The Society of the Spectacle Study Guide

The Society of the Spectacle by Guy Debord

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

The Society of the Spectacle is a philosophical text presented in nine chapters and 221short theses. Each thesis is brief—about a paragraph in length. The text presents an extensive reinterpretation of the philosophy of Marx, with particular focus on commodity fetishism and contemporary mass media. The work of Lukács is central to many theses, as is the philosophy of Hegel. In addition, the text expands Marx's notion of alienation well beyond labor. Debord directly addresses Soviet and American societies in the work.

The text is divided into nine named and enumerated chapters, each of which presents a basic theory and develops it with supporting matter and interpretation. The author presupposes a highly educated reader and throughout the text a plethora of references and insinuated references are discovered. The meaning of the text will change with the reader's familiarity with the various philosophies connected to the text. In general, a reader must be familiar with Marx and Hegel to make much sense of large portions of the text, particularly Chapter 4. Other sections are less dependent upon external references and much can be gained by a study of them, such as in Chapter 1, independent of other sources.

Debord suggests that modern society has undergone a significant and unique development since around the time of mass industrialization. People have moved away from the existence of necessity and toward an existence of surplus. As modern production has enabled the mass accumulation of capital, so it has changed the fundamental nature of the experience of living. Although this shift could have occurred in several ways, it did occur through a capitalist mechanism that has drawn upon several preexisting paradigms for support, notably Christianity. The result is Debord's society of the spectacle where, first, the condition of being is replaced by the condition of having; and, second, the condition of having is replaced by the appearance of having. In other words, modern production has enabled a surplus of the necessities of life so great that most people never face the reality of, e.g., starvation. In the early stages of the spectacle, massive amounts of capital are stockpiled—being is replaced by having. In the later stages of the spectacle, amassed capital becomes so immense that it is valueless within the system—having is replaced by the appearance of having.

Chapter 1, Separation Perfected

Chapter 1, Separation Perfected Summary and Analysis

The Society of the Spectacle is a philosophical text presented in nine chapters and 221 short theses. Each thesis is brief—about a paragraph in length. The text presents an extensive reinterpretation of the philosophy of Marx, with particular focus on commodity fetishism and contemporary mass media. The work of Lukács is central to many theses, as is the philosophy of Hegel. In addition, the text expands Marx's notion of alienation well beyond labor. Debord directly addresses Soviet and American societies in the work.

Chapter 1 presents theses 1 through 34. The chapter begins with a quote taken from the second edition of The Essence of Christianity by Ludwig Feuerbach. Chapter 1 is tightly focused on defining society, spectacle, and the historic process of replacing the society of the real with the society of the spectacle. All of life is a spectacle—a representation of the real. Reality becomes detached from experience and the spectacle simultaneously represents everything and all parts of society. In this definition, the spectacle is not merely a collection of images but actually is the social relation between people, a relation that is mediated by images. The spectacle is an objectified world vision; it is a product of, and a justification for, the current system of production. Note even at this early stage of the text the obvious reference to Marxism.

The spectacle is not a goal, per se, though it appears to be—or rather, it presents images which appear to be representative of desirable goals. As the spectacle is alienated from reality, so it makes itself a real reality. The spectacle can thus transform basic things into other basic things—"the true is a moment of the false" (Chapter 1, Thesis 9). While the spectacle appears to affirm life, in reality it negates life. In order to discuss the spectacle, it must be artificially divided into elements. Doing so often misleads individuals into believing the spectacle is simply a collection of ideas instead of a monolithic whole. The spectacle self-presents as good and desirable; it demands a passive acceptance. The tautological character of the spectacle is derived from the fact that the spectacle's means are also its ends. The spectacle aims at nothing other than itself.

The spectacle is the main production of modern society and therefore subjects people by means of the economy. The spectacle has evolved from the state of being, to the state of having, to the state of appearing. In a parallel development, the sense of touch has been replaced by the sense of vision. Real life has become a speculative universe. The spectacle reconstitutes and supersedes all—even replacing the religious illusion. It is dream-induced, has no goals, and is therefore always successful. The spectacle is a representation of society itself; it carries on a "laudatory monologue" (Chapter 1, Thesis 24), dominates communication, makes itself required, and destroys real meaning.

The historical separation of power has always been spectacular. The permitted is never the possible. Work specialization has been refined into meaningless machine operations created to feed an ever-expanding market. Note again the heavy reference to Marxism and the machine-worship prevalent in the early 1900s Communist philosophy throughout this section of the text. Thesis 26 suggests that unity and communication, subsumed into the spectacle, defines and explains the proletarianization of the world. Again in a historical context, work has changed into non-work which has changed into inactivity. But inactivity does not mean freedom because the spectacle negates activity. The spectacle focuses on the production of isolating objects. Even this abstraction which leads to a loss of working unity leads to the spectacle. The spectacle is the common language of separation. The spectacle elevates contemplation and denigrates actual living. The spectator is never at home—because the spectacle is everywhere. The spectacle elevates recognizing need but denigrates real desire. The spectacle ensures that production is external; workers are dispossessed. The spectacle always increases alienation, and as the spectacle grows life becomes merely a product. The spectacle of such amassed capital has turned capital into an image.

Chapter 2, Commodity as Spectacle

Chapter 2, Commodity as Spectacle Summary and Analysis

Chapter 2 presents theses 35 through 53. The chapter begins with a quote taken from History and Class Consciousness by György Lukács. Although not discussed directly in the text, it is generally acknowledged that Lukács' philosophy is fundamental to the theories presented. Chapter 2 is tightly focused on presenting the commodity—usually the commodity within capitalism—as a fundamental aspect of the spectacle. This focus proceeds from the general—the spectacle is related to the commodity—to the specific in various forms. The tangible commodity becomes an intangible commodity within the spectacle because the spectacle illustrates commodities. In this vision, quality yields to quantity and the process is repeated over and over, and the process is refined with each repetition.

The means of production have driven all of human development and history. Initially, production delivered the means of survival. As later refinements were made in the means of production, a surplus above the necessities of survival was achieved. Roles were further refined into crafts, which were further refined as the means of production became more efficient, until the craft became the commodity. This process has allowed for unprecedented population expansion. As the economy thus emerges it appears to be a special case because it is unprecedented. When the economy is understood to have become the totality of social life, the spectacle emerges. Within the spectacle, the pervasive economy requires producers to function also as consumers. As the surplus of production mounts, workers must become consumers. Eventually, society mistakes survival with satisfaction, and then satisfaction with privation. The automation of the means of production leads to a super-surplus. Yet labor must remain as a basic tenet of the means of production and hence the economy creates the so-called service sector.

Exchange replaces use just as money replaces commodity. Commodities thus yield to illusions; illusions are consumed; and the spectacle is manifested. Of course, the illusions must be believed to be useful. Just as money abstracted use, so the spectacle abstracts real life. Social labor produces appearance—social labor produces its own portrait. Finally, the only economic necessity becomes the need for infinite market growth. In effect, society recycles the economy while the economy recycles society. In its theoretical underpinning, Marxism proposes nearly the opposite of the spectacle.

Chapter 3, Unity and Division within Appearance

Chapter 3, Unity and Division within Appearance Summary and Analysis

Chapter 3 presents theses 54 through 72. Chapter 3 begins with a quote taken from the 21 September 1964 issue of Red Flag. Chapter 3 tackles the difficult topic of unity within diversity. The general approach is to demonstrate that perceived diversity is in fact a carefully modulated presentation of the unified spectacle. Although nobody deliberately controls the presentation, it is inherent within the universal construction of the spectacle. Thus, within the spectacle, observed diversity is in fact meaningless. The struggle for spectacular power provides the only real unity. The struggle is presented as real, for example, but the struggle only represents aspects of it, e.g., Communism. The spectacle colonizes society through false goods, presumed specializations within production, and false geographical localizations. Local resistance always loses to the global spectacle.

