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The (academic) society of the spectacle (of publication)

Unplugged

Yoann Bazin ● Gazi Islam ● Martin Parker ● Yiannis Gabriel

The Interpreters

Data we collect and use in organization and management studies look like “cold cases”. We want to offer more conversations, interpretations, arguments, even disputes. The Interpreters is a nexus where academics invite colleagues and friends to analyze and discuss freely an argument, raw data, cases, qualitative materials.

Offered by Yoann Bazin

The Interpreters : Yiannis Gabriel, Gazi Islam and Martin Parker.

A discussion around the following production:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydNWh99YZA8>

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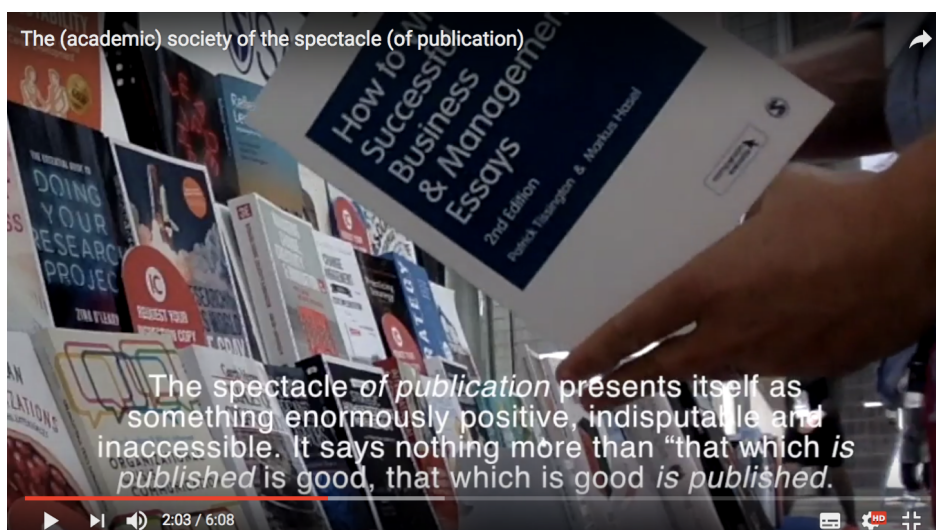
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INTRODUCTION

A recent article in the UK's *The Guardian* shrewdly noticed that “evaluating academic performance on the basis of journal publications is skewing research priorities”¹. Although quite critical, this is arguably an understatement when one considers the profound changes that have occurred in the past few decades in academia. Since the 1960's, many Western countries have been the sites of the (heterogeneous) convergence of the massification and commodification of higher education, the enactment of a neo-liberal agenda coupled with austerity measures, and an inability of academics to redefine their activity (in order to preserve it). This has led to a scholarly field in which accreditation, rankings, competition, administration and managerialism now play a role of problematic importance.

The literature on this has been flourishing. This includes “managerialism in US universities” (Roberts, 2004) and “the Circean transformation from substance to image” (Gioia & Corley, 2002), debates on the infamous “McUniversity” (Parker & Jary, 1995; Prichard & Willmott, 1997) and the insidious “audit culture” ramping in academia (Strathern, 1997, 2000a, 2000b). Many scholars worry about the influence of these discourses and policies influenced by (external) economic and (internal) managerial rationalities on academic work. Some authors elegantly deconstruct the system slowly put in place and expose its consequences. Fewer explore in depth the influence of that context on academics themselves, on their bodies and subjectivities. Too many remain fairly descriptive, struggling to build or connect their pointed observations to a wider theoretical framework that could problematize the phenomena further.

