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Spectacular Developments
Guy Debord's Parapolitical Turn

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2010

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD
in Cultural Studies

Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated.
Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references.
A bibliography is appended.

Signed.....

Date.....

Abstract

Following the attacks of September 11th, 2001, Guy Debord's concept of 'the spectacle' re-emerged in the work of a variety of theorists as a critical prism through which the attacks and subsequent 'War on Terror' could be approached. Debord's first book on the spectacle (1967) was written in the context of France's post-war boom; his later reflections, contained in a series of minor works written throughout the seventies and eighties, are heavily influenced by Italy's 'Years of Lead' and a broader geopolitical climate of armed struggle, terrorism, counter-insurgency and espionage. Nearly all post-9/11 invocations of Debord's concept draw on the version elucidated in Debord's 1967 book, with its emphasis on commodity fetishism, ideology, and alienation, and fail to engage his later work and its focus on terrorism, secrecy, and conspiracy. Among those that do in fact reference Debord's later work are several writers whose work could pejoratively be labelled 'conspiracy theory'. Looking at Debord's oeuvre as whole, and investigating how it combines a critique of late capitalism in its totality with parapolitical concerns of 'systemic clandestinity', *Spectacular Developments: Guy Debord's Parapolitical Turn* provides a bolstered conception of the spectacle that aims to reconfigure the conceptual foundations of this debate. This conception of the spectacle allows one to approach the 9/11 attacks and all that followed in their wake with both a precision and a breadth lacking in these other works, demonstrating the superficiality of readings that make the concept synonymous with the mass media or that attempt to unravel nefarious conspiracies of power. Simultaneously, this approach foregrounds the epistemological and strategic challenges faced by researchers, politicians and activists working in and on the society of the spectacle.

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Introduction

'The conspiracy theory of history' was in the nineteenth century a reactionary and ridiculous belief, at a time when so many powerful social movements were stirring up the masses. Today's pseudo-rebels are well aware of this, thanks to hearsay or a few books, and believe that it remains true for eternity. They refuse to recognise the real praxis of their time; it is too sad for their cold hopes. The state notes this fact, and plays on it.

–Guy Debord, 1988¹

*Probably the most disquieting aspect of Debord's books is the fact that history seems to have committed itself to relentlessly confirm their analyses. Twenty years after *The Society of the Spectacle*, the *Commentaries* (1988) registered the precision of the diagnosis and expectations of that previous book in every aspect. Meanwhile, the course of history has accelerated uniformly in the same direction: only two years after this book's publication, in fact, we could say that world politics is nothing more than a hasty and parodic *mise-en-scène* of the script contained in that book.*

–Giorgio Agamben, 1990²

¹ Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (London: Verso, 1998), p. 59.

² Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End*. Trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 80. Note: *Commentaries* refers to Debord's *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*.

There is a short chapter in Guy Debord's *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988) dedicated to General Manuel Noriega of Panama.³ Debord writes that Noriega is 'a perfect representative' of the contemporary society of the spectacle and lists several reasons: his sudden emergence on the world's stage; the fact that he governed a country carved into existence by a foreign power out of economic and geopolitical strategies; his imperial employment and simultaneous anti-imperialist rhetoric; his international security apparatus, and his status as a player on both the legal and black markets. Noriega, writes Debord, 'sells everything and fakes everything, in a world which does precisely the same thing.'⁴ He is 'a sort of statesman in a sort of state, a sort of general, a capitalist. He is the very mode of *our modern prince*, and of those destined to come to power and stay there, the most able resemble him closely.'⁵ Published in 1988, Debord's considerations obviously did not take into account the failed coup attempt in Panama on 3 October 1989; the US invasion Operation Just Cause later that year on December 20; the US army psychop in which hard rock, including Guns N' Roses' 'Welcome to the Jungle', was blasted at the Vatican Embassy, where Noriega was hiding to avoid arrest; nor Noriega's being sentenced to forty years in a US federal prison for drug trafficking in 1992.

Even with his colourful biography, Noriega seems to be a surprising choice for the society of the spectacle's poster boy.⁶ The term 'the spectacle' is more often than

³ Debord, *Comments*, pp. 57-8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Here we should of course keep in mind Ralph Miliband's point that the state cannot be reduced to the government. It is an assemblage of various apparatuses – government, administrative, coercive, and judicial apparatus, and then subcentral (regional, state, city) governments – that can by no means be reduced to one figure, even if that figure is the head of the executive and/or military. See Clyde Barrow, 'The Miliband-Poulantzas Debate', *Paradigm Lost* (USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) p. 16.

not used to characterise a society drowning in consumer abundance – a world fascinated by celebrities and television, shopping and video games, millionaire athletes and pop stars, in which politicians throw millions into what are essentially marketing campaigns, and a multi-million dollar diamond-encrusted skull passes for avant-garde art. None of this seems to have much to do with the world of Noriega. Nicknamed ‘Pineapple Face’ for his bad acne scars, he was among the least telegenic world leaders of his era. He ruled more through his control of the National Guard and his paramilitary force the ‘Dignity Battalions’ than any kind of sophisticated PR campaign. In fact, his image on the world stage was largely out of his hands – generated in Washington more than anywhere else. Once he was no longer considered useful, he was portrayed as a demon: a drug smuggling pervert with Nazi sympathies. He emerged from the Panamanian intelligence services under dictator Omar Torrijos in the seventies and most texts on him focus on his dealings behind the scenes: ‘Noriega’s life goal has been to remain an enigma, a sphinxlike mystery man. Like a stealthy spouse, he has vowed devotion to the US while promiscuously courting other mates: the Cubans, the Nicaraguans, and Libyan and Israeli intelligence agencies, to list a few.’⁷ Quite simply, one would assume that the existence and power of men like Noriega is exactly what the spectacle seeks to expel – or at least shroud.

Debord’s claim is doubly surprising if one considers the connotations of the term ‘modern prince’. Theorised by Antonio Gramsci in his Italian prison cell, the modern prince was not a single person but a broad movement: it was what the revolutionary communist party aspired to be.⁸ Debord’s classification of Noriega as the modern prince of the spectacle, on the contrary, seems to send us back to Machiavelli’s Florence and its palace politics, intrigues, conspiracies and lethal games

⁷ Frederick Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator* (NY: I.B.Tauris, 1990), p. 5.

⁸ See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2005), pp. 123-204.

of power. Noriega seems an archaic prince, a relic. One of the key aspects of the task awaiting Machiavelli's prince, which Gramsci emphasises, is the need to establish Italy as a modern nation-state. Noriega, on the other hand, is the head of a faux-state where any recourse to patriotism or national feeling – Noriega playing the victim of American imperialism – is not only purely strategic, but completely cynical. What is more, *The Prince* was meant as a programmatic and inspirational text, intended to convince the prince of the author's programme for achieving a lofty goal, and while Gramsci's situation made it impossible for him to be certain of his audience, 'the modern prince' is conceived as an agent of emancipation. Debord's use of the term, however, seems to reveal a brutally pessimistic conception of contemporary life. It implies that the only way to come to power in the society of the spectacle is to be completely co-opted, corrupt and unscrupulous.

Debord writes, 'It is not Panama which produces such marvels, it is our times.'⁹ What kind of society has a man like Noriega as its modern prince? What kind of spectacle? While Noriega will not be discussed in any depth in this dissertation, in many ways answering the question of why Debord sees him as the perfect representative of the contemporary spectacle, with all that entails, is one of my underlying goals. The characteristics of this society of the spectacle will be expounded upon in depth over the course of this dissertation. Debord wrote two books directly on the spectacle: *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967 and *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* in 1988. *Society of the Spectacle* consists of 221 numbered paragraphs spread over nine chapters, covering topics like the workers' movement, the experience of time and history, ideology, commodity fetishism, urban planning and the world of art and culture. Influenced by the historical avant-garde and writers

⁹ Debord, *Comments*, p. 59.

like Le Comte de Lautréamont, Debord's dialogue with Marx and Hegel, via Georg Lukács, Henri Lefebvre and Lucian Goldmann, attacks contemporary capitalist society as a totality. In a letter dated 14 December 1971, he gives a succinct summary of the 221 theses that make up the book: '*this is capitalism today*.'¹⁰ In 1988 he is slightly more specific, claiming that his book identified as the essence of the spectacle 'the autocratic reign of the market economy which had acceded to an irresponsible sovereignty, and the totality of new techniques of government which accompanied this reign.'¹¹

Most people tend to associate Guy Debord (1931-1994) with the 1950s and 1960s, primarily in relation to his position as the 'prime mover' of the Situationist International (SI). In the early 1950s he arrived on the French art scene as a member of the avant-garde group the Lettrists and then became a founding member of the splinter group the Lettrist International. In 1957, he co-founded the SI, which went on to become one of the most prominent of the post-war avant-gardes, introducing concepts like the *dérive* and *détournement* that are still crucial reference points for artists and activists throughout the world. The SI was involved in the build up to the events of May 1968, and *Society of the Spectacle* (advertised as the *Das Kapital* of the 20th century), is occasionally considered the handbook of the students' movement (at least by the Situationists and their acolytes). After the events of 1968 failed to overthrow the existing order, Debord is thought to have gone into exile, retiring from politics only to re-emerge late in his life as a man of letters with the publication of his autobiographical *Panegyric* in 1989, after which he received praise from French

¹⁰ [Emphasis Debord's.] Debord, *Correspondance*, vol. 4, (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2004), p. 455.

¹¹ Debord, *Comments*, p. 2.

cultural figures like Philippe Sollers and Michel Houellebecq.¹² Most people's knowledge of Debord tends to end in 1968 and few realise that the majority of his texts were actually published after the dissolution of the Situationist International in 1972. Relatively little is written about these later works – and even less on his admittedly sparse and rather obscure writings from the 1970s. Few would guess from reading recent commentaries and applications of his concepts that he wrote theoretically advanced and polemical texts on terrorism, the Red Brigades, the assassination of the Italian Christian Democratic party leader Aldo Moro, climate change, organic food – and indeed figures like Manuel Noriega.

In a letter from 21 February 1974, Debord writes the following: 'The epoch no longer simply demands a vague response to the question "What is to be done?". It is now a question, if one wants *to remain in the present*, of responding to this question almost every week: "*What is happening?*".'¹³ What is most evocative about this quotation is that it reveals a pensive Debord. Not the grand strategist out on the field marshalling his troops, who claimed that 'Revolution is not "showing" life to people, but bringing them to life', but back in his study, reading the paper, wondering how to understand what is going on in the world.¹⁴ This quote seems to indicate that Debord realised, despite his confidence in the accuracy and continued relevance of *Society of the Spectacle*, that the world was changing rapidly and new concepts needed to be created to understand it. It is worth noting some of what was happening in the world in the years prior to Debord writing this letter. There is the end of the Bretton Woods system of monetary management in 1971-72. In 1972 Nixon and Mao meet, Andreas

¹² See Andrew Hussey, *The Game of War: The Life and Death of Guy Debord* (London: Pimlico, 2002), pp. 1-9.

¹³ 'Guy Debord's Letters', 21 February, 1974, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/debord-21February1974.html>>.

¹⁴ Debord, 'For a Revolutionary Judgement of Art', *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley, California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), p. 396.

Baader and Ulrike Meinhof are caught by German police, and Deleuze and Guattari publish *Anti-Oedipus*. 1973 sees the global oil and economic crisis, the coup in Greece and the Yom Kippur War. Simultaneously the Vietnam War is in its dying stages and Italy is nearly midway through its 'years of lead'. *The Society of the Spectacle* may still be an effective portrait of the historical period for which, and in which, it was written, but it was constantly – inevitably – becoming a blurry portrait. Like Marx retreating to the British Library after the failures of the workers' movement in 1852 and again in 1867, Debord saw these years as demanding retreat and study.

Twenty-one years passed between the publication of *Society of the Spectacle* in 1967 and *Comments* in 1988; a similar amount of time has passed since Debord's final pronouncements on the concept of the spectacle. I say this to emphasise how much the world has changed since Debord published his final monograph on the concept. Some events Debord was able to witness before his death in 1994: the fall of the Berlin Wall and the break up of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the first Gulf War, the first WTC bombing, Tiananmen Square and the Italian prime minister Giulio Andreotti's Gladio revelations. Other things that may have drawn his attention or ire he has obviously missed: the OJ Simpson trial, the Kosovo war, the Clinton sex scandal, 9/11 and the 'War on Terror', the rise of Le Pen and Berlusconi, riots in the *banlieues*, the spread of the internet, etc.¹⁵ As often as Debord is praised for his prescience, he is dismissed for being anachronistic for not having taken into account video games, YouTube, or the 'interactivity' of shows like *Big Brother*.

Despite whatever has transpired between 1957, the year the concept was first used by Debord, and the present, the concept of the spectacle, as elucidated in his

¹⁵ Reading Debord's "*Cette Mauvaise Réputation...*" (1993), considering how much one places his work in a different era, it is somewhat surprising to hear him commenting on Clinton: '*le virtuose saxophoniste.*' Debord, *Oeuvres*, (Quarto Gallimard, 2006), p. 1834.

1967 book, is still widely referenced.¹⁶ This is despite numerous claims for its irrelevance, idiocy, or supersession by theorists as diverse and respectable as Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Susan Sontag, Régis Debray, Jonathan Crary, and, most recently, Jacques Rancière.¹⁷ Their complaints can be amalgamated and summarised as follows: the spectacle is an unwieldy metanarrative, too indebted to an anachronistic Hegelian model of social and historical change. It is so all-encompassing that while it tries to explain everything, it ends up explaining nothing. Alternatively, they argue, even if it once was a relative concept, the world (and especially media technology) has developed so quickly since 1960s France, when most people did not even own television sets, that it has become outmoded. While it may have made sense to talk about reality and image at the time, the two are today collapsed into indistinguishability. As Baudrillard remarks, echoing Debray, ‘we’re threatened not by separation or alienation, but by total immersion.’¹⁸

Despite these critiques, the concept of the spectacle will simply not go away. In the late-nineties, as the critique of branding and shopping gained increasing attention in the media, references to Guy Debord and the SI became commonplace in academia and lifestyle magazines alike. They were characterized as early ‘culture-jammers’ and a precursor to Naomi Klein and *Adbusters*, with *Society of the Spectacle* considered a prescient critique of the rampant consumerism of the nineties’

¹⁶ In Debord’s *Correspondence: The Foundation of the Situationist International (June 1957-August 1960)*, the editor claims that the first mention of the term is in December, 1959, in an article entitled ‘Cinema After Alain Resnais’, but this is inaccurate. The concept of the spectacle first appears, as far as I can tell, in Debord’s ‘Report on the Construction of Situations’ from 1957. Debord, *Correspondence: The Foundation of the Situationist International (June 1957-August 1960)*, trans. Stuart Kendall and John McHale (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009); Debord, ‘Report on the Construction of Situations’, *SI Anthology*, pp. 25-46.

¹⁷ See Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 1-23; Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (UK: Penguin, 2004), p. 98; Régis Debray, ‘Remarks on the Spectacle’, *New Left Review* (214, 1995), pp. 134-41; Jonathan Crary, ‘Eclipse of the Spectacle’. *Art After Modernism*, ed. Brian Wallis, (Boston: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), pp. 283-294; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, (USA: Vintage, 1995), pp. 216-7; Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (USA: Telos Press, 1975), p. 120; Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (USA: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 30.

¹⁸ Baudrillard, *Fragments*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 19.

bubble. This discourse honed in on Situationist concepts like the colonisation of everyday life and practices like *détournement* as being of particular relevance to theorists and activists in a period of triumphant capitalism. It focused on notions like alienation and commodity fetishism, and micropolitical strategies for understanding and resisting the forces that prevent one from living a fulfilling life in an age of abundance. The British lifestyle magazine *Dazed & Confused* celebrated Debord as one of the age's 'Famous Rebels' and in a review of Andrew Hussey's biography of Debord, *The Game of War*, in *The Guardian* on 25 August 25 2001, Phil Baker begins, 'Guy Debord is everywhere these days'.¹⁹

Two weeks later hijacked jetliners crashed into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. Following the attacks of 9/11, Debord was still 'everywhere', but references to him and discussions of his concepts had a decidedly different emphasis. Nowadays Debord is brought up primarily in relation to the so-called 'image-war' being fought between radical Islamists and the 'coalition of the willing'. The subject of the society of the spectacle has gone from being hypnotised by images of commodities, celebrities, and representative democracy to those of collapsing skyscrapers, hook-armed imams, and 'Shock and Awe'. Tariq Ali reviews *The Looming Tower* (2006), Lawrence Wright's reconstruction of the build-up to 9/11, under the rubric 'The Spectacle is All' in *The Guardian*.²⁰ A journalist in an under-siege Beirut in the summer of 2006 finds it hard to believe that the leadership of Hezbollah isn't acquainted with *The Society of the Spectacle* because of their cunning manipulation of the media.²¹ A year previous, the Retort collective – based in

¹⁹ Phil Baker, 'Culture Vulture', *The Guardian*, 25 August, 2001, Available online at: <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/biography/0,,541866,00.html>>.

²⁰ Tariq Ali, 'The Spectacle is All', *The Guardian*, 9 September, 2006, Available online at: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/sep/09/shopping.politics1>>.

²¹ Rasha in Beirut, 'Three Letters from Beirut', 17 July, 2006, Available online at: <<http://nyc.indymedia.org/en/2006/07/73157.html>>.

California and containing a couple of ex-Situationists – published *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in the New Age of War* (2005), applying the concept of the spectacle directly to 9/11 and the ‘War on Terror’, prompting a substantial debate in journals including *October*, *New Left Review* and *Public Culture*.²² Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) denigrates the concept as ‘breathtaking provincialism’, while Susan Willis uses it critically in *Portents of the Real* (2005) to discuss the Washington sniper and the anthrax letters. Here, by and large, the focus is less on the critique of everyday life and instead tends to view the society of the spectacle as the general mise-en-scène in which major geopolitical actors engage each other with an emphasis on the ubiquity of the media and the importance of images and appearances in contemporary politics and warfare.

These two uses of the concept – the one focusing on commodity fetishism and the politics of everyday life and the other focusing on the geopolitical importance of images and appearances, to generalise slightly – are not necessarily opposed; they merely emphasise different aspects of life in or under the society of the spectacle. Nor is there anything wrong with either of these readings of Debord’s concept of the spectacle per se, as they are more or less faithful to Debord’s theorisation of the concept in *Society of the Spectacle* (even if they often dilute it considerably). One of the arguments that this dissertation will try to make, however, is that both of these readings inherit the weaknesses of Debord’s formulation. Rather than improve on these weaknesses, or develop the concept of the spectacle, they fall victim to them and their analyses suffer accordingly. More often than not, the spectacle is mobilised as a general term for something like late capitalism, consumer capitalism, or

²² See Gopal Balakrishnan, ‘States of War’ *New Left Review* (36, Nov/Dec 2005), pp. 5-32; Julian Stallabrass, ‘Spectacle and Terror’, *New Left Review* (37, Jan/Feb 2006), pp. 87-106; ‘An Exchange on *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*’, *October* (115, Winter 2006), pp. 3-12; ‘Dossier on Retort’s *Afflicted Powers*’, *Public Culture* (Vol. 20, 3, Fall 2008).

postmodernity without any real historical or spatial specificity. It is used in such a way that it can often be interchangeable with other concepts like Integrated World Capitalism (Guattari), Empire (Hardt and Negri), Symbolic Misery (Stiegler), or even Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry.²³ Even in better texts like *Afflicted Powers* that actually do use the spectacle with some conceptual consistency, it is still underdeveloped and one-sided.

The title of my dissertation, *Spectacular Developments*, can be read in three different ways. First, and most simply, I am interested in the development of the *theory* of the society of the spectacle. This entails examining the actual historical context in which Debord developed the theory and his main theoretical influences. Much has already been written on Debord's influences at the time of *Society of the Spectacle* (Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, Lukács, and Korsch, as well as writers like Machiavelli and Sun Tzu), so my main interest is in seeing how Debord's thought developed in the years after *Society of the Spectacle*, and particularly after the events of 1968.²⁴ If the most important inspiration for Debord's formulation of the theory of the society of the spectacle in 1967 was the post-war Fordist modernisation of France and Paris coupled with the spread of consumer society and television, the inspiration for Debord's formulation of the transition from diffuse and concentrated spectacles to integrated spectacle, laid out in 1988's *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, is 1970s Italy and the unsolved assassination of his publisher, Gérald Lebovici, in 1984. 1970s Italy – described by a historian as a 'microcosm of the Cold War' – is as

²³ See Felix Guattari, 'Plan for the Planet', *Soft Subversions: Texts and Interviews 1977-1985*, trans. Chet Wiener and Emily Wittman (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), pp. 229-243; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000); Bernard Stiegler, *De la misère symbolique* (France: Editions Galilée, 2004); Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1997).

²⁴ See Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord* (California: University of California Press, 1999). Jappe's book is the most thorough discussion of Debord's theoretical influences.

fascinating as it is confusing with its revolutionaries and secret agents, conspiracies and assassinations, Euroterrorism and stay-behind armies, industrial unrest and parliamentary chaos, mafia hitmen, Vatican spies, and even shadowy Freemasons.²⁵

Over this period Debord produced or was involved with a series of works – texts like *The Real Report on the Last Chance to Save Capitalism in Italy* (1975), *On Terrorism and the State* (1979) by Gianfranco Sanguinetti,²⁶ ‘Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*’ (1979), and *Considerations on the Assassination of Gérard Lebovici* (1985) – that besides being cogent and distinct analyses of specific political situations worth reading in their own right, are interesting in that they reveal to a rather large extent the evolution of Debord’s thought between the publication of *Society of the Spectacle* in 1967 and 1988’s *Comments*. For example, in both *The Real Report on the Last Chance to Save Capitalism in Italy* and *Comments*, Debord enumerates the five defining characteristics of the present society, and the subtle, yet significant, differences between the two lists provide a clear indication of the extent to which Debord’s thinking changed.²⁷ Debord’s extreme self-assurance often gives the reader the impression that his thought never developed over time, largely because he claims every analysis he ever made was completely correct and thus not in need of amendment. Too many people take Debord’s rhetoric at face value and treat his conception of the spectacle as being essentially static. I will attempt to demonstrate otherwise.

²⁵ Anna Bull, ‘Italy and the Legacy of the Cold War’, European Research Institute Occasional Paper Series. 1997, Available online at: <<http://www.bath.ac.uk/eri/pdf/op-annabull.pdf>>.

²⁶ These texts were authored by Sanguinetti, but in the case of *The Real Report* it is clear that Debord played a major role in the text’s production, at least co-writing it. This will be discussed in depth in Chapter II. ‘Censor’ (Gianfranco Sanguinetti), *Real Report on the Last Chance to Save Capitalism in Italy*, trans. Len Bracken (California: Flatland Books, 1997), Sanguinetti, *On Terrorism and the State*, trans. Lucy Forsyth and Michel Prigent (London: Aldgate Press, 1982).

²⁷ See ‘Censor’, *Real Report on the Last Chance to Save Capitalism in Italy*, pp. 15-26; Debord, *Comments*, pp. 11-16.

In *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry* (2006), Vincent Kaufmann has stressed that in order to make any sense of Debord's work, it is important to look at his life concurrently. He provocatively also stresses the autobiographical nature of Debord's most theoretical works, claiming that *Society of the Spectacle* is only secondarily a theoretical text. 'Social criticism is autobiography by other means', he writes.²⁸ Debord's life is interesting in many respects but I disagree with Kaufmann about the necessity of knowing the biography to understand concepts such as the spectacle. There is even a tendency among those interested in Debord to overemphasise his personal life and celebrate him as a revolutionary personality – as an exemplary rebel – rather than deal with any lasting relevance his texts and concepts might have. Debord's aura weighs heavily on those trying to engage with his work and much of the writing on him tends towards hagiography or fan literature. His struggle to maintain as much control as possible over his persona during his life, largely against the mass media rather than through it, has had the strange effect of making people even more interested in his personal biography in a way unimaginable with other theorists.²⁹ This is justifiable when one thinks of certain works by Debord: obviously a text like *Panegyric* and those of his films that allude to his personal life. This tension permeates this dissertation as a whole. While Debord is obviously central here, my primary concerns are the questions generated by his later works, and the limitations of his answers. Rather than thinking about why things didn't work out between Debord and Michèle Bernstein, his first wife, or why he fell out with Lefebvre or the architect Constant, I am more interested in how the historical context in which Debord lived and worked affected his theories. For example, the fact

²⁸ Vincent Kaufmann, *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry*, Trans. Robert Bononno (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 77.

²⁹ Andrew Merrifield's *Guy Debord* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), reaches a nadir that even the most ardent pro-Situs do not quite approach in these terms as a photo of Debord's postbox is featured without any graspable textual justification.

that he wrote *Society of the Spectacle* at the twilight of *Les Trente Glorieuses* ('The Glorious Thirty', 1945-75), a period of tremendous economic growth in France more or less across the board, obviously coloured his depiction of the spectacle. That said, I also want to read Debord's more ostensibly personal works, such as *Panegyric*, as political texts. Reversing Kaufmann's claim, I want to assert that in Debord's case, autobiography is social criticism by other means.

The second sense of the title *Spectacular Developments* comes from the fact that I am looking at the development of the society of the spectacle itself. Jonathan Crary writes, 'A striking feature of [*Society of the Spectacle*] was the absence of any kind of historical genealogy of the spectacle, and that absence may have contributed to the sense of the spectacle as having appeared full-blown out of the blue'.³⁰ The opposite interpretation is also common: when Debord states that 'the origin of the spectacle lies in the world's loss of unity' or 'at the root of the spectacle lies that oldest of all social divisions of labor, the specialization of power', one is given the impression that the spectacle is as old as civilization itself.³¹ While in his later writings Debord is more specific, claiming the spectacle emerges in the 20th century, he does so without really elaborating why.³² As Julian Stallabrass has recently argued, in order to use the term spectacle critically, 'we have to ask deeper questions about the concept: how old is spectacle, and how exactly has it developed?'³³ Many aspects of the concept of the spectacle that seem necessary to consider if one wants to employ it are barely alluded to by Debord. When can we say it begins, roughly? How has it spread throughout the world? How do we understand its geographical diffusion? Are

³⁰ Jonathan Crary, 'Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory', *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough, (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2002) p. 456.

³¹ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1999), trans. par. 29, par. 23.

³² Debord, *Comments*, p. 73.

³³ Stallabrass, Julian, 'Spectacle and Terror', *New Left Review* (37, Jan/Feb 2006), p. 99.

we forced into accepting the idea that the spectacle is qualitatively identical in London, Lapland, and Dar es Salaam, or are there other options? What came before the spectacle and what might come after? How do we think the spectacle turning what was once directly lived into mere representation without idealising the past? Defining the society of the spectacle as a specific spatio-temporal epoch allows us to begin to consider these questions and get a tighter hold on a slippery concept.

A lot work has been done in this area already. A range of theorists have claimed different beginnings for the spectacle and have had it coincide with anything from the Great Exhibition of 1851 (Thomas Richards) to the decades of the Haussmannisation of Paris (TJ Clark) and the Werkbund movement in Germany in the early decades of the 20th C. (Fredrich Schwartz). Finally, as the obnoxious pro-Situ collective Not Bored puts it, ‘every reader of *The Society of the Spectacle* knows that "the spectacle" is what the modern State became during its post-Depression (1939) fusion with the capitalist economy.’³⁴ Meanwhile Cray has generated a rich history of the years and developments preceding the spectacle’s emergence over two works.³⁵ Debord himself is never very clear about the spectacle’s origins. In a letter from 1971 he writes that the spectacle has its origins in Greece, develops with capitalist thinking during the Renaissance and the opening of museums in the 18th century, and then appears as its accomplished form around World War I.³⁶ Later, in *Comments on Society of the Spectacle*, almost in passing he writes, ‘in 1967 [the society of the spectacle] had barely forty years behind it’, meaning it came about

³⁴ Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England*, (California: Stanford University Press, 1990); TJ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life* (USA: Thames and Hudson, 1990); Frederic Schwartz, *The Werkbund: Design Theory & Mass Culture before the First World War* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1996); Bill Not Bored, ‘another unkindly reply to RETORT’, *Not Bored*, 27 March, 2008, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/retorted.html>>.

³⁵ See Jonathan Cray, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990) and *Suspensions of Perception* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999).

³⁶ Debord, *Correspondance*, vol. 4 (Librairie Artheme Fayard, 2004), p. 455.

sometime in or slightly before 1927.³⁷ He gives no indication of why he names this rather specific date, although it is not exceedingly difficult to guess. This was a tumultuous decade in which fascism and Stalinism, public relations, Fordism, the synchronisation of sound and film, and television were all advancing and I argue that Debord saw a certain quantitative/qualitative shift occurring as the concurrent deployment of these various phenomena reached a critical mass that coincides with the birth of *the* society of the spectacle and its division into diffuse and concentrated varieties.

These two senses of the title *Spectacular Developments* provide the groundwork for the third sense of the title. The overarching aim of this project is to develop the theory of the society of the spectacle itself, with and occasionally against Debord and those writing on his work. Understanding the theoretical and historical context in which Debord developed the theory, and how his conception of the spectacle changed over time, as well as defining the actual society of the spectacle spatially and temporally, are steps towards this broader goal. Of course much of this also comes out of a close reading of Debord's texts on the spectacle, and his correspondence, which has recently been published in France, has also been useful. A large portion of this text will proceed via an engagement with theorists who are today referencing Debord and using the concept of the spectacle to understand the contemporary world. As mentioned earlier, numerous theorists have referenced Debord in relation to the events of 9/11 and the 'War on Terror'. Written about forty years after the concept was first formally presented, roughly eighty years from when Debord suggests the society of the spectacle began, these texts function as a perfect indication of how Debord's theory has been understood and applied. As I have

³⁷ Debord, *Comments*, p. 3.

previously stated, it is my contention that the vast majority of those who reference Debord banalise the concept of the spectacle and neglect the most relevant aspects of Debord's formulations for understanding the contemporary situation.

Walking into St. Marks Bookshop in New York while writing this dissertation, I felt both anxious and encouraged that there were no less than three Debord-related books on the new arrivals rack and two publications in the journal and magazine section that referenced the concept of 'the society of the spectacle' on their covers.³⁸ Of course every PhD student is nervous that someone will publish the results of a similar research project while they are in their final stages, but at the same time it is reassuring to see the concept of the society of the spectacle still being used since it makes one feel that one's research is not completely irrelevant or esoteric. The problem is that despite the fact that Debord's concept of the spectacle is referenced heavily within all varieties of cultural theory, it has never really been developed in and of itself. Often when I tell people that my research centres on the work of Guy Debord, they ask if there is really anything to say about him that hasn't already been said. This steady stream of books and articles suggests that Debord's work has not been exhausted.³⁹ One of the arguments that this dissertation will make is that this is particularly true with regards to Debord's later work: basically everything following the dissolution of the Situationist International in 1972.

In an era in which Arnold Schwarzenegger is the governor of the most populous state in the United States and used '*hasta la vista, baby*' as an electoral slogan during his campaign against the incumbent Gray Davis, when one sees the

³⁸ McKenzie Wark, *50 Years of Recuperation* (NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008); Michèle Bernstein, *All the King's Horses*. Trans. John Kelsey (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008); Debord, *Correspondence: The Foundation of the Situationist International (June 1957-August 1960)* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008); *ArtAsiaPacific* (no. 60, Sep/Oct 2008); and *Grey Room* (32, Summer 2008).

³⁹ Many of these recent texts focus on under-researched and under-appreciated aspects and members of the Situationist International or are in fact superficial, redundant or derivative.

carefully choreographed dismantling of a statue of Saddam in Baghdad or George W. Bush landing on an aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf in full flight gear, saying that we live in a ‘society of the spectacle’ is not all that contentious. What was once an original and perceptive diagnosis has over the last forty years ago become clichéd. As Debord himself writes in *Comments on Society of the Spectacle*, ‘no one can reasonably doubt the existence or the power of the spectacle; on the contrary, one might doubt whether it is reasonable to add anything on a question which experience has already settled in such draconian fashion’.⁴⁰ Yet it is not the contentious nature of the society of the spectacle thesis as much as its wide acceptance and self-evidence that serves as the start of my analysis.

Before outlining the structure of this project, it is important to try to say a bit more about what the society of the spectacle actually is, even if this will be developed considerably throughout the text. Debord wrote extremely little if you compare his oeuvre to that of other theorists. His two book-length treatments of the concept of the spectacle have a combined word count considerably smaller than this dissertation. This does not mean that the concept of the spectacle is inevitably vague, but it has prevented it from being sketched in the kind of depth a more lengthy treatment would allow. In addition to this, Debord’s books are different from the majority of social theory in that they were written as polemical interventions (one might even say political manifestos), filled with personal insults and ‘reckless historical judgements’, rather than the sober presentation of rigorous research.⁴¹ While *Society of the Spectacle* was not written with comparative haste, like *The Communist Manifesto* it was written as a theoretical accompaniment to the conflagration that the authors saw

⁴⁰ Debord, *Comments*. p. 5.

⁴¹ In *Comments* Debord says that critics implied he was making ‘reckless historical judgements’ in *Society of the Spectacle*. Debord, *Comments*, p. 3.

as imminent.⁴² In 1992 Debord confirms *Society of the Spectacle* was written ‘with deliberate intention of doing harm to spectacular society’.⁴³ Debord did not consider himself to be a social theorist or a political philosopher, but rather first and foremost a strategist.⁴⁴ This does not mean that the concept of the spectacle is not a complex theoretical construction; I will argue that it is considerably more complex than even some of its proponents acknowledge, but that his work cannot be approached as directly as most social theory. This will be addressed in more depth later in the dissertation, but the language of Debord’s texts – the Hegelian jargon, his use of the technique of *détournement*, and later his employment of decoys, strategic omissions and intentional opaqueness – makes it difficult to immediately understand or straightforwardly apply his concepts. In any case, Debord did not intend his writings to be endlessly interpreted, debated, elucidated and subjected to deep hermeneutics; they are meant to be utilised on the field of battle. However, they do not come pre-packaged: ready to be read, absorbed, and applied. Their ambiguities are strategies meant to close his texts for anyone but active readers.⁴⁵

In many ways *Society of the Spectacle* can be seen – theoretically – as a culmination of the work of Debord and the Situationists: an indictment of the society that they despised and had been organizing to destroy *in its totality*. The spectacle is the world of Brezhnev, de Gaulle, and Lyndon Johnson, of Le Corbusier and

⁴² Debord, *Comments*, p. 2.

⁴³ Debord, ‘Preface to the 3rd French Edition’, *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 10.

⁴⁴ As Giorgio Agamben recalls: ‘Many years ago I was having a conversation with Guy (Debord) which I believed to be about political philosophy, until at some point Guy interrupted me and said: “Look, I am not a philosopher, I am a strategist”. This statement struck me because I used to see him as a philosopher as I saw myself as one, but I think that what he meant to say was that every thought, however “pure”, general or abstract it tries to be, is always marked by historical and temporal signs and thus captured and somehow engaged in a strategy and urgency.’ Giorgio Agamben, ‘Metropolis’, *Roundtable: Research Architecture*, Available online at: <<http://roundtable.kein.org/node/1088>>.

⁴⁵ Obviously it could be said that this strategy was not enormously successful. As Steve Shaviro has noted, ‘situationism’ is one of the most ‘commercially successful “memes” or “brands” of the past half-century, for better or for worse.’ Although, as Shaviro writes, this is largely for their position of complete distance from the ruling spectacle and a kind of radical purity. See Steve Shaviro, ‘Michael Jackson’, *The Pinocchio Theory*, 28 June, 2009, Available online at: <<http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=767>>.

shantytowns, of the Rolling Stones and the Parisian Opera, of Godard and Hollywood. For the SI, critique was all or nothing. The choice facing every individual was ‘suicide or revolution’.⁴⁶ Their position was a ‘systematic rejection of all forms of social and political organization in the West and the East, and of all the groups that are currently trying to change them’, as one commentator laconically put it.⁴⁷ The concept of the spectacle was supposed to identify and attack everything wrong with the present organization of life. ‘Society of the spectacle’ is, to be slightly reductive, a derogatory epithet for the contemporary world. As Vincent Kaufmann writes, the spectacle is ‘responsible for *all* the world’s sins’.⁴⁸ The argument that this dissertation makes is that it is best thought of as a general term to describe a particular society that began in the United States and Europe in the mid-1920s and continues into the present, having spread to include most of the globe.⁴⁹ The term is both more specific and general than, say, late capitalism or consumer society. More specific because of its polemical nature and its emphasis on the multiple, linked meanings of the words ‘image’ and ‘representation’ and their relationship to the economy, the state and the worker’s movement, coupled with its reliance on the concept of totality. This being said, I want to operate with an open conception of the spectacle that can be read in tandem with other discourses that are not necessarily born from the same Hegelian Marxist tradition.

Importantly, however, I want to emphasise that this is *not* what is primarily useful or relevant about Debord’s theorisation of the spectacle. While the spectacle may be preferable to, again, consumer society, postmodernity or late capitalism as a

⁴⁶ Raoul Vaneigem, ‘Basic Banalities’, *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 121.

⁴⁷ Quoted in *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 500.

⁴⁸ Kaufmann, p. 160.

⁴⁹ This is not an unproblematic formulation, although it is one that I believe is in line with Debord’s conception of the spectacle. Later in the dissertation, where I address the spectacle’s spatio-temporal configuration and development, this claim will be complicated considerably.

descriptive term for the present epoch, it is so general and vague that simply arguing we live in the society of the spectacle – dominated by images and representations – is quite insufficient and alien to what I find interesting about Debord.⁵⁰ In his response to Retort's *Afflicted Powers*, WTJ Mitchell writes that 'Debord's spectacle is too powerful, too all-explanatory. Like every idol, it seems to take on a life of its own. It becomes precisely the figure of that "magic shaping power" of capital, as well as of modernity and consumerism. Spectacle is the face, the avatar, the image of capital. Its "totalizing closure" seems unavoidable.'⁵¹ Despite these harsh words, Mitchell does not want to jettison the concept. He suggests, in a move taken from Nietzsche's preface to *Twilight of the Idols*, sounding the concept rather than smashing it: hitting it with a tuning fork instead of a hammer.⁵² This is in fact much in line with the spirit in which the Retort collective use the concept. In an interview they state, 'Above all we wanted to find ways of taking spectacle seriously as a term of political explanation without turning it into the key to all mysteries. In a word, the concept needed to be *desacralized*. It needed to be applied, locally and conjuncturally – to dirty its hands with the details of politics.'⁵³

What I want to argue is today most relevant about Debord's body of work on the spectacle is his attempt in the later writings to elaborate the practical consequences of spectacular domination. Via a lengthy analogy with the manner in which the contingent discovery of independent fire by French troops changed tactics of military commanders following the French Revolution (newly recruited French soldiers were unable to learn how to keep ranks and fire on command and their more

⁵⁰ 'Postmodernity', as discussed by Perry Anderson and Fredric Jameson is often quite similar to the spectacle, but the spectacle is best not only thought of as a periodisation but also as an apparatus. See Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998), Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (USA: Duke University Press, 1991).

⁵¹ WTJ Mitchell, 'The Spectacle Today', *Public Culture*, p. 577.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 578.

