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stood; a very simple sign, "the fall of the Berlin Wall," repeated over and over again, immediately attained the incontestability of all the other *signs of democracy*.

In 1991 the first effects of this spectacular modernization were felt in the complete disintegration of Russia. Thus – more clearly even than in the West – were the disastrous results of the general development of the economy made manifest. The disorder presently reigning in the East is no more than a consequence. The same formidable question that has been haunting the world for two centuries is about to be posed again *everywhere*: How can the poor be made to work once their illusions have been shattered, and once force has been defeated?

Thesis 111, discerning the first symptoms of that Russian decline whose final explosion we have just witnessed and envisioning the early disappearance of a world society which (as we may now put it) will one day be erased from the memory of the computer, offered a strategic assessment whose accuracy will very soon be obvious: The "crumbling of the worldwide alliance founded on bureaucratic mystification is in the last analysis the most unfavorable portent for the future development of capitalist society."

This book should be read bearing in mind that it was written with the deliberate intention of doing harm to spectacular society. There was never anything outrageous, however, about what it had to say.

Guy Debord  
June 30, 1992

I

SEPARATION PERFECTED

*But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence... illusion only is sacred, truth profane. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.*

– Feuerbach, Preface to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity*

1 THE WHOLE LIFE of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. (All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.)

2 IMAGES DETACHED FROM every aspect of life merge into a common stream, and the former unity of life is lost forever. Apprehended in a *partial* way, reality unfolds in a new generality as a pseudo-world apart, solely as an object of contemplation. The tendency toward the specialization of images-of-the-world finds its highest expression in the world of the autonomous image, where deceit deceives itself. The spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of non-life.

3 THE SPECTACLE APPEARS at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification. As a part of society, it is that sector where all attention, all consciousness, converges. Being isolated – and precisely for that reason – this sector is the locus of illusion and false consciousness; the unity it imposes is merely the official language of generalized separation.

4 THE SPECTACLE IS NOT a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images. ]

5 THE SPECTACLE CANNOT be understood either as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the

technology of the mass dissemination of images.] It is far better viewed as a *weltanschauung* that has been actualized, translated into the material realm – a (world view transformed into an objective force. )

6 UNDERSTOOD IN ITS TOTALITY, the spectacle is both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production. It is not something *added* to the real world – not a decorative element, so to speak. On the contrary, it is the very heart of society's real unreality. In all its [specific manifestations – news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment] – the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life. It is the omnipresent celebration of a choice *already made* in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice. In form as in content the spectacle serves as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system. It further ensures the permanent presence of that justification, for it governs almost all time spent outside the production process itself.

7 THE PHENOMENON OF SEPARATION is part and parcel of the unity of the world, of a global social praxis that has split up into reality on the one hand and image on the other. Social practice, which the spectacle's autonomy challenges, is also the real totality to which the spectacle is subordinate. So deep is the rift in this totality, however, that the spectacle is able to emerge as its apparent goal. The language of the spectacle is composed of *signs* of the dominant organization of production – signs which are at the same time the ultimate end-products of that organization.

- 8 THE SPECTACLE CANNOT be set in abstract opposition to concrete social activity, for the dichotomy between reality and image will survive on either side of any such distinction. (Thus the spectacle, though it turns reality on its head, is itself a product of real activity.) Likewise, (lived reality suffers the material assaults of the spectacle's mechanisms of contemplation, incorporating the spectacular order and lending that order positive support.) Each side therefore has its share of objective reality. And every concept, as it takes its place on one side or the other, has no foundation apart from its transformation into its opposite: reality erupts within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and underpinning of society as it exists.
- 9 IN A WORLD THAT *really* has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood.
- 10 THE CONCEPT OF the spectacle brings together and explains a wide range of apparently disparate phenomena. Diversities and contrasts among such phenomena are the appearances of the spectacle – the appearances of a social organization of appearances that needs to be grasped in its general truth. Understood on its own terms, the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance. But any critique capable of apprehending the spectacle's essential character must expose it as a visible negation of life – and as a negation of life that has *invented a visual form for itself.*

- 11 IN ORDER TO DESCRIBE the spectacle, its formation, its functions and whatever forces may hasten its demise, a few artificial distinctions are called for. To analyze the spectacle means talking its language to some degree – to the degree, in fact, that we are obliged to engage the methodology of the society to which the spectacle gives expression. For what the spectacle expresses is the total practice of one particular economic and social formation; it is, so to speak, that formation's *agenda*. It is also the historical moment by which we happen to be governed.
- 12 THE SPECTACLE MANIFESTS itself as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: "Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear." The attitude that it demands in principle is the same passive acceptance that it has already secured by means of its seeming incontrovertibility, and indeed by its monopolization of the realm of appearances.
- 13 THE SPECTACLE IS essentially tautological, for the simple reason that its means and its ends are identical. It is the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire globe, basking in the perpetual warmth of its own glory.
- 14 THE SPECTACULAR CHARACTER of modern industrial society has nothing fortuitous or superficial about it; on the contrary, this society is based on the spectacle in the most fundamental way. For the spectacle, as the perfect image of the ruling economic order, ends are nothing and

development is all – although the only thing into which the spectacle plans to develop is itself.

- 15 AS THE INDISPENSABLE PACKAGING for things produced as they are now produced, as a general gloss on the rationality of the system, and as the advanced economic sector directly responsible for the manufacture of an ever-growing mass of image-objects, the spectacle is the chief product of present-day society.
- 16 THE SPECTACLE SUBJECTS living human beings to its will to the extent that the economy has brought them under its sway. For the spectacle is simply the economic realm developing *for itself* – at once a faithful mirror held up to the production of things and a distorting objectification of the producers.
- 17 AN EARLIER STAGE in the economy's domination of social life entailed an obvious downgrading of *being* into *having* that left its stamp on all human endeavor. The present stage, in which social life is completely taken over by the accumulated products of the economy, entails a generalized shift from *having* to appearing: all effective "having" must now derive both its immediate prestige and its ultimate *raison d'être* from appearances. At the same time all individual reality, being directly dependent on social power and completely shaped by that power, has assumed a social character. Indeed, it is only inasmuch as individual reality *is not* that it is allowed to *appear*.

