading of Lukács, it points to a pressing question. Namely, if under advanced capitalism, a second nature has become the new way of life, to which direction do we seek change? Are we to move to some formerly pure, first state, before 'the fall'? Also, how do we come to have an awareness of this second nature; or how do we penetrate the web of self-alienation?

Lukács states that once the commodity has become universalized and reification becomes more pervasive, people do have the opportunity to pursue an understanding of this new structure or 'to rebel against its disastrous effects and liberate themselves from servitude to this second nature so created' (Lukács, 1971, p. 86). For Lukács, the pressure to conform to the

laws of commodification is inescapable, but one can obtain knowledge of them, and learn to use them for one's advantage.<sup>4</sup> However, using the known laws for personal advantage does not mean that one can individually change them, or how one is subjugated under them through reification. One of the problems that Lukács is concerned about is that capitalism has no moral compass: because reification is disconnected from its sources of labour and is driven by production each new transformation is embraced.<sup>5</sup> The worker 'has to conform to its laws whether he likes it or not' (p. 89). In Lukács's account, reification is an inflexible process that cannot be modified through the individual agent who embodies its effects (this differs from contemporary accounts of agency, such as Butler and Haraway). It is only as a collective member of a class, specifically the proletariat, that commodity fetishism can be overturned.

Lukács believes that the proletariat has the unique ability to see inside the political economy because of its subjection to it: since the proletariat experience the most serious dehumanization from capitalism, it will be the class to desire change and have the insight to make it happen (Lukács, 1971, p. 149). They differ from the bourgeoisie who feel themselves to benefit from it and thus do not question it (p. 156). Self-alienation is an inevitable predicament in capitalism, but it is more likely to be infiltrated by those who experience its greatest harms. Lukács critiques 'bourgeois thought' for having an impenetrable facticity that takes its economic and cultural norms as timeless and objective (p. 157). However, he also states that bourgeois culture is the point of departure from which proletariat self-consciousness must begin (p. 163).

Lukács, contrary to what Honneth claims, is not making an implicit normative claim that we should attempt to *return* to a 'better' place or some first nature. Lukács states that 'proletarian thought does not require a tabula rasa, a new start to the task of comprehending reality and one without any preconceptions' (Lukács, 1971, p. 163). In fact, Lukács thinks that it is precisely the relationship of the proletariat to the bourgeoisie within capitalism that gives rise to its own 'standpoint', or class consciousness and the desire to overcome self-alienation. The path of the proletariat towards socialism is, as Andrew Feenberg states, 'a reorganization of the society around a dialectical mediation of the capitalist inheritance' (Feenberg, 2011, p. 110). For Lukács, activism occurs through the collective understanding of the current predicament; change cannot move backwards to a former state but only forwards through negotiation and re-appropriation. As we will see, this is precisely the approach that Haraway suggests cyborg feminists should take.

Still, Lukács's account of reification has its limitations, as he admits in his 'Preface to the New Edition' (1967). Lukács attempts 'to explain all ideological phenomena by reference to their basis in economics' (Lukács, 1971, p. xvii). His concern with the petrifying qualities of bourgeois thought and the potential of the proletariat class to uniquely overcome it fails to consider how ideological indoctrination from other sources of power has resulted in exploitation and objectification of entire groups of people, such as women and minority groups.<sup>6</sup> He gives what Fredric Jameson calls an 'epistemological priority' to the working class (Jameson, 2009, p. 214).

Feminist activism requires an understanding of reification under late capitalism that allows for transformation to occur and an individual agency that is not solely dependent upon class consciousness. Haraway claims that, 'most Marxisms see domination best' (Haraway, 1991, p. 172) but are not able to recognize changes that have and do occur under capitalism. For women, in particular, the nostalgia that Honneth portrays connected to going back to a more 'natural' or so-called 'human' time prior to capitalism seems ironic since oppression against women has become less severe over time (and under a capitalist society). Butler correctly argues that the structures of capitalism are not immune from social influences or the speech acts of individuals (Butler, 2010, pp. 148–149). Social-ontological indoctrination is pervasive through both economic and social structures that import normative equations into the minds of the populace, but this does not stifle the abilities of individuals to find performative agency within these systems.

Contemporary feminists such as Haraway, Butler, and Braidotti look for the opportunities to achieve change within an order that is dehumanizing but malleable. However, all three of these thinkers write with an aim to transcend the gender binary and are not specifically interested in how late capitalism affects women. In order to understand the particular set of challenges that women have, it is necessary to look to another group of feminist authors who analyse the consequences of female sexual objectification as a life-praxis.

## 2. Sexual Objectification and Reification: Feminist Problems

Lukács's critique of capitalism explains how women, as do men, experience its dehumanizing effects; yet women are further constrained by the ideological structures of male domination that exploit female sexuality in order to remain in power. Catharine MacKinnon writes, 'Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most

taken away' (MacKinnon, 1982, p. 515). The challenges that women have differ from men because they are connected to and gravitate around the commodification of female sexuality. Although significant changes have occurred since MacKinnon wrote in 1982, late capitalism, which seeks to exploit the most marketable human characteristics, retains patriarchal interests in objectifying female sexuality and reproductive labour. In addition, the aesthetics of desirability supported through an increasingly medicalized cosmetic industry that generates vast amounts of capital rests on the assumption that female value is connected to being sexually attractive to men. The predominance of sexual inequality between men and women means that women have different opportunities for agency under capitalism and require a feminist understanding of reification that includes its sexually objectifying trajectories.

MacKinnon states that similar to workers who are defined as a class through their work being used for the benefit of others, women are defined as a sex through their sexuality being used for the benefit of others, namely men (MacKinnon, 1982, p. 516). Women are dominated through the objectification of their sexuality, yet, ironically, they find a sense of personal significance through this experience. Sexual objectification naturalizes a 'truth' that the role of women is to be or become sexually desirable for men. 'Objectification makes sexuality a material reality of women's lives, not just a psychological, attitudinal, or ideological one' (p. 539). Sexual objectification involves the social-ontological normalization of a patriarchal influence in which female desirability becomes the highest good for women. Like workers who function under a distorted life-praxis, women perceive their sexual attributes as constitutive of who they are and are alienated from a sense of being that values their other characteristics. This is a form of reification. At the same time, female sexual desirability is perceived as a way in which to access greater freedom: it is a bartering tool, a commodity accessible through products that women buy, or a quality that a woman has within her person to be sold on the market.<sup>7</sup>

Under a capitalistic political economy, work that involves the use of female sexuality and reproductive functions is likely to be most vulnerable to its reifying and exploitative tendencies (and a strong location for political change). Similar to Honneth's reading of Lukács, Anderson argues that imposing market values onto female labour connected to sexuality and reproductive function assigns a price to that labour that detracts from its human value: these women are then assigned a worth that does not reflect their 'real' value. She claims that they are made into things, valued for their use instead of being respected and having the human dignity

that is accorded to them (Anderson, 1993, pp. 8–10). Anderson turns to a Kantian argument for the justification of the moral problems of use when she states that ‘use is a lower, impersonal, and exclusive mode of valuation. It is contrasted with higher modes of valuation, such as respect. To merely use something is to subordinate it to one’s own ends, without regard for its intrinsic value’ (p. 144).<sup>8</sup>

Anderson argues against the legalization of sex work. She claims that when one makes sex for sale, it detracts from the ‘human good of sexual acts’ and its status as a gift to be shared through mutual recognition, attraction, and offering (Anderson, 1993, p. 154). The sex worker’s autonomy is threatened because she ‘subjects herself to his commands’ (p. 156) and this devalues her as a property to be used without consideration for her ‘personal needs’ (p. 154). In other words, the sex worker’s sexuality is appropriated by the customer without thought of her humanity. Anderson claims that sex work threatens the dignity of all women through condoning disrespectful behaviour to women. For these reasons Anderson believes that the state is justified to prohibit sex work (p. 156).

There are a few striking problems with Anderson’s arguments against sex work. Like Honneth’s misreading of Lukács, she assumes that there is a more ‘natural’ place to return to and this imports a ‘pure’ status to women who are not sex workers (as if sex work is a fall from a better place). She presumes that the ‘gift’ of sex is equally shared between men and women without consideration that the coercive factors active in sex work, facilitated by male domination, are also part of marriage and other legal sexual relationships. Anderson does not adequately consider that the problems with sex work are based on deeper institutional and social problems connected to sexual inequality. The dehumanizing roles that are prevalent in sexual relationships of all kinds between men and women (and same-sex relationships), and are exacerbated in sex work, are structured by patriarchal and puritanical values that must be considered in addition to the problems of capitalism. As the writings of feminists who are sex workers can attest, consensual contractual negotiations are part of sex worker relationships, but the legal prohibition of sex work and puritanical attitudes can inhibit the consensual quality of them. Disrespectful attitudes to sex workers are often a result of shameful attitudes towards sexuality and anger at women who are perceived to be controlling their sexuality on their own terms (see Queen, 1997, pp. 125–135).

I turn to sex work as an example because Anderson’s analysis exemplifies what is problematic about approaching a feminist problem related to sexual objectification from an institutional and theoretical framework that does not connect with or consider the women who are living within its effects. Whereas

Anderson thinks that problems must be tackled externally through changing the institutional order, other feminists realize that activism happens from within and without and involves consciousness raising (MacKinnon, 1982, p. 520). Like Lukács's claims about the proletariat, I think that those who experience the most harmful consequences of the political economy that they live in (in this case sex workers within a patriarchal capitalistic world that promotes sexual objectification) have the most knowledge of it from which to generate change. Although female sexual objectification occurs through subjugation, this does not prevent women from achieving agency that extends beyond a false consciousness and allows for joy and change to occur. In the case of sex workers, paternalistic regulations are inefficient: concern for them means listening to their experiences and providing them with the support necessary to make their work safe and empowering and providing an exit strategy for those who want out. What is also important to consider is how politically aware women working in sex work have the power to change stigmatizing attitudes towards female sexuality.<sup>9</sup>

There is a spectrum of female sexual objectification that finds its most explicit representations in the sex industry. What I am attempting to get at with the rather difficult example of sex work is that even when female sexual objectification appears to have taken over the lifeworld of an individual, this does not foreclose the opportunity for agency, nor does it necessarily result in the woman being denied her humanity. There are both harmful and liberating aspects of female sexual objectification and an accurate account of it must consider both. Although women are limited by sexual objectification because it shapes their values and aspirations towards becoming desirable under a male gaze, not all forms of objectification are harmful or wrong: it is important to consider the context because sometimes the experience of objectification is an enjoyable aspect of sexual life (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 251), a chosen form of income, or a location for political change. Nussbaum argues that although it is morally impermissible to instrumentalize another person, she qualifies this statement, stating that if it occurs in a context that is affirmative of one's humanity it is acceptable (p. 289). From the perspective of a feminist sex worker, one which exceeds Nussbaum and the other authors mentioned above, recognizing the predominance of sexual objectification and learning how to perform that objectification with irony, self-empowerment, or a sex-positive approach that de-stigmatizes female sexuality can be a path towards greater agency for some women.<sup>10</sup> In order to explain what performative agency looks like and how it repeats, mimics, and challenges the normative orders of late capitalism, I turn to Butler, Haraway, and Braidotti.

### 3. Performative Agency and Posthuman Feminism

Haraway claims that feminists and Marxists err in their attempts to create a revolutionary subject from a perspective of hierarchical dualisms, moral superiority, nature, or innocence (Haraway, 1991, p. 176). Yet, Lukács's account of the activist potential of the proletariat is closer to her notion of cyborg feminist than might be supposed. They share the notion that late capitalism must be the point of departure for those most dehumanized by it so that they can move forwards through experimentation and re-appropriation. Haraway's cyborg feminist rejects the notion of salvation and views herself as embedded in the world. The term 'cyborg' is an ironic one meant to explain subjects who are 'the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism' (Haraway, 1991, p. 151).

The pursuit of individual agency and progressive political action involve learning to employ the languages and methods of the hegemonic order, but with a satirical performance that upsets its foundations. 'Posthuman feminists look for subversion not in counter-identity formations, but rather in pure dislocations of identities via the perversion of standardized patterns of sexualized, racialized, and naturalized interaction' (Braidotti, 2013, p. 99). In this section, I will explore what feminist activism might look like in late capitalism by way of Butler's performative agency and Haraway's cyborg feminism.

Butler's analysis disputes Lukács's notion that the individual cannot effect significant change from within the political economy. She argues that the market is open to being shaped by many different factors including social institutions and structures of meaning, *individual* speech acts, and technological networks (Butler, 2010, pp. 148–150). The social-ontological naturalization of particular ways of being in this world, as a woman or a worker, for example, are themselves effects of a performatively produced market, that is so continuous in its reiterations that it *appears* to allow for little variation (p. 149). However, performatives as reiterations inevitably involve failure since they are not exact copies (p. 153). The failing yet polyvalent character of late capitalism 'that actively produces differences for the sake of commodification' (Braidotti, 2013, p. 58) means that it is open to manipulation and change. Butler's notion of performative agency suggests that women (and men) can find malleability within the hegemonic order that is sexist, racist, and homophobic to exert an agency that both recalls and transgresses its reifying practices. Butler states that 'performativity seeks to counter a certain kind of positivism according to which we might

begin with already delimited understandings of what gender, the state, and the economy are' (Butler, 2010, p. 147).

It is vital, however, not to forget that the reifying effects of late capitalism are prolific, and in many instances without a moral compass. It is a multiplier of deterritorialized differences, which are packaged and marketed under the labels of 'new, dynamic and negotiable identities' and an endless choice of consumer goods. This logic triggers a proliferation and a vampiric consumption of quantitative options (Braidotti, 2013, p. 58).

In other words, the current society will not only allow for performative agency and cyborg personalities to emerge, it will also learn how to commodify them. The question that re-emerges is whether what is experienced as empowerment is not merely another form of commodity fetishism that perpetuates self-alienation.

Haraway thinks that the world is shifting dramatically from an industrial and organic one into a polymorphous world dominated by the control of information; there is no going back, at an ideological or a material level (Haraway, 1991, pp. 161–162). Humans are increasingly systematized through statistics and forecast; they are no longer 'sacred in themselves' (p. 163). The capital today includes data storages of human information ranging from genetic to consumer tendencies, as Facebook can attest to,<sup>11</sup> and profit is built upon owning what was previously considered to be private information. Whereas Haraway considers the current political economy to be an informatics of domination, Braidotti calls it biogenetic capitalism because it 'invests and profits from the scientific and economic control and the commodification of all that lives' (Braidotti, 2013, p. 59). It exploits the generative capacities of 'women, animals, plants, genes, and cells' (p. 95) and it is without limits as to what can be bought and sold. One of the challenges that activism currently faces is that there is not one source of domination from which to push against, as earlier feminists and Marxists believed, there are multiple (Haraway, 1991, p. 160). This means that activism cannot work in the same ways as previously supposed and must learn how to approach change from multiple perspectives even if they are incomplete and imperfect.

Haraway conceives of the cyborg as a new 'self', a model for activism of a social-feminist politics that looks to biotechnologies and communication technologies to redesign bodies and social relationships through the shaping of information (Haraway, 1991, p. 164). She states that the notion of the cyborg has transformative and political potential because modern



machines challenge the ubiquity and spirituality of the Father through their mobility, fluidity, and their omnipresence (p. 153). 'Cyborg unities are monstrous and illegitimate; in our present political circumstances, we could hardly hope for more potent myths for resistance and recoupling' (p. 154). The political potential of activism is not about 'the fall', the presumption that there was some prior wholeness or natural state, but instead it happens through 'seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other': such tools are the re-telling of stories to displace naturalized identities and hierarchical dualisms (p. 175). Haraway believes that technological culture helps to open up the hierarchies of formerly privileged dualisms because boundaries have become more fluid between the organic and the mechanical. Borders between the human and the animal, man and woman, the real and the virtual, and the 'self-developing and externally designed' (p. 152) are starting to overlap.