⁵³ Retort, *Afflicted Powers* (NY: Verso, 2005), p. 202.

anarchic style proved to be far more effective), Debord claims that while the consequences of the spectacle have been demonstrated in practice, they have not yet been understood in theory.⁵⁴ In his later works Debord considers the effects of the spectacle for contemporary life and politics. The concept of the spectacle is taken not only as read, but its existence so obvious as to be unchallengeable. Even if the existence of the spectacle is completely obvious, and pointing out its existence completely banal, Debord argues that few have understood the *consequences* of this existence. The development and growth of the spectacle has altered society so profoundly that everything from the art of government and political activism to the production of cultural theory has to be completely rethought. This is not only true for the enemies of the spectacle, but also for its most gleeful proponents. Very few on either side have actually understood what the domination of the spectacle actually entails and Debord seems to suggest that a deciding factor in this struggle between the spectacle's defenders and those who seek to destroy it will be an understanding of our spectacular times.

Most interesting are the counter-intuitive aspects of these practical consequences of spectacular domination. Throughout *Society of the Spectacle* the sheer visibility of the spectacle is stressed: the spectacle is about appearance, it is 'a negation of life that has *invented a visual form for itself*', it raises sight to the most important sense, and '*capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image*' is probably its most quoted, and enigmatic, definition.⁵⁵ The scientific name of the spectacle's model citizen is 'Homo Spectator': a bipedal primate characterized by a propensity to look or watch.⁵⁶ Graham MacPhee writes that for Debord (among others), 'the technological organization of vision and the visible defines the

⁵⁴ Debord, *Comments*, pp. 85-7.

⁵⁵ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 10, 18, 34.

⁵⁶ Debord, 'Preface to the Third French Edition', *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 9.

fundamental character of our contemporary condition.’⁵⁷ Almost without fail this is the sense in which the term ‘spectacle’ is bandied about in Cultural Studies. What is surprising about Debord’s later writings is that much of the focus is on secrecy, the clandestine, and the hidden. Rather than focusing on the impact of television on presidential campaigns, Debord is obsessed with the intelligence services and their conspiracies. Beneath, behind, or beyond the political spectacle that everyone loves to decry, Debord identifies forces at play that are as sinister as they are obscure, and Debord’s late work allows one to understand the secrecy of power and the spectacle’s pageantry as two sides of the same coin.

Many of Debord’s texts from the period following the dissolution of the SI to the end of his life can be usefully framed in relation to the study of parapolitics. Parapolitics is defined by Robert Cribb as the study of ‘systemic clandestinity’ or ‘the study of criminal sovereignty, of criminals behaving as sovereigns and sovereigns behaving as criminals in a systematic way.’⁵⁸ The term ‘parapolitics’ has only emerged in scholarly literature very recently, in the early nineties, and this dissertation presents a rather cursory analysis of Debord’s contribution to an understanding of the parapolitical but also points to areas where a more detailed consideration of Debord and the parapolitical could be pursued. Parapolitical research focuses not merely on the activities and crimes of clandestine and criminal groups like security services, cartels, terrorist organisations, secret societies, and cabals, but primarily on the systemic roles played by such actors. If traditional political science looks at the ‘overt politics of the public state, so parapolitics as a field studies the

⁵⁷ Graham MacPhee, *The Architecture of the Visible* (UK: Continuum, 2002), p. 4.

⁵⁸ Robert Cribb, ‘Introduction: Parapolitics, Shadow Governance and Criminal Sovereignty’, *Government of the Shadows*, ed. Eric Wilson (London and New York: Pluto Press, 2009), p. 2, 8. The term parapolitics (literally beyond or beside politics) is referred to in different senses as well. See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, Trans. Julie Rose (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), Raghavan Iyer, *Parapolitics: Toward the City of Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

relationships between the public state and the political processes and arrangements outside and beyond conventional politics,' claims Eric Wilson.⁵⁹ As a discipline it has been tainted by its similarities to traditional conspiracy theory, but also by the widespread failure of researchers to investigate the systemic nature of these phenomena, often preferring to see them as the work of rogue elements or corrupted individuals. The term never appears in Debord's writing, but the notion of his 'parapolitical turn' is considered preferable to what might be called a 'conspiratorial turn' because of his claims about the systemic nature of conspiracy. Approaching Debord's later work with the concept of parapolitics in mind opens discussions about the structural role of conspiracy and its influence in determining historical outcomes. It is precisely this parapolitical aspect of the theory of the spectacle that is entirely absent from most discussions of Debord following the 9/11 attacks. This is startling because the consequences of Debord's parapolitical reflections for any discussion of the spectacle in relation to 9/11 and the 'War on Terror' should be substantial. By overlooking Debord's later work, these theorists (Retort, Douglas Kellner, Henry Giroux, and more⁶⁰) present and apply an incomplete conception of the spectacle that not only badly misrepresents Debord's theory but also limits their analysis. My underlying argument is that it is not only problematic to discuss Debord and 9/11 together without thinking about conspiracy, secrecy, disinformation and fear (and subsequently their role or position within the society of the spectacle), but that any consideration of the events of 9/11 and the 'War on Terror' that does not take these themes into account will also be deficient as a result.

Interestingly, one book by an author very familiar with Debord's late work – *The Shadow Government: 9-11 and State Terror* (2002) by Len Bracken, who wrote a

⁵⁹ Eric Wilson, 'Deconstructing the Shadows', *Government of the Shadows*, p. 30.

⁶⁰ Douglas Kellner, *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy* (USA: Paradigm, 2005), Henry Giroux, *Beyond the Spectacle of Terrorism* (USA: Paradigm, 2006).

biography on Debord and translated Gianfranco Sanguinetti's *The Last Change to Save Capitalism in Italy* – posits a conspiratorial understanding of the 11 September attacks not dissimilar from well-known conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones, David Ray Griffin, Webster Griffin Tarpley and Michael Ruppert.⁶¹ A similar line is taken by the New York-based pro-Situ collective Not Bored, who also believes the US government was involved in the attacks to some degree.⁶² Despite being clearly indebted to Debord and Sanguinetti (almost ostentatiously in the case of Not Bored), Bracken and Not Bored's readings and application of Debord and Sanguinetti's concepts are selective and problematic. The manner in which Bracken and Not Bored underplay certain aspects of the society of the spectacle leads them into what can pejoratively be labelled 'conspiracy theory'. While they are correct that Debord depicts the integrated spectacle as a society awash in conspiracies, it is also a world of 'organised uncertainty', and the prevalence of lies, rumour, and disinformation inevitably stymie any attempt to unveil the truth. Brushing these details aside, Bracken and Not Bored's texts on the events of 9/11 begin to sound exactly like the 'tedious series of lifeless, inconclusive crime novels' that Debord ridicules in *Comments*.⁶³ Debord's late work becomes all the more relevant in relation to 9/11 as it frames the epistemological challenges facing researchers and theorists working on and within the spectacle.

A final note before moving on to the structure of the dissertation: those working with Debord seem to have an insurmountable urge to excuse or justify themselves for partaking in an act of potential recuperation and sanitisation of

⁶¹ See *Terrorstorm: A History of Government-Sponsored Terrorism*, dir. Alex Jones (2006); David Ray Griffin, *The New Pearl Harbor* (Gloucestershire: Arris Books, 2004); Webster Griffin Tarpley, *9/11 Synthetic Terror* (California: Progressive Press, 2007); Michael Ruppert, *Crossing the Rubicon* (USA: New Society, 2004).

⁶² The 'collective' seems to consist solely of Bill Not Bored, aka William J. Brown. See their website: <<http://www.notbored.org>>.

⁶³ Debord, *Comments*, p. 59.

Debord's revolutionary thought and practice. His work was not produced for the academy and was certainly not intended to be the subject of PhD dissertations. The Situationists write in a commentary on the events surrounding the publication of their infamous pamphlet 'On the Poverty of Student Life': '[W]e want ideas to become *dangerous* again.'⁶⁴ Those who wish to not simply carry on but develop the project of Debord and the Situationists perhaps have to have the faith that the ideas of the SI are *still* dangerous enough to make them volatile even in the hands of their most insidious – and in this epoch it can get a whole lot more insidious than a PhD dissertation – recuperators.⁶⁵ The SI was of course aware of this danger. They write with characteristicchutzpah, 'It is quite natural that our enemies succeed in partially using us. We are neither going to leave the present field of culture to them nor mix with them. [...] Like the proletariat, we cannot claim to be unexploitable in the present conditions; we must simply work to make any such exploitation entail the greatest possible risk for the exploiters'.⁶⁶ While it might be difficult to delineate exactly what risks academics or advertisers encounter by using Debord and the SI in their conference papers or ad campaigns, particularly after fifty years of recuperation, it is equally difficult to understand any claims of propriety over their legacy.

Structure of Dissertation

The first chapter, 'Desacralising the Spectacle', attempts to introduce Debord's theory. One of the charges often levelled at Debord is that the vagueness of the concept of the spectacle hinders its explanatory power. Régis Debray writes, 'The notion of spectacle drifts as an entelechy above cultures, an entity lacking all history

⁶⁴ 'Our Goals and Methods in the Strasbourg Scandal', *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 272.

⁶⁵ As Eyal Weizman has noted, Israel Defence Forces strategists study the SI for purposes of urban warfare. See Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 187, 209.

⁶⁶ 'Now, the SI', *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 136.

and economy, without borders or geography. A phantasmagorical notion, colossal and sauntering, it fuels spontaneous faith in the existence of a universal history of the image, of looking, or of recording sound, uniformly imposing itself in every nook and cranny of the so-called “global village”.⁶⁷ Similarly Carol Becker writes, ‘No matter how much Debord attempts a clear definition, the spectacle still eludes us because it is so all-encompassing, inclusive of everything relating to the economy as well as its “self-representation.”’⁶⁸ While both of these criticisms are applicable to certain readings of Debord, I am going to argue for a considerably more precise definition in which the spectacle is thought of as both a particular epoch of capitalist accumulation that can be defined and delimited with relatively precise historical and geographical precision, and the apparatus that assures the continuation of this epoch.⁶⁹

The first chapter is primarily concerned with delimiting and specifying the concept of the spectacle; the second and third chapters are more focused on the consequences of the spectacle’s dominance. Chapter II, ‘From the Cosmopolitan Conspiracy of Capital to the Conspiracy Theory of the Eternal Present’, seeks to chart the development of Debord’s work and conception of the spectacle from the dissolution of the Situationist International in 1972 to his death in 1994. The first half of the chapter title takes its name from Marx’s *The Civil War in France* from 1871, in which he contrasts the International Working Men’s Association to the ‘cosmopolitan conspiracy of capital’. It is my argument that by looking at the texts Debord produced in the later part of his life, one can see a shift of emphasis from an analysis of this

⁶⁷ Debray, p. 137

⁶⁸ Carol Becker, *Surpassing the Spectacle* (USA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), p. 1.

⁶⁹ The term ‘apparatus’ is being used here in the sense suggested by Foucault and further developed by Agamben. As Agamben writes, ‘I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions. or discourses of living beings.’ Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?* Trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 14. See also Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, ed. C. Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), pp. 194-6,

cosmopolitan conspiracy of capital to a more parapolitical conception of power. Many of these texts, and particularly the ones written in the seventies, deal explicitly with the ‘years of lead’ in Italy and a portion of the chapter is devoted to demonstrating the considerable effect of that period on Debord’s theory. The overall arc of this chapter is to move from Debord’s Western Marxist conception of the spectacle grounded in a critique of alienation and commodity fetishism, to an idea of the spectacle elaborated on a premise of conspiracy; from a critique of visibility and the image to one of secrecy and the clandestine, and from a discussion of the spectacle’s ontological characteristics to its effects as an apparatus. I show that while Debord undoubtedly remains a theorist of capitalism, many of the arguments he is making by the late eighties are drastically different to ones he made in the 1960s. This is done partially by going through Debord’s work chronologically, but also by reading him alongside other theorists like Leo Strauss, Derrida, Arendt, and Machiavelli.⁷⁰

The third chapter, ‘The Real Report on the Last Chance to Save the New American Century’, uses Debord’s late theory to argue against the various ways in which the concept of the spectacle has been applied to the analysis of the events of 9/11 and the subsequent ‘War on Terror’. I argue that both the dominant use of the concept of the spectacle to refer to a society inundated with media images, and the ‘lunatic fringe’ who have referenced Debord to try to demonstrate that 9/11 was an act of state terror, an inside job perpetrated by the US government for various nefarious purposes, ultimately misunderstand the contemporary relevance of Debord’s late theory. They not only fail to grasp the complexities of living within the society of

⁷⁰ Primarily: Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. (USA: Stanford, 2005); Derrida, ‘History of the Lie’, *Futures*, ed. Richard Rand (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 65-98; Hannah Arendt, ‘Truth and Politics’, *Between Past and Future*, (London: Penguin, 2006); and Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Trans. Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

the spectacle, they also are unable to reflexively consider how working within the society of the spectacle affects their situations as theorists.

The conclusion, 'The Disintegrated Spectacle and the Spectacle of Disintegration', shows how Debord's concept can be used in other contemporary contexts beyond discussions of 9/11 and the 'War on Terror'. I start with the myriad of conspiracy theories surrounding Obama and some of the continuities with the conspiracy theories of the Bush era before moving towards a theorisation of what I call the 'disintegrated spectacle'.

Chapter I

Spectacular Developments: The Theory of the Spectacle

If anything is true about The Society of the Spectacle it is that, thirty years after its publication, after having become one of the leading texts of far-left discourse, after literally falling into the public domain ten years ago, and having been quoted and commented on innumerable times, in many respects the book remains an enigma. [...]

Do we know exactly what Debord means by 'spectacle'? Can we know?
–Vincent Kaufmann, 2001⁷¹

'What are you working on, exactly? I have no idea.'

'Reification,' he answered.

'It's an important job,' I added.

'Yes, it is,' he said.

'I see,' Carole observed with admiration. 'Serious work, at a huge desk cluttered with thick books and papers.'

'No,' said Gilles. 'I walk. Mainly I walk.'

'I'm not sure I understand,' she admitted. 'But I used to walk around a lot too. I used to walk alone.'

–from Michèle Bernstein's *All the King's Horses*, 1960⁷²

⁷¹ Kaufmann, p. 73.

⁷² Michèle Bernstein, *All the King's Horses*, trans. John Kelsey (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008), p. 33.

In the ‘Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*’ Debord writes, ‘there is no doubt for anyone who examines the question coldly that those who really want to shake an established society must formulate a theory that fundamentally explains it, or which at least has the air of giving a satisfactory explanation of it.’⁷³ Even if one can question the explanatory power of the theory of the spectacle half a century after its initial formulation, its longevity suggests that Debord did indeed succeed in conveying to his contemporaries the air of a satisfactory explanation. As suggested in the introduction, the spectacle is one of those concepts constantly bandied about without much precision in cultural studies, the arts and activist circles. As Régis Debray writes disparagingly, ‘There is no longer an executive in advertising or television, a communications consultant, a wannabe in belles lettres, a cultural arriviste, who does not carry around *The Society of the Spectacle* as part of their bandoleer of intellectual passwords.’⁷⁴ The concept floats around in the general cultural ether and while it is often traced back to Debord, it is unusual to get the feeling that the user of the term has read much past the opening pages of *The Society of the Spectacle*, never mind Debord’s later writings on the subject. As Anselm Jappe has written, ‘there must be very few present-day authors whose ideas have been so widely applied in a distorted form, and generally without attribution’.⁷⁵ The goal of this chapter is to put forth a concise conception of the society of the spectacle as a relatively distinct period of capitalist development and

⁷³ Debord, ‘Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*’, <<http://www.notbored.org/debord-preface.html>>.

⁷⁴ Debray, ‘Remarks on the Spectacle’, p. 140.

⁷⁵ Jappe, p. 1. Consider Wikipedia’s definition of the society of the spectacle, still up at the time of writing: ‘The concept of a *Society of the Spectacle* may refer in a narrow sense to the people who appear in television, particularly the hosts of television shows and news. A broader meaning refers to all the people living in a society, and whose behavior and lives are heavily conditioned by the behavior of tv presenters.’ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Society_of_the_Spectacle>. This was retrieved as late as 11 Dec., 2009, it has since been edited.

the state and cultural apparatus that supports its continuation. This will allow us to explore the consequences for practicing politics and theory in this period. The conception is open and general enough to be read alongside other theories of the contemporary moment while avoiding the vague predominant use of spectacle as something synonymous with the world of images, consumer society and the 'twentieth-century mass media world'.⁷⁶

As the common mantra has it, 'everything has changed' in the aftermath of 9/11. The 'self-indulgent' nineties received their slightly belated deathblow and yet Debord and his theories are still 'everywhere'. There are at least five books published in English since 9/11 that reference Debord and contain the term 'spectacle' in their title.⁷⁷ Post-9/11 however, these references rarely refer to Debord as a critic of the excesses of consumerism, a radical artist, or as a cultural activist; instead, the vast majority of references focus on Debord as a theorist of the spectacle, particularly in relation to the 'spectacular' nature of the 9/11 attacks, as well as aspects of the subsequent 'War on Terror' like 'Shock and Awe' and the photos of torture at Abu Ghraib. As we will see in more detail below, the conception of the spectacle attributed to Debord is often an oversimplified or watered-down version, but for the moment it is worth mentioning how markedly different it is from the one most often attributed to Debord in the years prior to 9/11. There is a relatively clear change in accounts of Debord as a critic of 'the world of television, consumerism, alienated work, "holidays", organised sport, higher education, tourism, [and] hire purchase' to a theorist of the power of the image and its importance for states and their enemies in

⁷⁶ Marshall Berman, *On the Town: One Hundred Years of Spectacle in Times Square* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 122.

⁷⁷ Four of these will be discussed in depth below.

times of war.⁷⁸ The emphasis shifts from Debord as a critic of the emptiness behind the shiny façade of consumerism to one who presciently understood the importance of façades in international politics and conflict; from a theorist who can better help us understand shopping malls and graffiti to one who can help us understand streamed beheadings and geopolitical manoeuvring.

What is odd about this shift in focus is that it has not been accompanied by a focus on the later texts of Debord that, as we will see in the next chapter, deal heavily with terrorism and the state. In these texts, Debord is not as concerned with elucidating the concept of the spectacle *per se* but rather with laying out its underappreciated consequences for statesmen and revolutionaries: those who seek to defend the spectacle and those who wish to destroy it. Very few of the texts that discuss Debord and the spectacle in relation to 9/11 and the ‘War on Terror’ even seem to be aware of Debord’s later work, let alone discuss it in any depth. By overlooking Debord’s later work, these theorists present and apply an incomplete conception of the spectacle that not only badly reflects Debord’s theory but also limits their analysis. These theorists will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter III. In this chapter the focus will be on elucidating a specific, functional conception of the society of the spectacle. While I am more concerned with discussing the consequences of spectacular dominance, it is first necessary to say exactly what the society of the spectacle is, both as a theory and as a vision of a society.

⁷⁸ Baker, ‘Culture Vulture’. This being said, there is still a continued influence in Debord and the Situationists from an art historical perspective. Concepts and techniques such as *détournement* and *dérive* are continually referenced by artists and critics and several books have come out in recent years treating the SI almost exclusively as an art movement. See McDonough, “*The Beautiful Language of My Century*” (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); *In Girum Imus Nocte Et Consumimur Igne – The Situationist International (1957-1972)* (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2006); Simon Ford *The Situationist International: A User’s Guide* (Black Dog, London, 2004). Not to mention the multiple books to have come out on psychogeography, for example: Will Self, *Psychogeography* (UK: Bloomsbury, 2007); Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (UK: Pocket Essentials, 2007).

The Theory of the Spectacle

When Champ Libre decided to republish *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1971, Debord decided that he wanted nothing for the cover other than a geographic map of the world in its entirety. Not happy with the suggestions of Champ Libre's designer, he eventually settled on a world map from the turn of the century whose colours represented the commercial relations between the nations of the world and the course they were expected to take in the future.⁷⁹ This choice makes clear a few things about Debord's theory. First of all, it highlights the global character of the spectacle. The different colours suggest that while the spectacle 'covers the entire globe', as Debord puts it, it is not completely homogenous.⁸⁰ The fact that the map is of commercial relations rather than, for example, political blocs, focuses on global economic cooperation rather than geopolitical antagonism. Moreover, the choice of a map from the close of the 19th century, specifically one that sketched the course commercial relations between nations were likely to take in the future, suggests that the spectacle is coupled to the world economy and particularly its development since the dawn of the last century.

The cover of the first English edition of *Society of the Spectacle*, published by Black & Red in 1970 without official authorisation or approval from Debord, features a black and white image of a cinema audience, all wearing 3-D glasses. This image casts the theory of the spectacle as an ocularcentric discourse and suggests that life under the spectacle resembles the experience of sitting passively in a darkened cinema, living vicariously through the actions of the characters on screen, with the

⁷⁹ Guy Debord, *Considerations on the Assassination of Gérard Lebovici*, trans. Robert Greene (USA: TamTam Books, 2001) pp. 21-2.

⁸⁰ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 13.

added indignity of wearing silly glasses.⁸¹ It suggests that the focus of struggle and critique is in the world of leisure and consumption rather than production. Being a subject in the society of the spectacle is portrayed as analogous to being a spectator at a theatre production taking place on a traditional proscenium stage: one sits in one's chair observing the action, unable to intervene in unfolding events. It leads the reader to make a connection between Debord's conception of the spectacle and Plato's myth of the cave – with the implication that the technology modern society can utilise to keep subjects transfixed before illusions is significantly more sophisticated than Plato's shadow puppets: a quantitative rather than qualitative difference. Furthermore, it seems to suggest a close correlation between the concept of the spectacle and the growth of the media, and identifies the cinema – perhaps escapist Hollywood cinema in particular – as the temple of spectacle par excellence.

Each of these choices of cover art presents problems. Initially, the Black & Red cover is the more misleading. For Debord, unlike a film, the spectacle is not 'itself perceptible to the naked eye – even if that eye is assisted by the ear.'⁸² Also unlike a film, 'The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.'⁸³ To continue with the cave/cinema analogy, when the spectator stumbles out of the theatre, stretches her legs and interacts with her companions, she is by no means escaping the confines of the spectacle. The spectacle is continually reconstituted in the relationships people create in their everyday lives, which are obviously mediated by the media but also by teachers, psychologists, and politicians. The mass media in general, claims Debord, is

⁸¹ For an account of Debord's relation to vision see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).pp. 416-35.

⁸² Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 18.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, par. 4.

simply the ‘most stultifying superficial manifestation of the spectacle’.⁸⁴ Debord is at least partially at fault for encouraging this misinterpretation, however. He, without a great deal of nuance or consideration for notions of active or emancipated spectatorship, considered it to be the general condition of those living in the society of the spectacle and his disdain for the spectator continued until his death in 1994, giving the inhabitants of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail the derisive title ‘Homo Spectator’ in binomial nomenclature as late as 1992.⁸⁵

Debord’s choice of cover art for the Champ Libre edition does not have as many obvious problems, yet it leaves more questions unanswered, and is considerably more vague as to what sort of theory is presented in the actual text. The image from the atlas helps illustrate Debord’s axiom that ‘The spectacle has its roots in the fertile field of the economy’.⁸⁶ It illustrates, quite literally, his claim that ‘The spectacle cannot be understood either as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the technology of the mass dissemination of images. It is far better viewed as a *weltanschauung* that has been actualized, translated into the material realm – a world view transformed into a material force.’⁸⁷ In addition, as we will see in more detail later, Debord has placed the origins of the spectacle firmly within the 20th century, and the map can thus be read as a representation of the spectacle during its gestation. Yet, it gives no indication as to why Debord chose to label this epoch the society of the spectacle – why not ‘the society of the autocratic reign of the market economy’, or a catchier phrase with the same emphasis? If the focus on Debord’s

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, par. 24.

⁸⁵ I have written elsewhere about Debord’s problematic conception of spectatorship, particular in relation to Jacques Rancière’s critique of Debord in his essay ‘The Emancipated Spectator’. See Jeff Kinkle, ‘The Emaciated Spectator’, *That’s What A Chameleon Looks Like: Contesting Immersive Cultures* (Cologne: Harem Verlag, 2009).

⁸⁶ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 58.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, par. 5.

book is ‘capitalism today’, how does ‘spectacle’ become the central term for defining this moment of capitalist accumulation?

Obviously the breadth and complexity of the theory that emerges over the 221 theses of *The Society of the Spectacle* cannot be entirely encapsulated by the book’s cover – but it is nonetheless important to be able to make the conceptual link between these two different pieces of cover art. Debord’s choice of image gives as global a perspective as possible, while the Black and Red cover emphasises the situation experienced on a daily basis by the subjects of the spectacle by way of analogy. Understanding the relationship between these two levels allows us to appreciate how a theory like the spectacle could have appeared equally relevant to understanding shopping malls and a country’s obsession with Britney Spears, and simultaneously the ‘War on Terror’ from both sides of the front line (the front line including living rooms in Nebraska and eateries in Kabul, or anywhere else people gather around televisions). It would be foolhardy to argue that Debord posits a theory that completely elucidates both of these levels, both of these aspects of contemporary life and their interaction, with an adequate degree of nuance and specificity. As I will argue in more detail later in the dissertation, *Society of the Spectacle* can be understood better as a manifesto than as a book of academic theory. It polemically diagnoses the ills of existing society and seeks to rally the proletariat to bring it back to a healthier state.⁸⁸ Read today, much of this diagnosis feels hackneyed – the observations that the world is dominated by commodities and capital, that people live vicariously through celebrities, and that Stalinist parties and unions stand in the way

⁸⁸ While Debord’s texts, particularly the later ones, are peppered with nostalgia, he never suggests that pre-spectacular society was not without its own ills. Some of these are exacerbated by the spectacle, while some are shrouded. It should also be noted that Debord did not have a vision of a harmonious and static post-revolutionary society. Writing about his imagined post-revolutionary society he writes, ‘Neither Paradise, nor the end of history. We will have *other misfortunes* (and other pleasures), that’s all.’ Debord, *Correspondence: The Foundation of the Situationist International (June 1957-August 1960)*, p. 191.

of workers' autonomy no longer feel like revelations – and the book's style and primary theoretical references (ventriloquising Hegel, Feuerbach, the young Marx and Lukács) feel antiquated. Numerous theorists have dealt with these problems with a level of depth and specificity that Debord could not possibly have approached in his short book. Simultaneously, an equal number of theorists have identified a considerable number of problems with adopting these voices from the past in forming a critique of contemporary society. Despite this, the argument this chapter makes is not merely that 'the society of the spectacle' is an adequate term for contemporary society, but also that it is exactly such a totalising perspective that the concept relies upon and facilitates in a way that makes it a valuable jumping off point for understanding the contemporary situation.

The question that the theory of the spectacle attempts to answer can be phrased quite simply, even if the answer is enormously complex: how has modern capitalism – whether through consent, manipulation, or brute force – been able to make nearly the entire population freely participate in the society that it builds? As Debord continually stresses, this is not a neutral question; he is asking it as someone directly hostile to the present organisation of life who wants to revolutionise it in the most liberating way imaginable. It is a critical theory meant to polemically intervene in the reality of the author and reader. In the 'Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition to *The Society of the Spectacle*', Debord offers his motivations for writing the book: 'In 1967 I wanted the Situationist International to have a book of theory.' The SI was 'drawing near the culminating point of its historical action' and Debord wanted a Situationist-authored book to be in existence during the conflagration they felt imminent and for the period of contestation or transformation to follow.⁸⁹ Debord

⁸⁹ Debord, 'Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*'.

writes that a theory developed for this purpose ‘must be a completely unacceptable theory. To the indignant stupefaction of all those who find the very centre of the existing world to be good, it must be able to denounce the centre as bad, precisely because it has exposed the existing world's exact nature.’⁹⁰ As the spectacle maintains a ‘monopolization of the realm of appearances’, it proclaims, ‘Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear.’ Debord does not merely turn around the spectacle’s motto and claim that ‘Everything that appears is bad; whatever is bad will appear’; rather he formulates a theory that can illuminate the poverty underlying the age of abundance, the class antagonism that persists beneath the image of the affluent worker, the religiosity behind the modern secular state – and uncovering the spectacle as ‘no more than an image of harmony set amidst desolation and dread, at the still center of misfortune.’⁹¹ It is in this sense that the spectacle can be understood as a derogatory epithet for the contemporary world.

Nowhere is spectacle conceived in such grandiose world-historical terms or such detail as *Society of the Spectacle*. In a letter from 1965 to Raoul Vaneigem, fellow Situationist and author of *Revolution of Everyday Life* (1967), Debord breaks down his planned chapters (here twelve):

- 1/12. Generalities on the spectacle. Its omnipresence.
- 2/12. Economic foundations of the spectacle.
- 3/12. History of the workers' movement.
- 4/12. The environment of objects, and its perfected control (limiting-case: urbanism).
- 5/12. The representation of man in the society of the spectacle (the role, the star).
- 6/12. The relations of the spectacle and of time.
- 7/12. The internal contradictions of the "spectacular message."
- 8/12. Spectacular study of the spectacle (modern critical sociology).
- 9/12. The supercession of culture.
- 10/12. The survival of culture (= culture of survival).
- 11/12. The conditions of contestation in the society of the spectacle (here, the

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 12, 63.

experience of the SI).
12/12. Limits of this book (of all books?)⁹²

While the arrangement differs from the nine chapters of the published version, it still shows the book's scope and ambition. That the economic foundations of the spectacle, the history of the workers' movement, modern critical sociology, spectacular time, and the limitations of all books is only a partial list of the areas covered by this rather short one should give an indication of its density.

Debord's theoretical influences in *Society of the Spectacle* are not dramatically different to those one can see in the texts of the Situationist International throughout the sixties. Debord writes in his correspondence that 99.5% of *Society of the Spectacle* comes 'from comrades from the past'.⁹³ Debord took a 'collage approach to Marxism and cultural critique', as Stephen Hastings-King has written, and it is indeed very much a mix of elements, a large percentage coming from the Hegelian Marxist tradition (Korsch, Lukács, Goldman) but others like Feuerbach, Lautréamont, and even theorists like Karl Mannheim and Daniel Boorstin also very much present.⁹⁴ Still, it is the Hegelian Marxist element that is the strongest and as Donald Nicholson-Smith (who translated the version of the book being cited here) and TJ Clark (of Retort) have written, the Hegelian Marxist overtones of the book are almost overdone.

As mentioned several times above, defining the exact nature of the spectacle is notoriously difficult. Debord's discussion of it from multiple vantage points and at differing levels of specificity can lead to confusion for the reader unfamiliar (or

⁹² 'Guy Debord's Letters', 8 March, 1965, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/debord-8March1965.html>>.

⁹³ 'Guy Debord's Letters', 14 December, 1971, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/debord-14December1971.html>>.

⁹⁴ Stephen Hastings-King, 'L'Internationale Situationniste, Socialisme ou Barbarie, and the Crisis of the Marxist Imaginary', *SubStance* (90, 1999), p. 27

unsympathetic) with Debord's methodology.⁹⁵ Rather than diving right into *Society of the Spectacle*, it is informative to see how the concept developed in the decade preceding Debord's book. The root of the word 'spectacle' comes from the Latin *spectaculum* ('public show') and from *specere* ('to look') and important to keep in mind is that the word '*spectacle*' is considerably more quotidian in French than in English. While in English it usually refers to a grand show, or something out of the ordinary (like *Ben-Hur* [1959] or the Nuremberg Rally), in French it refers to any kind of show or choreographed performance. Thus when Debord writes, in *Society of the Spectacle*'s first thesis, that 'The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*,' he is not arguing that everyday life has come to be experienced like a prolonged Busby Berkeley extravaganza.⁹⁶ He is arguing that separation and a certain kind of distance are fundamental for the spectacle. From the beginning, this notion of separation and distance does have a link to the theatre, and in many ways develops out of the historical avant-garde's critique of the proscenium stage.⁹⁷ While 'spectacle' is first used as a term to denigrate specific forms of cultural production, it grows in stature to become a way of denigrating society as a whole.

Concerning the conceptual origins of the spectacle, Debord writes in his correspondence: 'I came to this concept through the real, although very 'avant-gardist', experience of the revolutionary activity of the 50s and the 60s.'⁹⁸ The first

⁹⁵ For more on the dialectical perspective that informs Debord see Bertell Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic*, (USA: Illinois University Press, 2003), pp. 59-112.

⁹⁶ In this sense, one could argue that Douglas Kellner's concept of 'megaspaces', which are said to be large-scale, often prolonged spectacles like the OJ Simpson trial, despite being superficially linked to Debord's theory, have actually little to do with it. Kellner, *Media Spectacle* (NY: Routledge, 2003). Busby Berkeley choreographed elaborate musical numbers for stage and screen.

⁹⁷ In this critique, which takes various forms in the work of the Italian Futurists, Russian Constructivists and the work of Bertold Brecht, to name just a few, the distance between the events on stage and the audience, and the passivity generated or encouraged by this set up, is to be overcome by generating innovations and techniques to activate the spectator physically, intellectually, or both.

⁹⁸ Debord, *Correspondance*, vol. 4, p. 455.

mention of the concept of the spectacle that I have come across in Debord's work is from this period and features in the 'Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationists Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action', which was delivered at the SI's founding conference on the Cosio d'Arroscia in Italy in 1957.⁹⁹ Here Debord utilises the term to elucidate the concept of the constructed situation which 'begins beyond the ruins of the modern spectacle. [...] It is easy to see how much the very principle of the spectacle – non-intervention – is linked to the alienation of the old world.'¹⁰⁰ While retroactively it is tempting to see Debord as here positing one of the primary aspects of the society of the spectacle, it is more likely that at this point he is just using the term spectacle in the common sense of a public show or display observed by an audience, and not claiming it as a characteristic of society as a whole. The constructed situation, according to the SI, was meant to turn the passive spectator of a spectacle into the active participant/creator of a situation. Debord continues, 'the most pertinent revolutionary experiments in culture have sought to break the spectators' psychological identification with the hero so as to draw them into activity by provoking their capacities to revolutionize their own lives. The situation is thus designed to be lived by its constructors. The role played by a passive or merely bit-part playing "public" must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors, but rather, in a new sense of the term, "livers", must steadily increase'.¹⁰¹ The constructed situation is perhaps the apex of the sequence of the avant-garde that tried to reduce the boundary between art and life.

⁹⁹ The earliest use of the term 'spectacle' I have come across in Debord's work is from an article from 1955, 'L'architecture et le jeu', in which Debord writes, 'Autant le spectacle de presque tout ce qui se passe dans le monde suscite notre colère et notre dégoût, autant nous savons pourtant, de plus en plus, nous amuser de tout.' The 'spectacle of almost everything that happens in the world' might sound like a premonition of the concept of the society of the spectacle, it seems more likely that the term is being employed in a more quotidian manner. Thanks Tom Bunyard for the reference. *Oeuvres*, p. 189.

¹⁰⁰ Debord, 'Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationists Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action', *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 40.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

In the constructed situation the very division would be eradicated and surpassed – abolished and realized in art’s transcendence.¹⁰² While this use of the term ‘spectacle’ is considerably more modest than it would become in later texts, it is still clearly in the same vein.

In the ten years between this initial use of the term and *Society of the Spectacle*, the conceptual framework develops considerably. In the text ‘The Use of Free Time’, published in the SI’s journal in 1960, the term spectacle is used to describe and denigrate the majority of the era’s cultural productions, in which an essentially celebratory vision of society is presented to the masses. These works are said to be offered ‘to the exploited in order to mystify them’, and examples include ‘televised sports, virtually all films and novels, advertising, the automobile as status symbol.’¹⁰³ Within the sphere of culture, this is countered by the avant-garde negation of the spectacle, which the SI sees as the only ‘original’ aspect of contemporary culture (in scare quotes in the original). However, this negation of the spectacle is, in most cases, still spectacular in the SI’s view, in that it is observed and contemplated rather than lived: a negation of the spectacle on the spectacle’s stage or the spectacle of negation, so to speak. For example, in another text from this period, ‘For a Revolutionary Judgment of Art’, Debord takes a critic to task for making a positive judgement on Jean Luc Godard’s *Breathless* (1960). The point of contention is the critic’s claim that it is important for works with revolutionary concerns to present spectators with a representation of their own existence. Debord’s argument is that not only is there no real evidence that success in portraying people’s existence to them will necessarily lead anywhere meaningful, but that such a film, and such a form of criticism, never critiques the function of the work as spectacle. He claims that when

¹⁰² Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 191.

¹⁰³ ‘The Use of Free Time’, *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 75.

analysing such works, 'It is not in its surface meanings that we should look for a spectacle's relation to the problems of the society, but at the deepest level, at the level of *its function as spectacle*.'¹⁰⁴ This can be summed up in the following quote by Debord: 'Revolution is not "showing" life to people, but bringing them to life'.¹⁰⁵

Gradually, one can see the conception of the spectacle shift from a denigratory term for the majority of the era's cultural production to one meant to characterise everyday life in contemporary society. In the 1960 text 'Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program', co-authored with Daniel Blanchard of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Debord expands upon this metaphor in a language that is clearly influenced by Cornelius Castoriadis' group: 'The relation between authors and spectators is only a transposition of the fundamental relation between directors and executants. It answers perfectly to the needs of a reified and alienated culture: the spectacle-spectator relation is in itself a staunch bearer of the capitalist order.'¹⁰⁶ As Sadie Plant writes, the Situationists redefined the idea of the proletariat from a designation of those with a specific relationship to the means of production, involved in a particular form of commodified labour, to one encompassing those who have no control over their own lives.¹⁰⁷ They saw this reflected in the sphere of culture where the masses as spectators had no control over cultural production. At this point, however, it is still the director-executant relation, as elucidated by *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, that is seen as being fundamental to society as a whole, and the spectacle-spectator relation is seen as being secondary to this and not vice-versa. While in a

¹⁰⁴ Debord, 'For a Revolutionary Judgment of Art', p. 393-4.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 396. It should be noted that this rather simplistic dichotomy between 'showing life to people' and 'bringing them to life' could be used to attack Debord's cinematic work as well. It is difficult to see any definite way in which Debord's films bring spectators to life any more than the films of Godard.

¹⁰⁶ Pierre Canjuers and Guy Debord, 'Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program', *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 390.

¹⁰⁷ Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 15.

letter from 1958 Debord refers to Socialisme ou Barbarie as ‘idiots’, in late 1960 he would formally join the group; although this relationship was short lived – Debord was only in the group for a few months – Socialisme ou Barbarie would become key for the development of the SI.¹⁰⁸ Not only was the SI’s eventual stress on the importance of workers’ councils taken from Debord’s former associates, but as Hasting-King writes in his history of the relation between the two groups, ‘Socialisme ou Barbarie functions as an Archimedean point around which the Situs tried to pivot from art and cultural dissent into revolutionary politics.’¹⁰⁹ This pivot can be seen quite clearly in texts like ‘Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program’ and ‘For a Revolutionary Judgment of Art’. It was here that Debord was able to begin to reformulate his avant-gardist assault on society and its institutions in a more Marxian vocabulary.

In this second Socialisme ou Barbarie influenced text from 1961, ‘For a Revolutionary Judgment of Art’, Debord seems to be approaching the theory of the spectacle as he writes of ‘the aesthetic and technological apparatus that constitutes an aggregation of spectacles separated from life.’¹¹⁰ This can be seen clearly in Debord’s film from the same year, *Critique of Separation* (1961). Echoing the critique of *Breathless*, Debord writes that alternative ways of living threaten the dominant equilibrium, but that these alternatives are usually only consumed via the media. ‘We remain outside it, relating to it as just another spectacle. We are separated from it by our own nonintervention’.¹¹¹ The concept of separation will remain important to Debord throughout his work: the first chapter of *Society of the Spectacle* is entitled

¹⁰⁸ Debord Correspondence: *The Foundation of the Situationist International (June 1957-August 1960)*, p. 151. In a later letter, Debord claims that even after withdrawing from the group, he remained ‘as sympathetic as possible’.