- 18 FOR ONE TO WHOM the real world becomes real images, mere images are transformed into real beings – tangible figments which are the efficient motor of *trancelike* behavior. Since [the spectacle's job is to cause a world that is no longer directly perceptible to be *seen* via different specialized mediations, it is inevitable that it should elevate the human sense of sight to the special place once occupied by touch] the most abstract of the senses, and the most easily deceived, sight is naturally the most readily adaptable to present-day society's generalized abstraction. (This is not to say, however, that the spectacle itself is perceptible to the naked eye) – even if that eye is assisted by the ear. The spectacle is by definition immune from human activity, inaccessible to any projected review or correction. It is the opposite of dialogue. [Wherever representation takes on an independent existence, the spectacle reestablishes its rule.]
- 19 THE SPECTACLE IS HEIR to all the weakness of the project of Western philosophy, which was an attempt to understand activity by means of the categories of vision. Indeed the spectacle reposes on an incessant deployment of the very technical rationality to which that philosophical tradition gave rise. So far from realizing philosophy, [the spectacle philosophizes reality, and turns the material life of everyone into a universe of speculation.]
- 20 PHILOSOPHY IS AT ONCE the power of alienated thought and the thought of alienated power, and as such it has never been able to emancipate itself from theology. The specta-

cle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion. Not that its techniques have dispelled those religious mists in which human beings once located their own powers, the very powers that had been wrenched from them – but those cloud-enshrouded entities have now been brought down to earth. It is thus the most earthbound aspects of life that have become the most impenetrable and rarefied. The absolute denial of life, in the shape of a fallacious paradise, is no longer projected onto the heavens, but finds its place instead within material life itself. The spectacle is hence a technological version of the exiling of human powers in a “world beyond” – and the perfection of separation *within* human beings.]

- 21 SO LONG AS THE REALM of necessity remains a social dream, dreaming will remain a social necessity. The spectacle is the bad dream of modern society in chains, expressing nothing more than its wish for sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of that sleep.
- 22 THE FACT THAT the practical power of modern society has detached itself from itself and established itself in the spectacle as an independent realm can only be explained by the self-cleavage and self-contradictoriness already present in that powerful practice.
- 23 AT THE ROOT OF the spectacle lies that oldest of all social divisions of labor, the specialization of power. The specialized role played by the spectacle is that of spokesman for all other activities, a sort of diplomatic representative of

hierarchical society at its own court, and the source of the only discourse which that society allows itself to hear. Thus the most modern aspect of the spectacle is also at bottom the most archaic.

- 24 BY MEANS OF THE SPECTACLE the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise. The spectacle is the self-portrait of power in the age of power's totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence. The fetishistic appearance of pure objectivity in spectacular relationships conceals their true character as relationships between human beings and between classes; a second Nature thus seems to impose inescapable laws upon our environment. But the spectacle is by no means the inevitable outcome of a technical development perceived as *natural*; on the contrary, the society of the spectacle is a form that chooses its own technical content. If the spectacle – understood in the limited sense of those “mass media” that are its most stultifying superficial manifestation – seems at times to be invading society in the shape of a mere apparatus, it should be remembered that this apparatus has nothing neutral about it, and that it answers precisely to the needs of the spectacle's internal dynamics. If the social requirements of the age which develops such techniques can be met only through their mediation, if the administration of society and all contact between people now depends on the intervention of such “instant” communication, it is because this “communication” is essentially one-way; the concentration of the media thus amounts to the monopolization by the admin-

istrators of the existing system of the means to pursue their particular form of administration. The social cleavage that the spectacle expresses is inseparable from the modern State, which, as the product of the social division of labor and the organ of class rule, is the general form of all social division.

25 SEPARATION IS THE alpha and omega of the spectacle. Religious contemplation in its earliest form was the outcome of the establishment of the social division of labor and the formation of classes. Power draped itself in the outward garb of a mythical order from the beginning. In former times the category of the sacred justified the cosmic and ontological ordering of things that best served the interests of the masters, expounding upon and embellishing what society could not deliver. Thus power as a separate realm has always had a spectacular aspect, but mass allegiance to frozen religious imagery was originally a shared acknowledgment of loss, an imaginary compensation for a poverty of real social activity that was still widely felt to be a universal fact of life. The modern spectacle, by contrast, depicts what society can deliver, but within this depiction what is permitted is rigidly distinguished from what is possible. The spectacle preserves unconsciousness as practical changes in the conditions of existence proceed. 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 comminution of machine-governed gestures, and an ever-widening market. In the course of this development (all community and critical awareness have ceased to be) nor have those forces, which were able – by separating – to grow enormously in strength, yet found a way to *reunite*.

- 26 THE GENERALIZED SEPARATION of worker and product has spelled the end of any comprehensive view of the job done, as well as the (end of direct personal communication between producers). As the accumulation of alienated products proceeds, and as the productive process gets more concentrated, consistency and communication become the exclusive assets of the system's managers. The triumph of an economic system founded on separation leads to the proletarianization of the world.
- 27 OWING TO THE VERY success of this separated system of production, whose product is separation itself, that fundamental area of experience which was associated in earlier societies with an individual's principal work is being transformed – at least at the leading edge of the system's evolution – into a realm of non-work, of inactivity. Such inactivity, however, is by no means emancipated from productive activity: it remains in thrall to that activity, in an uneasy and worshipful subjection to production's needs and results; indeed it is itself a product of the rationality of production. There can be no freedom apart from activity, and within the spectacle all activity is banned – a corollary of the fact that all *real* activity has been forcibly

channeled into the global construction of the spectacle. So what is referred to as "liberation from work," that is, increased leisure time, is a liberation neither within labor itself nor from the world labor has brought into being.

