



# Capitalism: concept, idea, image

Aspects of Marx's *Capital*  
today

edited by

**PETER OSBORNE**

**ÉRIC ALLIEZ**

**ERIC-JOHN RUSSELL**



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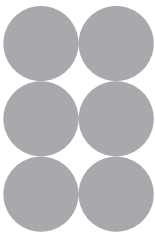
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### 3

## From the commodity to the spectacle: Debord's Marx

ERIC-JOHN RUSSELL

Published a century after Marx's *Capital*, Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* was described upon its release as 'the *Capital* of the new generation' (*Le Nouvel Observateur*).<sup>1</sup> However, the book's content has almost never been seriously examined alongside the dialectical logic of the social forms of value systematically ordered within Marx's *Capital*. Despite Debord's description of the modern spectacle as a development of the commodity-capitalist economy, discussions on Debord's debt to Marx customarily emphasize those early writings in which Marx enunciates the critique of alienation without having yet traversed the works of classical political economy.<sup>2</sup>

And for good reason, as his archival notes can verify. A preliminary glance at *The Society of the Spectacle* elicits the impression that the 'ruthless criticism of all that exists' first enunciated by Marx in his early twenties continued to reverberate a century later.<sup>3</sup> The book resounds with both implicit and

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1. *The Society of the Spectacle* was published in November 1967, a hundred years after the first German edition of *Capital*, Volume 1, published in mid-September 1867.

2. Debord refers to classical political economy as 'the science of domination' (§41). Within the present work all selections from *The Society of the Spectacle* are taken from the English translation by Fredy Perlman and Jon Supak, first published in Detroit by Black & Red, 1970. Quotations will be followed by thesis number to indicate location.

3. Debord began writing *The Society of the Spectacle* in the autumn of 1963 (*Guy Debord Correspondance*, Volume 2: *Septembre 1960–Décembre 1964*, Paris: Librairie Arthème

explicit reference to the phenomenon of social alienation or estrangement described by Marx in the *1844 Manuscripts*. And yet, we find, early on the following register of social alienation through which Debord situates the advent of the spectacle:

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. (§17)

Here, the primacy of appearance over property draws attention not simply to the way in which Debord's theory of the spectacle acquires theoretical determinations from Marx's early writings on social alienation, but, more specifically, how these developments of the commodity economy come to occupy a certain centrality to a dialectical structure of appearances in the critique of political economy. We find a clue in a 1990 letter to Giorgio Agamben where Debord writes:

I was happy to have attempted – in 1967 and completely contrary to Althusser's sombre denial – a kind of 'salvage by transfer' of the Marxist method by adding to it a large dose of Hegel, at the same time as it reprised a critique of political economy that wanted to bear in mind the Marxist method's ascertainable developments in our poor country, as they were foreseeable from what preceded them.<sup>4</sup>

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Fayard, 2001. Translation: NOT BORED! [www.notbored.org/debord-14](http://www.notbored.org/debord-14) November1963.html.) An infamously artful drinker, Debord vowed, two years later, not to pick up a glass until the book was complete. As to whether or not he stuck with such a pledge, one can never know. As he writes in a 1965 letter to Raoul Vaneigem: 'For a month, although I find myself quite happily occupied, I have subordinated many of the charms of everyday life and errancy to the completion of the critique of the spectacle. I have absolutely stopped drinking, until the last line is written. A dignified example from Antiquity! [Dignified] to the Thermopylae, and to the Spartans... In the best case, I still have six weeks or two months more. Which weighs upon me. But the trap I've caught myself in is clever' (*Guy Debord Correspondance*, Volume 3: *Janvier 1965–Décembre 1968*, Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2003. Translation: NOT BORED! [www.notbored.org/debord-1August1966.html](http://www.notbored.org/debord-1August1966.html)).

4. *Guy Debord Correspondance*, Volume 7: *Janvier 1988–Novembre 1994*, Paris:

For Debord, the society of the spectacle consists in a peculiar form of domination developed through the autonomy of the commodity economy within the capitalist mode of production in which human activity becomes structured by objective forms of appearance mediating social relations and yet is constituted by determinate modes of real, concrete practice. With the increasing fragmentation of human experience through the division of labour and the structuring of social relations through the form of the commodity, the spectacle is for Debord the reconstitution of a unitary social life from its separated and disjointed moments *at the level of appearances*. In a word, the spectacle is a critical category of social organization specifying the multivalent aspects of the unity of capitalist society in relation to an underlying determinate structure of appearance, the conception of which derives from Hegelian thought.<sup>5</sup>

However, it remains the case that the extent to which Debord is justified in his claim that the spectacle constitutes a qualitative development of capitalism has yet to be evaluated in accordance with the categorial determinations of the capitalist mode of production. Is it true, as has sometimes been claimed, that Debord's spectacle is simply a replacement for Marx's commodity albeit under conditions of postwar prosperity? Is the difference

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Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2008. Translation: NOT BORED! [www.notbored.org/debord-6August1990.html](http://www.notbored.org/debord-6August1990.html).

5. While Debord invoked the category of spectacle as early as 1955, it is only in the 1960s and finally within *The Society of the Spectacle* that it emerges as a critical concept for a structured totality. Beginning with 'Introduction à une critique de la géographie urbaine' in 1955, which appeared in number 6 of the Belgian surrealist journal *Les Lèvres Nues*, the category is utilized by Debord generically and in a nonpartisan manner to refer to publicity theatrics and the impressions and ambiances garnered from urban excursions. As might be expected, the term 'spectator' is also employed in a more commonplace capacity to refer to the subjectivity of passive reception. However, within the 1957 article 'Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l'organisation et de l'action de la tendance situationniste international', the category gets the specific definition of 'non-intervention' (*Internationale Situationniste*, 1997, p. 699) in relation to which '[t]he construction of situations begins beyond the ruins of the modern spectacle' (ibid.). It thereby begins to acquire a more technical meaning as a mode 'psychological identification' (ibid.). It is within this early article – which was one of the preparatory texts for the July 1957 conference at Cosio d'Arroscia, Italy, at which the Situationist International was founded – that the spectacle emerges as 'the spectacle of the capitalist way of life' (ibid., p. 701).

between Marx's critique of political economy and Debord's analysis of spectacle simply one of emphasis? Further, how does the spectacle relate to the other prominent forms of appearance of value, such as money and, perhaps more importantly, capital?<sup>6</sup> Finally, in what sense ought, as Debord writes in a 1966 letter, '[t]he revolutionary theory of Marx ... to be corrected and completed'?<sup>7</sup>

This essay attempts to answer these questions by highlighting the central role of appearance-forms in Marx's critique of political economy. Here, it will become clear that value – the social form of wealth within capitalist society – is ontologically structured as a totality through a set of appearance-form-determinations (*Erscheinung Formbestimmungen*). As we know from Hegel, a totality cannot be given directly or immediately, and so what becomes primary is the *form* of value or, again, what Marx refers to in a number of places as *Formbestimmung*, form-determination.<sup>8</sup> Here, value as formal determination or as the self-movement of form – not itself something directly perceptible and yet obtaining concrete appearances – derives from the self-reproducing logic of the totality of social relations necessary for the production and reproduction of capital.