On July 6th, I was asked to contribute to an EGOS parallel event organized by Juliane Reinecke and Mikkel Flyverbom on Guy Debord's concept of spectacle and how it could be of relevance for organization studies. Despite their very open invitation via a ‘open mic’ format, I was struggling to imagine something that would not make Guy-Ernest ashamed, amused or annoyed – quite a challenge for those who know his work. Having read Juliane and Mikkel's very interesting essay *The Spectacle and Organization Studies* (Flyverbom & Reinecke, 2017), I was tempted to reverse the Debordian mirror on academics themselves, thus connecting the critic mentioned earlier to the conceptual framework of the *Society of the Spectacle*. The result was a short video *détournement* (an embezzlement of pictures and movies that situationists

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1. Anonymous Academics (2017, June 30th). Pressure to publish in journals drives too much cookie-cutter research, *The Guardian*.

enjoyed – perhaps too much) of the *Society of the Spectacle* (Debord, 1967) itself:

<https://youtu.be/ydNWh99YZA8>

As those who know Debord's work will have already noticed, I followed most of the text in the *Society of the Spectacle*, simply changing a few words here and there: individuals and subjects became academics or scholars, society and company became universities, and so on. I reproduce the text thereafter with a few minor changes (as I found a better translation by Ken Knabb for Rebel Press) – and with the changed words in *italics*.

ACADEMIC SEPARATION PERFECTED

So what might a theoretically-informed reading of the present academic condition, inspired by Debord, look like? In the first chapter of the book “The culmination of separation”, Debord pushes further, and updates, the Marxist perspective. To him, relations between people in capitalist societies have become “an immense accumulation of spectacles” (thesis 1) primarily “mediated by images” (thesis 4). Individuals are therefore separated from their own lives (thesis 2 and 3) on which they have very little control, if any: our lives become a staged spectacle, turning us into spectators who passively contemplate it. But it does not stop there.

In Debord's view, the “spectacle” is the modern extension of the fetishism of merchandise that has looped on itself. It thus becomes an ideology that presents itself, and is understood, as being objective and natural. This renders any protesting, or even questioning, irrelevant, if not suspicious, since it operates under the illusion of being as inescapable as the laws of physics. The application I offer to the academic field, through this video *détournement*, thus becomes an entertaining – and sadly well-functioning – stylistic exercise.

Nevertheless, let's start this *détournement* in turn:

1 In *universities* dominated by modern conditions of production, *academic* life is presented as an immense accumulation of *publications*. Everything that was directly *intellectually* lived has receded into a representation.

2 The *articles* detached from every aspect of *intellectual* life merge into a common stream in which the unity of that *intellectual* 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.

4 The *academic spectacle of publication* is not a collection of *articles*; it is a social relation between *scholars* that is mediated by *articles*.

6 Understood in its totality, the *academic* spectacle of *publication* is both the result and the goal of the dominant mode of *editorial* production. It is not a mere *editorial* decoration added to the real *academic* world. It is the very heart of this real *university's* unreality. In all of its particular manifestations – *articles, chapters, conferences, entertainment* – the spectacle of *publication* represents the dominant model of *academic* life.

12 The spectacle of *publication* presents itself as a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned. Its sole message is:

“What is *published* is good; what is good gets *published*.”

The passive *intellectual* acceptance it demands is already effectively imposed by its monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without allowing any reply.

14 The *university* based on modern industry is not accidentally or superficially spectacular, it is fundamentally spectaclist. In the spectacle of *publication* – the visual reflection of the ruling economic order – *intellectual* goals are nothing, *editorial* development is everything. The spectacle of *publication* aims at nothing other than itself.

16 The spectacle of *publication* is able to subject *scholars* to itself because the *academic* economy has already totally subjugated them. It is nothing other than the economy developing for itself. It is at once a faithful reflection of the production of *articles*, and a distorting objectification of the *authors*.

25 *Intellectual* separation is the alpha and the omega of the spectacle of *publication*.

30 The alienation of the *academic*, which reinforces the contemplated *articles* that result from his own unconscious activity, works like this: the more he contemplates *professionally*, the less he lives *intellectually*; the more he identifies with the dominant *editorial* images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own *scholarly* desires.

32 The spectacle of *publication's* social function *within universities* is the concrete manufacture of *academic* alienation. Economic expansion consists primarily of the expansion of the particular sectors of industrial *academic* production. The “growth” generated by an economy developing for its own sake can be nothing other than a growth of the very alienation that was at its origin.