Within the spectacle, the consumer's supposed choice is a false choice. Dissatisfaction itself becomes a spectacular commodity to be produced and consumed. The family is, perhaps, the last remaining real relic of the old system of production. The spectacle constructs celebrity as a commodity. A celebrity is a life seemingly lived, and yet, the celebrity is the enemy of real persons—the celebrity is in fact even an enemy to the real person behind the spectacular façade of celebrity. Celebrities are not autonomous or free to act. Kennedy and Khrushchev are offered as examples of spectacular celebrity. For them, as for all, the spectacle offers only a false set of choices; in truth, it trivializes life, steals youth, and programs adults to accept the "unity of misery" (Chapter 3, Thesis 63). With real misery, the spectacle presents the image of happy unification.

The spectacle takes many forms. In some societies, the "concentrated" spectacle is a form of bureaucratic capitalism, focused on the being of one celebrity such as Mau Zedong in China. In this form, the spectacle is a police state with institutionalized permanent violence. On the other hand, in some societies the "diffuse" spectacle is a form of super-abundance of commodity, where happiness or even satisfaction becomes unattainable.

Within the spectacle, individual commodities struggle for superiority as the satisfaction of commodity use is replaced by the artificial ecstasy of commodity accumulation. Pseudo-need replaces real need. As the cycle repeats, each new commodity is hailed as innovative and then discarded as useless; yet it is instantly replaced by another apparently innovative commodity. The very act of replacement affirms the replaced item and belies the system—yet the spectacle must constantly change. The spectacle moves to create an illusion opposite to what really is.

Chapter 4, The Proletariat as Subject and as Representation

Chapter 4, The Proletariat as Subject and as Representation Summary and Analysis

Chapter 4 presents theses 73 through 124 and is the longest section of the text. Chapter 4 begins with a quote taken from Enquete Parlementaire sur l'Insurrection du 18 Mars. Many of the theses of Chapter 4 differ in construction from those previously seen in the text, as they are often less generally theoretical and more directly based upon contemporaneous socio-political developments. Thus, many references to individuals and specific events are included—these objects are often fairly obscure to modern readers and can present a real difficulty to textual interpretation. Typically, the author provides no biographical data or explanatory notes though some modern editions of the text have added occasional supplementary information. It is critical to remember that the work itself is dated in time, and that much of the critique of Russia has been borne out by history. Whereas upon original publication Chapter 4 was contemporaneously topical, today it loses much of its impact due to the passage of time; a topic itself considered in Chapter 5. Chapter 4, Thesis 73, begins with the assertion that the old order has been replaced; this resonates with c.f. Thesis 140.

Individuals view history as objective and thereby misinterpret their position. The class struggle dissolves separation and many forgo commentary on the real world for commentary on the transformation of the world. Thesis 76 presents a concentrated commentary on the work of Hegel, which is presented as simultaneously in opposition to but inextricable bound up with Marxist theory. When the proletariat acts to assert its historic role, many conclude the method is the goal. Practical thought alone can save history from spectacular interpretation of events. All proletarian theory, including that of Stirner, Bakunin, and importantly Marx, grew out of confrontation with the Hegelian interpretation. Many thus see Marx as inseparable from Hegel, or as simply a reaction to Hegel, and not as revolutionary thought. Yet Marx's theory was scientific and based upon "the rational understanding of the forces which really operate in society" (Chapter 4, Thesis 81). It is real and unique, but yet the new science of history was necessarily based upon a historical foundation. History does not need economic understanding unless it is economic history, and the author asserts that thinking to dominate current history by means of scientific knowledge is bourgeois.

Socialism is often attacked as being Utopian, and this is true but not because socialism rejects science, but because socialism rejects history. Socialism is in fact friendly to science, but it envisions a utopia that is hostile to history. Marx's theories, however, were originally formulated about a then-contemporaneous historical paradigm. As the milieu aged Marx refined and clarified, but the very process of failure condemned Marxism. Marx's reorganizations of theory made Marxism more abstract, more

theoretical, and blurred the distinctions between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Eventually, the proletariat became negatively defined as not the bourgeoisie, whereas the bourgeoisie became, historically, the only successful revolutionary class. The proletariat is thus attempting to repeat the revolutionary success of the bourgeoisie; yet both classes become subsumed in the spectacle. Even Marx realized this.

The socialist conception of the proletariat by necessity requires definition, which ultimately leads to organization and class. This apparently inevitable process robs spontaneity from revolutionary processes and, in fact, limits revolutionary processes. The process was apparent in socialist where Bakunin favored a totalitarian authority which would establish a pure idealism resulting in socialist, while Marx favored a gradual process of education and revolution which ultimately would reduce and reject centralized authority. However, with similar goals, became implacable enemies. The anarchist movement remains merely the "ideological negation of the State and of classes" (Chapter 4, Thesis 92) and is isolated because of its strident ideology. For example, in Spain during the 1936 anarchist revolution the beginning stages were entirely promising but quickly faltered due to the anarchist movement's inability to extend victory to revolution.

As the historical development of socialism continued, it became apparent that the proletariat needed education in order to enjoin revolution. Thus we have the odd development of education gaining in significance to the point that the bourgeoisie educates the proletariat; at this point, capitalism has subsumed the movement. History shows this to have been the case. Lenin executed orthodox Marxism in the Russian milieu and the Russian revolutionaries thereafter became the professionals of the absolute management of society. In the world view, socialism became Russia, with all its failings. Thus, socialism was subsumed into the modern spectacle as the representation of the proletariat opposed itself to the proletariat. The general falsification of society had been attained; in Russia was seen the counter-revolutionary inversion. The Bolshevik party had become the party of the proprietors of the proletariat. This assertion is bolstered by the presentation of Theses 103 and 104 which summarize the Communist party takeover, under Stalin, of the Russian revolution and the establishment—or rather the maintaining—of the power of economy and the market society's commodity labor. This process culminates in ideology becoming the goal, not a means. This type of ideology transforms perception, by means of the police, not process. Of course, the ideological-totalitarian class must proclaim its non-existence even as it extends its infallible and absolute will. This fundamental contradiction is termed, by the text, both lunacy and social insanity, and Stalinist is viewed as terrorism. The central lie ensures that ideological-totalitarianism cannot, and will not, be as efficient at capitalist competition as outright capitalism.

Contrarily, fascism borrows the organizational bureaucracy of Stalinism and mates it to the threat of crisis to achieve a state of siege capitalism and society in which the state must massively intervene in all aspects of social management. Fascism, however, is not ideological and refers to violent myth, pseudo-values, and archaic practices. Fascism is thus nothing more than an evolutionary stage of the spectacle, with a central role in the

destruction of the working class movement. Finally, fascism will always ultimately be replaced by a more efficient form of capitalist power.

Meanwhile, the Russian bureaucracy pretends to move beyond Stalinist thought but of course is unable to because the whole system is based upon the same ideological monopoly. Devoid of passion, the ideology becomes trivial but remains repressive. The ideology remains in power but is not credible; terrorism becomes a laughingstock, but a laughingstock maintained by terror. Meanwhile, it yearns for the truly capitalist efficiency of the west. Simultaneously, the rise of Chinese Communism, in opposition to Russian Communism, exposes the lie that Communism is international in character. Similarly, the ruthless subjection of revolutionary workers within Russia exposes the lie of Russia's supposedly revolutionary workers underpinnings. The spectacular elements are obvious. Instead of self-correction, however, theorists look outward from Russia toward developing countries where, they irrationally hope, the results of a Communist revolution will be different. Several examples illustrating this fallacy of thought are enumerated in Thesis 113.

The proletariat, though, still exists, as it will always exist, and it has been stripped of potential power and stripped of all power except to support capitalism. Furthermore, proletariat must form the seed of a new revolutionary process. The text looks forward to self organization, spontaneous action, and a self-realizing proletariat. The revolutionary institution cannot succeed by remaining on the margins; the proletariat must reject the spectacle by recognition of its own self identity. Revolutionary theory must eject revolutionary ideology.