The systematic exposition of *Capital* proceeds through a structured succession of categories that unfold immediate appearances to reveal their internal dynamics and, most crucially, the *necessity* through which essential social relations obtain the appearance-forms they do. It is a mode of presentation (*Darstellung*) that examines social reality as a totality of inner connections and

6. Gilles Dauvé, aka Jean Barrot, 'Critique of the Situationist International' (1979); translated by Louis Michaelson in Stewart Home, ed., *What is Situationism? A Reader*, Edinburgh: AK Press, 1996; and 'Back to the Situationist International' (1979), *Aufheben* no. 9 (2000). See also: Perspectives, *At Dusk: The Situationist Movement in Historical Perspective*, Berkeley CA: Perspectives, 1975.

7. *Guy Debord Correspondance*, Volume 3: *Janvier 1965–Décembre 1968*. Translation: NOT BORED! [www.notbored.org/debord-26December1966a.html](http://www.notbored.org/debord-26December1966a.html).

8. The concept *Formbestimmung* first appears in Marx's doctoral dissertation, but only re-emerges in the *Grundrisse* and the first German edition of *Capital*, *Volume 1*.

determinations. Marx's *Darstellung* gives concrete conceptual unity to aggregated historical detail. It is a reconstruction that starts from the immediacies of how wealth appears within capitalist society and proceeds to unfold the mediating essence that is the retrospective ground for those forms of appearance.

It is through the logic of the forms of appearance (*Erscheinungsformen*) of value that Marx attempts to provide an answer to the problem as to why value must assume its particular forms. This is a question never posed by classical political economy and yet, as we learn from Marx, remains fundamental for explaining the mediations between, for example, profit and labour. This problem cannot be adequately answered without Hegel, specifically his *Wesenslogik* in which essence must appear as something other than itself. For Marx, this logic – through which the *mutually constitutive identity* of appearance and essence calls into question the limits of formal dualisms – is a conceptual resource for conceiving not only the necessity for surplus-value to appear as profit, but also the necessity of value to assume its particular concrete shapes, such as commodity, money and capital.<sup>9</sup>

Not only does the concept of spectacle derive from this essentially Hegelian movement of the self-development of appearance-forms inherited by Marx, but in the first instance Marx's usage contains insight already disposed towards, let us say, the spectacular. One can identify attributes of the Latin *spectaculum*, and its connection to a 'mirror image' or 'arranged display', and of *spectare* – 'to view', 'watch' or 'behold' – within the development of the forms of appearance of value.<sup>10</sup> However,

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9. See Patrick Murray, *Marx's Theory of Scientific Knowledge*. Amherst NY: Humanity Books, 1988, and 'The Secret of Capital's Self-Valorisation "Laid Bare": How Hegel Helped Marx to Overturn Ricardo's Theory of Profit', in Fred Moseley and Tony Smith, eds, *Marx's 'Capital' and Hegel's 'Logic': A Reexamination*, Leiden: Brill, 2014.

10. As Debord wrote in 1980 to a Greek translator of *The Society of the Spectacle*: 'In French, "spectacle" has the merit of being linked to the Latin *speculum* and thus to mirror, to the inverted image, to the concept of speculation, etc.' *Guy Debord Correspondance*,

this would at best only demonstrate that Debord is composing a theory of the spectacle by emphasizing certain methodological aspects of Marx's critique of political economy. This is certainly true, and the gravity with which Debord aims to formulate a critique of society within the contours set by a Hegelian dialectic emerges as Debord scrutinizes different possible titles for *The Society of the Spectacle*:

*La véritable société du spectacle*

*La dialectique de la société du spectacle*

*La dialectique de la société comme spectacle*

*La dialectique dans de la société du spectacle*

*La dialectique dans de la société comme spectacle*

*Le moment spectaculaire de la société marchande (ou sous-titre?)*

*La société comme spectacle*<sup>11</sup>

Besides the connotations involved in these working titles and their affinity with the method of Marx's critique of political economy, there are, in my view, some considerable advances made by Debord with his concept of spectacle, which I aim to elucidate here. This essay assesses the way in which Debord's society of the spectacle remains a critical category that exceeds the specific determinations of the critique of political economy while yet having its conceptual basis within them.

### **Value and its spectacular forms of appearance**

Let me begin with §10 of the first chapter of *The Society of the Spectacle* and consider some of the issues embedded there.<sup>12</sup>

Volume 6: *Janvier 1979–Décembre 1987*, Paris: Librairie Artheme Fayard, 2006. Translation: NOT BORED! [www.notbored.org/debord-5August1980.html](http://www.notbored.org/debord-5August1980.html).

11. Within Debord's archival materials, a rummage through his notations on Henri Lefebvre's *Sociology of Marx* reveals these few additional working titles for what would eventually become *The Society of the Spectacle*.

12. This is a characterization of the spectacle that Debord will retain into the 1990s when he composed the preface to the third French edition of the book. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 8.

Considered in its own terms, the spectacle is affirmation of appearance and affirmation of all human life, namely social life, as mere appearance. But the critique which reaches the truth of the spectacle exposes it as the visible negation of life, as a negation of life which has become visible. (§10)

What does it mean for a negation to gain positive form or obtain this appearance-form? For Debord, this is the result of the autonomous movement of the commodity economy in its abstract and quantitative structuring of social relations. But fully to grasp what this means, we have to tour Marx's theory of the form of value. It is there that we will see how it is that the economy acquires this independent force of objectivity through its forms of appearance.

At the most elemental level, one recalls Marx's description of the dual character of the commodity as a 'sensuous supersensible' (*sinnlich übersinnlich*) thing whereby, in Marx's exposition, the unity of sensuous use-value and abstract exchange-value contained within the commodity unfold corresponding to concrete and abstract forms of human labour crystallized therein. Marx refers to this unity as *value*, a unity that becomes posited *for itself* when the products of labour are equalized in the exchange process; they are abstracted from their heterogeneous and concrete particularities by the reduction of the substance of their use-value to a quantum or aliquot of socially necessary abstract labour time, which is the measure of their value.