28 THE REIGNING ECONOMIC system is founded on isolation; at the same time it is a circular process designed to produce isolation. Isolation underpins technology, and technology isolates in its turn; all goods proposed by the spectacular system, from cars to televisions, also serve as weapons for that system as it strives to reinforce the isolation of "the lonely crowd." The spectacle is continually rediscovering its own basic assumptions — and each time in a more concrete manner.

29 THE ORIGIN OF THE spectacle lies in the world's loss of unity, and its massive expansion in the modern period demonstrates how total this loss has been: the abstract nature of all individual work, as of production in general, finds perfect expression in the spectacle, whose very manner of being concrete is, precisely, abstraction. The spectacle divides the world into two parts, one of which is held up as a self-representation to the world, and is superior to the world. The spectacle is simply the common language that bridges this division. Spectators are linked only by a one-way relationship to the very center that maintains their isolation from one another. The spectacle thus unites what is separate, but it unites it only in its separateness.

30 THE SPECTATOR'S ALIENATION from and submission to the contemplated object (which is the outcome of his unthinking activity) works like this: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The spectacle's externality with respect to the acting subject is demonstrated by the fact that the individual's own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator feels at home nowhere, for the spectacle is everywhere.

31 WORKERS DO NOT produce themselves: they produce a force independent of themselves. The success of this production, that is, the abundance it generates, is experienced by its producers only as an abundance of dispossession. All time, all space, becomes *foreign* to them as their own alienated products accumulate. The spectacle is a map of this new world — a map drawn to the scale of the territory itself. In this way the very powers that have been snatched from us reveal themselves to us in their full force.

32 THE SPECTACLE'S FUNCTION in society is the concrete manufacture of alienation. Economic growth corresponds almost entirely to the growth of this particular sector of industrial production. If something grows along with the self-movement of the economy, it can only be the alienation that has inhabited the core of the economic sphere from its inception.

33 THOUGH SEPARATED FROM his product, man is more and more, and ever more powerfully, the producer of every detail of his world. The closer his life comes to being his own creation, the more drastically is he cut off from that life.

34 THE SPECTACLE IS capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image.

## II

### THE COMMODITY AS SPECTACLE

real abstract  
or real

The commodity can only be understood in its undistorted essence when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole. Only in this context does the reification produced by commodity relations assume decisive importance both for the objective evolution of society and for the stance adopted by men towards it. Only then does the commodity become crucial for the subjugation of men's consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression. . . . As labor is progressively rationalized and mechanized man's lack of will is reinforced by the way in which his activity becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative.

— Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*

- 35 THE SELF-MOVEMENT of the spectacle consists in this: it arrogates to itself everything that in human activity exists in a fluid state so as to possess it in a congealed form – as things that, being the *negative expression* of living value, have become exclusively abstract value. In these signs we recognize our old enemy the commodity, which appears at first sight a very trivial thing, and easily understood, yet which is in reality a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties.
- 36 HERE WE HAVE the principle of commodity fetishism, the domination of society by things whose qualities are “at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses.” This principle is absolutely fulfilled in the spectacle, where the perceptible world is replaced by a set of images that are superior to that world yet at the same time impose themselves as *eminently* perceptible.
- 37 THE WORLD THE SPECTACLE holds up to view is at once *here* and *elsewhere*; it is the world of the commodity ruling over all lived experience. The commodity world is thus shown as it really is, for its logic is one with men’s estrangement from one another and from the sum total of what they produce.
- 38 THE LOSS OF QUALITY so obvious at every level of the language of the spectacle, from the objects it lauds to the behavior it regulates, merely echoes the basic traits of a real production process that shuns reality. The commodity form is characterized exclusively by self-equivalence –

- it is exclusively quantitative in nature: the quantitative is what it develops, and it can only develop within the quantitative.
- 39 DESPITE THE FACT that it excludes quality, this development is still subject, qua development, to the qualitative. Thus the spectacle betrays the fact that it must eventually break the bounds of its own abundance. Though this is not true locally, except here and there, it is already true at the universal level which was the commodity’s original standard – a standard that it has been able to live up to by turning the whole planet into a single world market.
- 40 THE DEVELOPMENT of the forces of production is the real unconscious history that has built and modified the conditions of existence of human groups (understood as the conditions of *survival* and their extension): this development has been the basis of all human enterprise. The realm of commodities has meant the constitution, within a natural economy, of a surplus survival. The production of commodities, which implies the exchange of a variety of products among independent producers, was long able to retain an artisanal aspect embodied in a marginal economic activity where its quantitative essence was masked. Wherever it encountered the social conditions of large-scale trade and capital accumulation, however, such production successfully established total hegemony over the economy. The entire economy then became what the commodity, throughout this campaign of conquest, had shown itself to be – namely, a process of quantitative development. The

unceasing deployment of economic power in the shape of commodities has transfigured human labor into labor-as-commodity, into wage-labor, and eventually given rise to an *abundance* thanks to which the basic problem of survival, though solved, is solved in such a way that it is not disposed of, but is rather forever cropping up again at a higher level. Economic growth liberates societies from the natural pressures occasioned by their struggle for survival, but they still must be liberated from their liberators. The *independence* of the commodity has spread to the entire economy over which the commodity now reigns. The economy transforms the world, but it transforms it into a world of the economy. The pseudo-nature in which labor has become alienated demands that such labor remain in its service indefinitely, and inasmuch as this estranged activity is answerable only to itself it is able in turn to enroll all socially permissible efforts and projects under its banner. In these circumstances an abundance of commodities, which is to say an abundance of commodity relations, can be no more than an *augmented survival*.