Chapter 5, Time and History

Chapter 5, Time and History Summary and Analysis

Chapter 5 presents theses 125 through 146. Chapter 5 begins with a brief quote taken from William Shakespeare's Henry IV. The chapter considers the interplay between the passage of time and the creation of history. Note that the topic of spectacular time is considered in Chapter 6. Chapter 5 presents a dual interpretation of time—that of cyclical time and that of irreversible time. Cyclical time is conceptualized as a repeating cycle of events spaced in time as experienced by nomadic peoples—their experiences are repetitive on at least an annual basis, and because of this events are 'recoverable' inasmuch as they have happened before and will happen again. Divorced of repetitive geography and seasonal repetitions, modern man experiences what he perceives as irreversible time—events do not cycle and do not repeat, except in trivial ways. The chapter begins with the assertion that man is time and history inasmuch as he contemplates them and thereby creates them as artificial impositions upon reality. It then proceeds in a roughly chronological pattern from ancient Greece to the society of the spectacle.

Societies organize time for selfish, and self-preserving, reasons. Nomadic societies use cyclical time, where events repeat by geographical location as the nomad repeats his movement through space and time. Agrarian societies also experience cyclical time because the seasons organize their experiences and demand a repetition of labor practices. As labor surplus is appropriated by the appropriating class, so to surplus time is appropriated by the same class. Successful societies attempt to freeze development—which infers fundamental change—by halting time. Men, to remain men, must also struggle against time. Societies focus on writing as an instrument of the state to enable the state to span time. Modern societies typically posit a dynastic origin; the dynasty is said to have been built in a past mythological period of cyclical time, whereas the modern inheritor—the present society—exists in irreversible time. History claims irreversible time, as in cyclical time there is nothing historic. Irreversible time appears dangerous as it holds the menace of forgetting.

The moment of realization, the moment of moving from cyclical time to irreversible time, was the classical period of ancient Greece. Then, too, it was realized that only those freed of excessive work may live through irreversible time. Thus, cyclical time became mythical, irreversible time became history. Modern religions offer a mystical compromise between mythology and history; Christianity, in particular, has been successfully adapted to spectacular society because it foresees an absolute endpoint, the rapture. Thus, all irreversible time becomes a countdown and insinuates urgency. The image of the pilgrim, so constant in modern society, is a representation of a person leaving cyclical time. During the Middle Ages, western society moved out of myth, leaving behind cyclical time. Because of this, the Middle Ages were dominated by an obsession with death, the natural endpoint of irreversible time.

Revolutionary thought seeks to supersede all elements of historic time, including religious buttresses. The religious appeal to God is analogous to the peasant appeal to the feudal lord—both are self-defeating because the proletariat does not successfully appeal its own interests to the bourgeoisie. The Renaissance was in part a response to this very issue inasmuch as it desanctified power even as it made power bases transient. Then arose the bourgeoisie with its powerful notion that labor transforms. The labor force thus transcends cyclical time even as society moves toward historic time. Thesis 140 ends with the assertion that the world's foundation has changed, which echoes a similar assertion made in c.f. Thesis 73; the author sees the advent of the bourgeoisie as a fundamentally unique development in society.

The bourgeoisie is heavily invested in historic time; the very notion of production ruins cyclical time. In this scheme, history becomes a general movement and time becomes a commodity. The ruling class is made up of specialists in the owning of things and in turn are owned by them; thus it follows that the producer, the worker, is part of history. The bourgeoisie tries to self-present as fundamental but this is untenable in the big picture. So it then seeks to reconstruct passivity within the proletarian largely by means of Christianity and its beliefs. For example, the entire world has come to exist in unified historical time—in time measured by the Christian era. Time is unified, globalized, and becomes the time of world markets. It is critical to realize, however, that global time represents the interests of only certain groups.

Chapter 6, Spectacular Time

Chapter 6, Spectacular Time Summary and Analysis

Chapter 6 presents theses 147 through 164. Chapter 6 begins with a brief quote taken from Oraculo Manual y Arte de Prudencia by Baltasar Gracián y Morales. Chapter 6 continues to explore the concept of time in modern society with a focus on the way time operates within spectacular society. Production time, that is time spent laboring to produced, debases man and leaves him, ultimately, dead. To obscure this, spectacular society presents the illusion that production time is cyclical—in fact, it is only pseudo-cyclical. Production time equates to exchangeable units of time; in requires a loss of quality but must be made to appear meaningful. The pseudo-cyclical nature of production time is reinforced by natural cycles of day and night, work and rest, and an annual planned vacation. Pseudo-cyclical time is transformed by modern industry into a commodity just as modern industry produces commodities to consume time. Time thus becomes a packaged commodity—a unit known as leisure. Time-saving commodities are produced in order to expand the commodity market itself.

Society presents the illusion that leisure is somehow the real life, and that workers should await its periodic return. However, real time gives way, in spectacular society, to advertisement of real time. In this mechanism, the past dominates the present. In historic time, the individual is meaningless and insignificant. The individual history is not the collective history and has no larger meaning. The spectacle fosters a false consciousness of time; spectacular time requires the dispossession of the producer. In this interpretation, the individual becomes guilty of age and death because it is not useful to history or production. Society thus separates people from their own time. A revolutionary classless society would necessitate a process of removing individuals from spectacular time.

Chapter 7, The Organization of Territory

Chapter 7, The Organization of Territory Summary and Analysis

Chapter 7 presents theses 165 through 179. Chapter 7 begins with a quote taken from The Price by Niccolò Machiavelli. Modern means of production and transit have unified geographic space to such a degree that localization has vanished. As the real local geography vanishes, it is replaced by a spectacular localization. Tourism is simply the leisure to go and see the banal spectacular localizations; tourism—human circulation—is consumption. Modernization removes time from travel, and also it removes space or geography from travel.

Urbanization is the logical extension of a society which alienates; urbanization is alienation. Urbanization is the freezing of life at a point in time. It safeguards class power and encourages individuals participate in sprawling isolation; it isolates people together in factories and other places of work. The mass character of spectacular life spreads everywhere and colonizes everything. Modern travel leads to ever-larger dispersions of urbanization. Technical organization makes additional space for consumption of commodity. The town and country are eroded by the spectacle as a failure of history. A universal history, devoid of localization, arises through urbanization. The city replaces the natural relations between people with false relations. The slums house the new peasantry. Revolution can change things by bringing back the reality of the voyage to replace the life as voyage. Revolutionary elements must realize that total change must be accomplished; partial change will only be absorbed by the spectacle.

Chapter 8, Negation and Consumption within Culture

Chapter 8, Negation and Consumption within Culture Summary and Analysis

Chapter 8 presents theses 180 through 211. Chapter 8 begins with a quote taken from a March 1843 letter of Arnold Ruge, addressed to Karl Marx. The chapter, the second longest in the text, considers several topics, beginning and ending with an appraisal of culture; here Debord relies heavily upon Hegel's notion of culture. After a general consideration of culture, Debord moves on to specifically address art, sociology, structure, and then the role of critique in the spectacle, before concluding with more general comments upon culture. Many elements of this chapter are obviously self-referential, especially e.g. theses 195 and 203 through 206.

Culture is defined as the knowledge of society and the representations of the lived. Culture is the locus of the search for lost unity. While innovation leads to culture, culture is not innovative. Culture is self-dissolving because, like all autonomous entities, it leads to its own collapse. Culture is a sense of the world that doesn't make sense. Debord proposes a fundamental split within culture, like two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, culture suppresses itself and offers a false critique of society; on the other hand, culture preserves itself as a dead object and defends class power and the status quo.

As society loses things, so to it loses the language needed to discuss the things lost. The very ability to discuss, the very ability to perceive, lost things is lost with the things that are lost. Just as language fragments, art decomposes. Art becomes great only as real life fades away. Debord then inserts a concise history of the progression of art, beginning with the baroque period. Baroque art was a response to a world without its center. It led to romanticism and then to cubism which is the negation of art. Eventually, all art becomes equal as all art loses distinction. Dadaism and surrealism are the theoretical endpoint of art. They stand in opposition to each other but are fundamentally inadequate to deal with their self-derived questions. Modern art seeks a restructuring without community.

