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THE SOCIETY OF SPECTACLE: AN OBSERVATION OF GUY DEBORD WITH
MODERN APPLICATION

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ABSTRACT

In 1967, inspired by Karl Marx's theories on communism, philosopher and filmmaker Guy Debord wrote the *Spectacle of the Society*. In this manifesto, Debord theorizes that today's society is highly mediated, image-obsessed, and capital-driven, dictated by the spectacle. In this paper, I attempt to understand Debord's conception of the society of spectacle and on this basis understand how his ideas still define society today. After explaining Debord's terminology, I then center on an analysis of the influence of social media, influencers, and advertisers applying Debord's theories. I use my penultimate section to focus on contemporary politics and politicians, including President Donald J. Trump using a spectacular lens. In my conclusion, I question if our world can operate outside of the spectacle.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
Chapter 1 Information	1
Chapter 2 What is the Spectacle?	3
Chapter 3 The Modern Spectacle	17
Chapter 4 The spectacular President Trump	23
Chapter 5 Conclusion	30
BIBLIOGRAPHY	33

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Chapter I

Introduction

In 1849, after the boom of the industrial revolutions and its transformation of how humans lived in Europe, the advent communism was declared with Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*. In this work, Marx examines this alienation between the working class, who physically create objects made for human consumption, and the value of their creations, which are controlled by the bourgeoisie. Guy Debord, a French philosopher, filmmaker, and self-established revolutionary, studied Marx and believed there was truth in his works. However, by 1967, Debord realized the world had evolved and, though Marx had a proper vision of the world, the *Communist Manifesto* no longer entirely explained the reality of the society he lived in. From there, Debord constructed his own manifesto *The Spectacle of the Society* to encompass Marx's ideas while also expanding into an understanding of modern capitalism in terms of what he called the society of the spectacle.

The irony of tackling a topic based on Guy Debord's writing is that Debord was not an academic; he would not have called himself an academic by any account. Therefore, analyzing Debord requires deciphering his texts differently than traditional philosophical writings. Debord wrote only what he thought was necessary, and his work does not follow a conventional style of argumentation. Debord was an anti-establishment thinker, and his writings reflect that nature. *The Spectacle of the Society*, therefore, does not follow a clear, straightforward line of thinking. *The Spectacle of the Society* cannot be read as one solid

theory, but rather Debord's text must be interpreted as a constellation composed from 221 different sections. Because of its style and nature, one could theoretically begin reading *The Spectacle of the Society* at any point in the text. Due to this fragmentation of thought, encapsulating the fullest meaning of the text and explaining its theories requires direct quotation rather than paraphrasing. Furthermore, organizing Debord's array of thoughts becomes a daunting task; therefore, explaining these theses requires a compilation of connected analyses.

Due to the length and complexity of the *Spectacle of Society*, I will not be able to give a full analysis of Debord's theories in their entirety. Instead, I will focus on his ideas of augmented reality, appearances, commodity fetishism, and recuperation in the context of Debord's era. The aim of this thesis is to understand Debord's conception of the society of spectacle and on this basis understand how his ideas still define society today. The focus of my application of Debord's ideas to the world today will center on an analysis of the influence of social media influencers on contemporary politics and politicians, including President Donald J. Trump.

Chapter II

What is the Spectacle?

In this chapter, I will situate Guy Debord's *The Society of Spectacle* within the 1960s. First, I will establish the historical context, setting the stage for Debord's purpose for writing. Next, I will discuss a few selected concepts in *The Society of Spectacle* on the basis of which I shall turn to an analysis of our contemporary world. I will begin with what Debord refers to as augmented reality, move to the ideas of appearances, commodity fetishism, recuperation, and conclude this discussion with a discussion of how an individual becomes involved within the society of spectacle.

Debord's *Society of Spectacle* explores the world of modern-day consumer culture, its fixation on commodities, and the pervasive deceptions necessary to live in a society under modern capitalism. In order to function in such a society, one becomes captive to what Debord calls the *spectacle*. The spectacle develops in a society at the height of the production and consumption of commodities. The spectacle reduces our realities into a compilation of fragmented images meant to replace reality with a *representation* of reality. The spectacle, in oversimplified terms, operates through our highly mediated, image-obsessed, capital-driven society.

The spectacle redefines every aspect of life through oversimplified images which morphs these aspects, which used to be experienced, into a mere representation. This spectacle, or vision of realness in an intrinsically unreal world, is nothing but a fantasy vision.

On this point, Debord says, “In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.”¹ In such a capitalistic society, we cannot gain knowledge of the world through experiences alone. Instead, the experience of an individual becomes one miniscule part of society’s collective experience. We do not interpret the world by actually living it. Instead, the spectacle modifies our experiences and projects an image of meaning that we collectively accept.