The use-values of two commodities become momentarily displaced during the exchange process. Value is thereby realized in the exchange process through the negation of use-value in which the qualitative aspects of the commodities are momentarily expelled by the quantitative equivalence of exchange.<sup>13</sup> And

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13. I am indebted to Christopher J. Arthur for this interpretation. Christopher J. Arthur, *The New Dialectic and Marx's 'Capital'*, Leiden: Brill, 2004.

yet, for Marx, this negation of use-value acquires a positive presence in the form of money and capital, each of which take possession of the materiality of production and consumption for the purpose of exchange. Within capitalism, production is production for exchange, and in this way the concreteness of the world is brought into existence by the abstract objective force of value. Here, the natural form of the commodity becomes its value-form as its form of appearance. As Marx writes:

Within the value-relation and the value expression included in it, the abstractly general counts not as a property of the concrete, sensibly real; but on the contrary the sensibly-concrete counts as the mere form of appearance or definite form of realisation of the abstractly general.<sup>14</sup>

The constant expulsion and affirmation of concrete reality constitutes the essential movement of value, a process whereby the negation of use-value during exchange in turn objectifies itself, or negates its negation, by instantiating concrete reality through its development of forms (*Gestaltungsprozess*). It is an abstract emptiness acquiring concrete constitutive power. Such is the manner in which value gives itself its own concrete reality, an autonomy of real abstractions constituting the world in its own image.<sup>15</sup>

Debord's opening chapter, 'Separation Perfected', continues within this framework. In so far as within capitalism social reality appears as an inverted world and subsists through estranged forms of abstract social unity, the spectacle is the

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14. 'The Value-Form', Appendix to the 1st German edition of *Capital, Volume 1*, 1867, in *Capital and Class 4* (Spring 1978), pp. 130–50.

15. It should be noted that the category of real abstraction derives not from Marx himself but from Alfred Sohn-Rethel, even if its conceptual content can be traced to the former's analysis of exchange abstraction and equalization. Alfred Sohn-Rethel's *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (1978; trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel, Atlantic Highlands NJ: Humanities Press, 1983) examines the correlation between the social synthesis of the exchange abstraction, along with its anthropological genesis within antiquity, and the epistemological abstractions culminating in the philosophy of Kant. While there is no available evidence indicating that Debord was familiar with the work of Sohn-Rethel, that the concept of the society of the spectacle bears an unmistakable affinity to the concept of a real abstraction is undeniable.



culmination of this fetish in which the ‘unity it imposes is merely the official language of generalized separation’ (§3).<sup>16</sup> Debord aims to elucidate an autonomized social reality constituted through appearances, wherein social unity only exists in its inverted form. As such, the spectacle is not a falsified *representation* of reality, but the visual or phenomenal exposition of an already falsified reality; it is the development of value becoming visible to itself. As will become clear, the spectacle is not a distorted representation of social reality but the appearance and justification of the actual distortion or perversion of social reality itself. As Debord writes in the second chapter: ‘The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life. Not only is the relation to the commodity visible, but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world’ (§42).

However, if we are to regard the spectacle as a visualization of the world of commodities, then the category of the commodity itself does not yet obtain the characteristics Debord is describing. We need instead to traverse the varied capacities and functions of money. Indeed, while the commodity features as a more prominent protagonist in *The Society of the Spectacle*, on the surface of things, I’d like to argue that it is actually different aspects of the logic of money which better elucidate the spectacle as a development of the capitalist mode of production.

### **The spectacular nature of money**

For Marx, the forms of appearance of value proceed through ‘visual inspection’ or *Augenschein*. This is Marx’s formulation

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16. In the analysis to follow, it is worth bearing in mind the affinity between the concepts of separation and abstraction. While Debord relies more heavily on the former, the Latin *abstrahere* is always a process of separation and so it might speculatively be said that an alternative title to the first chapter of *The Society of the Spectacle* – one which would have equally encompassed its content while making more explicit the form of domination constituted by the spectacle in its continuity with the value-form – would have been ‘Abstraction Perfected’.

which comes to the fore most explicitly in the first chapter of the first German edition of *Capital* and the 'Value-Form' Appendix to that edition. There, it is appearances themselves that commence the dialectic on the forms of value: 'Der Augenschein lehrt ferner'. In a sense, Marx is simply observing (*betrachtet*) their development. Among the initial passages of *Capital, Volume 1*, the *Erscheinungsformen* proceed through four basic moments – a dramaturgy between coat and linen – progressively gaining greater visual impact through a totalization of commodity values and culminating in the money-form whose fetish-riddle, as Marx writes, is 'the riddle of the commodity fetish, [but] now become visible and dazzling to our eyes'.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the money-fetish is only the commodity-fetish rendered *spectacular*.

Prior to this, Marx's exposition has traversed the simple form of relative value for which the being of value only 'comes to light' (*kommt dagegen zum Vorschein*) as a relation between two commodities, whereby their equal relation posits, on one side, 'the body of another commodity, sensibly different from it [and] becomes the mirror [*Spiegel*] of its own existence as value [*Wertsein*]' Here, value 'reveals itself' (*offenbart sich*), or receives sensual expression (*erhält sinnlichen Ausdruck*), in the relation between commodities; that is, one commodity's use-value becomes the form of appearance (*Erscheinungsform*) or the objective reflection of the value of another commodity.

Second, Marx proceeds to the equivalent form of value, which unlike future editions already broaches the discussion of the fetish character of commodities whose mystical form elicits the famous optical metaphor in which subjective impressions are explicable 'not as a subjective stimulation of the optic nerve itself, but as the objective form of a thing outside the eye'. The equivalent form is, as Marx states, a 'reflection determination' of

17. *Capital, Volume 1*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 35, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1996, p. 103, translation amended.

the use-value of other commodities. In his example, linen 'sees itself' as equivalent to the coat. There is a reciprocal and mirroring relation of opposites in the relative and equivalent forms of value.

Third, Marx proceeds to the developed form of relative value in which the form of value becomes an *environment* of commodities. Here we find the proliferation of many simple relative value expressions. The accidental character of the equation of two commodities immediately falls away to reveal an 'indefinite, constantly extendable series of its relative value-expressions [and] the linen relates itself to all possible commodity-bodies as mere form of appearance of the labour which is contained in itself'. Within this emergent world of commodities, the body of each becomes a mirror (*Spiegel*) for a universal equivalent.

Finally, Marx follows this series of developments into a situation in which the totality of values can now attain the appearance of exchange-values or what he calls the universal relative form of value. In this process, one commodity as a specific equivalent within the world or environment of relative forms of value remains. Marx is now tracing the developing money-form of value out of the equivalent form's position within the universal relative form of value. Here emerges the universal (*allgemeine*) equivalent, the universal and yet individuated materialization of abstract human labour whose use-value is precisely its universal form of value as a universal equivalent. All commodities thereby 'mirror' or 'reflect' themselves in one and the same commodity as quantities of value.

Within this development, what appears as Marx's frequent use of visual similes cannot simply be regarded as a stylistic peculiarity. For instance, there is a determinate reflective structure between two commodities in the relative form of value; in turn, the equivalent form reflects within itself the relative use-value of all other commodities; the universal equivalent is the visible

incarnation or 'reflection determination' (*Reflexionbestimmung*) of the totality of commodities in which the body and use-value of each become mirrors (*Spiegel*) for the universal equivalent.<sup>18</sup>

It is, however, within the form of money that the *spectacular* nature of the value-form finds its most potent expression. Indeed, money emerges as a great visual embodiment and display of all that has preceded it. It can, in my view, be argued that money within the capitalist mode of production is *spectacular* in nature. There are three aspects to Marx's theory of money that, in my view, coalesce under the concept of spectacle, or, rather, three important elements inherited from the money-form of value that come to constitute the spectacle: (1) money as the objective visualization of value; (2) money as an omnipotent purchasing power and therewith in a monopoly on use-value; (3) money as *Gemeinwesen*, which, as we'll see, is always already capital. But let me now briskly traverse these three aspects before discussing the relation between spectacle and capital.