Haraway critiques the notion that women as a category can be mobilized, stating that there is no such thing as being definitely 'female'. Instead of looking to some kind of 'natural' identification between people such as gender, class, or race, Haraway argues that we need coalitions, political kinships, and affinities—otherwise 'taxonomies of feminism produce epistemologies to police deviations from official women's experience' (p. 156), as was exemplified above during Anderson's assessment of sex work. The problem with the positing of women as a political group is that it necessarily seeks to subsume the diverse experiences of women under one banner and in doing so fails to acknowledge the variant and irreducible interests of that broad category. It ends up assimilating the 'polyvocal' into one feminist voice without admitting to it.<sup>12</sup> What Haraway points to is a significant problem with feminist discourse that continues: women associate with their class and cultural background more than they do with other women. For example, white feminists, socialist and liberal, have failed to consider the concerns of women of colour, transgender people, and sex workers, among others. Haraway thinks that feminists have erred (as Lukács also erred with his concentration solely on the bourgeoisie) 'through searching for a single ground of domination to secure our revolutionary voice' (Haraway, 1991, p. 160). In fact, the presumption that domination comes from one primary source is, again, another form of reification.

I agree with Haraway that supporting an essentialist theory of 'woman' disavows the polyvalent character of women's voices, both individual and dissenting, to be heard (see Haraway, 1991, p. 160). What, however, can be achieved through asking how late capitalism affects women is not a move towards entrenching a limited conception of what a 'woman' is. Instead, it

helps us to understand how the confluence of the market commodification of human life and the sexually objectifying drive of male dominance shape those people that the state recognizes as female. Polarized forms of sexual difference are still active and strong. This is not to presume there is a common life-praxis that all women share or one female language that can be spoken. However, once we understand how ideological systems of meaning work to shape our consciousness as women, we can learn how to break down these influences and employ them for what Haraway calls new 'fusions' (Haraway, 1991, p. 173) or new performative options in late capitalism. Machines, animals, the gender roles and sexualities of all people, provide sources of innovation for feminist cyborgs. As Haraway states, the point now is not to figure out what is false consciousness and what is a clear consciousness. Yet we must still ask how to reduce self-alienation in late capitalism with a combined interest in learning how the new 'pleasures, experiences, and powers' (p. 173) can be employed to shift the hegemonic order of things.

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## 9. Reified Life: Vitalism, Environmentalism, and Reification in Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* and *A Sick Planet*

Joost de Bloois

*La défense immunitaire a fait son temps sur la terre.*

– Guy Debord, *Son art, son temps*

'Revolution makes the sunshine', Guy Debord (2008, p. 94) writes in *A Sick Planet* (*La Planète Malade*). At first sight, the latter appears as a rather peripheral text in Debord's oeuvre. Written in 1971, its dozen or so pages were intended to figure in the thirteenth volume of *The Situationist International* that never saw the light of day, due to the dissolution of the *SI* shortly before its projected publication. *A Sick Planet* was published posthumously in 2004. However, this short text constitutes a key moment in Debord's oeuvre. *A Sick Planet* brings to the fore Debord's thought as 'environmentalism' that is as constant as it is complex. That is to say, the crucial significance of *A Sick Planet* is not that it is, at first sight, literally, a reflection of the state of 'the environment'. In it, Debord, in fact, dismisses the emerging 'green' movement: its lamentations of 'pollution' are themselves part of a spectacle that does not hesitate to mesmerize us with images of its auto-destruction, the ultimate tautology of the spectacle's own disintegration. Rather, what emerges in *A Sick Planet* is the intricate entanglement of seemingly mutually exclusive discourses: on the one hand, a *vitalism* (or a vitalist materialism) and on the other, and less surprisingly, a *historical materialism*; with a third discourse spanning these two: that of *anthropology*. I use the notions of 'vitalism' and 'anthropology' here in fairly broad strokes. Obviously, Debord's thinking does not explicitly proceed from or engage with a (Francophone) vitalist tradition (that would span from Bergson to Canguilhem to Deleuze)—at least evidently not to the extent that his thinking is rooted in historical materialism. Nor does he engage extensively with contemporary anthropological theories (e.g. Levi-Strauss or Leroi-Gourhan). However, in this chapter I argue that Debord's thinking—in particular in his conceptualization of 'environmentalism'—does,

and significantly so, dovetail with figures of thought that are at the heart of philosophical vitalism and modern anthropology (i.e. notions of 'life', 'becoming', 'transience', plural humanity, to name but a few). It is in the light of such perhaps surprising parallels that I approach Debord's work here. Debord's analyses of the environmental catastrophe reveal the set of Borromean rings (the interlocking of vitalism-historical materialism-anthropology) that is at the heart of his thinking and that is vital to its understanding, in particular that of the 'later' Debord of the 1970s–1990s (i.e. his very last televisual work, the 1994 'documentary' *Guy Debord, son art, son temps* that is foremost a montage of news footage showing the devastation of the human eco-system and its psycho-pathological costs). In what follows, I will provide a chiasmic reading of Debord's canonical *The Society of the Spectacle* and the lesser-known, but nonetheless crucial short essay *A Sick Planet* that shows the peculiar intersection of the vocabularies of vitalism, historical materialism (in particular the concept of *reification*), and anthropology in Debord's work.

In this chapter, I will also tentatively trace the central narrative of Debord's work: that of *the history of modernity as the history of reification*, which, for Debord, ultimately signifies *the reification of life itself*. As we will see, this narrative runs as follows: the spectacle signifies reification in its absolute form, the *materialization* of the world of commodity relations, or better still: commodity relations *made world*. The spectacle does not so much refer to the image as mediator between man and his world, but to the image-as-commodity turned into man's very *environment*. Debord's notion of reification dovetails with Lukács's analyses in *History and Class Consciousness* (quotes from which serve as an *exergue* in *The Society of the Spectacle*). As Lukács argues, the dominant form of commodity exchange influences 'the *total* outer and inner life of society' (Lukács, 1971, p. 84, emphasis in the original); the extent to which commodity exchange determines the totality of (social) life is not merely a *quantitative* matter: the reifying effect of the commodity form 'permeat[es] every expression of life' (p. 84). Foremost, the reification that results from commodity relations is a *qualitative* matter: it touches upon 'the subjugation of men's consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression' (p. 86).<sup>1</sup> Commodity exchange thus becomes man's 'second nature' (p. 86). As Lukács writes: 'reification requires that a society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange'; reification implies that all 'natural relations, which exhibit human relations' are replaced with reified relations (p. 91). Reification comes at the price of generalized separation: of producer and means of production, of primary social relations, and, ultimately, of the

human subject and life itself. In Debord, this history of reification, the vocabulary of historical materialism, is grafted upon, and perhaps paradoxically so, anthropological and vitalistic thought. The history of reification is the history of life itself: 'life' is negatively revealed insofar as it falls prey to reification; yet, it is within this same history that life can be restored to its (a-historical) quintessence, as pure transience. The history of life itself—of *bios*—reveals itself as the history of man—of the *anthropos*—insofar as man, as the producer of (his own) irreversible temporality, reflects on life as pure transience: man is the consciousness of life as pure becoming. Debord thus makes a very complex (tripartite: vitalist, historical materialist, and anthropological) claim that, if taken seriously, forces us to rethink Debord's work as a sustained and fundamental work of *bio-politics*: on the reification and subsequent politicization of *bios*. Such a reading of Debord allows us to shed a new light on the Situationist Debord (as it allows us to think of Situationism as a radical environmentalism positing the primacy of the environment over the subject, and as a bio-political project: of living versus dead time, of living environment).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it allows us to avoid reading the later Debord merely as a melancholy writer, deploring the passing of the *enfants perdus* of Parisian bohemia, the waning of historical knowledge, of poetry, of 'good wine'—but as a radical environmentalist who proposes a wholly original holistic vitalism against the spectacle's automated catastrophe.

Finally, as we will see throughout this chapter, such a reading also situates Debord in close proximity to the German-speaking proponents of Western Marxism. In particular, *The Society of Spectacle* echoes Adorno's (posthumously published) *The Idea of Natural History* (Adorno, 1984). In it Adorno attempts to 'dialectically overcome the usual antithesis of nature and history [...] [by] pushing these concepts to a point where they are mediated in their apparent difference' (Adorno, 1984, p. 111). He does so by tracing such mediated differences in his contemporaries Lukács and Benjamin. In Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*, according to Adorno, we find the notion of a 'second nature'. The second nature that environs modern man is a commodified world—a world of things, world of convention—created by man, yet, as such, lost to him for its intrinsic meaninglessness ('this world supplies neither a meaning for the subject in search of a goal nor sensuous immediacy as material for the acting subject', Adorno paraphrases Lukács, p. 117). For Adorno, Lukács demonstrates a dialectics similar to his own undertaking. The petrified life of Lukács's 'second nature' is thoroughly historical; inversely, what appears as nature is nothing but petrified history (p. 118). It is Benjamin, who, according to Adorno in *The Idea of Natural History*, solves

the riddle of the chiasmic relation between history and nature: nature, in Adorno's reading of Benjamin, '*carries the mark of transience*' (p. 120, emphasis added). Because nature is transitory, 'it includes the element of history' (p. 120). The passage of time reveals itself to be the minimal unit of history: history itself is rooted in 'the basic quality of the transience of the earthly' (p. 121). Thus, 'all being or everything existing is to be grasped as the interweaving of historical and natural being' (p. 121). In Debord, we see how, in a sense, Adorno's aborted project of reformulating the idea of natural history is picked up and completed: in *The Society of the Spectacle* and *A Sick Planet*, the spell of the young Lukács's 'second nature' (history as the history of reification) can only be broken by means of recognizing the irreducible transience of life (of human life as transience), which, as the *conditio sine qua non* of history, is alone capable of negating history's petrification under the capitalist mode of production.

### 1. Dialectical Vitalism: *The Society of the Spectacle*

In the opening section of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord writes that 'any critique of the spectacle must expose it as a *visible negation of life*' (Debord, 1995, p. 14, emphasis added). In fact, Debord's insistence throughout *The Society of the Spectacle* on the notion of 'life' is significant: the critique of the spectacle is a truly titanic task in that it faces the spectacle dubbed by Debord as 'the autonomous movement of non-life' (p. 12). At the heart of *The Society of the Spectacle* we find the ultimate antagonism life/death whereby the spectacle 'in its generality is a concrete inversion of life' (p. 12). For Debord, the spectacle thus signifies 'the *absolute* denial of life' (p. 18, emphasis added). As such, it is not so much a pseudo-theology—a purely contemplative *askesis*, a false idolatry or belated idealism—rather it is a *fully materialized* negation of life that is 'no longer projected onto the heavens, but finds its place instead within material life itself' (p. 18). The spectacle's negation of life is not a form of transcendence of life, it is as concrete as it is absolute in that it introduces the negation of life within life itself. Debord is categorical: spectacle is not mere ideology, it is the *materialization of ideology*, *Weltanschauung* made flesh (p. 150). As the autonomous movement of non-life, the spectacle parasitizes, drains, and in the end completely phagocytizes material life. If, as we will see is the case for Debord, the spectacle signifies the reification of life, it can only do so if it simultaneously signifies nothing less than the negation of life itself.

How to read the notion of 'life' in Debord? Perhaps surprisingly, we find in Debord's work a peculiar *vitalism*, an oxymoronic 'dialectical vitalism'

that affirms life *and* historicizes it.<sup>3</sup> On closer inspection, this vitalism consists of three main, apparently conflicting, components. Firstly, we might claim that, in *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord remains faithful to the anthropological project of the young Marx: he poses the life of the human species as that of *social being*. Secondly, it is man's sociality, as we will see, that makes him a *historical being*. Thirdly, by a dialectical reversal of fortune, it is this historicization of life that allows for a consciousness of 'life' as it occurs beyond the realm of human existence, and crucially for Debord, as *enjoyment* or consummation of life *as such*, that is to say: of the life of man as irreversibly transient, as becoming. It is at the latter point where Debord departs from Marx: he heralds a vitalism that is emphatically non-productivist. *The Society of the Spectacle* demonstrates the ontology behind the Situationist slogan *Ne travaillez jamais*: ultimately, the significance of the life of human beings does not reside in collective production, but in the seizing and subsequent enjoyment of 'life' as pure transience, as the pure passing of time. From *A Sick Planet* onwards, Debord will move more and more towards a holistic vitalism: once 'life' exceeds human life in Debord, it is seen by Debord as part of its living environment. That is to say, Debord does not so much abandon a dialectical or historicist perspective, but in fact demonstrates that the historical development of the spectacle, as the acme of the history of the capitalist mode of production, culminates in the antagonism life/death, vital transience/reification, and leaves no other formula for resistance than a holistic vitalism. The latter is reflected in Debord's political project, outlined in *The Society of the Spectacle* and explicitly articulated in his later writings: the properly *bio-political* affirmation of the consummation of life against the spectacle, which consists of environmental, anthropological, as well as epistemological positions. As we will see, in particular in *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord emphasizes the concurrence between the spectacle, as the reification of life itself, and Western philosophical modernity. In that sense, Debord's (later) work can be read as a vindication of the singular (and singularly finite) life of the *anthropos* against the universalist abstractions of the *humanitas*<sup>4</sup> (and a critique of reification as universalizing reified universality).

For Debord, the spectacle is an *automaton*: 'the spectacle is simply the economic realm developing for itself', he concisely argues in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1995, p. 16). The spectacle is foremost the separation of the realm of power located in economic production from its living environment. At the root of the spectacle we find the specialization of power. The spectacle is fundamentally fetishistic: 'thus the most modern aspect of the spectacle is also at bottom the most archaic', Debord writes (p. 18). In



Debord we thus find at the same time a historical narrative (the spectacle as the dialectical development of reified power), as well as an anthropological narrative: the spectacle, in all of its stages, repeats a foundational *moment of cleavage* within the life of the society of man. This moment of 'self-cleavage' (p. 18) of the *anthropos* is a double-bind: it gives birth to modern, Vitruvian man (as universal subject) *and* heralds his inevitable extinction, since the condition for his coming into being ultimately is the reification of life itself. Debord here resonates with Horkheimer and Adorno's narration of Odysseus's estrangement from nature: 'Odysseus, they write, like the heroes of all true novels after him, throws himself away, so to speak, on order to win himself' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. 38). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, man, as personified by Odysseus, pays the ultimate price for his cunning triumph over nature, since it is only by *denying himself as nature* that Odysseus domesticates its powers. Odysseus thus 'saves his life by making himself disappear' (p. 47); after his neutralization of the Sirens, he re-emerges as Nobody: he has exchanged himself as living being for the mere token 'man'. Therefore, Horkheimer and Adorno conclude:

With the denial of nature in human beings, not only the *telos* of one's own life becomes confused and opaque. At the moment when human beings cut themselves off from the consciousness of themselves as nature, all the purposes for which they keep themselves alive—social progress, the heightening of material and intellectual forces, indeed, consciousness itself—become void and the enthronement of the means as the end. (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. 42)

Horkheimer and Adorno point to a fundamental moment of cleavage between man and nature, or better still: between man and man-as-nature. The price Odysseus has to pay is, in a sense, death by reification.

Throughout his work, Debord scrutinizes (historical) opportunities to restore this (self-)cleavage, to restore the *anthropos* as that being that mirrors life itself through his enjoyment of it. In this sense, for Debord, the spectacle is inseparable from the rise of the modern state and modern philosophy's complicity with it, in its attempts at universalizing the Western *humanitas*. The Hobbesian moment is the spectacle's foundational moment: it is precisely in Hobbes that 'life' in the state of nature is famously defined as the absence of society, of industry, of knowledge; 'and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short' (Hobbes, 1998, p. 84). Debord performs a *détournement* of Hobbes' anthropological narrative: the state is

edified against life, the state is the automatization of non-life against man and his living environment. Debord argues:

The spectacle is *self-generated*, and it makes up its own rules: it is a specious form of the sacred. And it makes no secret of what it is, namely, *hierarchical power evolving on its own, in its separateness*, thanks to an increasing productivity based on an ever more refined division of labor, an ever greater communication of machine-governed gestures, and an ever-widening market. (Debord, 1995, p. 20)

The complicity of Western philosophy with the unbridled development of state power, for Debord, lies in the fact that modern philosophy provides the epistemological matrix for the profoundly tautological character of state power. The spectacle is nothing but the state, insofar as the state culminates and consolidates the capitalist mode of production, presenting the spectacle of its own power. The state offers nothing but the spectacle of reification: reification of power, reification through the production of commodities, reification of social relations, reification of life itself. By privileging *vision*, modern thought posits the subject as a contemplative subject (Debord, 1995, p. 17). At the same time, post-Cartesian philosophy offers the epistemological matrix for the reification of the lifeworld *and* a naturalization of the separateness of state power. The isolation of Vitruvian man from his living environment is co-extensive with his unconditional acceptance of state power. The universal subject of Western modernity, the *humanitas*, thus universalizes the reification of and by state power.