Alienation

Debord suggests the spectacle “is the heart of the unrealism of the real society. In all its specific forms, as information or propaganda, as advertisement or direct entertainment consumption, the spectacle is the present model of socially dominant life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choice already made in production and its corollary consumption.”² The spectacle surrounds us: it is our reality despite its unreality. By breaking down an aspect of reality and shifting these aspects into images, the spectacle benefits and promotes consumer culture. Debord theorizes that the society of spectacle exists because the economy has become ingrained into everyday life—it exists because the implementation of commodities into social lives becomes mediated through the spectacle. By surrounding us

¹ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, (St. Petersburg, FL: Black & Red, 1967), Thesis 1.

² *Ibid.*, Thesis 6.

with images, we are distracted from the harshness of our real lives as we are exploited by the capitalist system. The spectacle is what capitalism is and aims to be: a society where those who are exploited are eager to become part of the system.

As mass media is seen by a massive audience, we respond to these images, communicating our thoughts about them with others. This, in turn, creates the illusion of global connectivity. To clarify, the spectacle Debord describes is not necessarily the collection images projected within society, but rather a product *of* the social relations of those in the society. As Debord writes: “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.”³ The spectacle is an omnipresent force that drives capitalism to its world domination and totality. The spectacle produces an image of unity among members of its society, bringing a feeling of global connectivity. We all watch the same five-o’clock news cast, read the morning paper, and stroll by numerous advertisements, consuming the spectacle’s images throughout our day. Consuming the same information, we have something in common, something to discuss. However, as Debord argues, this connectivity is nothing more than a facade created to hide the reality that society divides us into an isolating realm dominated by the illusion of choice. According to Debord: “The alienation of the spectator to the profit of the contemplated object is expressed in the following way: The more [the spectator] contemplates the less he lives; the more he accepts recognizing himself in the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own

³ Ibid., Thesis 4

existence and desires.”⁴ The more we are entertained with the spectacle through television, movies, etc., watching people living their lives, the less we actually live. In this way, we lose our own sense of self and individuality by trying to live in the image of other people. This is the idea of consumer alienation. By wanting (or “needing” as the spectacle would have us believe) what others have, we lose our identity and become part of the spectacle. Watching personalities and media stars in the entertainment world enjoying their lives in the capitalist society forces us to ignore our own *true* wants and needs. In this way, we cannot be freed from the exploitation of capitalism. The spectacle forces us to behave the same as celebrities and characters we see, becoming a mindless object of mimicry and imitation. The media we consume teaches us to act in ways that benefit capitalism as we try to become the celebrities we see. In this sense, even our bodies become a spectacle. This is how we become isolated from our bodies, by subconsciously reenacting the people we see in pop culture. Once our bodies are spectacularized in this way, there becomes no world outside of the spectacle. Every aspect of our daily lives is held captive by the spectacle, and therefore capitalism.

Elevated survival

When Debord wrote the *Society of Spectacle* in 1967, the world had been transformed after the end of World War II. With the majority of the world at peace, the global market flooded consumer products from all over the world available in local shops. Instead of going

⁴ Ibid., Thesis 30.

to stores to buy the things we need such as food, clothing, etc., people walk into stores to look around at what they did not have and become convinced that they needed these commodities. This is what Debord referred to as an elevated survival; once we can easily obtain items needed to actually survive, we become convinced that we need non-necessities as well, even more. As Debord writes: “This incessant expansion of economic power in the form of the commodity, which transformed human labor into commodity-labor, into wage-labor, cumulatively led to an abundance in which the primary question of survival is undoubtedly resolved, but in such a way that it is constantly rediscovered; it is continually posed again each time at a higher level.”⁵ With access to commodities around the globe, our survival needs are easily met. On a surface level, this seems like a sign of progress to our society. However, this is how, arguably, the spectacle came to rise.

To further expand his argument, Debord argues that capitalism relies on creating new desires, distracting people in order to maintain its oppression over the working classes. As Debord writes: “The general acceptance of the illusion at the heart of the consumption of modern commodities: use in its most impoverished form (food and lodging) today exists only to the extent that it is imprisoned in the illusory wealth of increased survival. The real consumer becomes a consumer of illusions. The commodity is this factually real illusion, and the spectacle is its general manifestation.”⁶ In other words, capitalism is an inherently uncreative system. Within a society of spectacle, human life revolves around producing and

⁵ Ibid., Thesis 40.

⁶ Ibid., Thesis 47.

consuming commodities. Due to the rapid economic growth and rise of the spectacle, we cannot live without working. One-third of the average person's life will be spent at work, another third will be spent asleep, leaving what with the last third? The opportunity to use one's wealth to support the economy, and thus the spectacle, through consumption? We work in order to buy a luxurious house, filled with glamorous commodities, surrounded by a picket fence, displaying a well-kept garden and lawn. However, the average person will only spend around eight hours reaping the benefits and using these commodities. We work to obtain these items and work in order to afford a vacation away from this work but will never spend as much time in our fantasy, vacation land as we do at work. This is the contradiction of the spectacle and of capitalism. Capitalism works against human interest as we are distanced from actually living life and doing what we enjoy. Instead, we work jobs we hate to make money and believe we can improve our lives through the accumulation of commodities.