### **Money as the visualization of value**

The money-form necessarily follows from the exchange relation in so far as the exchange-value of commodities needs to acquire an objective existence. In fact, money emerges as the externalized community of commodities, the appearance of their unity given an independent existence. As a necessary and observable form of appearance of the total social labour within capitalism, money is the mirror in which the value of all commodities finds determinate reflection. Because every commodity receives its

<sup>18</sup>. Within the first German edition of *Capital, Volume 1*, Marx makes clear that his usage of categories of reflection derives from what Hegel terms *Reflexionbestimmung* in his *Wesenslogik*. Marx offers the following analogy: 'There is something special about such reflection-determinations. This man is, for example, only King, because other men behave towards him like subjects. They believe, however, that they are subjects because he is King.' Karl Marx, 'The Commodity' [first chapter of the first German edition of *Capital*], trans. Albert Dragstedt, 1976, [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/commodity.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/commodity.htm); translation amended).

status in relation to all others, money appears, in Marx's exposition, as the actualization of commodity homogeneity and commensurability, the visual embodiment of the relation between all commodities. As Marx writes, through the money-form, value remains 'everywhere visible'; it is 'the social resumé of the world of commodities'.<sup>19</sup>

It is within money that value obtains its most visible incarnation. Important to emphasize here is that money is not, strictly speaking, the representation of the value of commodities, but an exposition of their relation as values. It is the presented actuality of the unity of value. As Marx writes,

It is as if alongside and external to lions, tigers, rabbits, and all other actual animals, which form when grouped together the various kinds, species, subspecies, families etc. of the animal kingdom, there existed also in addition *the animal*, the individual incarnation of the entire animal kingdom. Such a particular which contains within itself all really present species of the same entity is a *universal* (like *animal, god*, etc.).<sup>20</sup>

Money is the necessary presentation of value for itself, not as a representation of value but its visual presence.<sup>21</sup> This further entails the way in which Marx is not conceiving a nominalist theory of money, or money as a mere symbol of value. Money is not a stand-in or reference for commodity values, but the totality of their relations given an independent form. If anything, money

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19. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 29, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1987, p. 337; *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 79.

20. Marx, 'The Commodity'.

21. Christopher J. Arthur, 'Value and Money', in Fred Moseley, ed., *Marx's Theory of Money: Modern Appraisals*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005; Hans-Georg Backhaus, *Dialektik der Wertform: Untersuchungen zur Marxschen Ökonomiekritik*, Freiburg: Caira, 1997; Ricardo Bellofiore, 'From Marx to Minsky: The Universal Equivalent, Finance to Production and the Deepening of the Real Subsumption of Labor under Capital in Money Manager Capitalism', in Heiner Ganßmann, ed., *New Approaches to Monetary Theory: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, London: Routledge, 2012, pp. 191–211; Michael Heinrich, *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert*, Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1995; Christian Lotz, *The Capitalist Schema: Time, Money and the Culture of Abstraction*, Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2014; Helmut Reichelt, *Neue Marx Lektüre – Zur Kritik sozialwissenschaftlicher Logik*, Hamburg: VSA, 2008.

liberates itself as a form of representation and in turn transforms everything around it into its representative. As Marx writes, in money 'everything is turned around, and all actual products ... become the representation of money'.<sup>22</sup>

Through this aspect of money, which doesn't conceal the real material content of economic relations but instead makes them phenomenologically actual, it becomes clear in what sense the spectacle cannot be conceived as a manipulation or distorted representation of the world – that is, a conspiratorial or intentional effort to mystify the world, or merely the technological capacity to disseminate images. Nor does the category refer to any semiological aspect of the commodity economy. Instead, like the monetary instantiation of value, the spectacle is a social relation rendered into a materially objective force: 'a *Weltanschauung* which has become actual, materially translated. It is a world vision which has become objectified' (§5). It is a category that elucidates the abstract form of domination constituted by the *Erscheinungsformen* of value and its development into an objective phenomenal form.

### **Money as the monopoly on use-value**

I move on now to a second aspect of money that is inherited by the spectacle. The value of money in the first instance is money's purchasing power: that is, what money can command. As a universal equivalent, it can potentially purchase anything, even that which does not appear on the market. Further, while all commodities might not be products of labour, all are capable of acquiring a price-form.<sup>23</sup> As such, money is a universality that

22. Karl Marx, *Economic Manuscripts of 1857–58*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 28, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1986, p. 126.

23. As Marx elaborates: 'The price form, however, is not only compatible with the possibility of a quantitative incongruity between magnitude of value and price, i.e., between the former and its expression in money, but it may also conceal a qualitative inconsistency, so much so, that, although money is nothing but the value form of

renders in principle everything in the universe exchangeable with everything else. Its use-value is precisely its capacity to exchange the totality of use-values. Money is ‘an appropriate expression of equivalence in the infinite variety of use-values’. Money is ‘the essence of all the use values’. It is for this reason that Marx describes money as the ‘absolute commodity’ or ‘the ubiquitous [*allgegenwärtige*] commodity’.<sup>24</sup> As already anticipated in the ‘Power of Money’ section of the *1844 Manuscripts*, money is *the* means of purchase, that which gives access to all objects and the only true need.<sup>25</sup> Here, money as a means of purchase grants it its mystifying and omnipotent power; it is the medium under which all needs are potentially met. In fact, money emerges as the only true objective need governing the rest.

Within the second chapter of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord begins to address the relationship between the spectacle and use-value or social need. Between §§46 and 47, Debord brings his diagnosis closer to the form-determinations of value. Here, the relation of exchange-value and use-value are constituted through a relation of subsumption, wherein use appears as *internal* to exchange, a development most clearly illustrated in Marx’s identified ‘four peculiarities’ or ‘inversions’ of the equivalent form of value. As Debord writes, ‘mobilizing all human use and establishing a monopoly over its satisfaction, exchange value has ended up *directing use*’ (§46). Subordinated to exchange, use becomes inseparably appended to the production

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commodities, price ceases altogether to express value. Objects that in themselves are no commodities, such as conscience, honour, &c, are capable of being offered for sale by their holders, and of thus acquiring, through their price, the form of commodities. Hence an object may have a price without having value.’ *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 112.

24. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 281; *Economic Manuscripts of 1857–58*, p. 200; *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 374; *Economic Manuscripts of 1857–58*, p. 164.

25. ‘By possessing the *property* of buying everything, by possessing the property of appropriating all objects, *money* is thus the *object* of eminent possession. The universality of its *property* is the omnipotence of its being. It is therefore regarded as an omnipotent being. Money is the *procurer* between man’s need and the object, between his life and his means of life.’ Karl Marx, ‘The Power of Money’, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975, p. 323.

of exchange-value – that is, to an utterly abstract and quantitative criterion. The spectacle here subjects concrete human needs to its own standard, as a form of appearance wherein the abstract assumes the shape of the concrete.