- 41 THE COMMODITY'S DOMINION over the economy was at first exercised in a covert manner. The economy itself, the material basis of social life, was neither perceived nor understood – not properly known precisely because of its “familiarity.” In a society where concrete commodities were few and far between, it was the dominance of money that seemed to play the role of emissary, invested with full authority by an unknown power. With the coming of the industrial revolution, the division of labor specific to that

revolution's manufacturing system, and mass production for a world market, the commodity emerged in its full-fledged form as a force aspiring to the complete colonization of social life. It was at this moment too that political economy established itself as at once the dominant science and the science of domination.

- 42 THE SPECTACLE CORRESPONDS to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life. It is not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see – commodities are now all that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity. The growth of the dictatorship of modern economic production is both extensive and intensive in character. In the least industrialized regions its presence is already felt in the form of imperialist domination by those areas that lead the world in productivity. In these advanced sectors themselves, social space is continually being blanketed by stratum after stratum of commodities. With the advent of the so-called second industrial revolution, alienated consumption is added to alienated production as an inescapable duty of the masses. The entirety of labor sold is transformed overall into the total commodity. A cycle is thus set in train that must be maintained at all costs: the total commodity must be returned in fragmentary form to a fragmentary individual completely cut off from the concerted action of the forces of production. To this end the already specialized science of domination is further broken down into specialties such as sociology, applied psychology, cybernetics, semiology and so

on, which oversee the self-regulation of every phase of the process.

43 WHEREAS AT THE PRIMITIVE stage of capitalist accumulation "political economy treats the proletarian as a mere worker" who must receive only the minimum necessary to guarantee his labor-power, and never considers him "in his leisure, in his humanity," these ideas of the ruling class are revised just as soon as so great an abundance of commodities begins to be produced that a surplus "collaboration" is required of the workers. All of a sudden the workers in question discover that they are no longer invariably subject to the total contempt so clearly built into every aspect of the organization and management of production; instead they find that every day, once work is over, they are treated like grown-ups, with a great show of solicitude and politeness, in their new role as consumers. The humanity of the commodity finally attends to the workers' "leisure and humanity" for the simple reason that political economy as such now can – and must – bring these spheres under its sway. Thus it is that the totality of human existence falls under the regime of the "perfected denial of man."

44 THE SPECTACLE IS a permanent opium war waged to make it impossible to distinguish goods from commodities, or true satisfaction from a survival that increases according to its own logic. Consumable survival must increase, in fact, because it continues to enshrine deprivation. The reason there is nothing beyond augmented survival, and no end to its growth, is that survival itself belongs to the realm

of dispossession: it may gild poverty, but it cannot transcend it.

45 AUTOMATION, WHICH IS at once the most advanced sector of modern industry and the epitome of its practice, confronts the world of the commodity with a contradiction that it must somehow resolve: the same technical infrastructure that is capable of abolishing labor must at the same time preserve labor as a commodity – and indeed as the sole generator of commodities. If automation, or for that matter any mechanisms, even less radical ones, that can increase productivity, are to be prevented from reducing socially necessary labor-time to an unacceptably low level, new forms of employment have to be created. A happy solution presents itself in the growth of the tertiary or service sector in response to the immense strain on the supply lines of the army responsible for distributing and hyping the commodities of the moment. The coincidence is neat: on the one hand, the system is faced with the necessity of reintegrating newly redundant labor; on the other, the very factitiousness of the needs associated with the commodities on offer calls out a whole battery of reserve forces.

46 EXCHANGE VALUE COULD only have arisen as the proxy of use value, but the victory it eventually won with its own weapons created the preconditions for its establishment as an autonomous power. By activating all human use value and monopolizing that value's fulfillment, exchange value eventually gained the upper hand. The process of exchange

became indistinguishable from any conceivable utility, thereby placing use value at its mercy. Starting out as the condottiere of use value, exchange value ended up waging a war that was entirely its own.

- 47 THE FALLING RATE of use value, which is a constant of the capitalist economy, gives rise to a new form of privation within the realm of augmented survival; this is not to say that this realm is emancipated from the old poverty: on the contrary, it requires the vast majority to take part as wage workers in the unending pursuit of its ends – a requirement to which, as everyone knows, one must either submit or die. It is the reality of this situation – the fact that, even in its most impoverished form (food, shelter), use value has no existence outside the illusory riches of augmented survival – that is the real basis for the general acceptance of illusion in the consumption of modern commodities. The real consumer thus becomes a consumer of illusion. The commodity is this illusion, which is in fact real, and the spectacle is its most general form.
- 48 USE VALUE WAS formerly implicit in exchange value. In terms of the spectacle's topsy-turvy logic, however, it has to be explicit – for the very reason that its own effective existence has been eroded by the overdevelopment of the commodity economy, and that a counterfeit life calls for a pseudo-justification.
- 49 THE SPECTACLE IS ANOTHER facet of money, which is the abstract general equivalent of all commodities. But

whereas money in its familiar form has dominated society as the representation of universal equivalence, that is, of the exchangeability of diverse goods whose uses are not otherwise compatible, the spectacle in its full development is money's modern aspect; in the spectacle the totality of the commodity world is visible in one piece, as the general equivalent of whatever society as a whole can be and do. The spectacle is money for contemplation only, for here the totality of use has already been bartered for the totality of abstract representation. The spectacle is not just the servant of *pseudo-use* – it is already, in itself, the pseudo-use of life.