## 2. Time's Crooked Arrow

The anthropological narrative in *The Society of the Spectacle* is doubled with the historical narrative of the reification of the life of the *anthropos*. Debord's peculiar 'dialectical vitalism' consists of the minute analysis of the stages of an ever-tightening [dialectics of the] reification of life. That is to say, Debord scrutinizes the latter's self-contradicting logic: in *The Society of the Spectacle* he appears to be on the outlook for those moments where the history of reification, as the history of the negation of life, finds itself, in turn, negated. It is in those moments (the sumptuous banquets of the Renaissance, the proliferation of leisure time of the post-war years) that he identifies potential modes for the resurgence of a vitalism that is potentially revolutionary. At the basis of the reification of life, according to Debord, we

find what he calls 'the temporalization of man'. Again, he starts from the triad anthropology-dialectics-vitalism: the 'temporalization of man' refers to the socio-cultural history of man doubled as 'natural history' (Debord, 1995, p. 92). It is the anthropological a priori of the socialization of man that turns him into a temporal being. It is as a social being that man becomes endowed with a consciousness of time, that is to say, for Debord, a consciousness of life as transience. Social life, for Debord, originally is organized according to distinct temporalities: cyclical, eschatological, etc. It is thus social life that installs the collective consciousness of time's passing as the proper mode of being of man. In this sense, the history of man, the history of the *anthropos* as a social being, is always already 'natural history': *bios* reflecting (upon) itself. 'Time's natural basis, the sensory data of its passage, becomes human and social in so much as it exists for human beings', Debord writes (p. 116). In *The Society of the Spectacle* Debord underlines the dialectics of this 'natural history'. Time bifurcates, on the one hand, into history as the history of reification; on the other hand, into the understanding, and foremost consummation of life as irreversible transience, as the pure becoming of temporality. As such, the latter resists reification by becoming a *plurality of times*.

Debord's dialectical vitalism reveals itself to be profoundly bio-political in that what might joyously await us at its outcome is a 'communism' that is understood as the 'withering away of the social measurement of time, socially necessary labour time, in favour of an individual and collective irreversible time which is playful in character and which encompasses, simultaneously within it, a variety of autonomous yet effectively federated times' (p. 116). For Debord communism heralds the end of reification: insofar as communism heralds the end of the history of reification, it discards the (falsely) universalizing aspirations of reification. In doing so, communism restores the *anthropos* to the immediate enjoyment of *bios* for *each according to his own*. That is to say: under communism, the immediate enjoyment of life takes the form of a necessarily *plural* becoming. The history of political modernity can thus be read as 'the tireless pursuit of a monopoly of historical life', first by the absolute-monarchist and later the bourgeois state (p. 103). For Debord, the narrative of political modernity is the monopolization of irreversible time, of the conversion of transience into history understood as the history of state and reification.

Once more, the peculiar logic of Debord's dialectical vitalism demonstrates that the struggle over the 'ownership of history' (p. 96) is a tortuous one. It is within the history of reification that we encounter epochs within which the cleavage between *anthropos* and *bios* is restored, albeit

momentarily. The pivotal example of such an epoch, for Debord, is the Italian Renaissance ‘in the exuberant life of the Italian cities, in the arts of the festival, *life came to recognize itself as the enjoyment of the passing of time*. But this enjoyment of transience would turn out to be transient itself’ (p. 103, emphasis added). Over and again time’s crooked arrow turns against life itself. The very movement that temporarily re-unites *bios* and *anthropos* in the Renaissance festival, at the conjunction of a power formation that is not quite the state and a mercantilism that is not quite capitalism, that is to say: the movement of reification itself, finally paves the way for the emerging bourgeoisie. ‘The victory of the bourgeoisie was the victory of a profoundly historical time’, Debord argues (p. 104). The decisive dialectical ruse of the bourgeoisie consists of the *reification of irreversible time*, of the reification of the time of life itself via the *production of commodities*. ‘The irreversible time of production is first and foremost the measure of commodities’, Debord claims (p. 107). According to Debord, this appropriation of life’s defining temporality is twofold. On the one hand, the production of commodities signifies the rationalization of the production process, the breakdown of the transient temporality of life into measurable, exchangeable, and thus universalizable units. Again, Debord finds himself at Lukács’s side, who makes a similar case in *History and Class Consciousness*. In it, Lukács sketches the transformation of (man’s consciousness and use of) time in an environment constituted by the reifying effects of commodity production: in such an environment ‘time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable things’ (Lukács, 1971, p. 90). Essentially, Lukács argues, time becomes *space*: it is ‘transformed into abstract, exactly measurable, physical space’ (p. 90); time’s fundamental fluidity and transience are morphed into a static juxtaposition of exchangeable, quantifiable units: the reification of time entails its—literal—objectification.

On the other hand, the *consumption* of commodities, the generalization of commodity fetishism, subsumes any remaining or freed up irreversible time: ‘the development of capitalism meant the unification of irreversible time on a world scale’ (Debord, 1995, p. 107). In *The Society of the Spectacle* Debord underlines the profoundly antagonistic character of the *leisure time* that is freed up in consumerist capitalism: as the time liberated from the impetus of production it holds the promise of the amalgamation of *anthropos* and *bios*, of the enjoyment of life’s transience; however, leisure time, rather than being devoted to the consummation of life, is entirely devoted to the consumption of commodities. Perversely, as Debord argues, in the society of the spectacle, it is *time itself* that becomes consumable

(p. 112). 'The consumable disguise of the time-as-commodity' effectively suppressed any *qualitative dimension* of time, that is to say: any potential for a non-reified consummation of life. Again, the spectacle shows its blatant tautological nature. What is ultimately consumed in the society of the spectacle is *the spectacle of the consumption of time, and consequently of life itself*' (p. 112). In the society of the spectacle, we consume images of a reified life: 'all that once was directly lived has become mere representation', famously says the very first thesis from *The Society of the Spectacle* (p. 12). It is through the reification of the temporality of *bios* that the spectacle becomes, in Debord, the ultimate incarnation of *bio-power*: the reified time of the spectacle signifies 'that augmented survival in which daily lived experience embodies no free choices and is subject, no longer to the natural order, but to a pseudo-nature constructed by means of alienated labor' (p. 110). Spectacle is the perfection of the management of life itself in that it creates a pseudo-time and thus a pseudo-life that is perfectly contained within a perfectly reified lifeworld. It constitutes a properly *spectacular* bio-politics insofar as it sells off as the *image of authentic life* the very life of the *anthropos* that it has negated. In particular, it is the falsely ritualistic 'pseudo-cyclical' time of leisure (holidays, fashion, sports events, etc.) that is crowned with the aura of authenticity: yet even in such special moments, ostensibly moments of life, the only thing being generated, the only thing to be seen and reproduced, is the spectacle 'and what has been passed off as authentic life turns out to be merely a life more authentically spectacular' (p. 112). Despite a difference in tone (Debord's axiomatic formalism hardly resembles Adorno's melancholy), Debord appears to be in close proximity to the Adorno of *Minima Moralia*. 'Our perspective of life has passed into an ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer', Adorno writes (2005, p. 15). For Adorno, too, 'life has become *appearance*': the relation between life and production, in the contemporary mode of production, has become irreversibly dissymmetrical; life itself has been debased to a mere 'ephemeral appearance' of production, which has now become 'absolute' and by consequence 'monstrous' (perhaps foremost in the sense of: living a life of its own, a life independent from man—the life of the artefact that has become the automaton) (p. 15, emphasis added).

For Debord, the spectacle holds one final, devastating contradiction: the more man's environment is man-made (that is to say, reified, supplanted by the infinite procession of commodities), the more man becomes separated from his living environment and ultimately life itself. 'Though separated from his product', Debord writes, 'man is more and more, and even more

powerfully, the producer of every detail of his world. The closer his life comes to being his own creation, the more drastically he is cut off from that life' (Debord, 1995, p. 24). As automaton, the spectacle congeals 'everything that in human activity exists in a fluid state' (p. 26), that is to say, for Debord life itself as pure transience.<sup>5</sup> As 'self-movement' (p. 26) the spectacle expropriates the *anthropos* from his *world*, and the living environment is supplanted by the morbid fruits of dead labour. 'The spectacle is a map of this new world', Debord claims (p. 23). 'We already live in the era of *the self-destruction of the environment*', we read in *The Society of the Spectacle* (p. 123): the reification of the environment irreducibly signifies the negation of 'environment' as such.

The Spectacle erases the dividing line between self and world, in that the self, under siege by the presence/absence of the world, is eventually overwhelmed; it likewise erases the dividing line between true and false, repressing all directly lived truth beneath the real presence of the falsehood maintained by the organization of appearances. (Debord, 1995, p. 153)

The spectacle simply is the environment of the false, and as we will see, will also hold up a false environmentalism. Debord's peculiar environmentalism, as laid out in *A Sick Planet*, thus proceeds from his peculiar vitalism: the disappearance of the lifeworld is the ultimate logic of spectacle, the outcome of a long and tortuous dialectics. Life has a history: 'natural history' as the history of man insofar as he represents foremost life reflecting (upon) itself. Yet that history remains grafted upon a fundamental vitalism that proves to be the driving force behind any fundamental contestation of the spectacle: to live without *dead* time.

### 3. *A Sick Planet: Life as Revolutionary Wildcard*

In *A Sick Planet* Debord draws environmentalism, insofar as it encompasses biopolitical and vitalist assumptions, as a revolutionary wildcard. As Debord argues in *The Real Split in the International*, the stakes are high in the years that immediately follow 1968: these represent a rare and precarious syncope in the dialectics of reification (Debord and Saguinetti, 2003). *A Sick Planet* argues for the politicization of *bios* as a means of resistance (and perhaps the only viable resistance left) against the spectacle's morbid politics of reification. It is this wager that continues to be the ground of Debord's later polemics, films, and writing. *A Sick*

*Planet* addresses the issue of environmental ‘pollution’, as the idiom of the early 1970s has it. Debord’s modest text is in fact contemporary with the Club of Rome’s *Limits to Growth* and uses much of its terminology. In it, Debord stresses the fundamental antagonistic nature of ‘pollution’: the ‘struggle against pollution’ becomes an intrinsic part of spectacle’s subsistence—albeit as a palliative of sorts—and it refers to a ‘real process’ that effectively rips through the seamlessness of that ideology (Debord, 2008, p. 77). Even though, in perfect line with his analysis in *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord again and again emphasizes the eminent *materiality* of the impending ecological catastrophe, environmental pollution is in fact caught up in a dialectical process. Or perhaps better: what goes under the name of ‘pollution’, for Debord, is *the* dialectical moment that exposes the mutual entanglement of history and living matter (and brings both of them to their conclusion). The ecological catastrophe exposes the spectacle as an eminently bio-political project. ‘Pollution’ is the name for two fundamentally antagonistic movements between which ‘the current moment’ oscillates. ‘The current moment’ is that of ‘the supreme stage of commodity production’ and, simultaneously, ‘the project of its total negation’. The latter movement for Debord is again bifurcated: the historical-revolutionary project of the negation of spectacle runs parallel to the negation of spectacle through the environmental catastrophe. ‘Pollution’ becomes a veritable revolutionary wild card. As a keen gambler, for Debord, the question is to know how to use the wild card. This is, I argue, exactly what is at stake in *A Sick Planet*: how to play the wild card of environmental catastrophe in the revolutionary critique of spectacle; how, as good dialecticians, to draw lessons from the idiom of vitality, materiality, and *Umwelt* that imposes itself in ‘this historical moment’. The ‘historical moment’ Debord refers to, is the post-68 momentum: ‘the moment when it becomes impossible for capitalism to carry on working’ (p. 77). This moment is antagonistic in its own right. On the one hand, spectacle, along historical-dialectical lines, produces the new proletariat (of disgruntled consumers, workers, youth, minorities, and women) in opposition to its totality; on the other hand, there is reification’s perhaps unanticipated offshoot of ‘pollution’ that negatively affects proletariat and spectacle alike—a different totality: the totality of living matter. Since Debord remains a cunning dialectician, in *A Sick Planet* this cleavage folds back onto itself: it exposes the spectacle as a self-contradictory process that colonizes life and its inestimable habitats, only to ultimately negate these. As the ultimate stage in the history of reification, the spectacle turns the tables on historicity itself.

Therefore, Debord underlines that the environmental critique of the spectacle should not be confused with an essentially conservative aestheticism, heralding quality-of-life issues. Debord writes in *A Sick Planet*:

The problem of the degeneration of the totality of the natural and human environment has already ceased to present itself in terms of a loss of *quality*, be it aesthetic or of any other kind; the problem has now become the more fundamental one of whether a world that pursues such a course can preserve its material existence. (Debord, 2008, p. 79, emphasis added)

He vehemently rejects the analyses of those whom he brands ‘backward-looking gas-bags’—the ‘staunch defenders of good cooking’—who offer nothing but an *aesthetic critique* that remains firmly within the logic of reification of the spectacle (Debord, 2008, p. 79). In *A Sick Planet*, Debord continues the critique of the society of the spectacle as the critique of the *totality* of commodity relations; yet, this totality now in fact comprises its own material possibility of existence. As the materialization of ideology, the spectacle produces the environmental catastrophe that threatens to destroy the very possibility of ideological embodiment itself. The materialization of the spectacle comes at the expense of the material conditions of life itself. It is the metabolism of the spectacle itself, the process of reification that pumps life into the spectacle itself that threatens to short-circuit its own material survival. In its ultimate stage, the spectacle touches upon the limits of the future of organic life per se.

In *A Sick Planet*, Debord apparently has recourse to *The Blue Marble*, the iconic photograph of the Earth taken by the crew of Apollo 17, which plays such an important role in the spectacle’s own imaginary: from the space race to the notion of a unified humanity to its palliative use of the spectre of pollution. He presents to us our sick planet to demonstrate how the spectacle now dictates the ‘transformation of the conditions of life on Earth’ (Debord, 2008, p. 78). Just when spectacle effectively ‘globalizes’ our world by reifying it, as exemplified in the poster of *The Blue Marble*, it simultaneously lays bare the Earth as a *living ecosystem*. Once more, the spectacle appears as fundamentally alien to an original vitalism. The *world* of the society of the spectacle is determined by a part of itself that ontologically remains exterior to it (Debord, 2008, p. 81). Over and again, Debord asserts the self-negating logic of the spectacle: it kills the social organism upon which it is grafted, thereby revealing its own irreducible materiality. (Debord’s assertion of the spectacle’s ‘limits to growth’ has nothing moralizing; it is to be taken in dead earnestness.)



For Debord, 'our moment' simply proves that the history of reification has reached its limits. That is to say, the impending ecological catastrophe shows that its limits are not so much quantitative—in fact, the search for new markets is limitless, as Debord contends—but *qualitative*: as the ultimate stage in the history of reification, the spectacle is simply at odds with life. Thus, in *A Sick Planet*, Debord describes what he calls the 'terrors of the year 2000': the pollution not just of the atmosphere and waters, but also the ubiquity of noise, plastic debris, modified food, urban sprawl and proliferation of mental illness (p. 80). Debord paints a psycho-pathological *Umwelt* of social relations now irreparably damaged in their very materiality. The 'qualitative' here does not refer to the 'aesthetic quality' mourned over by the aforementioned 'backward-looking gas-bags': the qualitative simply *is* the material according to Debord. 'The qualitative is the most decisive dimension of real progress' (p. 82), he argues. The spectacle, as the ultimate stage in the history of reification, recomposes the world as false environment. Debord writes: 'a society that is ever more sick, but ever more powerful, has recreated the world—everywhere and in concrete form—as the environment and backdrop of its sickness: it has created a sick planet' (p. 81).