In the society of the spectacle, culture is a commodity—beyond this, it is and must be the star commodity—culture will be and must be the driving force in the development of the economy. Culture has replaced the automobile and, before that, the railroad in this regard. Knowledge is used to justify a society without justification. Knowledge cannot and will not investigate its own material basis in the spectacular system. The spectacular critique, or the critique of the society of the spectacle, is part of the spectacle. Contemplation of the spectacle is submission to the spectacle. Sociology may be truly reformist, but it fails to grasp the reality beyond the empirical data. For example, waste functions as a necessary component of the spectacle, and it cannot be eliminated. A 'fair' society is past; making spectacular society fair is impossible and

futile. The society of the spectacle ensures that the tendency to celebrate the current system as eternal and uncreated is realized.

Power leads to structure; structure can only be accurately judged from outside of the system creating the structure. Discourse cannot destroy the system being discussed. A critique of the spectacle is only the theory of its real conditions; critique is not a change agent. By nature, critique of a system is considered, by the system, to be scandalous and an abomination. Debord, in thesis 206, inserts some observations on the stylistic methodologies of some writers. Plagiarism becomes normal and essential—and unavoidable. Quotation gives way to diversion; only a cultural inversion can maintain real culture.

Chapter 9, Ideology Materialized

Chapter 9, Ideology Materialized Summary and Analysis

Chapter 9 presents theses 212 through 221. Chapter 9 begins with a short quote taken from The Phenomenology of Mind by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Chapter 9 is the shortest chapter of the text and considers ideology—most translations position the discussion in a playful tone. Ideology is the basis of thought; ideological facts are not real, but the do impact education. Ideology becomes legitimized by victory. Once victorious, ideology vanishes into the bases of society—it leaves no history behind. Ideologies are ephemeral. An ideology's completion is its disintegration into society. The spectacle is ideology par excellence.

The political economy produces only one need—money; and money is the only need of the political economy. Individuals within the society of the spectacle experience a fusion of schizophrenia and catatonia. Their isolation is complete and is further strengthened by their daily experience. Their feeling of being on the margins is compensated by their need for representation within the system—a need that is fulfilled by illusion in spectacle. Critiques must acknowledge their own limits; the spectacle will always filter into any critique of the spectacle. Real truth and real change are only possible when individuals are linked directly to universal history. Real truth and real change are only possible where dialogue is able to make its own conditions victorious.

Characters

Guy Ernest Debord

Guy Ernest Debord (1931 - 1994) was a Marxist theorist, writer, filmmaker, and political activist. Prior to committing suicide he enjoyed an unusual and influential life, publishing The Society of the Spectacle in 1967. The book has been translated into English numerous times. The text offers no biographical data about the author, though some latter versions have supplementary biographical material, not included in the original. Debord was born in Paris and raised by his grandmother. After a brief stint of studying law he left the University of Paris and, in 1952, became active in the Lettrist International, a collective of radical artists and theorists often compared to America's Beat Generation. In the early 1960s, Debord was highly influential in the Situationist International group—itself briefly mentioned in Thesis 191. The Situationist International movement pursued several defined but complex goals, among them the construction of situations, or moments of life deliberately constructed to focus on a unitary ambiance and a so-called game of events. The publication of Society of the Spectacle, in 1967, provided the Situationist International with a formal critical theory grounded in Marxist theory; it expanded the Marxist concept of reification as developed by György Lukács. Debord's text is widely considered to be one of the major catalysts for the Paris uprising of 1968. In the 1970s, Debord left the Situationist International and pursued film, making several acclaimed productions including a 1973 film version of Society of the Spectacle. In his latter life, Debord became somewhat isolated, continuing correspondence with only a handful of acquaintances. A heavy drinker, Debord suffered from polyneuritis. He ended his own life at home by shooting himself through the heart.

Debord published several books, including Society of the Spectacle, Comments on the Society of the Spectacle, and several autobiographical works. Debord's first book, Memoires, was bound with sandpaper so that it would degrade other books shelved next to it. Debord also produced several films, including an adaptation of the Society of the Spectacle. He appears fairly often in modern literary references, and his memory has demonstrated surprising durability in popular culture.

György Lukács

Lukács (1885 - 1971) was a Hungarian philosopher and literary critic. He published several books including, in 1923, the influential History and Class Consciousness which is briefly quoted during the Chapter 2 introduction. The book is generally credited with initiated Western Marxism and was enormously influential. Lukács has a long and interesting political life, though the text offers no biographical data about him. His theory is explicitly commented upon in, e.g., Thesis 112 and in a more diffuse sense informs the entire text of the Society of the Spectacle.

Lukács, born Löwinger György Bernát, was known in German as Georg Bernhard Lukács von Szegedin and in Hungarian as Szegedi Lukács György Bernát, yet published under the names Georg Lukács and György Lukács. Born into a wealthy Jewish banking family in Budapest, Lukács studied at the universities of Budapest and Berlin, completing a Ph.D. in 1906. Lukács demonstrated an affinity for socialist principles from early in his education and during his university studies he read Sorel, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Dostoyevsky. In 1915 he founded the Budapest Sunday Circle, which sponsored arts events attracting notable regional artists. During the final year of World War I, Lukács joined the Communist Party and began to focus on political theory. Lukács was active in the government of the briefly-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic; after that government's collapse Lukács left Hungary for Vienna. There, he met Thomas Mann and inspired the character Naphta, from The Magic Mountain.

Throughout the early 1920s, Lukács remained in Vienna and worked on developing Leninist philosophical ideas. By the mid 1930s, Lukács had abandoned direct involvement in politics to favor purely theoretical work; in 1933 he fled the burgeoning Nazism of Germany and settled in Moscow until the end of World War II. In the mid 1950s Lukács again briefly became politically active and was involved in a series of widely criticized activities culminating in the 1956 Hungarian Revolutions, after which he was deported to Romania. He returned to Budapest in 1957 and thereafter remained within the Communist Party until his death. Lukács' codification of Marxist thought was hugely influential to later theorists, particularly in the West, and underlies most of the basic Marxist theory presented in the Society of the Spectacle.

Ludwig Feuerbach

Feuerbach (1804 - 1872) was a German philosopher and anthropologist. He published several books including the influential Das Wesen des Christentums (The Essence of Christianity) which is briefly quoted during the Chapter 1 introduction. The book was first published in 1841; the second edition was translated into English in 1881. Although his philosophy was popular with the revolutionary movements of the time, Feuerbach remained predominantly apolitical during his life. The text offers no biographical data about Feuerbach.

Sigmund Freud

Freud (1856 - 1939) was an Austrian psychiatrist and neurologist who founded the psychoanalytic school of psychology. He published extensively and was enormously influential to all subsequent western thinking. Freud is briefly quoted in Chapter 2, Thesis 51, though the text offers no biographical data about him. Freud is representative of many authors and theorists within the text inasmuch as he is alluded to without being developed.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev, and

John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1917 - 1963), often referred to in popular culture as JFK, was President of the United States of America from 1961 until his assassination. Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev (1894 - 1971) was First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964, and Chairman of the Council of Ministers from 1958 to 1964. He was removed from power and replaced by Leonid Brezhnev in 1964. Kennedy and Khrushchev led their respective countries during a brief but tense standoff known as the 'Cuban Missile Crisis.' Mao Zedong (1893-1976) was a Chinese military and political leader, leading the People's Republic of China from its establishment in 1949 until his death. The book offers all three men as examples of celebrities in Chapter 3. No biographical data are offered for any of the men.

William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare (c. 1564 - 1616) was an English playwright and poet. He is today widely regarded as the greatest English-language writer and dramatist. Shakespeare's work Henry IV is briefly quoted during the Chapter 5 introduction, though the text offers no biographical data about him. Shakespeare is representative of many authors within the text inasmuch as he is alluded to without being developed.