¹⁰⁹ Hastings-King, p. 26.

¹¹⁰ Debord, ‘For A Revolutionary Judgment of Art’, *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 393.

¹¹¹ Debord, ‘Critique of Separation’, *Complete Cinematic Works* (Oakland, California: AK Press, 2003), p. 34.

‘Separation Perfected’. Here it expresses the idea, present since the young Marx, that capitalism atomises people, alienating them from their peers, products and human essence. Modern capitalism takes this atomisation a step further as the exponential growth of the media and alienated consumption separates people outside of the production process. While both might appear to bring people together, they are never able to relate to each other directly: all communication is mediated by the spectacle as it colours their dreams, desires and language. It is only the free creation of situations, Debord claims, that can overcome separation and prevent the creation of new specialisations.

By 1962 the Situationists had begun to speak of ‘the theory of the spectacle’ and the ‘society of the spectacle’ – although it was yet to be theoretically expounded in any real detail.¹¹² In this text the society of the spectacle is likened to a ‘televised Elsinore Castle,’ and is said to be ‘designed to present an omnipresent hypnotic image of unanimous submission’, an image in which cracks are continually appearing as revolutionary activity emerges in pockets around the globe.¹¹³ In both of these usages, the spectacle – as an aesthetic and technological apparatus – seems to be conceived as something like the culture industry theorised by Adorno and Horkheimer. As with Adorno, Debord considered the spectator (generally defined) as ‘an appendage to the machinery.’ And just as Adorno argues that ‘To take the culture industry as seriously as its unquestioned role demands, means to take it seriously critically, and not to cower in the face of its monopolistic character,’ so the early activity of the Situationists was largely concerned with developing critical artistic practices that could both activate passive spectators (constructed situations) and shift and play with

¹¹² ‘The Geopolitics of Hibernation’, *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 106.

¹¹³ ‘The Bad Days Will End’, *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 107.

the meanings of cultural productions (*détournement*).¹¹⁴ They sought therefore to attack and compete with the culture industry within the cultural sphere.

This alienation of humanity's productive capabilities is not unique to contemporary capitalism, and the society of the spectacle inherits forms of separation from religion and diverse previous hierarchies. By 1964 this link is being made explicit, with the Situationists claiming that the spectacle is the 'heir of religion', and just like 'the "critique of religion" in Marx's day, the critique of the spectacle is today the essential precondition for any critique.'¹¹⁵ This idea is expressed in greater detail and linked to commodification and consumer society in a text from the following year where the SI writes, 'The spectacle is the terrestrial heir of religion, the opium of a capitalism that has arrived at the stage of a "society of abundance" of *commodities*. It is the illusion actually consumed in "consumer society."¹¹⁶ Like the young Marx, the young Debord was concerned with critiquing capitalism in the same mode as a Feuerbachian critique of religion. And just as Marx in *Capital* pointed to the need to 'take flight into the misty realm of religion' in order to find an analogy for the commodity fetish, Debord wants to point out that modern society, for all its secular pretensions, is still hypnotised by an illusion of religious proportions. Clearly drawing on Feuerbach's argument in *The Essence of Christianity* (a quote from which would later provide the epigram for the first chapter of *Society of the Spectacle*), Debord saw the spectacle here as a kind of modern, secular godhead.¹¹⁷ Just as the godhead

¹¹⁴ Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (NY: Routledge, 1991) p. 102. *Détournement* is defined by the SI as 'The integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu.' 'Definitions', *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 52. For more on *détournement* and the Situationists' complex relation to the culture industry see Tom McDonough, "*The Beautiful Language of My Century*": *Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945-1968*, pp. 1-8, 13-51.

¹¹⁵ 'Now the SI', *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 175.

¹¹⁶ 'Address to Revolutionaries of Algeria and of All Countries', *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 191.

¹¹⁷ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

functions as a kind of assemblage of all that humanity can accomplish and given a false unity as it is projected upon a beyond, the spectacle is a false unity in which society projects an image of all it wants to be. In both cases, this projection begins to live a life of its own as its creators no longer recognise their hand in its production. One can *détourn* Marx to make this point, replacing ‘religion’ with ‘spectacle’: ‘To abolish the spectacle as the *illusory* happiness of the people is to demand the *real* happiness. The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the *demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions*. The criticism of the spectacle is therefore *in embryo the criticism of the vale of tears*, the *halo* of which is the spectacle.’¹¹⁸ This is one of the main points of Debray’s scathing critique of Debord’s concept. Despite being published in 1967, Debray writes, in syntax and vocabulary *Society of the Spectacle* ‘should really bear the date 1841, the year of the first edition of *The Essence of Christianity*. [...] Feuerbach provides not only an epigraph for Debord, but a ready-made structure for his argument.’¹¹⁹ Debray claims that all Debord does is combine two banalities, the themes of alienation in Feuerbach and the young Marx and the emerging discourses about the consumer society and celebrity culture. In doing so, he goes on, Debord creates an unwieldy concept without explanatory power, a crude anachronism in contemporary clothing. As TJ Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith write in their partial response to this critique, ‘Why Art Can’t Kill the Situationist International’, much of Debray’s argument is dubious.¹²⁰ Even if he is correct, Debray’s observation that Debord depends on Feuerbach, Marx and Hegel in his formulation is hardly insightful as this reliance is not only obvious but ostentatious in the book.

¹¹⁸ Marx, ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law: Introduction’, *Marxists.org*, Available online at: <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>>.

¹¹⁹ Debray, ‘Remarks on the Spectacle’, p. 134.

¹²⁰ TJ Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith, ‘Why Art Can’t Kill the Situationist International’, *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, pp. 467-488.

It is also in the texts from this period that Debord and the SI begin to talk seriously about the commodity and commodification in a mode that is heavily influenced by Georg Lukács. As Anselm Jappe writes in his useful intellectual biography of Debord, which focuses on his relation to the Hegelian Marxist tradition, Lukács influenced Debord profoundly and provided the foundation for his development of Marxist themes.¹²¹ Lukács also argued that the subject in capitalist society was cast in the position of a mere observer to the activity of society. This is primarily true in the factory, where the worker on a Taylorist assembly line can do little but tinker with the products that pass into his workspace according to the orders he has been given. Lukács argues that the factory contains ‘in concentrated form the whole structure of capitalist society,’ and as the commodity becomes universally dominant, ‘the fate of the worker becomes the fate of society as a whole’.¹²² While most Marxists in the period when Lukács was writing (Lenin, Luxemburg, Kautsky) grounded their condemnation of capitalism in its tendency towards crisis, pauperisation, the falling rate of profit, and ‘the blood and dirt’ of imperialism, Lukács was one of the only theorists to focus on questions like commodity fetishism and the consequences of capitalism for the subjectivity of the individual subject and working class. Lukács’ work, with its focus on reification and fetishism, became heavily influential as a way of theorising the contradictions and antagonisms that accompanied the post-war capitalist boom (not only for Debord but also for groups like *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and theorists like Lefebvre). The spectacle is thought of as the realm of a thoroughly commodified ‘pseudoculture’ and ‘pseudocommunication’ that follows market dictates and the logic of capital rather than any authentic or organic need.

¹²¹ Jappe, pp. 20-1. This relationship is dealt with thoroughly by Jappe See Jappe, pp. 20-36.

¹²² Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 90-1.

In another text from 1966, ‘The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy’, which applied Situationist themes and concepts to the riots in Watts in August 1965, we see the first indication of the spectacle’s global reach. Not limited to the most privileged sectors of the globe as one might expect, instead the Situationists claim, ‘The spectacle is *universal*, it pervades the globe just as the commodity does.’¹²³ Despite the fact that large portions of the globe might have appeared to be split into two diametrically opposed power blocs bent on mutual destruction, Debord and the SI instead saw two sides of the same coin, two forms of spectacle that in *Society of the Spectacle* he would term ‘diffuse’ and ‘concentrated’: the former referring to the liberal democratic West, the latter to countries of really existing socialism and previously fascism. In 1967 the SI write, ‘The peaceful coexistence of bourgeois and bureaucratic lies ended up prevailing over the lie of their confrontation. The balance of terror was broken in Cuba in 1962 with the rout of the Russians. Since that time American imperialism has been the unchallenged master of the world.’¹²⁴ Debord acknowledges that commodity production is not as developed under the concentrated spectacle, but that it can also be conceived as concentrated: ‘the commodity the bureaucracy appropriates is the totality of social labor, and what it sells back to society – *en bloc* – is society’s survival.’¹²⁵ In his later work, as we will see in the following chapter, Debord theorises the emergence of a higher form of spectacle – the integrated spectacle – that represents a synthesis of the concentrated and diffuse forms, but primarily develops out of the diffuse, which is said to have been stronger.

¹²³ ‘Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy’, *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 201.

¹²⁴ ‘Two Local Wars’, *Situationist International Anthology* p. 254

¹²⁵ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 64.

This notion of the ‘spectacle-commodity economy’, where the spectacle’s ‘role is to *inform* the commodity world,’ is very close to the concept elucidated in *Society of the Spectacle*.¹²⁶ As the consumption of commodities is necessary for the continuation of capitalism, in ‘Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy’ the spectacle is depicted as both the entire technological and cultural apparatus that makes this possible, the ideology of the system, as well as the world that results from this process. As the spectacle becomes more and more developed as a concept, it becomes increasingly world-historical. Being ‘spectacular’ is no longer a negative trait of certain cultural productions but the defining characteristic of global society. *Society of the Spectacle* contains no actual discussion of the empirical origins of the spectacle, but it does detail an abstract historical narrative of linear development that eventually leads to its emergence. The protagonist (or perhaps antagonist) of this narrative is the commodity. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács claimed that ‘the commodity can be understood in its undistorted essence when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole’.¹²⁷ This quotation serves as the epigraph to the second chapter of *Society of the Spectacle*, ‘Commodity as Spectacle’. In this chapter Debord claims the spectacle ‘is the world of the commodity ruling over all lived experience’.¹²⁸ A few paragraphs later Debord writes that the spectacle is the society ‘where the commodity contemplates itself in a world of its own making’.¹²⁹ The spectacle is the society in which the commodity has finally emerged as the universal category of society as a whole.

Over the course of this chapter Debord provides a general historical sketch of the commodity from its position on the interstices of local, more or less self-sufficient

¹²⁶ ‘Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy’, *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 201.

¹²⁷ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 86.

¹²⁸ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 37.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* par. 53.

communities to its role in the society of the spectacle.¹³⁰ The development of greatest consequence in this pre-history of the spectacle – the history of the commodity’s rise to dominance – is the industrial revolution. ‘With the coming of the industrial revolution, the division of labor specific to that revolution’s manufacturing system, and mass production for a world market, the commodity emerged in its full-fledged form as a force aspiring to the complete colonization of social life’.¹³¹ This is the epoch described so vividly in the first volume of *Capital*: when the commons are enclosed, peasants are forced off their land, and forced to sell their labour power to survive. This commodification of labour power, rather than the advent of industry per se, is the key moment of the industrial revolution for Debord. For Marx, (and Lukács quotes the following approvingly) ‘The capitalist epoch is characterized by the fact that labour-power, in the eyes of the worker himself, takes on the form of a commodity which is his property; his labour consequently takes on the form of wage-labour. On the other hand, it is only from this moment that the commodity form of the products of labour becomes universal.’¹³² The spectacle, while its roots are in the industrial capitalism theorised by Marx and Lukács, is similarly said to announce a new epoch in the process of social production.

If the pre-history of the spectacle in this account is the march of the commodity towards hegemony, for Debord, ‘The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life. It is not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see – commodities are now *all* that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity.’¹³³ Debord appears to align this historical moment with the second industrial revolution,

¹³⁰ This narrative is basically identical to the one found in *Capital*. vol. I.

¹³¹ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 41.

¹³² Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 274. (fn. 4).

¹³³ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*. par. 42.

but it is not completely clear whether the second industrial revolution marks the beginning of the society of the spectacle or whether it sets in motion a process that leads to the society of the spectacle – whether or not it is the spectacle’s condition of possibility. He writes, ‘With the advent of the so-called second industrial revolution, alienated consumption is added to alienated production as an inescapable duty of the masses.’¹³⁴ This is further complicated by the fact that the dating of the second industrial revolution is itself a matter of contention and can range from the mid-19th century growth of railroads to turn of the century electrification and even the spread of Taylorist scientific management principles.

In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx was able to write that ‘the worker only feels himself outside of his work, and in his work feels outside himself’.¹³⁵ In the earlier phases of capitalist accumulation, Debord argues that this was the case – that the proletariat was regarded by the dominant discourse only as a worker. Outside of work, his activity was more or less uninteresting to the capitalist and outside of his sphere of direct influence. This is no longer the case by Debord’s time as the productive forces have reached a point at which the workers’ ‘collaboration’ becomes vital. Debord writes,

All of a sudden the workers in question discover that they are no longer invariably subject to the total contempt so clearly built into every aspect of the organization and management of production; instead they find that every day, once work is over, they are treated like grown-ups, with a great show of solicitude and politeness, in their new role of consumers. The *humanity of the commodity* finally attends to the workers’ “leisure and humanity” for the simple reason that political economy *as such* now can – and must – bring

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, par. 42.

¹³⁵ *Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1978), p. 74.

these spheres under its sway. Thus it is that the totality of human existence falls under the regime of the “perfected denial of man”.¹³⁶

What we see here is that the spectacle is demarcated as a qualitatively new development in capitalism or a new stage of capitalist accumulation – a stage that may not have outmoded Marx’s theories completely, but one that certainly needs new concepts and analysis if it is to be understood and changed.

But to what extent can we say, in agreement with everything discussed above, that the commodity has *completed* its colonisation of everyday life? As Kojin Karatani writes, ‘Even in fully developed capitalist economies where commodity exchange reaches its zenith by way of commodifying labor power, commodity exchange remains strictly partial. The forms of robbery and gifting persist even in the stage in which commodity production and commodity exchange appear to permeate to the limit.’¹³⁷ Not only do certain social ties and means of exchange and survival from prior accumulation regimes continue into capitalism, but there also always seem to be nooks and crannies through which the colonisation of the everyday might penetrate. Consider for a moment events subsequent to Debord’s claim: firstly the ‘endocolonisation’ of the human body itself – the commodification of the human genome, the spread of plastic surgery, designer babies, the organ trade – and secondly the (technologically optimistic) possibilities depicted in films like *Videodrome* (1983), *Strange Days* (1995), and *Existenz* (1999), in which flawlessly integrated virtual worlds can be bought and sold as easily as DVDs or videogames, making ‘reality’ increasingly difficult to discern. Even from this brief list, it seems clear that the society of the spectacle Debord saw evolving in the 1960s or even 1988 was still in its infancy, or at least adolescence, and that the commodity form still had – still has

¹³⁶ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 43.

¹³⁷ Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique* (USA: MIT Press, 2005), p. 203.

– territory to conquer. Complete commodification or the real subsumption of all human relations to the logic of capital always seems to be lurking just around the corner.¹³⁸

It is important to think of this transition into the society of the spectacle not simply in terms of technical proficiency and a quantitative/qualitative shift in the level of commodification, but in terms of social relations. In the fourth paragraph of *Society of the Spectacle* Debord writes, ‘The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.’¹³⁹ This is a *détournement* of Marx in the final chapter of the first volume of *Capital* where he writes, ‘capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons which is mediated through things.’¹⁴⁰ For Marx, the shift from feudalism to capitalism, instead of being caused by an originary accumulation of capital, is based upon a shift of social relations from feudal bondage to the contract between employer and labourer.¹⁴¹ The shift into the society of the spectacle in this sense is based on the new type of relationship between the capitalist and worker engendered by developments within production that make mass consumption necessary. But there is also a sense in which this new relationship is an illusion. Just as for Marx, the peasants forced from their land into manufacturing were free in a double sense – free from the feudal bond, free to enter into contractual work, but also free in that they were essentially propertyless – here the life of the new affluent worker is impoverished despite his affluence.¹⁴² It ‘is after all produced solely as a form of pseudo-gratification which still embodies

¹³⁸ It has even been provocatively argued elsewhere that this almost common sensical notion that commodity relations are spreading is actually a false assumption and that commodification is actually receding. See Colin C. Williams, *A Commodified World?* (UK: Zed Books, 2005).

¹³⁹ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 4.

¹⁴⁰ Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 932.

¹⁴¹ For a summary of the debate around this shift see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origins of Capitalism* (Canada: Monthly Review Press, 1999).

¹⁴² See John Hutnyk, *Critique of Exotica* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), pp. 101-4.

repression.¹⁴³ The worker may be treated like a ‘grown-up’, but ‘an adult in the sense of someone who is master of his own life is nowhere to be found.’¹⁴⁴

So when, and indeed where, can we say that the society of the spectacle began? While nowhere in his sparse oeuvre does Debord take up the question of the origins of the spectacle in any depth, other theorists have filled in the gap. As Jonathan Crary – whose own work has detailed the spectacle’s ‘pre-history’ – has noted, ‘A striking feature of [*Society of the Spectacle*] was the absence of any kind of historical genealogy of the spectacle, and that absence may have contributed to the sense of the spectacle as having appeared full-blown out of the blue’.¹⁴⁵ The opposite interpretation is also common: when Debord states that ‘the origin of the spectacle lies in the world’s loss of unity’ or that ‘at the root of the spectacle lies that oldest of all social divisions of labor’, one is given the impression that the spectacle is as old as civilization itself. As a result of this combination the concept of the spectacle can begin to feel a bit vague and all encompassing as it could be seen as being synonymous with anything from class society to modernity to late capitalism, and Debray’s allegation quoted in the introduction that Debord’s spectacle is ‘an entelechy above cultures, an entity lacking all history and economy, without borders or geography’, starts to make sense. It is useful to think about the origins of the spectacle not just in order to specify the concept historically but because it gives us a way into the concept that is not centred on Debord’s theses.

Just as Marx in *Capital* chides Adam Smith for talking about primitive accumulation in mythical, ahistorical terms – as original sin – it is necessary to treat

¹⁴³ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 59.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, par. 62.

¹⁴⁵ Jonathan Crary, ‘Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory’, *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, ed. Tom McDonough, (USA: MIT, 2002) p. 456. He has elsewhere detailed the ‘pre-history’ of the society of the spectacle. See Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* and Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*.

the spectacle as a (relatively recently formed) historical epoch. Of course it is ludicrous to suggest the spectacle appeared everywhere equally overnight or that one could identify the specific date of its inauguration, but it is necessary to emphasise its recent origins to avoid mythologizing both the spectacle and the pre-spectacular days of unity and wholeness. When Debord speaks of the spectacle's nature as the 'transmutation of everything for the worst', and taking into account his overall contempt for the present, it is easy to conceive of the days before the spectacle as a prelapsarian whole where tomatoes tasted like tomatoes and wine was cheap, plentiful and delicious. While there may be no single event or historical moment that marks the changeover into the spectacle – as Marx writes, 'epochs in history of society are no more separated from each other by strict and abstract lines of demarcation than are geological epochs' – being able to broadly discuss its origins greatly specifies it as a historical epoch.¹⁴⁶

While Debord's work is bereft of any type of genealogy of the spectacle, there are two points at which Debord at least mentions its origins, even if the two are not entirely consistent. The first instance is in a letter from 14 December 1971 addressed to Juvénal Quillet.¹⁴⁷ Expounding the concept of the spectacle in 'everyday terms' he writes,

I came to this concept through the real, although very 'avant-gardist', experience of the revolutionary activity of the 50s and the 60s – but the phenomenon is a lot older: it has its origins in Greek thought; it grows stronger towards the Renaissance (with capitalist thinking); and even stronger in the 18th century, when the collections are opened to the public as *museums*; it appears in its accomplished form around 1914-1920 (with the wartime propaganda and the collapses of the worker movement).¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 492.

¹⁴⁷ Quillet appears to have been involved in the student uprising in Nantes.

¹⁴⁸ *J'en suis venu à ce concept par l'expérience réelle, quoique très "avant-gardiste", de l'activité révolutionnaire dans les années 50 et 60 – mais le phénomène est bien plus ancien: il a ses bases dans la pensée grecque; il grandit vers la Renaissance (avec la pensée capitaliste); et plus encore au XVIIIe siècle, quand on a ouvert au public les collections comme musées; il apparaît sous sa forme achevée*

The temporal and geographical range of this partial list undoubtedly makes the search for an easily identifiable origin to the society of the spectacle considerably more complicated, but it also provides a revealing glimpse at the foundation of Debord's thinking while challenging some common preconceptions. While *Society of the Spectacle* quite clearly identifies the role the collapse of the workers' movement played in the birth of the spectacle, especially the concentrated spectacle, the mention of the opening of museums to the public, capitalist thinking during the Renaissance and Greek thought are perhaps surprising. The reference to Greek thought could mean a number of things: anything from Plato's allegory of the cave to Nietzsche's distinction between the Apollonian and Dionysian in *The Birth of Tragedy* and the split between art and life – so problematic for the Letterists and Situationists. Capitalist thinking during the Renaissance is also a vague formulation. It is difficult to know exactly what Debord means: whether he is referring to the developments in humanism that would eventually be picked up in the classical liberalism of Adam Locke and Adam Smith, a certain way of thinking about the economy in relation to the commerce and banking of the Italian city-states, or relating both to new conceptions of the split between the private and the public or developments in pictorial representation, it at the very least reaffirms Debord's later claims that link the society of the spectacle and capitalism inexorably.

The naming of the opening of museums to the public in the 18th century is worth commenting on as it somewhat repudiates Michel Foucault's attack on Debord. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Foucault rejects the notion of the spectacle: 'Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance. [...] We are neither in the

vers 1914-1920 (avec le "bourrage de crânes" de la guerre, et les effondrements du mouvement ouvrier).' Debord, *Correspondance*, vol. 4 (Librairie Artheme Fayard, 2004), p. 455.

amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism'.¹⁴⁹ For Foucault, antiquity was the civilization of spectacle, in which the architecture of the time – in its building of arenas, theatres, temples, etc. – responded to the demand of making a few objects viewable to a large number of people. In a society organised around the panoptic principle, 'in a society in which the principal elements are no longer the community and public life, but, on the one hand, private individuals and, on the other, the state, relations can be regulated only in a form that is the exact reverse of the spectacle'.¹⁵⁰ Not only, as Crary has noted, does this passage imply that Foucault did not watch or think much about the role of television, but the inclusion of the opening of museums to the public in the list of phenomena leading to the development of the society of the spectacle demonstrates that Debord's conception of spectacle is already more subtle than its caricature as an ocularphobic, iconoclastic attack on media saturated consumer capitalism. Rather, the spectacle too orders and disciplines bodies within space; it not only makes them conscious that they are always potentially being observed but also teaches them how to observe and how to look.

This idea of the museum as a synthesis of surveillance and spectacle is cogently argued by Tony Bennett in *The Birth of the Museum*.¹⁵¹ Bennett juxtaposes the trajectory of Foucault's 'carceral archipelago' with what he terms the 'exhibitionary complex'.¹⁵² While Foucault traces the movement from punishment as spectacle to incarceration in which bodies are moved from the public to the private, Bennett sees the institutions that make up the exhibitionary complex as doing the reverse: taking domains and objects that had once been for the use of a tiny minority

¹⁴⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 217.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

¹⁵¹ Bennett never mentions Debord or 'the society of the spectacle' by name.

¹⁵² Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (UK: Routledge, 2005).

and opening them up to the public at large. Bennett is keen to stress that these movements happen roughly simultaneously: the archetypal English prison of the time, Pentonville Model Prison, is opened in 1842, and is followed less than a decade later by the archetypal event and monument of the exhibitionary complex – the Great Exhibition of 1851 at the Crystal Palace.¹⁵³ Although both the carceral archipelago and the exhibitionary complex are concerned with the problem of order, they attack the problem in different ways. While the aim of the carceral archipelago was to make the populace constantly visible to power, the institutions of the exhibitionary complex, ‘through the provision of object lessons in power – the power to command and arrange things and bodies for public display – sought to allow the people, and *en masse* rather than individually, to know rather than be known, to become the subjects rather than the objects of knowledge.’¹⁵⁴ But the ambition of the exhibitionary complex does not end there: ‘Ideally, they sought also to allow the people to know and thence to regulate themselves; to become, in seeing themselves from the side of power, both the subjects and the objects of knowledge, knowing power and what power knows, and knowing themselves as (ideally) known by power, interiorizing its gaze as a principle of self-surveillance and, hence, self-regulation.’¹⁵⁵ Spectacle and surveillance need not be diametrically opposed and as Debord writes later in *Comments*: ‘Networks of promotion/control slide imperceptibly into networks of surveillance/disinformation.’¹⁵⁶

Several other theorists have proposed different origins to the society of the spectacle. Thomas Richards has claimed that ‘at the time Debord saw it at work in

¹⁵³ Bennett, p. 61.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁵⁵ Bennett, p. 63.

¹⁵⁶ Debord, *Comments* p. 74.

France, the commodity spectacle was already one hundred years old'.¹⁵⁷ According to Richards, the spectacle can be best understood as beginning with the Great Exhibition in 1851, which he claims is responsible for synthesizing what he calls the six major foundations of a semiotics of commodity spectacle: the establishment of an autonomous iconography for the manufactured object, the use of commemoration to place objects in history, the invention of a democratic ideology of consumerism, the transformation of the commodity into language, the figuration of a consuming subject, and the myth of the already achieved society of abundance. The Great Exhibition marks the rebirth of the commodity on the world historical stage in which it sheds its reputation as the generic end of industrial production and steps into the gleaming lights of the Crystal Palace with a new, radiant aura on a par with the work of art.

TJ Clark briefly mentions the origins of the society of the spectacle in *The Painting of Modern Life* (1984) where he writes, 'one is obviously not describing some neat temporality but, rather, a shift – to some extent an oscillation – from one kind of capitalist production to another'.¹⁵⁸ Clark makes the case for understanding this shift as occurring in the second half of 19th century Paris in the rise of consumer society, as well as in its Haussmannisation and the 'move to the world of *grands boulevards* and *grands magasins* and their accompanying industries of tourism, recreation, fashion, and display – industries which helped alter the relations of production in Paris as a whole'.¹⁵⁹ Fredrich Schwartz, on the other hand, has made a case for seeing the origins of the spectacle in early twentieth century Germany as a generation of artists, architects, and designers tried to make sense of the fledgling capitalist culture. As mentioned in the introduction, Crary has also produced a rich

¹⁵⁷ Richards, p. 13-4.

¹⁵⁸ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, p. 9.

¹⁵⁹ Clark, p. 10.

two-volume pre-history to the spectacle. Read together, these works provide a complex tapestry in which to trace the threads of the spectacle's development.

In Debord's case, as I will argue in the following chapter, the concept of the spectacle becomes more precise as he gets older and this extends to his statements concerning its origins. The second of the two instances mentioned earlier (the closest he comes to actually dating the origin of the society of the spectacle) dates from 1988. In *Comments on Society of the Spectacle*, he writes, almost in passing, 'in 1967 [the spectacle] had barely forty years behind it', meaning the spectacle came about sometime in or slightly before 1927, but unlike in the above mentioned letter to Quillet from 1971, he gives no indication of why he names this rather specific date.¹⁶⁰ As Crary has noted, the fact that Debord chooses such a precise period of time to have elapsed since the origin of the spectacle ('barely forty years' instead of say 'around fifty' or 'about half a century') indicates that he likely has something specific in mind. I would add that it also seems likely that his understanding of the spectacle's origins has developed over the twenty years separating *Society of the Spectacle* and *Comments* (and the seventeen years that have passed since the Quillet letter). Throughout *Comments* the spectacle is clearly being conceived as a 20th century development. This means Debord's notion of the society of the spectacle has become more exact. Instead of being a tendency ubiquitous throughout human history, class society, or industrial capitalism, it has become, or is at least more clearly expressed as, a specific, qualitatively unique historical epoch. Crary has sketched some possible reasons why Debord may have dated it in the mid-to-late 1920s including 1) the technological development of the television and simultaneously of broadcasting, a

¹⁶⁰ Debord, *Comments*, p. 3.

‘vast interlocking of corporate, military, and state control’¹⁶¹ 2) the first film to synchronize video and sound, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), which Crary argues created a qualitative difference in the nature of attention required by the viewer, and 3) the rise of fascism and Stalinism and their alternative modes of ‘concentrated spectacle’: *Mein Kampf* appears in 1925, Stalin gains control of Russia in 1929, and Mussolini comes to power in 1922.

In *Comments* Debord identifies the integration of the state and the economy as one of the two principal features of the society of the spectacle. This is also the period during which Fordism was developing and expanding, soon to be incorporated into the state. In his important notes on ‘American and Fordism’, Gramsci details the development of Fordism and its ambitious attempt to model not only the behaviour of the workers in the factory but also influence their private life in order to make them more useful in the valorisation process. One of the focal points of Gramsci’s essay are these ‘social workers’ employed by Ford Motor Company sent to workers’ homes to make sure they were spending their money productively and not wasting it on alcohol and prostitutes. Rather than seeing Ford as an anomaly, Gramsci identifies this as a larger development in American capitalism. He writes:

[t]he new methods of work are inseparable from a specific mode of living and of thinking and feeling life. One cannot have success in one field without tangible results in the other. In America rationalization of work and prohibition are undoubtedly connected. The enquiries conducted by the industrialists into the workers’ private lives and the inspection services created by some firms to control the “morality” of their workers are necessities of the new methods of work. People who laugh at these initiatives (failures though they were) and see in them only a hypocritical manifestation of “puritanism” thereby deny themselves any possibility of understanding the importance, significance and objective import of the American phenomenon, which is *also* the biggest collective effort to date to create, with unprecedented speed, and

¹⁶¹ Crary says this is the year of the ‘technological perfection of television’ when Vladimir Zworikin patented his iconoscope but from my admittedly limited reading it seems difficult to give a specific date to the birth of television.

with a consciousness of purpose unmatched in history, a new type of worker and of man.¹⁶²

For Gramsci the value of thrift and responsibility that Ford tried to instil in his workers was not about making their lives richer. Instead, these ‘puritanical’ initiatives are simply meant to preserve ‘a certain psycho-physical equilibrium’ that ‘prevents the physiological collapse of the worker, exhausted by the new method of production.’¹⁶³ Spending the evening after work in the bar or brothel would leave the worker incapable of contributing to his maximum ability on the production line.

Since Gramsci’s text, much of the discourse around Fordism has centred on the idea that it was not only about regulating the lives of the workers beyond the factory gates, but also about turning them into a class of consumers capable of buying the products industry was churning out in increasingly large numbers. Whether or not this was a conscious decision on the part of Ford or the Ford Motor Company (it is still somewhat uncertain who actually developed the idea of the five-dollar day), this ended up being the effect.¹⁶⁴ David Harvey summarizes the novelty and importance of Ford thus: ‘What was special about Ford (and what ultimately separates Fordism from Taylorism), was his vision, his explicit recognition that mass production meant mass consumption, a new system of the reproduction of labour power, a new politics of labour control and management, a new aesthetics and psychology, in short, a new kind of rationalized, modernist, and populist democratic society.’¹⁶⁵ An under-discussed aspect of Ford Motors in this regard is that it did not just train its workers to shop properly but actually provided them with places to do so. What started as a single shop on the Highland Park campus spread to over forty-five outlets across the country selling mass-produced products at lower prices than all regional competitors

¹⁶² Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 302.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

¹⁶⁴ See Douglas Brinkley, *Wheels for the World* (USA: Penguin, 2003), pp. 161-177.

¹⁶⁵ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (UK: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 125-6.

and still turning a profit.¹⁶⁶ It has even been suggested that in Ford's shops one sees the origins of the modern supermarket.¹⁶⁷ The benefits of such a venture for the Ford Motor Company were multiple: 'The commissaries were set up at a time of price rises and concerns about the costs of living. The role they played therefore was on the one hand to defeat profiteering by merchants, prevent extravagance by Ford's own workers and to teach value to the Ford staff. On the other hand, it was to generate economic value by attracting and holding Ford employees and to make a small profit.'¹⁶⁸

Ford did not have the ability to bring about this rationalised, modernist and populist democratic society on his own, of course, and while it would arrive shortly thereafter, it did not do so overnight. As Gramsci observed, this tendency, or perhaps model, to regulate the worker outside as well as inside the factory was spreading from individual capitalists to the state. 'The attempts made by Ford, with the aid of a body of inspectors, to intervene in the private lives of his employees and to control how they spent their wages and how they lived is an indication of these tendencies. Though these tendencies are still only "private" or only latent, they could become, at a certain point, state ideology, inserting themselves into traditional puritanism and presenting themselves as a renaissance of the pioneer morality and as the "true" America'.¹⁶⁹ Gramsci uses the example of prohibition to demonstrate that this was already beginning to become a reality and it is not only here that these ideas came to influence the country as a whole.¹⁷⁰ As Ford biographer Douglas Brinkley suggests,

¹⁶⁶ Brinkley, p. 179., Paul Freathy and Leigh Sparks, 'Fordism and Retailing: A note on the curious neglect of the Ford Commissaries' <http://www.irs.stir.ac.uk/pdf/Working_papers/9203.pdf>.

¹⁶⁷ See Stanley Hollander and Gary Marple, *Henry Ford: Inventor of the Supermarket?* (USA: Michigan State University Press, 1960).

¹⁶⁸ Freathy and Sparks.

¹⁶⁹ Gramsci, p. 304.

¹⁷⁰ In *Comments* Debord describes prohibition as 'one of the finest examples this century of the state's pretension to be able to exercise authoritarian control over everything, and of the results which ensue'. Debord, *Comments*, p. 65.

many of these criteria for moral living would be added to the US Federal Income Tax Code, which gave benefits to married couples, homeowners, etc.. Brinkley writes, ‘Ford Motor, in other words, was onto the formula that has since been accepted for encouraging the sort of clean living that leads to a productive workforce or populace.’¹⁷¹ It would not be until capitalism faced one of its greatest crises that Fordism would be applied on the national level. As Harvey writes, ‘It took Roosevelt and the New Deal to try and save capitalism by doing through state intervention what Ford had tried to do alone’.¹⁷² In fact, one-time Ford employee James Couzens, widely credited with generating the idea of the five dollar day and convincing Ford to implement it, later went on as the mayor of Detroit to institute a work relief program that would be used as a model for the New Deal.¹⁷³ Because of the role overproduction, or under-consumption, played in the instigation of the Great Depression, it became widely recognized that demand for the products of industry had to be maintained at all costs. And as Harvey writes, ‘A new mode of regulation had to be devised to match the requirements of Fordist production and it took the shock of savage depression and the near-collapse of capitalism in the 1930s to push capitalist societies to some new conception of how state powers should be conceived of and deployed.’¹⁷⁴ Different capitalist states came up with different solutions over these years – the most famous being Roosevelt’s New Deal in the US and the corporatist solutions in Italy and Germany – but all sharing an increased willingness to allow the state to intervene in the economy.¹⁷⁵ The Retort collective characterise this movement

¹⁷¹ Brinkley, p. 174.

¹⁷² Harvey, *Conditions of Postmodernity*, p. 126-7.

¹⁷³ Brinkley, p. 166.

¹⁷⁴ Harvey, p. 128.

¹⁷⁵ Although Reagan was probably wrong when he made the duplicitous claim in *Time Magazine* in 1976 that, ‘Fascism was really the basis for the New Deal. It was Mussolini’s success in Italy, with his government-directed economy, that led the early New Dealers to say “But Mussolini keeps the trains running on time.”’ Fascism and the New Deal were both reactions to a similar problem that had some characteristics in common, but also obviously huge differences. See Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Three*

in terms that relate it to the spectacle: ‘slowly but surely the state in the twentieth century had been dragged into full collaboration in the micromanagement of everyday life. The market’s necessity became the state’s obsession.’¹⁷⁶

The Situationists saw 1929 as being a key moment in this shift. In their journal they write, ‘Since the great crisis of 1929, state intervention has been more and more conspicuous in market mechanisms; the economy can no longer function steadily without massive expenditures by the state, the main “consumer” of all noncommercial production (especially that of the armament industries).’¹⁷⁷ In a similar manner, Negri sees 1929 as a fundamental moment for a periodization of what he calls ‘the planner state’. ‘The Wall Street crash of “Black Thursday” 1929 destroyed the political and state mythologies of a century of bourgeois domination... [It marked] the final burial of the classic liberal myth of the separation of state and market, the end of *laissez-faire*.’¹⁷⁸ Now it is not as though the state and the market were completely separate until this point; Marx had stressed the importance of state intervention on behalf of the economy in the origins of English capitalism, and Negri writes here that state intervention had been growing in the period after 1871.¹⁷⁹ ‘What was new, and what marks this moment as decisive, was the recognition of the emergence of the working class and of the ineliminable antagonism it represented within the system as a *necessary feature of the system which state power would have to accommodate*.’¹⁸⁰ The growing power of the working class throughout Europe and North America, coupled with the success of the Bolsheviks that demonstrated the possibility of proletarian revolution, meant that the capitalist state was forced to incorporate the

New Deals (NY: Picador, 2006).

¹⁷⁶ Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, p. 20.

¹⁷⁷ ‘Two Local Wars’, *Situationist International Anthology* p. 254.

¹⁷⁸ Negri, *Revolution Retrieved* (England: Red Notes, 1988), p. 12-3.

¹⁷⁹ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I. p. 885; Negri, *Revolution Retrieved*, p. 13.

¹⁸⁰ Negri, *Revolution Retrieved*, p. 13.

working class into its system. The result is the beginning of the Keynesian Welfare State, as well as relatively short-lived corporatist states in Germany, Italy, and elsewhere.

This is seen as a global trend, a planetary movement to a new form of society by a myriad of writers from the period. James Burnham's 'managerial revolution', Bruno Rizzi's 'bureaucratisation of the world', Friedrich Pollack and Franz Neumanns' writings on state capitalism, and Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of the 'totally administered world' are all theories that see seemingly opposed blocks converging around a common world system that mixes elements of bureaucratic control with capitalist exploitation.¹⁸¹ Coming in the period following this string of texts, Debord is unique in his focus on the commodity instead of a global bureaucracy, managerial class or creeping totalitarianism. Unlike the other theorists who see the management society as a superior form to capitalism, Debord writes in the final preface to *Society of the Spectacle* that the ruling bureaucratic class 'never had much faith in its own destiny' and 'it knew itself to be nothing but an "underdeveloped type of ruling class" even as it yearned to be something more.'¹⁸² The spectacle's basis in the market economy is said to be 'axiomatic'.¹⁸³ Partially, of course, this has to do with the fact that Debord was writing two decades after the defeat of fascism, during a period of triumphant capitalism.

This lengthy detour through the spectacle's origins should allow us to formulate a more concise historical and geographic definition of the society of the

¹⁸¹ It is unclear the extent to which Debord was aware of these theories when writing *Society of the Spectacle*. Editions Lebovici, the publisher Debord would come to work with would publish Rizzi in 1976 and in a letter from that year Debord makes clear his familiarity with Burnham. Although Debord also claims that Socialisme ou Barbarisme used Rizzi without acknowledging the influence so in a sense Debord could be understood to have been influenced by Rizzi by transitive property. 'Guy Debord's Letters', 29 Sept., 1976, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/debord-29September1976.html>>. See Bruno Rizzi, *The Bureaucratization of the World* at *Marxists.org*, 2006 [1939], Available online at: <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/rizzi/bureaucratization/index.htm>>.

¹⁸² Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 9.