With this condition of elevated survival, we also see the growth of well-functioning commodities becoming obsolete simply with age. One way that we can imagine this is through the concept of fashion. To become fashionable is to have the latest style in one's wardrobe. An outfit purchased years, months, or even weeks ago that still fits comfortably is deemed outdated. In order to keep up with the trends of clothing, one must acquire a new wardrobe each time a new style is considered up-to-date. Even though in terms of use, certain commodities are perfectly functionable, encouraged by the society of spectacle, after the newest object is released, improving upon the last, our "old" commodities seem obsolete. Part of the reason that the spectacle benefits capitalism is that it always convinces the consumer to

buy more than is necessary. By making products that become “useless” shortly after its purchase, the worker constantly consumes by abandoning the idea of function for the idea of modernity. Distractions are at the heart of the spectacle: to be consumed by buying what we do not need, we keep the cycle of capitalism circulating.

Commodity fetishism

Debord explains that the spectacle lives in a society which revolves around the obsession of endlessly obtaining products developing a fetishism of commodities. As Debord writes: “The fetishistic, purely objective appearance of spectacular relations conceals the fact that they are relations among men and classes: a second nature with its fatal laws seems to dominate our environment.”⁷ Commodity fetishism explains how the commodity and its value are inherently deceitful and misleading. Commodities possess a specific yet mysterious aura about them. For Marx, who originally coined the term and notion, commodity fetishism involves the social relationship between people being replaced by the social relationship between *objects* and people.

To break this down, the production of commodities requires an immense amount of human interactions. Workers communicate with each other to manufacture the commodity, who then communicate with white collar workers to ship that product, who communicate with

⁷ Ibid., Thesis 24.

drivers to transport the goods, and so on. The actual production of a commodity relies on social interaction to place the goods on the shelves of a store, but the consumers shopping around do not experience all of the complex labor and communication that went into its creation. Instead, we replace this experience with the mystical property of the commodity itself. To better explain this idea, we must remember that the term “fetishism” originally refers to the idea that inanimate objects can possess godly qualities. For example, some believe that crystals such as quartz, opals, amethyst, et cetera possess natural healing powers inherently. Despite the lack of scientific evidence, some people will still buy these crystals believing that their energy will remedy their pain. Commodities, similarly, are believed to possess qualities which are not inherently present once they transcend into the economic market. When we shop, we do not think of all the labor that went into the commodity’s production. Instead, we judge the object’s value on price, the reviews of other consumers, and superficial qualities. Through commodity fetishism, products are perceived to possess a quality that is not intrinsic in their physical components and functional value.

Appearances

One of the most important aspects of understanding spectacle is to understand the prevalence of appearances in our daily lives. Through the spectacle, we do not merely consume to accumulate commodities; we consume to acquire a more favorable image. As Debord writes:

“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.”⁸

In this context, “being” refers to what a person does and who they are based on their actions. “Being” relates to identities that are created through particular actions, skills, etc. The most authentic way for humans to define themselves, according to Debord, is to identify them with talents and skills that showcase an individual’s creativity. “Having,” alternatively, refers to one’s possessions and personal wealth. Individual worth is no longer determined a person's actions but rather the possessions that they own. Through the idea of “having”, one can increase their self-worth by owning more products. “Appearing,” Debord argues, entirely pervades in capitalist society. “Appearing,” rather than “being” or “having,” determines a person’s worth, even if there is none. Commodities have evolved from having use and exchange values to symbolic and sign value. Instead of worth being determined by *how much* one owns, it is determined by *what* one owns and the image that those possessions produce. “Appearing” now rules over our society because capitalism has separated us from the value of “being.” In other words, we no longer pursue activities and occupations that stimulate our

⁸ Ibid., Thesis 17.

creativity. Instead, we try to reproduce the expression of our creativity through buying commodities to create a personal identity. Capitalism has made true “being” impossible, so instead we turn to “appearing” to fill our need for creativity and self-expression. Society has evolved from an authentic sense of “being,” to an inauthentic state of “having,” which has created a duly inauthentic condition of “appearing.”