Baltasar Gracián y Morales

Baltasar Gracián y Morales (1601 - 1658) was a Spanish writer who was influential on later philosophers. His Oraculo Manual y Arte de Prudencia (usually translated as The Art of Worldly Wisdom) is briefly quoted during the Chapter 6 introduction, though the text offers no biographical data about him. Gracián y Morales is representative of many authors within the text inasmuch as he is alluded to without being developed.

Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli

Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli (1469 - 1527), nearly always referred to as simply Machiavelli, was an Italian philosopher, diplomat, and writer. He is best-remembered for his seminal political philosophy presented in The Prince, which is quoted from during the Chapter 7 introduction. The text offers no biographical data about Machiavelli; he is representative of many authors and theorists within the text inasmuch as he is alluded to without being developed.

Karl Heinrich Marx

Karl Heinrich Marx (1818 - 1883) was a German philosopher and political thinker. Marx published widely is the most influential political philosopher of modern Western society.

Marx co-wrote and published his brief but seminal work The Communist Manifesto in 1848. Although not specifically stated, the text is generally held to be a direct response to Marx's political theory of the class struggle—a theory today widely known as Marxism. Chapter 8 is introduced with a quotation from a letter addressed to Marx, and Chapter 4 frequently refers to Marx's philosophical work; indeed, one must have a solid foundation in Marxism to appreciate the arguments of the text. However, the text offers virtually no biographical data about the man himself.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770 - 1831) was a German philosopher. Widely published, his philosophy has been immensely influential on Western culture. Chapter 9 begins with a short quotation taken from Hegel's text The Phenomenology of Mind. Beside Marx, Hegel's philosophy is the most dominant presented in the text, though of course this would be natural for the time and place of writing. A basic familiarity with Hegel is nearly a prerequisite to understanding major portions of the text. The text offers no biographical data about him.

Objects/Places

Society

Debord uses the term society in a fairly standard way throughout the text, though his interpretation generally tends to focus on modern communities that are distinguishable units because of their particular aims and standards of conduct. Throughout the text, the primary society considered is naturally that society which produces and is simultaneously produced by, the spectacle.

Spectacle

Debord implements the term spectacle in several ways—from the most-basic interpretation as a system declaring putatively notable, unusual, and entertaining events to the self-defined processes whereby the society of the spectacle is self-generating and self-promoting. Indeed, much of the early chapters of the text are devoted primarily to defining and explaining the spectacle's existence and functioning within society.

Enquete Parlementaire sur l'Insurrection du 18 Mars

From March 18 to May 28, 1871, Paris was ruled by an anarcho-socialist organization known as the Paris Commune. After the political movement was overthrown during a bloody period of fighting, an official inquest was held. The proceedings, including the report, depositions, and supporting materials, were published in Enquete Parlementaire sur l'Insurrection du 18 Mars, which is typically published in multiple volumes. The text quotes from the report during the Chapter 4 introduction. No other data regarding the report are offered in the text.

Ruge's letter to Marx, March 1843

Chapter 8 begins with a quotation taken from a letter written in March, 1843, by the German philosopher Arnold Ruge and addressed to Karl Marx. The quote is fairly long in comparison to the text's other quotes. No additional data about the letter are given.

Capitalism

The text does not rigorously define capitalism, and instead relies upon a traditional expansive interpretation; e.g., an economic system characterized by private ownership of commodities. The text attacks the notion that individuals are able to make private decisions regarding prices, production, and distribution, however.

Commodity

A commodity, traditionally, is an economic good such as a product of mining or agriculture. Debord begins with this definition but then expands it well beyond traditional meanings to first, something useful, then something values, and then merely as something that is desired. The end-state commodity in the society of the spectacle is little more than the mass media presentation of an image. Thus, in the hyper-exploitative society of the spectacle, a commodity represents time, interpretation, and even experience.

Worker's Councils

A worker's council is an assembly or organization of working class members that intends to facilitate direct worker involvement in the management of business or production. Unlike trade unions, worker's councils attempt to put workers directly in control of production rather than representing them through collective bargaining. Worker's councils are sometimes referred to as communes within Marxist literature. For Debord, the worker's councils offered the only viable methodology of truly revolutionary progress.

Production

Production is the process arising from labor—e.g., a working person yields production. Debord uses a fairly typical Marxists portrayal of production but notes that the objects produced need not be tangible, useful, or even empirically identifiable. That is, over-specialized workers in the service sector produce commodities that consist of, perhaps, little more that flattering images meant to drive a frenzy of desire.

The Bourgeoisie

The bourgeoisie is the name given to that class of modern capitalists who are the owners of the means of social production. They are the employers of the wage laborer. Debord inherits this rather typical interpretation from Marx and is, generally, content to use it without extensive modification.

The Proletariat

The proletariat is the name given to that class of modern laborers who do not possess the means of production. They are thus reduced to selling their labor power in order to live. Debord inherits this rather typical interpretation from Marx and is, generally, content to use it without extensive modification.

Themes

The Degradation of Life

The text proposes a theoretical process of understanding societal construction which includes many processes that degrade life. The society of the spectacle is one in which being is replaced by having, and having is replaced by appearing to have—hence, reality is displaced in favor of appearances. This extends even to social life, which has become a mere representation of social life. Debord argues this complete replacement is facilitated by advanced forms of capitalism, the mass media, and governance by structures that favor the spectacle. In the advanced stages of spectacle, relationships between commodities have fully replaced relationships between people. People remain merely to produce, or appear to produce, commodities and gaze at the spectacle. Numerous theses comment on the degradation of human life, including 6, 8, 10, 16, 17, 19, 30, 37, 60, 68, 114, 134, and 192. Aside from direct experience, the text also suggests that the spectacle degrades knowledge, rational thought, and other elements of society.

Commodity Fetishism and the Mass Media

Much of the text examines the twinned topics of commodity fetishism and the contemporaneous mass media. These two aspects of the society of the spectacle conflate to drive capitalism to spectacular ends. They result in the amassing of capital, the alienation of the proletariat, and the gradual replacement of actual, real life with the representation of life. Although the spectacle attempts to suborn all the senses, it is the most successful with vision. The spectacular presentation of images is primarily responsible for the illusion of life. According to Debord, images have supplanted real human interaction because images are used to mediate human interaction. This idea is encapsulated in the process of advertising, where images project what people need—rather what they are told they need—and in turn seek out to accumulate, or at least to appear to accumulate. As this process cyclically repeats, it grows stronger and becomes more abstracted eventually resulting in commodity fetishism divorced of any actual commodity. Ironically, the mass media itself becomes a commodity, as does the desire for commodity. This topic is especially relevant to theses 1, 4, and 17.

Mass Media Marketing v. Religion

The text suggests that the mystical role played by religions in past societies has been nearly entirely supplanted, in the society of the spectacle, by the role of mass media advertising and marketing. Commodity fetishism, spurred by the mass media, frenzies the consumer with "religious fervor" (Thesis 67) and devotion to transient commodities. As these waves of enthusiasm spread throughout society, so the commodity becomes the new fetish and religion is discarded. Debord asserts that relics of the old societies,

such as the family and religion, are disbanded as rapidly as possible by the society of the spectacle, in favor of mass marketing and the appearance of reality. Debord also singles out Christianity as being especially favorable to the transition of society into the spectacle for several reasons, primarily because Christianity posits a special creation and a final rapture, thus envisioning history as irreversible and finite. This one-way interpretation of events is easily captured and subverted into commodity fetishism through mass media appeals. In other words, Debord argues that Christians make especially efficient and especially passive commodity consumers. The interplay of religion and the society of the spectacle is especially relevant to theses 20, 25, 59, 67, 132, 136, and 182.