¹⁸³ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 9.

spectacle. It is important to acknowledge that for Debord there is no single development that leads to the society of the spectacle. He writes in his correspondence, 'Of course, there has been television, the theatre, the bureaucratic falsification of the concrete revolutionary movement, etc., but current capitalist society would not be fundamentally spectacular and even deliberately "spectaclist" due to these things alone.'¹⁸⁴ All of these things – television, the bureaucratic falsification of the revolutionary movement, the birth of museums, the integration of the state and the economy, propaganda and PR, shopping centres and celebrity culture (whether they be dictators or film stars) – are the constituent parts that together make up the society of the spectacle. It is a concept that designates the life-world of modern capitalism in its totality. To put it another way, it is the world that modern capitalism has brought into being – not as a mere effect, but as a completely fundamental part to such an extent that modern capitalism and the spectacle have become inseparable.

As Jappe writes, it is also due to the influence of Lukács that Debord and the SI began to think the notion of totality. As Debord writes in his *Correspondence* in 1959, 'Our necessary activity is dominated by the question of the *totality*.'¹⁸⁵ For Sadie Plant, this led the SI to the adoption of a 'maximalist position', in which alienation was treated as though it was the sole consequence of capitalist society. The SI took a position against capitalist society in its totality because 'only from this extreme position is the reversal of perspective necessary to the critique of the spectacle possible, and any stance which fails to subject the totality of existing society to a rigorous critique is vulnerable to accommodation within it.'¹⁸⁶ As Debord would later write in *Society of the Spectacle*, 'capitalism's ever-intensifying imposition of

¹⁸⁴ 'Guy Debord's Letters', 14 December, 1971, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/debord-14December1971.html>>.

¹⁸⁵ Debord, *Correspondence*, p. 235.

¹⁸⁶ Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture*, p. 19.

alienation at all levels makes it increasingly hard for workers to recognize and name their own impoverishment, and eventually puts them in the position of having either to reject it in its totality or do nothing at all'.¹⁸⁷ This created a stark dichotomy where people would be faced with choosing between life or mere survival, revolution or suicide. Any group, movement, or theorist that did not contest the totality was dismissed as haplessly reformist. 'We can comprehend this world only by contesting it. And this contestation is neither true nor realistic except insofar as it is a contestation of the totality.'¹⁸⁸

Debord unabashedly assumed this totalising perspective. Clark and Nicholson-Smith have responded to Debray's attack in their equally scathing 'Why Art Can't Kill the Situationist International'. As they note, Debord was writing in the moment 'when the very word *totality* and the very idea of trying to articulate those forces and relations of production that were giving capitalism a newly unified and unifying form, were tabooed (as they largely still are) as remnants of a discredited "Hegelian" tradition.'¹⁸⁹ They claim that Debord's 'forced' conversation with the early Marx, Hegel and Feuerbach is an answer to a situation in which the majority of the left was abandoning the concept of totality on the one hand and yet had failed to adequately interrogate its Stalinist lineage. "'Forced" in two senses: it is ostentatious and obviously pushed to excess (so that even Debray cannot miss it); and these qualities are precisely the signs of the tactic being a tactic, forced on the writer by the history – the disaster – he is recounting.'¹⁹⁰ Importantly, however, Clark and Nicholson-Smith acknowledge that this tactic perhaps hampers the book and the concept, but not irreparably. Indeed, a decade after defending Debord and the SI in this essay, as I will

¹⁸⁷ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 122.

¹⁸⁸ 'The Bad Days Will End', *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 106.

¹⁸⁹ TJ Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith, 'Why Art Can't Kill the Situationist International', pp. 477-9.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 479.

discuss in Chapter III, Clark was to put the concept in the title of the book he co-authored with the Retort collective.

Chapter II

Spectacular Consequences:

From the Cosmopolitan Conspiracy of Capital to the Conspiracy
Theory of the Eternal Present

A combination of circumstances has marked almost everything I have done with a certain air of conspiracy.

-Guy Debord, 1989¹⁹¹

The victory will go to those who are capable of creating disorder without loving it.

-Guy Debord, 1958¹⁹²

They are conspiring, never doubt it, those sinister clowns.

-Hakim Bey¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ Debord, *Panegyric: Volumes 1 and 2*, trans. James Brook and John McHale (UK: Verso, 2004), p. 105.

¹⁹² Debord, 'Theses on Cultural Revolution', *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 54.

¹⁹³ Hakim Bey, 'The Ontological Status of Conspiracy Theory', *Zero News Datapool*, Available online at: <<http://www.t0.or.at/hakimbey/conspire.htm>>.

The vast majority of material on Guy Debord focuses on his output during the Situationist years (1957-1972). Obviously this is true of the more art historical texts, but it is also true of most of the texts that treat Debord as a critical theorist of contemporary capitalism. This is justifiable to an extent as *The Society of the Spectacle*, published in 1967, is Debord's longest, most programmatic and best-known work. He himself has described the works of theory that follow it as 'postscripts' to this first work, and not trailblazing theoretical undertakings.¹⁹⁴ As a result, many of these works receive little more than a mention in monographs on Debord's theory, while some are rarely mentioned at all. It is necessary to consider that Debord, not one to pick up his pen without deeming it absolutely necessary (notwithstanding his correspondence, of which seven volumes have been published in France), must have considered it imperative to make these additions to the theory laid down in *Society of the Spectacle*, which he has moreover described as a 'perfect' work. These works are postscripts partially in the sense that they take that book as read and refrain from trying to defend or demonstrate earlier theses, freeing them to focus on their consequences and the spectacle's dominance instead. During a period when most people, as Debord acknowledges, take the existence of the spectacle as being perfectly obvious, these postscripts become more interesting than the original work.

The most important addition to the theory of the spectacle in *Comments* is Debord's discussion of the 'integrated spectacle'. Debord makes it clear that this comes into being in the years between 1968 and 1988 and pinpoints its geographical origin in France and Italy. The emergence of this new form in these two countries is

¹⁹⁴ Debord, 'Preface to the 3rd French Edition', *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 8.

‘attributable to a number of shared historical features, namely, the important role of the Stalinist party and unions in political and intellectual life, a weak democratic tradition, the long monopoly of power enjoyed by a single party of government, and the need to eliminate an unexpected upsurge in revolutionary activity.’¹⁹⁵ While this description may accurately characterise Italy and France over this period, many other states in Western Europe and North America, with the exception of a strong Stalinist party, could be made to fit this mould.¹⁹⁶ It seems likely that the reason Debord decided upon France and Italy as the birthplaces of the integrated spectacle concerns his personal experiences there during this period. By tracing Debord’s writings and activities between the auto-dissolution of the Situationist International in 1972 and the publication of *Comments*, it is possible to sketch his rationale.

Debord’s thought is rarely depicted as being in flux and much of the writing on his work focuses on the constants: the themes, concepts, and motifs that preoccupied his texts and films throughout his life.¹⁹⁷ In this chapter I seek to trace a shift in Debord’s thinking on the concept of the spectacle and its consequences between its formulation in 1967’s *The Society of the Spectacle* and 1988’s *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. This will be done by comparing aspects of these two texts and also by charting the ‘minor’ works he produced or collaborated on over this twenty year period: *The Real Report on the Last Chance to Save Capitalism in Italy* (1975), *On Terrorism and the State* (1979) by Gianfranco Sanguinetti, ‘Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*’ (1979), *Considerations on the*

¹⁹⁵ Debord, *Comments*, p. 8-9.

¹⁹⁶ Sweden over this period, for example, matches this description quite well. The Social Democratic Party had a level of hegemony that rivalled that of the Christian Democrats in Italy, unions and the communist party were strong, the prime minister was killed, and, as David Harvey has written, there was no perhaps no country in the West in which the rule of capital was democratically threatened as much as in Sweden. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 112.

¹⁹⁷ See, for example, Kaufmann, *Guy Debord: Revolution at the Service of Poetry*.

Assassination of Gérard Lebovici (1985), as well as some of his films and short essays.

Debord himself never explicitly states how his theory has changed or developed; on the contrary, he always insists on the veracity of his previous claims. In 1992's Preface to the Third French Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle* he writes, 'I am not someone who revises his work' and 'A critical theory of the kind presented here needed no changing – not as long, at any rate, as the general conditions of the long historical period that it was the first to describe accurately were still intact.'¹⁹⁸ In 1979's 'Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*' he comments with characteristic self-confidence, 'I flatter myself to be a very rare contemporary example of someone who has written without immediately being contradicted by the event, and I do not mean contradicted a hundred or a thousand times like the others, but not once. I have no doubt that the confirmation all my theses encounter ought not to last right until the end of the century and even beyond.'¹⁹⁹ Simultaneously, however, he quotes Heraclitus favourably on the impossibility of stepping in the same river twice and claims that theories 'have to be replaced because they are constantly being rendered obsolete'.²⁰⁰ Quite simply, despite the self-assurance bolstering every word Debord ever uttered, there is reason to suppose that a theorist who took the passage of time so seriously did not intend his constructions to remain forever cemented in the riverbed against the flow of history. This being said, it is doubtful that one could identify anything as dramatic as an 'epistemological break' in Debord. Rather, as we will see, the transformations in his conception of the spectacle occur gradually. Little by little, key theses from the 1967 book become less

¹⁹⁸ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 7.

¹⁹⁹ Debord, 'Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*', Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/debord-preface.html>>.

²⁰⁰ Debord, 'In Girum Imus Nocte Et Consumimur Igni', *Complete Cinematic Works*.

prominent before disappearing altogether, while his language too becomes markedly different. Over twenty years these small changes, shifts, and differences in wording combine to demonstrate a markedly different conception of not only the society of the spectacle, but also the capacities and opportunities for political change and theory.

Some of these differences can perhaps be attributed to a shift in perspective from the street to the inner corridors, or perhaps backrooms, of power. To over-generalise, if a book like 1967's *The Society of the Spectacle* is about the experience of late capitalism from the perspective of the street – ‘street’ meant literally as the Situationist critique of urbanism and everyday life and ‘street’ meant to denote the Debord that scrawled ‘Never work’ on a Paris wall and felt more comfortable with alcoholics, drop outs, and petty criminals than academics and artists – if this book, *Society of the Spectacle*, is about a critique of alienation, commodity fetishism and the banality of everyday life, exposing the falsity of the glimmering surface covering the rotten core of consumer capitalism in the West and the ‘workers’ states’ in the East, then we can say that a book like 1988's *Comments of the Society of the Spectacle* is about what goes on behind the scenes, the ways in which those in power stay there: the management of the spectacle and the consequences of its domination. This is perhaps a perspective that Debord developed via his relationship with publisher/patron Gérard Lebovici, who mingled in the upper echelons of French and European cultural, economic and political circles. The focus of Debord's later work is no longer on the false consciousness of the population, hypnotised by commodities and celebrities and tricked into loving the spectacle, but about the cynical cunning, corruption, and brutality of ‘those that run the spectacle’ (a phrase found in *Comments* that would be difficult to imagine Debord saying in 1967 when the spectacle runs itself, so to speak). When Debord first coined the concept, the spectacle had been

loved – or at least ‘it was convinced it was loved’; later, in 1988, it is feared. Concepts such as alienation, ideology, commodity fetishism, and even the proletariat are rarely mentioned, if they are mentioned at all, and ideas of secrecy, conspiracy, and disinformation are pushed to the fore.²⁰¹

These changes cannot be attributed solely to this shift in perspective. First, a lot happened historically between the original publication of *Society of the Spectacle* and *Comments*. 1968 and its aftermath are of great importance, but also of consequence are Italy’s ‘years of lead’ and on a more personal level the unsolved assassination of Lebovici in a Parisian parking garage in 1984. All of this had a marked impact on his conception of the spectacle. One also has to consider that *Society of the Spectacle* was written towards the end of ‘the age of development’ – *Les Trente Glorieuses*, a period of tremendous economic growth more or less across the board. *Comments* follows the downturn of the 1970s and the Cold War hysteria of the 1980s also leaves a clear trace. Second, it is likely that Debord’s theoretical foundations shifted slightly over the years.

One of the main differences between *Society of the Spectacle* and the majority of Debord’s later work is that these works by and large occlude the abstract discussion of the spectacle’s world historical movement and focus on its functions as an apparatus. As Agamben has written, every apparatus has a concrete strategic function, and here the focus is on the techniques and opportunities the society of the spectacle creates, allows, and encourages to allow for the continuation of capitalism,

²⁰¹ See, for example, a letter from 1974 where Debord justifies his shift away from Hegel, Marx and Lautréamont: ‘The principle work that, it appears to me, one must engage in – as the complementary contrary to *The Society of the Spectacle*, which described frozen alienation (and the negation that is implicit in it) – is *the theory of historical action*. One must advance *strategic* theory in its moment, which has come. At this stage and to speak schematically, the basic theoreticians to retrieve and develop are no longer Hegel, Marx and Lautréamont, but Thucydides, Machiavelli and Clausewitz.’ ‘Guy Debord’s Letters’, 21 Feb., 1974, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/debord-21February1974.html>>.

as well as the dominance of the elites at its helm.²⁰² These phenomena and forces are diverse – an apparatus is a heterogeneous set that can include virtually everything: economic policy, television shows, sociological conceptions – yet the spectacle is the term that allows Debord to think them together. This is a side of Debord’s oeuvre that is usually neglected, even by theorists sympathetic to him or otherwise employing the concept of spectacle. Take, for example, a book like James Compton’s *The Integrated News Spectacle* (2004), where he writes, ‘There is a tendency in Debord’s writing to dismiss the products of cultural production – in our case cultural performances, or media events – as fetishes, as mere ideology; in doing so Debord occludes a full investigation of the inner working of the spectacle. In other words, Debord’s abstract formulation of the spectacle complicates his own method of analysis.’²⁰³ Unsurprisingly, Compton’s citations come almost exclusively from *Society of the Spectacle* – only venturing as far as the second page of *Comments*. He appears unaware of the more obscure works written after *Society of the Spectacle* – works particularly relevant to the role of media events in the spectacle like *Considerations on the Assassination of Gérald Lebovici* or to a lesser extent “*Cette Mauvaise Réputation...*” – that do, in fact, investigate the inner workings of the spectacle, largely by cataloguing the lies of the media. This is notable even if one merely looks at the titles of many of the works Debord wrote or was involved in the production of during these years. *The Real Report on the Last Chance to Save Capitalism in Italy*, *Considerations on the Assassination of Gérald Lebovici*, ‘Notes on the “Immigrant Question”’, and ‘Hunger Reducer’, for example, all investigate a rather specifically delineated subject to which the concept of the spectacle is applied.²⁰⁴ They may not

²⁰² Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?*, p. 2-3.

²⁰³ James Compton, *The Integrated News Spectacle* (Peter Lang, 2004), p. 38.

²⁰⁴ This is of course true of many texts from the journal of the Situationists, the best known examples perhaps being ‘On the Poverty of Student Life’ (1966) and ‘The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-

have the depth of detail of a lengthy academic investigation, but neither do they treat the spectacle with abstractions; they focus on the ‘practical consequences’ of spectacular domination. The arc of this chapter is to move from Debord’s Western Marxist conception of the spectacle grounded in a critique of alienation and commodity fetishism to one grounded in notions of conspiracy; from a critique of visibility and the image to one of secrecy and the clandestine; from a discussion of the spectacle’s ontological characteristics to its functioning as an apparatus. This transition is often described as the cynical retreat of a failed revolutionary or a result of paranoia, but if put into the context of Debord’s life and the socio-political changes of the seventies and eighties his perspective becomes more understandable and his theoretical conclusions more persuasive.

The Origins of the Integrated Spectacle: Laboratory Italy

Being for the moment the most advanced country in the slide towards proletarian revolution, Italy is also the most modern laboratory for international counter-revolution. The other governments born of the old pre-spectacular bourgeois democracy look with admiration at the Italian State for the impassiveness that it manages to maintain, though it is at the center of all degradations, and for the tranquil dignity with which it wallows in the mud.

-Guy Debord, 1979²⁰⁵

In April 1972, the Situationist International was down to two active members when Gianfranco Sanguinetti and Debord decided to announce the group’s auto-dissolution.²⁰⁶ Debord is anything but prolific in the years that follow but we can get a partial sense of his intellectual development via the works of Sanguinetti – ‘Debord’s

Commodity Economy’ (1966) on the Watts Riots. Though these texts are often not written exclusively by Debord they obviously met with his approval. Both texts are in *Situationist International Anthology*.

²⁰⁵ Debord, ‘Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*’.

²⁰⁶ JV Martin and his girlfriend were still technically members, as Debord hadn’t bothered to expel them. Their role was completely insignificant, however. See Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, ‘Situationist Map of Denmark’, 2003, Available online at: <<http://www.copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk/sikortuk.html>>.

most steadfast drinking partner and chief conspirator’ – which are intimately tied to the climate in Italy at the time.²⁰⁷ From a rich and respected family in the north of Italy, Sanguinetti had co-founded the Italian section of the SI in 1969 when he was only twenty. As Kaufmann writes, this was ‘the last and certainly the most “political” of the SI sections, the farthest removed from any artistic concerns’.²⁰⁸ It only had three members at its start but was soon the most active of the remaining SI sections and Debord increasingly began to see Italy as ‘the new theatre of operations’.²⁰⁹ Its lifespan was remarkably short however, even by Situationist standards, and Sanguinetti travelled to Paris to join up with Debord and the French section in late 1970 after the Italian section’s dissolution. His stay would last only six months as Sanguinetti was deported from France in July 1971 by the Interior Minister. In Italy he was often under police surveillance and at one point was arrested and spent several months in jail on, it is claimed, trumped up arms possession charges. In order to understand Sanguinetti’s two main texts from this period – *The Real Report to Save Capitalism in Italy* (1975) and *On Terror and the State* (1978) – it is first necessary to provide a brief overview of the historical context in which they were written.

The revolutionary activity that erupted in France in May 1968 played out differently in Italy. Italy’s ‘May in slow motion’, the ‘hot autumn’ of 1969, which saw massive worker mobilisation culminating in a national general strike in mid-November, was the beginning of a decade of political and social upheaval. ‘While the French Events [sic] were spectacular, their duration was brief and their social effects were quickly reversed. The Italian cycle began earlier, lasted longer, and affected

²⁰⁷ Hussey, p. 306.

²⁰⁸ Kaufmann, p. 216.

²⁰⁹ Hussey, p. 251.

society and politics more profoundly than did the French one.²¹⁰ Social movements in post-68 Italy were more intensive and extensive than in most of the rest of Europe, especially in terms of their militancy.²¹¹ The ideas of the Situationists had more resonance in Italy than in France or elsewhere and, as Debord writes, perhaps in an attempt to flatter, ‘it is in the factories of Italy that [*Society of the Spectacle*] has found for the moment its best readers.’²¹² During the early seventies Debord was still partially based in Paris but was gradually spending more and more time in Italy. Eventually he and his wife acquired an apartment in the Oltrarno district of Florence. There were a number of reasons Debord decided to leave Paris, ranging from unwanted attention by the police and pro-situs due to his post-68 notoriety, to an unwillingness to see the Paris he loved further mangled by modernisation and an attraction to the heavily politicised and revolutionary climate in Italy. Hussey writes that ‘It was precisely Debord’s ideas on the city which explained his current movements and, above all, his present decision to move his headquarters to Florence, a city which incarnated for Debord the ideal city-state of the Renaissance.’²¹³ His attraction to Florence was also influenced by his literary and theoretical tastes. Hussey continues, ‘It was not only political turbulence which attracted Debord to Italy but also a fascination with the ideas of Machiavelli and Castiglione.’²¹⁴

Debord may not have stayed in Italy long, but even a cursory examination of the period demonstrates that his work from the 1970s and onwards is intimately tied to the Italian situation. As Jappe writes, ‘What Debord describes is the combination of the oldest with the most modern methods of domination, and this is an area where

²¹⁰ Sidney Tarrow, *Democracy and Disorder: Protest and Politics in Italy, 1965-1975* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 6.

²¹¹ Robert Lumley, *States of Emergency* (UK: Verso, 1990), p. 3.

²¹² Debord, ‘Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of *Society of the Spectacle*’.

²¹³ Hussey, p. 284.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

Italy probably leads the world.’²¹⁵ If the most important inspiration for Debord’s formulation of the theory of the society of the spectacle in 1967 was the post-war Fordist modernisation of France and Paris coupled with the spread of consumer society and television, the main inspiration for Debord’s formulation of the transition from diffuse and concentrated spectacles to integrated spectacle is 1970s Italy in its role as ‘the avant-garde of the contested spectacle’.²¹⁶ A simple summary of the decade reads like the perfect backdrop for a spy novel (like those of Francis Ryck, of whom Debord is said to have been a fan).²¹⁷ Revolutionaries and secret agents, coup plots, conspiracies and assassinations, Euroterrorism and stay-behind armies, mafia hitmen and Vatican spies, even shadowy Freemasons creating parallel governments – this ‘microcosm of the Cold War’ provides the primary historical context for the theory of the integrated spectacle.²¹⁸

While much of Debord’s decision to place Italy and France at the heart of the integrated spectacle likely had to do with the fact that these were the two countries in which he spent the most time over this period, the idea of Italy’s exemplarity was certainly not unheard of at this time. In 1979, for example, Felix Guattari would claim in an interview that ‘the future of England, France and Germany is Italy.’²¹⁹ All of these countries, according to Guattari, were going down the same path of a diffuse and generalised totalitarianism in which the immense and complex machinery of State power, coupled with economic might, would rule over more and more areas of life, creating a climate of ‘understanding acceptance’ in which repression is ‘more

²¹⁵ Jappe, *Guy Debord*, p. 122.

²¹⁶ ‘Guy Debord’s Letters’, 18 September, 1978, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/debord-18September1978.html>>.

²¹⁷ Len Bracken, *Guy Debord: Revolutionary* (Venice, CA: Feral House, 1997), p. 232. This said, Debord had problems with Ryck as an individual. See ‘Guy Debord’s Letters’, 15 October, 1984, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/debord-15October1984.html>>.

²¹⁸ Bull, ‘Italy and the Legacy of the Cold War’.

²¹⁹ Guattari, ‘Why Italy?’, *Autonomia*, trans. Jon Johnston (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), p. 235.

psychologically comprehensive.’ Guattari’s judgment, like Debord’s, is not entirely pessimistic however. The conditions that make Italy into a trailblazer in this regard simultaneously create a situation where new forms of resistance, creativity and lines of flight can emerge. He writes, ‘In Italy there is no tradition of State power, no civic spirit, nothing like the French tradition of centralism and hierarchical responsibility. The situation therefore is more favorable for bringing about a number of shifts.’²²⁰ While Guattari is unsure where this will lead, the one thing he seems certain of is that a new society is emerging, with new forms of control and new exigencies.

There is no easy way of simply diving into these *anni di piombo* – ‘years of lead’ – dubbed so because of the staggering level of political violence in the long decade that stretched from 1969-1980.²²¹ While terrorism was highly visible throughout Europe and the world over this period, in Italy the sheer number of terrorist attacks is shocking: over 12,000 incidents of political violence, with 1,926 attacks in 1977 followed by 2,379 in 1978, perpetrated by both extremes of the political spectrum – at times with the assistance of elements within the state, especially the secret and intelligence services.²²² Victims – 356 dead and over 1,000 wounded in the two decades following 1969 – not only included civilians but also judges, lawyers, bureaucrats, bankers, and even a Prime Minister in 1978.²²³ The difficulty in getting at what was actually happening – the fact that one has to sift through a myriad of texts that read either like conspiracy theories or state propaganda – make palpable Debord’s claims on the integrated spectacle as a society where ‘there is no room for verification’. One account seems reliable enough until it alleges that

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

²²¹ See Donatella Della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²²² Bracken, *Guy Debord*, p. 204. Only matched by Ireland and Spain over the same period.

²²³ Philip Willan, *Puppetmasters: The Political Use of Terrorism in Italy* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Authors Choice Press, 2001), p. 15.

Antonio Negri is probably a CIA agent,²²⁴ another until it states that anyone claiming the state is incapable of engaging in anything nefarious is a conspiracy theorist. The best way to proceed is to try to give a brief account of these years in the way Debord and Sanguinetti roughly understood them. Rather than summarising this long decade and its myriad cast of characters, a collage of some of its major events and scandals should demonstrate its character.

- On 12 December, 1969 a series of coordinated bombs go off at the Bank of Agriculture in Milan's Piazza Fontana and in Rome, killing thirteen and injuring just under a hundred.²²⁵ Over four thousand people are arrested in total: many of them anarchists. One, Giuseppe Pinelli, is declared guilty an hour after he dies in police custody following his 'jump' out of a fourth-story window.²²⁶ Another anarchist, Pietro Valpreda, is arrested and sentenced despite constantly proclaiming his innocence, only to be exonerated almost twenty years later. The whole time many on the left (Debord and Sanguinetti included) suspect the fascists, in league with the police or secret services, as having perpetrated the attack (until 1974 most of the left believed the acts of terror were right/state provocations).²²⁷
- A bombing during a union and anti-fascist demonstration in Brescia on 28 May, 1974 kills eight and injures 94. In August of the same year the bombing of the Italicus express train kills twelve and injures just over a hundred.

²²⁴ Willan, *Puppetmasters*, pp. 186-8.

²²⁵ I've seen several different body counts. Thirteen is the mean.

²²⁶ This timeline is available in varying degrees of detail from a wide range of sources. See for example, Tarrow, *Democracy and Disorder*, pp. 293-6. For the Italian SI's pamphlet on this bombing see 'Is the Reichstag Burning?', 19 Dec., 1969, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/reichstag.html>>. Dario Fo's play, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970), is based on these events.

²²⁷ Joseph LaPalombara, *Democracy Italian Style* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 175.

- On 16 March, 1978 Christian Democrat Party leader Aldo Moro is kidnapped with ‘military precision’ and held for over a month and a half by the Red Brigades.²²⁸ The recent Italian PM Romano Prodi, then an academic at the University of Bologna, takes part in a séance during which the ghost of the recently deceased Christian Democrat politician Giorgio La Pira tells the group three locations where Moro is being held – one of which turns out to be a Red Brigade hideout but not in fact Moro’s prison.²²⁹ The powers that be refuse to negotiate for his release and Moro’s correspondence shows he feels increasingly isolated and betrayed by his former friends and colleagues. Moro had been lobbying for a ‘historic compromise’ that would bring the Communists into a coalition government with the Christian Democrats and was on his way to announce this coalition when he was kidnapped. On 9 May, 1978, Moro’s body is found in the boot of a car in Rome, halfway between the Christian Democrat and Communist party headquarters. The police and government investigations before and after his murder are filled with inadequacies, blunders and suspicious decisions.
- On 2 August, 1980 the Bologna railway station is bombed, killing 85 and injuring over 200. Members of the neofascist Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari were eventually sentenced, despite maintaining their innocence.
- In 1981, a police raid on the office of Licio Gelli uncovers the existence of Propaganda Due, P2.²³⁰ P2 is a clandestine Italian lodge of the world’s

²²⁸ See Leonardo Sciascia, *The Moro Affair*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (London: Granta, 1988).

²²⁹ ‘The séance that came back to haunt Romano Prodi’, *The Independent*, 2 Dec., 2005. Available online at: <<http://news.independent.co.uk/europe/article330676.ece>>; Philip Willan, ‘Moro’s ghost haunts political life’, *Guardian*, 3 March, 2009, Available online at: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/elsewhere/journalist/story/0,,952658,00.html>>.

²³⁰ Prefacing his remarks on P2, Paul Ginsborg provide a note of caution that we should probably apply to the narratives of all of these events. ‘It is all too easy to exaggerate the significance of this secret history, and seek within it a cohesion and explanatory force which it clearly did not possess. It is, by contrast, extremely difficult, if not impossible, to acquire reliable evidence and assemble it into a

largest secret society, the Freemasons. A membership list is found holding nearly one thousand names including cabinet ministers, MPs, army officers, bankers, industrialists, judges, Silvio Berlusconi, newspaper editors, civil servants, the leadership – including the heads – of the secret services, and politicians of all the major parties except the PCI (Italian Communist Party) and the Radicals. There were also known international rightwing terrorists such as Stefano Delle Chiaie, who is connected to fascist bombings in Italy, as well as Operation Condor in South America.²³¹ Considered a ‘shadow cabinet’ or ‘a state within a state’, by many, ‘the real scope of the group was the creation of an organization, which would allow for the control of entire sectors of Italian life and the economy.’²³² The group’s manifesto, ‘A Plan for the Rebirth of Democracy’, is found in Gelli’s daughter’s double-bottomed briefcase in a Rome airport, outlining P2’s strategy to dominate Italian politics, including rewriting the Italian constitution, suspending union activity, manipulating the media and the removal of parliamentary immunity.²³³ The group is linked to the control of newspapers, illegal arms and drug trafficking, Mafia hits, the corruption of magistrates (many of whom were members), and a good number of the terror attacks mentioned above, among other things. Gelli, who sat in the front row at Reagan’s

convincing picture. In these circumstances the historian can only proceed with great caution and considerable scepticism.’ Paul Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 144.

²³¹ See Stuart Christie, *Stefano Delle Chiaie: Portrait of a Black Terrorist* (London: Anarchy Magazine and Refract Publications, 1984).

²³² Sandra Koff and Stephen Koff, *Italy: From the First to Second Republic* (NY and London: Routledge, 2000), p. 96. See also Daniele Ganser, ‘Beyond Democratic Checks and Balances: The “Propaganda Due” Masonic Lodge and the CIA in Italy’s First Republic’, *Government of the Shadows*, pp. 256-275.

²³³ Tobias Jones, *The Dark Heart of Italy* (New York: North Point Press, 2003), p. 186.

inauguration in 1980, was later convicted of misleading the police inquiry into the bombing of the Bologna railway station.²³⁴

- Roberto Calvi, head of Banco Ambrosiano, known as ‘God’s banker’ because of his ties to the Vatican, is found dead, hanging underneath Blackfriars Bridge in London in June 1982. The police initially classify it as a suicide but later as a murder. Considered by some to be P2’s financial arm, Calvi is wearing two pairs of underwear, a brick inserted between them covering his genitals. His pockets are filled with five kilos of bricks and stones (i.e. masonry) and members of P2 referred to themselves as ‘*fratineri*’, ‘black friars’. His death has been linked to them as well as the Vatican, Opus Dei and the Mafia.²³⁵
- In October 1990 Prime Minister Andreotti admits the existence of Operation Gladio, a so-called stay behind army created by NATO together with the CIA and MI6 in 1956 (the French version was called *Rose des Vents*). Organised as a sleeper army of sorts that would spring into action only in the occurrence of a Soviet invasion, it was staffed largely with ex- and neo-fascists as their anti-Communist credentials made them trustworthy. Gladio never really lay dormant and soon after its creation began targeting the left within Italy. It is also linked with many of the terror attacks listed above.²³⁶

All of this should be put in the larger global climate of the 1970s. The Greek coup d’état of 1967, the Chilean coup of 1973, not to mention the Vietnam War, all demonstrated the extent to which the United States would interfere in the national

²³⁴ He was also a guest at Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter’s inaugurations. Ganser, ‘Beyond Democratic Checks and Balances’, p. 261.

²³⁵ Hilary Partridge, *Italian Politics Today* (Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 137. See Philip Willan, *The Last Supper* (London: Robinson, 2007).

²³⁶ For the most comprehensive survey of the stay-behind armies in English, see Danielle Ganser, *NATO’s Secret Armies* (London and NY: Frank Cass, 2005). See also Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents*, pp. 171-3.

politics of a given state to enact their strategy of containment. Meanwhile, the tanks of the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies rolling into Czechoslovakia showed that the countries of the eastern bloc would also resort to arms to keep their satellites in line. Of course the preceding decades were by no means tranquil globally, and the wars of national liberation in the Third World and Western-backed coups were nothing new, but the economic crises of the 1970s, the oil crisis of 1973, urban guerrilla movements in Europe, Japan and North America, and the golden age of skyjackings, all contributed to visions of a world in chaos and decline that was perhaps more palpable to those living in the countries dominated by the diffuse spectacle than it had been since the war.

The two key concepts that need to be understood in order to build a narrative around the Italian events and to make sense of the texts by Debord and Sanguinetti are the 'historic compromise' and the 'strategy of tension'. The very existence of the strategy of tension, long disputed as a construction of paranoid radicals, is now more or less universally acknowledged. Arguing that its origins lay in the international trend towards *détente* in the late 1950s, Bull and Newell summarize the strategy succinctly: with the growth in power of the left and the possibility of the Communists joining the government, 'military circles began to fear the new climate, and forged closer links with the extreme right. The strategy was predicated on the basis of spreading a climate of fear (through indiscriminate terrorist attacks), to provide a perceived necessity for a restoration of public order, either through a coup or through the political consequences following from an awareness by politicians of preparations for a coup.'²³⁷ There were two main phases of the strategy of tension. The first

²³⁷ Martin J. Bull and James L. Newell, *Italian Politics* (UK: Polity, 2005), p. 101. According to statistics from the Italian ministry of interior, of the 'affrays, guerrilla actions and destruction of property' committed between 1969 and 1980, 67.55% were attributable to the far right, 26.5% to the

involved cooperation between the secret services and the far right and was encouraged by Washington. The second began in the mid-seventies when the notion of a coup and institution of a far-right government seemed less appealing to both Washington and many Italian elites, with the secret services half-heartedly attempting to rein in the indiscriminate terror. During this period the extreme right found sanctuary in P2, which also tried to create the conditions that would make a coup seemingly necessary.

In a sense the historic compromise is the opposite of the strategy of tension. Italy had the largest communist party of any Western democracy (PCI) but despite getting large percentages of the popular vote, up to thirty-four percent in 1976, they had never been part of a ruling government coalition. Keeping the Soviet-funded communists out of government had been a key concern for the United States. The first CIA action in 1948 was dedicated to influencing the Italian general election to guarantee a victory for the Christian Democrats. In short, the historic compromise refers to the movement towards a coalition government in Italy between the Christian Democrats and the Communist Party, meant to save Italy from the social, economic, and political crises of the 1970s. Opposition to this move came from both extremes of the political spectrum, as well as from the United States. Moro was set to announce the compromise when he was kidnapped.

Censor Says the Unsayable about the State

In August 1975, Gianfranco Sanguinetti published a pamphlet, *The Real Report on the Last Chance to Save Capitalism in Italy*, under the pseudonym 'Censor'. The book would be published in French the following year, translated by

far left, and 5.95% to others. Negri, 'Between "Historic Compromise" and Terrorism', *Le Monde Diplomatique* (August 1988), fn. 7.

Debord. Although the latter's role in the production of the original manuscript (which perhaps jokingly he calls the best book to appear in Italian since the 17th century) is not absolutely certain, his influence was undoubtedly crucial.²³⁸ Hussey claims that, while Sanguinetti played a part, 'It was also however Guy Debord's book, and would certainly not have existed without Debord's strenuous guiding hand over theoretical and editorial matters.'²³⁹ Another of Debord's biographers, Len Bracken, gives slightly more credit to Sanguinetti. Saying it would be 'completely erroneous to misattribute Sanguinetti's book to Debord,' Bracken still claims that 'while one can certainly hear Sanguinetti's accent in this, his first book, the work is almost too rich to believe that it was written when the author was still in his twenties without some assistance from Debord, then in his forties.'²⁴⁰ This correlates with Bracken's claim elsewhere that Debord's French translation of the book, published by Champ Libre in 1976, is superior to the original Italian. Kaufmann's opinion is similar: 'Behind Censor was Sanguinetti, but behind Sanguinetti was Debord, or at least his style, in every sense of the term: his understanding of formulaic statements, his acerbic wit, his sense of intervention – and arguments that he had been making for years.'²⁴¹

The text is written anonymously from the perspective of someone high up in the Italian political establishment, a man of the state, and is addressed to other men of the state, those at 'the summit of economic power': not the Italian bourgeoisie as a whole, 'but only to the part of the bourgeoisie in which one can distinguish the real power *elite*.'²⁴² Clearly taking on the posture of a modern Machiavelli speaking the truth of power – saying the unsayable about the State – Censor gives a blunt

²³⁸ 'Guy Debord's Letters', 6 August, 1975, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/debord-6August1975.html>>.

²³⁹ Hussey, p. 306.

²⁴⁰ Bracken, *Guy Debord – Revolutionary*, p. 197.

²⁴¹ Kaufmann, p. 264-5.

²⁴² Sanguinetti, *Real Report*, p. 9.

assessment of the threats to bourgeois class rule and advice on how to deal with the workers' movement.²⁴³ It was mailed to 520 members of Italian elites from the academy, industry, media and politics, garnering a lot of attention.²⁴⁴

Deciding how to read *The Real Report* awakens numerous hermeneutic difficulties, and not only because the precise authorial arrangement is unclear. The text is not exactly a satire and it is rarely sarcastic. It is difficult to know if Sanguinetti is making recommendations that he honestly believes would help the Italian ruling class or the complete opposite, and it is difficult to gauge whether he expected its elite readers to be appalled by the brutality of his analysis and policy suggestions or simply to be convinced. Debord himself sees a certain ambiguity in the text. Arguing as to why the French edition should not contain a preface, he writes in a letter to Sanguinetti, 'This [absence of a preface] would present the thing as a mystery, which is causing a scandal in its country of origin, and let it be understood that this mystery must be still more profound because the book's intention is not obvious and its meaning is less univocal than such extremism might suggest.'²⁴⁵ Is Sanguinetti merely revealing the truth of power, first to Italy's elites assuming that the text will eventually circulate widely? What is the strategy being deployed? Is he not concerned about giving too much information to just anybody?

There are two main currents to the text: the first is Censor delineating the threats to democratic capitalism and the second is deciding the best defensive actions to take. The biggest danger to Italian capitalism according to Censor is the refusal of work and the organisation of workers outside of the established parties and unions. It

²⁴³ Debord claims Machiavelli was able to 'say the unsayable about the State'. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 139.

²⁴⁴ Sanguinetti quotes many of the reactions in the media here, Sanguinetti, 'Proofs of the Nonexistence of Censor by his Author', *Not Bored*, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/censor-nonexistence.html>>.

²⁴⁵ 'Guy Debord's Letters', 15 August, 1975, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/debord-15August1975.html>>.

was with May 1968 that he claims to have realised the precariousness of the situation. ‘At first it was misunderstood, and then it was hidden – and not without reason – but this insurrection was, by its simple existence, the most scandalous and terrible defeat suffered by the European bourgeoisie since 1848.’²⁴⁶ In Italy, by the end of 1969, with the intensification of the ‘hot autumn’ and a general insurrection looking all the more likely, Censor describes the reaction of the Italian elites as one of panic. This is the recourse to the creation of ‘the false card of artificial terrorism’.²⁴⁷ After the Piazza Fontana bombings of Dec. 12th, ‘As if by magic, a strike movement that was so widespread and so prolonged, forgot itself and stopped.’²⁴⁸ The state was forced ‘to stage its own terrorist negation to reaffirm its power’.²⁴⁹ The problem with this technique, despite its obvious successes, is that it is incredibly risky. If exposed, it could ignite exactly what it sought to extinguish.