We can see this idea of “appearing” rule over our society through the use of advertisements. Within a society of spectacle, images of a happy life equate to images of people who benefit from the ease and attainment of commodities, and thus the obtainment of value. For example, Hoover (a vacuum-cleaner brand) ran a series of advertisements throughout the mid-twentieth century with the slogan “you’ll be happier with a Hoover.” One Hoover advertisement from 1948 claims that owning a Hoover vacuum will increase happiness because it “keeps your house brighter,” “it cleans so quickly and easily, saves your time and strength,” and because “it’s the name women prefer 2 to 1 over any other cleaner.”⁹ Though the reasons stated in the advertising may be convincing enough, paired with an image of an attractive woman with a thin waist, elegant clothing, and a smile plastered on her face, we can picture ourselves as happy and appealing as her. The appeal of Hoover in its advertisements occurs through both the promise of happiness and the image of what a happy life appears to be. However, acquiring what the spectacle deems to be a “happy life” leads us to fall into a contradicting cycle. In order to obtain a happy life, we must *appear* to be happy; to appear happy, we must consume as much as possible; to have the means to consume, we

⁹ <https://www.amazon.com/RelicPaper-1948-Hoover-Vacuum-Happier/dp/B072F1P9BG>

must work; at work, we are reduced to mere gears in the system of production, creating the commodities we wish to obtain.

Through the appeal of appearances through advertisements, we can also see the rise of stardom through celebrities. Envy is created through the spectacle of the celebrity. Since the spectacle is used to define traits and characteristics, the celebrity is the perfect bridge between media and an individual. As Debord writes: “The celebrity, the spectacular representation of a living human being, embodies this banality by embodying the image of a possible role.”¹⁰ Since advertisements show the embodiment of certain characteristics, people who want to possess a certain quality try to buy a product that is related to a certain quality. Since celebrities are used to define products and characteristics, we become envious of the celebrities, wanting whatever they possess. Celebrities in advertisements are perceived to have more products and more desired traits; they possess an aura. Therefore, they are assumed to be happier, and enviable. When we see images of models and celebrities with seemingly more fulfilling lives, we covet the happiness they seem to possess. The assumption is that the people seen in advertisements are happier than we are because they are something we are not; they are us but with a product which has somehow enhanced their lives.

By reducing humans to a state of “appearing” rather than “being,” the society of spectacle has ultimately changed human life to benefit capitalism. Rather than expressing ourselves through creative acts, we consume goods that we believe express our true selves.

¹⁰ Ibid., Thesis 25.

However, no amount of money or commodities will ever replace our need for self-expression; that is why we say: “money cannot buy happiness.”

Recuperation

One aspect of the spectacle, critical to understanding Debord, is the concept of recuperation. This is to say that any revolutionary or unpopular ideas that would overturn the capitalist nature of the spectacle can be converted and distorted in a way that benefits the spectacle: they in turn becomes spectacularized. In fact, to even try and speak against the spectacle, one must understand and then use the methods of the spectacle or speak its language. As Debord writes: “To describe the spectacle, its formation, its functions and the forces which tend to dissolve it, one must artificially distinguish certain inseparable elements. When analyzing the spectacle one speaks, to some extent, the language of the spectacular itself in the sense that one moves through the methodological terrain of the very society which expresses itself in the spectacle.”¹¹ If we want to be able to understand the spectacle and how it works, then we must learn its language and break its code. This is how we can come to challenge it. The spectacle is spoken through imagery and has its own logic. Learning this language will enable us to truly perceive how capitalism works. Capitalism uses current culture, mass media, and advertising through the use of the spectacle in order to make us blind to our situation and live in the system. However, if we can decode the spectacle’s language, then we would be able to see the capitalist system at work. The answers to this system can be

¹¹ Ibid., Thesis 11.

found within the society of spectacle; the details are able to be critiqued and analyzed as long as we know the code. The goal of capitalism is to produce for itself a way to make those who benefit it the most, yet are in fact exploited, come to eagerly and passionately support it. For example, in our current state of society, several people who say that shopping is one of their hobbies exist. People love to go to the mall, the epicenter of capitalism, indulging themselves in an image of what their lives would look like if they could only own the newest clothes, appliances, etc. The spectacle is the way commodities and capital make us love living in a capitalist society.

Again, it can be very difficult to realize that all the pop culture phenomena we love are, in part, ways to keep us enjoying our own exploitation. However, when revolutions appear, trying to garner support against these exploitations, they too become spectacularized and commodified, making existence outside of capitalism seem unimaginable.

In the past, art has been created to express the oppressions of people; they are sparked by ideas of change and insurgence. Debord argues that art has come to be viewed as entirely independent of everyday life and has lost all radical potential: “When culture becomes nothing more than a commodity, it must also become the star commodity of the spectacular society.”¹² The potentially radical historical context into which a piece of art emerged is eradicated and it is presented as simply something nice to view. In doing this, the spectacle hides the fact that change is possible. To understand capitalism as based on commodification

¹² Ibid., Thesis 193.

of culture in Debord's era of the 1960s, we can look at Andy Warhol's pop art. Pop art was a movement in which artists created a repetition of the same photograph, each contrasted in a different lighting with different colored filters. Warhol, through his art, sought to evoke an emotion in his viewers that both shocks and desensitizes them from the state of the original image. In his piece entitled *5 Deaths*, Warhol depicts a collage of the same photograph of lifeless bodies underneath a downturned car. *Race Riot* shows a group of African Americans running from police as a dog snips at a man from behind, and so on. In this way, Warhol both evokes terror and desensitizes it simultaneously. Pop art was a movement meant to strike emotion and speak against the mundaneness of mass production. However, overtime, works of pop art, itself, became a source of mass production and commodity. Pop art was used in advertising, printed on shirts, and replicated to be sold in stores. In this way, pop art was decontextualized to benefit capitalism by taking away the revolutionary aspect of the artwork.

