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Society of the Spectacle:
Social Degradation through the Internet

In Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* we see a continuation/revision of Karl Marx's thesis on capitalism in modern day society. With some of the world's greatest evolutions beginning over three hundred years ago, the importance of the commodity and the origin of its value have practically been in a constant state of transition. One of the most important changes in society was the Industrial Revolution. This transition created ground for Marx's argument, that the disconnect from society was found in having (or not having) things. Because people no longer had to make whole products themselves, the worth and the value of creating that product went unrecognized. The worth and the value of a product were then found in having it, rather than making it. As Marx originally proposed that the disconnect from society was found in having, Debord suggests that our disconnect has transitioned into merely appearing. As technologies developed and people are pushed further away from the origin of their products, Marx's theory, though still viable, had become a vast understatement. Debord suggests that in today's society, capitalism is used by Corporate America to tell people who they are. This accusation forces people to evaluate what is truly reality and what is perceived reality, what aspects of their lives are being created and idealized for them and what aspects are sincere.

Nearly half a century after Debord first introduced this theory, we are able to see it magnified in our society's reliance on the internet and social networking sites as an aid or even a foundation for human relationships. Our society has become so dependent on using the internet for communication that functioning without it has become a frightening thought. Corporations use e-mail to get information out rather than talking straight to the people. Friends get to know

each other through profiles on Facebook rather than having an actual conversation. People form relationships through dating sites instead of actually going out and getting to know someone face-to-face. Over four decades after Debord proposed *The Society of the Spectacle*, his theory of “appearing” has never been more accurate. It has become so easy to appear likable or appealing over the internet, that creating and sustaining a genuine personality in the real world (outside of the internet) is no longer necessary.

Debord derived a large majority of his ideas from Marx. Marx believed that society had become so disconnected from the value of labor that people no longer found worth in making something, but only having it. Before the Industrial Revolution, artisans worked by hand to create all kinds of products. By focusing on one type of trade and creating whole products, manufactures were able to develop a connection with the item they were making and see its true value. Small communities allowed people to know and appreciate the people creating their products and where they were coming from. At this point in time, people were satisfied with their work because they were creating the whole product, but as soon as machines began to develop, values shifted and were then found in the ability to purchase things. Post-industrial society allowed for products to be made in mass amounts by machines, with workers only focusing on parts of products. This caused workers to lose sight of the value of their products.

Marx popularized the idea of the commodity fetish, where social relationships are transformed by commodities or money. Marx saw society move from an ^{SP}artesian based industry, where each person had a certain skill, to a industrial based society, where workers pressed buttons in a factory that did all the work for them. Debord recognizes this in his book *The Society of the Spectacle*, saying that, "the first phase of the domination of the economy over social life brought into the definition of all human realization the obvious degradation of *being*

into *having*” (Debord 17). Marx was able to see how societies separation from the creation of products was affecting social relationships; however he couldn't have fathomed the next phase, and the type of technological society we live in now. As Marx's theory was based in a transition to an industrial age, our society has obviously transitioned into a technological age; thus Debord's theory is developed.

Debord furthers Marx's theory by suggesting that now we do not even need to have things, but only appear as if we do. Debord says in his book *The Society of the Spectacle*, “the present phase of total occupation of social life by the accumulated results of the economy leads to a generalized sliding of *having* into *appearing*, from which all actual “having” must draw its immediate prestige and its ultimate function” (Debord 17). The emphasis no longer lies on making the product, or having the product, but now on appearing like you have the product. Our reality has been skewed so much that we now live through representations of reality.

Debord says that though capitalism presents itself as a law of nature, it isn't. We often believe that nature and culture coexist, however these two things are very different. Our use of technology today is not a necessity, though we might think it to be. Before these new technologies, we lived in a very successful society that ran just fine. Nevertheless, we have convinced ourselves that society will not function without these new technologies. Our willingness to become passive and inactive towards the world around us has become outstanding. Debord recognizes that, "Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation” (Debord 1). We no longer live in reality, but only a representation of reality. This representation can be seen in our pseudo relationships. Though we still recognize the need for human contact, our vision of reality has become so blurred that we see internet relationships to

be sufficient, and thus allow ourselves to live vicariously through characters we have created on the internet. ~~specific examples~~

Our culture has become dependent on the internet and social networking sites to create and sustain a variety of different relationships. Through these sites we see “*affirmation of appearance and affirmation of all human life, namely social life, as mere appearance*” (Debord 10). The most common social networking sites we see now are personal pages. There are a number of different personal pages such as MySpace, Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, YouTube, and Formspring. All of these sites allow for people to set up and share their own information, ranging from their current address to the activities they do.