Of course, one could deem this stylistic exercise of *détournement* of the *Society of the Spectacle* to be an irrelevant literary trick. Indeed, as Gazi Islam very relevantly dares to ask later in this section, “does the video escape re-enacting this same circulation in a new medium, one perhaps

even more amenable to acceleration and artifice than that which it critiques?” However, for those aware of the pervasive economic and managerialist shifts in academia in general, and universities in particular, Debord offers a strange and heuristic echo to what we often live today. Efficiency, productivity and competition have become more and more central to our physical and intellectual lives, which could, and should, instead be driven by intellectual curiosity and the production and diffusion of knowledge to students in particular, and society in general – a call wonderfully phrased by Abraham Flexner (1939/2017) in his *Usefulness of Useless Knowledge*. Although this view of academia also requires scientific publication, it makes it only a part of a more global framework for its activity, not the sole and overarching aim.

If so, would pushing this stylistic exercise a little further might also help us find a path for escaping the Spectacle?

THE EDITORIAL COMMODITY AS SPECTACLE OF PUBLICATION

Pushing the logic one step further – through what feels as a painfully meandering style – in the second chapter of the book, Debord considers how merchandise, and in general all commodities, have become spectacles, fully integrated in and articulated into this society of the spectacle. Once the process of fetishism of the commodity has been completed, “the real world is replaced by a selection of images that are projected above it, yet which at the same time succeed in making themselves regarded as the epitome of reality” (thesis 36).

In other words, slowly, the spectacle has started “organizing the real” (Flyverbom & Reinecke, 2017: 1628). How could scholars escape such a trap if, as per my video thesis, our field is now dangerously becoming a part of the society of the spectacle? By reminding us that academic publication is also, and perhaps mainly, a business, Martin Parker reminds us in the same section that “writing and publishing are not the same things, and (when considering the problems with the contemporary university) it seems particularly important to disentangle them”. Elegant, isn’t it? This distinction matters.

But to understand how much of a challenge this elegantly phrased objective is, we need to go back to Debord once more:

33 Though separated from what they produce, *academics themselves* nevertheless produce every detail of their *intellectual* world with ever-increasing power. They thus find themselves increasingly separated from that *their intellect*. The closer their *academic* life comes to being their own creation, the more they are excluded from that *intellectual* life.

34 The spectacle of *publication* is capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images.

52 Once *academia* discovers that it depends on the *editorial* economy, the *editorial* economy in fact depends on *academia*. When the subterranean power of the economy grew to the point of visible domination, it lost its power. The *editorial* economic Id must be replaced by the *scholarly* I. This *author* can only arise out of *academia*, that is, out of the *intellectual* struggle within *academia*.

53 Consciousness of desire and desire for consciousness are the same project, the project that in its negative form seeks the abolition of classes and thus the *academics'* direct possession of every aspect of their activity. The opposite of this project is the society of the spectacle of *publication*, where the *editorial* commodity contemplates itself in a world of its own making.

The spectacle does not simply function as the coercive imposition of a so-called dominant class. It is not solely the entertaining product of a conspiracy theory. Spectacle comes to existence when we become part of it, when we (more or less) unconsciously accept taking a step back and watching – in exchange for the comfort and tranquility of passivity. It is therefore not only about physical coercion, but also about psychological, emotional and corporeal indoctrination.

We are the main actors of the spectacle by accepting to sit down and relax to watch the play of our own lives, to relinquish our part in writing the play being enacted on stage, and committing instead simply to enjoying ourselves until the curtains falls.

HOW TO END THE SPECTACLE? STOP THE SHOW, JUMP ON STAGE, AND REWRITE THE SCORE

Therefore, a way out would start not only with acknowledgement, but with a strong sense of reflexivity. It is only through a harsh and non-indulgent look in the mirror that we could escape the spectacle. Let me illustrate this via a personal example of how a Debordian introspection can help us become conscious of our own spectaclist bias.