In *A Sick Planet* Debord attempts to formulate an equally entangled proletariat whose agency is crucially grafted upon its *bios*. This is what, for Debord, constitutes a properly *materialist demand* for revolutionary change: the ecological catastrophe represents 'an immense motive for revolt, a material requirement of the exploited just as vital as the struggle of nineteenth-century proletarians for the right to eat' (p. 82). The 'materialist demand' is that of an environmental justice or sustainability in the literal sense of the very possibility of the material subsistence of life and its manifold environments. As we have seen, such a vitalist-materialist demand is no less engrained in a historical-dialectical movement since it is in the spectacle that the process of reification, as the completed negation of man 'has reached its perfect material conclusion' (p. 84). 'Negation' and 'conclusion' here take on the double sense of end of a dialectical as well as a vital-biological endgame; the spectacle reveals itself as a life-negating force through the slow phagocytizing of man's milieu. Consequently, in *A Sick Planet* Debord presents the environmental catastrophe not so much as an event, but as the general result of alienated labour. The spectacular, late capitalist mode of production drags the environment itself into the sphere of commodities, and not just literally by turning water and even clean air into sellable goods or by cluttering our planet with ever more stuff. As we have seen in our analysis of *The Society of the*

*Spectacle*, the spectacle foremost signifies the production of a milieu. In *A Sick Planet* this production of a milieu has led to its self-contradictory conclusion (spectacle has crossed the last threshold of *its* progress): the completed materialization of the spectacle's false milieu affects its material subsistence (the very possibility of any milieu). As Debord writes: from the 'production of [mediated] non-life', 'a final threshold' has just been passed: 'what is now produced, directly, is death' (Debord, 2008, p. 85). In this context, politics equals bio-politics. Debord argues: 'that the management of everything has become directly political, right down to the herb of the fields and the possibility of drinking water, sleeping without pills or washing without developing sores' (p. 86). For Debord such a moment heralds *the end of specialized politics*: the concern of any contemporary emancipatory politics is none other than the milieu; any true politics is environmentalist in the dual sense of the word. 'The enemy at its gates of historical consciousness', Debord writes, is not illusion but the death of consciousness itself (p. 86). Consequently, the environmental catastrophe equally heralds the end of *voluntarist* politics: there is no managing poisonous riches (p. 87). The ecological catastrophe cannot be warded off through bureaucracy (again, the battleground is the qualitative and not the quantitative). As an example of such a 'voluntarist politics', the 'fight against pollution' (not yet named 'green politics' in *A Sick Planet*) can only be part of the spectacular machinery: it merely serves the creation of new types of employment, advancing the proliferation of spectacle's own toxic milieu; the high tech industries (or cognitive capitalism) that accompany it can only be palliative for the pollution that results from the mode of production of which they are intrinsically part (pp. 82–83). If 'seizing the means of production' has any meaning left, in *A Sick Planet*, it signifies taking hold of the means of production of a milieu or lifeworld (the qualitative reconstruction of the totality of the world taken in its material sense). Debord is equally keen to point out the incompatibility between representative democracy and truly environmental politics: any representative system is by its very nature conservative—that is to say, geared towards the conservation of the existing status quo ('qua voters, they would not change even if the world was coming to an end', Debord writes [p. 89]). Environmental politics is thus played elsewhere: in the opposition to the automated process of late capitalist production. If anything, environmental politics is thus a politics against reification, of which it shows its entangled historical and material sense—this, for a start, constitutes the enduring significance of Debord's modest treatise on *A Sick Planet*.

'The immune system has had its time on earth', Debord proclaims in his very last documentary, *Guy Debord, son art son temps* (1994) (Debord, 2006, p.1875, my translation). For Debord, the current, and final, stage of the spectacle, that of the 'integrated spectacle' that no longer faces any noticeable opposition (and, in an unprecedented bio-political project that effectively raised and 'moulded to its laws' (Debord, 1998, p. 7) a whole generation born after 1968), has turned life against itself: the ultimate form of reification. The world of the 'integrated spectacle' is characterized by the *generalized breakdown of the immune system*: at its very core life, in all its aspects, becomes defenceless against reification—or in its 'contemporary' euphemism: pollution. In his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Debord writes that 'there remains nothing, in culture or in nature, which has not been transformed, and polluted, according to the means and interests of modern industry. Even genetics has become readily accessible to the dominant social forces' (1998, p. 15). The integrated spectacle has succeeded in its main and only objective: it 'is mixed into all reality and irradiates it' (p. 9). According to Debord, the AIDS epidemic of the early 1980s and nuclear catastrophes such as the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 have become emblematic of the spectacle's radical inhumanity (its fundamental anti-anthropology and anti-vitalism): 'the economy has now come to openly make war on human beings, not only on our possibilities for life, but also those of survival', he argues (Debord, 1998, p. 39). The breakdown between spectacle and environment, which resulted from this history of reification, has resulted in the breakdown between man and environment: only this time, the 'environment' is already reified, already signifies the direct production of non-life. The integrated spectacle completes Debord's narrative of the spectacle's appropriation of human temporality and through it the temporality of life itself: the integrated spectacle heralds the irreparable reification of the irreversibility of life's transience by turning life into non-life, *bios* into *thanatos*. 'Negation has been so thoroughly deprived of its thought that it was dispersed long ago', Debord laments in his *Comments* (p. 84). Negation, as the weapon of choice of dialectical thought, has been falsified by a now integrated spectacle. As the later Debord's incessant writing as well as his insistence on the veracity of materiality (really lived time, real city life, real history) demonstrate: what remains at the heart of his thought, after the stratagems of historical materialism, is not so much negation, but what has always been his main project: the revolutionary affirmation of life's transience.

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## 10. Images of Capital: An Interview with Zachary Formwalt

*Samir Gandesha and Johan F. Hartle*

SG/JH: Your work is of tremendous interest for this book for one obvious reason: In many different ways it again and again deals with the echoes and effects of the form of capital on the technologies of visual representation, reading visual culture with *Capital*. Long-time exposure and time-lapse photography are, for instance, discussed as visual means of making labour invisible—much in line with the logics of commodity fetishism, which conceals the social relations in the commodity. In this attempt it can be located in the theoretical transitions from Lukács's analysis of reification to Debord's critique of spectacle, a continuity that is often neglected. How has this tradition become important for your work? And would you characterize this continuity yourself? Where would you see the most interesting discontinuities and how do you relate to them?

I think it was Badiou and I think this was in relation to Deleuze that he says somewhere, difference is what there *is*, sameness is what must be produced. I think you could, in relation to this, characterize a continuity between Lukács and Debord in their development, in the direction of generality, of the concept of commodity fetishism. This would of course be a dialectical development, with Marx's term as the primary instance, Lukács's 'reification' as the middle term, and Debord as some kind of return to the first in a more specific, or historically adequate, form of commodity fetishism: the spectacle. In all three of these cases, there is the articulation of a form through which capital produces sameness. It's been a while since I've read both Debord and Lukács, but as I remember it, Marx seems to be a little more optimistic about this sameness that capital produces, at least in relation to the eventual possibility of another kind of unity being articulated and empowered to act against the interests of capital and in the interests of its by-product, the exploited masses. Capital produces a unified body of disempowered individuals and aspects of that unification can be used against it.<sup>1</sup> This is also a way of saying that there are formal aspects of the process of capital accumulation that can be used against it.

If Lukács generalizes commodity fetishism into a broader formal process of reification, at which point it could perhaps become usable as a form

through which actions can be orchestrated against capital, then it seems that Debord shows how this opportunity has been lost to capital itself and in a way this forces a return to the more specified realm of commodity fetishism at a moment when the objects of aesthetic experience have all been reduced to the commodity form.

Is it the case that social relations are no longer primarily mediated by the goods we as labourers produce, which obscure the very manner in which we produce them, thus making the true nature of our relations to one another inaccessible in any immediate form of action? If so, can we instead say that these social relations are now directly taken up in the realm of the spectacle, and that we are constantly presented with representations of them, which make it all the more difficult to see, there, a space of action? I think that's one way of articulating a discontinuity. On the other hand, it could be that what we produce now, primarily, are images in the realm of the spectacle. This would then be a way of articulating the continuity with commodity fetishism, reification, and spectacle. The form of the commodity has not changed, just its material, in a crude sense.

I am more sceptical about the discontinuity formulation, because I think that making an image of social relations is the exception rather than the norm and that such images have the potential to assist in the development of actions against capital, rather than in their containment. But I also think that one must be aware of the primary role of images as commodities. And perhaps this is really the true continuity with Marx: that in our society, the commodity is the most basic material. It is not only what we produce, but what we have to produce with. Any attempt to get to the origin of a given commodity will lead us at best to an image, which is itself a commodity. The idea that one can get to an origin that lies at the threshold where a natural substance encounters a social process whereby it is formed into a good that can be sold on the market is one of those images. It's the kind of image that keeps its audience in a world that they don't actually inhabit and are thereby powerless to act in.<sup>2</sup> So what kinds of images don't do that? Those are the images that, very generally, I am interested both in finding and producing.

**SG/JH:** One can agree with the claim that Marx, Lukács, and Debord are concerned with the manner in which sameness is produced in capitalist society. Where Debord seems to return to Marx with his famous opening statement in *The Society of the Spectacle* that 'Spectacle is capitalism accumulated to the point where it becomes images' suggests a *specifically historical thesis* that around the mid- to late-1920s, we see a dialectic of the transformation of quantity into quality. Yet in your film *In Place of*

*Capital* (2009) you seem to suggest that with the equiprimordial origin of finance capital and photography we find a certain inescapable logic of fetishism. That in capital's movement from  $M$  to  $M'$ , the moment in which what you call, quoting Henry Talbot, the 'moving multitude' disappears just as in the earliest photographic experiments of Talbot and Daguerre, given the extremely long exposure time, movement, itself, could not be represented. Are you saying here that the medium per se cannot function in a critical or if you like 'de-fetishizing' way? This point is reinforced by your reference to the way in which photography is absolutely key to the Taylorism that would further accelerate the passage through capital's circuit of valorization.

I don't at all think, or mean to imply, that photography is incapable of functioning in a critical manner, especially in relation to capital. Photography is a technology just as finance is. I'm not so sure that they have shared origins, but they certainly interact with each other in various ways at certain moments. These interactions are much more interesting and complex than is usually suggested through the kinds of photographs used as illustrations in the financial press. I made *In Place of Capital* in 2009, so a couple of years into the financial crisis that had begun to unfold in 2007. At that time there were all kinds of stories relating to the crisis, and to the financial sector in general, that were being illustrated by photographs. *In Place of Capital* took up Henry Talbot's 1845 photographs of the Royal Exchange in London (Figure 10.1) as a counterpoint to the contemporary images of it and other banking and finance institutions that were appearing daily in the newspapers at the time. On one level this was to draw out a legacy of failure in photography; the failure to capture certain types of movements. In 1845, photography failed to capture bodies moving in space—specifically the bodies of passers-by in front of a commodities exchange in London. In 2009 it failed to capture the movement of capital. But I was also interested in trying to see that earlier failure in the depiction of moving bodies as itself an image of capital. The building façade and the allegorical pediment sculpture are rendered as clearly in the 1845 photograph as they are in the average newspaper photograph of the same façade today. But there's something missing from the earlier photograph. An economy of representational forms appears: the allegory of commerce is rendered perfectly at the expense of the actual commerce below. A good portion of the film is spent 'discovering' the traces of those bodies in movement below. The failure to capture the movement of those bodies—the crowds around the Royal Exchange—can also be seen as a successful expression of a key aspect of





Figure 10.1. Video still from Zachary Formwalt, *In Place of Capital* (2009), showing a part of one of Henry Talbot's 1845 photographs of the Royal Exchange in London.

the aesthetic situation of capital: the history of movements responsible for the accumulation of capital is continually erased in this very process of accumulation (see Marx, 1992b, pp. 159–160).<sup>3</sup> So at that early moment in the development of photographic technologies, the medium was actually well suited to depict this particular aspect of capital.

But to return to your question about photography and fetishism, I think it's important not to fetishize photography as such. Ultimately, photography is something practiced. A fetishistic deployment of it in one place does not preclude its opposite. Especially today with its widespread use in social media, photography should neither be taken for granted, nor reified.

**SG/JH:** When viewing your work one finds not only reflections on the convergence of capital and visual media and, thus, reification and spectacle but also a very elaborate interest in the spatialization of capital through both the geometries of power and social abstraction (the glass towers of, for instance, Shenzhen and Amsterdam) but also the picturesque (as in your *Through a Fine Screen*, your film on Central Park). This comes with an immense attentiveness to geometric form. This formal approach is in a great deal of tension with a Lukácsian, realist emphasis (which, through your historical inquiries, your social contextualization of formal practices, however, also comes to its own right) on narrativization. It also seems to be quite opposed to the more subversive stylistic practices of *détournement*, while your film essays are, at the same time, as through

**somewhat monotonous and melancholic voice-over, quite clearly in line with some of Debord's own work. How would you characterize your own aesthetic strategy in relation to a Lukácsian de-reifying attempt at narrativization and historical embedment on the one hand and the Situationist agenda (of *détournement*, *dérive*, and the tradition of Debordian film essays) on the other?**

The *détournement* in the film essays sometimes relates to just a single image, or more recently, to a particular kind of image. *Through a Fine Screen* takes up the first image to be printed in a newspaper by mechanical means (Figure 10.2). When it was printed in 1880, it was only described in terms of its technical properties. The whole point of the image in that context was to demonstrate the directness of its relation to the photograph—that there was no artist in between the photograph and the newspaper print as there was in every other photographic image appearing in newspapers of the time in the form of etchings. This, *The Daily Graphic*, the newspaper in which it appeared, claimed, was how images would be printed in newspapers in the future. And they were, more or less, correct in their prediction. But aside from this technical aspect that *The Daily Graphic* described, what was this an image of? The only textual hints given in the paper are the caption, 'A Scene in Shantytown, NY', and the affirmation in the main article referring to the image, that the photographer had taken the photograph in the immediate presence of the structures depicted. So why would 'A Scene in Shantytown, NY' be chosen to illustrate the technical properties of mechanically reproducing photographs in newsprint that had been taken in the immediate presence of that which they depict? This was the starting point of the film, which spends a lot of time looking at Central Park and theories of the picturesque that were influential in the design of that park. In the form of the park, the picturesque was another strategy for bringing nature into view, in an apparently immediate manner. The theory and practice of picturesque park design, just like that of a certain strain of photography, was very much a practice of reification that resulted in a particular idea of nature and one's relation to that. It grasped reality in a form which denied the constructedness of this reality, making it impossible to see the specific conditions of its production.

With Central Park, this meant that the clearing of houses and the strategies of representing those living there as undesirable in order to justify their removal was not seen as a condition of the park's existence. With the image in the newspaper, the immediate presence in which the photographer made the image of Shantytown, NY, remains abstract, being both historically and



Figure 10.2. 'A Scene in Shantytown, NY. Reproduction Direct from Nature' (*The Daily Graphic*, 1880). Production still from Zachary Formwalt, *Through a Fine Screen*, 2010.

geographically indeterminate. There is no way to verify where this image was actually taken. Part of Shantytown, NY, was demolished to make way for the park twenty years before that image appeared in *The Daily Graphic*, but part of it still existed at the time, just west of the park (and the name 'shantytown' was really a more general term that would come to be used interchangeably with 'slum'). So there was a possible, material connection between the image in *The Daily Graphic* and the construction of Central Park. That there was no way to verify this was largely due to the way in which the photograph had been described in the newspaper, simply as an image of the future of print media.

The *détournement* was related to this image's place at the origins of the photo-illustrated press. I wanted to reinscribe this reification of the photographic print technology, and a certain kind of fetishization of the slum as something detached from its real social conditions, onto these origins. And I wanted the photograph to be considered in a different history. Not only in the history of photojournalism, as a key moment in the technological development of that field, but also in a history of urban development. The *détournement* was really not so much in relation to this image itself, but in relation to its place in the history of photojournalism. At the beginning of the photo-illustrated press, there was not simply a camera, halftone screen, printing press, etc., but also a way of describing the image as both

an objective registration of presence and a denial of the very place and time of that presence. A description of the technological guarantee of objectivity in place of the social conditions of the scene objectively reproduced.

**SG/JH:** Then, of course, there is a very specific interest in your work in spatial form that situates your work in yet another way in between and in opposition to the tradition of Lukács and Debord. For the specific context of our book, this is, secondly, we think, also interesting because of its affinity to the work of Henri Lefebvre, who could be said to hold a mediating position between Lukács and Debord, reinterpreting the critique of reification in spatial terms (and indeed in dialogue with the Situationists). The key idea here of course is the production of space and the role of visual forms of representation, photography in particular, in such production.

One thing that I think is particularly prevalent in the present moment, is this notion that capital is beyond comprehension. This idea relates to the neoliberal concept of the market as the supreme calculator—the computer of social relations. The market is seen as the only entity capable of calculating at the scale of social relations. So what kind of entity is this market? Is it locatable? Does it exist in space and time, or is it rather the very condition of space and time as we now experience it? In a way, *market* functions here as a spatial counterpoint to *capital*. The market is the place where, and through which, capital flows. So what does this place look like? Well, look around. If what you see is a series of transactions taking place wherein individuals are each pursuing only their separate, individual interests, then you're looking at the market. In the market all relations beyond the transaction are void. If you look around and you see a series of social relations which are not simply reducible to the transaction, then you're quite possibly looking at capital. Ultimately, you can't see the two together.