MySpace was one of the first popularized sites that allowed individuals to create their own page, allowing users to customize nearly everything, displaying their “*personality*”. From different background colors to height, weight and relationship status, MySpace allows users to create a persona, even if it’s not completely true. Creating a MySpace page requires an e-mail address and knowledge of the internet basics, allowing for practically anyone to make an account (or two). Though this site was once somewhat credible, expectations of honesty have slowly diminished because of the staggering amount of false profiles and lack of security. One would think that a website that perpetuates lies would be rejected and die out, but because, “*our whole life is surrounded by an immense accumulation of spectacles,*” we seldom recognize dishonesty, and even when we do we are passive and have no motivation to do anything about it (Law).

Facebook soon followed the personal page trend, creating a more standard and official way to share information. Differing from MySpace, Facebook does not allow users to pick their own personal background, but instead it has a blue and white standard setting for all. Users can display as much or as little information as they would like, as well as control the privacy of their

information, from completely private and unsearchable (except for friends), to open to the entire public. As it is a more professional version of MySpace, personal questions such as height and weight are not part of the information section users can fill out. Popularity is often gauged on one's amount of friends or wall posts. Viewing people's pictures, reading through their activities, interests and "about me" section are easy ways to get to know someone, without ever having to ask them a single question. Because of the abundance of accessible information, people are blinded to the, "concrete manufacture of alienation" (Debord 32). We do not realize that through our attitude of, "passive acceptance," we are being driven into a masked solitude (Debord 12).

Tumblr is a blogging site where you can share pictures, videos, music, quotes and personal blog updates with people. Twitter is a way to update people on what you are doing at a certain time or just to say something in general. YouTube allows people to share videos, allowing anyone to post them, from movie stars to bored thirteen-year-old girls. On these sites you can have "friends" or "followers" who you allow to see your information. This simulation has become an unconscious way of devaluing friendship, taking over our society and allowing for people to think that because they are "friends" with someone on a social networking site they are friends in real life. The simulation of a relationship "appears in the fact that [ones] own gestures are no longer [their own] but," through the internet, "[which] represents them," are often seen through a false reality and misinterpreted (Debord 30).

Probably the first type of social networking was e-mail. E-mail has become a way for all different types of people to keep in contact, as well as for corporations to reach out to their clientele. Bosses can e-mail their employees and never have to set foot in their office. Teachers can e-mail students and never have to have a face to face conversation. Corporations can use e-mail as a way to inform clients of sales or other information. Friends can keep up with old

*Some Debord of
quotes taken out of
context /
misapplied.*

friends by e-mailing back and forth. Yahoo, Google, MSN, and AOL are only a few of the most popular e-mail sites. We also see different forms of “chatting” developing through AIM, Skype, and Stickam. People can keep in contact and even video chat with people all around the world, helping to simulate relationships.

Romantic relationships are also forming through the ever so popularized dating sites. Using commercials and internet ads to reach to their personnel, sites such as eHarmony and Match.com have popularized the idea that “true love” can be found by only answering a few short questions! Though this method might work for some people, it is an idealized fantasy that true love can be found through someone’s “interests” and photograph.

It is not difficult to recognize the role that the internet plays in our society. As a culture we have become so engulfed in the technological phenomena, things that once were the backbone of our society have fallen to the wayside. Emphasis has moved from having a good personality or a good work ethic to appearing as if you have those things through an attractive Facebook profile. Because we are still in constant contact with people through these internet mediums, the idea that we have traded in our social lives seems a little extreme. However, being “social” requires action, and these mediums perpetuate inaction. Debord is accurate in his assertion that, “the concrete life of everyone has been degraded into a *speculative* universe,” where nothing can be seen as permanent and everything must be questioned (Debord 19). This defect has become almost unrecognizable in our society, and even for those who do recognize it, they realize that it cannot be undone. Situationist Larry Law once said that, “the Spectacle has so successfully infiltrated Everyday Life that an attack upon the Spectacle appears to be an attack upon society. When attacked the Spectacle threatens us with the Specter of anarchy” (Law). The

idea of a world without the internet is no longer heard of, and the mere suggestion of life without it is taboo.

Provocative

McLuhan → media does

Debord → media appears

Most would apply McLuhan to social networking, because it extends/interacts/self-publishes/does

→ But Debord also works, because we appear.

↳ This assessment is more direct,

original, insightful application

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