It is here that Censor moves on to considerations of the ‘historic compromise’. In his opinion it is the conclusion of the events of 1968 that provide the first lesson as to what action to take. He writes, ‘In France and Czechoslovakia, where the revolutionary moment was on the best footing, who repressed it most effectively? Who favored or imposed the return to normal in the factories and streets? Well, in both cases it was the communists: in Paris thanks to the unions, and in Prague thanks to the Red Army.’²⁵⁰ The lesson to be learned from this is that it is the institutions of the left that are best equipped to quell the revolutionary fervour of the workers. The solution to the crisis of Italian capitalism is then to ‘employ’ the communists, to bring them into the management of Italian capitalism. ‘The force of the communist party and unions has already been useful to use, and it has been our principle support since

²⁴⁶ Sanguinetti, *Real Report*, p. 37.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

the autumn of 1969. However, the effect of the communists has remained, until now, insufficient to reverse the process. It is in our undeniable interest to *galvanize* this force by applying it to the center of State power.’²⁵¹ The heart of Censor’s argument is that it is autonomous, self-organising workers who are the enemy of *both* the capitalists and the Communists, and thus the best solution is to work together to rein them in – a project the capitalists cannot accomplish without the Communists.²⁵² Having already been revealed as the text’s author, in a French edition of *The Real Report*, Sanguinetti ended up including a short text called ‘Proofs of the Nonexistence of Censor by his Author’ that does explain his motivations a bit. He writes, ‘What did I intend by writing a parallel book and inventing such a person? I intended, in fact, to injure Italian capitalism, which is the weakest and stupidest element of class domination in the world; and more particularly to injure all those who are engaged in the unhappy enterprise of saving such domination, as are the neo-capitalist bourgeoisie and the Communist Party.’²⁵³ What he intended to prove in the text was that the ‘historic compromise’ demonstrates the pathetic state of Italian capitalism *and* of its official resistance: the Communist Party and the unions. This demonstration was intended above all for the workers.

Sanguinetti Says the Unsayable About the Moro Kidnapping, Belatedly

In his foreword to *The Real Report*, Len Bracken writes, ‘Given his personal history, it is understandable that Sanguinetti quickly looked for an alibi when he heard the news that Prime Minister Aldo Moro was kidnapped in 1978.’²⁵⁴ His fears were not completely unfounded as his house was searched by ‘eighteen armed soldiers’

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²⁵² The Communists, however, could in fact do this on their own, as in the countries of ‘really existing socialism’.

²⁵³ Sanguinetti, ‘Proofs of the Nonexistence of Censor by his Author’.

²⁵⁴ Sanguinetti, *Real Report*, p. 6.

while Moro was still being held.²⁵⁵ In a letter dated 21 April, 1978, a little over a month after Moro was kidnapped and two weeks before he was killed, Debord writes to Sanguinetti. After detailing why the Red Brigades could not have kidnapped Moro, he encourages him to once again unveil the reality behind the State's manoeuvring in the spirit of Censor. Speaking of Sanguinetti in the third person he writes, 'He demonstrated his comprehension once. One knows that he will do it again. He is, today, considered by some to be the most dangerous man in Italy.'²⁵⁶ Sanguinetti, at the time anyway, had a different reading of the events. Bracken reports that while Sanguinetti was sympathetic to Debord's analysis, he also felt as though in this case it was likely that Moro was actually kidnapped by leftists.²⁵⁷

Strangely enough, the following year Sanguinetti published *On Terror and the State* (part of an unfinished larger work called *Remedy to Everything*), which more or less adopted Debord's position on the kidnapping and murder. Not only did *On Terror and the State* not meet with Debord's approval, it actually contributed to the end of Sanguinetti and Debord's working relationship and friendship. Writing to a Dutch publisher who was considering publishing *On Terror and the State* together with Debord's 'Preface to the Fourth Italian edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*', Debord writes,

I cannot at all accept the publication of my *Preface* in the same book as Gianfranco Sanguinetti's *Terrorism*. I think it's a very good thing to publish *Terrorism*, which is completely accurate on its central question and is full of valuable arguments concerning it. It is [however] extremely deficient theoretically, and its pretentious tone is most disagreeable, when he has the insolence to treat – and reduce to a ridiculous schemata – the historical and

²⁵⁵ It is not specified whether or not these were in fact soldiers or Carabinieri. Bracken, *Guy Debord – Revolutionary*, p. 204-5.

²⁵⁶ 'Guy Debord's Letters', 21 April, 1978, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/Cavalcanti.html>>.

²⁵⁷ Bracken, *Guy Debord – Revolutionary*, p. 204-7.

strategic question of armed struggle in general and the particular case of *all terrorism* as it has existed in many diverse forms throughout history.²⁵⁸

In a letter from two years earlier Debord was even less forgiving, saying the text ‘constitutes an irreparable and monstrous disaster.’²⁵⁹ He goes on, attacking Sanguinetti both as a theorist and personally,

To summarize the fundamental error of the *author*, one can say that he has, so as to surpass "Censor," stupidly reprised this glorious persona, with all of his idiosyncratic expressions, but *debased* because he has passed over to the side of the proletarians, with the result that the discourse takes on an aspect that evokes the beards of the old, autodidactic, anarchists of the end of the 19th century. And to summarize the error of the *man*, it is necessary to say that the most lamentable sides of his personality, which once a month or so express themselves by inept comportment in a restaurant, are spread about without limits in the language of historical action.²⁶⁰

Notwithstanding Debord’s comments, Sanguinetti’s *On Terror and the State* is still useful, not least because it goes into more detail about the Moro kidnapping and general situation in Italy than Debord’s only published text on these events, ‘Preface to the *Fourth Italian Edition of The Society of the Spectacle*’, but also because, despite Debord’s disparaging remarks, it appears to have had an influence on *Comments* (or else we are seeing Debord’s effect on Sanguinetti, which is equally illuminating in tracing Debord’s theoretical development).

Sanguinetti’s conceptual schema is relatively simple and is laid out in the text’s first paragraphs. All terrorist attacks can be classified as either offensive or defensive. Only ‘the desperate and the deluded’ resort to offensive terrorism and these acts are ‘always doomed to fail’.²⁶¹ The examples he names without elaboration are

²⁵⁸ ‘Guy Debord’s Letters’, 23 February, 1981, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/kloosterman.html>>.

²⁵⁹ ‘Guy Debord’s Letters’, 12 November, 1978, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/debord-12November1978.html>>.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ Debord is not as dismissive of all forms of offensive terrorism. In the SI journal in 1969 he writes, ‘From the strategical perspective of social struggles it must first of all be said that one should never *play with terrorism*. But even serious terrorism has never in history had any salutary effectiveness except in situations where complete repression made impossible any other form of revolutionary activity and thereby caused a significant portion of the population to side with the terrorists.’ Quoted in

the actions of the Palestinians and the Irish. Defensive terrorism on the other hand can have some success but this success is always momentary and precarious. It is ‘*always and only* States which resort to defensive terrorism, either because they are deep in some grave social crisis, like the Italian State, or else because they fear one, like the German State.’²⁶² There are then two different types of defensive terrorism: direct and indirect. The first is ‘directed against the population’, and the examples listed are the Piazza Fontana bombings of 1969, the bombings of the high speed *Italicus* train and an anti-fascist demonstration in Brescia in 1974. Indirect defensive terrorism in contrast ‘must be apparently directed against [the State]’, the example listed being the Moro kidnapping and murder.²⁶³

Throughout the rest of the text, Sanguinetti reveals ‘State secrets’ and the ‘truth about terrorism’ during the years of the strategy of tension. Much of Sanguinetti’s discourse revolves around the notion of unveiling: of uncovering the truth, and, like in *The Real Report*, saying the unsayable about the contemporary Italian State. The truth is thought to be stronger than the spectacle’s mystifications: ‘only the truth is revolutionary, only the truth is capable of *causing harm* to power’, writes Sanguinetti.²⁶⁴ He paints a picture of Italy as a country that ‘proclaims itself free and democratic’ but ‘is in reality directed by a few hundred heroic imbeciles’.²⁶⁵ These heroic imbeciles are essentially commandeering a sinking ship, desperately trying to keep it afloat. Defensive terror is a means to do just that. He writes,

the goal, from December 12th, 1969 [Piazza Fontana] to March 16th, 1978 [Moro kidnapping], and still today, has in fact always remained the same, which is to make the whole population, who, nowadays, can no longer suffer,

Plant, p. 128. Then in the 1979 film in *In Girum*, a picture of Andreas Baader and Gudrun Enslin is shown over the narration, ‘The flower of youth dies in prison.’ Debord, ‘In Girum Imus Nocte Et Consumimur Igni’, *Complete Cinematic Works*, p. 163.

²⁶² Sanguinetti, *On Terrorism and the State*, p. 57.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁶⁴ Sanguinetti, *On Terrorism and the State*, p. 72.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

or is struggling against, this State, believe that it *has at least an enemy in common* with this State, and from which this State defends it on condition that it is no longer called into question by anyone.²⁶⁶

Following the upheavals of the ‘hot autumn’, the state has to frighten the population so that they ‘always choose “the lesser evil”, namely the present state of affairs.’²⁶⁷

The Italian state may have been mismanaging the economy and scandals may have undermined its authority, but it had to present itself as the only force preventing Italy from being taken over by ruthless terrorists. Sanguinetti also attacks the ‘alienated extra-parliamentarians’ (Guattari and Negri are insulted individually, as well as Potere Operaio in general) who support so-called left terrorism for not understanding ‘that the Red Brigades are teleguided, that Moro was eliminated by the parallel services, and that they themselves are fatheads, good for being thrown into prison each time it is useful.’²⁶⁸

Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition

Debord only published one direct commentary on Italian politics: ‘The Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*’ (1979). The fact that the text is occasionally labelled ‘The State of the Spectacle’, gives an indication of its contents. Despite its short length (about six thousand words), it is interesting both in the sense that it offers a relatively detailed analysis of a specific situation using the concept of the spectacle and also that, more than any other text, it prefigures *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. Like *The Real Report*, in many ways it can be seen as a midpoint in Debord’s thinking on the spectacle. This is even reflected in

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-9.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 68. This is a particularly odd dismissal of Guattari, more in line with the Situationist tendency to insult nearly everyone than any legitimate critique.

the language. Advising a translator of the text he writes, 'The general tone is coldly Machiavellian and, even, as they say "cynical," but dignified'.²⁶⁹ At the same time there are numerous passages that echo the dialectical jargon of *Society of the Spectacle* ('real movement of its negation', 'in itself and for itself').

The first quarter of the text addresses the various bad translations of, and bad critical responses to, *Society of the Spectacle*. Then, following a few paragraphs putting the book into context and praising its merits, Debord addresses the Moro kidnapping specifically and the terror attacks in Italy in general. Despite their falling out, Debord's understanding of contemporary events in this text mirrors that of Sanguinetti. 'The kidnapping and execution of Aldo Moro was a mythological opera with great machinations,' he begins. Moro's belief in the 'historic compromise' is nothing but a belief 'in the capacity of the Stalinists to finally smash the movement of revolutionary workers.' The real split in Italian capitalism is depicted as centring on the question of 'the utilization of Stalinists', and Moro was essentially killed by those who would prefer to do without them: 'there is no doubt a real Italian "Censor" who played this card'.²⁷⁰ It is the very fact that the Italian workers were not overly enthusiastic about the PCI that meant the Red Brigades were needed: 'it is because a large number of Italian workers have escaped being enrolled by the Stalinist trade union police that the "Red Brigade," whose illogical and blind terrorism could only embarrass them, was set in motion, and that the *mass media* seized the opportunity to recognize in the "brigade" their advanced detachment of troops and their disquieting

²⁶⁹ 'Guy Debord's Letters', 7 Feb., 1979, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/debord-7February1979.html>>.

²⁷⁰ 'Guy Debord's Letter's, 18 September, 1978, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/debord-18September1978.html>>. In his correspondence Debord writes, 'This affair is evidently staged by the enemies of the "Historic Compromise", not by revolutionary enemies [of the State]. The leftists are ordinarily very naive, even in Italy, where they gladly engage on these occasions in the completely *theological* discussions of the problems of revolutionary violence, like that chorus of children who, in their faded aestheticism of the "anarchist assassin," once believed that Oswald killed Kennedy.' 'Guy Debord's Letters', 21 April, 1978, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/calvacanti.html>>.

leaders beyond the shadow of a doubt.’ The state is seen as tolerating the smaller attacks by what very well may be genuine left and rightwing groups, but the big attacks, Debord claims, were perpetrated by elements within the State.²⁷¹ ‘Red Brigades’ is always written in quotation marks and they are described as ‘a gloomy caricature of what one would be presumed to think and carry out if one were to advocate the disappearance of the State’. Aside from their function of creating chaos, they also serve ‘to disconcert or discredit proletarians who really rise up against the State, and maybe one day eliminate some of the most dangerous of them.’ Any of the militant ‘fatheads’ falsely accused by the police will mistake the state for simply being unjust and not actively conspiring against them. Even if Debord and Sanguinetti drastically underestimate the extent to which the Red Brigades were actually based in the factories, the point for them is that they might as well have been completely infiltrated and teleguided by the state, or the state within the state, because the consequence of their activity is nothing but counter-revolutionary.

There are two important ways in which the ‘Preface’ foreshadows Debord’s theorisation in *Comments*. The first is that Italy is clearly seen as a test ground for the integrated spectacle. What is happening in Italy during this decade is depicted as ‘integrated spectacle in one country’, so to speak, only this model would soon spread the world over. ‘Italy sums up the social contradictions of the entire world and attempts, in ways well known to us, to amalgamate in one country the repressive Holy Alliance between class power – bourgeois and bureaucratic-totalitarian – that already openly functions over the surface of the entire earth, in the economic and police solidarity of all States, although, in this too, not without some discussions and settling

²⁷¹ ‘In such a climate as this, we inevitably note the broadening of a peripheral layer of sincere small-time terrorism that is more or less watched over and temporarily tolerated, like a fish preserve in which some culprits can always be hauled out in order to be displayed on a platter, but the “striking force” of the central interventions could only have been comprised of professionals, which corroborates every detail of their style.’ Debord, ‘Preface to the fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*’.

of accounts in the Italian manner.²⁷² Second, it is in Italy during this period that the power of the ‘unanswerable lie’, one of the defining features of the integrated spectacle, begins to progress. Following the entire Moro affair Debord writes that ‘we have been able to see the State lie develop in and for itself, having so well forgotten its conflictual link with truth and plausibility that it can forget and replace itself for hour to hour.’ Yet, Debord’s very strategy in this document, similar to that of Sanguinetti in his two texts, seems to suggest that the unanswerable lie has not yet reached a level of omnipotence. There is still a danger of riposte, and this is exactly what Debord and Sanguinetti were attempting to provide or provoke. But as Debord’s reaction to Sanguinetti’s dawdling over his publication of the ‘truth’ of the Moro affair suggests, this riposte has to be delivered in a specific moment and context if it is to triumph over the spectacle’s obfuscations.

²⁷² Debord, ‘Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*’.

Considerations on Assassinations

...for our times do not resemble any other, and baseness is everywhere.

-Guy Debord, 1985²⁷³

Alongside the ‘years of lead’, the single event whose impact upon Debord’s development was the most profound is arguably the murder of his publisher, Gérald Lebovici, in 1984. Hussey writes that Lebovici was ‘the man whose life would be most closely interlinked with Debord’s own’ between the dissolution of the SI in 1972 and his murder.²⁷⁴ Lebovici was the successful founder and head of an agency for actors that he built up into a prosperous media empire. He worked as a producer and distributor and counted superstars like Brigitte Bardot and Catherine Deneuve as clients and friends. Inspired by the events of May 1968 Lebovici founded the publishing house Champ Libre, which would be dedicated to publishing radical and subversive texts. In 1972 Champ Libre acquired the rights to *Society of the Spectacle*, starting a partnership between Lebovici and Debord that would last over a decade. Lebovici was charmed, impressed and fascinated with Debord and essentially became his closest friend and sponsor, financing his films and providing him with generous advances. Debord also began to wield a great deal of influence over Champ Libre, especially over the books that would be published. Lebovici’s generosity was pushed to almost comical levels in 1983 when he bought a cinema in Paris, Studio Cujas, which exclusively and continuously played Debord’s films.²⁷⁵

Early on the morning of 7 March, 1984, Lebovici was found dead behind the wheel of his car in an underground parking garage in Paris with four bullet wounds in the back of his head. He had not been robbed, but his identity papers were missing and a note with nothing on it but the name ‘François’ was found in his pocket. The

²⁷³ Debord, *Considerations*, p. 1.

²⁷⁴ Hussey, p. 275.

²⁷⁵ It would be interesting to see the box office figures.

autopsy revealed that he had been killed on the night of 5 March. That evening he had cancelled several appointments and left his film offices early after receiving a phone call from someone said to be calling on behalf of Sabrina Mesrine, the biological daughter of Jacques Mesrine, a French super criminal and ‘Public Enemy no. 1’, who claimed thirty nine murders in total and had his autobiography, *The Death Instinct*, published by Champ Libre in 1984.²⁷⁶ Lebovici had adopted Sabrina after her father was killed in a shootout with police in 1979. The police were baffled and to this day the murder remains unsolved. All sorts of theories were bandied about in the press with suspects including the far left, the far right, police assassins (French as well as Spanish), Mesrine’s associates, the KGB, videocassette pirates, the mob, Action Directe, the Red Brigades, and, last but not least, Guy Debord. The amount of speculation and sheer idiocy in the media varied from story to story, but a dominant theme was that of Debord seducing Lebovici into a dangerous life of leftist extremism for which in the end he paid the ultimate price.²⁷⁷ Debord’s reaction was to vow to prevent his films from ever showing in France, to sue several newspapers and magazines for libel – a case he eventually won – and to release a book: *Considerations on the Assassination of Gérald Lebovici* (1985).

Considerations consists largely of citations from articles in the popular press on Debord and his possible role in the assassination mixed with commentary on these articles and society as a whole. In many ways it functions as a case study that Debord can bounce his theses off (not that this was necessarily the text’s purpose). And like

²⁷⁶ Mesrine was recently the subject of a pair of popular biopics directed by Vincent Cassel, *Mesrine: Killer Instinct* (2008) and *Mesrine: Public Enemy No. 1* (2008).

²⁷⁷ One article cited by Debord from the rightwing daily *Minute*, provides the best summary of the SI I have heard: ‘But what then is situationism? What is its program? Briefly put, it is the following: “Discredit the good. Compromise all bosses. Unsettle their beliefs. Deliver them up to general disdain. Make use of base and vile men. Disorganize all authority. Sow discord among the citizenry. Stir up the young against the old. Ridicule all traditions. Disrupt supply lines. Make people listen to lascivious music. Spread lewdness.”’ Quoted in Debord, *Considerations*, p. 9.

most of Debord's late theoretical work, the spectacle is primarily discussed as an apparatus. There has already been a discussion of the oft-cited warning from the first chapter of *Society of the Spectacle* against simply equating the spectacle with the range and power of the mass media, the spectacle's 'most stultifying superficial manifestation'.²⁷⁸ In *Considerations*, however, the mass media is given a primary role in the spectacle that belies this previous conception to an extent: more than a superficial manifestation, it is said to 'lead [...] the great enterprise of the falsification of reality'.²⁷⁹ The media, and particularly television, receives considerably more attention in Debord's later work and there are practical historical reasons for this. In the France of the 1950s and 1960s that incubated Debord's developing conception of the spectacle, access to television was still quite limited (especially compared to the US), and this is reflected in the fact that very few critical cultural works of the period even mention television.²⁸⁰ This does not mean that the spectacle comes to be equated with the excesses of the media – Debord is quite clear later in *Comments* that this is not the case – but that the media is an important force in maintaining spectacular domination and not merely a side effect of the said domination.

Considerations feeds into *Comments* primarily in relation to this emphasis on the power of the media in the integrated spectacle. The media, never defined with much specificity by Debord, is seen as having completely replaced any form of civil society or public discourse. 'There is no place left where people can discuss the realities which concern them, because they can never lastingly free themselves from

²⁷⁸ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 24.

²⁷⁹ Debord, *Considerations*, p. 46.

²⁸⁰ Kristen Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), p. 140. This association of spectacle and television is surprisingly pervasive. Jonathan Crary, for example, in his essay 'Eclipse of the Spectacle' argues that Baudrillard is 'not wrong to proclaim the end of what Guy Debord called "the society of the spectacle"' in large part because 'a certain period in the initial deployment of television is over, a phase roughly coinciding with post-World War II US hegemony.' Crary, *Art After Modernism*, ed. Brian Wallis (USA: New Museum, 1984). pp. 283-94.

the crushing presence of media discourse and of the various forces organized to relay it.²⁸¹ This discourse is always subordinated to needs of spectacular domination, partially because media professionals suffer from the destruction of history and systematised ignorance like everyone else, but also perhaps because they are more directly dependant on the logic of the spectacle than other professions. ‘It must not be forgotten that every media professional is bound by wages and other rewards and recompenses to a master, and sometimes to several; and that every one of them knows he [sic] is dispensable.’²⁸² The overall result of this coupled with the eradication of the *agora*, the public space of interaction and debate, café and salon culture and workers’ clubs, is that the media – in controlling the gathering and distribution of information – achieves an unlimited power to falsify and people cannot believe anything that they have not learnt directly themselves.²⁸³ It is not difficult to see how the events on which Debord reflects in *Considerations* led to such a position, as the extremity of the lies and defamations circulating in the press after Lebovici’s murder is surprising even to one cynical of the rigor and ethics of the popular press.²⁸⁴ Kaufmann claims that Debord’s technique is to throw these falsifications back in the face of the falsifiers. He writes that *Considerations* ‘functions like an amplifier, concentrating and accumulating, and will enable the enemy to see for itself the extent of its own falsehoods.’²⁸⁵ What is implied is that the research carried out in exposing the media’s lies about him as an individual could be repeated *ad infinitum*, revealing a constant barrage of daily lies about every conceivable realm of public and private life.

²⁸¹ Debord, *Comments*, p. 19.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-9.

²⁸⁴ This could be related to 1970s Italy as well. LaPalombara says that ‘by conservative estimates’, at least three out of every four Italian journalists during the period had backgrounds in or close ties with various political parties and that these connections undoubtedly contaminate their work. In 1970s Italy, he claims, ‘the straightforward news story is relatively unknown.’ LaPalombara, *Democracy, Italian Style*, p. 187.

²⁸⁵ Kaufman, p. 243.

One response might be that the fact Debord sued several newspapers and magazines for libel and won, shows that the media does not in fact have free rein, and that they do normally work within boundaries, even if they occasionally transgress them. Part of the court judgment in Debord's favour stipulated that he could choose any three of the magazines to print the libel verdict at their own expense. Debord refused this opportunity however, stating, 'I am not interested in rectifying their reports on me. The only thing that I could not allow this time was to let them say whatever they wanted.'²⁸⁶ This may not be completely adequate as a response, but Debord's hyperbolic rejection of 'the media' does not allow much room for distinction.

Overall *Considerations* is rather light conceptually. Kaufmann writes, 'The true "subject" of [*Considerations*] is, in the end, Debord himself, who, symbolically assassinated by the press, takes the place of his friend.'²⁸⁷ While one might question Debord's priorities in focusing on his own 'symbolic assassination' by the press when his best friend had been shot four times in the back of the head, a more appropriate question here is to ask quite simply why he does not make any attempt whatsoever to present a theory of the assassination. We have seen Debord speculate about those behind the Moro assassination (in published works in both 1979 and 1988, as well as in his correspondence), so why does he express no opinion at all on who might have been behind the murder of Lebovici? Without falling into the same speculation Debord decries in *Considerations*, we can hypothesise that knowing Lebovici intimately, it is likely Debord would have known if his friend felt as though he was in mortal danger from any particular group of his supposed enemies. The only way to begin to imagine an answer to this question is by thinking about it in terms of the theses in *Comments*. *Comments* is dedicated to Lebovici's memory and Kaufmann

²⁸⁶ Debord, *Considerations*, p. 72.

²⁸⁷ Kaufmann, p. 244.

argues that the book ‘must be understood in light of Lebovici’s murder and the insinuations that followed. [It gives] a more theoretical form to a response that the affair as a whole made necessary.’²⁸⁸ In these writings on the role of secrecy, lies, and conspiracy in the integrated spectacle, one can understand why Debord perhaps felt it impossible to discover who murdered Lebovici.

Comments on the Integrated Spectacle

Comments on the Society of the Spectacle was written by Debord in the early part of 1988 in the Parisian flat he shared with his wife, Alice Becker-Ho. He had moved back to Paris from his country house in 1987 and was living in a wealthy area of the city, distant from the place he once loved temporally and culturally if not geographically. Formally speaking, *Comments* is markedly different from *Society of the Spectacle*. The text in many ways appears to be more direct, using a clear, classic prose rather than Hegelian-Marxist, dialectical jargon. While *Society of the Spectacle* organised 221 paragraphs into nine clearly schematised chapters, *Comments* consists of thirty three short chapters, demarcated by nothing but roman numerals – although the themes of each chapter are not indecipherable. The tone is more acerbic and less philosophical. Overall the influence of Debord’s old darlings – Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, and Lukács – is much more subtle and almost unidentifiable. Debord’s voice sounds slightly detached, as though he is no longer marshalling troops on the field of battle but observing the carnage from a distance. While I would hesitate to call it a more mature text, it does seem to be written by someone in the twilight of his life.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 238

The late Debord is often portrayed as a bitter loner, exhausted with the society he had failed to overthrow.²⁸⁹ Hussey depicts the Debord of this period as a ‘warrior at rest, whose arms had been laid down for the last time. [A friend] described him as an aristocrat who had decided to detach himself from life, his century, his time. There was clearly a sense of defeat in Debord’s thought and demeanour.’²⁹⁰ So why bother writing? ‘In other circumstances’, Debord writes in *Comments*, ‘I think I could have considered myself altogether satisfied with my first work on this subject, and left others to consider future developments. But in the present situation, it seemed unlikely that anyone else would do it.’²⁹¹ Hussey claims that Debord was driven by ‘the impulse to make a final comment and analysis of the world’.²⁹² Bracken also sees *Comments* as a ‘theoretical summing up’.²⁹³

This position is understandable. As mentioned above, Debord himself thought of the work as a postscript to *Society of the Spectacle* and *Comments* does stand as his final book of theory (it is followed only by the autobiographical *Panegyric*, ‘*Cette mauvaise réputation...*’, which is similar in structure to *Considerations*, and the mysterious *Des contrats*, which consisted of nothing but Debord’s cinematographic contracts with Lebovici). Early in the book Debord says he will add only a single detail on the theoretical level to his previous formulation and parts of the text do read like ‘comments’ in the most ordinary sense of the word. The text contains several passages in which he acerbically decries various aspects the contemporary world and, of course, there are the token insults of assorted popular figures in politics and theory. Certain parts of the text do also look backwards to his earlier arguments, and certain

²⁸⁹ The exception, once again, is Kaufman, who finds ‘no bitterness’ in the late Debord. See Kaufman, p. 211.

²⁹⁰ Hussey, p. 353.

²⁹¹ Debord, *Comments*, p. 73.

²⁹² Hussey, p. 354.

²⁹³ Bracken, *Guy Debord – Revolutionary*, p. 218.

passages even rue missed opportunities, but even if there is a great deal of continuity between it and the rest of Debord's oeuvre, there is more novel than recycled material in *Comments*. One of the most simple reasons why *Comments* is much more than a mere summing up is that in Debord's opinion, historical developments have confirmed his original theses to such an extent that the existence of the spectacle has become so obvious it no longer has to be demonstrated theoretically. 'No one today can reasonably doubt the existence or the power of the spectacle; on the contrary, one might doubt whether it is reasonable to add anything on a question which experience has already settled in such draconian fashion.'²⁹⁴ There is a sense in which this obviousness makes *Society of the Spectacle* prescient but no longer timely.²⁹⁵ Even if we accept Debord as being correct, the contestatory tone of the book from 1967 still feels anachronistic in that what it describes has become so palpable and universally recognised.²⁹⁶ Yet if the notion of the spectacle is widely accepted, most people only understand or comment upon its most superficial manifestations: the media, consumerism, celebrity worship, etc. 'The vague feeling that there has been a rapid invasion which has forced people to lead their lives in an entirely different way is now widespread', but what he calls the 'practical consequences' of spectacular domination are 'still little known'.²⁹⁷ It is the discussion of these practical consequences that drives the book.

Alongside these consequences, what I want to suggest is that, above all else, the book is framed by the question of how power effectively functions in the spectacle. What *Comments* is essentially dealing with is – to take a quote from

²⁹⁴ Debord, *Comments*, p. 5.

²⁹⁵ For example, take Mark Fisher's remark that 'now, the fact that capitalism has colonized the dreaming life of the population is so taken for granted that it is no longer worthy of comment.' Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (UK: Zero Books, 2009), pp. 8-9.

²⁹⁶ See Debord, *Comments*, p. 5-6.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Debord's correspondence of 1978 – 'the management of society in the era of *the contested spectacle*.'²⁹⁸ As such, the discussion of the spectacle is largely framed by its role as apparatus and the manner in which this is controlled and manipulated by those in power. This means that the concept of the spectacle becomes less metaphysical and more specific, and thus also considerably easier to utilise in understanding concrete situations. While the conception of the spectacle elaborated in *Society of the Spectacle* tended to allow 'Debordist' readings of art, culture and politics to simply dismiss everything outright as 'spectacle', *Comments* demonstrates a much more nuanced form of critique. So rather than simply summing up, Debord uses his previously elaborated theory of the spectacle – not only from *Society of the Spectacle* but all his works post-68 and pre-*Comments* – as a foundation on which to build what is in many ways a bolstered, more precise and functional theory of the spectacle.

From the start of the book this precision is notable. Early on in *Comments* Debord defines the 'essence' of the modern spectacle in the clearest terms in his published work: 'the autocratic reign of the market economy which had acceded to an irresponsible sovereignty, and the totality of new techniques of government which accompanied this reign.'²⁹⁹ In the previous chapter I discussed Debray's critique of the concept of the spectacle as 'an entelechy above cultures, an entity lacking all history and economy, without borders or geography.'³⁰⁰ Even if this critique is not entirely unforeseeable or unfounded, it is based both on a simplistic reading of Debord, and one relying entirely upon *Society of the Spectacle*. Although the concept is still ambitious – Debord is still talking in terms of totality – it is much more spatio-

²⁹⁸ 'Guy Debord's Letters', 18 Sept., 1978, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/debord-18September1978.html>>.

²⁹⁹ Debord, *Comments*, p. 2.

³⁰⁰ Debray, p. 137.

temporally specific. While in 1967 the historical origins of the spectacle were barely even implied, by 1988 Debord provides a rather specific point of origin. He makes it clear throughout the book that the society of the spectacle is very much a phenomenon with its origin in the 20th century (for example, he says at one point that the development of the spectacle is that century's most important event).³⁰¹ But then, to be even more precise he writes, almost in passing, that when he wrote *Society of the Spectacle* in 1967, the spectacle 'had barely forty years behind it.'³⁰² The modern spectacle is thus seen as having begun in the 1920s. It is also given a more solid geographical setting. In *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord named two at once complementary and competing sectors of the spectacle, the diffuse and the concentrated: the diffuse coinciding with consumer capitalist states, the concentrated with the states dominated by fascism or 'really existing socialism'. These two 'rival and successive forms of spectacular power' are summarised in *Comments* in a manner that adds to their conceptualisation. For one, each of these forms is given an originary locus, the United States for the diffuse, Germany and the Soviet Union for the concentrated. This is implied in *Society of the Spectacle*, but never mentioned directly. Elsewhere, in a short essay called 'Notes on the "Immigrant Question"', he writes that the United States is '*the heart of the spectacle*' and that 'we [the French] have made ourselves Americans'.³⁰³ From this we can infer that there must be a process of gradual *spectacularisation* as the spectacle spreads from state to state, region to region. This is made clear as Debord writes that the diffuse spectacle 'represented the Americanisation of the world'. It is difficult to determine what Debord means by 'Americanisation': whether he means the spread of tailfins,

³⁰¹ Debord, *Comments*, p. 73.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

³⁰³ Debord, 'The Immigrant Questions', *Not Bored*, 2007 [1985], Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/immigrant-question.html>>.

refrigerators and Humphrey Bogart or in the Gramscian sense a Fordist disciplining of the worker inside and outside of the factory by corporations and the state. The answer is likely both as both the ubiquity of commodity culture and the integration of state and economy are the pillars of spectacular society.

Most central to *Comments* is Debord's theorisation of the 'integrated spectacle, which has developed in the two decades since 1968.³⁰⁴ Emerging in France in Italy, it is described as 'simultaneously concentrated and diffuse', a rational combination of the spectacle's two previous competing varieties, and the result of the diffuse spectacle's general victory over the concentrated. Benefiting from this hybrid essence, the integrated spectacle is more powerful than either of its forbears. 'When the spectacle was concentrated, the greater part of surrounding society escaped it; when diffuse, a small part; today, no part. The spectacle has spread itself to the point where it now permeates all reality.'³⁰⁵ Everything has been polluted by this proliferation of spectacular power, even 'the legacy of old books and old buildings' that preserved the only remaining trace of another world is being reclassified and absorbed into the spectacle. The integrated spectacle has also benefited 'spectacular government', which 'now possesses all the means necessary to falsify the whole of production and perception' allowing it to control and manipulate the historical record and with it people's understanding of the present and future. Debord's chapter

³⁰⁴ Debord is not the only theorist to use the term 'integrated' to describe developments in capitalism around this time. Around the same time Debord was writing *Comments*, Felix Guattari was using the term integrated world capitalism (IWC) as a term synonymous with a post-industrial capitalism in which immaterial labour has become prominent. See Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*. trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London: Continuum, 2008); Felix Guattari and Toni Negri, *Communists like Us* (New York, Semiotext, 1990).

³⁰⁵ Debord, *Comments*, p. 9. It should be noted that the term 'permeates' is perhaps somewhat misleading. The original French is, '*Le spectacle s'est mélangé à toute réalité, en l'irradiant*', which the Not Bored collective, for example, translate literally as 'The spectacle is mixed into all reality and irradiates it.' Now Debord approved Malcolm Imrie's translation so we should perhaps give it the benefit of the doubt but 'permeates' to me suggests something slightly more totalizing than 'mixed into'. This may seem like a slight difference of meaning but the consequences for how we think of the integrated spectacle based on this sentence are quite profound. For example, 'permeates' seems to imply a Baudrillardian state where the spectacle has seeped into and contaminated all reality while 'mixed into' does not imply the same level of contamination.

introducing this new era ends with an enigmatic claim: ‘Yet the highest ambition of the integrated spectacle is still to turn secret agents into revolutionaries, and revolutionaries into secret agents.’³⁰⁶

The society attacked by Debord in 1967 was in many ways dominated by a kinder, gentler spectacle. It denied life and reduced the population to an alienated existence full of pseudo-pleasures, but it at least tried to please or convince. By contrast, the integrated spectacle is much more menacing. The words fallacious, deceptive, impostrous, inveigling, insidious, and captious ‘taken together constitute today a kind of palette of colours with which to paint a portrait of the society of the spectacle.’³⁰⁷ The cynical and corrupt Manuel Noriega is this society’s ‘modern prince’.³⁰⁸ Growing alongside the integrated spectacle is the Mafia (the ‘model’ of all advanced commercial enterprises in the integrated spectacle), industrial food processing, shantytowns, the secret services and illiteracy.³⁰⁹ It is no longer just men of state and criminals that have to worry about being assassinated but businessmen, bureaucrats, journalists, and anyone in the wrong place at the wrong time. ‘Going from success to success, until 1968 modern society was convinced it was loved. It has since had to abandon these dreams; it prefers to be feared. It knows full well that “its innocent air has gone forever.”’³¹⁰ After the failed revolutionary moments of the late sixties and seventies, the society of the spectacle has concentrated on defending itself from these threats and occasionally launching counter-attacks.

This Machiavellian conception of the integrated spectacle as a society that prefers to be feared rather than loved comes directly from Debord’s theorisation of

³⁰⁶ Debord, *Comments*, p. 11.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

seventies Italy. Towards the end of the ‘Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*’ Debord writes almost identically,

The society of the spectacle began everywhere in coercion, deceit and blood, but it promised a happy path. It believed itself to be loved. Now it no longer says “What appears is good; what is good appears”; now it says simply “It is so.” The society of the spectacle admits frankly that it is no longer essentially reformable, though change is its very nature (the transmutation of everything for the worst). It has lost all its general illusions about itself.³¹¹

What Debord was witnessing in Italy over this decade was a shift from a spectacle that ruled via illusion, which projected a vision of happiness for its subjects, to a more nefarious spectacle that ruled via fear. Part of this is the state’s ‘use’ of terrorism. Sanguinetti wrote that fear of terrorism pushed the population to accept the status quo.³¹² Debord takes this to be a general characteristic of the integrated spectacle in *Comments*. Spectacular democracy, he writes, wants ‘*to be judged by its enemies rather than by its results*’. The story of terrorism is written by the state and is therefore highly instructive. The spectators must certainly never know everything about terrorism, but they must always know enough to convince them that, compared with terrorism, everything else must be acceptable, or in any case more rational and democratic.³¹³ Negri and Guattari in their *Communists Like Us* write about the role of terror and fear in what they dub Integrated World Capitalism. This fear is generated by the spectre of nuclear annihilation, economic crisis and the possibility of impoverishment, and the figure of the global industrial reserve army.³¹⁴ Similarly, the integrated spectacle no longer tries to convince the population that they are on the path to something great, but that all the other paths are fraught with even greater dangers or are simply dead ends. What this also means is that while the diffuse spectacle at least ran on pure ideology so to speak, the integrated spectacle needs a

³¹¹ Debord, ‘Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*’.

³¹² Sanguinetti, *On Terrorism and the State*, p. 97.

³¹³ Debord, *Comments*, p. 24.

³¹⁴ Guattari and Negri, *Communists Like Us*, pp. 47-74.

much stronger apparatus in order to rule. It must be careful since, following Machiavelli, it is necessary for it to be feared and not hated.³¹⁵

The societies that have reached the stage of the integrated spectacle share five principal features: incessant technological renewal, integration of state and economy, generalized secrecy, unanswerable lies, and an eternal present. These first two are said to be characteristics of the society of the spectacle since its origin, while the latter three are effects of the spectacle's domination in its integrated stage. This five-point taxonomy of the spectacle has been in Debord's mind for over a decade. There is a chapter *The Real Report on the Last Chance to Save Capitalism in Italy* in which Sanguinetti details five 'distinctive traits of this new reality in which he writes.³¹⁶ These are, in order of appearance: 1) 'the quantitative and qualitative *progress of political lies* to a level of power that has never been seen in history'; 2) '*a grandiose reinforcement of State power* as an increasingly sophisticated organism of surveillance'; 3) the perfection of the separation of people; 4) unprecedented growth in the power of the economy and of industry; and 5) 'the vertiginous growth in the complication of the everyday intervention of human society of all aspects of the production of life, and its replacement of every natural element with a new factor that one could call artificial'.³¹⁷ We can witness the development of Debord's conception of the spectacle as these five characteristics can be compared with the 'five principal features' of the integrated spectacle enumerated in *Comments*. The New York based, pro-situ collective Not Bored chooses to focus entirely on the similarities in what, to be fair, is a brief introduction to *The Real Report*. They write that there are 'strong similarities' between the five features of contemporary capitalism listed by Censor

³¹⁵ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chapter XVII.

³¹⁶ Sanguinetti, *Real Report*, p. 19.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-24.

and the ‘five principal features’ of the integrated spectacle.³¹⁸ For Debord, those features are 1) incessant technological renewal (which corresponds with #4 in Censor's list); 2) integration of state and economy (#2 in Censor's list); 3) generalised secrecy (#5 in Censor's list); 4) unanswerable lies (#1 in Censor's list); and 5) an eternal present (#3 in Censor's list).³¹⁹ Even if we can find similarities between these two enumerations, Not Bored seems to be trying to fit round pegs in square holes. It is only by focusing exclusively on the similarities and ignoring all differences between the two lists that one would be able to even roughly equate ‘an eternal present’ with ‘the perfection of separation’ or ‘generalised secrecy’ with ‘the replacement of everything natural by the artificial’.