To relate this to Debord and Lukács, I would say that 'the market' is a reification of the capital relation. It's much easier to make a photograph, or a film for that matter, of 'the market' than it is to make one of capital. I think the actual *process* of making images is much more related to capital than the outcome of this process, i.e. the images themselves.

Over the past four years I have been working on a series of films, two of which were shot on the construction site of the new Shenzhen Stock Exchange in China and the last was shot in the former Grain Trading Hall of Amsterdam's Beurs van Berlage, which became, in the late 1970s, the home of Europe's first options exchange. Both of these exchange buildings were built,

not only to provide shelter for market activity, but also to symbolize this market. To literally 'broadcast' this activity, as the architects of the Shenzhen Stock Exchange put it. Marx's famous description of capital overcoming all spatial barriers and ultimately, through the physical infrastructure of the exchange and its extension through means of communication and transportation, annihilating space by time, is relevant here. These buildings are meant, not only to house the activity of coordinating the flow of capital via various markets, which carries out, to some extent, the annihilation Marx describes, but their façades, and in some cases the surfaces of their interiors, are also meant to travel as images, primarily in the form of photographs, representing 'the market'. These buildings are built as much for these images as they are for sheltering market activity. In the Shenzhen Stock Exchange, for example, a press photographers' platform is built into the main ceremonial space where the opening and closing bell ceremonies take place just in front of a massive LED screen that is to show market data in various graphic and numerical forms (Figure 10.3). This LED screen stands just in front of a glass wall overlooking the city. From the inside, photographers are positioned in front of this surface, so that the images they take will picture, in close up, whoever might be standing in front of the LED screen ringing the bell, and in a wide shot, this would be placed before the view out onto the city. The LED screen as backdrop makes an image of the bell ringer in a world of market figures and the city as backdrop makes an image of the market figures as interface with the city/world. When photographing the outside, this space where the opening ceremony takes place becomes part of a huge cantilevered podium that seems, again in the description of the architects, to 'float' over the ground beneath (Figure 10.4). Now, the image of a floating podium, which required an enormous amount of capital and labour to produce, along with the patterned glass façade of the tower that extends above it, described by the architects as 'revealing the construction technology behind' the façade 'while simultaneously rendering it mysterious and beautiful' are both, I think, extremely good examples of the reification of capital relations in the image of the market as figured by the architecture of the stock exchange. And I think this reification is something that extends to most elements of the built environment, but it is of course interesting to see stock exchange architecture as a kind of paradigmatic case. This is especially so because it turns on its head the famous annihilation of space by time, which the extension of the market as the place where capital can flow, is supposed to accomplish. Because here in these images, it is time, and specifically labour time, that is annihilated. Understanding architecture as an adjunct of capital, as a very different architect, Michael Bell,



Figure 10.3. View from the press photographers' platform of the opening and closing bell ceremonial space, Shenzhen Stock Exchange, China. Production still from Zachary Formwalt, *In Light of the Arc*, 2013.

has suggested, means seeing that 'architecture produced by the market systems that dominate the contemporary city is embedded with time-based processes of material and labour, yet these modes of time are rarely knowable or recoverable in the final form of building; the memory of the city's production is essentially inaccessible' (Bell, 2004, p. 120). So while the extension of market mechanisms entails an annihilation of space by time, this time is no longer on the scale of human experience. We are left with spaces whose histories have been replaced with the transaction. In the last two exchange films I wanted to replace this time of the transaction with the time of construction. Not so much the physical construction of the building, though that is very much included in some parts of *In Light of the Arc*, but the construction of this image of the market as something which forecloses images of other social processes.

**SG/JH:** Marx's concept of 'primitive accumulation' seems to have made a big comeback recently in, among others, the work of David Harvey who re-names it 'accumulation by dispossession'—the idea being that capitalism manages to solve the contradictions flowing from 'over-accumulation' by a specific spatial logic with the city as its central locus. The massive surplus accumulated by capital in the immediate aftermath of '*les trentes*



Figure 10.4. Exterior view of the Shenzhen Stock Exchange in China under construction. Production still from Zachary Formwalt, *In Light of the Arc*, 2013.

*glorieuses*' congealed as finance capital led, of course, to tremendous speculation in the real estate market and a massive process of gentrification, displacement and marginalization of the poor. To what extent were you thinking of this relation between this specific 'production of space' (Lefebvre) and violence ('insects bravely removed by the force of police bludgeons' [New York Times, 1866]) in *Through a Fine Screen*?

This was a big part of *Through a Fine Screen* and the book, *Reading the Economist* that was produced alongside it. The book begins with some sections from a notebook that Marx kept in 1868, part of which followed *The Economist* (then a weekly newspaper, now a magazine, though it is the same institution) in its reporting on what their editor referred to, in 1866, as the first credit panic in living memory (Figure 10.5). So Marx was looking back a couple of years and following the emergence of this credit crisis through the reporting on it in the financial press. *The Economist* articles on the panic that Marx copies into his notebook draw out a kind of aesthetics of finance, or what is perhaps better described as an anaesthetics of finance, with particular emphasis on the money market. The basic argument was that when the credit system works, its mechanisms are imperceptible, but when there is a panic the anaesthesia wears off and the mechanisms suddenly begin to appear. This appearance leads people to make a panicked attempt to exchange whatever store of value

they possess, that they now see as a mere token of credit, for a store of value that does not appear to be credit-based, i.e. cash is withdrawn from a bank, or paper money exchanged for gold in the extreme case. It is the collective action of these panicked individuals which perpetuates the crisis. If everyone would just calm down and look away from the credit mechanisms underlying their various stores of value, then the value would return. *The Economist* was trying to limit the scope of the crisis in 1866 through an explanation of the virtue of invisibility in the sphere of finance. This was at a time when scenes of panic, of bank queues, were being reported in the daily press. I had been working on the research for this book throughout the time of the 2007–2009 crisis, when images of bank queues were again appearing in the press, along with discussions of the ethics of running such images which were seen to contribute to the very scenes they were depicting. In 2007, *The Economist* ran a photograph of the bank run on Northern Rock in an issue that explained securitization as the thing which connected ‘the first bank run in Britain since 1866’ to what they described as ‘dodgy American mortgages’ (*Economist*, 2007a, p. 15; 2007b, p. 89), in the caption of this photograph.

*Reading the Economist* ends with a section in which the Shantytown image from *The Daily Graphic* that appears in *Through a Fine Screen* is (re)connected to another story from the same issue of that newspaper. It

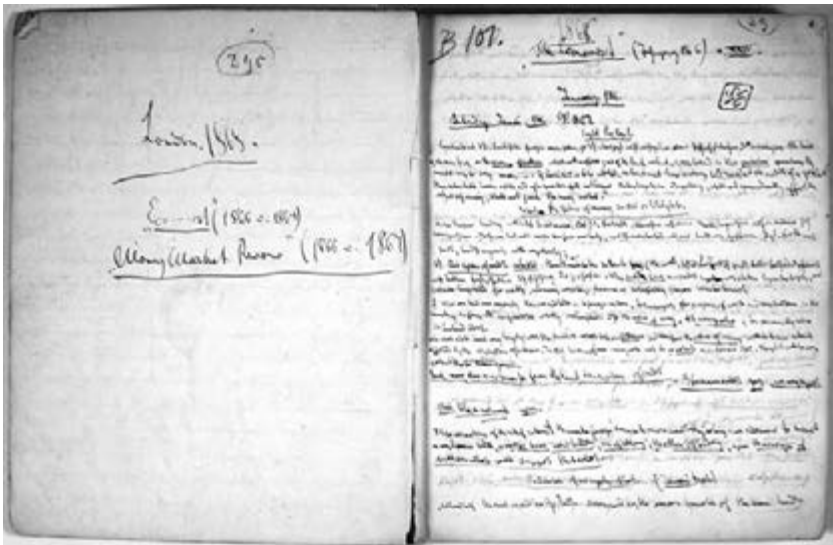


Figure 10.5. Pages in a notebook that Marx kept in 1868, from Zachary Formwalt, *Reading the Economist*, 2010. The notebook can be found at the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.



turns out that this photograph could very well have been an illustration of a story about William H. Vanderbilt's purchase of land in Manhattan for the development of infrastructure for shipping and receiving ocean and railway freight. The story points out that the land is, at the time of writing, 'devoted to nothing except squatters' (Formwalt, 2010, p. 71). Certainly not as harsh language as that used earlier in the *New York Times* but also clearly not a defence of the right of the 'squatters' to the land either, something which must be understood in the context of that term's usage at the time, as in the case of the parts of Shantytown that were cleared to make way for Central Park, when even landowning residents were described in the media, first as 'squatters', and then by the *New York Times* as 'insects'. In either case, their removal was presented, at the very least, as a necessary part of urban development.

In all of this one can see a series of disappearances; certain events which are disarticulated in relation to 'the economy' through its articulation via other events. With the Shantytown image in 1880, described as the future of media imagery, but completely abstracted from the real context in which the photograph was taken, a context in which the destruction implied by urban development is explicit.<sup>4</sup> With the 'dodgy American mortgages' connected in 2007 to the bank runs in Britain, the very real disaster of foreclosure for millions in the United States would have to be described elsewhere.

**SG/JH:** Obviously a particular mode of visual representation goes hand-in-hand with the expanded reproduction of capital in an under-capitalized space à la Luxemburg's *Accumulation of Capital*. In art historical terms your reference to such modes of primitive accumulation also reminds one of Canada's most famous artistic movement, the Group of Seven, as constituting in visual terms the ideology (crystallized in the Roman legal term '*terra nullius*') by disappearing the original inhabitants of Canada's northern landscape. Space is imagined as '*terra nullius*'—'land belonging to no one', de-populated, uninhabited, eminently colonizable. And of course, in your project on Ghana (*A Projective Geometry*) you explicitly refer to Marx's comments on the theory of colonization (as an element of his reflections on primitive accumulation). How do you see the function of (in some cases technologically mediated) visual representation here?

In the scene from *A Projective Geometry* that you refer to, the screen is divided in half. On the left side is the final page of the last chapter of *Capital, Volume I*, which closes with Marx clarifying his interest in the colonies, in this particular instance, as being exclusively 'the secret discovered in the New World by the political economy of the Old World', namely that the

fundamental condition of capital accumulation is the expropriation of the worker, or ‘the annihilation of that private property which rests on the labour of the individual himself’ (Marx, 1992a, p. 940). In order to reveal this secret more clearly, Marx specifies at the beginning of this chapter that he is dealing with ‘true colonies’, which he defines as ‘virgin soil colonized by free immigrants’ (Marx, 1992a, p. 931). It is the United States that is given pride of place here. Native Americans are not mentioned. The problem for capital in such an imaginary space is that there is no incentive for individuals to become wage labourers when they can simply work the ‘virgin soil’ into a productive little plot of land for themselves. These plots of land must be removed from the public sphere and put under the control of capital so that the potential labour market does not dissipate into a multitude of independent producers who would rather determine their own working conditions than submit to those of an employer. In that final chapter, as in so many other instances, it is the state which comes to the rescue of capital, by setting an artificially high price on the land so that individual workers are unable to purchase it and are thus forced into a situation of wage labour in a place where, outside of this action of the state, there is an abundance of resources ripe for the taking. Granted, Marx is looking specifically at E.G. Wakefield’s theory of ‘systematic colonization’ in this chapter, so the state action he describes is the one Wakefield prescribes. And what this prescription reveals is the apparently non-capitalist moment that capital requires the state to secure in order for capital to accumulate through the exploitation of labour power. In the colonies, the dependence of the worker

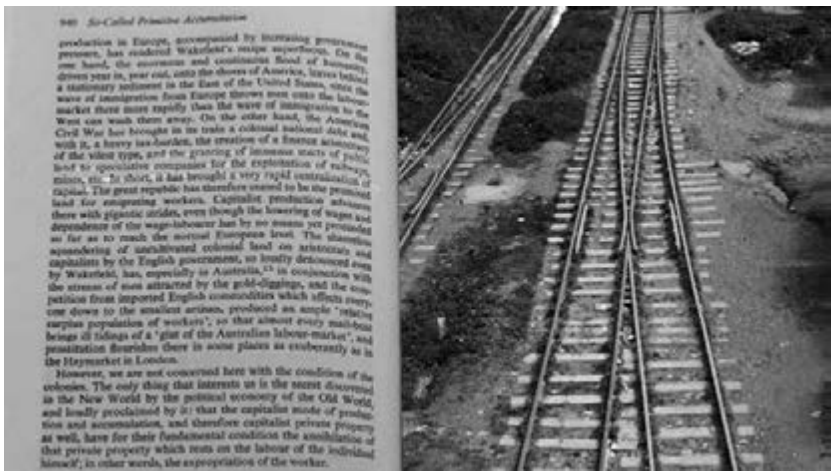


Figure 10.6. Video still from Zachary Formwalt, *A Projective Geometry*, 2012.

on the capitalist must be produced and it is the state that plays a key role here. So why not include in this description, that other condition, which had to be secured in order for this theory of systematic colonization to be formed? Namely, the systematic destruction of the native population. For this, too, is clearly a moment of accumulation by dispossession. A dispossession of the most violent sort. But in that final chapter of *Capital* it is as if the dispossession of the workers has displaced rather than followed upon this other dispossession of the native population (Figure 10.6).<sup>5</sup>

So the page that concludes that chapter stands on the left of the screen. The right half is filled with an image of three train tracks, two of which meet towards the top of the frame, where a young girl and what could be her mother enter, walking down these tracks as the frame then begins to fill with passers-by from both top and bottom and a voice can be heard asking if I, the cameraman, am surveying. The man tells me that he is studying surveying at school. I tell him that I am documenting one of the tracks below; the one that no longer runs, which used to travel to the coastal city of Sekondi, but which is no longer in service. He confirms that the track is indeed no longer in use. And he then says he is off to church. It's a Sunday and no trains are running. The tracks are filled instead with pedestrians. After describing Marx's 'true colonies' as a place where he could sketch out an image of the most basic condition of capitalist production, I then begin to describe the conditions of my own image production there in Ghana, where I was on several occasions mistaken for a surveyor in my filming of the railway track. The whole history of colonial exploitation was so much more on the surface than I had imagined. With my camera and tripod, I effectively became a railway surveyor, though rather than leaving with a map, I left with these images and a story from the 1930s about a community which this railway had served. I had come there with a story about a man who helped determine its path. Both of these stories involve the reproduction of an image of an eminently colonizable space, as you put it.

These stories appear in reverse chronology in the film, with the first describing an episode from the 1930s when the colonial authority decided to relocate the railway headquarters from the city of Sekondi to Takoradi, where in 2007 oil was discovered offshore and which, in light of this, has again become a magnet for capital. In the 1930s the railway station was being moved in order to facilitate access to the larger, industrial port then being built in Takoradi. This move would cause all kinds of problems for the local community in Sekondi and a petition was drafted and submitted with hundreds of signatures from Sekondi residents, addressed to the governor of the colony, which detailed the negative impact that the transfer would

have on the community there. Within the colonial administration, notes were made on the petition indicating that the local population was ‘not competent to form an opinion’ (Provincial Commissioner’s Office, 1934) on the matter. And the petitioners were simply ‘informed’ that the move of the headquarters would realise a large savings for the railway company. The main problem brought up about the negative impact on the local community was left completely unanswered. The change was made with the interests of the empire in mind and the fallout on the ground in the local ‘incompetent’ community was of no perceived consequence from this perspective (Figure 10.7). This image of an incompetent native population who needed to be told how to organize their existence is one that is familiar from the colonial perspective. In the documents surrounding the transfer of the railway and the petition from the residents of Sekondi, it is clear that ‘incompetence’ here simply meant an interest in the local situation—a view from this specific place rather than a view of it as a simple node in the empire.