While I was preparing the video during the 2017 EGOS conference in Copenhagen, I ran into a former colleague of mine at lunch. After the usual friendly pleasantries and academia gossip, we discussed our current research and upcoming projects. And as he was telling me that he and his co-authors are in the (hopefully) final round to be published in the *Academy of Management Journal* (the journal is not relevant here, any other well-known outlet would have triggered my following reaction), I congratulated him. I didn't know what the paper was about. I had no idea if they enjoyed

doing this research or writing about it. I didn't care if the topic was relevant to students, business or society – or at least I didn't ask him about it to check whether and how it was. Instead I was congratulating him solely based on the number of stars this publication represented in the latest rankings! This is where the spectacle appears: in this kind of judgment, based solely on the economic value of our work, rather than on the interest, relevance or intellectual amusement that it brings to us as academics. The sad thing is that, as Yiannis Gabriel reminds us in this section, we “are all aware of the game's pointlessness, but remain mesmerized by the spectacle”. I was too.

Debord himself was not overly optimistic about our collective ability to wake up from spectacle-induced drowsiness. Even worse, he stressed that “the spectacle is the nightmare of imprisoned modern society which ultimately expresses nothing more than its desire to sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of sleep” (thesis 21). Shall we then declare defeat and go back to our intellectual nap? Hopefully not. Indeed, I'd argue it is not too late time for us to resist. How? It is certainly not going to be easy, as my EGOS encounter shows. In addition, many ideas have already been formulated here and there. My contribution to this is to suggest we could start by building, and encouraging, reflection as a means for resisting the spectacular – or as Debord put it, work on our “consciousness of desire and desire for consciousness”.

PUBLIC SPECULATIONS ON PUBLICATION SPECTACLES

“Your emoji defeated my argument” (Dean, 2016: 4)

“But I have that within which passeth show” Hamlet, Act1, Scene 1

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“Have we made spectacles of ourselves?” Yoann’s camera interrogates, aiming its gaze into the maze-like corridors and pages of our scholarly profession. The questioning camera begs a response – can one respond to a spectacle as one would respond to a written argument? In watching Yoann’s video, I remark that the audience has not been presented with an argument, but placed within a gaze. Where words appear, they appear as if images, mimicking Debord’s text, itself a parody of itself. Text attached to video circulates as image, now disseminated via YouTube, video of academic texts that in their own circuit transit behind digital paywalls, calling from behind these walls to be cited by others and diffused. Texts desiring to be circulated tend toward the status of images. Images desiring to break free of this circuit demand response, as if they were texts. My writing searches for a site of dialogue with Yoann’s camera; that site is this text, circulated to you, submitted to your gaze.

I cannot help but read an argument into the video. I understand it to be a critique of the ceaseless circulation of our writing, writing converted into a commodity through circulation, and a critique of the sense that something essential is lost in this circulation. Does the video escape reenacting this same circulation in a new medium, perhaps even more amenable to acceleration and artifice than that which it critiques? It may be that to reenact something in a new medium can itself perform a kind of critique. Parody, for instance. Strategic mimesis as resistance. But parody and reenactment too easily feed back into the system of circulation. Despite its protests, has the call/response of critique once again gotten pulled into the undertow of spectacular production and consumption?

(As if to respond in the affirmative, the journal M@n@gement reproduces both video and my response, completing the circuit in a section ironically entitled “Unplugged”.)

In the search for new ways to write, present our ideas, and debate, we may challenge taken-for-granted structures and produce new ones. Or are we merely cordoning off temporary spaces for the planting of surplus-value, having over-exploited the soil of our old and traditional forms of expression? In a world where the commons has been

thoroughly exhausted, we may need to cultivate new commons, and who is to say whether each new communism is not an antechamber for capital?

The sites of scholarly argumentation, in a kind of parlor trick, seem to erode constantly and without end. Books are replaced by articles, which enforce ever shorter word-counts. Academics move to Twitter, whose 140 characters pit visibility against comprehension. Yet the spaces of circulation seem vaster than ever, with more vehicles to circulate ideas (but less space for those ideas). Thinking of the prospect of an academia built on circulation rather than argumentation, I wonder whether dialogue in such a situation is possible at all.

