From Spectacular Images to the Destitution of the Interface

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FROM SPECTACULAR IMAGES TO THE DESTITUTION OF THE INTERFACE

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How to think and act with images may be one of the most important philosophical and, hence, political questions of our day. The crucial point is not how to make use of images in our thinking and our actions, but how to think and act in a world based on the circulation of images. The question, then, is less how to think and act with images than how to think and act when images themselves are doing an increasing amount of thinking and acting, when the affordances of digital interfaces and their modulating image surfaces come to determine every aspect of the human being.

SPECTACULAR IMAGES

In 1967, French Situationist Guy Debord proclaimed that we are living in a *society of the spectacle*, i.e. a condition where the world has ceased to be directly graspable because it has been replaced by technologically transmitted images that provide the only possible medium for social relations. The spectacle is driven by capitalist modes of production, and its constituent circulation of images is the expression of commodity fetishism amplified through mass media. The cognitive powers and agency of its consumers are disabled, banned to the wasteland of the incommunicable and, thus, the non-living, because only expressions in harmony with the spectacle are allowed.

Debord's spectacle is produced by a specific historical moment that follows the first stage of economic domination established by the primacy of *having* over *being*. The subsequent stage described by Debord, of which the technologically mediated fetish character of the commodity provides the dominant paradigm, is thus the primacy of *appearing* over *being* – the imperative to visibly become what one essentially is. In the society of the spectacle being only gains existence in the form of an image.

In 1988, Debord himself described the development of the spectacle towards what he called the "integrated spectacle", which not only surpassed the erstwhile division between the *concentrated* and *the diffused spectacle* – i.e. Soviet state capitalism and Western market capitalism – but also surpassed the separation between image and reality:

For the final sense of the integrated spectacle is this – that it has integrated itself into reality to the same extent as it was describing it, and that it was reconstructing it as it was describing it. As a result this reality no longer confronts the integrated spectacle as something alien. (Debord: 1990, 9).

But, although it undoubtedly holds true that the separation of image and reality has been replaced by a more profound integration of the spectacle into reality, Debord's analysis has focused on the problematic passivity of the spectator:
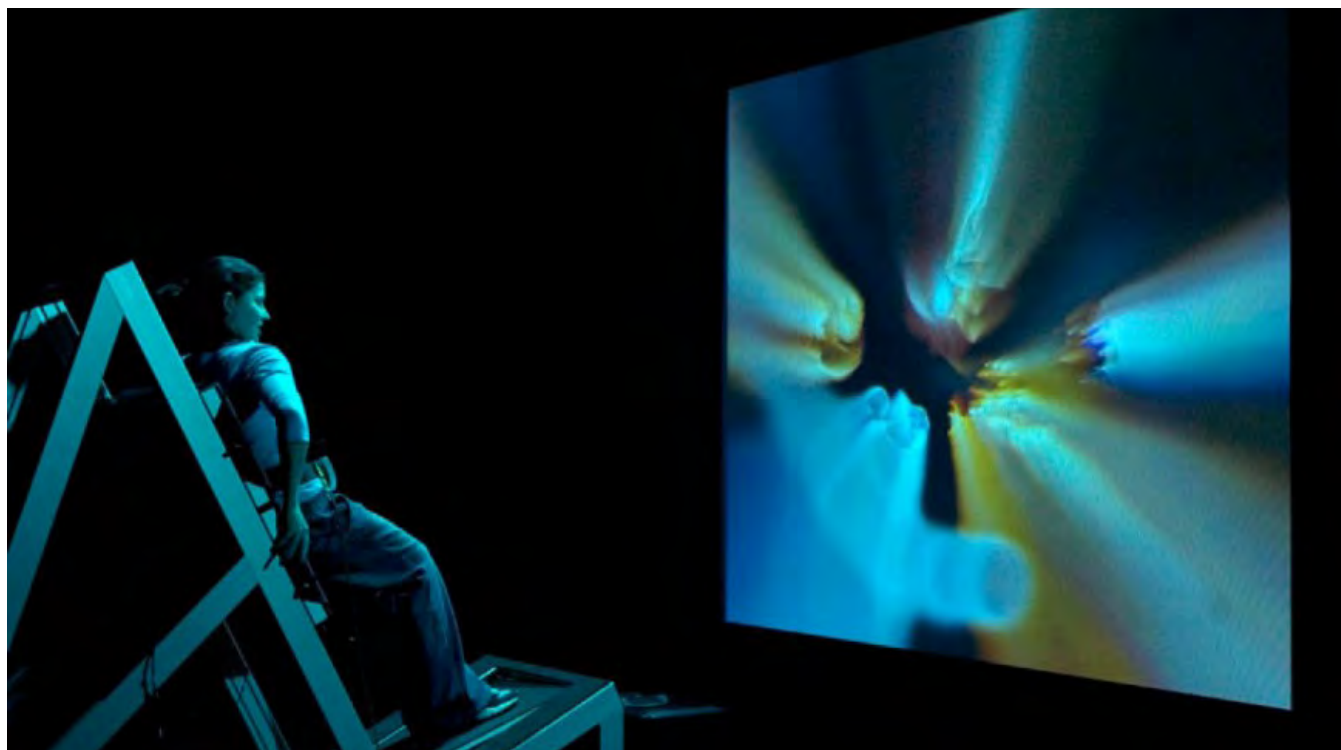
"The spectator is simply supposed to know nothing, and deserve nothing. Those who are always watching to see what happens next will never act: such must be the spectator's condition." (Debord: 1990, 22).