So here the spectacle follows again an aspect of money in so far as it is by no means an idealist optical illusion, but the determinate reflection of the relations among all other commodities, the ontologically objective actuality of relationality that gives structure and meaning to all empirical existence. It is in this way that Debord can characterize, in a 1969 letter, the spectacle as ‘a *moment* in the development of the world of the commodity’.<sup>26</sup> This moment is the Gestalt of money which renders a world of commodities possible. The visible material world is in fact the determinate reflection, or spectacular image, of general equivalence which structures that world’s concrete and differentiated heterogeneity. This framework elicits a situation in which reflection becomes reality itself and the matter and use-values reflected as ephemeral appearance. As Marx writes, money is ‘the external, common medium and faculty for turning an image into reality and reality into a mere image’.<sup>27</sup>

Within this framework, Debord identifies a ‘*tendency of use value to fall*’ (§47), appropriating Marx’s own formulation of the rate of profit and referring to a loss of the autonomy of use from exchange. As Debord writes, ‘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

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26. Guy Debord *Correspondance*, Volume 4: *Janvier 1969–Décembre 1972*, Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2004. Translation: NOT BORED! [www.notbored.org/debord-6August1990.html](http://www.notbored.org/debord-6August1990.html).

27. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, p. 325. In the words of Engels, money is a ‘magic potion that can transform itself at will into anything desirable and desired’, and all other forms of wealth are ‘mere semblances compared with this incarnation of wealth as such’. Frederick Engels, *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 26, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, p. 266.



this *factually real* illusion, and the spectacle is its general manifestation' (§47, emphasis added)

Debord's second chapter builds from the exchange relation not just the spectacle as the prevailing model of social life, but that through the analysis of use-value as internal to exchange-value the spectacle serves also as the total justification or legitimation of the existing system and ensures the permanent presence of that justification. In this way, the spectacle is both the embodiment of existing social meaning and its verification. As Debord writes:

In the inverted reality of the spectacle, use value (which was implicitly contained in exchange value) must now be explicitly proclaimed precisely because its factual reality is eroded by the overdeveloped commodity economy and because counterfeit life requires a pseudo-justification. (§48)

So in this chapter we find that the spectacle refers to a pseudo-autonomy of use as it is emphatically lauded in order to justify the reigning domination of the commodity. As Debord will later write in the third chapter, 'The satisfaction which no longer comes from the use of abundant commodities is now sought in the recognition of their value as commodities: the use of commodities becomes sufficient unto itself' (§67). Here again we find as a model the money-form whose use-value is its power of exchangeability. The spectacle asserts itself where the shadow of use has reappeared in its inverted form: the economy appears as an objective reality which mediates between need and satisfaction.<sup>28</sup> However, this is, to borrow a phrase from Adorno,

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28. Additionally, within this 'fraud of satisfaction' (§70), the constitution of human needs within the movement of value cannot be contrasted with any opposing 'natural' or 'authentic' needs and desires. It is rather the case that social existence, in its real subsumption within the self-producing development of the commodity-form, becomes recalibrated as mediated moments within the autonomous economy. The pseudo-need imposed by modern consumption clearly cannot be opposed by any genuine need or desire which is not itself shaped by society and its history. The abundant commodity stands for the total breach in the organic development of social needs. Its mechanical accumulation liberates unlimited artificiality, in the face of which living desire is helpless.

the socially necessary semblance of an epoch wherein need and its satisfaction are merely the determinate and subordinated moments which mediate an economy developing *for itself* outside of anyone's control. Through this framework it becomes clear that the spectacle entails the commensurable identification with the predominant images of social need constituted in and through the money structure.<sup>29</sup> In this way, while reiterating the trifling distinction between '*superficial needs* and *deep needs*', the spectacle erects a model of social satisfaction integral to its domination. It is from this perspective that '[s]pectators do not find what they desire; they desire what they find'.<sup>30</sup>

This analysis, in my view, comprises an advance beyond Marx with regard to the way in which the category of the spectacle elicits a sustained critique of use-value and need satisfaction, thereby sidelining what Hafner has called the tendency of 'use-value fetishism' (*Gebrauchswertfetischismus*).<sup>31</sup> From that perspective, one finds descriptions for the decay or degradation of use-value by exchange extrinsically eroded by market forces,

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The cumulative power of independent artificiality sows everywhere the falsification of social life' (§68). Further explication on the distinction between 'superficial' and 'genuine' needs as a tenet of class society can be found in Adorno's 'Thesen über Bedürfnis (1942), in *Adorno Soziologische Schriften II*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

29. Debord identifies the advent of the spectacle proper with the period after the 'second industrial revolution', which ran from the late nineteenth century until World War I, the historical moment in which 'alienated consumption becomes for the masses a duty supplementary to alienated production' (§42). At this point, roughly from the beginning of the 1920s and accelerating after World War II, the economy must no longer disregard the manner in which its working class satisfies its needs. Focused efforts on cultivating the *consuming* aspect of the proletariat, rather than simply ignoring it, inaugurated a deeper integration of the proletariat into the accumulation process. For Debord, the historical specificity of the modern spectacle unfolding in accordance with the development of the autonomy of the commodity can thereby be witnessed through a greater absorption of labour into the circulation sphere, an effort devoted strictly to the realization of surplus value, rather than to its creation. As Debord writes, 'as soon as the production of commodities reaches a level of abundance which requires a surplus of collaboration from the worker' (§43), consumption in general becomes, as the proletariat gains greater access to the total commodity, a dialectical determination of capitalist production, or, said another way, the real subsumption of use in – and the abstractions of – commodity exchange.

30. Guy Debord, *Complete Cinematic Works: Scripts, Stills and Document* (1978), trans. and ed. Ken Knabb. Edinburgh: AK Press, 2003, p. 114.

31. Kornelia Hafner, 'Gebrauchswertfetischismus', in Diethard Behrens, ed., *Gesellschaft und Erkenntnis: zur materialistischen Erkenntnis- und Ökonomiekritik*, Freiburg: Çaira-Verlag, 1993, pp. 59–88.

a theme frequently found within Critical Theory but one which emerges as prominent in the work of Helmut Reinicke, Wolfgang Pohrt, Stefan Breuer and even Hans-Jürgen Krahl.<sup>32</sup>

As the complement to money, the spectacle detaches the use-value of money as the medium of circulation, itself the necessary universal equivalent of all commodities, and establishes a pseudo-autonomy of *use in general* as a category for society as a whole. If money is the realization of exchange-value's negation of use, then the spectacle is the return of use, now draped in a counterfeit independence. The spectacle is the appearance of value as use in its sovereignty while unrelentingly still draining the world of its detail. It is thereby as both the objective visualization of value and its monopoly on use that Debord can describe the spectacle as 'the money which one *only looks at*, because in the spectacle the totality of use is already exchanged for the totality of abstract representation' (§49).