The revolutionary aspects of these radical artworks are taken away and become productive to perpetuate the spectacle. It not only becomes difficult to critique the spectacle but difficult to even imagine a world without it. In *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, as Debord writes, under the spectacle, "there is no place left where people can discuss the realities which concern them, because they can never lastingly free themselves from the crushing presence of media discourse and of the various forces organized to relay it."¹³ The spectacle works to twist the meaning of any rebellious ideas through recuperation and made imagining a society without capitalism impossible.

¹³ Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (London: Verso, 1998), 17.

Chapter III

The Modern Spectacle

In this chapter, I contextualize Debord's theory of spectacle in our contemporary world. With the introduction of social media, mass production on a larger scale, and the evolution of branding, our world, I argue, fits the theory of spectacle today more than in Debord's own era in the 1960s.

Today's Elevated Survival

The epitome of elevated survival in our modern era is a Walmart Supercenter. At Walmart, we have everything we could ever need or want within arm's reach. Necessities such as groceries, household items, clothing, and even non-necessities such as children's toys, gaming consoles, office supplies, etc., Walmart has everything a person could ever dream to possess: it can all be found in one shop. With our everyday needs covered in terms of food supply and other daily needs, shops like Walmart show our society's elevated survival. It often occurs. A person who simply needs to buy a gallon of milk will walk into Walmart and leave with far more than they originally intended. This is the purpose of Walmart. Walk in, and you have everything at your disposal as you are encouraged to buy more and more. We wander through aisles, looking at the shelves, and picture a life with these items in our houses. We envision an alternate world where those commodities have improved our lives by making it

simpler or through our appearances. “Look at that television,” we think with a cart full of groceries. “This model is larger than my TV and has a much clearer picture.” We are able to talk ourselves into buying products we do not need with the promise of a better version.

Though this stream of consciousness may not be apparent in the front of our minds, we also envision, for example, a party in which our friends come to visit and see our new, expensive television. We think that by owning this newer model, they will think we have more value with the means to purchase such an expensive commodity. In this way, we are convinced that products are not something we want, but rather something we need. In America, we have even created a sort of holiday to express this phenomenon.

Thursday night at midnight after Thanksgiving, Lines begin to form outside of department stores, malls, and supercenters. After celebrating what we are thankful for, people begin to crowd into stores fighting one another to buy Christmas presents at a cheaper price. This ritual, as we have aptly named it, is known as Black Friday. If Debord had been alive to see the spectacular imagery of Black Friday, he would have been completely affirmed in the theories presented in the *Spectacle of the Society*. Consumer culture has become so prevalent to the point where we abandon morality, shoving through crowds, combating one another to get our hands on the latest products, we are living in a world of spectacle. Newsreels highlight the moments of Black Friday, so people at home can watch this live spectacle. In this way, our society simultaneously watches the spectacle and also a part of the spectacle. This is elevated survival as we come home with our prizes after Black Friday shopping, buying things that we do not necessarily need to survive, yet which we nonetheless covet.

Modern Obsession with Appearances

Beyond seeing the spectacle through our sense of elevated survival today, we can see how appearances are so prevalent through modern advertising. The psychology of advertisements attempts to seduce the consumer into buying a product in order to increase their societal image. Referring to the idea “having” versus “appearing,” it no longer matters how much we possess, but rather what we possess. By owning a commodity with an esteemed branding, we hope to elevate our own social status by equating ourselves with that brand. As workers we lose our self-image through expression creativity, we try to replace this loss with expression through commodities. For example, think of buying a car. A Wall Street banker would likely not be seen driving a 2005 Ford Taurus. What would that say about him or her? Instead, these are the types of people we see driving extravagant cars from luxury brands such as Lamborghini, Lexus, Tesla, etc. To be fair, these brands often offer better features that make driving safer or easier. However, if Honda and Porsche made an identical model of car, the Porsche would still be considered more valuable based on its brand name alone.

To continue on with this idea, let us revert back to the idea of fashion. What makes a t-shirt from Gucci and a t-shirt from Walmart different t-shirt from Walmart would cost about five dollars to purchase, whereas a shirt from Gucci, on average, costs about 400 to 600 dollars. Why? Is the cotton used by Gucci more difficult to produce? Are the inks soaked into the fabric more luxurious? In a simple answer: no. What makes these two shirts different is

the branding. Wearing something with the name Gucci printed on, shows to the world that they have paid far more for this t-shirt and most people do on a computer. Wearing this brand symbolizes worth, poise, and opulence. This showcases the idea of how appearance is used through the spectacle to perpetuate capitalism. These products, likely made in the same factory, have two very different price points and two very different societal values. The key difference between them is the appearance that they give to its owner.