The need for incessant technological innovation has a past that precedes the society of the spectacle. As Marx observes, capitalist competition drives firms to constantly introduce new means of production, as well as management techniques, to produce more and more quickly. He also argues that technology is a powerful weapon in the class war in that labour-saving inventions make workers expendable and increase the size of the industrial reserve army. ‘It would be possible to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working-class revolt.’³²⁰ Debord concurs and does not argue that incessant technological renewal is specific to the society of the spectacle. Rather, he writes, ‘Technological innovation has a long history, and is an essential component of capitalist society, sometimes described as industrial or post-industrial. But since its most recent acceleration (in the aftermath of the Second World War) it has greatly reinforced spectacular authority, by surrendering everybody to the mercy of

³¹⁸ Not Bored, ‘Gianfranco Sanguinetti: Veritable Report on the Last Chance to Save Capitalism in Italy’, No date given, available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/report.html>>.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

³²⁰ Marx, *Capital*. Vol. I. p. 563.

specialists, to their calculations and to the judgements which always depend on them.³²¹ Technological developments are not only important in the realm of production but in the realm of consumption as well. I have already discussed in the previous chapter Debord's dating of the spectacle to 'barely forty years' before 1967. In terms of incessant technological renewal it is interesting to note that in addition to technological developments in industrial production and the media during this period, it was in 1925 that the board of General Motors voted to introduce annual models in order to spur consumption. The new models would of course contain new technologies but the changes would above all be design-based and superficial in terms of the actual functioning of the automobile. It was then during the Great Depression in the US that notions of planned obsolescence began to develop, although they did not really take off until after the war. The manipulation and stimulation of desire in the effort to get consumers to purchase the latest technological gadget is one of the most common tropes in the critique of 'consumer society'.

It is important to stress here that Debord is no luddite. On the contrary, stretching back to his Lettrist days, technology was seen as a means of freeing people from base survival and time consuming, back breaking labour in order to build the environments of their dreams. The future cities envisioned by Debord, Chtcheglov and Constant would utilise highly advanced technology. Like Marx, who did not see the logic of technological innovation and the logic of capital as being identical, the problem is not technology itself but its subordination to the logic of capital. In *Comments*, Debord's condemnation of the society of the spectacle's use of technology is for the most part limited to the environmental disasters wrought by its application of industry – from the destruction of the rainforest to the decimation of the ozone

³²¹ Debord, *Comments*, p. 12.

layer, nuclear accidents and contamination. Science is seen as being ‘prostituted’ to the state and economy.

The second principal feature of the integrated spectacle is the integration of state and economy. Like incessant technological renewal, it is a characteristic of both the integrated spectacle and the society of the spectacle in general. It is said to be the ‘most evident trend of the century’ and ‘at the very least the motor of all recent economic developments.’³²² Going back to our considerations on the origins of the spectacle, the 1920s was an important decade for the integration of the state and the economy. In the previous chapter this was discussed in relation to Fordism and its institution on a national scale in the post-1929 development of the Keynesian Welfare State. As Negri writes, ‘The Wall Street crash of “Black Thursday” 1929 destroyed the political and state mythologies of a century of bourgeois domination... [It marked] the final burial of the classic liberal myth of the separation of state and market, the end of *laissez-faire*.’³²³ Negri calls the new state form that developed thereafter the planner state, but for Debord this marks the beginning of the society of the spectacle proper.

It is interesting, and perhaps slightly counter-intuitive, that Debord was positing the integration of state and economy as one of the defining features of the society of the spectacle towards the end of a decade in which Keynesian economics and the Fordist compact were being discredited and dismantled. Wendy Brown, drawing heavily on Foucault’s lectures on the German *Ordo*-liberals and the Chicago School, argues that while liberal democracy had for the past two hundred years maintained a gap between the economy and the polity, it is this gap that neoliberalism threatens to close. ‘Neoliberal rationality,’ she writes, ‘while foregrounding the

³²² Debord, *Comments*, p. 12.

³²³ Negri, *Revolution Retrieved*, p. 12-3.

market, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy; it involves *extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action*, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player'.³²⁴ A chief characteristic of neoliberal political rationality, Brown continues, is that the sphere of politics, and in fact all dimensions of contemporary life, are submitted to economic rationality. She writes, 'not only is the human being configured exhaustively as *homo æconomicus*, but all dimensions of human life are cast in terms of a market rationality'.³²⁵ The assumption is not that left to their own devices humans will inevitably obey a certain rationality, but that institutions, discourses and policies have to be generated that will encourage and reward such behaviour: the claims of neoliberals are constructivist and normative rather than ontological. As such, it is different from classical laissez-faire liberalism in that the state is not meant to take a hands-off approach. Nor does the state direct the economy; rather 'the market is the organizing and regulative principle of the state and society'.³²⁶ As a result the state's legitimacy is based on the economy's health and propensities for growth. This is what Debord is getting at when he implies that 'the integrated spectacle has "transformed the world economically"'.³²⁷ He capitalises the word 'Market', implying that, like the Feuerbachian godhead, this human creation has taken on a seemingly autonomous life of its own.³²⁸

Neither of these first two characteristics of the integrated spectacle is discussed in any real detail in *Comments*. They are the foundations on which the spectacle has been built, while Debord writes that the following three features – generalised secrecy, unanswerable lies, and an eternal present – are 'effects of spectacular domination' rather than the underlying causes. These features receive

³²⁴ Wendy Brown, *Edgework* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 39-40.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³²⁷ Debord, 'Preface to the Third French Edition', *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 8.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

considerably more attention in *Comments* and are thus worthy of a more detailed discussion.

Generalised Secrecy

We live in an age that cannot distinguish privacy from secrecy.

-Martin Taylor, Secretary General, Bilderberg Group

Secrecy plays a central role in the integrated spectacle of *Comments* to such an extent that the book is occasionally cited as *Treatise on Secrets*.³²⁹ Debord writes, ‘Generalised secrecy stands behind the spectacle, as the decisive complement of all it displays and, in the last analysis, as its most vital operation.’³³⁰ As mentioned in the introduction, the significance of secrecy to the integrated spectacle appears to be counterintuitive. Throughout *Society of the Spectacle* the sheer visibility of the spectacle is stressed: the spectacle is about appearance, it is ‘a negation of life that has *invented a visual form for itself*, it raises sight to the most important sense, and ‘*capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image*’ is probably its most quoted definition.³³¹ The scientific name of the spectacle’s model citizen is ‘Homo Spectator’: a bipedal primate characterized by a propensity to look or watch.³³² MacPhee writes that for Debord (among others), ‘the technological organization of vision and the visible defines the fundamental character of our contemporary

³²⁹ It’s cited as *Treatise on Secrets: Commentaires sur la société du spectacle* in several places online but I haven’t been able to find any edition that actually has this title. Jack Bratich claims it is a translation of its French title but I’ve never this title in French either. Jack Bratich, ‘Public Secrecy and Immanent Security’, *Culture Studies* (20:4, 2006), p. 494.

³³⁰ Debord, *Comments*, p. 12.

³³¹ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 10, 18, 34.

³³² Debord, ‘Preface to the Third French Edition’, *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 9.

condition.’³³³ This is almost exclusively the sense in which the term ‘spectacle’ is used in Cultural Studies.

The emphasis on secrecy in *Comments* challenges this model. Back in Debord’s 1967 book, the shiny, hypnotic surface of the spectacle shrouds antagonism and misery, but this is not exactly secrecy. In Sissela Bok’s in-depth investigation of secrets, she argues that at the heart of the definition of the secret or secrecy is intentional concealment.³³⁴ In this sense the secret has to be distinguished from the unknown, the private, or the illusory. Intelligence analysts Abram Shulsky and Gary Schmitt make a helpful distinction between secrets and mysteries: ‘Secrets are bits of information that exist somewhere but to which one does not have direct access,’ while mysteries, ‘on the other hand, are things that nobody can know for certain.’³³⁵ A secret is something that either you know that you do not want certain others to know or something that someone else knows that you do not have access to. Also important to the definition of the secret, unlike the unknown or the mysterious, is that the secret is known by someone. Secrecy implies that there is a segment of society with access to the secret, to some underlying truth, which they intentionally hide from everyone else. As Bok writes, ‘The separation between insider and outsider is inherent in secrecy; and to think something secret is already to envisage potential conflict between what insiders conceal and outsiders want to inspect or lay bare.’³³⁶

The importance of secrecy in *Comments* implies a rather different configuration of the spectacle to the 1967 book. There the portrait of the spectacle was as a generalized illusion, infecting the population as a whole and making them ripe for manipulation. The spectacle was ‘the acme of ideology’ and this blanket of

³³³ Graham MacPhee, *The Architecture of the Visible*, p. 4.

³³⁴ Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (USA: Vintage Books, 1989).

³³⁵ Abram Shulsky and Gary Schmitt, *Silent Warfare: Understanding the World of Intelligence* (Virginia: Brassey’s Inc, 2002), p. 236, n.9.

³³⁶ Bok, *Secrets*, p. 6.

false consciousness laid over everyone, workers, capitalists, bureaucrats and politicians alike.³³⁷ Now, however, Debord is writing of ‘those who run the spectacle, or their friends’.³³⁸ In *Society of the Spectacle* there is only an ‘it’; in *Comments* Debord can speak of a ‘they’. There are the manipulators and the manipulated, the deceivers and the deceived, the informed and the disinformed, those who are in on the secret, those who think they are in on the secret, those who are aware of their ignorance, and those ignorant of their ignorance.

This focus on secrecy brings to mind two interrelated questions. Is secrecy not something unavoidable in any social arrangement and has it not always been a part of politics in and between states? To most theorists of international relations or warfare, for example, secrecy is taken as inevitable. One can find references to the need for secrecy throughout the political science and strategy canon: in Sun Tzu, Thucydides, Machiavelli, Clausewitz. Even in a semi-Hobbesian international system in which states compete not only militarily, but also for international sporting and cultural events, corporate headquarters, etc., any hope for full transparency seems a utopian fantasy. Nor is secrecy something exclusive to the modern age as this list of authors attests. Hannah Arendt in her reflections on the Pentagon Papers writes, ‘For secrecy – what diplomatically is called discretion as well as the *arcana imperii*, the mysteries of government – and deception, the deliberate falsehood and the outright lie used as legitimate means to achieve political ends, have been with us since the beginning of recorded history.’³³⁹

What about Debord’s own use of secrecy in his writings and private life, his affinity for cloak and dagger, and his likening of his own work to strategy and

³³⁷ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 215.

³³⁸ Debord, *Comments*, p. 18.

³³⁹ Hannah Arendt, ‘Lying in Politics: Reflections on The Pentagon Papers’, *The New York Review of Books* (Vol. 17, No. 8, 18 Nov 1971), <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/10375>>.

military manoeuvres? As Kaufman demonstrates, many of Debord's works are directed towards a public in the know, a public that can understand his texts' esoteric messages. This clearly functions in the manner Bok describes of creating a clear separation between those who know or understand the secret, and those left in the dark. And indeed, at their worst, the 'zines, websites, and texts of groups and individuals heavily influenced by Debord and the Situationists often give off the impression that the author is in on a secret – a self-satisfied position of having understood, and looking down on those who have not found edification. Even if this is an aberration of Debord's intention, it nonetheless implies that Debord is hardly championing a form of complete openness and transparency.

What differentiates contemporary secrecy for Debord is that it has become generalised: it does not exist only in relation to the military or secret services, but is spread throughout society.

Our society is built on secrecy, from the "front" organizations which draw an impenetrable screen over the concentrated wealth of their members, to the "official secrets" which allow the state a vast field of operation free from any legal constraint; from the often frightening secrets of *shoddy production* hidden by advertising, to the projections of an extrapolated future, in which domination alone reads off the likely progress of things whose existence it denies, calculating the responses it will mysteriously make.³⁴⁰

There are more areas and buildings in the city and countryside that are off limits to the general population, and more and more people are trained to act in secret in various sectors receiving more and more state funding or reaping more profits in the private sector. One corporation guards its secrets with the same tenacity that its rivals employ to reveal them, whether it is advances in military hardware or fabric softener. Not only this, but secrecy in general becomes a visible part of the spectacle itself: the

³⁴⁰ Debord, *Comments*, p. 52.

secrets of celebrities' private lives, beauty secrets, and even secret conspiracies of power become the subject of mass speculation in the media.

Debord also views the critique of the integrated spectacle as being cloaked in secrecy: it is both hidden and in hiding. There are two different senses in which this is argued to be the case. The first is the relatively standard Chomskian position that the corporate controlled media have a series of filters that remove positions and stories that are particularly unfavourable to their interests, while simultaneously polluting civil society with diversionary bells and whistles.³⁴¹ The second is that because of the state's ability to infiltrate, manipulate and destabilise its opponents, and the proclivity of various secret services and security professionals to provoke in order to discredit groups and individuals taking hostile positions towards this society, genuine critique has to operate clandestinely in order to avoid being exposed. Revolutionaries are in a double bind as the death of the agora means that they are forced to spread their message through the mass media wing of the spectacle, so to speak, which will be resisted and silenced by the powers that be. Simultaneously, any attempt to go public will leave them prone to surveillance, infiltration and manipulation.

This predicament is one of the main reasons why Debord claims he was forced in *Comments* to devise a new way of writing. Right from his first published writings, his texts are filled with literary illusions, *détournements* and references to his personal history. Rarely easy or straightforward, they often require multiple readings for their richness to be appreciated. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* is doubly awkward in that it presents a set of hermeneutic difficulties that arise from its self-professed ambiguity. The book can be read relatively quickly as the language no longer requires the reader to linger on every paragraph, trying to decipher what each

³⁴¹ Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002).

sentence means. But this simplicity is superficial: a ruse hiding a text much more knotted and complex than it appears.

It begins with an epigraph from Sun Tzu on the art of deception in warfare. The two opening paragraphs of the text proper then offer a message to the reader that is worth quoting in full:

These *Comments* are sure to be welcomed by fifty or sixty people; a large number given the times in which we live and the gravity of the matters under discussion. But then, of course, in some circles I am considered to be an authority. It must also be borne in mind that a good half of this interested elite will consist of people who devote themselves to maintaining the spectacular system of domination, and the other half of people who persist in doing quite the opposite. Having, then, to take account of readers who are both attentive and diversely influential, I obviously cannot speak with complete freedom. Above all, I must take care not to give too much information to just anybody.

Our unfortunate times thus compel me, once again, to write in a new way. Some elements will be intentionally omitted; and the plan will have to remain rather unclear. Readers will encounter certain decoys, like the very hallmark of the era. As long as certain pages are interpolated here and there, the overall meaning may appear: just as secret clauses have very often been added to whatever treaties may openly stipulate; just as some chemical agents only reveal their hidden properties when they are combined with others. However, in this brief work there will be only too many things which are, alas, easy to understand.³⁴²

Now it is of course possible that this warning is itself a decoy simply meant to focus attention: by being told that the text is full of tricks, the dedicated reader will be extra attentive. After all, if Debord actually wanted to trick certain readers, why would he tell them about it beforehand? As such it should also be considered that this is just an attempt to appear clever and a sign of Debord's increasing recalcitrance and inflated sense of self-importance – more than one critic has decried his megalomania. He also has a history of producing texts intentionally inscrutable to the uninitiated stretching back to his first book, *Mémoires* (1959), famously bound with sandpaper so it would destroy any book placed next to it. Speaking of Debord and the Lettrist scene of the

³⁴² Debord, *Comments*, p. 1.

fifties, Vincent Kaufmann writes, ‘The lost children are smug, they have no understanding or appreciation of publication. They have replaced it with secrecy, with anti-books.’ – of which *Mémoires* is a prime example.³⁴³ This penchant for double-meanings and literary tricks lasts until *Panegyric*.³⁴⁴ In his ‘On the Difficulties of translating *Panégryque*’, published as an appendix to *Panegyric* volumes I and II, Debord claims the book ‘contains many traps and multiple, deliberately intended meanings’, such as sentences that present two possible meanings and sentences or passages in which the irony is uncertain.³⁴⁵

On the surface they may make strange bedfellows, but it is worthwhile to think of these concerns from the perspective of the political philosopher Leo Strauss. In *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952), Strauss details the technique of what he calls ‘writing between the lines’.³⁴⁶ Strauss primarily discusses philosophers of the political in his text – from Plato and al-Farabi to Hobbes and Spinoza, but his argument can be generalised. All theorists, the argument goes, are constrained by the threat of persecution, which covers everything from capital punishment to social ostracism and anxiety about offending a friend or colleague. As a result, they must develop a technique that will allow them to get their point across to their target audience without risking persecution. ‘Persecution,’ Strauss writes, ‘gives rise to a peculiar technique of writing, and therewith to a peculiar type of literature, in which the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines. That literature is addressed, not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers

³⁴³ Kaufmann, p. 33.

³⁴⁴ As Alexander Galloway has noted, even Debord’s book on his board game, *The Game of War*, is filled with illegal moves that cannot be written off as mere typos or mistakes. See Alexander Galloway, ‘Debord’s Nostalgic Algorithm’ *Culture Machine* 10, 2009, Available online at: <<http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/350/352>>.

³⁴⁵ Debord, *Panegyric*, pp. 171-2.

³⁴⁶ It is interesting to think through this thin line between elitism and prudence in relation to the neo-conservative Straussians, whose texts are filled with in-jokes and concealments for the uninitiated. See Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven: Yale, 2004), pp. 95-108.

only.³⁴⁷ The possibility of this technique is based on two axioms. The first that ‘thoughtless men are careless readers, and only thoughtful men are careful readers,’ and the second ‘that a careful writer of normal intelligence is more intelligent than the most intelligent censor, as such.’³⁴⁸ It is the censor that must demonstrate that the text’s disguised message is offensive and it is unlikely that the censor will be skilled enough in the art of interpretation to do so. Every text therefore has what Strauss calls its esoteric and exoteric teachings. Its exoteric teaching is ‘a popular teaching of an edifying character, which is in the foreground,’ and its esoteric ‘a philosophic teaching concerning the most important subject, which is indicated only between the lines.’³⁴⁹ This exoteric message is intended for the establishment so to speak, while the esoteric message is meant to excite the minds of the young, of the would-be philosophers who will be fascinated by the text and see it as a challenge. Thus the text’s esoteric teaching does ‘not disturb the slumber of those who cannot see the wood for the trees, but act(s) as awakening stumbling blocks for those who can.’³⁵⁰ It is only the truly impassioned reader who is able to critically interrogate the work in order to discover the writing between the lines.

To what extent can this conception be applied to Debord? It is unlikely he was afraid of persecution in the Straussian sense, although arguably he had reason to fear the authorities (he and the SI had been under police surveillance following the events of May ‘68) and also the public – many of whom likely still considered him responsible for the assassination of Lebovici. Kaufmann meanwhile stresses that post-‘68, Debord was never forced to leave France to avoid arrest: ‘repression was not the reason he left. It seems that he left not to escape the police or even a Paris that no

³⁴⁷ Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) p. 25.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25, 26.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*,

longer existed, but for his image, his newfound glory. Was he pursued by the police or by pro-situationists? Both probably, but the fact that he refers only to the second is not without significance. His exile appears to have been voluntary. It was based on his great need for clandestinity – it was almost a question of taste.³⁵¹ Debord perhaps had more adoring fans than spiteful enemies. *Comments*, however, comes two decades after 1968, and his acclaim in France as a ‘man of letters’, spurred in part by Philippe Sollers’ discovery and promotion of Debord, did not really take off until the publication of *Panegyric* in 1989, so it is difficult to believe that various sorts of Debord enthusiasts would have been beating down his door looking for autographs at the time of writing.

So what is Debord afraid of? Does he fear alerting ‘those that run the spectacle’ of the most developed radical thought, allowing them to adjust their repressive strategies accordingly? Is he worried about recuperation, his ideas being blunted by absorption into the spectacle? This was a recurring fear of the Situationists after witnessing first hand the domestication of Dada and Surrealism (and perhaps it is worth mentioning that the first large retrospective on the SI would be held at the Centre Pompidou the following year, boycotted by Debord), but as the Situationists wrote back in 1964, ‘It is quite natural that our enemies succeed in partially using us. We are neither going to leave the present field of culture to them nor mix with them. [...] [L]ike the proletariat, we cannot claim to be unexploitable in the present conditions; we must simply work to make any such exploitation entail the greatest possible risk for the exploiters.’³⁵² Everything can be potentially co-opted and Debord surely felt his ideas were still dangerous, so why this need to risk alienating potential allies in order to befuddle the fifty ‘professional underlings of the spectacle’?

³⁵¹ Kaufmann, p. 65.

³⁵² ‘Now the SI’, *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 136.

There are no obvious answers to these questions. At the very least one might say that Debord's warning works in that the reader cannot take anything in the text as given. One cannot simply absorb or adopt Debord's positions because one is never sure if a given sentence or phrase is meant to fool his enemies. The result is a text that explicitly 'demands making veritable judgments at every line', and thus requires an active reader.³⁵³ As Kaufmann writes, imbibing his subject's point of view, 'To be a reader of Debord is, from all appearances, something that must be deserved.'³⁵⁴ It goes without saying that being this worthy reader is not the same as being a disciple (the SI was patently against having 'disciples'³⁵⁵); rather, an interrogator. The text's esoteric teaching will only reveal itself through critical examination and implementation in the world.

Unanswerable lies

Whoever is unable to lie does not know what truth is.

-Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1885

Related to generalised secrecy is the fourth principal feature of the integrated spectacle: the dominance of what Debord calls 'unanswerable lies'. This unanswerable status has given the false a new quality. 'At a stroke it is truth which has almost everywhere ceased to exist or, at best, has been reduced to the status of pure hypothesis. Unanswerable lies have succeeded in eliminating public opinion, which first lost the ability to make itself heard and then very quickly dissolved

³⁵³ Debord, *Comments*, p. 29.

³⁵⁴ Kaufmann, p. 33.

³⁵⁵ 'Situationist International Anti-Public Relations Service', *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 134.

altogether.³⁵⁶ The consequences of this extend from politics and the natural sciences to the administration of justice and the arts. It is impossible to verify anything and the result is a world in which we ‘live and die at the confluence of innumerable mysteries.’³⁵⁷ From the lies of politicians and the illusions created by television to the false promises of commodities and the dubious conclusions of corrupted researchers, no one and nothing can be trusted. Beyond this, however, living or dying at the confluence of mysteries rather than secrets or lies implies that nothing can be known for certain by anyone. In *On Terrorism and the State* and ‘The Preface to the Fourth Italian edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*’ Sanguinetti and Debord believed in the revolutionary power of the truth, particularly if revealed at the right moment. Is this a position that has become out-moded by the time of *Comments*? Has the reign of the unanswerable lie discredited the notion that truth – factual, empirical truth – can explode into the political arena?

The reflections of Arendt and Jacques Derrida on truth, lying and the political can add to Debord’s formulations. Derrida defines the lie thus: ‘the lie is not a fact or a state; it is an intentional act, a lying. There is not the lie, but rather this saying or this meaning-to-say that is called lying: to lie would be to address to another a statement or more than one statement, a series of statements that the liar knows, consciously, in explicit, thematic, current consciousness, form assertions that are totally or partially false’.³⁵⁸ Just as the secret only makes sense in opposition to an idea of openness or publicness, to think of the lie only makes sense in relation to the truth. Derrida writes, ‘By definition, the liar knows the truth, if not the whole truth at least the truth of what he thinks; he knows what he *means to say*; he knows the

³⁵⁶ Debord, *Comments*, p. 13.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

³⁵⁸ Derrida, ‘History of the Lie’, *Futures*. ed. Richard Rand (California: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 68.

difference between what he thinks and what he says; he knows that he is lying.³⁵⁹ The lie presupposes not only a differentiation between lie and truth, but liar and lied to. ‘These intentional acts [lies] are destined for the other, another or others, with the aim of deceiving them, with the aim of *making them believe*’.³⁶⁰ As the secret necessitates someone who knows the truth, so the lie necessitates a liar, for nothing is a lie in itself: what is key is the subjective knowledge of the person making the claim.

Again, like secrecy, lying is nothing new. To quote Arendt once more, ‘Lies have always been regarded as necessary and justifiable tools not only of the politician’s or the demagogue’s but also of the statesman’s trade.’³⁶¹ But although lying may be a permanent feature of the political arena, Arendt also sees a quantitative and qualitative difference in the power of the lie in modern life. She notes that ‘modern political lies deal efficiently with things that are not secrets at all but are known to practically everybody.’³⁶² The modern lie, which begins in the totalitarian regimes of fascism and Stalinism, seeks to erase certain facts from historical existence. Arendt writes, ‘the difference between the traditional lie and the modern lie will more often than not amount to the difference between hiding and destroying.’³⁶³ The traditional lie targeted the enemy while the modern lie targets everybody. As such, in the past, one could spot a lie relatively easily by looking at the context as a whole and searching for contradictions, incongruities, etc. Modern political lies, on the other hand, ‘are so big that they require a complete rearrangement of the whole factual texture – the making of another reality, as it were, into which they will fit without seam, crack, or fissure’.³⁶⁴ Additionally, with the traditional lie, the liars did

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

³⁶¹ Arendt, ‘Truth and Politics’, *Between Past and Future* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 223.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 247.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

not deceive themselves and in certain company took the liberty to speak the truth. Arendt claims that this distinction is in danger of collapsing, as the liars begin to believe their own lies.

Despite the ubiquity and power of the modern lie, for Arendt it will never be omnipotent. ‘The truth of the matter is that this can never be done by either theory or opinion manipulation – as though a fact can be safely removed from the world if only enough people believe in its nonexistence. It can be done only through radical destruction – as in the case of the murderer who *says* that Mrs. Smith has died and then goes and kills her.’³⁶⁵ While in isolated cases this may in fact be possible, things are different in the realm of politics. Arendt continues, ‘In the political domain, such destruction would have to be wholesale. Needless to say there never existed on any level of government such a will to wholesale destruction, in spite of the fearful number of war crimes committed in the course of the Vietnam War. But even where this will is present, as it was in the case of both Hitler and Stalin, the power to achieve it would have to amount to omnipotence.’³⁶⁶ Arendt uses Trotsky as an example and claims that despite Stalin’s best efforts it was impossible to eliminate his presence completely. He can be killed, his family can be killed, his name can be taken out of school textbooks and deleted from official records but, particularly internationally, his story remains known. While individuals or states may go to enormous lengths to suppress, alter or destroy the truth – leaving a trail of destruction in their wake – they will never completely succeed.

For Debord however (and we can see this in his correspondence from the late 1970s) there is something about the modern lie ‘which goes *even further than Goebbels* [and one would assume Stalin], because the socio-material conditions of the

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁶ Arendt, ‘Lying in Politics’.

reception of the lie have evolved since 1930.³⁶⁷ This development of the modern lie seems to be an extremely recent phenomenon, as in his film *In Girum*, where discussing the 1950s, he says that, ‘Liars were in power, as always; but economic development had not yet given them the means to lie about everything, or to confirm their lies by falsifying the actual content of all production’, which implies that the modern lie developed some time after that period.³⁶⁸ It is interesting that in this same letter Debord names the ‘assassination’ of Red Army Faction’s Andreas Baader (and presumably Gundrun Ensslin, Jan-Carl Raspe and Irmgard Möller) as a ‘very significant turning point’ in the development of the unanswerable lie. On Oct. 17th, 1977, Baader and company were found dead in their Stammheim prison cells (with the exception of Möller who was stabbed in the chest four times [or who stabbed herself in the chest four times] but survived). Baader and Raspe died of gunshot wounds while Ensslin was found hanging. The authorities immediately ruled it suicide but many suspected they were executed.³⁶⁹ Debord writes, ‘The dazzling absurdity of the "governmental truth" – *this time* – is not a fault in the execution of the operation. I think that the intention was to register on such a basis the formal accord of everyone (that is to say, all those who can speak in the spectacle) with this purely unbelievable version of the facts, but which must be *registered* just the same.’³⁷⁰ One observes not only the complacency of the various authorities and establishment figures who parrot an obviously false version of the events, but also the impotence,

³⁶⁷ ‘Guy Debord’s Letters’, 18 September, 1978, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/debord-18September1978.html>>.

³⁶⁸ Debord, ‘In Girum Imus Nocte Et Consumimur Igni’, *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works*, pp. 154-5.

³⁶⁹ Stefan Aust, one of the RAF’s better-known chroniclers, has recently said: ‘I looked under every rock. I spent weeks and months following up every lead, and the simple truth is there is nothing that allows you to truly maintain that it was clearly either a murder or a suicide.’ Quoted in J. Smith and André Moncourt, *The Red Army Faction: A Documentary History, Volume 1: Projectiles for the People* (Montreal, Canada: Kersplebedeb, 2009), p. 511

³⁷⁰ ‘Guy Debord’s Letters’, 18 Sept., 1978 Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/debord-18September1978.html>>.

and Debord claims ‘cowardice’, of the opposition who can only resort to ineffectual counter claims about what really happened. They are no longer militants capable of intervening in the situation but merely ‘*vitelloni spettatori*’ (‘lazy spectators’).³⁷¹

Jean Baudrillard, in his discussion of the Stammheim deaths in the short essay ‘Our Theater of Cruelty’ takes a similar stance.³⁷² It is the staging of Baader’s death in all its ambiguity that makes the strategy of the German state effective. This ambiguity erases the death itself and makes everyone focus on the truth about the death. Those sympathetic to the aims of RAF especially wanted to get to the truth of the matter, convinced that if they were to expose the role of the German state in the deaths, insurrection would ensue. Baudrillard dismisses this as ‘a load of rubbish’ and writes,

the inspired manoeuvre of the German government, which consists in delivering through its “calculated” errors an unfinished product, an unrecoverable truth. Thus everyone will exhaust himself finishing the work, and going to the end of the truth. A subtle incitement to self-management. It is content to produce an event involving death; others will put the finishing touches on the job. The truth.³⁷³

Focusing on the details surrounding their deaths leads one to ignore their politics and ideology. The discussion is organised around an endless debate on the veracity of various claims and facticity gradually dissolves. Baudrillard continues, ‘The price of the truth for power is superficial. On the other hand, the benefits of general mobilization, dissuasion, pacification and mental socialization obtained through this crystallization of the truth are immense. A smart operation, under which Baader’s

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*

³⁷² Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (Semiotext(e), 1983). pp. 113-123. For more on the relationship between Debord and Baudrillard see Stephen Best and Douglas Kellner, ‘Debord and the Postmodern Turn: New Stages of Spectacle’, *Illuminations: Kellner*, Available online at: <<http://www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/kell17.htm>>. In “*Cette Mauvaise Réputation...*” (1993) Debord actually seems to have some positive things to say about Baudrillard, or at least his concept of simulacra: ‘Partout l’excès du Simulacre a explosé comme Tchernobyl, et partout la mort s’est répandue aussi vite et massivement que le désordre.’ (‘Excess Simulation has exploded everywhere like Chernobyl, and everywhere death spreads as fast and massively as disorder.) Debord, *Oeuvres*, p. 1832.

³⁷³ Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of Silent Majorities*, p. 122-3.

death threatens to be buried definitively.³⁷⁴ As for Debord, the official resistance is reduced to playing the role of critic to a theatrical production put on by the state. To retranslate this sentiment back into the language of *Comments*: ‘Thus is uncertainty organized everywhere.’³⁷⁵

All of this relates to Debord’s relatively lengthy and opaque discussion in *Comments* of what he calls disinformation. The traditional definition of disinformation is ‘false propaganda’ and Bok defines it as a ‘neologism that stands for the spreading of false information to hurt adversaries.’³⁷⁶ Debord’s use of the term is considerably nuanced, or confusing, however, and is not addressed in any secondary literature. It is said to have been imported from Russia and, unlike the straightforward lie, ‘disinformation must inevitably contain a degree of truth but one deliberately manipulated by an artful enemy.’³⁷⁷ In this sense it seems to be a tool of the state to use against enemies. But then Debord writes that ‘[disinformation] is all that is obscure and threatens to oppose the unprecedented happiness which we know this society offers to those who trust it, a happiness which greatly outweighs various insignificant risks and disappointments. And everyone who *sees* this happiness in the spectacle agrees that we should not grumble about its price; everyone else is a disinformers’, and then claims that *Comments* itself could be considered an attempt to disinform about the spectacle.³⁷⁸ Bok claims that disinformation more often than not reflects back onto the disinformers and results in bad publicity.³⁷⁹ But in the integrated spectacle, where ‘talk of scandal is archaic’, this is no longer the case.³⁸⁰ The ubiquity

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

³⁷⁵ Debord, *Comments*, p. 55.

³⁷⁶ Bok, p. 187.

³⁷⁷ Debord, *Comments*, p. 45.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46, 48

³⁷⁹ Bok, p. 188-9.

³⁸⁰ Debord, *Comments*, p. 22.

of unanswerable lies and disinformation combine to prevent any chance of speaking the truth to, or about, power.

Debord described the integrated spectacle as ‘*a world where there is no room for verification.*’³⁸¹ One of the lessons he learned from seventies Italy during the period of the contested spectacle was the ambiguity of all political events. For most there was no way to know if a bombing was perpetrated by the left, the right in the guise of the left, or the state in the guise of the right impersonating the left. One could not trust the courts to hand down a legitimate verdict, one could not trust investigative journalists, politicians or whistleblowers to undercover the truth. History was no longer decided, or even influenced, by the masses but by old white men meeting behind closed doors with the law of *omerta* binding elites in every segment of society. This position leads Debord into a difficulty, both epistemologically and strategically. As he writes, ‘it is no longer possible to believe anything about anyone that you have not learned from yourself, directly.’³⁸² This may seem hyperbolic, but Debord has to be taken quite literally on this point. Peter Dale Scott cites the Church Committee’s report from 1976 that revealed that the CIA was using several hundred American academics and that prior to 1967 they had published over 1,000 books (via subsidy, sponsorship, or actual production). The same is true for journalists: ‘For example, a book written for an English-speaking audience by one CIA operative was reviewed favourably by another CIA agent in the *New York Times*’.³⁸³ Other studies have shown the effects the CIA had on movements and developments within art and culture following the Second World War.³⁸⁴ The danger of course is that this position can

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 18-9.

³⁸³ Peter Dale Scott, *The Road to 9/11* (California: University of California Press, 2007), p. xix

³⁸⁴ See Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural War* (London: Granta Books, 1999). Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (USA: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

become debilitating. There is relatively little that one can learn about the modern world ‘directly’, whatever that even means, and it is unclear why one should necessarily trust one’s own sensory experience or sense of judgment.

Eternal Present

The fifth and final principal feature of the integrated spectacle – alongside the integration of state and economy, generalised secrecy, incessant technological innovation, and unanswerable lies – is an eternal present. This notion is similar to the concept of ‘spectacular time’ in *Society of the Spectacle*. To briefly recapitulate Debord’s ambitious summary of the history of civilisation, which goes from pre-agrarian nomads to late capitalism in twenty-one paragraphs heavily influenced by Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*, first there is cyclical time: the time of nomadic and agrarian life, in which the days, the months, and the seasons repeat year after year with little variation and things do not change much from one generation to the next. Historical time begins to emerge in Greece but the fall of antiquity stops the clock, so to speak. It is not until the victory of the bourgeoisie that historical time proper becomes dominant. People begin to see the ‘general movement’ of history and, as the economy and industry begin to rapidly transform the world, an ideology of progress and development begins to take hold. Time is seen as linear and irreversible, but as the time of production it is also alienated: it is bourgeois time, the time of the owners of the economy and the producers are estranged from it.³⁸⁵ This alienated time of production is accompanied by spectacular time, which is synonymous with ‘consumable pseudo-cyclical time’: the time appropriate to the consumption of

³⁸⁵ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 143.

images and the image of the consumption of time.³⁸⁶ It revolves around new cycles of work, leisure, holidays, fashion and consumption that form a ‘paralyzed history’, a ‘false consciousness of time’.³⁸⁷ Individual subjects in the society of the spectacle experience time cyclically in their everyday lives: organised into quantitative blocks of work, leisure, and sleep. Individual everyday life is not historical, but an image of the historical is consumed: the masses are informed about history rather than actively experiencing its creation. The task of the proletariat is to break out of these cycles and live historically on the level of the individual and the level of the social by collectively moving history.

Twenty years later the proletariat still has not accomplished its literally historic task and society is mired in an eternal present. Life in the integrated spectacle is ‘a kind of eternity of noisy insignificance’, a global village ‘ruled by conformism, isolation, petty surveillance, boredom and repetitive malicious gossip about the same families.’³⁸⁸ This eternal present is even more inert, even more naturalised, than the society Debord decried in the sixties. In the integrated spectacle, he claims, historical time is no longer even consumed; it is being erased. The eradication of historical knowledge in general is said to be spectacular domination’s first priority. The more important an event, the more thoroughly its existence is hidden – May ’68 epitomising such treatment according to Debord.³⁸⁹ Previous techniques of suppressing history – burning books, killing political opponents who can testify to alternate narratives of events – were inevitably limited within, and especially beyond, any given ruler’s fiefdom. The powers of the integrated spectacle and its global reach,

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, par. 153.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, par. 158.

³⁸⁸ Debord, *Comments*, p. 33.

³⁸⁹ This continues into the present, with Sarkozy announcing during his election campaign in 2007 that ‘In this election, we’re going to find out if the heritage of May ’68 is going to be perpetuated or if it will be liquidated once and forever.’ Quoted in Nina Power and Alberto Toscano, ‘The Philosophy of Restoration: Alain Badiou and the Enemies of May’, *boundary 2* (36:1, 2009), p. 27.

however, are unprecedented. ‘The manufacture of a present where fashion itself, from clothes to music, has come to a halt, which wants to forget the past and no longer seems to believe in a future, is achieved by the ceaseless circularity of information, always returning to the same short list of trivialities, passionately proclaimed as major discoveries.’³⁹⁰ Beyond a critique of the neatly packaged chunks of the past that could be easily consumed and effortlessly digested via television documentaries and blue plaques on the sides of buildings, Debord saw modern architects and urban planners building a landscape of historical absence in their ‘new towns’ and building projects.³⁹¹ In such environments, which Debord saw as overrunning ‘historic’ city-centres, it is only the latest model of gadget or a gradually escalating sense of impending doom that allows us to notice that time is actually moving forward: their motto could be: ‘On this spot nothing will ever happen – and *nothing ever has*’.³⁹²

Of course this position is not unique to Debord; it is a trope of post-war philosophy, in which theorists, often beleaguered by the denigration of the communist hope, the mediocrity of liberal democracy, or the horrors of fascism, generate a vision of ‘a stalled, exhausted world, dominated by recursive mechanisms of bureaucracy and ubiquitous circuits of commodities, relieved only by the extravagances of a phantasmatic imaginary without limit, because without power,’ as Perry Anderson succinctly puts it.³⁹³ In fact, just one year after Debord published *Comments*, the pop Hegelian neo-conservative Francis Fukuyama published his (in)famous essay ‘The End of History?’.³⁹⁴ Hegel is said to have claimed that history had ended with the

³⁹⁰ Debord, *Comments*, p. 13.

³⁹¹ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 177.

³⁹² *Ibid.*

³⁹³ Perry Anderson, *A Zone of Engagement* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 280.