Yet, as I listen once again to the YouTube video (while eating popcorn, checking my email, and writing this text, wondering nervously who will click on my link), I am struck by the word “publication”, and reflect on the notion of “public” as it echoes from my screen. Asking myself whether an image could break free from its circulation, perhaps I should have been asking in what ways a publication can support, or even create, the public it presupposes. If spectacle ultimately reduces content into commodity through its objectifying gaze, publications invoke publics through the call for meaningful response. Images, like capital, speculate. Arguments, you might say, “publicate”, like politics.

Keeping in mind that:

Our publications may be valued as commodities, coveted for their exchange value over their use value.

The easy circulation and citation of articles may replace substance with “performance” in multiple senses of the term.

The property regimes behind publication may favor price-gouging publishers over scholarly communities.

Keeping all this in mind, the publics we create are not publics of passive consumers; more like social media than spectacle, they rely on active (if overworked) publics. They produce the commons of capital. If our academic work were mere spectacle, one might ask who is behind the veil, and reveal the hidden abodes of production behind the camera. But as Yoann’s camera positions us as both subjects and objects of the critical gaze, it reveals us as the creators of the speculative bubbles that entrap us, and also as the workers behind the scenes setting the stage. In our eagerness for visibility, can we learn to recognize the publics that prepare

backstage, and recognize that space behind the visible as a space of emancipation? To see in ourselves that which passes show, and to see in the spectacle the inverted forms of consciousness that, when seen right, would set right an inverted world?

TRACES OF PUBLICATION

“There were about 28,100 active scholarly peer-reviewed English-language journals in late 2014 (plus a further 6450 non-English-language journals), collectively publishing about 2.5 million articles a year.” (Ware & Mabe, 2015: 6)

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Writing and publishing are not the same things, and (when considering the problems with the contemporary university) it seems particularly important to disentangle them. The brief remarks I make here concentrate on the publishing of business and management, but they apply to wide swathes of the university, and are aimed at understanding why so many people are writing so much.

Even setting ‘text’ books aside, which have a profitable market among students, or airport bookstall popular management work, which must sell well enough to keep its shelf space, the scale of production of journal articles and specialist academic books on business topics globally is a remarkable phenomenon. The spectacle of the publishers’ stalls in the lobby of international conferences are testament to the scale and variety of the produce on offer. It is a frenzy of communication, of repeated and desperate attempts at communication, but I don’t think that we are very clear about just what message are being communicated to who and about what.

The global scale of English language business and management education makes publishing knowledge about this area the single largest part of what is a huge industry. But, despite the teetering piles, these journals and books have few readers (Eveleth, 2014). The vast majority of what is published will rarely be read, and consequently will have no discernable effect on the teaching of students or the thinking of researchers in any particular area. It is publishing without a market, in the sense that it doesn’t have actual readers, but imaginary ones. If I were to approach a commercial publisher and tell them about my imaginary market, they would not be interested in publishing my book. Yet books continue to be published that sell two hundred copies, and articles accepted that are read by few and cited by no-one. Craig Prichard, in a twentieth anniversary article for the journal *Organization* notes that ‘*Organization* has published 569 papers in its 20 years. Of these 44% have been cited less than four times, and just on 9%, or 48 papers, have never been cited at all—not even by their own authors.’ (2012: 143).

It seems clear that the economics of this sort of publishing is very different to the sort of publishing that has characterized the industry since the seventeenth century. Books have traditionally been sold to be read, but that seems not to be the case here. Yet this is not vanity publishing, in the sense that authors don't directly pay for their work to be produced. Instead it's a combination of state funding and student fees which effectively provide the money that allows for the labour of editing, proofreading, typesetting, printing and/or the maintenance of websites and marketing (Parker, 2013). As has been demonstrated on many occasions, multinational knowledge companies are a major financial beneficiary of this activity, because they sell the words that academics produce, as well as the technologies that allow journals and their articles to be produced and ranked, and allow for academics themselves to engage in this comparative ranking on a personal basis (Harvie et al. 2012, 2013). Secondary beneficiaries are the professional academic associations with highly ranked journals who earn income from their own publishing, or from entering into contracts with knowledge corporations to publish their content.