Style

Perspective

The text is a response to, and in some ways an apology for, contemporaneous Marxist theory. The historical failures of Marxist thought having become apparent, Debord and others attempted to reinvent, or at least reinterpret, Marx within the paradigm them obtaining. The text is scholarly and incredibly dense. Indeed, its brevity belies the immense amount of information conveyed and the exceptional information density of the text is one of the primary hurdles to interpretation. During some sections—notably Chapter 4—the text relies heavily on prior philosophical work, especially that of Marx and Hegel. This framework is not required for understanding all of the text but its stamp throughout is unmistakable. The text appeared during a time of political foment and social unrest in many European countries and America. In part, it was a response to a perceived abject failure of Marxism, but in part it was in response to increasing market commodities and mass media penetration into the global psyche. The text was well received by a limited audience, but its deeply philosophical nature kept it from a wider appeal, especially among the class Debord would refer to as the proletariat.

Originally written in French, the text has been translated into English on several occasions, and the various interpretations can vary surprisingly in detail and even broad interpretation. Debord relied heavily on what he termed 'detourned phrases', or détournments; that is, phrases drawn from a source and used—usually verbatim—in another context. Many of Debord's détournments were drawn from Hegel. This use gives depth of meaning which is virtually impossible to relay through translation, particularly because in translation the detourned phrase will generally not be recognized as a borrowed concept. Various translations and editions attempt to compensate through various approaches—few are very successful.

Tone

The document is a curious blend of tones, in some parts utilizing a fairly austere and intellectual presentation of philosophy, while in other parts presenting text in almost jargon. Of course, this effect depends heavily on translation and some English-language editions attempt a compression of tone. The mood of the text is likewise complex. While the surface mood denounces advances and processes occurring in society, the undercurrent is a hopeful appeal to future revolutionary processes which may throw off the yoke of the spectacle in preference for an experiential, or real, life. Some theses undeniably exhibit a brooding feeling brought on by the realization of widespread, constant, and brutal colonization by the spectacle; other theses are objective and academic in their portrayal; still others are lighthearted and hopeful. Nevertheless, the text is presented as a nearly objective analysis of the then-prevailing circumstances and presents a well-developed and internally cohesive response intended to educate and, insofar as possible, facilitate revolutionary change.

Structure

The text has a straightforward structure which is easy to follow. Major divisions are termed chapters—there are nine—and they are named and enumerated. Their ordered presentation allows for a natural building of meaning within the text. Each chapter is further divided into enumerated theses, each an atomic unit of thought generally building upon a prior thesis. This outline structure aids in comprehension and allows for an easy discussion of ideas that naturally transcends not only various editions, but also translations and languages. That is to say, several English language translations can compare Thesis 67 without further reference to page numbers, sentence numbers, and so forth—the structure has proved durable through all translations and editions. Similarly, themes within the text can be cited by noting which theses are particularly relevant. The text was clearly intended as an educational and introductory statement; it is interesting to ponder how Debord might have reformulated the text given today's prevailing paradigm.

There are several English-language translations available, and some of the major translations have been revised at various times. Each publication has typically appeared at least a few editions. Thus, the English-language text is available in a bewildering variety of formats. Many contain no commentary, but many include a range of commentary. Dozens of interpretations and supporting texts have also been published, including a few by the author. Many editions are now freely available on the internet.

Quotes

17.
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. 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. At the same time all individual reality has become social reality directly dependent on social power and shaped by it. It is allowed to appear only to the extent that it is not.
18.
Where the real world changes into simple images, the simple images become real beings and effective motivations of hypnotic behavior. The spectacle, as a tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly), naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs; the most abstract, the most mystifiable sense corresponds to the generalized abstraction of present-day society. But the spectacle is not identifiable with mere gazing, even combined with hearing. It is that which escapes the activity of men, that which escapes reconsideration and correction by their work. It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever there is independent representation, the spectacle reconstitutes itself.
19.
The spectacle inherits all the weaknesses of the Western philosophical project which undertook to comprehend activity in terms of the categories of seeing; furthermore, it is based on the incessant spread of the precise technical rationality which grew out of this thought. The spectacle does not realize philosophy, it philosophizes reality. The concrete life of everyone has been degraded into a speculative universe.
20.
Philosophy, the power of separate thought and the thought of separate power, could never by itself supersede theology. The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion. Spectacular technology has not dispelled the religious clouds where men had placed their own powers detached from themselves; it has only tied them to an earthly base. The most earthly life thus becomes opaque and unbreathable. It no longer projects into the sky but shelters within itself its absolute denial, its fallacious paradise. The spectacle is the technical realization of the exile of human powers into a beyond; it is separation perfected within the interior of man.
(Chapter 1, Theses 17-20)

50.
At the moment of economic abundance, the concentrated result of social labor becomes visible and subjugates all reality to appearance, which is now its product. Capital is no longer the invisible center which directs the mode of production: its accumulation spreads it all the way to the periphery in the form of tangible objects. The entire expanse of society is its portrait.
51.

The victory of the autonomous economy must at the same time be its defeat. The forces which it has unleashed eliminate the economic necessity which was the immutable basis of earlier societies. When economic necessity is replaced by the necessity for boundless economic development, the satisfaction of primary human needs is replaced by an uninterrupted fabrication of pseudo-needs which are reduced to the single pseudo-need of maintaining the reign of the autonomous economy. The autonomous economy permanently breaks away from fundamental need to the extent that it emerges from the social unconscious which unknowingly depended on it. "All that is conscious wears out. What is unconscious remains unalterable. But once freed, does it not fall to ruins in turn?" (Freud).

52.

As soon as society discovers that it depends on the economy, the economy, in fact, depends on society. This subterranean force, which grew until it appeared sovereign, has lost its power. That which was the economic it must become the I. The subject can emerge only from society, namely from the struggle within society. The subject's possible existence depends on the outcome of the class struggle which shows itself to be the product and the producer of the economic foundation of history

53.

The consciousness of desire and the desire for consciousness are identically the project which, in its negative form, seeks the abolition of classes, the workers' direct possession of every aspect of their activity. Its opposite is the society of the spectacle, where the commodity contemplates itself in a world it has created.

(Chapter 2, Thesis 50-53)

60.

The celebrity, the spectacular representation of a living human being, embodies this banality by embodying the image of a possible role. Being a star means specializing in the seemingly lived; the star is the object of identification with the shallow seeming life that has to compensate for the fragmented productive specializations which are actually lived. Celebrities exist to act out various styles of living and viewing society unfettered, free to express themselves globally. They embody the inaccessible result of social labor by dramatizing its by-products magically projected above it as its goal: power and vacations, decision and consumption, which are the beginning and end of an undiscussed process. In one case state power personalizes itself as a pseudo-star; in another a star of consumption gets elected as a pseudo-power over the lived. But just as the activities of the star are not really global. they are not really varied.

61.

The agent of the spectacle placed on stage as a star is the opposite of the individual, the enemy of the individual in himself as well as in others. Passing into the spectacle as a model for identification, the agent renounces all autonomous qualities in order to identify himself with the general law of obedience to the course of things. The consumption celebrity superficially represents different types of personality and shows each of these types having equal access to the totality of consumption and finding similar happiness there. The decision celebrity must possess a complete stock of accepted human qualities. Official differences between stars are wiped out by the official similarity which is the presupposition of their excellence in everything. Khrushchev

became a general so as to make decisions on the battle of Kursk, not on the spot, but at the twentieth anniversary, when he was master of the State. Kennedy remained an orator even to the point of proclaiming the eulogy over his own tomb, since Theodore Sorenson continued to edit speeches for the successor in the style which had characterized the personality of the deceased. The admirable people in whom the system personifies itself are well known for not being what they are; they became great men by stooping below the reality of the smallest individual life, and everyone knows it.
62.
False choice in spectacular abundance, a choice which lies in the juxtaposition of competing and complimentary spectacles and also in the juxtaposition of roles (signified and carried mainly by things) which are at once exclusive and overlapping, develops into a struggle of vaporous qualities meant to stimulate loyalty to quantitative triviality. This resurrects false archaic oppositions, regionalisms and racisms which serve to raise the vulgar hierarchic ranks of consumption to a preposterous ontological superiority. In this way, the endless series of trivial confrontations is set up again. from competitive sports to elections, mobilizing a sub-ludic interest. Wherever there is abundant consumption, a major spectacular opposition between youth and adults comes to the fore among the false roles-false because the adult, master of his life, does not exist and because youth, the transformation of what exists, is in no way the property of those who are now young, but of the economic system, of the dynamism of capitalism. Things rule and are young; things confront and replace one another.
(Chapter 3, Thesis 60-62)

