

Self-Contemplation – A Modern Adaptation of the Spectacle

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the origins and developments of a spectacular society since the post-war era, when mass media is expanding into the visual world of daily life, giving birth to a new way to organize the society around the notion of consumption and reduce into the representation of an immense spectacle. From the analysis of theories concerning consumption and spectacle, a new form of contemplation can be discovered in the contemporary society, which can be identified as “self-contemplation”.

Keywords: *mass media, history, social theory, consumerism*

1. INTRODUCTION

The society in its general visual form has walked into people’s daily life gradually in the 20th century. With televised images first made possible during the inter-war period, televisions and broadcasted channels welcomed a boom in the 1950’s as videotapes were invented. A significant development in this period was the introduction of the visual world into the broadcasted signals, whereas earlier ways the masses acquired information were through the radio and paper media. Although the mediation of images didn’t at once replace all old forms of communication, profound changes have happened to the popular values, cultures and ideologies, which may impact the very basic logic upon which the society is established. The televisions have provided an unprecedented resemblance to the reality, which generates a power of separation between the world in the screen and the real world.

2. WORLD WARS: IN SEARCH OF ALTERNATIVES

The background of such historical developments of mass media is the World Wars, when mass propaganda was first applied to the countries through radio broadcasting during WWII. It is thus crucial to analyze how the mass media was groundbreaking in the disaster imperialism faced since the World War. The logic of post-war consumer culture lied in the notion of growth.

One problem that had lasted from the Victorian Era is the necessitated expansion of capital in the real world. As Lenin identified as the logic of an imperialist society, capitals had to compete for colonies, raw resources, manpower, and production (Lenin, 1999, pp. 91-92). Despite all the advancement in industrialization and technology, quite a large population still remained “half-starved and poverty stricken” (Lenin, 1999, p. 70), whereas the production had

gone on growing. The promise an imperialist society made to the people was a stable society of growth. But such growth is undermined by the disparity between ever-growing production and insufficient consumption that played a large part in the Great Depression according to the Keynesian view (Klein, 1977, pp. 56-58, 169, 177-179). Then the legitimacy of a society would be questioned in the problems related to growth.

Economic crisis before the Great Depression was outweighed by the expansion in sphere of influence of the powers, but there is always a limitation to this growth in the sense of the finite natural resources and manpower. Conflicts take place in this stage, which intensified over time – from Morocco Crisis and Balkan Wars to the eventual World Wars. Although minor conflicts could for a while resolve the problem of overproduction, the devastating blow of the World War and World War II twenty years later had proven the growth through colonization would no longer function. In order to sustain itself, the capitalist countries had to find an alternative that would promise growth that is separated from reality. It was the time when a consumer culture was given birth through the mass media that had been successfully used during the war for propagation in the form of radio broadcasting, and quickly extended its grasp into the visual world of people.

3. MASS MEDIA OF IMAGES: THE SPECTACLE

Televisions in the 1950’s welcome a boom in production and consumption due to their lowered prices. By tactfully applying these electronic devices with little screens on them to the masses, there came to be the possibility to coin a different world easily envisioned. By sitting in front of the box, a Sicilian may be contemplating into the same scene of war in the Middle East as a Californian did. Out from the broadcasted moving images, the world inside screens are now so distinct, as a report on war may take up roughly the same time of a promotion ad. As Debord named it, this seemingly separated world present in mere images is the

spectacle.

Mediated by images, the society, including not only figures, sceneries, events but also the social relationship that connects everything together, gets separated and forms the spectacle that resembles real life with the vividness of the new medium of broadcasting:

The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of that life can no longer be recovered. Fragmented views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a separate pseudo-world that can only be looked at. (Debord, 2014, §2)

‘Fragmented views’ are exactly the role broadcasted images play – through the reorganization of themselves, they unite, but not in the way real life stages. Instead, when broadcasted in a selective manner, the images may successfully assemble a “pseudo-world” that is displayed to the public in a unilateral way. The public may only look at, or contemplate the spectacle. Although there may be regional differences depending on when televisions become affordable for local residents, it is overall similar no matter in which part of the world, as long as the television is the medium, and a power holds the platform of broadcasting the images. In present days, spectacles are still common on televisions, and images in TV commercials or news have been continuously doing the job.

With the help of spectacle, a new rule of ‘growth’ gets established when boundaries no longer persist under this system – wars will not be the final solution for growth since deficiencies and growth are now able to coexist through rather extensive period in the spectacle.

We have to go even further and acknowledge that this real poverty is a myth - and one in which the myth of growth glories, pretending to battle fiercely against it and yet keeping it alive all the same as its secret goals require. (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 56)

At a time when the spectacle resembles real life and gets broadcasted into every family, ‘myth’ replaces real poverty and real growth. The masses perceive the world through the mediation of images, but are kept from handling it in actual practice. When news about the government funding to help the poor, a disaster somewhere on earth, or civil wars in foreign countries, they impress the majority in rather similar ways hinting at new deficiencies that requires growth to deal with. However, deficiencies still exist, in Syria, or in the urban slums, while efforts in combating them only puts them into an ever-lasting cycle – a new regime gets established with domestic conflicts going on, some individuals receive aids and social ‘respect’ as more remain invisible in the spectacle. When people work to overcome these deficiencies of the spectacle, according to Debord, the product of the people only ‘become foreign to them’ (Debord, 2014, §31), accumulating the foreign power of the spectacle.