On the idea of appearances in today's society, one of the most prevalent celebrities who epitomizes the meaning of spectacle is Kylie Jenner. With 172 million followers on Instagram, Kylie is one of the most recognizable stars, not just in the United States, but globally. Though she came to notoriety through the reality television show *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* alongside her family, Kylie gained massive fame when she was named the youngest self-made billionaire after the launching of her business Kylie Cosmetics. The makeup company's most sold product, by far, is the Kylie Lip Kit. Using her massive Instagram following to promote her own makeup looks, Kylie was able to target a youthful audience, promising full and luscious lips like hers to whoever bought her lip product. However, any early viewer of *Keeping Up with Kardashians* can remember that Kylie was not naturally blessed with the eclipse she is known for today. Many have speculated, though it is not confirmed, that Kylie underwent plastic surgery and used lip fillers to achieve this glamorous look. This, however, did not prevent people from buying Jenner's lip kits and hopes to look like her. The spectacle of Kylie Jenner proves the prevalence of spectacle in our modern world. Kylie was able to convince people to buy her product because they wanted to

look like her. This is a more direct example of how appearances can influence the perpetuation of capitalism, but we must also remember that Kylie Cosmetics is known for its high-end, high-cost products. Since advertisements show the embodiment of certain characteristics, people who want to possess a certain quality try to buy a product that is related to a certain quality. In terms of Kylie Jenner, this quality is luxury.

Our Involvement with the Spectacle

Undoubtedly, the most spectacular aspect of our society today is displayed through our use of social media. With the rise of technology and social media, advertisements now have more presence in everyday life than in Debord's time. With Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and other applications, advertisements glide with ease from screen to screen. These aforementioned applications are notorious for hiding advertisements in plain sight. On social media, advertisements have the same format as a normal post. Because of this, influencers can share products and advertisements to their followers and friends. Not only does an advertisement taunt its audience to spend money on a product, but now our friends can place this pressure to buy onto us. Through use of social media and the spectacle, corporations can be viewed as individuals; they can endorse causes, create a persona by relating certain characteristics with the company, and create a false sense of human attachment. This masquerading of companies in the online world only strengthens the spectacle.

We as individuals are not mere bystanders to the spectacle of social media. Rather than selling a commodity, we develop marketing strategies for our professional, dating, and casual lives. We use social media to sell our own image. With one click, we can show our friends, family, and the world who we wish to become, and furthermore spread this false image of permanent happiness. Because people now are able to socially sell themselves, they are distanced from reality. This is the power of the spectacle in its purest essence. This is why people are so selective over what they post on social media; the less others know, the better. As we become more immersed into social media, and the further we stray from actual life and the more immersed we become with the spectacle.

Chapter IV

The Spectacular President Trump

In this section, I will use the modern application of spectacle to discuss the celebrity, candidacy, and presidency of Donald Trump. On June 15, 2015, Donald J. Trump, with a thumb up in the air, rode down an escalator in Trump Tower and waltzed to a podium where he would announce his candidacy for the 2016 presidential election, promising to “Make America Great Again.” To many, this grand entrance of the reality television star seemed like some sort of joke, this way merely the beginning of the spectacular event of Trump’s presidency. Building his appearance as a successful and strong businessman, Trump garnered support from voters who wanted to see the American Dream alive and in action. From there, Trump released merchandise with his campaign logo, making his campaign an identity to his supporters. With call outs to reporters, Trump has created a skepticism of the media, forcing the American people to question every article written about him. All of this was the spectacle at work as we watched a multi-billionaire become an idol for the working class, promising a better life.

From Reality Television to Reality

Many Americans were already familiar with Trump as a reality television star and business mogul. Both aspects were highlighted with Trump as the host of NBC’s *The*

Apprentice and *The Celebrity Apprentice*. This reality competition series featured fourteen to eighteen contestants who were challenged to display creative entrepreneurial skills through various tasks in hopes to win a one-year \$250,000 contract to manage one of Trump's business projects. On the show, the viewers were brought into the grandeur vision of Donald Trump's life inside of Trump Tower in New York City. The program showcased the luxuries of Trump Tower from the leather throne in his boardroom to the porcelain throne—or rather golden throne—in his bathroom. Beyond the splendor of Trump's possession, the show also illustrated Trump as a business genius with his well-known, trademarked catchphrase “You’re fired!” as he determined which contestants would push through to the next challenge. Despite this television image, the reality of Donald Trump's business success highlights a quote from Debord which says, “the spectacle is affirmation of appearance and affirmation of all human life, namely social life, as mere appearance.”¹⁴ Through the appearance of luxury (based on the interior design of Trump Tower) and of success (showcased with Trump's “business expertise” as the show's judge), we can see that *The Apprentice* is nothing more than an example of spectacle as we compare Trump's image on the show to his reality off camera.