85.
The weakness of Marx's theory is naturally the weakness of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat of his time. The working class did not set off the permanent revolution in the Germany of 1848; the Commune was defeated in isolation. Revolutionary theory thus could not yet achieve its own total existence. The fact that Marx was reduced to defending and clarifying it with cloistered, scholarly work, in the British Museum, caused a loss in the theory itself. The scientific justifications Marx elaborated about the future development of the working class and the organizational practice that went with them became obstacles to proletarian consciousness at a later stage.
86.
All the theoretical insufficiencies of content as well as form of exposition of the scientific defense of proletarian revolution can be traced to the identification of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie from the standpoint of the revolutionary seizure of power.
(Chapter 4, Theses 85-86)

91.
The first successes of the struggle of the International led it to free itself from the confused influences of the dominant ideology which survived in it. But the defeat and repression which it soon encountered brought to the foreground a conflict between two conceptions of the proletarian revolution. Both of these conceptions contain an authoritarian dimension and thus abandon the conscious self-emancipation of the working class. In effect, the quarrel between Marxists and Bakuninists (which became

irreconcilable) was two-edged, referring at once to power in the revolutionary society and to the organization of the present movement, and when the positions of the adversaries passed from one aspect to the other, they reversed themselves. Bakunin fought the illusion of abolishing classes by the authoritarian use of state power, foreseeing the reconstitution of a dominant bureaucratic class and the dictatorship of the most knowledgeable, or those who would be reputed to be such. Marx thought that the growth of economic contradictions inseparable from democratic education of the workers would reduce the role of the proletarian State to a simple phase of legalizing the new social relations imposing themselves objectively, and denounced Bakunin and his followers for the authoritarianism of a conspiratorial elite which deliberately placed itself above the International and formulated the extravagant design of imposing on society the irresponsible dictatorship of those who are most revolutionary, or those who would designate themselves to be such. Bakunin, in fact, recruited followers on the basis of such a perspective: "Invisible pilots in the center of the popular storm, we must direct it, not with a visible power, but with the collective dictatorship of all the allies. A dictatorship without badge, without title, without official right, yet all the more powerful because it will have none of the appearances of power." Thus two ideologies of the workers' revolution opposed each other, each containing a partially true critique, but losing the unity of the thought of history, and instituting themselves into ideological authorities. Powerful organizations, like German Social-Democracy and the Iberian Anarchist Federation faithfully served one or the other of these ideologies; and everywhere the result was very different from what had been desired.
(Chapter 4, Thesis 91)

93.
The anarchists, who distinguish themselves explicitly from the rest of the workers' movement by their ideological conviction, reproduce this separation of competences among themselves; they provide a terrain favorable to informal domination over all anarchist organizations by propagandists and defenders of their ideology, specialists who are in general more mediocre the more their intellectual activity consists of the repetition of certain definitive truths. Ideological respect for unanimity of decision has on the whole been favorable to the uncontrolled authority, within the organization itself, of specialists in freedom; and revolutionary anarchism expects the same type of unanimity from the liberated population, obtained by the same means. Furthermore, the refusal to take into account the opposition between the conditions of a minority grouped in the present struggle and of a society of free individuals, has nourished a permanent separation among anarchists at the moment of common decision, as is shown by an infinity of anarchist insurrections in Spain, confined and destroyed on a local level.
94.
The illusion entertained more or less explicitly by genuine anarchism is the permanent imminence of an instantaneously accomplished revolution which will prove the truth of the ideology and of the mode of practical organization derived from the ideology. In 1936, anarchism in fact led a social revolution, the most advanced model of proletarian power in all time. In this context it should be noted that the signal for a general insurrection had been imposed by a pronunciamiento of the army. Furthermore, to the extent that this revolution was not completed during the first days (because of the

existence of Franco's power in half the country, strongly supported from abroad while the rest of the international proletarian movement was already defeated, and because of remains of bourgeois forces or other statist workers' parties within the camp of the Republic) the organized anarchist movement showed itself unable to extend the demi-victories of the revolution, or even to defend them. Its known leaders became ministers and hostages of the bourgeois State which destroyed the revolution only to lose the civil war.
(Chapter 4, Theses 93-94)

107.
Stalinism was the reign of terror within the bureaucratic class itself. The terrorism at the base of this class's power must also strike this class because it possesses no juridical guarantee, no recognized existence as owning class, which it could extend to every one of its members. Its real property being hidden, the bureaucracy became proprietor by way of false consciousness. False consciousness can maintain its absolute power only by means of absolute terror, where all real motives are ultimately lost. The members of the bureaucratic class in power have a right of ownership over society only collectively, as participants in a fundamental lie: they have to play the role of the proletariat directing a socialist society; they have to be actors loyal to a script of ideological disloyalty. But effective participation in this falsehood requires that it be recognized as actual participation. No bureaucrat can support his right to power individually, since proving that he's a socialist proletarian would mean presenting himself as the opposite of a bureaucrat, and proving that he's a bureaucrat is impossible since the official truth of the bureaucracy is that it does not exist. Thus every bureaucrat depends absolutely on the central guarantee of the ideology which recognizes the collective participation in its "socialist power" of all the bureaucrats it does not annihilate. If all the bureaucrats taken together decide everything, the cohesion of their own class can be assured only by the concentration of their terrorist power in a single person. In this person resides the only practical truth of falsehood in power: the indisputable permanence of its constantly adjusted frontier. Stalin decides without appeal who is ultimately to be a possessing bureaucrat; in other words, who should be named "a proletarian in power" and who "a traitor in the pay of the Mikado or of Wall Street." The bureaucratic atoms find the common essence of their right only in the person of Stalin. Stalin is the world sovereign who in this manner knows himself as the absolute person for whose consciousness there is no higher spirit. "The sovereign of the world has effective consciousness of what he is-the universal power of efficacy-in the destructive violence which he exerts against the Self of his subjects, the contrasting others." Just as he is the power that defines the terrain of domination, he is "the power which ravages this terrain."
(Chapter 4, Thesis 107)

136.
The monotheistic religions were a compromise between myth and history, between cyclical time which still dominated production and irreversible time where populations clash and regroup. The religions which grew out of Judaism are abstract universal acknowledgments of irreversible time which is democratized, opened to all, but in the

realm of illusion. Time is totally oriented toward a single final event: "The Kingdom of God is at hand." These religions arose on the soil of history, and established themselves there. But there they still preserve themselves in radical opposition to history. Semi-historical religion establishes a qualitative point of departure in time (the birth of Christ, the flight of Mohammed), but its irreversible time-introducing real accumulation which in Islam can take the form of a conquest, or in Reformation Christianity the form of increased capital is actually inverted in religious thought and becomes a countdown: the hope of access to the genuine other world before time runs out, the expectation of the last Judgment. Eternity came out of cyclical time and is beyond it. Eternity is the element which holds back the irreversibility of time, suppressing history within history itself by placing itself on the other side of irreversible time as a pure punctual element to which cyclical time returned and abolished itself. Bossuet will still say: "And by means of the time that passes we enter into the eternity which does not pass."
(Chapter 5, Thesis 136)