³⁹⁴ Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History?’, *The National Interest*, Summer, 1989, available online at: <<http://www.wesjones.com/eoh.htm>>. And as Anderson notes, Fukuyama’s essay was written almost simultaneously to Lutz Niethammer’s study *Posthistoire*. Anderson, *Zone of Engagement*, p. 281. Fukuyama would soon thereafter write a book on the subject. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992).

battle of Jena in 1806, which marked the triumph of the French revolution's ideals of liberty, equality and democracy. Everything that followed was just the gradual process of the material world catching up with the victory already achieved within the realm of ideas. In 'The End of History?' Fukuyama essentially argues that if history did not end with the battle of Jena, the end of the Cold War definitely confined it to the past. 'The triumph of the West, of the Western idea' he writes, 'is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism', particularly following the implosion of really existing socialism.³⁹⁵ He continues, 'What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government'.³⁹⁶ As with Napoleon's victory in Jena, liberal democracy may not yet be universal and there will be unrest within a world still mired in history, but one will never create a better system: victory has been achieved in the ideal. All the 'important social or political forces or movements that are a part of world history' have failed to supplant liberal democracy.³⁹⁷ It is not a perfect system, but there is no preferable alternative. To quote Churchill's famous dictum, 'Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.' The fundamental contradiction or class antagonism that Marx identified within liberal capitalism has been successfully resolved in the West, as the affluent worker no longer has any reason to want to dig capitalism's grave.

³⁹⁵ Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?'

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁷ We are told 'it matters very little what strange thoughts occur to people in Albania or Burkina Faso that are not a part of the common ideological heritage of mankind'.

Fukuyama's pronouncement was attacked from both sides of the political spectrum, but the veracity of his thesis is slightly besides the point here. Even if there are problems with his argument (he himself questioned his thesis only a few years later, as has fellow neo-con Robert Kagan³⁹⁸), it certainly captured the period's zeitgeist and the notion that 'we cannot picture to ourselves a world that is essentially different from the present one, and at the same time better' is still pervasive and widely commented upon today.³⁹⁹ It is unsurprising that it is not difficult to relate it to various bits of *Comments*.⁴⁰⁰ First, obviously, there is the notion that history has ended, or is at least on an indefinitely long hiatus. Second, there is the universal acceptance of liberal democracy. The main difference between these two positions is that while for Fukuyama history reached its teleological completion, for Debord our sense of history is actively being destroyed by the spectacle. History has definitively not come to a conclusion, either in the realm of ideas or material reality; the eternal present in which *homo spectator* exists is not the final state of humanity, but a temporary state with the trappings of eternity. The (class) antagonism that Fukuyama claimed consumer capitalism had resolved was still pullulating under the gleaming surface of the society of the spectacle and it is the strategic elimination of history that keeps this surface tranquil. Debord writes,

The precious advantage which the spectacle has acquired through the *outlawing* of history, from having driven the recent past into hiding, and from having made everyone forget the spirit of history within society, is above all the ability to cover its own tracks – to conceal the very progress of its recent

³⁹⁸ Anderson thoroughly discusses Fukuyama's antecedents and the merits of his argument in the final chapter of *A Zone of Engagement*. See Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (London: Atlantic Books, 2008).

³⁹⁹ Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, p. 46.

⁴⁰⁰ There is also the fact that Debord sat in on Alexandre Kojève's lectures on Hegel in Paris in the 1950s. Kojève is particularly influential to Fukuyama's account. See Anderson, *Zone of Engagement*, pp. 309-324. For Agamben's amusing commentary on some of the eccentricities of Kojève's theory see Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 9-12.

world conquest. Its power already seems familiar, as if it had always been there. All usurpers have shared this aim: to make us forget that *they have only just arrived*.⁴⁰¹

Thus, an economic system that from the perspective of human history has *just* come into existence – capitalism – and a variation of that system which has only been with us for a few decades – neoliberalism – are seen as inevitable. People are completely disconnected from even the most recent past, and resistance (outside of lobbying for minor reforms) is seen to be futile. As Debord writes, ‘We have dispensed with the disturbing conception, which was dominant for over two hundred years, in which a society was open to criticism or transformation, reform or revolution. Not thanks to any new arguments, but quite simply because all argument has become useless. From this result we can estimate not universal happiness, but the redoubtable strength of tyranny’s tentacles.’⁴⁰² One cannot mention the word ‘revolution’ without seeming like a naïve anachronism from a not so distant, but long forgotten past. As Slavoj Žižek writes, ‘Today’s predominant form of ideological “closure” takes the precise form of mental block which prevents us from imagining a fundamental social change, in the interests of an allegedly “realistic” and “mature” attitude’.⁴⁰³ Since Thatcher made her ‘There is no alternative’ claim with a celebratory air, the statement has been grudgingly accepted across the board. No more naïve utopian dreaming about alternative futures, but an acceptance of liberal capitalism’s coordinates and a struggle for hegemony and reforms within it.

After portraying a situation that seems as bleak as it is impassable, Debord closes with an intriguing assertion: ‘To this list of the triumphs of power we should, however, add one result which has proved negative: once the running of a state

⁴⁰¹ Debord, *Comments*, pp. 15-6.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 21-2.

⁴⁰³ Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek . *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (London: Verso, 2000). p. 324.

involves a permanent and massive shortage of historical knowledge, that state can no longer be led strategically.’⁴⁰⁴ Some of the evidence of this assertion’s validity will be discussed in the following chapter, but for the moment it is worth remarking how this notion, combined with the epistemological confusion created by generalised secrecy, unanswerable lies and disinformation, creates a situation where the ability to understand the new coordinates in which struggle takes place – the society of the spectacle – drastically influences the capabilities and effectiveness of the combatants. Since the study of history is at once about providing a timeline of important events and an understanding of the interrelations and consequences of various actions, it can allow one to both understand how the present has come about and to speculate and strategise about what might come next. As the Retort collective write, ‘Debord had a robust and straightforward view of the necessity, for individuals and collectives, of learning from the past. (It is not the least of the ways his thinking is classical, as opposed to postmodern.)’⁴⁰⁵ The integrated spectacle is gradually creating a world in which the past is forgotten and thus the future is unimaginable. This new reality, Debord argues, has been either misunderstood or underappreciated by both the defenders of the spectacle and its enemies, giving his book a huge significance in the cold and hot clashes to come.

⁴⁰⁴ Debord, *Comments*, p. 20.

⁴⁰⁵ Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, p. 23.

The Conspiracy Theory of the Eternal Present

The spectacle is an infirmity more than a conspiracy.

Guy Debord, 1975⁴⁰⁶

In Marx's 1871 text *The Civil War in France*, he writes that the International Working Men's Association is the counter-organization of labour to what he calls 'the cosmopolitan conspiracy of capital'.⁴⁰⁷ In the society of the spectacle, all activity is activity in 'submission' to the logic of capital, a logic that for Debord has colonised not just production and consumption, but all of life. The conspiratorial nature of the integrated spectacle extends, however, beyond this notion of capital secretly controlling the spectacle. As noted above, previously when speaking of spectacular domination, Debord would speak of an 'it', but by *Comments* he is speaking of a 'they'.⁴⁰⁸ The motif of conspiracy central to *Comments* is more than just one technique through which those that run the spectacle maintain their power; an elite conspiratorial network also comes to replace the class-conscious proletariat as the spectacle's revolutionary subject.

This centrality of conspiracy to *Comments* partially has to do with the shift in the West from the diffuse to the integrated spectacle during the years of 'contested spectacle'. During this period, the spectacle could no longer rely on 'silent compulsion' and conspiracies were hatched to save its very existence. Benjamin writes in the *Arcades Project*: 'Just as the *Communist Manifesto* ends the age of professional conspirators, so the Commune puts an end to the phantasmagoria holding sway over the early years of the proletariat. It dispels the illusion that the task of the proletarian revolution is to complete the work of 1789 hand in hand with the

⁴⁰⁶ Debord, 'Refutation of All the Judgments, Pro or Con, Thus Far Rendered on the Film *The Society of the Spectacle*', *Complete Cinematic Works*, p. 112.

⁴⁰⁷ Marx, 'The Fall of Paris', *The Civil War in France*, Available online at: <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch06.htm>>.

⁴⁰⁸ Debord, *Comments*, p. 18.

bourgeoisie.⁴⁰⁹ By the time of *Comments*, however, conspirators are once again gainfully employed.⁴¹⁰ ‘Formally one only conspired against an established order. Today, *conspiring in its favour* is a new and flourishing profession. Under spectacular domination people conspire to maintain it, and to guarantee what it alone would call its well-being. This conspiracy *is a part* of its very functioning.’⁴¹¹ In Italy, for example, many of these conspiracies were tied to the infiltration and manipulation of militant groups on the left and right by the secret services and others in government in order to perpetrate campaigns of terror that would frighten the population into supporting the status quo. While there were elements in groups like P2 that did want to undermine the state and launch a coup, much of their activity did indeed go toward conspiring for the protection of the established order.

As with secrecy and lying, conspiracy necessitates individuals who conspire. In the integrated spectacle, ‘the controlling centre has now become occult’.⁴¹² Examples given in *Comments* are not only P2 in Italy, but also the Iran-Contra scandal in the US that left the world wondering who was in charge of the executive of the world’s hegemon.⁴¹³ Also, like secrecy, conspiracy has become generalised: ‘thousands of plots [*complots*] in favour of the established order tangle and clash almost everywhere’,⁴¹⁴ and like generalized secrecy, this muddled web of generalised conspiracy makes strategizing difficult. Bok links increases in secrecy in government and business to the rise of conspiracy theory: as secrecy multiplies so does the fear of

⁴⁰⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (USA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 12-3.

⁴¹⁰ Debord, *Comments*, p. 83.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴¹³ ‘So mysterious has power become that after the affair of the illegal arms sales to Iran by the US presidency, one might wonder who was running the United States, the leading power in the so-called democratic world. And thus who the hell was running the democratic world?’ *Comments*, p. 56. The answer is John Poindexter. See Jeff Kinkle, ‘Another Neat Idea: FutureMAP’, *Left Curve* (31, 2007).

⁴¹⁴ Debord, *Comments*, p. 82.

conspiracy.⁴¹⁵ Does Debord's position here amount to a conspiracy theory of power? This question will be dealt with in more depth in the next chapter, particularly in relation to the parapolitical. Here I am primarily considering how Debord's assertion that conspiracy is central to the functioning of power in the integrated spectacle can be read with and against his earlier claims about the ability of the proletariat to reshape the world.

The label 'conspiracy theory', which will also be considered in more depth in the next chapter, is almost always used in the pejorative. Belittled by Richard Hofstadter as a 'political pathology', conspiracy theory is often seen as at best a misguided and inadequate attempt to understand the functioning of power in an increasingly complex global society.⁴¹⁶ As Fredric Jameson writes, 'Conspiracy, one is tempted to say, is the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system, whose failure is marked by its slippage into sheer theme and content.'⁴¹⁷ Bereft of any conceptual apparatus to understand the antagonisms, fluctuations and developments in global politics and the economy, conspiracy theory becomes an immensely oversimplified narrativisation of amorphous and/or anonymous global power dynamics. On the surface Debord does indeed resemble a typical conspiracy theorist: the paranoia, the self-certainty, the secrecy, the production of theory outside the traditional academy and the attempt to stuff the messiness of reality into a grand narrative encompassing the globe and all of recent history. His warning at the beginning of *Comments*, in which he fears letting the fifty of his readers dedicated to the spectacle learn too much, seems to imply a vision of a world

⁴¹⁵ Bok, p. 199.

⁴¹⁶ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (NY: Knopf, 1966), p. 6.

⁴¹⁷ Fredric Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (USA: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 356.

dominated by a secret cabal of men with power, apparently eagerly awaiting Debord's new book so they can plan the next stage of their world-historical scheme.

Yet, it is a fact that people with power meet in secret and sometimes plot massive conspiracies that can change the course of history for countless individuals and even states. There is a difference, however, between seeing conspiracies afoot here and there, or even everywhere, with varying degrees of success and influence, and seeing a vast conspiracy as being the driving force of history.⁴¹⁸ Debord claims in *Comments* that the 'conspiracy theory of history' – the notion that a small cabal of elite individuals are behind all historical developments, events and revolutions – 'was in the nineteenth century a reactionary and ridiculous belief, at a time when so many powerful social movements were stirring up the masses'.⁴¹⁹ The conspiracy theory of history dates at least as far back as panic about the Bavarian Illuminati towards the end of the 18th century in both Europe and the US. Hofstadter traces the tradition from the discourses surrounding the Illuminati to McCarthyism and various other conspiracy theories about ingenious communists having infiltrated all elite sectors of American society in the 1950s in his seminal essay 'The Paranoid Style of American Politics'. Even Marx felt the International Working Men's Association was being attacked by proponents of the conspiracy theory of history when he wrote in 1871, 'The police-tinged bourgeois mind naturally figures to itself the International Working Men's Association as acting in the manner of a secret conspiracy, its central body ordering, from time to time, explosions in different countries. Our Association is, in fact, nothing but the international bond between the most advanced working men in the various countries of the civilized world.'⁴²⁰ It is this bond that

⁴¹⁸ Hofstadter, p. 29.

⁴¹⁹ Debord, *Comments*, p. 59.

⁴²⁰ Marx, 'The Fall of Paris', Marx had his own flirtation with conspiracy theory. See Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx: A Life* (London: Norton, 1999), pp. 207-213.

differentiates this organic vanguard from a shadowy cabal manipulating the masses.⁴²¹ This Marx quote is doubly relevant in the sense that it covers the beginning of a specific political, revolutionary sequence that Debord may have seen as being recently extinguished by the time of *Comments*.

Conspiracy theory is often associated with a sense of political helplessness, and this must be considered in relation to Debord's position at the end of the eighties. Timothy Melley writes, 'The post-war model of conspiracy is dependent upon a notion of diminished human agency.'⁴²² Exemplary is the belief in conspiracy by a latent world government to take away the rights or undermine the potentials of the individual, but Debord's conspiratorial vision of society is not necessarily one in which the agency of individuals is diminished; rather it is the masses who have become insignificant. As Sven Lütticken writes, 'Conspiracy theory recurs throughout the modern era, but it is significant that Debord took recourse to conspiracism when it had become glaringly obvious that the revolutionary project of the 1960s had failed.'⁴²³ It is the end of this revolutionary sequence – stretching from Marx through the events of 1968 and their aftermath – and the centre stage departure of its subject – the proletariat – that seems to lead Debord to resuscitate the conspiracy theory of history for the eternal present of the integrated spectacle. 'Pseudo-rebels', according to Debord, believe that the conspiracy theory of history would remain reactionary and ridiculous for eternity and not recognise how drastically society has shifted. In the integrated spectacle, where history is undergoing an eclipse, the revolutionary subject is nowhere to be found and the antagonism that splits society has been spackled over,

⁴²¹ It should be noted that the Situationists always were hostile to the idea that they were a vanguard, leading or representing the proletariat.

⁴²² Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 3.

⁴²³ Sven Lütticken, *Secret Publicity* (Holland: NAI, 2005), p. 193.

the conspiracy theory of history has become accurate and political struggle ‘now becomes a struggle of enemy brothers’, to paraphrase Marx.⁴²⁴

One of the most striking differences between *Society of the Spectacle* and *Comments* is the conspicuous absence of the proletariat. While the 1967 book’s longest chapter was ‘The Proletariat as Subject and Representation’, the word ‘proletariat’ does not appear once in *Comments*. Is Debord also staging a ‘retreat from class’ and acknowledging that the proletariat is no longer the agent of History? As late as 1985’s *Considerations* Debord jokes, ‘like the proletariat, I am supposed to not exist in this world’, implying that despite the proletariat having falling out of vogue as a conceptual category, its existence in reality was still certain.⁴²⁵ It should be remembered that in the sixties the proletariat was already fading from the analysis and critique of many theorists. In the advanced industrial world this was the age of the affluent worker, in which consumerism and technology were meant to undermine the category’s primacy. Debord’s position in 1967 was that ‘The proletariat has not been eliminated, and indeed it remains irreducibly present, under the intensified alienation of modern capitalism, in the shape of the vast mass of workers who have lost all power over the use of their own lives and who, *once they realize this*, must necessarily redefine themselves as the proletariat – as negation at work in the bosom of today’s society.’⁴²⁶ In the same text Debord had written that the triumph of the spectacle led to, or was synonymous with, ‘the proletarianization of the world’.⁴²⁷ Does the very ubiquity of the proletariat by the time of *Comments*, when ‘the spectacle has spread itself to the point where it now permeates all reality’, make its usefulness as a category of analysis obsolete? Other theorists that posit integrated,

⁴²⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. III, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 362.

⁴²⁵ Debord, *Considerations*, p. 44

⁴²⁶ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 114.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, par. 26.

global systems of governance hold on to a conception of the proletariat, for example Hardt and Negri.⁴²⁸ Did Debord's thinking shift over these three years leading him to jettison the concept of the proletariat or is there something else at work?

I would like to present this shift in Debord's thinking by way of three quite long quotations: one from Lukács, one from *Society of the Spectacle*, and one from *Comments*. The first is a passage from the essay 'Rosa Luxemburg's Marxism' from *History and Class Consciousness* where Lukács quotes Luxemburg favourably for understanding the intricate links between proletarian class-consciousness and revolution:

As early as her first polemics with Bernstein, Rosa Luxemburg lays emphasis on this essential distinction between the total and the partial, the dialectical and the mechanical view of history (whether it be opportunistic or terrorist). "Here lies the chief difference," she explains, "between the Blanquist coups d'état of a 'resolute minority' which always explode like pistol-shots and as a result always come at the wrong moment, and the conquest of the real power of a state by the broad, class-conscious mass of the people which itself can only be the product of the incipient collapse of bourgeois society and which therefore bears in itself the economic and political legitimation of its timely appearance."⁴²⁹

This was, following Lenin, not a controversial position in Marxist circles. As Lenin writes when considering the art of revolution, 'To be successful, insurrection must rely not upon conspiracy and not upon a party, but upon the advanced class. That is the first point. Insurrection must rely upon a *revolutionary upsurge of the people*.'⁴³⁰

Debord in *Society of the Spectacle* by and large follows Lukács in his emphasis on class-consciousness, although for him the process does not involve the party. The penultimate paragraph in his chapter 'The Proletariat as Subject and Representation' reads:

⁴²⁸ See Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, pp. 256-7 on the proletariat specifically, but of course everything on the concept of the 'multitude' is relevant to this discussion as well.

⁴²⁹ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 40.

⁴³⁰ Lenin, 1917, 'Marxism and Insurrection: A Letter to the Central Committee of the R.S.D.L.P.(B.)', *Marxists.org*, 13-14 September, 1917, Available online at: <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/sep/13.htm>>.

The proletarian revolution is predicated entirely on the requirement that, for the first time, theory as the understanding of human practice be recognized and directly lived by the masses. This revolution demands that workers become dialecticians, and inscribe their thought upon practice; it thus asks much more of its *men without qualities* than the bourgeois revolution asked of those men with qualifications that it enlisted to run things (the partial ideological consciousness constructed by a segment of the bourgeois class had as its basis only a key *portion* of social life, namely the economy, where this class was *already in power*). It is thus the very evolution of class society into the spectacular organization of non-life that obliges the revolutionary project to become *visibly* what it always was *in essence*.⁴³¹

This stress on the revolutionaries organising themselves and putting theory into practice is present in Sanguinetti's *The Real Report* as well as Debord's 'Preface to the fourth Italian Edition of *Society of the Spectacle*' from 1979, and all three texts end with – or indeed amount to – a revolutionary call to arms.

With the absence of the proletariat in Debord's analysis in *Comments*, his conception of historical change is quite different. Here is the penultimate paragraph of *Comments*:

We must conclude that a changeover is imminent and ineluctable in the coopted cast who serve the interests of domination, and above all manage the protection of that domination. In such an affair, innovation will surely not be displayed on the spectacle's stage. It appears instead like lightning, which we know only when it strikes. This changeover, which will conclude decisively the work of these spectacular times, will occur discreetly, and conspiratorially, even though it concerns those within the inner circles of power. It will select those who will share this central exigency: that they clearly see what obstacles they have overcome, and of what they are capable.⁴³²

This passage is only followed in *Comments* by a long quotation discussing the precise meaning of 'vainly', in the sense of acting in vain.

What is surprising is how similar Debord's description of 'changeover' ('*relève*' in the French, not the same thing as revolution) in *Comments* is to the description attributed to Blanqui denigrated by Luxemburg. What Debord is describing sounds almost exactly like a 'coup d'état of a "resolute minority"' that will

⁴³¹ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 123. The 'men without qualities' is a clear reference to the Austrian writer Robert Musil's novel *The Man Without Qualities* (1930-42).

⁴³² Debord, *Comments*, p. 88.

‘explode like pistol-shots’ rather than a mass movement of class-conscious workers. The final passage of *Comments* almost reads like a deferential *détournement* of Blanqui, which is doubly interesting because he is actually named in passing earlier in *Comments* alongside Varlin and Durruti. This conception of the revolutionary subject could not be further away from that of *Society of the Spectacle*.⁴³³ The revolt will not begin in the streets but in the inner halls and backrooms of power; it is not the masses who will revolt, but a dissatisfied section of the elites (a dissatisfied section of the elites who have read Debord).

Another apt comparison may be the conclusion of Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. We have already seen the importance of recent Italian history to Debord’s post-68 work, but Renaissance Italy is also an inspiration. As Kaufmann argues, ‘with *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Debord wrote his most “Italian,” his most “Florentine” book’.⁴³⁴ Machiavelli was important to Debord in the sixties as well: in *Society of the Spectacle* he writes that Machiavelli said ‘the unsayable about the State’, and a quote from *The Prince* serves as the epigram of the chapter ‘Environmental Planning’. Machiavelli’s presence in *Comments* is considerably greater. As Kaufmann explains, power in the integrated spectacle functions in a Machiavellian fashion: ‘The end of democracy and a return to Machiavellian tyranny, not to the spectacular dictatorships of old but to a world of obscure intrigue, one characteristically Florentine: power does not come from the barrel of a gun but in a vial of poison, preferably invisible and radioactive.’⁴³⁵ This influence is present throughout the book, and especially in the introduction and conclusion.

⁴³³ If, of course, this passage is in fact identifying a revolutionary subject. This paragraph will be discussed more in the following chapter in relation to Not Bored’s linking it to the emergence of the Project for The New American Century.

⁴³⁴ Kaufmann, p. 257.

⁴³⁵ Kaufmann, p. 258. Here one immediately thinks of Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko and Alexander Litvinenko. It would be interesting to think the concept of the integrated spectacle in

While in *Society of the Spectacle* Debord is challenging the proletariat to realise their potential, the conclusion of *Comments* reads more like Machiavelli's exhortation to the prince to save Italy from the barbarians. Gramsci has written that rather than being something 'tacked on' to the end of *The Prince*, the final chapter is rather 'the element which gives the entire work its true colour, and makes it a kind of "political manifesto"'.⁴³⁶ He argues that the rest of the book is written with scientific detachment, simply stating the difficult decisions a prince must make and the ruthless means he must use in order to achieve certain ends. But in the end, Gramsci argues, Machiavelli 'merges with the people, becomes the people; not, however, some "generic" people, but the people who he has convinced by the preceding argument. [...] The entire logical argument now appears as nothing other than auto-reflection on the part of the people – an inner reasoning worked out in the popular consciousness, whose conclusion is a cry of passionate urgency.'⁴³⁷ A cry for action, not just to the people on behalf of the prince or to the prince on behalf of the people, but a call on both to institute the Italian state.

It should be remembered that an epigram from Sun Tzu opens *Comments*. It begins, 'However desperate the situation and circumstances, do not despair.' This phrase is reminiscent of a line from Marx's 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge, quoted in Debord's film *In Girum Imus Nocte Et Consumimur Igni*: 'You will not say that I have had too high an opinion of the present time; and if, nevertheless, I do not despair of it, that is only because it is precisely the desperate situation which fills me with

relation to Putin's 'managed democracy', or 'sovereign democracy', and the former Soviet Bloc in the sense that the diffuse and concentrated spectacle's integration seems to have found a somewhat different configuration than in Western Europe and North America. See, for example, *Poisoned by Polonium: The Litvinenko File* (dir. Andrei Kekrasov, 2007). Also Perry Anderson, 'Russia's Managed Democracy', *London Review of Books* (vol. 29, no. 2, 25 January 2007), pp. 3-12, Available online at: <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n02/perry-anderson/russias-managed-democracy>>.

⁴³⁶ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 127.

⁴³⁷ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 126-7.

hope'.⁴³⁸ Until the very end of *Comments*, this hope is non-existent. If *Society of the Spectacle* was, as Clark and Nicholson-Smith have claimed, 'conceived and written as a book for bad times', then *Comments* was conceived and written as a book for catastrophic times. By 1988, the spectacle had 'continued to gather strength; that is, to spread to the furthest limits on all sides, while increasing its density in the centre.'⁴³⁹ The 'class which is able to effect the dissolution of all classes' was not even worth mentioning in a world dominated by secrecy and lies, where people are trapped in an eternal present, unable to even imagine a different world.⁴⁴⁰ *Comments* is usually described as a bleak and bitter work: the reflections of a failed revolutionary on a society becoming worse in every way, and for ninety percent of the book this is the case. Yet, in the final pages of *Comments* Debord writes, 'Certainly conditions have never been so seriously revolutionary, but it is only governments who think so.'⁴⁴¹

Kaufmann interprets this thus,

while the conditions *are* revolutionary, given the number of means available to the world's leaders to destroy humanity, the *perspective* of revolution has completely disappeared. Negativity has disappeared, the power structure no longer has any enemies, which means that it has to create its own, usually in the form of romantic red brigades and mild-mannered theorists who write doctorates on subversion. This is the integrated spectacle, from which nothing escapes. Debord was aware of this, and after trying not only to conceptualize but to make revolution, he became, in a sense, the theorist of its absence.⁴⁴²

This reading is not entirely persuasive and it is hard to reconcile a world where the 'power structure no longer has any enemies' with a situation in which conditions are revolutionary. What then can we say about the book's conclusion, in which 'changeover is imminent'?

⁴³⁸ Karl Marx, 'Marx to Ruge: Cologne, May 1843', Letters from the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher, *Marxists.org*, Available online at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_05.htm>.

⁴³⁹ Debord, *Comments*, p. 2-3.

⁴⁴⁰ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 221.

⁴⁴¹ Debord, *Comments*, p. 84.

⁴⁴² Kaufmann, p. 260-1. Debord, not at his most humble, claims in *Considerations* that, 'To a great extent, during an entire generation, the work of the negative in Europe has been lead by me.' Debord, *Considerations*, p. 70.

After reading *Comments* penultimate three-page chapter dozens of times, its meaning is still relatively obscure. The first two-thirds of the chapter are dedicated to a seemingly tangential discussion of military tactics and strategy following the French Revolution. This part of the chapter ends with Debord writing how the contingent discovery of independent fire by the French soldiers (in opposition to keeping ranks and firing on command that was the dominant tactic), despite being by far the most effective method of firing, was still being debated and disputed into most of the 19th century. This digression then becomes an analogy for the art of government in the society of the spectacle: both produced results in practice before they were comprehended in theory. Debord suggests that just as commanders slow to understand the advantages offered by independent fire risked being routed, statesmen and elites who have failed to recognise the innovations in the art of government under the integrated spectacle risk being usurped or made redundant. This is right before the above quoted passage about a changeover being immanent.

In Louis Althusser's monograph *Machiavelli and Us*, he claims the Italian is 'thinking the possible at the boundary of the impossible.'⁴⁴³ Gopal Balakrishnan succinctly summarises Althusser's own project as asking the question of 'how a new political order could be established in wholly unfavourable circumstances.'⁴⁴⁴ For Althusser, Machiavelli is a theorist of 'concrete conjunctures', 'who bring concealed vectors of strategic action to light, exposing the immanent possibilities of the present as a moment in history.'⁴⁴⁵ Important to his point, according to Balakrishnan, is the fact that Machiavelli's analysis does not rely on the prince acting as an agent of history. 'What Machiavelli offers us instead is an art of thinking focused wholly on the conditions of undertaking tasks immediately to hand, without anchorage in any

⁴⁴³ Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, trans. Gregory Elliot (UK: Verso, 1999), p. 56.

⁴⁴⁴ Gopal Balakrishnan, 'From Florence to Moscow', *New Left Review* (3, May/June 2000), p. 160.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

underlying movement of history: a supposedly deeper, albeit more unstable kind of knowledge.⁴⁴⁶ It is an art of thinking political change in the eternal present.

Can this lead us to think of the conclusion of *Comments* in a new way? Early in this chapter I quoted Debord's enigmatic claim that the highest ambition of the integrated spectacle is 'to turn secret agents into revolutionaries, and revolutionaries into secret agents.'⁴⁴⁷ What if this conclusion is, like Machiavelli's epilogue, to be read as an exhortation to those with the means to do so to end these spectacular times? Debord even claims that *Comments* is written with a 'scientific detachment' of sorts similar to that seen by Gramsci in *The Prince*: he claims that he will not be entering into polemics, trying to convince, moralising nor attempting to argue for a better world; his words 'simply record what is.'⁴⁴⁸ In this sense *Comments* could almost be read as the polar opposite of Censor's *The Real Report*: cataloguing the mediocrity of the integrated spectacle – of the transmutation of everything for the worst – is meant to lead those in the upper echelons of power to conspiratorially break out of this eternal present and revitalise history. He claims that 'It is certainly not the spectacle's destiny to end up as enlightened despotism', but is that a possibility following this immanent changeover?

From the beginning of *Comments*, the reader is told how obscure the text is, that it is being welcomed by only fifty or sixty members of an 'interested elite', half of whom are in the spectacle's service, the other half struggling against it. *The Prince* was ostensibly addressed to an even smaller audience, consisting solely of Lorenzo de' Medici – but Althusser's reading provides a twist. Althusser claims that while the book, from its dedication onwards, seems to be written for the Prince, it is actually written for the people. He writes, 'This manifesto, which seems to have for its sole

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 160

⁴⁴⁷ Debord, *Comments*, p. 11.

⁴⁴⁸ Debord, *Comments*, p. 5.

interlocutor a future individual, an individual who does not exist, is in fact addressed to the mass of the common people. A manifesto is not written for an individual, especially a nonexistent individual: it is always addressed to the masses, in order to organize them into a revolutionary force.⁴⁴⁹ *Comments* can also be understood as a revolutionary manifesto in this respect. In this reading, the book's introduction and conclusion would be read as feints. While the book proclaims itself to be written for fifty or sixty interested elites, it is in fact written for the people as a call to arms. Althusser writes, '[Machiavelli] hails us from a place that he summons us to occupy as potential "subjects" (agents) of a potential political practice. This effect of captivation and interpellation is produced by the shattering of the traditional theoretical text, by the sudden appearance of the political problem as a problem and of the political practice as a practice; and by the double reflection of political practice in his text and of his text in political practice.'⁴⁵⁰ It is the people themselves who need to recognise what they have accomplished and what they are capable of; to remember that the spectacle has only 'just arrived' and to take advantage of the fact that the state too struggles to formulate an effective strategy in the eternal present of the spectacle.

⁴⁴⁹ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, p. 25.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Chapter III

The Real Report on the Last Chance to Save
the New American Century

The thunderbolt falls before the noise of it is heard in the skies, prayers are said before the bell is rung for them; he receives the blow that thinks he himself is giving it, he suffers who never expected it, and he dies that look'd upon himself to be the most secure; all is done in the Night and Obscurity, amongst Storms and Confusion.

–Gabriel Naudé, 1639⁴⁵¹

Quite frankly, there are a lot of patriots out there who'd like to remain alive. Typically, patriots are dead.

–‘Stability’, 2002⁴⁵²

⁴⁵¹ Quoted in Edward Luttwak, *Coup d'Etat: A Practical Handbook* (USA: Penguin, 1979), pp. 9-10.

⁴⁵² Quoted in Christopher Ketcham, ‘The Israeli “art student” mystery’, *Salon*, 7 May, 2002, Available online at: <<http://dir.salon.com/story/news/feature/2002/05/07/students/index.html>>.

In the New York-based ‘pro-situ’ collective Not Bored’s translation of *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, they insert a footnote at the end of the penultimate chapter, directly following Debord’s cryptic paragraph about how ‘the changeover, which will conclude decisively the work of these spectacular times, will occur discreetly, and conspiratorially, even though it concerns those within the inner circles of power’.⁴⁵³ This footnote reminds the reader that just four years after the book’s publication, the men of the state who would go on to become founding members of the neoconservative think-tank the Project for the New American Century – Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz and Donald Rumsfeld, among others – were ‘trying to convince then-President George H. Bush that the time was right for the USA to take over the world’.⁴⁵⁴ While these men failed to convince Bush Sr., Not Bored writes, they would eventually succeed with his son, who, they remind us, was president on 11 September, 2001. ‘Ever since then – with and through America’s military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Haiti – the efforts to create a new American Empire have been going full steam.’

How or why the activities of PNAC, which disbanded in 2006, would ‘conclude decisively the work of these spectacular times’ is left for the imagination of the reader. It would be considerably easier to argue that PNAC’s activities were firmly rooted in the world of the integrated spectacle. While one might say that they behaved conspiratorially – a dubious claim considering they were never shy about revealing their positions and in fact courted publicity – one would have to add that it was in the name of maintaining the status quo rather than disrupting it. The think-tank

⁴⁵³ Debord, *Comments*, p. 88.

⁴⁵⁴ Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Not Bored (2005), fn. 61, Available online at: <http://www.notbored.org/commentaires.html#_edn61>. PNAC was founded in 1997 and members included Francis Fukuyama, Zalmay Khalilzad, Jeb Bush, and Scooter Libby.

rose to prominence as their hawkish, neoconservative promotion of American military might and ‘full-spectrum dominance’ became a major influence on the Bush Doctrine. Following the attacks of 9/11, they became infamous in certain circles as their claim that ‘a new Pearl Harbor’ was needed to galvanise Americans into supporting military interventions throughout the Middle East was cited by various (conspiracy) theorists to suggest the possibility of Bush administration involvement in actively planning the attacks, or at least allowing them to happen. Not Bored’s reading is interesting, firstly because it demonstrates the ambiguity of the conclusion to *Comments*, where it is difficult to ascertain if Debord is talking about a coup d’état that will lead to an even more oppressive regime than the spectacle or if he is talking about a takeover that will lead to a better society. Secondly, Not Bored’s comments are intriguing as they open up the possibility of a Debordian reading of 9/11 heavily informed by his later writings.

The events of 9/11 and their aftermath – the ‘Global War on Terror’, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the anthrax letters, the Patriot Act, etc. – are ripe for Debordian analysis for a myriad of reasons. Some of these are obvious and conducive to a superficial use of Debord’s theses. The attacks created, or are inseparable from, their status as a global media event, captured by and feeding into blanket television coverage and the military-entertainment complex in its various guises. The image of the burning towers and their rapid collapse were burned indelibly in the minds of people around the world, while the US state’s reaction, with its emphasis on stage-managed performances – everything from Bush landing on an aircraft carrier to announce victory, to the toppling of the Saddam Hussein statue in Baghdad, or the doctrine of ‘Shock and Awe’ – sought to create counter-images. Both were experienced with horror and fascination by spectators around the world glued to their

televisions or computer screens. In terms relating more to *Comments*, there is the commonplace notion that the Bush administration was ‘the most secretive [American] government in fifty years’ and that they took political lying to new heights.⁴⁵⁵ Bush’s *consigliere* Karl Rove is commonly portrayed as a Machiavellian figure, taking complete advantage of the spectacular contemporary terrain to capture and maintain power for his boss.⁴⁵⁶ Meanwhile, theorists of varying levels of respectability have argued that certain self-proclaimed revolutionaries were actually secret agents and vice versa.⁴⁵⁷ The official narrative of the attacks, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, did little to quell conspiracy theories of every imaginable variant or stop them from reaching large audiences. The fact that more Americans googled ‘Nostradamus’ than ‘Bin Laden’ in the aftermath of the attacks gives credence to the claim that the general population perhaps has a suspect understanding of history and its lessons.⁴⁵⁸

Debord’s concept has undeniably been of relevance to a wide range of theorists. There are more than six books of theory and politics published in North

⁴⁵⁵ Brown, *Edgework*, p. 52. For Bush’s lies see Frank Rich, *The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9/11 to Katrina* (USA: Penguin, 2006), David Corn, *The Lies of George W. Bush* (USA: Three Rivers Press, 2004).

⁴⁵⁶ See, for example, Paul Alexander, *Machiavelli’s Shadow: The Rise and Fall of Karl Rove* (USA: Rodale Books, 2008). A quick google search reveals that numerous other figures have been dubbed ‘Bush’s *Consigliere*’, such as Condoleezza Rice and Alberto Gonzales. Rove is also said to have his own *consigliere*: the lawyer Robert Luskin. Retort refer to James Baker as the Bush family *consigliere*. Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, p. 41. The fact that this word is thrown around so often these days should be thought in light of Debord’s claim in *Comments* that ‘The Mafia is not an outsider in this world; it is perfectly at home. Indeed, in the integrated spectacle it stands as the *model* of all advanced commercial enterprises.’ Debord, *Comments*, p. 67.

⁴⁵⁷ The former is certainly more common than the latter. For example, numerous claims have been made that Osama Bin Laden was in the employ of the CIA. CIA meetings with Bin Laden up to two months before 9/11 have been reported by the mainstream press. See Anthony Sampson, ‘CIA agent alleged to have met Bin Laden in July’, *The Guardian*, 1 November, 2001, Available online at: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/nov/01/afghanistan.terrorism>>. Peter Dale Scott talks about the role of agents and double agents, informants who are recruited and then go on to become increasingly important both to the security agency and as to the party being investigated as they become more active and operate as a sort of agent provocateur. ‘The greater the successful provocation, the more important the double agent to the agency to which he reports. Truly successful double agents acquire their own agendas, distinguishable from those of their agency and possibly their party as well.’ Peter Dale Scott, *The Road to 9/11* (California: University of California Press, 2007), p. xiii. For more on this in relation to both the WTC bombing in 1993 and 9/11 see Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, *The War on Truth: 9/11, Disinformation, and the Anatomy of Terrorism* (Gloucestershire, Arris Books, 2005).

⁴⁵⁸ Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2003), p. 160.

America since 9/11 that contain the term ‘spectacle’ in their title. Three of these are particularly useful in terms of identifying the contemporary uses and treatments of Debord’s concept: *Beyond the Spectacle of Terrorism* by Henry Giroux, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* by the Retort Collective, and *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy* by Douglas Kellner.⁴⁵⁹ Each of these at some point in the first few pages makes clear that the ‘spectacle’ in the title refers to the concept developed by Debord in *Society of the Spectacle*; each also uses it as a tool to discuss both the events of 9/11 and the subsequent ‘War on Terror’ to varying degrees. However, their different conceptions of ‘spectacle’ and the stringency with which they stick to the concept as developed by Debord varies highly. What is odd about this referencing is that none of the above texts, as mentioned previously, spotlight Debord’s later work on terrorism and the state. By overlooking this portion of his oeuvre, these theorists present and apply an incomplete conception of the spectacle that not only badly reflects Debord’s theory but also limits their analysis. For if it is problematic to discuss Debord and 9/11 together without thinking about conspiracy, secrecy, disinformation and fear (and subsequently their role or position within the society of the spectacle), then any consideration of the events of 9/11 and the ‘War on Terror’ that does not take these themes into account will be deficient as a result.

There are, however, two notable exceptions to this tendency to ignore Debord’s later texts: the work of Debord-biographer Len Bracken and that of Not

⁴⁵⁹ Others such as *Surpassing the Spectacle: Global Transformations and the Changing Politics of Art* by Carol Becker appeared after 9/11 but were written before. Fran Shor, *Bush-League Spectacles: Empire, Politics, and Culture in Bushwacked America* (USA: Factory School, 2005), could also be included in this list but Short’s use of Debord is so minimal (it’s restricted to the book’s epigram), that I have left it out. James Compton’s *The Integrated News Spectacle* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004) focuses on the media but it is constantly discussed in a broader context of economic and social relations and is a convincing application of an amended concept of the spectacle, although it is not particularly useful for this discussion. That said, despite having the word ‘integrated’ in its title, the conception of spectacle with which Compton operates is taken solely from *Society of the Spectacle*.