- 50 WITH THE ACHIEVEMENT of a purely economic abundance, the concentrated result of social labor becomes visible, subjecting all reality to an appearance that is in effect that labor's product. Capital is no longer the invisible center determining the mode of production. As it accumulates, capital spreads out to the periphery, where it assumes the form of tangible objects. Society in its length and breadth becomes capital's faithful portrait.
- 51 THE ECONOMY'S TRIUMPH as an independent power inevitably also spells its doom, for it has unleashed forces that must eventually destroy the economic necessity that was the unchanging basis of earlier societies. Replacing that necessity by the necessity of boundless economic development can only mean replacing the satisfaction of primary human needs, now met in the most summary manner, by a ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs, all of which come down

in the end to just one -- namely, the pseudo-need for the reign of an autonomous economy to continue. Such an economy irrevocably breaks all ties with authentic needs to the precise degree that it emerges from a social unconscious that was dependent on it without knowing it. "Whatever is conscious wears out. Whatever is unconscious remains unalterable. Once freed, however, surely this too must fall into ruins?" (Freud).

52 BY THE TIME society discovers that it is contingent on the economy, the economy has in point of fact become contingent on society. Having grown as a subterranean force until it could emerge sovereign, the economy proceeds to lose its power. Where economic id was, there ego shall be. The subject can only arise out of society -- that is, out of the struggle that society embodies. The possibility of a subject's existing depends on the outcome of the class struggle which turns out to be the product and the producer of history's economic foundation.

53 CONSCIOUSNESS OF DESIRE and the desire for consciousness together and indissolubly constitute that project which in its negative form has as its goal the abolition of classes and the direct possession by the workers of every aspect of their activity. The opposite of this project is the society of the spectacle, where the commodity contemplates itself in a world of its own making.

### III

## UNITY AND DIVISION WITHIN APPEARANCES

*A lively new polemic about the concepts "one divides into two" and "two fuse into one" is unfolding on the philosophical front in this country. This debate is a struggle between those who are for and those who are against the materialist dialectic, a struggle between two conceptions of the world: the proletarian conception and the bourgeois conception. Those who maintain that "one divides into two" is the fundamental law of things are on the side of the materialist dialectic; those who maintain that the fundamental law of things is that "two fuse into one" are against the materialist dialectic. The two sides have drawn a clear line of demarcation between them, and their arguments are diametrically opposed. This polemic is a reflection, on the ideological level, of the acute and complex class struggle taking place in China and in the world.*

— Red Flag (Peking), 21 September 1964

VIII  
NEGATION AND CONSUMPTION  
IN THE CULTURAL SPHERE

*Do you seriously think we shall live long enough to see a political revolution? — we, the contemporaries of these Germans? My friend, you believe what you want to believe.... Let us judge Germany on the basis of its present history — and surely you are not going to object that all its history is falsified, or that all its present public life does not reflect the actual state of the people? Read whatever papers you please, and you cannot fail to be convinced that we never stop (and you must concede that the censorship prevents no one from stopping) celebrating the freedom and national happiness that we enjoy....*

— Ruge to Marx, March 1843

180 CULTURE IS THE GENERAL sphere of knowledge, and of representations of lived experience, within a historical society divided into classes; what this amounts to is that culture is the power to generalize, existing *apart*, as an intellectual division of labor and as the intellectual labor of division. Culture detached itself from the unity of myth-based society, according to Hegel, "when the power to unify disappeared from the life of man, and opposites lost their connection and living interaction, and became autonomous" ("The Difference between the Philosophical Systems of Fichte and Schelling"). In thus gaining its independence, culture was embarked on an imperialistic career of self-enrichment that was at the same time the beginning of the decline of its independence. The history that brought culture's relative autonomy into being, along with ideological illusions concerning that autonomy, is also expressed as the history of culture. And the whole triumphant history of culture can be understood as the history of the revelation of culture's insufficiency, as a march toward culture's self-abolition. Culture is the locus of the search for lost unity. In the course of this search, culture as a separate sphere is obliged to negate itself.

181 THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN tradition and innovation, which is the basic principle of the internal development of the culture of historical societies, is predicated entirely on the permanent victory of innovation. Cultural innovation is impelled solely, however, by that total historical movement which, by becoming conscious of its totality, tends

toward the transcendence of its own cultural presuppositions – and hence toward the suppression of all separations.

182 THE SUDDEN EXPANSION of society's knowledge, including – as the heart of culture – an understanding of history, brought about the irreversible self-knowledge that found expression in the abolition of God. This "prerequisite of every critique," however, was also the first task of a critique without end. In a situation where there are no longer any tenable rules of action, culture's every *result* propels it toward its own dissolution. Just like philosophy the moment it achieved its full independence, every discipline, once it becomes autonomous, is bound to collapse – in the first place as an attempt to offer a coherent account of the social totality, and eventually even as a partial methodology viable within its own domain. The *lack of rationality* in a separated culture is what dooms it to disappear, for that culture itself embodies a call for the victory of the rational.

183 CULTURE ISSUED FROM a history that had dissolved the way of life of the old world, yet culture as a separate sphere is as yet no more than an intelligence and a sensory communication which, in a *partially historical* society, must themselves remain partial. Culture is the meaning of an insufficiently meaningful world.

184 THE END OF THE HISTORY of culture manifests itself under two antagonistic aspects: the project of culture's self-transcendence as part of total history, and its manage-

ment as a dead thing to be contemplated in the spectacle. The first tendency has cast its lot with the critique of society, the second with the defense of class power.

185 EACH OF THE TWO aspects of the end of culture has a unitary existence, as much in all spheres of knowledge as in all spheres of sensory representation – that is, in all spheres of what was formerly understood as *art* in the most general sense. The first aspect enshrines an opposition between, on the one hand, the accumulation of a fragmentary knowledge which becomes useless in that any endorsement of existing conditions must eventually entail a rejection of *that knowledge itself*, and, on the other hand, the theory of practice, which alone has access, not only to the truth of all the knowledge in question, but also to the secret of its use. The second aspect enshrines an opposition between the critical self-destruction of society's old *common language* and its artificial reconstruction, within the commodity spectacle, as the illusory representation of non-life.