The second story is about a railway surveyor who gave a talk in 1901, back in London, about the progress being made on the railway being constructed in the Gold Coast at the time to connect a series of mines to the coastal city of Sekondi, where the raw materials from these mines could be loaded onto boats and transported elsewhere in the empire. During the talk the surveyor regrets not having slides to show to his audience of the progress that was being made in the development of a disciplined labour force in the West African Colonies. He then goes on to describe the ‘before’ of this

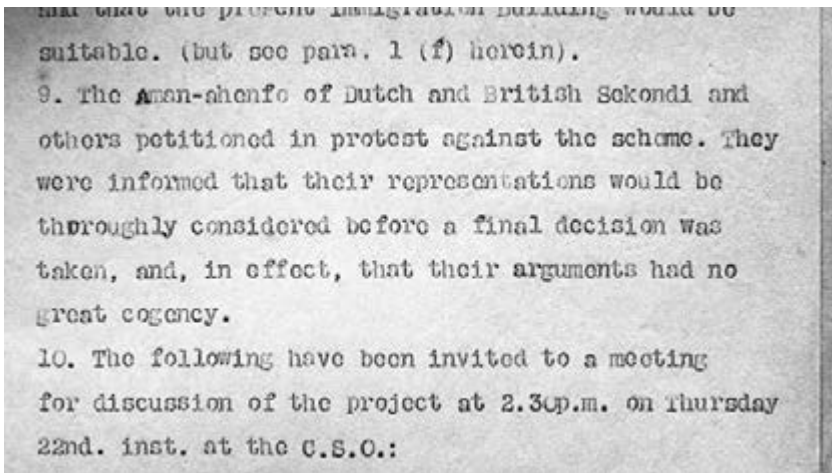


Figure 10.7. Notes by the colonial administration regarding a petition from the residents of Sekondi. These notes can be found in the National Archives of Ghana, in Accra. Video still from Zachary Formwalt, *A Projective Geometry*, 2012.

progress in the form of locals in Sekondi doing nothing but watching the imported labourers construct the railway there (Shelford, 1901). For the surveyor and his London audience, these undisciplined observers were the unformed nature awaiting colonial development. And yet, they were, in the surveyor's description, doing exactly what he had wanted his London audience to do! Watching the progress being made on the railway. But of course, they would be watching from the place where this was happening, with the interests of that place, the place of their community, their homes, their livelihoods in mind. The audience in London would be watching with a different set of interests, where these communities were important only to the extent that they could produce and maintain labour power and eventually also consumption. A path to a factory and a market is what, ultimately, the surveyor's imaginary slides showing the construction of these colonial railways represented. These were not the true colonies Marx spoke of. They were real colonies, where various forms of primitive accumulation were taking place, not simply that of the expropriation of the worker, though for sure that too. But to return to your question of the function of visual representation in relation to primitive accumulation, I'm not so sure that it is all that obvious that a specific mode of visual representation goes hand-in-hand with the expanded reproduction of capital. Certain strategies are used to make the capitalist mode of production appear infinite in its reach. And perhaps at certain historical moments the appearance of this infinite has a definite character. But what I think is more decisive are the ways in which possibilities of something other than capitalist reproduction/accumulation are either made to disappear or appear ridiculous.

**SG/JH:** Marx presents the capital relation as a relation between living and dead labour and, of course, the book, *Capital*, is filled with ghosts, vampires, werewolves, etc. The traditions of Lukács and Debord, the conceptualizations of reification and spectacle, but also your own work seems to be dealing with this rhetoric of life and death. And this is not entirely surprising given the connections Roland Barthes draws in *Camera Lucida* between the '*punctum*' or that detail within the photograph that enables it to transcend its banal context ('*studium*') and death. The 'presence' within a photograph is precisely its absence—'that moment which is no longer'. The concrete forms of visual representation (including architecture, more often than not in its most geometrical monumentality) are presented as mortifying. They make processes invisible and freeze movements. And then your films show the presence of the absent in an indeed ghost-like

**manner, the passers-by in Central Park, the workers constructing the Shenzhen Stock Exchange, etc. How are video and photography on the one hand and the commodity on the other indeed a question of life and death?**

This presence of the absent that you mention as being rendered in a ghost-like manner in the films: It's true that this is the case in both *Unsupported Transit* and *Through a Fine Screen*. And the former is perhaps the easiest film to talk about in this respect because there this relation of the living labour of the present to accumulated past labour is articulated explicitly in the voice-over and in the way the images present a picture of subtraction—the subtraction of the present in which they were taken. The 'punctum' here is more this process of subtraction of certain details, their ongoing disappearance in these images. These details, in *Unsupported Transit*, are the workers who can only be found with a certain effort from the viewer. Even then, they are only half-there, translucent, blurred before the worksite that can be seen through them (Figure 10.8). In time-lapse films this kind of blurring is achieved through the intentional use of longer exposure times in order to prevent the appearance of faster movements from interfering with the slower ones that the film is to depict. In the case of time-lapse films documenting the progress on construction sites, it is the slow ascent of the building that is to be represented and this is done at the expense of all the real labour that actually makes such an ascent possible. Today such films are made as a matter of course in any given construction project, especially with larger, monumental structures. The time-lapse film is a favoured form of representation of such projects and in general it can be seen as a popular medium for the depiction of capital accumulation at the scale of the built environment.

It is in the second half of *Unsupported Transit*, made up of a series of three fairly long static shots of the stock exchange construction site, where it is most difficult to locate the vanishing workers because of the sheer scale of the scene, which is still only a partial view of the entire site. These wide shots reveal a space the scale of which is difficult to fathom. The relation of the human body to the massive structure being built is, on the side of the 'studium', one of construction. Anyone appearing in the shot is involved with the very real work of building this massive structure. But the scale of the structure makes such activity impossible to grasp. One can either see the work or the structure, but not both simultaneously. The specificity of both the work and the workers has been transformed into a general picture of the ongoing results of this labour (Figure 10.9). At the scale of the building as a whole, there is only labour power in use and not any specific labour to



Figure 10.8. Worksite at Shenzhen Stock Exchange. Video still from Zachary Formwalt, *Unsupported Transit*, 2011.

be seen, except perhaps in the few places where a large machine is being operated by an individual worker. But even there, it is the machine that you see and not the operator. Of course, one could look at that machine as accumulated labour, just like the building itself. And that's the point—that what *appears* here is the result of past labour. At the exchange, this is what labour looks like. A commodity, like anything else.

The thing is that at the scale of abstraction at the Stock Exchange, with the exception of the traders and other exchange staff, labour is impossible to see optically, but it's in every single thing that is exchanged there. You need an adequate theory of capital, not a state-of-the-art imaging technology, to be able to see labour there. When an exchange is being built on the other hand—when it's a construction site like any other—labour is precisely what there is to see. But at a certain point in the process, the scale of things takes over. The sheer accumulation of capital overwhelms the actual work being done. When I shot *Unsupported Transit*, the site had definitely reached that point. I felt like it would be a good moment to slow down the time-lapse of this construction project and see some of the mechanisms through which labour disappears in that kind of image of capital accumulation.

**SG/JH:** The ghostly presence of the political—the figure of the worker as you mention—suggests a melancholic figure of shifting moments of absence and presence in the dominant regime of visual/spatial representation. This relates to the work of Debord again. For when speaking about life, death, reification, spectacle, and, of course, the tradition of

**Debord one of course stumbles over the most obvious parallel between your films and some of Debord's films (first and foremost of course the film version of *The Society of the Spectacle*): the monotonous (and maybe melancholic) voice-over. Would you want to situate this obvious formal decision in this tradition?**

Yes, though I wouldn't overemphasize the melancholic aspect of this. It's difficult for me to read a text without dramatizing it and not sounding a little bit melancholic. The monotony is related to this lack of staging. The first time I used my own voice in a work was for a television program that I made in 2005 called *A Story Called 'Eurabia'*. It was for a small artist-run television station in Copenhagen called tv-tv that had a slot just before the porn started late at night. I was living in Malmö, just across the Öresund from Copenhagen, at the time. FOX News was run on normal television in Malmö and they had just aired a program called *Eurabia* that looked at several European cities, one of which was Malmö, where they made a series of superficial links between immigration and terrorism. *A Story Called 'Eurabia'* carried out an analysis of the program, the way in which they used images and texts to make their connections. Working on that piece was really exciting for me, because there was a kind of urgency to it. I had a short deadline to meet and access to a rudimentary recording studio (Figure 10.10). I was able to get most of the footage I needed online and then re-stage the 'broadcast' on a television screen that I then recorded. I had



Figure 10.9. Exterior of Shenzhen Stock Exchange. Video still from Zachary Formwalt, *Unsupported Transit*, 2011.



just seen for the first time Godard and Miéville's *Ici et ailleurs, Comment ça va?* and *Numéro deux* and was completely taken by those works. The first was probably the most influential on the works I would make in the next couple of years, but they all made an impact. Shortly after that I started watching Alexander Kluge's stuff from the 1970s and 1980s and in combination with Harun Farocki, a whole world of possibilities for film and video had opened up for me. All of these filmmakers were using, at one point or another, their own voices. There was something about the immediacy of that that I found attractive and, ultimately, it was a way in which I could work without having to raise any money for the projects. I had seen Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* years earlier, but it had not made an impact on me in the way that these other works did. I think this was in part about timing and my own ideas about filmmaking. Perhaps I wasn't ready for that film when I first saw it. After Farocki, Kluge, Godard, and Miéville, however, I took another look at Debord's films and what really struck me about them was this purity that they seemed to have. A kind of ultimate impenetrability. I think this is because they seem to refuse to touch down on the detail, always remaining on the level of the totality, of the spectacle



Figure 10.10. Voice-over microphone in Malmö recording studio. Video still from Zachary Formwalt's 2005 television program, *A Story Called 'Eurabia'*.

as such, rather than any particular manifestation of it even though the films are loaded with particular images. What I had really liked about the work of Godard/Miéville, Kluge, and Farocki was the way in which a particular instance or detail would suddenly open onto a whole. But I think in all these cases, Debord included, the relation of the voice to the image is never fully resolved. I think that formal decision is as important as the decision to use one's own voice.

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# Notes

## Introduction

1. Sections of this Introduction were presented by Samir Gandesha in a paper entitled 'Jacques Derrida: A "Good European"?' at a Conference on 'Philosophy, Language and the Politics: Re-Evaluating Post-Structuralism' at Jawaharlal Nehru University in December 2014. We would like to thank Ian Angus, Andrew Feenberg, Am Johal, Daniel Musekamp, Joseph Nicolai, and Wayne Knights for their helpful comments on previous drafts. Special thanks to Jason O'Neal King for various kinds of support.
2. Personal communication from art historian and critic Professor Lu Xinghua.
3. This has a particular valence in Putin's aggressive policies vis-à-vis the Ukraine.
4. Pouring cold water on 15 February as representing anything other than a certain mobilization of global citizenry under the aegis of fear was Perry Anderson's typically trenchant commentary. The idea of pan-European solidarity was of course also terribly contradicted by the fiscal contradictions that began to sharpen only a few years later with the global economic crisis of 2007–2008 wherein it was revealed how irreconcilable northern and southern regions of the EU actually are as reflected in the Greece referendum whose anti-austerity results were simply ignored and more recently by the election of SYRIZA and its opposition to German-led austerity.
5. One of the worst being a beheading of some 21 Coptic Christians on a Libyan beach.
6. So much so that in Europe, many prepare themselves for an imminent invasion of ISIS fighters.
7. One must not forget that the ground of the Arab Spring was, to some extent, prepared in Persia, i.e. the 2009 Green Revolution in which the 'micro-spectacle' was turned in the direction not of rendering the population more passive but for creating conditions under which the Ahmadinejad regime could be challenged (unsuccessfully, as it turned out).
8. Demands that have and are being made and with success in, for example, Seattle by Socialist Alternative, as well as in struggles that are brewing elsewhere.
9. This is Moishe Postone's distinction between the critique of capitalism from the 'standpoint of labour', on the one hand, and the critique of 'abstract labour as the dominant form of social mediation', on the other. See Postone, 1996, Chapter 2.
10. In fact, this can explain to some extent the positive reception in the mid-1980s of the conservative critique of 'depoliticization' in the pages of the erstwhile leftist journal *Telos*, which did so much to introduce Critical Theory to North America.

11. See also Chris Hedges (2010), which, despite evoking the concept of 'spectacle', demonstrates no real grasp of how to account for what Marx called 'socially necessary illusion' nor any really convincing, structural account of the 'spectacle'. As such, the author's only real stance isn't a properly 'political' one but rather shrill, impotent sermonizing.
12. One of the most promising accounts of the problem of extremist or Jihadi responses to the neo-liberal 'fundamentalism of the market' is the account offered by Moishe Postone. To wit: The critique of the governing form of social mediation under capitalism, namely, the law of value or 'abstract labour', is concretized in the form of 'spectacular' images of the enemy: quintessentially the rootless 'Jew', but which could just as easily apply, today, to the refugee, migrant, or asylum-seeker, etc. This is a 'false concretization' of the abstract insofar as the structural conditions are not only hidden from view, but actually become reinforced particularly through a re-doubled dynamics of colonization driven by a politics of fear of the other.

### 1. Reification as Structural Depoliticization: The Political Ontology of Lukács and Debord

1. See Jaeggi and Stahl (2011), Bewes and Hall (2011), Thompson (2011), Bitterolf and Maier (2012), Plass (2015).
2. Timo Jütten (2011) goes into a similar direction. He emphasizes that every critique of reification is fundamentally a form of re-politicization (pp. 725–729).
3. In Axel Honneth's book *Reification* (2008), the key text for such ethical readings, the political implications of the term get obscured. Although Honneth is eager to reconstruct the reification of self-relations, of relations to others, of thought and of objects within the framework of his ontological theory of the social, one politically crucial aspect of reification remains in the dark: the reification of society.
4. This seems to be the central claim of the slightly obscure chapter on depoliticization in Gilman-Opalsky (2011, pp. 64–77), which I hope to be able to elucidate to some extent.
5. For the concept of political ontology and the indirectly political dimensions of ontology, see also Bourdieu (1991).
6. It is important to note here that *Gegenstandsform* really describes the forms of objects rather than the form of objectivity as such. To avoid reiterating the failed belief in an all-embracing idealist horizon of subject-object identity, one should be aware of this distinction.
7. As I refer to the concrete factuality of commodities (and later) images, I use this term quite differently from Durkheim's famous use of the term. According to Durkheim (2012), social facts are basically all kinds of social behaviour that exist independently of individual action. In my use of the

- term, 'social facts' are empirical facts into which social relations and general behavioural patterns, characteristic for a specific society, are inscribed.
8. And as Searle specifies in his *Making the Social World*, this act is possible only because subjects (S) performatively relate (R) to the status of these objects (Y) because they have the power to do so (Searle, 2010, pp. 102–104). This might, however, suggest that we are dealing with practices that can still be attributed to individuals which is not the case in Marx's example: Commodification is a widely anonymous and structural (thus: not individual) practice.
  9. One could say more here about the nature of Lukácsian dialectics (and its critique of the natural sciences—see, for instance, Lukács, 1971, p. 6) and its effects on the further development of critical theory. I would just like to refer to the following three (or so) publications here.
  10. If not the terminology of institutional facts, reference to 'instituting' and 'instituted' social reality plays a major role in the political ontology of Cornelius Castoriadis. Society's 'alienation with respect to itself' is 'a manner of instituting itself which contains the refusal to see that *it* institutes itself' (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 214). Castoriadis (in particular and the group Socialisme ou Barbarie in general) has been one of the intermediaries between Lukács and Debord.
  11. The most obvious form of such an ontology in contemporary social and political philosophy is the political ontology of Hardt and Negri, which they themselves describe as 'radical ontology of the production of the social' (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 28). Their critique of 'Empire' (just as much as Castoriadis's theory of political alienation, see above) can be read as a continuation of the critique of political reification in the tradition of Lukács.
  12. Which really suggests that men have lost their practical understanding of the social world as well.
  13. Samir Gandesha (2016) also interprets this key passage as a Rancièrian 'redistribution of the sensible'.
  14. It is thus no coincidence that Debord called his 1961 film *Critique de la séparation*.
  15. See the introduction of this book and the chapters by Joost de Bloois, Sudeep Dasgupta, and Noortje de Leij for further aspects of contemporary analyses of spectacle.
  16. As is well known, Debord even invented his own strategic board game: *A Game of War*.
  17. See particularly Lukács, 1971, p. 80, where Lukács explicitly praises the workers' councils. Debord interprets Lukács's critique of reification (and his plea for radical workers' democracy) as radically contrary to Leninism and his Leninist leanings as massive self-misunderstanding: 'When Lukács, in 1923, pointed to this same organizational form [of the workers' council] as the long-sought mediation between theory and practice thanks to which proletarians, instead of being mere 'spectators' of events that occur in their own organization, consciously choose and experience those events, what he was