### Money as *Gemeinwesen*

There is one other aspect of money that helps us understand the relation between spectacle and capital. For Marx, since the money-form of value is the concrete actualization of general equivalence, society appears as unified and as a whole within money. In money, one sees both, in the words of Anitra Nelson, 'the universality of the estrangement of individuals from themselves and from others' and 'the universality and generality of all their relations and abilities.'<sup>33</sup> However, for Debord and within

32. Helmut Reinicke, *Revolte im bürgerlichen Erbe: Gebrauchswert und Mikrologie*, Gießen: Achenbach, 1975; Wolfgang Pohrt, *Zur Theorie des Gebrauchswerts oder über die Vergänglichkeit der historischen Voraussetzungen, unter denen das Kapital Gebrauchswert setzt*, Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat, 1976; Stefan Breuer, *Die Krise der Revolutionstheorie. Negative Vergesellschaftung und Arbeitsmetaphysik bei Herbert Marcuse*, Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat, 1977; Hans-Jürgen Krahl, 'Bemerkungen zur Akkumulation und Krisentendenz des Kapitals', in *Konstitution und Klassenkampf*, Frankfurt am Main: Neue Kritik, 1971, pp. 82–97.

33. Anitra Nelson, *Marx's Concept of Money: The God of Commodities*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 70.

the spectacle, society is capable of appearing unified everywhere, not just in the money-form but 'where the totality of the commodity world appears as a whole, as a general equivalence for what the entire society can be and can do' (§49). How this relates to capital requires a look at money's function as a unified *Gemeinwesen*.

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx discusses, among the functions of money, its third determination from which it is distinct as both a measure of value and a means of circulation. Here money appears as an end-in-itself, 'money as money' or as 'the *universal material representative of wealth*' (*universeller materieller Repräsentant des Reichtums*).<sup>34</sup> Marx describes this third determination as the unity of the previous functions of money and which, as an *end-in-itself*, cannot be confined to the sphere of circulation. This third determination is already latent capital, albeit only by preserving its fluid becoming and by withdrawing and re-entering the sphere of circulation. In a word, for exchange-value to become truly autonomous as money it needs to develop into capital; that is, it must exit and re-enter circulation and aspire to imperishability. Money that is made autonomous and results from circulation as exchange value but that re-enters circulation and perpetuates and valorizes itself is capital. That is, only in capital has money lost its rigidity and become a process. And, of course, the specific exchange through which money becomes capital and not simply a commodity is in the purchasing of labour-power, the use-value that money purchases in order to become capital through the immediate unity of the labour process and the valorization process.

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34. Marx, *Economic Manuscripts of 1857–58*, p. 151. Within the *Grundrisse*, the *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* and *Capital, Volume 1*, Marx discusses this concept of 'money as money' in terms of three predominant sub-determinations: (1) hoard; (2) means of debt repayment; (3) means of payment in international trade, i.e. world money.

Here, within the transition to capital, money is no longer simply independent exchange-value but the autonomy of exchange-value as 'self-positing' (*selbstsetzende*): 'money must be spent for productive consumption, that is it must be engaged in reproducing exchange-value.'<sup>35</sup> Within M-C-M', money is 'exchange-value-for-itself' (*Der Tauschwert als sich selbstsetzende Bewegung*). Money as capital is independent of circulation and activates production with the purchase of labour-power. Capital must exist in both production and circulation, as both commodity and money.

In its becoming capital, money becomes the community or *the* social bond. 'It is itself the *community*, and cannot tolerate any other standing above it. But this implies the full development of exchange value, hence of a social organisation corresponding to it.' As Marx continues, money is 'the *real community*, in so far as it is the general material of existence for all, and also the communal product of all'.<sup>36</sup> It is in this way that capital becomes society, a development which includes the real subsumption of the labour process by the valorization process. The form-determination of value strives to make itself a unified totality.<sup>37</sup> We can trace this aspiration first through *Capital, Volume 1*, in which Marx defines capital as value-in-process, then through circulating capital as the identity of variable and constant capital within *Capital, Volume 2*, and finally, within both *Capital, Volume 3*, and the *Grundrisse*, capital is defined as the unity of the

35. Marx, *Economic Manuscripts of 1857-58*, p. 113.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 155 and 158. Here again we find money as the monopoly of use-value, as that which 'satisfies every need, in that it can be exchanged for the object of every need [and is] quite indifferent to every particularity' (*ibid.*, 153). Money possesses every natural particularity of commodities. Money, as general wealth, is therefore the totality of need which 'can embody the possibility of all pleasures.' (*ibid.*, 155); it is 'the god among commodities' representing 'the celestial [*himmlische*] existence of commodities, while they represent [*darstellen*] its earthy [*irdische*] existence' (*ibid.*, p. 154).

37. Camatte writes: '[s]o capital exercises an absolute domination over society, and tends to become society ... The opposition is no longer between capital and previous modes of production, but between a fraction of capital and capital itself, the presupposition of the production and circulation processes.' Jacques Camatte, *This World We Must Leave and Other Essays*, Brooklyn NY: Autonomedia, 1995, p. 123.

production and circulation processes. In a word, capital becomes the form of value that constitutes itself as society. We are now able to directly engage the relation between capital and the *society* of the spectacle.

### Capital as spectacle

The spectacle cannot be reduced to the commodity because the commodity does not by itself yield the objective autonomy of exchange-value. This only occurs through the advent of the money-form. And yet the spectacle cannot be reduced to money since it is not a phenomenon confined to the sphere of circulation. Money only exits circulation as capital (money-capital). So, is the spectacle synonymous with capital or, more specifically, with value-in-process? I would argue that it is not, and not simply for the way in which Debord identifies some pre-capitalist tendencies of the spectacle, themes which unfortunately I cannot go into here.<sup>38</sup>

I have indicated that the spectacle incorporates, from the commodity, exchangeability as the dominant mode of social synthesis.<sup>39</sup> More important, however, are the tripartite aspects of money outlined above: (1) as the visual objectification and actuality of inverted social relations; (2) as the essence of all use-values; (3) as the unified social whole or the unity of appearance-forms – that is, as capital. However, the purview of *The Society of the Spectacle* traverses an array of social phenomena not directly reducible to the category of capital. These broadly include the

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38. It is worth noting that alongside these developments Debord also sketches the historical origins of the spectacle within both religious projection and the phenomenon of specialization, both of which have at their foundation a social division of labour requisite for the production and exchange of commodities. The emergence of a specialized segment of priests within society, and the religious fetishism wielded therewith, can be explicable, at least partially, in terms of a social division of labour and a class configuration.

39. It is for this that it can accurately be said that 'the concept of spectacle assumes the methodological importance which the category of commodity has for Marx'. Perspectives, *At Dusk: The Situationist Movement in Historical Perspective*, p. 38.

spectacular appearance of seemingly opposed political factions, the spectacular image of individuality as advertised celebrity personalities (chapter 3), the spectacular representation of the proletariat in various organizational forms (chapter 4), the spectacular appearance time structured by commodity production and circulation (chapters 5–6), the spectacular composition of the urban environment (chapter 7), the spectacular presentation of cultural products and discourses (chapter 8) and the spectacular rendering of ideology (chapter 9). These are only a few of the aspects of social life that the multivalent category of spectacle is meant to critically examine, none of which can be easily reduced to the category of capital.