186 ONCE SOCIETY HAS LOST the community that myth was formerly able to ensure, it must inevitably lose all the reference points of a truly common language until such time as the divided character of an inactive community is superseded by the inauguration of a real historical community. As soon as art – which constituted that former common language of social inaction – establishes itself as independent in the modern sense, emerging from its first, religious universe to become the individual production of separate

works, it becomes subject, as one instance among others, to the movement governing the history of the whole of culture as a separated realm. Art's declaration of independence is thus the beginning of the end of art.

187 THE FACT THAT the language of real communication has been lost is what the modern movement of art's decay, and ultimately of its formal annihilation, expresses *positively*. What it expresses *negatively* is that a new common language has yet to be found – not, this time, in the form of unilaterally arrived-at conclusions like those which, from the viewpoint of historical art, *always came on the scene too late*, speaking to *others* of what had been experienced without any real dialogue, and accepting this shortfall of life as inevitable – but rather in a praxis embodying both an unmediated activity and a language commensurate with it. The point is to take effective possession of the community of dialogue, and the playful relationship to time, which the works of the poets and artists have heretofore merely *represented*.

188 WHEN A NEWLY INDEPENDENT art paints its world in brilliant colors, then a moment of life has grown old. By art's brilliant colors it cannot be rejuvenated but only recalled to mind. The greatness of art makes its appearance only as dusk begins to fall over life.

189 THE HISTORICAL TIME that invaded art in fact found its first expression in the artistic sphere, beginning with the baroque. Baroque was the art of a world that had lost its

center with the demise of the last mythic order recognized by the Middle Ages, an order founded, both cosmically and from the point of view of earthly government, on the unity between Christianity and the ghost of an Empire. An *art of change* was obliged to embody the principle of the ephemeral that it recognized in the world. In the words of Eugenio d'Ors, it chose "life as opposed to eternity." Theater and festival, or theatrical festival – these were the essential moments of the baroque, moments wherein all specific artistic expression derived its meaning from its reference to the decor of a constructed space, to a construction that had to constitute its own unifying center; and that center was *passage*, inscribed as a vulnerable equilibrium on an overall dynamic disorder. The sometimes excessive importance taken on in modern discussions of aesthetics by the concept of the baroque reflects a growing awareness of the impossibility of classicism in art: for three centuries all efforts to create a normative classicism or neoclassicism have never been more than brief, artificial projects giving voice to the official discourse of the State – whether the State of the absolute monarchy or that of the revolutionary bourgeoisie draped in Roman togas. What eventually followed the baroque, once it had run its course, was an ever more individualistic art of negation which, from romanticism to cubism, renewed its assault time after time until the fragmentation and destruction of the artistic sphere were complete. The disappearance of a historical art, which was tied to the internal communications of an elite whose semi-independent social basis lay in the relatively playful conditions still directly experienced by the last aristocra-

cies, also testified to the fact that capitalism had thrown up the first class power self-admittedly bereft of any ontological quality; a power whose foundation in the mere running of the economy bespoke the loss of all human *mastery*. The baroque ensemble, a unity itself long lost to the world of artistic creation, recurs in a certain sense in today's *consumption* of the entirety of the art of the past. The historical knowledge and recognition of all past art, along with its retrospective promotion to the rank of world art, serve to relativize it within the context of a global disorder which in turn constitutes a baroque edifice at a higher level, an edifice into which even the production of a baroque art, and all its possible revivals, is bound to be melded. The very fact that such "recollections" of the history of art should have become possible amounts to the *end of the world of art*. Only in this era of museums, when no artistic communication remains possible, can each and every earlier moment of art be accepted – and accepted as *equal in value* – for none, in view of the disappearance of the prerequisites of communication *in general*, suffers any longer from the disappearance of its own *particular* ability to communicate.

- 190 ART IN THE PERIOD of its dissolution, as a movement of negation in pursuit of its own transcendence in a historical society where history is not yet directly lived, is at once an art of change and a pure expression of the impossibility of change. The more grandiose its demands, the further from its grasp is true self-realization. This is an art that is necessarily *avant-garde*; and it is an art that *is not*. Its vanguard is its own disappearance.

191 THE TWO CURRENTS that marked the end of modern art were dadaism and surrealism. Though they were only partially conscious of it, they paralleled the proletarian revolutionary movement's last great offensive; and the halting of that movement, which left them trapped within the very artistic sphere that they had declared dead and buried, was the fundamental cause of their own immobilization. Historically, dadaism and surrealism are at once bound up with one another and at odds with one another. This antagonism, involvement in which constituted for each of these movements the most consistent and radical aspect of its contribution, also attested to the internal deficiency in each's critique – namely, in both cases, a fatal one-sidedness. For 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.

192 SPECTACULAR CONSUMPTION preserves the old culture in congealed form, going so far as to recuperate and rediffuse even its negative manifestations; in this way, the spectacle's cultural sector gives overt expression to what the spectacle is implicitly in its totality – *the communication of the incommunicable*. Thoroughgoing attacks on language are liable to emerge in this context coolly invested with positive value by the official world, for the aim is to promote reconciliation with a dominant state of things from which all communication has been triumphantly declared absent. Naturally, the critical truth of such attacks, as

utterances of the real life of modern poetry and art, is concealed. The spectacle, whose function it is *to bury history in culture*, presses the pseudo-novelty of its modernist means into the service of a strategy that defines it in the profoundest sense. Thus a school of neo-literature baldly admitting that it merely contemplates the written word for its own sake can pass itself off as something truly new. Meanwhile, beyond the unadorned claim that the dissolution of the communicable has a beauty all its own, one encounters the most modern tendency of spectacular culture – and the one most closely bound up with the repressive practice of the general social organization – seeking by means of a “global approach” to reconstruct a complex neo-artistic environment out of flotsam and jetsam; a good example of this is urbanism's striving to incorporate old scraps of art or hybrid aesthetico-technological forms. All of which shows how a general project of advanced capitalism is translated onto the plane of spectacular pseudo-culture – that project being the remolding of the fragmented worker into “a personality well integrated into the group” (cf. recent American sociology – Riesman, Whyte, et al.). Wherever one looks, one encounters this same intent: *to restructure society without community*.