This financing model allows the publishing to happen, because if it wasn't funded the wide variety of activities which contribute to the publishing process could not take place. Most notably this means the salaries of professional academics writing, reviewing and editing, as well as all the other downstream activities performed by the knowledge companies themselves. Money paid by the state, and fees by paid by students, provide the subsidy which funds the academic salaries that allows all these unread words to be written, and assembled into articles and books.

However, the reason for this publishing is not primarily to find readers, either among students or academics, or state policy makers, or even the general public. Authors might imagine that this is what they are doing, and that is probably a productive way to think about the motivations for writing, but the only readers that really matter are the reviewers and editors for journals. These readers are really gatekeepers, not an audience. Reading after publishing does happen sometimes, particularly among PhD students or junior staff, but this is an activity which is epiphenomenal to publishing itself. That is to say, the publication is the aim, and in a sense it doesn't matter what is written, as long as it produces a publication. Or, to be more precise, the aim is to produce a record of a publication, on a CV, in an institutional research database, on a website, in a state research exercise. The *trace* of a publication is ultimately the aim of the activity, the evidence that it exists, because this sign is a valuable

commodity, and the more of these signs, spoors, tracks point to particular authors, the more benefits will accrue to them.

Publishing, as I suggested earlier, is not the same as writing. Publishing can take place even if the publications are not read much; if it has little or no effect on any particular occupational practice, state policy or the opinions of the general public; if it indirectly results in higher taxes to subsidise universities, and higher fees for students. Despite all this, publishing continues to happen. But why?

For much of their long history, academics in universities had teaching as their primary responsibility. From the nineteenth century onwards, the idea of the university as a place of research became increasingly important. Nowadays, for a high-status institution, evidenced claims about research volume, income, impact and so on are necessary if it is to maintain its high status. (Though there is no necessary reason for this to be the case.) Encouraging employees to conduct something called research is therefore functionally necessary for research intensive universities, and (apart from counting income) the simplest and most efficient way to prove and audit the existence of something called research is through the traces of publications, evidence of output, proof of production. Just the trace, in a line in a document somewhere, because actually reading the words would confuse matters and take a long time.

Given a demand for publications, it is possible to imagine that academic employees might respond collectively. As with any management measurement system, employees could respond by generating lots of what the management demands – left shoes, smiles or patients seen within three hours. There is no intrinsic reason why publications could not be subject to the same logic, with each university employee writing an agreed number of papers per year which are published in journals that in turn agree to publish everything that they receive.

This simple and effective system might work in an entirely stable system of universities, but the problem is that there is competition in quasi-market systems, and research productivity is one of the potential measures that allows for positional comparisons. The traces of publications then become a valuable metric for an institution because they can be used to demonstrate a greater intensity of research than competitors. And since employees in different institutions are then in competition with each other, it is a short step to imagine that the employees are also in competition within any given institution. Publishing is competitive, and the spectacle of the piles of books and journals in the conference foyer are the spoils of the victors, and the humiliation of the losers.

So this is why publishing has to be difficult. If it was easy, there would be nothing at stake in the positional glass bead game. When someone gets the trace of a publication in a well-recognized site like *Organization Studies* or *The Academy of Management Review* this is worth more than a trace in some new or marginal site, perhaps based outside the English-speaking world, on-line only, or positioning itself against the mainstream (Li & Parker, 2013). Rejection rates are the clearest way of signaling this, with the piles of discarded papers only serving to emphasize the importance of the few that have been published. The traces must be of different intensities, ranked, and marking the excellent and the inadequate, those who will get to move to better institutions, and have promotions and pay rises, and those who can only stay where they are, nursing their resentment. This is what is marked in the trace of publication, the absent presence of being unsuccessful, rejected, ignored. The haunting possibility of not being worthy, of not leaving any trace.