The new structure of spectacle is therefore the key feature of the post-war period, but it turned out that perfection of the spectacle is still required, when socialist movements struck France, the U.S. and Japan in the 60’s and 70’s. Within the broadcasting process of the spectacle, people discovered the unilateral essence within. In the unilateral broadcasting are the masses shown spectacles, when they

have no actual control over the whole process. These social movements were how they struggled for conversation and expression in the overwhelming spectacle. Anyway, it is safe to claim by this point that a modern period of history has already come into existence in post-war era on a worldwide scale.

4. SELF-CONTEMPLATION

With the spectacular society in mind, another advancement in this spectacle can be discovered through the spread of the internet. The technology of the internet did take place in late 1990’s, when minor innovations on all aspects of the net have always been going on in modern days. With regards to ‘growth’, the spectacle works fairly well by displaying deficiencies. But the change is to be noticed in the shift of the object of contemplation. As can be inferred from Debord’s texts, the contemplation of the spectacle will end up in the “lived reality” aligning with the spectacle (Debord, 2014, §8). Therefore, current society has represented itself in the way Debord expected – people’s lives mediated through the social media are instantly separated and thus turned into the spectacle. However, the contemplation of such spectacles is creating a new system of communication in addition to the one between the people and the spectacle. This new system of communication is embodied through the interpersonal interactional options the social media has to offer, which appears to reopen a way for people to communicate to others in the form of a separated spectacle. It may cast doubt on the existence of the unilateral communication system, as is argued by Debord as a characteristic of the spectacle (Debor, 2014, §24), when people now have the chance to “like” or to “comment on” the posted spectacle, but it remains a fact that the diffused spectacles remain spectacles in that they are being posted on a centralized platform. The conversations with other figures on this platform create an illusory experience that the characters staging in the spectacle have become loyal to the owners of them, and Internet is a sheer virtual space, where people’s life is expanded, but no longer separated. However, the platform itself absent in the process of generating spectacles is still delivering everything to the spectators. In other words, just like televisions of the past, social media is but a more transparent medium, through which all interactions that seem to take place between users are also separated, which can be summarized as the separation of feedback.

The further separation in the feedback is a decisive factor supporting the claim that the internet and the social media have been able to signify a new stage of the spectacle. It creates a possibility for a reversed perception of an individual:

Media images mediate how individuals perceive people, as looks, image, and style become more and more fundamental constituents of social identities, shaping how people are publicly viewed and defined. (Kellner, 2003, p. 109)

As spectators ‘perceive’ the figures displayed, the figure is inevitably identified with the ‘fundamental constituents’, which can be seen as the symbols imposed on this figure

from the foreign power of the spectacles. With the represented unquestionable power and vacation, stars used to be unapproachable symbols of the “joy of life” (e.g. the most able pleasure craft ashore is a WideTrack Pontiac), when they were bound to the ideal actions in the spectacular society. As certain actions rule over the stars, the stars are extending this ideal to a general public (Debord, 2014, §60-61). However, the internet has democratized the chance of becoming stars by displaying the ideal way of living to users – with this, you become one real star in real life! This may not be costly besides the costs for such ideals since the technology is what removed the requirements of a star by granting everyone the chance to become a star. Hence the stars supposedly object the people are now closer to daily life than any other time in history. Additionally, when the public views are questioned in their authenticity, they present similar qualities of the spectacle: one may not have any chance to notice who liked them, who commented what, but all these feedbacks fused into a larger general spectacle that alter the existence of spectacular figure of this person online, therefore his own perception of this spectacular figure. Under this circumstance is the active perception on themselves, which ought to have been a rather simple process through meditation, gradually reversed into the passive status of being contemplated by the other existence of the spectacle.

The objectified person in this process of perception is banned from communication with this spectacle, instead, they are contemplating the feedback spectacle, which constitute a social identity of the figure of himself – this means that the existence of the person is reduced into self-contemplation, where they themselves are eventually and ultimately separated from themselves in reality. Under this system of self-contemplation, spectators are still producing the separate power as Debord argued (Debord, 2014, §26), and this power will be not only their own product of themselves in the spectacle, but also their simple and genuine, as they may argue that way, interaction with the spectacle. The object of self-contemplation is not limited to a separated self anyway, as more democratic “stars” are also surrounding the person, but the eventual outcome of such contemplation is only to again align the self with stars.

Self-contemplation discussed above is exactly an embodiment of the separating power of the social media, and that is how the internet never decentralizing the organization of the spectacular society. The only thing created out from the internet is the reaffirmation of the spectacle of itself.

5. CONCLUSION

Mass media after World War II have remained rather unchanged in their function of creating the infinitive deficiency and growth, as a compensation for the concentrated crises the capitalist society has faced in 20th century. The spectacle is the new structure of the society to sustain itself in creating a non-living pseudo-world to sustain the deficiency and growth through the process of separation and contemplation. The unilateral

communication in televisions appear to present a separated spectacle of real life by broadcasting the images through cable lines into the living room of spectators. Although the internet may appear to overthrow the oppressive unilateral structure of the spectacle by enabling the interaction between people, it is illustrated that the social media only strengthens the structure of the spectacle and wields more separative power against people by creating the situation of self-contemplation.

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