160.
The irreducibly biological element which remains in labor, both in the dependence on the natural cycle of waking and sleep and in the existence of irreversible time in the expenditure of an individual life, is a mere accessory from the point of view of modern production; consequently, these elements are ignored in the official proclamations of the movement of production and in the consumable trophies which are the accessible translation of this incessant victory. The spectator's consciousness, immobilized in the falsified center of the movement of its world, no longer experiences its life as a passage toward self-realization and toward death. One who has renounced using his life can no longer admit his death. Life insurance advertisements suggest merely that he is guilty of dying without ensuring the regularity of the system after this economic loss; and the advertisement of the American way of death insists on his capacity to maintain in this encounter the greatest possible number of appearances of life. On all other fronts of the advertising onslaught, it is strictly forbidden to grow old. Even a "youth-capital," contrived for each and all and put to the most mediocre uses, could never acquire the durable and cumulative reality of financial capital. This social absence of death is identical to the social absence of life.
(Chapter 6, Thesis 160)

165.
Capitalist production has unified space, which is no longer bounded by external societies. This unification is at the same time an extensive and intensive process of banalization. The accumulation of commodities produced in mass for the abstract space of the market, which had to break down all regional and legal barriers and all the corporative restrictions of the Middle Ages that preserved the quality of craft production, also had to destroy the autonomy and quality of places. This power of homogenization is the heavy artillery which brought down all Chinese walls.
166.
In order to become ever more identical to itself, to get as close as possible to motionless monotony, the free space of the commodity is henceforth constantly

modified and reconstructed.
167.
This society which eliminates geographical distance reproduces distance internally as spectacular separation.
168.
Tourism, human circulation considered as consumption, a by-product of the circulation of commodities, is fundamentally nothing more than the leisure of going to see what has become banal. The economic organization of visits to different places is already in itself the guarantee of their equivalence. The same modernization that removed time from the voyage also removed from it the reality of space.
(Chapter 7, Theses 165-168)

189.
The historical time which invades art expressed itself first of all in the sphere of art itself, starting with the baroque. Baroque is the art of a world which has lost its center: the last mythical order, in the cosmos and in terrestrial government, accepted by the Middle Ages-the unity of Christianity and the phantom of an Empire has fallen. The art of the change must carry within itself the ephemeral principle it discovers in the world. It chose, said Eugenio d'Ors, "life against eternity." Theater and the festival, the theatrical festival, are the outstanding achievements of the baroque where every specific artistic expression becomes meaningful only with reference to the setting of a constructed place, a construction which is its own center of unification; this center is the passage, which is inscribed as a threatened equilibrium in the dynamic disorder of everything. The somewhat excessive importance given to the concept of the baroque in the contemporary discussion of esthetics is an expression of the awareness that artistic classicism is impossible: for three centuries the attempts to realize a normative classicism or neoclassicism were no more than brief artificial constructions speaking the external language of the State, the absolute monarchy, or the revolutionary bourgeoisie in Roman clothes. What followed the general path of the baroque, from romanticism to cubism, was ultimately an ever more individualized art of negation perpetually renewing itself to the point of the fragmentation and complete negation of the artistic sphere. The disappearance of historical art, which was linked to the internal communication of an elite and had its semi-independent social basis in the partly playful conditions still lived by the last aristocracies, also expresses the fact that capitalism possesses the first class power which admits itself stripped of any ontological quality, a power which, rooted in the simple management of the economy, is equally the loss of all human mastery. The baroque, artistic creation's long-lost unity, is in some way rediscovered in the current consumption of the totality of past art. When all past art is recognized and sought historically and retrospectively constituted into a world art, it is relativized into a global disorder which in turn constitutes a baroque edifice on a higher level, an edifice in which the very production of baroque art merges with all its revivals. The arts of all civilizations and all epochs can be known and accepted together for the first time. Once this "collection of souvenirs" of art history becomes possible, it is also the end of the world of art. In this age of museums, when artistic communication can no longer exist, all the former moments of art can be admitted equally, because they no longer suffer from the loss of their specific conditions of communication in the current general loss of

the conditions of communication.
(Chapter 8, Thesis 189)

219.
The spectacle obliterates the boundaries between self and world by crushing the self besieged by the presence-absence of the world and it obliterates the boundaries between true and false by driving all lived truth below the real presence of fraud ensured by the organization of appearance. One who passively accepts his alien daily fate is thus pushed toward a madness that reacts in an illusory way to this fate by resorting to magical techniques. The acceptance and consumption of commodities are at the heart of this pseudo-response to a communication without response. The need to imitate which is felt by the consumer is precisely the infantile need conditioned by all the aspects of his fundamental dispossession. In the terms applied by Gabel to a completely different pathological level, "the abnormal need for representation here compensates for a tortuous feeling of being on the margin of existence."
220.
If the logic of false consciousness cannot know itself truly, the search for critical truth about the spectacle must simultaneously be a true critique. It must struggle in practice among the irreconcilable enemies of the spectacle and admit that it is absent where they are absent. The abstract desire for immediate effectiveness accepts the laws of the ruling thought, the exclusive point of view of the present, when it throws itself into reformist compromises or trashy pseudo-revolutionary common actions. Thus madness reappears in the very posture which pretends to fight it. Conversely, the critique which goes beyond the spectacle must know how to wait.
221.
Emancipation from the material bases of inverted truth this is what the self-emancipation of our epoch consists of. This "historical mission of installing truth in the world" cannot be accomplished either by the isolated individual, or by the atomized crowd subjected to manipulation, but now as ever by the class which is able to effect the dissolution of all classes by bringing all power into the dealienating form of realized democracy, the Council, in which practical theory controls itself and sees its own action. This is possible only where individuals are "directly linked to universal history"; only where dialogue arms itself to make its own conditions victorious.
(Chapter 9, Theses 219-221)

Topics for Discussion

Using your own words, define what Debord means by "the society of the spectacle."

Debord extends Marx's notion of labor production into the modern world, where laborers produce commodities. Consider Debord's notion of commodity. How abstracted do you think a commodity can become? For example, consider this book summary itself. It is a commodity functioning within a spectacular society. As an electronic document it has no physical existence and as a summary of a translated work which responds to another's philosophy, it has a very tenuous claim on significance. Yet somebody is purchasing it.

Debord's central theorem is that being has been replaced by having, and that having has been replaced by appearing to have. Consider the internet, for example. Have you ever known a friend who made a self-presentation on a social networking site? How accurate was their self portrayal? Was it based on being, having, or appearing?

Chapter 4 is usually viewed as the most difficult portion of the text. In fact, the language and ideas in Chapter 4 are simpler than the language and ideas in Chapter 1. The true difficulty of Chapter 4 lies in the huge number of references to other books and ideas. Do you think it's possible to philosophize about the nature of society without referring to external ideas? Why or why not?

In Chapter 5, Debord states "Man...is identical to time" (Thesis 125). Debord argues that since humans perceive time they in effect have created it as a commodity. Based upon your daily experience, do you think that time is an artificially imposed conceptualization of the real world?

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss several types of time, including cyclical time, irreversible time, and pseudo-cyclical time. Of the three, which would you say most closely approximates your personal daily experience?

Debord suggests in Chapter 7 that modern methods of transportation have removed the experience of localization from the modern world. This is to say, since it is possible to travel from New York to Moscow in a few hours, there is nothing inherently local about either place. If you have traveled extensively, do you agree with this concept? Is one place much like any other place, with the same stores, the same clothes, the same food, and the same stuff? Is Hawaii a really great place to visit, or is it just convincing advertising?

Debord argues that Christianity is especially suited to exploitation by capitalism because Christianity inherently organizes time as irreversible and finite. Consider a hypothetical religion that views time as endless and inherently cyclical. How might such a religion inherently resist colonization by capitalism?

How do you think Debord would define the concept of true freedom?

Review thesis 203; does Debord suggest that it would be moral to destroy the spectacle? Is the spectacle inherently immoral or unethical?

Debord suggests that it is desirable to overthrow the society of the spectacle, but he admits to an inability to describe what a post-spectacular society would look like or how it would function. Why should we struggle to overthrow a system with only an obscure idea of what the unknown future would then bring?