When the England evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins wrote *The Selfish Gene* (1976), he was soliciting a shift from one unit of analysis to another. From organisms, families, populations, to the genes themselves, to the information, not its carrier. It seems to me that we need to perform an operation like this to understand the mania for publication that grips the b-school, and large parts of the university. The unit of analysis should not be the book or the article, the author or reader, because this suggests that writing and reading the words that make are important. They are not. Rather, they are only important insofar as they can contribute to the production of evidence for competitive purposes. The traces of publication are the key exhibits in this competition, with the millions of publications per year themselves merely being the means by which such traces are produced. Inscriptions on spreadsheets, counts on reports, tabulations of success and failure. In focusing too much on what the publications say, on their contents, there is a danger of misunderstanding their function.

AN ACCUMULATION OF SPECTACLES OR A CLASS SOCIETY OF ACADEMICS?

Yoann Bazin's roving eye offers a thought-provoking satire on contemporary business research publishing. It emerges, in line with Debord (1977) as "an immense accumulation of spectacles" (thesis 1), "mediated by images" (thesis 4). Academic publishing is a vast game of shadow-boxing, a spectacle put up for the benefit of various audiences that readily gobble it up – rankings compilers, appointments, tenure and promotion panels, students and alumni, editors and publishers, government and university bureaucrats, and ultimately academics themselves.

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There is no inherent meaning in most contemporary academic publishing; it is to all intents and purposes, content-free. Nobody is concerned with ideas and arguments, let alone any practical or policy implications – the name of the game is to score a 'hit' by having something published and subsequently having it cited. The higher the impact factor of the publication and the greater the number of citations, the bigger the hit. The content and meaning of the game may be entirely immaterial, but there are ever-vigilant algorithms keeping meticulous score on all the players, tracking infinitesimal moves in positions and ranks. Publishers, editors, authors, reviewers, deans, and even government and university bureaucrats are all aware of the game's pointlessness, but remain mesmerized by the spectacle – the emperor's new clothes may be fictional but a naked emperor out in the streets makes an absorbing site all the same.

Bazin's commentary is not an application of Debord's theses to academic publishing, since the spectacle itself is nothing to write home about. Displays of publishers' tables with journals and books in academic conferences are restrained and modest, scarcely a spectacle compared to the orgies of spectacle staged by different business schools in their corporate functions, their brochures, their buildings and their promotional activities. Rather than a spectacle, what is on display is a huge concatenation of printed words on white paper, bound together in sober-looking covers, destined to remain unread, before ending up, scattered in various dumps across the globe, unloved and unmissed. If books, even second-rate ones, could once languish in libraries for decades waiting for someone in the future to remove the dust from their covers, journal publications scarcely merit the space on a library's bookshelf and librarians increasingly make do without them. Their shelf-life is virtually infinitesimal.

Ultimately Bazin's commentary is a parody of a parody, a parody of Debord's slightly heavy-handed parody of Marx (1848/1972). What I find interesting in this action is that it leads us to the truth of the original, Marx's toiling worker and his or her alienation, in the academic domain. The spectacle of academic publications is not, like so many other contemporary spectacles, driven by the demands of the consumers. Instead, it is driven by the ambition and the ceaseless toil of myrmidons of academic proletarians, working night and day in pursuit of publication hits.

This labour is not pretend-labour but real labour, displaying all the characteristics of Marxist alienation (e.g. Hall, 2018). It is labour shrouded in veils of deceptions and self-deceptions as to its ultimate meaning, value and significance. This labour is part of a stratified system, involving large industrial armies of employed, casually employed and unemployed workers across the higher education sector. It is labour that, for the most part, keeps academics from undertaking those activities that have traditionally been associated with scholarship, reading, debating, arguing and teaching.

Marx would have had less difficulty recognizing the class character of today's business academia than Guy Debord. He would have observed (and satirized) an aristocracy of labour swanning around conference floors and enjoying various privileges and powers, sometimes appearing truly Olympian in the eyes of their subordinates – just like a Victorian butler may have appeared to the cohorts of domestics and servants working under him. Marx would have observed and satirized the skilled craftsmen sinking into the undifferentiated class of white collar workforce, forever and slightly pathetically seeking to preserve their superior status and waning autonomy. He would also have observed the toiling multitudes, exploited and oppressed, insecure and divided, yet thoroughly absorbed in their struggle to reach some imaginary top of a greasy pole. To them, he might have addressed one of his famous aphorisms.

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