- describing as actual virtues of the Bolshevik party were in fact everything that the Party was not' (Debord, 1995, p. 81).
18. The problem of a strictly Hegelian reading of Lukács (a misinterpretation for which Lukács himself is not quite innocent) mainly goes back to the idea that the proletariat has to be understood as the self-identical subject-object of history (Lukács, 1971, p. 206). Jameson (1982, pp. 35–39) suggests a different, materialist reading of Lukács, which I also happen to find more convincing. For a discussion of transparency in Debord, also see Clark, 1999, p. 9.
  19. Lukács somewhat admits this in his self-criticism in the introduction of 1967 (the year of the publication of *The Society of Spectacle*), when he calls his *History and Class Consciousness* a work of romantic anti-capitalism (Lukács, 1971, p. x).
  20. Surprising because of Rancière's general sharp anti-Leninism and his harsh critique of Debord in his *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009).
  21. We consider this aesthetic-political dimension as fundamental for any kind of Marxism. See Samir Gandesha and Johan F. Hartle, eds. *Aesthetic Marx* (2017).
  22. This also suggests why and how it remains so incommensurable with Honneth's (2008) attempt of its reconstruction, mentioned in the beginning.
  23. A major part of Fredric Jameson's theoretical efforts are about this problem. See Jameson (1990).
  24. See the famous texts of Brecht, Bloch, and Adorno, in Adorno et al. (1977).
  25. See also Debray (1995).
  26. See also the chapters by Tyrus Miller and Noortje de Leij in this volume.
  27. Jameson (1982, pp. 35–39, and 2009, p. 230) rejects this interpretation of Lukács and the subsequential identification of Lukács's perspective with a Hegelian identity philosophy. Žižek (2000, p. 120) follows him in this, emphasizing the unforeseeable implications of the revolutionary act, which informs the conception of totality: '[W]e never reach the zero-level of a purely "objective" state of things. The ultimate point is not objectivity, but social "totality" as the process of the global "mediation" between the subjective and the objective aspect. In other words, the Act cannot ever be reduced to an outcome of objective conditions.' I will follow their lead in my interpretation and in my plea for an experimental aesthetics.
  28. This becomes especially interesting from the standpoint of indigenous resistance to the process of primitive accumulation, that is, dispossession and displacement. See Glen Coulthard (2014), in particular how his idea of 'grounded normativity' entails, we might say, 'relations' to the land, people, and animals over the 'fact' of property and exchange relations.

## 2. 'Reification' between Autonomy and Authenticity: Adorno on Musical Experience

1. This chapter was originally presented at the Canadian Society for Continental Philosophy in fall 2014 at Simon Fraser University. I would like to thank Ian Angus, Bruce Baugh, Andrew Feenberg, Johan F. Hartle, and Willow Verkerk for their helpful comments on a previous draft. Any errors of fact or interpretation are mine alone.
2. Adorno first uses this formulation in a letter to Walter Benjamin dated 29 February 1940. See also Thijs Lijster's chapter in this volume.
3. In Goldmann's (2009) view, Lukács's conception of totality and Heidegger's concept of *Sorge* (care) in which past, present, and future are unified, are homologous.
4. See Taminiaux (1985).
5. See Biro (2011); Cook (2011); and also Debord (2008).
6. By this Adorno means the attempt to circumvent a rigorous analysis of capitalism by invoking an illusory past era of supposed unity or reconciliation of subject and object. It is, in a word, what Lukács would use to describe his own position in *Theory of the Novel*: 'romantic anti-capitalism' (Lukács, 1974, p. 18). See for example, Adorno's analysis (1973a, p. 26) of the problem of 'shelteredness' (*Geborgenheit*).
7. The first model shapes the history of Western Marxism in key ways, particularly via the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School both in the first generation as well as in Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action*, and in Andrew Feenberg's philosophy of technology. It also has a profound impact on the thinking of the Situationist International, most notably Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, although, as Howard Caygill (2013, pp. 176–177) has recently suggested, not necessarily Vaneigem's *Revolution of Everyday Life*. The second model shapes various developments in French and Anglo-American thought. In particular, Heidegger's 'ontological difference' is taken up and radicalized in Jacques Derrida's (1982) decentering of structuralism through the operations of *differance*—the differing, deferring logic of the trace that manifests the inherent 'undecidability' of signification and therefore the very possibility of an opening to a 'democracy to come'. It also forms the basis for Hannah Arendt's (1958) differentiation of the *vita activa* and her attempt to distinguish action, as the temporally-bounded inauguration of a new beginning, with the endless and mechanical repetition of behaviour constitutive of what she calls 'the social'. The difference model forms a basis, as well, for Charles Taylor's (1985) elaboration of a philosophical anthropology directed against objectivism and positivism within the human sciences that provides an account of human beings as 'self-interpreting animals'. It can also be discerned in Hubert Dreyfus's (2014) critique of artificial intelligence based on the anthropological specificity of 'skilful coping' based on Heidegger's 'existential analysis of *Dasein*'.



8. Taking as their starting point sense certainty and the commodity form Hegel and Marx seek in the *Phenomenology* and *Capital* to unfold the mediations that lead from these starting points to Absolute Knowledge and the mode of production as a whole, respectively.
9. This can also be discerned in Marx's discussion of the way in which surplus value is erased in the transition from the first to subsequent circuits of capital's expanded reproduction. (See the interview with Zachary Formwalt at the end of this volume.)
10. This is what Althusser and Balibar (1986, p. 17) criticize as 'expressive totality' or the idea that the social formation as a whole could be said to express or be constituted by a single contradiction.
11. This means the attempt to determine the nature of 'Being' by determining the nature of God.
12. Recall also Heidegger's reference to the Choral Ode on the 'Strangeness of Man' from the *Antigone* in his notorious *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1959) from 1935.
13. This means that Honneth replaces metaphysical commitments of the post-Idealist sort, i.e. transcendental subjectivity, with social-psychological ones capable of being empirically tested.
14. This itself stems from the Wittgensteinian attempt to address the sceptical problem of the possibility of 'knowing' other minds by virtue of an 'acknowledgment' of the pain expressed by the other which cannot itself be known with certainty. See Wittgenstein, 2003, §302–§303.
15. See chapter by Hartle in this volume.
16. This is the gist of the critical rejoinders by Judith Butler, Raymond Geuss, and Jonathan Lear included in the volume. See also Andrew Feenberg (2011).
17. In fact these are its Rousseauian roots. See Rousseau's notion of the 'General Will', in Rousseau (1984), which was such an inspiration for Kant.
18. This is precisely the term Fichte uses to describe a set of worries generated by the Napoleonic campaigns in the German-speaking lands in his addresses to the German nation and this has a profound impact on Lukács. See Lukács, 1971b, p. 18. See Bibliography>, in which modern individualism (Fichte's 'sensual selfishness') is a symptom of the age of 'absolute sinfulness'.
19. As Howard Caygill (2014) recently suggested, a critical move in this respect is made by Schiller in taking the step from the actual to the possible as the move from the realm of necessity to that of freedom. In his *Theory of the Novel*, Lukács presents the idea of 'second nature' which anticipates the concept of reification in *History and Class Consciousness* which he describes as 'the charnel house of long-dead interiorities' (Lukács, 1971b, p. 64).
20. Literally 'mineness' and is cognate with *Eigentum* or 'property'. See Adorno, 1973a, pp. 127–28.
21. As Debord puts it in a remarkably similar formulation: "The spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of *life*, is the autonomous movement of the *non-living*' (Debord, 1995, §2, emphasis added).

22. The controversy initially caused by the publication of Victor Farias's book *Heidegger and Nazism* through to the recent publication of the *Schwarze Hefte*, which reveal the extent of Heidegger's anti-Semitism, can be usefully understood in light of Moishe Postone's (1980) account of anti-Semitism as the false concretion of the abstract logic of finance capital in the figure of the Jew.
23. For an elaboration of this, see the 'Introduction' to Gandesha and Hartle (2016).
24. See the chapter in this volume by Thijs Lijster.
25. Adorno's concept of 'structural listening' has been the focus of a critical debate within the philosophy of music. For example, Rose Subotnick, in line with the postmodern suspicion of 'totality', has sought to deconstruct the concept. Richard Leppert, on the other hand, has sought to defend it. What both sides of this issue miss, however, is the manner in which the concept is tied to Adorno's reading of the Hegelian concept of *Erfahrung*, denoting a dynamic, unifying form of experience of an object mediated by subjectivity. This is brought out in Lydia Goehr's positing of the 'elective affinity' between music and philosophy that lies at the heart of Adorno's work. See Goehr, 2008, pp. 1–44.

### 3. 'All Reification Is a Forgetting': Benjamin, Adorno, and the Dialectic of Reification

1. On the other hand, Žižek has been defending Lukács's Leninism against the Frankfurt School. See Žižek (2000).
2. For some classic discussions, see, for instance, Rose (1978) and Jameson (1990). For a more recent and thorough discussion of Adorno's critique of Lukács, however, see Hall (2011). As Hall shows, Adorno criticizes Lukács both for not getting beyond idealism and for regressing behind it, to a form of what Lukács himself calls 'romantic anti-capitalism' (Hall, 2011, p. 62). For my argument here I will focus only on the first accusation.
3. Lukács himself also makes this point in his self-critical 1967 preface to *History and Class Consciousness*.
4. See Benjamin's letter of 20 May 1935 to his friend Gershom Scholem (Benjamin and Scholem, 1980, p. 195).
5. Marx quoted in Benjamin, 1999a, p. 657. For Marx, however, the social meaning projected on the commodity as fetish is never a mere projection. Differences in exchange value of commodities also refer to *real* differences in hours of socially necessary labour, which in turn point to class relations. This connection tends to be blurred by Benjamin's consumption-oriented approach.
6. Nevertheless, Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre (2011) argue that the nineteenth-century collection is the model for a form of capitalism that comes after industrial capitalism, in which commodities that have an aura

- of singularity and individuality (such as haute couture fashion and designer objects, gadgets, and other luxury goods) are increasingly preferred over standardized goods.
7. See Benjamin's essay on Surrealism, where he writes the following about André Breton: 'He can boast an extraordinary discovery: he was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the "outmoded"—in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them' (Benjamin, 1999b, p. 210).
  8. See for instance: 'Aura is not only—as Benjamin claimed—the here and now of the artwork, it is whatever goes beyond its factual givenness, its content; one cannot abolish it and still want art. Even demystified artworks are more than what is literally the case' (Adorno, 1997, p. 56).
  9. This ontological interpretation of the commodity form as being destructive with regard to the use value has been characteristic for the early Frankfurt School. It can, however, be questioned whether it adequately represents the argument of *Capital*, which very much seems to be about the dialectics of the equivalent form allowing for exploitation: surplus value.
  10. Furthermore, the subject also loses that aspect of *him/herself* that is alien or non-identical, the sensuous or bodily aspect of what it is to be human. Hence Adorno's preoccupation with suffering, which he considers as the somatic remainder of nature in the subject.
  11. See Benjamin, 2003, p. 338. This characterization of the experience of 'natural' aura is likely to be inspired by Baudelaire's poem 'Correspondences': 'Man walks within these groves of symbols, each / of which regards him as a kindred thing' (Baudelaire, 1993, p. 19).
  12. Like the translators of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I prefer to translate *Eingedenken* as 'remembrance', rather than 'mindfulness', which is also often used in the literature. The reasons are, first, that 'mindfulness' is more or less synonymous with 'awareness' or 'consciousness' and lacks the historical dimension that the concept 'remembrance' has, and second, the concept of 'mindfulness' brings along associations of contemporary practices of meditation and (Eastern) spirituality, which I here want to avoid.
  13. For instance: what is obscured in this ideology is that the fluidity and flexibility our 'network society' boasts about is reserved for money, commodities, and tourists, not for refugees or jobseekers.
  14. This process of the *displacement* of critique and the resulting *disorientation* of critique is most elaborately discussed in Boltanski and Chiapello (2005).
  15. See especially Latour (1993 and 2010). For an interesting critique of Latour as well as a positive re-appropriation of the concept of reification, see Silva (2013).

## 5. 'The Brilliance of Invisibility': Tracking the Body in the Society of the Spectacle

1. The above description of modernity, and Clark's extension of it to the society of the spectacle emphasizes the *capitalist* character of modernity, instead of a generalized description of a specific period. See Peter Osborne (2000, pp. 63–77) for a critique of theorizations of modernity which emphasize the *experience* of flux and dissolution while ignoring the capitalist and class-fracturing dynamic of modernity, such as in Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts into the Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1988). Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) notion of 'liquid modernity' is similarly critiqued by Rancière (2009, p. 37). The emphasis in my argument of the importance of the category of class, and of socioscopy (Bolla, 1996) as the visualization of a class-riven social totality is predicated precisely on this crucial link between capitalism as an economic system and transformations in visual experience.
2. Karl Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1984) is the exemplary text in which class is figured through the dialectic of coherence and dispersal due to the multiplications of contradictions and economic and political interests. See Marx, 1984, pp. 123–135 in particular.

## 6. Art Criticism in the Society of the Spectacle: The Case of *October*

1. Letter from the editors to *Artforum* as quoted in Bracker (1995, p. 107). The other editors who signed the letter were Lawrence Alloway, Max Kozloff, and Joseph Masheck.
2. The journal was allusively named after Serge Eisenstein's silent film *October*: a phantasmagoric montage about the 1917 October Revolution and methodologically based on Eisenstein's interpretation of Marxism. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe was initially also involved with *October*, but he left after a few issues. Soon after, Douglas Crimp joined the editorial team. However, in 1990 Crimp left *October* after a disagreement over a special issue he put together on the AIDS crisis. In organizing the issue, Crimp had moved towards the domain of political activism, away from the much more theoretical, critical analysis that was typical for *October*. The other *October* editors, however, did not answer Crimp's call for political activism and after their refusal to publish a second issue on the subject that he had organized (entitled 'How Do I Look?'), Crimp left the journal. Benjamin Buchloh, Yve-Alain Bois, and Hal Foster joined *October* after Crimp's departure. It should be noted that Annette Michelson, although a founding editor, is quite seldom brought up in discussion about *October* and often seems not to be regarded as a core 'member' of what is sometimes referred to as the '*October* group'.

3. See Debord, 1995, p. 136: 'Dadaism sought to abolish art without realizing it, and surrealism sought to realize art without abolishing it. The critical position since worked out by the Situationists demonstrates that the abolition and the realization of art are inseparable aspects of a single transcendence of art.'
4. Krauss, Bois, Foster, and Buchloh all participated in the roundtable discussion. The term 'integrated spectacle' stems from Debord's 1988 *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*: a forlorn update of his original analysis, enucleated of his (pre-1968) 'naive' revolutionary optimism. The integrated spectacle 'has spread itself to the point where it now permeates all reality', Debord decrees, and leaves no escape (Debord, 2011, p. 9).
5. No account of *October* would be complete without an analysis of the journal's introduction of French theory into art criticism. Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson in particular extensively incorporated thinkers like Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze. It would, in fact, be of great interest to analyse how Foucault's conception of 'bio-power' and Deleuze's 'societies of control' converge and conflict with the notion of 'spectacle' in the *October* writings. However, within the scope of this chapter, I will confine my analysis of *October* to their use of Debord's 'spectacle'.
6. Krauss's title explicitly refers to the 1984 essay 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' by the Marxist theorist and literary critic Fredric Jameson.
7. Krauss mentions the trance-like installations or colour projections of James Turrell as exemplary for this 'sensory reprogramming' of 'hyperreality'. It is noteworthy that Turrell, described by Krauss as 'an extremely minor figure for Minimalism', appears in practically all the *October* writers' texts as emblematic for the sublimatory, ahistorical, and spectacular experience (Krauss, 1990, p. 12); see also, for example, Foster (2004).
8. See also the chapter by Sudeep Dasgupta in this volume.
9. One common denominator between Baudrillard and Debord and the Situationists is the Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre. Both Baudrillard and the Situationists were heavily influenced by Lefebvre, especially by his *Critique of Everyday Life*, in which he analysed capitalism's permeation of everyday life. Departing from a Hegelian-Marxist conception of alienation, Lefebvre argued that the commodity form had extended to the everyday life, leading to social alienation and atomization. Surprisingly enough, Lefebvre had not read George Lukács's *History of Class Consciousness* when he first developed this analysis of the commodification of everyday life in *La Conscience Mystifiée*. 'Is it true what a chap who has looked through *A Conscience Mystifiée* tells me: that the book just repeats what has already been said in Germany by Lukács?' wrote Lefebvre in a letter to his collaborator Norbert Guterman (Lefebvre as quoted in Trebitsch, 1991, p. xvii). Although Lefebvre and the Situationists ended on rather bad terms, they worked together quite closely and mutually inspired each other from 1957 until their break

in 1963. The Situationists were most fundamentally influenced by Lefebvre's plea for a revolution of the everyday life (literally referenced in Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life*) as well as by his analysis of a shift from the consumption of goods to the consumption of signs and images ('consumer-goods are not only glorified by signs and "good" insofar as they are signified; consumption is primarily related to these signs and not to the goods themselves' (Lefebvre as quoted in Gotham and Krier, 2008, p. 166.)). Baudrillard started his academic career as Lefebvre's assistant and his further theoretical development was also heavily influenced by Lefebvre's work. From the 1970s onwards, however, Baudrillard distanced himself from his earlier Marxist framework and by the time he introduced his ideas on 'simulations' and 'the hyperreal', he argued that there was no truth underneath the 'untrue' anymore, since simulations had become more real than the real. In this hyperreality, 'social theory loses its very object as meanings, classes, and difference implode into a "black hole" of non-differentiation' (Kellner, 1994, p. 10). It is within this context that Baudrillard argued that 'we are no longer in the society of the spectacle which the Situationists talked about, nor in the specific types of alienation and repressions which it implied' (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 273).