Despite the success of his real estate companies, Trump has faced financial failure in more ways than one. In March of 2016, *Rolling Stone* published an article entitled “Donald Trump's 13 Biggest Business Failures.” The article highlights some of Trump's bankrupt business ventures such as Trump Airlines, Trump Vodka, Trump Steaks, and most

¹⁴ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 10.

notoriously Trump University.¹⁵ Furthermore, Trump has claimed to be a self-made billionaire, even though his father Fred Trump passed off his own wealth and expertise in the real estate business to jumpstart Donald's career.

Clearly, Trump's business career has been far from flawless, despite what has appeared on *The Apprentice*. To the show's producers, contestants, and viewers, however, all of this seemed irrelevant. The image of success was important above all else. By living in the right building with luxurious decor, Trump appears to be a successful figure head of the business world, proving the American dream was real. With the loss of jobs as manufacturing was replaced by technology-centered jobs, many American workers wanted a leader who could give them the wealth that they felt disconnected from. Thus, Trump's promise to rebuild the American economy was the answer they wanted to hear. An appearance of success was, arguably, the ticket into Trump's election as the United States president.

Merchandise and Identity

After announcing his intentions to "Make America Great Again," Trump's campaign released merchandise with the same slogan. We could begin to question what does "make America great again" even mean? Was America not great before Trump candidacy? What has

¹⁵ Tessa Stuart, "Donald Trump's 13 Biggest Business Failures," *Rolling Stone*, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/donald-trumps-13-biggest-business-failures-59556/>

been lost but now needs to be regained to achieve this level of greatness? The answer, at least according to Trump and his campaign committee, is economic stimulation and wealth. To isolated and alienated workers who do not reap the benefits of their labor, promises of a strong economy and release from poverty are just what they need. By releasing merchandise embroidered with this exact promise, Trump supporters gained a sense of relief. This signified the start of the Trump supporter identity. By purchasing a bright red “MAGA” cap, voters could gain a sense of identity. This hat, to them, said, “I support Donald Trump, a man who will bring economic prosperity to our country, and this differentiates me from those who do believe in the American Dream.” By using the advantage of commodity fetishism, the Trump campaign was able to give people what they wanted: the promise of a better life, a product that symbolized this, and the identity of a Trump supporter.

Skepticism?

On January 20, 2016, Trump was inaugurated into the position of the president of the United States. This event was everything he and his faithful supporters had hoped for. Finally, Trump could celebrate his win over Hillary Clinton with, what he hoped, would be a large turnout from his supporters. In fact, Trump himself promised “an unbelievable, perhaps record-setting turnout.”¹⁶ However, the inauguration ceremony crowd was only around a third

¹⁶ David Millward, "Trump Inauguration Turnout Dwarfed by Obama in 2009," The Telegraph, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/01/20/trump-inauguration-turnoutdwarfed-obama-2009/>.

of the size at Barack Obama's inauguration. Rather than admitting defeat, Trump and his administration went on the offensive, claiming that the crowd was larger than his predecessor. Trump's White House Press Secretary at the time, Sean Spicer, went on to contradict the statements of experts and reporters to say that the event had "the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration—period."¹⁷ On January 22, 2017, Kellyanne Conway, Counsellor to the president, defended Sean Spicer's statement, despite the facts that proved his claims were false. She stated that Spicer had not lied but, instead, "gave alternative facts."¹⁸

In the past, many politicians attempted to hide their falsehoods, fearing that people might see them misrepresenting themselves. Donald Trump, however, has been known to do the exact opposite. Instead, he has regularly made claims that are openly false or highly exaggerated. I would argue, however, that this is the point. Trump and his administration have regularly used the phrase "fake news" to encourage skepticism of the mainstream media. The initial object of skepticism may indeed be Trump himself, yet they awaken the part of our brain that seeks to criticize everything. If Trump is lying, we come to think, are all politicians lying, too? If there are liars and opportunists on the conservative side of the political spectrum, then surely there are liars and opportunists on the left too, right?

¹⁷ Doina Chiacu and Jason Lange, "White House Vows to Fight Media 'Tooth and Nail' over Trump Coverage," Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-priebusidUSKBN1560RM>.

¹⁸ NBC News, "Kellyanne Conway: Press Secretary Sean Spicer Gave 'Alternative Facts' Meet the Press | Nbc News," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSrEEDQgFc8>.