193 A CULTURE NOW wholly commodity was bound to become the star commodity of the society of the spectacle. Clark Kerr, an ideologue at the cutting edge of this trend, reckons that the whole complex system of production, distribution and consumption of *knowledge* is already equivalent to 29 percent of the annual gross national product of

the United States, and he predicts that in the second half of this century culture will become the driving force of the American economy, so assuming the role of the automobile industry in the first half, or that of the railroads in the late nineteenth century.

- 194 THE TASK OF the complex of claims still evolving as *spectacular thought* is to justify a society with no justification, and ultimately to establish itself as a general science of false consciousness. This thought is entirely determined by the fact that it cannot and does not wish to apprehend its own material foundation in the spectacular system.
- 195 THE OFFICIAL THOUGHT of the social organization of appearances is itself obscured by the generalized *subcommunication* that it has to defend. It does not see that conflict is at the root of every feature of its universe. Spectacular power, which is absolute within the unchallengeable internal logic of the spectacle's language, corrupts its specialists absolutely. They are corrupted by their experience of contempt, and by the success of that contempt, for the contempt they feel is confirmed by their acquaintanceship with that genuinely *contemptible individual* – the spectator.
- 196 A NEW DIVISION of tasks occurs within the specialized thought of the spectacular system in response to the new problems presented by the perfecting of this system itself: in the first place modern sociology undertakes a *spectacular critique of the spectacle*, studying separation with the sole aid of separation's own conceptual and material tools;

meanwhile, from within the various disciplines in which structuralism has taken root, an apologetics of the spectacle is disseminated as the thought of non-thought, as an authorized amnesia with respect to historical practice. As forms of enslaved thought, however, there is nothing to choose between the fake despair of a nondialectical critique on the one hand and the fake optimism of a plain and simple boosting of the system on the other.

- 197 THERE IS A SCHOOL of sociology, originating in the United States, which has begun to raise questions about the conditions of existence created by modern social development. But while this approach has been able to gather much empirical data, it is quite unable to grasp the true nature of its chosen object, because it cannot recognize the critique immanent to that object. The sincerely reformist orientation of this sociology has no criteria aside from morality, common sense and other such yardsticks – all utterly inadequate for dealing with the matter in hand. Because it is unaware of the negativity at the heart of its world, this mode of criticism is obliged to concentrate on describing a sort of surplus negativity that it views as a regrettable irritation, or an irrational parasitic infestation, affecting the *surface* of that world. An outraged goodwill of this kind, which even on its own terms can do nothing except put all the blame on the system's external consequences, can see itself as *critical* only by ignoring the essentially *apologetic* character of its assumptions and method.

198 PEOPLE WHO DENOUNCE incitements to wastefulness as absurd or dangerous in a society of economic abundance do not understand the purpose of waste. It is distinctly ungrateful of them to condemn, in the name of economic rationality, those faithful (albeit irrational) guardians without whom the power of that same economic rationality would collapse. Daniel Boorstin, for example, whose book *The Image* describes the spectacular consumption of commodities in America, never arrives at a concept of the spectacle because he mistakenly feels able to treat private life, like something he calls an "honest product," as quite independent of what he sees as a disastrous distortion or "exaggeration." What he fails to grasp is that the commodity form itself lays down laws whose "honest" application gives rise not only to private life as a distinct reality but also to that reality's subsequent conquest by the social consumption of images.

199 BOORSTIN TREATS the excesses of a world that has become alien to us as excesses alien to our world. The "normal" basis of social life to which he refers implicitly when he describes the superficial reign of images, in terms of psychological and moral judgments, as the product of "our ever more extravagant expectations," has no reality at all, however, either in his book or in the historical period in which he lives. Because the real human life that Boorstin evokes is located for him in the past – even in a past of religious passivity – he has no way of comprehending the true depth of society's dependence on images. The *truth* of that society is nothing less than its *negation*.

200 A SOCIOLOGY THAT believes it possible to isolate an industrial rationality, functioning on its own, from social life as a whole, is liable likewise to view the technology of reproduction and communication as independent of overall industrial development. Thus Boorstin accounts for the situation he portrays in terms of an unfortunate and quasi-serendipitous coming together of too vast a technology of image-diffusion on the one hand, and, on the other, too great an appetite for sensationalism on the part of today's public. The spectacle, in this view, would have to be attributed to man's "spectatorial" inclinations. Boorstin cannot see that the proliferation of prefabricated "pseudo-events" – which he deplores – flows from the simple fact that, in face of the massive realities of present-day social existence, individuals do not actually experience events. Because history itself is the specter haunting modern society, pseudo-history has to be fabricated at every level of the consumption of life; otherwise, the equilibrium of the *frozen time* that presently holds sway could not be preserved.

201 THE CLAIM THAT a brief freeze in historical time is in fact a definitive stability – such is, both consciously and unconsciously expressed, the undoubted basis of the current tendency toward "structuralist" system building. The perspective adopted by the anti-historical thought of structuralism is that of the eternal presence of a system that was never created and that will never disappear. This fantasy of a preexisting unconscious structure's hegemony over all social practice is illegitimately derived from linguistic and anthropological structural models – even from

models of the functioning of capitalism – that are misapplied even in their original contexts; and the only reason why this has occurred is that an academic approach fit for complacent middle-range managers, a mode of thought completely anchored in an awestruck celebration of the existing system, crudely reduces all reality to the existence of that system.