The media no longer let their images fall upon passive consumers that dare add nothing, however, and the spectacle is no longer mere technical objectification of a vision or visibility of the world. The spectacle now autonomously operates as a mode of both thought and agency. The never-acting consumer waiting to see what happens next is still prevalent in the form of the binge watcher of the current video streaming services, of course, "binging" being the contemporary epitome of passive consumption, but the spectacular operation of the image has changed. It is now the goal of spectacular images to activate consumers, to incite participation and action, to drive just one more "click," "like," "selfie" or "story" out of the exhausted minds and bodies of "users". As Jodi Dean aptly put it: "Our participation does not subvert communicative capitalism. It drives it." (Dean: 2010, 37).

It is thus necessary to consider the question of thought and agency beyond images and examine the point where action and image enter a zone of indistinction: the *interface*.

THE INTERFACE OF CONTROL

It would probably not be wrong to define the extreme phase of capitalist development

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in which we live as a massive accumulation and proliferation of interfaces – interfaces that project images through which we think and act, without any access to the logical operations behind the flickering images on the surface. Interfaces are technological nodes in the interaction between humans and machines, between machines and machines, software and hardware and even between software and software. The API (Application Programming Interface), for example, is the assemblage of technological specifications or protocols for one software application to interact with the functionality of another. As American media theorist Alexander Galloway has pointed out, "protocol is a technique for achieving voluntary regulation within a contingent environment" (Galloway: 2004, 7). It modulates the possible thoughts and actions that can be processed by the system.

Increasingly, whenever we contemplate or interact with images, we do so via digital interfaces – from screens and input devices to the obscure operations of code – that

incite and allow specific behaviors. And they primarily demand continued interaction. Whether the image be a shared video on Facebook, a selfie on Instagram or written words on the surface of a Kindle, continued participation is imperative, because only as long as the user reads the image can the image read the user. In the case of the Kindle, the interface reads the reading habits of the reader – where she pauses, whether the book is read till the end – and the data is fed back into the production of new books, just as user data from Netflix was used to determine the production of "House of Cards". Similarly to these content providers, social media interfaces read user preferences, but they also read user-contributed images, where depicted symptoms of illness in small children may return and haunt them in adult life in the form of more expensive health insurance (Paglen: 2016).

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DESTITUTING THE INTERFACE

The interface and its underlying protocols do not force specific thoughts and actions on its users; "the behavior is emergent, not imposed" (Galloway 2005: 24). And this emergent control is inherent to the interface as such. There is no "good" interface. As the interface-driven images proliferate, "agency as such is rendered unobtainable" (Hui: 2015, 90). Although the dominant media environment of his day led Debord to focus on the passivity of the spectator, he was right in claiming

that the spectacle, or in our case the interface, reconstructs reality in its very depiction of it. And this reconstruction does not constitute new modes of agency and thought but captures them within the protocols of the interface that predetermines the minutiae of being.

There have been many attempts to find a proper reconstitution of the interface that allows for new democratic freedoms. French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman clearly hopes to counter the predispositions of André Malraux's strictly curated *Musée imaginaire* and its false universal humanity by promoting Aby Warburg's chaotic *Atlas Mnemosyne* as "the undepletable resource – for a rereading of the world" (Didi-Huberman: 2011, 20). Similarly, Israeli visual culture scholar Ariella Azoulay sees in new digital technologies the possibility for the archive to be "reconfigured and reconceptualized through a new grid" and thus to counter the "sovereign archives" of ruling power with new and more democratic "civil archives" (Azoulay: 2010).

These projects are truly laudable, but, as French philosopher Michel Foucault rightly pointed out, "[m]en have dreamed of liberating machines. But there are no machines of freedom, by definition" (Foucault: 2002, 356). In the age of the interface, it is thus important for the critical reader of the image not to search for the *correct* way to use or reconfigure the interface. Even critical participation in the interface only drives the contemporary operations of the spectacle. It is now the task of the reader neither to reconstitute the constitutions of power nor to rejoin the passive spectators described by Debord, but to attempt the destitution of the interface, i.e. to render its determining power inoperable. Thinking and acting with the omnipresent proliferation of images should concentrate on determining the conditions of the interface so that its determination can be rendered destitute and hence truly open for new thought and action.