By reading the *Society of the Spectacle* at a surface level, it becomes easy to argue that everything is merely spectacle and to sit back and boast that one is aware of this. Critical thinking and skepticism are vital and important, yet the goal of Debord's text was not to persuade his audience to view everything as spectacle, but rather to see through the appearances and reveal the truth concealed within. Trump's declarations of falsehoods have further perpetuated a societal mindset where we begin to believe that everything we once thought was true is now up for debate. Trump supporters will often defend the president because he is different from politicians who backtrack on their lies. While other politicians try to cover up to add to their image, at least Trump says exactly what is on his mind, true or not. Trump will stand by lies to make himself seem confident and different from modern politicians.

Perpetuating the Trump Storm

Historically, it seems a politician's main goal was to try and conceal any fabrications to save their image. This highlights the idea of "spectacular politics," where appearances matter more than a politician's actual policies. Trump's obvious lies often seem to break through this facade. However, with some Debordian observation, this makes sense. The more ridiculous the statement he makes, the more headlines, media coverage, and Twitter threads Trump inspires. A theme of Trump's career has been to take advantage of his scandals, exemplifying the phrase "any attention is good attention." This continued through the

Republican primaries and into the 2016 election. Trump's criticism of reporters during press conferences, outbursts at rallies, in debates and on Twitter allowed him to dominate the news circuit to the point that few other candidates could get a word in. For Trump, there was never a need to be the best candidate because he had managed to block all others from the voters' view. In a world where politics, above all else, is seen as boring, Trump has made policies and debates entertaining. Many people might have loved him as hated him, but the ridiculousness of his candidacy gained far more attention than Barack Obama or Mitt Romney in the previous election. Trump recognizes this and uses it to his advantage, aware that to increase the absurdity of his assertions is to allow him to keep the attention on him in the news cycle. We are at the point today that whether we love or hate Trump, still talking about him and watching his every move. In turn, I would argue that Trump has used the spectacular state of American society to gain his position as the president of the United States.

Chapter V

Conclusion

Guy Debord wrote the *Society of the Spectacle* to expand on Karl Marx's theories which seemed outdated by the 1960s. Almost sixty years later, we would think that another philosopher would add to Debord's claims, improving his theories to fit our times. However, I think Debord's work thrives in 2020 more than it did in 1967. Not only has the modern world introduced us to spectacle through lavish advertisements and social media, but also the spectacle of United States politics with its idol being Donald Trump.

Let us think back to Debord's characterization of spectacle: appearances, alienation, commodity fetishism, and recuperation. Donald Trump on *The Apprentice* series showcased his ability to be a firm and successful businessman, despite the failures of many of his ventures. This contradiction of appearances and reality highlights Debord's idea of appearance; that if something appears to be what it seems, that is all that matters. This, in turn, led to his political supporters voting for him based on the idea that Trump would treat America like a global business and stimulate the economy. When people have become so eager to support the economic system by means of selecting a leader based on this idea alone, we can see the alienation of individuals who have become consumed in capitalist society. The sale of MAGA apparel feeds into Debord's ideas of commodity fetishism as Trump's supporters buy this merchandise to express their ideologies and beliefs rather than through meaningful actions. Through the standings of the 2020 elections as of April, we can also see

the spectacle recuperate itself from the revolutionary mindset of Bernie Sanders. Sanders' campaign relied heavily on his socialist policies with promises of universal healthcare, higher taxes for the wealthy, and more opportunities for the impoverished. However, through this campaign, many pointed to Sanders, claiming that a vote for him was a vote for Russia, connecting his policies with the homeland of communism. After his numbers continued to drop in the election polls during the primary election, Sanders dropped out of the campaign. Many people posed that this was because his policies were "too left," and that he would never be able to compete with Trump. This, I would argue, shows that the spectacle's ability to recuperate has reached into politics. Though I am no political scientist, I fear that Donald Trump's presidency has highlighted the evolution of the society of spectacle. From this, I wonder if after Trump's presidency, will every politician be just as spectacular?

After understanding our modern world in terms of Guy Debord, one question still remains: can we ever shatter the screen of the spectacle? I would argue, no, at least not in my lifetime. In the final moments of writing this thesis, I sit in my childhood bedroom rather than the university library due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the lockdown of our society, we have had to adjust to completing work, school, and other daily activities at home, increasing our use of the internet. When I began the process of writing this thesis, I thought our society was at a point where it was already impossible to know what was real and what was not. During the outbreak, politics and news have become so spectacularized that the average person must do their own research to determine what is and is not safe during this crisis. On television, it seems that half the reports on the news are actually about the virus and the other

critique Trump's handling of the situation. Another focus has been lifting stay-at-home orders within the United States to help the economy by letting people go back to work. When people have become so worried about upholding the capitalist world we live in rather than focusing on keeping themselves and others safe, I feel like we have hit a point of no return. In these pessimistic times, I can only imagine how our world will change, not only after surviving the pandemic, but adapting our society in a way that only makes the spectacle stronger than ever before.

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