- 202 IN SEEKING TO UNDERSTAND “structuralist” categories, it should always be borne in mind, as in the case of any historical social science, that categories express not only the forms but also the conditions of existence. Just as one does not judge a man’s value according to the conception he has of himself, one cannot judge – or admire – this specific society by taking the discourse it addresses to itself as necessarily true. “One cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life.” Structures are the progeny of the power that is in place. Structuralism is *a thought underwritten by the State*, a thought that conceives of the present conditions of spectacular “communication” as an absolute. Its fashion of studying the code of messages in itself is merely the product, and the acknowledgment, of a society where communication has the form of a cascade of hierarchical signals. Thus it is not structuralism that serves to prove the transhistorical validity of the society of the spectacle; but, on the contrary, it is the society of the spectacle, imposing itself in its massive reality, that validates the chill dream of structuralism.

- 203 WITHOUT A DOUBT, the critical concept of the *spectacle* is susceptible of being turned into just another empty formula of sociologico-political rhetoric designed to explain and denounce everything *in the abstract* – so serving to buttress the spectacular system itself. For obviously no *idea* could transcend the spectacle that exists – it could only transcend ideas that exist about the spectacle. For the society of the spectacle to be effectively destroyed, what is needed are people-setting a practical force in motion. A critical theory of the spectacle cannot be true unless it joins forces with the practical movement of negation within society; and this negation, which constitutes the resumption of revolutionary class struggle, cannot for its part achieve self-consciousness unless it develops the critique of the spectacle, a critique that embodies the theory of negation’s real conditions – the practical conditions of present-day oppression – and that also, inversely, reveals the secret of negation’s potential. Such a theory expects no miracles from the working class. It views the reformulation and satisfaction of proletarian demands as a long-term undertaking. To make an artificial distinction between theoretical and practical struggle – for, on the basis here defined, the very constitution and communication of a theory of this kind cannot be conceived independently of a *rigorous practice* – we may say with certainty that the obscure and difficult path of critical theory must also be the path of the practical movement that occurs at the level of society as a whole.
- 204 CRITICAL THEORY has to be communicated in its own language – the language of contradiction, dialectical in

form as well as in content: the language of the critique of the totality, of the critique of history. Not some "writing degree zero" – just the opposite. Not a negation of style, but the style of negation.

- 205 EVEN THE STYLE OF exposition of dialectical theory is a scandal and an abomination to the canons of the prevailing language, and to sensibilities molded by those canons, because it includes in its positive use of existing concepts a simultaneous recognition of their rediscovered fluidity, of their inevitable destruction.
- 206 THIS STYLE, which embodies its own critique, must express the mastery of the critique in hand over all its predecessors. The mode of exposition of dialectical theory will thus itself exemplify the negative spirit it contains. The truth, says Hegel, is not "detached... like a finished article from the instrument that shapes it." Such a theoretical consciousness of dialectical movement, which must itself bear the stamp of that movement, is manifested by the *reversal* of established relationships between concepts and by the diversion (or *détournement*) of all the attainments of earlier critical efforts. Thus the reversed genitive, as an expression of historical revolutions distilled into a form of thought, came to be considered the hallmark of Hegel's epigrammatic style. As a proponent of the replacement of subject by predicate, following Feuerbach's systematic practice of it, the young Marx achieved the most cogent use of this *insurrectional style*: thus the philosophy of poverty became the poverty of philosophy. The device

of *détournement* restores all their subversive qualities to past critical judgments that have congealed into respectable truths – or, in other words, that have been transformed into lies. Kierkegaard too made use of *détournement*, and offered his own pronouncement on the subject: "But how you twist and turn, so that, just as Saft always ended up in the pantry, you inevitably always manage to introduce some little word or phrase that is not your own, and which awakens disturbing recollections" (*Philosophical Fragments*). The defining characteristic of this use of *détournement* is the necessity for *distance* to be maintained toward whatever has been turned into an official verity. As Kierkegaard acknowledges in the same work, "One further remark I wish to make, however, with respect to your many animadversions, all pointing to my having introduced borrowed expressions in the course of my exposition. That such is the case I do not deny, nor will I now conceal from you that it was done purposely, and that in the next section of this piece, if I ever write such a section, it is my intention to call the whole by its right name, and to clothe the problem in its historical costume."

- 207 IDEAS IMPROVE. The meaning of words has a part in the improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress demands it. Staying close to an author's phrasing, plagiarism exploits his expressions, erases false ideas, replaces them with correct ideas.
- 208 *Détournement* IS THE ANTITHESIS of quotation, of a theoretical authority invariably tainted if only because it has

become quotable, because it is now a fragment torn away from its context, from its own movement, and ultimately from the overall frame of reference of its period and from the precise option that it constituted within that framework. *Détournement*, by contrast, is the fluid language of anti-ideology. It occurs within a type of communication aware of its inability to enshrine any inherent and definitive certainty. This language is inaccessible in the highest degree to confirmation by any earlier or supra-critical reference point. On the contrary, its internal coherence and its adequacy in respect of the practically possible are what validate the ancient kernel of truth that it restores. *Détournement* founds its cause on nothing but its own truth as critique at work in the present.

- 209 WHATEVER IS EXPLICITLY presented as *détournement* within formulated theory serves to deny any durable autonomous existence to the sphere of theory merely formulated. The fact that the violence of *détournement* itself mobilizes an action capable of disturbing or overthrowing any existing order is a reminder that the existence of the theoretical domain is nothing in itself, that it can only come to self-knowledge in conjunction with historical action, and that it can only be truly faithful by virtue of history's corrective judgment upon it.
- 210 ONLY THE REAL negation of culture can inherit culture's meaning. Such negation can no longer remain *cultural*. It is what remains, in some manner, at the level of culture – but it has a quite different sense.

- 211 IN THE LANGUAGE of contradiction, the critique of culture manifests itself as *unified*: unified in that it dominates the whole of culture – culture as knowledge as well as culture as poetry; unified, too, in that it is no longer separable from the critique of the social totality. It is this unified theoretical critique that goes alone to its rendezvous with a *unified social practice*.