One of Debord's most explicit connections between capital and the spectacle comes at the end of the first chapter. There he writes: 'The spectacle is *capital* to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes image' (*Le spectacle est le capital à un tel degré d'accumulation qu'il devient image*) (§34). How are we to understand such a formulation? After all, from the perspective of value as the unity of the forms of appearance, capital is already 'image', understood here as *Erscheinung*. A solution to this cryptic thesis can be found, in my view, by recalling the aforementioned discussion of the money-form of value. That is, just as money was the becoming visible of commodity relations in their totality, the spectacle is for Debord the becoming visible of capital as a totality, but not simply as the monetization of capital since this would be a redundant formulation. Capital is already the movement of money.<sup>40</sup> Instead, the spectacle as the becoming visible

40. The final thesis of the opening chapter of *The Society of the Spectacle* has frequently confounded interpreters regarding whether it is the commodity or capital-form of value that has greater import for Debord's theory of the spectacle. See Gilles Dauvé, aka Jean Barrot, 'Critique of the Situationist International' (1979), trans. Louis Michaelson, in Home, ed., *What is Situationism? A Reader*; and 'Back to the Situationist International'. However, to cite just one example of Debord's sensitivity regarding the subtleties of the categories of the critique of political economy, the following polemical remarks waged against Raoul Vaneigem following the dissolution of the SI are indicative: 'We come across another gem further on when he discovers that "what weighs upon us is no longer capital, but the logic of the commodity". He knows full well that Marx did

of capital is the becoming visible of the unity of appearances – that is, the mode of appearance of society unified under capital. However, do not let the term ‘visibility’ suggest that the spectacle is a concept primarily concerned with literally visual imagery or is reducible to an environment oversaturated with advertisements or consumerism. Visibility here refers back to the riddle of the money-fetish – to the inverted world become, in Marx’s words, ‘dazzling to our eyes’. In this way, the spectacle remains a category that critically elucidates the abstract form of domination constituted by the exchange relations of the capitalist mode of production and yet carries this structure well beyond solely ‘economic’ relations. As Debord writes: ‘Capital is no longer the invisible center determining the mode of production.’ Under the spectacle, ‘[s]ociety in its length and breadth becomes capital’s faithful portrait’ (§50).

The notion that human beings are deprived of any substance not imported by the form-determination of value, and therewith structured by appearances, derives from Marx’s critique of political economy. However, from the perspective of the concept of spectacle, the totalizing implications of this general movement of appearance were not theoretically carried through. Central here is the manner in which the full autonomy of appearance-forms only arises with the emergence of fictitious or interest-bearing capital in which capital returns to the form in which it first arose as money and begets more money seemingly as a result only of itself or the increase in value directly from circulation. Here, the production process effectively disappears, and for Marx it is the culmination of the form-determinations in which everything is reduced to circulation.<sup>41</sup> However, it remains the case for Marx

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not wait for him to demonstrate that capital was merely “the logic of the commodity”; even so, he reckoned naively on his phrase *having a modern sound to it.* *Situationist International*, 2003, p. 127.

41. ‘In interest-bearing capital, therefore, this automatic fetish, self-expanding value, money generating money, is brought out in its pure form and in this form it no longer bears the birthmarks of its origin.’ Marx, *Capital, Volume 3*, in Karl Marx and Frederick



that this ‘completion of fetish capital’<sup>42</sup> nevertheless is intrinsically related and dependent upon relations of production. It can therefore be said that Marx, in his analysis of capital, renders explicit the necessity of the relations between appearance-forms and essential social relations.

However, the manner in which forms of appearance detach themselves and come to reconstitute real concrete social relations indexes their triumph as social reality and therewith solicits the demand to examine how the autonomy and movement of appearances might come to pervade all aspects of social life. It is here that the category of the spectacle is of service. The major distinction to be made between the development of value in its particular forms of appearance and the spectacle is that, unlike the fetish-character of value, there is no masquerade operative in its mystification. The spectacle has a sole demand: that social reality appear in all of its transparency.

Recall that the spectacle adopts the mandate of exchange-value: everything is possible because everything is equivalent. As the negation of life and of concrete reality that has become visible qua appearance, the spectacle follows the objective form-determinations of value by asserting a positive presence as the determinate negation of use-value. For this, the spectacle makes visible a world that is at once both present and absent. The spectacle, as that which is beheld, refers to the identity of the non-identical of exchange value not merely as operative, but as disclosed. It is the commodity social form ‘shown for *what it is*’ (§37), a display of alienation in its utmost clarity. As Debord writes, ‘[n]ot only is the relation to the commodity visible but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world’ (§42).

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Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 37, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998, p. 389, translation amended.

42. As Marx writes: ‘Here the fetish form of capital and the representation [*Vorstellung*] of fetish capital are complete. In M–M’ we have the meaningless [*begriffslose*] form of capital, the perversion [*Verkehrung*] and materialisation of production relations in their highest degree’. *Ibid.*, p. 390, translation amended.

As a structure of disclosure constitutive of its object, the spectacle is a luminosity unfolding upon the terrain of the false. Within the spectacle, social activity is made to appear, and in doing so is embedded with a meaning that contains both the image and the goal of social development under commodity society. Through the spectacle, the portrait of capital becomes all of society, for which '[a]t the moment of *economic* abundance, the concentrated result of social labor becomes visible and subjugates all reality to appearance, which is now its product' (§50). In the words of Jacques Camatte: 'The spectacle has to show humans what they are, or what they must be', in which the human being becomes 'no more than a ritual of capital'.<sup>43</sup> Here, capital becomes 'the mirror of all representations', divorced from any dependency on its transubstantiations and reproducing itself, in part, through the form determinations of its forms of appearance.<sup>44</sup> Capital becomes spectacle to the extent that, as a social reality, only the forms of appearance persist. For both Camatte and Debord, this movement of capital – as self-valorizing value or as a self-developing form of appearance without substance

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43. Camatte, *This World We Must Leave and Other Essays*, pp. 170, 108–9. Camatte is an important resource for illustrating the way in which objective forms of appearance come to dominate social relations within capitalist society. While there was no direct correspondence between Debord and Camatte, their respective analyses comprise a similar picture. Camatte came out of the political tradition of Italian left communism, strongly influenced by early Italian Communist Party member Amadeo Bordiga, and argued that capital had anthropomorphized itself as a material community. Camatte, who has barely received any attention from the anglophone world, never claimed any affinity with Socialisme ou Barbarie or the Situationist International because they were formal organizations and, in his eyes, held to outdated council communist programmes. Debord, for his part, left no evidence of any contact with Camatte. In a passage that could have appeared within *The Society of the Spectacle*, Camatte writes: 'Capital has become absolute representation: everything men do is reflected in it; it can be the spectacle of the world in that it reflects, returns to all beings their various movements integrated into its life process.' Jacques Camatte, *Capital and Community* (1976), trans. David Brown, New York: First Prism Key Press, 2011, pp. 339–40. The affinity with Debord is unmistakable. In another passage, which in all likelihood is a direct appropriation of §17 of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Camatte writes: 'They are stripped of their activity, which is restored to them in the form of representations; the movement of alienation no longer bears on the being or the having, but on appearing: their life is organized for them, and thus they increasingly tend to perceive of themselves as being thrown into non-life.' Camatte, *Capital and Community*, p. 252.