10. Not surprisingly, in this respect, Buchloh was the one responsible for writing the entry for 'The Social History of Art' in the introduction to *Art Since 1900*—the comprehensive art history book that Foster, Krauss, Bois, and Buchloh wrote as a joint undertaking. Krauss wrote the entry for 'Poststructuralism and Deconstruction', Foster was in charge of 'Psychoanalysis', and Bois took care of 'Formalism and Structuralism'. 'None of us is married to a particular method', Bois noted in one of their roundtables, yet this division is nonetheless characteristic for their respective art critical approaches (Bois in Bois et al., 2004b, p. 671).
11. Motivated by his discontent with a suffocating 'overdetermined cultural identity' in post-war Germany, Buchloh emigrated in 1977 to the United States with hopeful expectations of arriving in a country that had developed, at least in an early stage, a 'postnational cultural identity' (Buchloh, 2003a, p. xviii). His intellectual formation was, however, highly indebted to Germany's post-war political climate during the 1960s student protests and intellectual debates, fuelled by the Frankfurt School, about the political potential of artistic expressions, the rise of the culture industry, and an overall concern with finding ways to deal with the country's fascist past. Of all the *October* writers, Buchloh is most strongly indebted to the Frankfurt School, especially to Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin's cultural theories (he even adopted the latter's name).
12. See Buchloh, 2003a, p. xxii: 'when culture industry and spectacle massively invade the once relatively autonomous spaces, institutions, and practices of avant-garde culture and begins to control them'.
13. At the beginning of an essay on Hans Haacke, Buchloh quotes Adorno stating that '[t]he organizing, unifying principle of each and every work of art is

- borrowed from that very rationality whose claim to totality it seeks to defy' (Adorno as quoted in Buchloh, 2003b, p. 203). The totalizing rationality that art, in Buchloh's art criticism, has to defy, however, is that of spectacle.
14. See Gotham and Krier (2008) for a lucid explication of the difference between these two forms of 'immanent critique'. Horkheimer and Adorno's project of immanent critique was mainly 'to discern what aspects of existing society should be negated or transcended, in order to create a better society. The Situationists informed their critique of the spectacle with a vision of liberation using the strategy of *détournement*. [...] For the Situationists, *détournement* is revolutionary praxis that attempts to reveal that the ideas, values, and cultural and technological means of launching progressive social change are already available to everyone. [...] The goal of Situationist practice is to appropriate the texts, images, and advertisements that are produced by the spectacular society in an effort to bring critical awareness to people's struggles and conflicts, and to incite collective revolt against the stultification induced by entertainment and spectacle' (Gotham and Krier, 2008, pp. 180, 181).
  15. The minimalist three-dimensional object challenged Clement Greenberg's 'disembodied' contemplative observer and situated the subject in a spatial and temporal relation to the work by encouraging him/her to physically engage with the three-dimensional cubes and beams. For formalists such as Fried, these works herewith contaminated the specifics of the medium sculpture with the timely experience of theatre. See also the chapter by Kati Röttger in this volume.
  16. See also Day, 2010, pp. 187–193.
  17. Buchloh acknowledges in his 'Epilogue on the Idea of Use Value', the concluding subchapter of the essay, that 'use value is at the same time art's most heteronomous counterpart' and warns in the section that follows for the imminent recuperation of art's critical transgression (in Marxist-Adornian fashion he emphasizes that art's possibility of critique is intertwined with the specific conditions of its historical context) in which it is transformed into a 'merely aesthetic object'. Herewith art is not only neutralized but becomes, as both Debord and Marcuse theorized, a sublimating distraction that strengthens the dominant social structure: 'Restorations on the formal surfaces of social reality', Buchloh writes, 'effect the opposite of their original intentions' (Buchloh, 2003c, pp. 198–199).
  18. See also Day, 2010, p. 187.
  19. Buchloh's focus on the distinction between a false, surface reality and 'real' social structures underneath clearly reveals a break with the Baudrillardian conception of simulacrum as referenced by Krauss and Foster. Nevertheless, they all share a concern for uncovering or unveiling a certain truth, or, so to speak, for waking up the sedated subject—which might lead us, again, to question *October's* integration of Baudrillard's theory of simulacrum into their art critical project.

## 7. Spectacle and Politics: Is There a Political Reality in the Spectacle of Society?

1. Referring to the congruence between the notions of spectacle and theatre in Debord's approach, see Debord, 1995, p. 41.
2. Rancière 2004, p. 272: 'Plato drew an opposition between the poetic democratic community of the theatre and a "true" community: a choreographic community in which no one remains spectator, in which everyone moves according to a commutarian rhythm determined by mathematical proportion.' See Starobinski, 1988, p. 81.
3. This is precisely the advantage of the term. It is inclusive and, at the same time, differentiates. This also applies, for example, to an analysis of Modernist spectacle in terms of theatre or media studies. The concept of the spectacle is suitable in this context for analysing and describing different mass media such as film, radio, theatre, and TV, while these media themselves include spectacular practices. In many cases, the popularity of these media is linked to precisely these practices and the genres associated with them and emerging from them, such as grand opera, comedy, musicals, and Westerns (Röttger, 2015).
4. See Davis and Postlewait, 2003, pp. 4–5.
5. This rethinking has already gained some ground in theatre practice and in theatre studies, without this having been reflected in treatises on literary or political theory. In a nutshell: The focus is on confronting the theatre of representation with the theatre as event, the theatre of identity with the theatre of appearance, the theatre of imagination with the theatre of production, and finally to relinquish the paradigm of an architecturally defined illusionist stage in order to construe the theatre as materialization of a stage that can be constituted wherever actors and spectators meet (see, among others, Lehmann, 2006).
6. Nancy distinguishes in this context between good and bad mimesis and between good and bad spectacles (2000, pp. 68 and 72).
7. For more on this (including examples), see Hartmann et al. (2012).
8. See on this Arendt, 1998, p. 237
9. For the English version, see Debord, Guy. "Theory of the Dérive" (1958). Trans. Ken Knapp. Bureau of Public Secrets, <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/2.derive.htm>. (last accessed 13.2.2018).
10. *International Situationniste*, 1960, p. 152.
11. It is important to stress that urban interventions are not the only theatrical art form that produce a shift to the so-called dramatic theatre. See e.g. Hans-Thies Lehmann's considerations about 'new forms of theatre', or more specifically, *post-dramatic theatre*: 'Aristotle's poetics couples imitation and action in the famous formula that tragedy is an imitation of human action, *mimesis praxeos*. [...] While for good reasons the poetics of drama have never abandoned the concept of action as the object of mimesis, the reality of the new theatre begins precisely with the fading away of this trinity of



drama, imitation and action' (2006, pp. 36–37). Instead, it realizes that the real of our experiential worlds, of our ways of seeing and thinking is shaped and structured by art or even created by art in the first place. This shift from the representational mode of theatre to the *aesthetic* experience through theatre bears in terms of post-dramatic theatre various consequences: 'A characteristic factor of the theatre now comes into its own, to which the following formula applies: sensuality undermines sense' (Lehmann, 2006, p. 162). It includes a detachment of the word through the body, and a phenomenology of perception. The bodily presence, the experience of theatre as event, the performance of its materiality, all generate a change in the relation between *mimesis*, *poesis*, and *aisthesis*. *Aisthesis* gains from *mimesis*, and *poesis* separates itself from the word.

12. According to Arendt, production is crucially different to action as it produces an artificial world of things. Cf. Arendt, 1958, p. 14.

## 8. Reification, Sexual Objectification, and Feminist Activism

1. Two recent examples are Hull (2013) and Jütten (2010).
2. I agree with Honneth's (2008, p. 20) claim that Lukács views reification to be a process in which social behaviours do not correspond to ontological facts.
3. Lukács quotes Marx: 'The property-owning class and the class of the proletariat represent the same human self-alienation. But, the former feels at home in this self-alienation and feels itself confirmed by it; it recognizes alienation as its own instrument and in it possesses the semblance of a human existence. The latter feels itself destroyed by this alienation and sees in it its own impotence and the reality of an inhuman existence' (Lukács, 1971, p. 149).
4. 'The individual can use his knowledge of these laws to his own advantage, but he is not able to modify the process by his own activity' (Lukács, 1971, p. 87).
5. 'The divorce of the phenomena of reification from their economic bases and from the vantage point from which alone they can be understood, is facilitated by the fact that the [capitalist] process of transformation must embrace every manifestation of the life of society if the preconditions for the complete self-realisation of capitalist production are to be fulfilled' (Lukács, 1971, p. 95).
6. Honneth critiques Lukács for considering reification to be solely a result of economic circumstances: he accuses Lukács for having 'a systematic blindness associated with his prejudice that only economic forces can lead to a denial of humans' human characteristics. Lukács in no way sought to gain knowledge of the ideological convictions that could cause entire groups of people to appear depersonalized and thus as mere things. He was so singularly focused on the effects of capitalist commodity exchange on the behaviour of social actors that he was incapable of taking note of any other social source of reification' (Honneth, 2008, p. 78).

7. MacKinnon explains how female desirability becomes commodified: 'Like the value of a commodity, women's sexual desirability is fetishized: it is made to appear a quality of the object itself, spontaneous and inherent, independent of the social relation which creates it, uncontrolled by the force that requires it' (MacKinnon, 1982, p. 540). For women, MacKinnon argues that the predicament of reification is all-pervasive; it is their reality (MacKinnon, 1982, p. 542).
8. Anderson further argues that the commodification of female labour, such as surrogate pregnancy and 'prostitution', is disrespectful of women and encroaches upon their autonomy. She states that one is autonomous if 'she confidently governs herself by principles and valuations she reflectively endorses' (Anderson, 1993, p. 142). However, autonomy can be affected and potentially threatened through 'addictions, compulsions, phobias, and other neuroses, which motivate a person in ways she cannot reflectively endorse' (ibid.). In addition, Anderson states that, coming from external sources, autonomy can be undercut by social systems of domination and stigmatization (ibid.). She claims that the sale of reproductive labour or one's sexuality adversely affects female autonomy especially because it is often if not always performed under coercion.
9. Queen describes the role of an activist sex worker: 'to support our clients' forays away from traditional masculine sexuality, to transgress masculine boundaries and rebel against the rigid limitations created by our own fear of sex'. She states that sex workers act as educators for their clients and for each other to challenge normative understandings of sexual identity and sexual pleasure (Queen, 1997, pp. 134–135).
10. See Nina Hartley's (1997) account of objectification from the perspective of a sex worker. See also the stories of other feminist sex-workers in the same volume (Nagle, 1997).
11. Braidotti makes a similar point: 'Data banks of biogenetic, neural and mediatic information about individuals are the true capital today, as the success of Facebook demonstrates at a more banal level' (Braidotti, 2013, p. 61).
12. Haraway states that her problem with the Marxist and socialist standpoint is that it unifies the 'polyvocal' contributions that have become 'visible in anti-colonial discourse and practice' and presents itself as a totality, instead of admitting that its accounts are only partial (Haraway, 1991, pp. 159–160).

9. **Reified Life: Vitalism, Environmentalism, and Reification in Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* and *A Sick Planet***

1. As Lukács argues: 'There arises a rational systematization of all statutes regulating life, which represents, or at least tends towards, a closed system applicable to all possible and imaginary cases' (Lukács, 1971, p. 96).
2. From the onset, in his Situationist and even lettrist works, Debord's thinking is entirely *environmental*. Psychogeography and *dérive* take the milieu

- of the modern subject as the battleground precisely because spectacle—as ideology embodied—entails the production of the lifeworld or environment.
3. In his biography of Guy Debord, Anselm Jappe writes: 'It would certainly be a mistake to tax the Situationists with 'vitalism' in any traditional sense, in the sense that Bergson or Simmel was a vitalist. They in no way meant to criticize social institutions or art as extraneous to life as it actually exists today. [...] Undoubtedly they wished to contrast life and its reifications, but they wished to do so in the name of *another life*' (Jappe, 1999, p. 136; emphasis in the original). What I attempt to show in this chapter is that the distinction between vitalism and historicism that Jappe makes is not that clear-cut in the work of Debord. Debord's historical materialism is in fact underpinned by vitalist assumptions—an idiosyncratic vitalism perhaps, in the sense that is not explicitly grounded in any recognizable philosophical tradition, but a distinct vitalism nonetheless.
  4. For an elaborate discussion of the distinction between *anthropos* and *humanitas*, see Mignolo (2003 and 2011). See also Bloois '2015).
  5. Once more, a parenthetical reference to Adorno is illuminating concerning the stakes of Debord's argument: in *Minima Moralia*, Adorno argues that 'every undistorted relationship, perhaps indeed the conciliation that is part of organic life itself, is a gift. He who through consequential logic becomes incapable of it, makes himself a thing and freezes' (2005, p. 42). For Adorno, life is opposed to exchange: once entered into the sphere of commodity production, life becomes ossified, reified for having been made exchangeable. As gift, life is transient: it defies objectivation.

## 10. Images of Capital: An Interview with Zachary Formwalt

1. This is most famously articulated in Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto* (1998) in which the bourgeoisie is understood in Faustian terms as the sorcerer that calls into being the very force, namely the proletariat, that will bring about its own demise.
2. See, for example, Althusser's Lacanian account of ideology as 'an imaginary relation of [...] individuals to the real conditions in which they live' (Althusser, 1971, p. 165).
3. In describing the 'expanded reproduction' of capital in *Capital, Vol. II*, Marx shows the way in which the origin of capital in surplus value is obliterated in the passage from the first to subsequent circuits of capital.
4. As a kind of side-note to this, the last residents of the area that became Central Park were evicted during a financial crisis in 1857. Descriptions of this crisis could be found throughout the newspapers of the time, while the final removal of residents went unreported. The description of the residents as 'insects' who had been violently/bravely removed by the police came al-

most a decade later in a *New York Times* article on Central Park ('CENTRAL PARK', 1866).

5. It was a decade later, but at that time, as Rebecca Solnit vividly describes in her account of Eadweard Muybridge's panoramic photographs of San Francisco made in the summer of 1877, at the height of the Great Railway Strike in the US, urban workers and Native Americans, though now 'separate subjects on bookshelves and in universities, seemed that summer as though they were engaged in the same war, a war against the central institutions that were taking away their power, their freedom, even their ability to feed themselves, to survive. It was as though every kind of population were being subjugated to the might of the industrial age, to its control of resources, to the brutality of regimented jobs and locked-down lives that still didn't provide enough to eat, whether it was railroad workers on twelve-hour shifts or Indians forced to till the inferior land of the reservations. Removing the Indians opened up their land as an exploitable resource; keeping the labourers subjugated supplied the already-industrialised zones with the cheap labour that made such heinous profits possible. Five years earlier Sitting Bull had sat down to smoke a pipe in the middle of a battle. In the summer of 1877 hundreds of thousands were doing something similar, and from Buffalo to the wilder parts of Montana they succeeded in shutting down the industrial complex and defying the military' (Solnit, 2003, pp. 164–165).



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