44. Camatte, *Capital and Community*, p. 251.

– proceeds to an anthropomorphization, which both capitalizes human beings and humanizes capital.

Reichelt reminds us that Marx's various formulations about the phantasmic cannot be mere rhetoric, but refer to features of reality, wherein '[r]eality is inversion, is appearance, in which reason, in its inverted forms of existence, subsists contradictorily through – estranged – forms of social unity'.<sup>45</sup> Correspondingly, Debord's concept of the spectacle follows such an analysis and amounts, in my view, to the most developed form of this unification within twentieth-century Marxism. The spectacle is the appearance of social unity in which separate spheres of social life, although dependent on capitalist production, have reached an accord that synthetically organizes each of its moments into a totality. For this, Debord aims to fully outline the contours of what Adorno called that 'diabolical image of harmony'.<sup>46</sup> Important to recall here is the way in which the spectacle is less a critical theory of appearances than it is a theory of the *unity* or organization of appearance-forms. A justification for one of its moments is a justification for its entirety. It is the name for the reigning identity of production and consumption, of work and leisure, of culture and commodity, of state and economy, of ideology and the material environment. It renders commensurate not only the distinctions between production and consumption, monopoly and competition, use-value and exchange-value but also class distinctions, leaving in their wake personifications, representations, appearances or images of its own movement. Such a mode of social organization, which, as Debord writes in a 1966 letter, 'monopolizes all human communication', entails also the organization of human perception, defining *what* is

45. Helmut Reichelt, 'Social Reality as Appearance: Some Notes on Marx's Conception of Reality', in Werner Bonefeld and Kosmas Psychopedis, eds, *Human Dignity: Social Autonomy and the Critique of Capitalism*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005, p. 34.

46. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Reflections on Class Theory', in *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 96.

to be seen with *how* it is apprehended.<sup>47</sup> The spectacle is the phenomenological terrain of value, a 'monopoly of appearance' (§12) which, as Debord writes, 'naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs' (§18).<sup>48</sup> The spectacle thereby 'says nothing more than 'that which appears is good, that which is good appears' (§12).

## Conclusion

The key to grasping the relations between Marx's critique of political economy and Debord's theory of the spectacle is in the study of the structure of the forms of appearance of value. As such, already in the first three chapters of *Capital, Volume 1*, we find the elementary forms of the spectacle. However, for Marx, the form of appearance 'makes the actual relation invisible, and, indeed, shows the direct opposite of that relation'.<sup>49</sup> This is in stark contrast to the way in which the spectacle operates by exposure. This is why the fetish-character of money is so important: the mystification acquires an objective and autonomous form, unlike the commodity-fetish for which social relations remain concealed behind the social relations of things. Even if having its basis within them, it remains the case that

47. *Guy Debord Correspondance*, Volume 3: *Janvier 1965-Décembre 1968*.

48. Debord's emphasis on vision should be situated in relation to the following passage in Marx's 1844 *Manuscripts*, in which the history of human sensibility is made actual in and through the objectivity of alienated human practice: 'Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man's essential being is the richness of subjective *human* sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form – in short, *senses* capable of human gratification, senses affirming themselves as essential powers of *man*) either cultivated or brought into being. For not only the five senses but also the so-called mental senses, the practical senses (will, love, etc.), in a word, *human* sense, the human nature of the senses, comes to be by virtue of *its* object, by virtue of *humanised* nature. The *forming* of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present. The *sense* caught up in crude practical need has only a *restricted* sense.... For the starving man, it is not the human form of food that exists, but only its abstract existence as food. It could just as well be there in its crudest form, and it would be impossible to say wherein this feeding activity differs from that of *animals*. The care-burdened, poverty-stricken man has no *sense* for the finest play; the dealer in minerals sees only the commercial value but not the beauty and the specific character of the mineral: he has no mineralogical sense.' Marx, 'The Power of Money', pp. 301–2.

49. Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 540.

the category of spectacle exceeds the specific determinations of value, a broader model of social organization for which the structure of appearing outpaces that which appears; or, more specifically, it gives particular appearances inner coherence as moments of a totality.

The spectacle is a category which elevates Marx's forms of appearance as a polyscopic and omnipresent element of social reality. As Henri Lefebvre put it, 'there is more to *Capital* than political economy.'<sup>50</sup> In this way, the category of the spectacle attempts to provide a theoretical reconstruction of social reality as an organic whole which is constituted in and through the autonomy of the forms of appearance of value. The spectacle ought, then, not to be measured by an attained quantitative degree of capitalist accumulation, but by the degree to which the total result of a society based on capital accumulation obtains objectivity at the level of ruling appearance-forms as the dominant social structure.

The spectacle is an aspect of capital that is not reducible to the phenomenon of exploitation. It elicits a form of impoverishment that has expanded proletarian wretchedness more capaciously into a *nouveau prolétariat*,<sup>51</sup> one beyond classical relations of exploitation and deteriorating working conditions, instead grasping the poverty inherent within capitalist affluence. It is in this way that the emergence of the critique of spectacle acquires poignant historical determinacy through the peculiarities of postwar prosperity. Here, revolutionary class struggle would find orientation no longer simply in the emancipation from want, but from the dissatisfaction implicit within the dominant images of satisfaction and social meaning. The *nouvelle pauvreté*<sup>52</sup> exceeds

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50. Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 1 (1947), trans. John Moore, London: Verso, 1991, p. 80.

51. Internationale Situationniste, *Internationale situationniste: Édition augmentée*, Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1997, p. 253.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 256.

material poverty and instead proliferates within the amelioration granted by postwar prosperity. As Debord proclaims in his 1961 film *Critique de la séparation*, ‘The point is not to recognize that some people live more or less poorly than others, but that we all live in ways that are out of our control.’<sup>53</sup>

As a critical concept, the spectacle elucidates and gives unifying structure to diverse phenomena within contemporary capitalism under a logic, derived from the structure of exchange, for which ‘appearances of a socially organized appearance’ (§10) have acquired ‘enormous positivity’ (§12). It is in the spectacular realm of appearance that the inner content of objectivity is manifest. That is, the spectacle is the *total commodity* of society – the total result of social objectification and its visible vindication. In this way, the spectacle is more suitably construed as the phenomenological terrain of value as a totality, or perhaps simply as the phenomenality of value: the self-movement of appearance-forms which, to echo the dynamic of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, draws into itself both subject and substance.

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53. Debord, *Complete Cinematic Works*, p. 31.

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