Bored. Intriguingly, as the footnote cited above implies, both utilise the texts of Debord, as well as those of Sanguinetti, to develop a conspiratorial account of the 9/11 attacks that depicts them as acts of false-flag terrorism perpetrated by actors within the US state. While both Bracken and Not Bored raise several provocative questions about the official version of events, their use of Debord and Sanguinetti is problematic for two main reasons. Firstly, their work largely consists of a direct application of arguments developed in a different historical situation, namely that of seventies Italy. By doing so they fail to acknowledge important historical and political differences between the two periods. Secondly, their use of Debord is highly selective, as they conveniently ignore many of Debord's theses on the integrated spectacle that would throw doubt upon the confidence with which they put forward their conspiratorial narrative of the 9/11 attacks.

This chapter will begin with a discussion of the books that reference Debord in direct relation to 9/11 and the 'War on Terror', paying particular attention to Retort's *Afflicted Powers* and Bracken's *The Shadow Government: 9-11 and State Terror*. These two books are singled out because they are written by theorists particularly engaged with Debord's work and because of the radically different conclusions they have drawn from this engagement. Much of this revolves around their opposing attitudes to Debord's so-called 'penchant' for conspiracy theory.⁴⁶⁰ Retort ignore it; Bracken embraces it. From there I will move on to discuss conspiracy theory in general and its relation to the epistemological uncertainty generated by the integrated spectacle. Against both Retort and Bracken, I will argue that what is key about Debord's theory is that he offers a way of taking really existing conspiracies seriously without regressing to what is pejoratively labelled 'conspiracy theory', instead

⁴⁶⁰ Lütticken, *Secret Publicity*, p. 191

thinking about his work in relation to the emerging field of parapolitical studies. What is important about the concept of the spectacle is that it designates contemporary life in its totality. It is by emphasising the global hegemony and homogeneity of the spectacle as the terrain in which events takes place that a Debordian approach can powerfully analyse the relations between the ‘War on Terror’ and revolutionary Islam, alongside other concerns about rampant commodification, alienation and everyday life in the early 21st century. Underlying this are the epistemological and strategic challenges that face statesmen and activists in the spectacle, as much as theorists and researchers.

Banalising the Spectacle

‘I was sometimes accused of having invented [the spectacle] out of thin air, and was always accused of indulging myself to excess in my evaluation of its depth and unity, and its real workings. I must admit that others who later published books on the same subject demonstrated that it was quite possible to say less. All they had to do was to replace the totality and its movement by a single static detail on the surface of the phenomenon...’

–Guy Debord, 1988⁴⁶¹

Before moving on to Retort and Bracken, it is worth taking a quick look at Kellner and Giroux’s books because they so clearly demonstrate the inadequacies of many contemporary interpretations and applications of Debord’s theory. Debord states quite plainly in the first chapter of *Society of the Spectacle* that the mass media is the spectacle’s ‘most stultifying superficial manifestation’.⁴⁶² As such it is surprising how many theorists apply the concept of the spectacle as a theory of the ubiquity of the mass media, or treat the spectacle as being synonymous with the media and entertainment industries. Kellner is perhaps the main culprit. His books

⁴⁶¹ Debord, *Comments*, p. 3.

⁴⁶² Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 24.

Media Spectacle (2003) and *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy* (2005) reference Debord, but work with a conception of spectacle more or less equivalent to the term's common usage as 'a theatrical display or pageant.' His presentation of Debord's theory in *Media Spectacle* is cursory yet competent (besides strangely replacing 'the commodity' with 'the consumption' in a quote from *Society of the Spectacle*⁴⁶³), and it is clear he has a grasp of Debord's work from texts he has written previously, but despite his claims to the contrary, his concept of the media spectacle does not so much build on Debord's theory as banalise it.⁴⁶⁴

Kellner's conception of the spectacle is purposely different from Debord's: he replaces the 'somewhat abstract and theoretical' notion of his source text with one that is 'concrete and contemporary' (strange that 'theoretical' is here seen as the opposite of 'contemporary').⁴⁶⁵ He attempts to 'update and develop' Debord's concept by analysing examples of spectacular culture. He also introduces the concept of 'megaspectacles', which are said to be large-scale and prolonged affairs like the Bill Clinton sex scandal or the Super Bowl. Essentially contemporary versions of the circuses of the old adage 'bread and circuses', they serve to 'distract people from the pressing issues of their everyday lives with endless hype on shocking crimes, sports contests and personalities, political scandals, natural disasters, and the self-promoting hype of media culture itself.'⁴⁶⁶ Most of Kellner's case studies of spectacular culture could barely be more obvious: McDonalds, Nike, the OJ Simpson trial, *The X Files* and presidential campaigns each boast a dedicated chapter.

⁴⁶³ Kellner, *Media Spectacle*, p. 3. What makes this particularly bizarre is that the English translation of *Society of the Spectacle* that the quote is said to come from uses the accurate term 'commodity'. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983), par. 42.

⁴⁶⁴ See Best and Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (London: Routledge, 1997), or Best and Kellner, *The Postmodern Adventure* (London: Routledge, 2001).

⁴⁶⁵ Kellner, *Media Spectacle*, p. 11.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy by and large applies the concept of media spectacle to 9/11 and the 'War on Terror'. This is done via the new concept of 'spectacles of terror', sometimes referred to as 'media spectacles of terror' or 'terror spectacles': essentially terrorist attacks meant to be captured and disseminated through the media. 9/11 was not the first spectacle of terror and Kellner mentions earlier examples like the media-savvy skyjackings and hostage-takings of the seventies. These acts are done with a specific understanding of their context and goals. They are orchestrated in order to get national or global attention for a group or cause and help them attain certain political objectives by spreading terror among the public.⁴⁶⁷ The fact that attacks clearly have symbolic motivations and consequences does not, of course, preclude their having direct material consequences too, Kellner notes. The terror spectacle of the 9/11 attacks, for example, demonstrated that 'the United States was vulnerable, that terrorists could create great harm, and that anyone at any time could be subject to a deadly terrorist attack, even in Fortress America.'⁴⁶⁸ Meanwhile, the state and the media can create their own spectacles of terror, as the images of the attack and the threat of future attacks can be spread and reframed for their benefit. So where as the terrorists used terror spectacle to strike a real blow and attract recruits to their global jihad, the Bush administration exploited the images of the attacks to gain support for imperial adventures, pass desired legislation and distract the population from domestic policy failures.

As Debord has claimed, while it is doubtful that one could add to the theory of the spectacle, it is certainly possible to say a lot less. Overall, as Kellner himself admits, *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy* is theoretically light. The concept of the spectacle is not deployed to great effect and the majority of the book is

⁴⁶⁷ Kellner, *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy*, p. 27.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

more or less a standard and by now rather hackneyed, anti-Bush text (rant is only slightly too loaded a term) about the deterioration of democracy and the necessity of its revitalisation both with and against the media spectacle.⁴⁶⁹ The fact that Kellner's book is organised around the concept of media spectacle effectively leads it to platitudinous pronouncements like 'During a media age, image and spectacle are of crucial importance to presidential campaigns.'⁴⁷⁰

When the spectacle is thought of as being synonymous with the mass media, it is then easy to argue that Debord has been surpassed as the rise of new media and interactivity has left Debord's critique dated. Kellner, together with Stephen Best, makes this exact argument in an earlier text.⁴⁷¹ There they argue that the integrated spectacle has developed into what they call 'the interactive spectacle'. This later offshoot 'comprises new technologies (unforeseen by Debord) that allow a more active participation of the subject in (what remains) the spectacle. The subject of the new stage of the spectacle is more active, and new interactive technologies like the computer, multimedia, and virtual reality make possible more participation, albeit of limited and ambivalent types'. The 'Homo Spectator' that Debord posited as the spectacle's subject implied the passive consumption of spectacle in opposition to real activity involving imagination and creativity. Best and Kellner write, 'in this earlier conjuncture [of spectacle], the subject sat more or less passively in front of a movie or television screen, or was a slightly more active spectator of sporting events or commodity spectacle in stores or malls. This phase elicited analyses of the domination of the subject by the object, and categories of passivity, seriality, separation, and

⁴⁶⁹ Some of Kellner's anti-Bush rhetoric is even detrimental to his analysis as the Iraq Wars – Desert Storm and the present war – are more or less reduced to the need by the Bushes to distract the American population from policy failures. See Kellner, *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy*, pp. 39-42.

⁴⁷⁰ Kellner, *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy*, p. 107.

⁴⁷¹ Best and Kellner, 'Debord, Cybersituations, and the Interactive Spectacle', *Parallax* (20. 2001), pp. 129-56.

alienation described the decline of agency and transformative practice'.⁴⁷² This more advanced stage of spectacle, on the other hand, replaces passivity with interactivity and entails the simultaneous creation of novel cultural forms that can be both empowering and subversive and/or part of a generation of new, often subtler, kinds of subjection and domination. The degree of interactivity promised by these new forms varies considerably however, and the line between genuine interactivity and its commercial parody is often indistinct.

Without citing this earlier argument in his more recent texts, Kellner continues to make the same point. In *Media Spectacle* he juxtaposes this vision of spectacle as 'a contested terrain' with Debord's supposed take on it as a 'picture of a quasi-totalitarian nexus of domination'.⁴⁷³ This feeds into a drastically oversimplified conception of both Debord's theory of the spectacle and the activity of the Situationists whose relationship with the media and dominant culture was drastically more complex than one could imagine from these accounts.⁴⁷⁴ When he argues that the politics of the spectacle are 'highly unstable' and that media spectacles are subject to 'dialectical reversal' in which positive images become negative and vice versa, he is no doubt correct.⁴⁷⁵ Images and particular spectacles can indeed be read in different ways like anything else, this constituting the possibility of *détournement* as a technique (although of course *détournement* depends on a subtler semiotics than 'anything goes').

Debord was understandably unable to take into consideration the ways in which new media and technological developments have challenged the more

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁴⁷³ Kellner, *Media Spectacle*, p. 11. For an elucidation of a similar position that also references Debord see Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (USA: The New Press, 2007).

⁴⁷⁴ See Kinkle, Review in *Historical Materialism* (18. 2010), pp. 164-77.

⁴⁷⁵ Kellner, *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy*, p. 78.

homogenous media sphere of the 1960s in which he developed the theory of the spectacle. Even if one were to accept that people today may indeed be considerably savvier in their consumption of media and that new technologies make its production and distribution considerably easier for increasing numbers, these facts only threaten to undermine an impoverished version of the theory of the spectacle. For example, there is a double movement in the interactivity promised by much of what Best and Kellner call the interactive spectacle. When commodity exchange becomes a matter of digitally transmitting a stream of data or buying binary generated experiences, the commodity form abounds with even more 'metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties'. The fluid and dynamic forces that Marx saw congealed in the commodity form are seemingly liquidised by virtue of cyberspace exchange; at the same time, however, the real social relations of production are even more shrouded. It is complicated enough to try to think of the human activity that went into manufacturing the chair I am sitting on, but the activity that went into producing and running the word processing programme I am using is almost inconceivable. Perhaps it was designed somewhere in California with part of the programming outsourced to an office in Bangalore; former sweatshop seamstresses in Malaysia assembled the chips through which the programme runs on components made of raw materials extracted from and processed at an array of locations throughout the world. Even if playing a video game may be more interactive than watching a movie, the technological advancement makes the human interactions involved in creating the game even more difficult to grasp and the forces that coordinate them seem even more magical.

Having said this, and in agreement with Kellner, one would be foolish to belittle the radical possibilities, some already demonstrated, of interactive technologies and digital media. Julian Stallabrass has convincingly, if briefly, laid out

the ways in which ‘Digital technologies, precisely because they are capable of countering the broadcast mode of spectacle, can be important tools in [the anti-globalization/war] struggle.’⁴⁷⁶ Phenomena like the open source movement attempt to decommodify the web and create an expanding digital common. While it is at present difficult to circumvent the necessity of using hardware and infrastructure created in unsavoury conditions, the movement at least aims to reclaim a large chunk of our everyday lives from the logic of capitalist accumulation and its original arguments have spread to address concerns about genetic patents and property rights. Simultaneously, it would be difficult to argue that the relative ease with which independent media sources can exist online has not at least dented the corporate and state control of the media, even if one is cynical about the range of their impact. One could also consider the possibilities of VR *dérives* in collectively designed cities or in realised, virtual versions of Piranesi’s sketches and Constant’s models that could serve as psychogeographical experiments, or, why not, VR environments that allow individuals to play with and discover desires usually kept in check (which has been a common trope in texts on cyberspace).

Overall, however, the main problem with Best and Kellner’s approach is that in their conception of the interactive spectacle they treat the term as a media-technological apparatus that has invaded and is actively structuring society (now with a more active role for the subject). The spectacle is not reducible to the mass media or the world shaped by the mass media’s excessive influence and technological development. Rather, the mass media is subordinate to the logic of the spectacle in a similar way to, say, urban planning or political and military campaigns. Kellner treats instances of spectacle as content to be analysed, rather than a form that has been

⁴⁷⁶ This argument is made against Retort. Stallabrass, ‘Spectacle and Terror’, *New Left Review* (37, Jan/Feb 2006), p. 105.

generalised throughout society. What his analysis misses is any consideration of how the society of the spectacle reproduces itself other than by distracting the population with gripping, but ultimately mind-numbing, infotainment narratives or images of terror that aim to frighten into submission.

Giroux uses a similar terminology to Kellner in his *Beyond the Spectacle of Terrorism* (2006), but is careful to differentiate between what he calls ‘the terror of the spectacle’ and ‘the spectacle of the terror’. The terror of the spectacle is basically meant to be a streamlined version of the concept of the society of the spectacle described by Debord in 1967. Like Debord’s first elucidation of the spectacle there are two variants. Rather than the diffuse and concentrated, however, Giroux refers to the spectacles of consumerism and fascism. Both of these forms are said to lead the populace into ignoring questions of power and antagonism through visual spectacle and practices that project a vision of a unified society. ‘Demanding a certain mode of attentiveness or gaze elicited through phantasmagoric practices, including various rites of passage, parades, pageantry, advertisements, and media presentations, the terror of the spectacle offers the populace a collective sense of unity that serves to integrate them into state power.’⁴⁷⁷ ‘Terror’ is perhaps not the word most would use to describe the way they experience spectacular society or consumerism, particularly under the diffuse spectacle. ‘Ennui’, ‘estrangement’, ‘alienation’ or even ‘misery’ would all perhaps be more appropriate terms since what Giroux is describing bears no resemblance to the terror discussed in the previous chapter in relation to Debord, or Negri and Guattari. Despite confusion over differences in terminology, however, it is clear that the concept of the spectacle Giroux is attempting to present is a generic version of that of Debord in *Society of the Spectacle*.

⁴⁷⁷ Giroux, p. 29.

Giroux argues that the conception of the spectacle formulated in the latter text is no longer adequate for understanding the present. He claims that we are living in ‘a new order of spectacle’, ‘in which the visual is bound to a brutalizing politics of fear and hyped-up forms of terrorist threats.’⁴⁷⁸ He dubs this new order ‘the spectacle of terrorism’, which was inaugurated by 9/11, or rather by the images of 9/11 as they spread around the world. ‘The spectacle of terrorism conjures up its meaning largely through the power of images that grate against humane sensibilities. Rather than indulging a process of depoliticization by turning consuming into the only responsibility of citizenship [as does the terror of the spectacle], the spectacle of terrorism politicizes through a theatrics of fear and shock.’⁴⁷⁹ The spectacle of terrorism is not wholly novel and inherits many aspects of the spectacles of consumerism and fascism, but its arrival means that discourses on the spectacle from Debord to Kellner (Giroux actually names both) need to be rethought.⁴⁸⁰ He argues that while these works are important in that they engage the spectacle as a central aspect of the era’s cultural politics, it is necessary to rethink and revise the concept ‘since the first video images of fiery plane crashes and collapsing towers inaugurated the War on Terror.’⁴⁸¹ This is for two main reasons according to Giroux. ‘Debord could not have imagined either how the second media revolution would play out, with its multiple producers, distributors, and consumers, or how a post-9/11 War on Terrorism would transform the shift, especially in the United States, from an emphasis on consumerism to an equally absorbing obsession with war and its

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11, p. 8.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 30. A different angle to this could be taken by looking at the doctrine of ‘Shock and Awe’ practiced by the US military. See Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade, *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance* (National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, 1996).

⁴⁸⁰ Giroux, p. 31.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

politically regressive corollaries of fear, anxiety, and insecurity.⁴⁸² While Giroux may have a point with the former, the latter is incorrect.

The notion that Debord, writing during a spurt of tremendous economic growth and promised consumer prosperity (*Les Trente Glorieuses*), was only able to depict a spectacle that projected a vision of comfortable unity, not fear and terror, is simply wrong. Giroux's citations of Debord come exclusively from *Society of the Spectacle* and there is no indication that he has read *Comments* or any of Debord's texts that deal directly with terrorism and the manipulation of fear. This is obvious when Giroux writes that his conceptualisation of the spectacle of terrorism 'complicates previous theories of the spectacle, defined almost exclusively through the merging of mass consumption and its multi-mediated images of endless attainable pleasures.'⁴⁸³ Positioning himself against Debord he writes, 'Unlike Guy Debord's society of the spectacle, which justifies capitalism by elevating consumption to an aesthetic ur-experience, the spectacle of terrorism affirms politics (of war, life, sacrifice, and death) over the aesthetics of commodification through an appeal to the real over the simulacrum.'⁴⁸⁴ The insufficiencies of this depiction of Debord's theory should be perfectly clear to anyone who has read Debord's work following the dissolution of the SI as discussed in the previous chapter. The theoretical consequences of Giroux's deficient reading will be elucidated over the course of this chapter but I would like to cursorily address some of them now. Firstly, by acknowledging that Debord did indeed present a theory of the spectacle that gave fear and terror a central role, one is forced to consider the novelty of the present 'new order of spectacle'. This is not to say that one should merely graft Debord's theories, developed in the context of Italy's 'years of lead' and a broader geopolitical scenario

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 41-2.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

of armed struggle, terrorism, counter-insurgency and espionage, directly onto the present; neither is it to argue that these theories are not without their inadequacies; it is, rather, to acknowledge that the manipulation of fear and terror are not exclusive to the 21st Century. It is not only in 1970s Italy that fear was mobilised for political ends but throughout the Cold War – even during periods of remarkable economic growth.⁴⁸⁵ From the mid-60s until the late-70s, television viewers in Europe and North America would have been accustomed to seeing images of inner city riots, plane hijackings, terrorist bombings (IRA, RAF, Carlos the Jackal, Weathermen, etc.), inner city decline, rising crime and impending social chaos. The present period of course has its own specificities and horrors (internet, end of Cold War, suicide bombings, etc.), but ignoring the similarities to previous periods and overestimating our current uniqueness can be theoretically negligent. Secondly, this discourse sees the state as essentially reacting to acts of terror – taking advantage of their unfortunate occurrence to bolster its own powers – and disregards the possibility that the state itself at the very least welcomed, and at the most actually perpetuated, the attacks: in other words, it ignores the possibility of conspiracy.

Retort: Desacralising the Spectacle

Of the multiple texts that relate the concept of the spectacle to 9/11, Retort's *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* has received the most attention and provoked the most critical discussion. The subject of the book according to the authors is 'the contradictions of military neo-liberalism under conditions of

⁴⁸⁵ For example, back in 1971 Debord wrote of the 'terrifying *spectacle* of thermonuclear war'. Debord, *Sick Planet*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London, New York, Calcutta, Seagull Books, 2008), p. 88. See also Corey Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2004).

spectacle.⁴⁸⁶ Polemical and provocative, it has received in-depth responses in journals like *Public Culture*, *New Left Review* and *October*. Written by a collective including Iain Boal, Joseph Matthews, Michael Watts and ex-Situationist TJ Clark, its scope is tremendously wide – a result of its contributors’ varying specialties⁴⁸⁷ Yet, as Gopal Balakrishnan writes, the three terms in the book’s title – capital, war and spectacle – are interconnected ‘at a remarkable level of imaginative intensity’.⁴⁸⁸ Here I will largely bypass their analyses of revolutionary Islam, the relationship between the US and Israel and the role played by oil in the motivations for the war in Iraq, instead focusing specifically on the manner in which they mobilise the concept of ‘spectacle’.⁴⁸⁹ This mobilisation has consequences for understanding not only the importance of an event like 9/11 and the overall ‘War on Terror’, but also the possibilities of engaged critique within the society of the spectacle in general.

Retort are very explicit about their use of the term spectacle, with their version of it being ‘minimal, pragmatic, and matter of fact.’⁴⁹⁰ Debord, they claim, gave the concept an ‘exultant, world-historical force’ – and this is an aspect that their own usage seeks to avoid.⁴⁹¹ In an interview published in *October* they reflect further, calling the spectacle ‘a word, we realize, that gets a bit shopworn and all-consuming with time.’⁴⁹² They reject the concept’s ‘totalizing closure’, yet they want to retain it,

⁴⁸⁶ Retort, *Afflicted Powers* p. 15.

⁴⁸⁷ TJ Clark is best known as an art historian. He was a member of the short-lived English section of the Situationist International. Iain Boal is a social historian whose work has focused on the commons and enclosures. Michael Watts is a geographer and political economist and much of his recent work has focused on oil and Africa. Joseph Matthews is an attorney.

⁴⁸⁸ Balakrishnan, *Antagonistics* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), p. 76.

⁴⁸⁹ The chapter of Balakrishnan’s *Antagonistics* dedicated to *Afflicted Powers* deals thoroughly with all of these questions, as does the special issue of *Public Culture*. Balakrishnan’s essay was original published in *New Left Review*: Balakrishnan, ‘States of War’, *New Left Review* (36, Nov/Dec 2005), pp. 5-32.

⁴⁹⁰ Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, p. 19.

⁴⁹¹ In one of the better commentaries on the book, WTJ Mitchell takes Retort to task for failing to do this. See WTJ Mitchell, ‘The Spectacle Today’. *Public Culture* (Vol. 20, 3. Fall 2008), pp. 573-81.

⁴⁹² ‘An Exchange on *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*’, *October* (115, Winter 2006), pp. 3-12. This interview is included in the new edition of *Afflicted Powers* as an

since they claim it still possesses explanatory power.⁴⁹³ As they say, ‘we wanted to find ways of taking spectacle seriously as a term of political explanation without turning it into the key to all mysteries. In a word, the concept needed to be *desacralized*.’⁴⁹⁴ Referencing the Situationist critiques of the riots in Watts in 1965 and revolutionary activity in Algeria and China, they argue that the concept needs to ‘dirty its hands with the details of politics’ and be locally and conjuncturally applied, it being important to consider it as something subject not only to change but also to destabilisation.⁴⁹⁵ Their definition of the term is clearly and concisely summarised early in their text. They understand it to describe a new stage of capitalist accumulation in which the logic of the market has infiltrated a previously unheard of portion of everyday life and commodified human sociability on a similar scale. Describing the ‘society of the spectacle’ and ‘the colonisation of everyday life’ as mutually dependent, twinned notions, they treat the spectacle ‘as a first stab at characterizing a new form of, or stage in, the accumulation of capital.’⁴⁹⁶ What the concept of the spectacle sought to identify, they write, ‘was the submission of more and more facets of human sociability to the deadly solicitations (the lifeless bright sameness) of the market.’⁴⁹⁷ Here the process of spectacularisation is understood as a type of capitalist colonisation turned inwards; the real subsumption of our lives – including everything from rebellion and recreation to patterns of speech – by capital and the commodity.

The most important of Retort’s claims in relation to a Debordian understanding of 9/11 is this: ‘*Spectacularly*, the American state suffered a defeat on

epilogue. References to it will be taken from that edition and not *October*. Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, p. 198.

⁴⁹³ Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, p. 22.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17, 19.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

September 11th. And spectacularly, for this state, does not mean superficially or epiphenomenally. The state was wounded in September in its heart of hearts, and we see it still, almost four years later, flailing blindly in the face of an image it cannot exorcize, and trying desperately to convert the defeat back into terms it can respond to.⁴⁹⁸ The terrorists were well versed in the power of the image, or so the narrative goes. They understood the logic of the spectacle and realised that ‘control over the image is now the key to social power’, and thus calculated correctly that attacking the most powerful symbol of American (world) capitalism just in time for the morning news would have profound effects across the globe. Retort ‘do not believe that one can destroy the society of the spectacle by producing the spectacle of its destruction’, but this does not mean that the trauma was not ‘real’.⁴⁹⁹ So even if an event like 9/11 did not do an immense amount of damage to the economic and geopolitical might of the United States, the blow it inflicted in the realm of images was still actual. ‘A state that lives more and more in and through a regime of the image does not know what to do when, for a moment it dies by the same lights. [...] And image-death – image defeat – is not a condition this state can endure.’⁵⁰⁰ As such the US state was forced to come up with a riposte. They were sufficiently sensitive, according to Retort, to cover Picasso’s *Guernica* before Powell’s infamous WMD presentation at the UN and to disallow any photos of dead American soldiers, body bags and funerals. They engineered ‘Shock and Awe’, the toppling of the Saddam statue, and had Bush hopping out of the fighter jet on the deck of the *Abraham Lincoln* and proclaiming victory all in response to the image of the falling towers. This, however, was immediately countered by a second image defeat: the leaking of images from Abu

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

Ghraib.⁵⁰¹ Retort's analysis thus differs from Giroux and Keller's in that rather than seeing the attacks as a kind of blessing in disguise that gave the Bush administration the long-awaited opportunity to reorder the Middle East, push through desired legislation at a time when questioning the president on anything was deemed unpatriotic, and hand out billions of dollars of contracts to buddies in the military industrial complex, they see them as plunging the US government into a nightmare from which it was unable to wake – and perhaps still is today.

For Retort, the society of the spectacle is the context in which the 9/11 attacks took place and in which the American state was forced to respond. Their argument revolves around the rather modest claim that any attempt to understand the attacks must consider the realm of the spectacular *alongside* the realms of the economic and the geopolitical. In the belief that thinking the actual balance and relation between these realms is the main theoretical challenge for the contemporary left to confront, they posit their book as an imperfect attempt to come to a solution.⁵⁰² They write, 'we would argue that the present condition of politics does not make sense unless it is approached from a dual perspective – seen as a struggle for crude, material dominance, but also (threaded ever closer into that struggle) as a battle for control of appearances.'⁵⁰³ For Retort, this means that the realm of images comes to be a factor that influences the behaviour of statesmen (and terrorists, revolutionaries, etc.) alongside geopolitical and economic concerns. It is not yet known whether an image-event *in itself* can 'alter the balance of world-political forces, surging out of the blue of international disorder and remaking the terms of statecraft'.⁵⁰⁴ While they claim

⁵⁰¹ See also Susan Sontag, 'Regarding the Torture of Others', *New York Times*, 23 May, 2004, Available online at:

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/23PRISONS.html?pagewanted=1>>.

⁵⁰² Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, p. 200.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 200-1.

that such an image-event is a logical possibility that may yet occur one day, 9/11 was not an image-event of this magnitude. ‘It was an image-defeat, yes; but it only produced the long-term or mid-term effects that it did because, as an image, it resonated so ominously with the gross material realities of “failed states,” the disintegrating world arms market, the threats to the state’s monopoly of the means of mass destruction, and the general neo-liberalization of war.’⁵⁰⁵ The effect of 9/11 as image was to shake the world order and alter it irrevocably, but only because of its relation to certain economic and geopolitical realities.

Unlike Kellner and Giroux, Retort are clearly aware of Debord’s later writings and his theorisation of the eternal present is important for their argument. To recap from the last chapter, in *Comments* Debord lists ‘an eternal present’ as one of the spectacle’s five principle features and the ‘eradication of historical knowledge in general’ is said to be spectacular domination’s first priority.⁵⁰⁶ Important here is the acknowledgement that Debord is not saying that a particular state, say the US state, actively tries to eradicate history. Rather, it is spectacle, developing according to its own logic, which gradually destroys access to history. Debord initially points out that this implemented amnesia is debilitating for resistance of any kind and that it greatly reinforces the power of those who sell novelty (as opposed to the genuinely new) and state power in general, which is spared from being compared with any other historical variants. From the perspective of the state, however, there is one drawback to this eternal present. Retort quote Debord: ‘To the list of triumphs of power we should add one result which has proved negative: once the running of the state involves a

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁶ Debord, *Comments*, p. 12, 13.

permanent and massive shortage of historical knowledge, that state can no longer be led *strategically*.⁵⁰⁷

Debord's claim, echoed by Retort, that not only the general population but also the state are suffering from a sort of manufactured amnesia might be slightly hyperbolic, but one can still make a strong case that a shortage of historical knowledge has been behind some of the US state's misadventures by looking at changes to the intelligence community specifically post 9/11.⁵⁰⁸ Oversimplifying a bit, since the Second World War the methodology behind intelligence gathering – for example, that pioneered in the US by Sherman Kent, a Yale history professor who would be pivotal in the early days of the CIA – has resembled that of the social sciences with agents first doing background research on their given area, learning the local language, and only then doing fieldwork to gather data that is then processed and analysed, with subsequent policy suggestions going through a thorough peer-review process. This conception of intelligence was overturned by the Bush administration in the aftermath of 9/11 where the focus was on speed and decisions were made by an unprecedentedly small group of individuals with similar (and narrow) aims and ideals. Bush was, famously, the least worldly of recent US presidents and it has often been noted how little Middle East expertise Bush's cabinet possessed, most of them being former Cold Warriors and Soviet experts. This lack of historical understanding extends throughout the intelligence services. For example, in the 1970s a typical CIA analyst would spend about 70 to 80% of their time doing basic research on important topics. Today 90% of their time is spent on current

⁵⁰⁷ Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, p. 22, Debord, *Comments*, p. 20.

⁵⁰⁸ Just to take some superficial examples, nearly a third of Americans, according to a *Washington Post* poll, cannot remember the year in which the attacks of 9/11 took place (5% didn't know the month or day) and similar polls have revealed extreme ignorance in European populations about things like the Gulag and Holocaust. Or else take for example the largely ahistorical framing of Al Qaeda as irrational and evil, disconnected from any aspect of US foreign policy or geopolitics.

reporting.⁵⁰⁹ As a former CIA agent and chief of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the State Department comments: ‘Analysts today are looking at intelligence coming in and then writing what they think about it, but they have no depth of knowledge to determine whether the current intelligence is correct. There are very few people left in the intelligence community who even remember how to do basic research’.⁵¹⁰ Retort wryly note that Debord would likely have ‘revelled in the endless *double entendres* provided by the media, to the effect that Bush and Blair’s rush to war in Iraq should be blamed on ‘faulty intelligence’!’⁵¹¹

The phrase ‘History begins today’ is said to have been used repeatedly in the White House on 12 September, 2001 and it was reiterated by Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage to the head of Pakistani intelligence soon thereafter.⁵¹² The question is of course whether this is simply a rhetorical strategy meant to give the American public a simple narrative of good vs. evil, which conveniently erases any notion of the attacks as ‘blowback’ (the past deemed irrelevant) or if this attitude is actually adopted when formulating policy and strategy.⁵¹³ As Stallabrass writes, this position exposes one to certain risks: ‘The danger of Debord’s view [that the spectacular state can no longer be led strategically] is that it underplays the complexity, differentiation of specialized parts, and finally the political capacity of the state.’⁵¹⁴ Similarly, WTJ Mitchell insists on some ‘realism about such “strategic” claims’, arguing that while the strategy of the United States in Iraq and the Israeli

⁵⁰⁹ James Risen, *State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵¹¹ Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, p. 23.

⁵¹² Quoted in, David Bromwich, ‘Euphemism and American Violence’, *The New York Review of Books* (Vol. 55, No. 5, 3 April, 2008), Available online at: <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/21199>>.

⁵¹³ Thomas Friedman’s editorial in the *New York Times* a year after the attacks could not illustrate this position better. Thomas Friedman, ‘9/11 Lesson Plans’, *New York Times*, 4 Sept, 2002, Available online at: <<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/04/opinion/9-11-lesson-plan.html?sec=&spon=&pagewanted=1>>.

⁵¹⁴ Stallabrass, ‘Spectacle and Terror’, p. 99.

state regarding the Palestinians may lead to the US and Israeli states' respective long term demise, they are still being led strategically.⁵¹⁵ Firstly, in defence of Debord and Retort, one might say that Debord's quote does not refer to the limitation of the power of the spectacle, but to the limitations of (state) power within the spectacle, or the power of statesmen to govern. Key to his argument is that it is not only state power that is potentially undermined by the spectacle, but also the power of anyone to organise or strategise against the state. Secondly, Debord obviously does not mean that a state cannot have a strategy, but rather that the strategy will inevitably be incompetent and flawed: strategic decisions in general are exceedingly difficult to make, especially if one does not have an understanding of the functioning of the spectacle and its consequences.

This contradiction between strategy and spectacle is brought out nicely in a footnote in this section of *Afflicted Powers* where the authors claim that for the main part 'deeply secret' arenas still exist where 'certain aspects of state interest and policy are plotted over the long term': in relation to the economy.⁵¹⁶ One need not resort to a conspiracy theory of history, they claim, to observe the state's enabling role in economic affairs, or 'to see how elaborate were the tradeoffs between capital and the state in the planning and instrumentation of the whole neo-liberal push'.⁵¹⁷ They claim that the state has 'real ruthlessness, lucidity, and expertise at its disposal' when dealing with thinking capitalism strategically, but struggles considerably when dealing with questions of geopolitical balance, the shifting nature and efficacy of warfare in relation to state interests, and ideological struggle.⁵¹⁸ The financial crisis of 2008 suggests that the state's strategic grasp of the economy is not in fact exceptional.

⁵¹⁵ Mitchell, 'The Spectacle Today', p. 576

⁵¹⁶ Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, fn. 11.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*

That said, it is difficult to argue that those whose actions contributed to the crisis or those involved in organising the state's response have no reservoir of historical knowledge to draw from. Ben Bernanke, for example, Chairman of the Federal Reserve since 2006, is an academic who made a career out of studying the crash of 1929.⁵¹⁹ One can obviously attack his work in a number of ways but claiming he had no access to history is a bit dubious (he certainly had access to 'the legacy of old books and old buildings'). Just as one does not want to underestimate the consequences of the spectacle for the running of states, one should avoid belittling the extent to which statesmen and men of the state have actually become adept at ruling under conditions of spectacle. Despite these various failures of intelligence, state power is not really under threat anywhere in what Debord would likely consider the most developed sectors of the integrated spectacle. There have certainly been tactical and strategic blunders, but that is not historically novel.

Beyond the eternal present, life in the society of the spectacle has other important consequences for Retort's argument. One of these is their notion of 'weak citizenship', a concept never discussed by Debord. The result of the emergence and dominance of the spectacle, as 'an older, more idiosyncratic civil society' is continually being replaced with 'a deadly simulacrum of community', weak citizenship is said to have developed into a necessity for modern states.⁵²⁰ This does not mean that it does not have its drawbacks. 'A tension exists – let us put it mildly – between the dispersal and vacuity of the public sphere, which is necessary to the maintenance of "consumer society", and those stronger allegiances and identifications which the state must call on, repeatedly, if it is to maintain the dependencies that feed

⁵¹⁹ See Ben Bernanke, *Essays on The Great Depression* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁵²⁰ Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, p. 21.

the consumer beast.⁵²¹ There is a sense in which Retort's use of the concept of the spectacle here unites what Giroux refers to separately as the spectacle of terror and the terror of the spectacle. As Corey Robin has observed, the fear generated by the events of 9/11 was openly depicted by countless pundits and politicians as a blessing in disguise; allowing the American populace to wake up from the frivolous consumerist reverie of the Clinton nineties and see the stark global polarisations of good and evil and right and wrong, it would encourage them to take sides and make the sacrifices necessary on the way to realising their country's destiny (a new American century or Pax Americana).⁵²² Fear is seen as the potential source of domestic collective renewal that would remind Americans that their 'country has, with all our mistakes and blunders, always been and always will be the greatest beacon of freedom, charity, opportunity, and affection in history.'⁵²³ Essentially, fear is seen as being the one force capable of strengthening the weak citizenship 'required' by the integrated spectacle. This can allow one to try to make sense of the two seemingly contradictory messages coming out of the Bush administration in the wake of the attacks. First: Bush and the media urging Americans to return to their shopping malls as though the brief sojourn from history that was the 1990s was still in effect. Second: messages coming from the newly formed Department of Homeland Security and the media warning Americans that the country's thousands of shopping malls were all potential terrorist targets. (They should only leave home to stock up on tinned

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁵²² Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*, p. 157. Robin quotes from David Brooks' *Newsweek* article, which captures this position perfectly. David Brooks, 'Facing Up to Our Fears', *Newsweek*, 22 Oct. 2001, Available online at: <<http://www.newsweek.com/id/75667>>.

⁵²³ Larry Miller, 'You Say You Want a Resolution', *Weekly Standard*, 14 Jan., 2002, quoted in Friedman, '9/11 Lesson Plan'. This sentiment has even made its way into popular culture. An episode of the NBC superhero drama *Heroes* for example features a character planning on setting off an explosion in New York, expected to kill half the city, and justifies it on 'humanitarian' grounds. The villain proclaims, 'Out of the ashes, humanity will find a common goal, a united sense of hope, couched in a united sense of fear.' *Heroes*, Season 1, Episode 19, First aired 23 April, 2007.

goods and bottled water, otherwise remaining in front of the TV for warnings of the next attack – prompts to duct tape their doors and windows.)⁵²⁴

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to analyse whether Retort's judgment that the American state is floundering illogically after 9/11 is being made prematurely or not – the jury still seems to be out on the extent to which the present Iraq quagmire is 'strategic', sought, or an actual catastrophic failure. Time will determine whether 9/11 will be thought of mainly as a spectacular defeat for the US or as an event that convinced a country to go to war, control the world's oil supply, rescind its own civil liberties, etc.⁵²⁵ Before moving on I would like to make three observations. First, what Retort are essentially concerned with is looking at a situation in which the geopolitical actors are engaging each other under *conditions of spectacle*. The spectacle is seen as the *mise-en-scène* in which contemporary events take place. The attacks were not on the society of the spectacle per se; rather they were an attack on the US state staged within the spectacle or using the power of the spectacle against its point of highest density. Numerous theorists (Retort included) have argued the (post)modernity of the radical Islamists and whether it be the exploding of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, filming IED attacks from multiple angles, or streaming beheadings online, it is obvious that the exploitation and manipulation of the televisual is not a foreign practice to them.⁵²⁶ Retort even suggest that the logic of the spectacle can encourage the Jihadi vanguard: 'In the spectacular heartland the image-world thins and volatilizes; but out on the consumer frontier it has become one of the key instigators

⁵²⁴ 'Ridge Tries to Calm American's Nerves', *Cnn.com*, 14 Feb, 2003, Available online at: <<http://www.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/02/14/homeland.security/>>.

⁵²⁵ See, for example, Jim Holt, 'It's the Oil', *London Review of Books* (Vol. 29, No. 20, 18 October 2007), pp. 3-4, Available online at: <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n20/jim-holt/its-the-oil>>. Two popular examples of these competing positions would be the film *No End in Sight* (2007, dir. Charles Ferguson) vs. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

⁵²⁶ See, for example, Sven Lütticken, *Idols of the Market: Modern Iconoclasm and the Fundamentalist Spectacle* (Berlin and New York: Sternberg Press, 2009).

of a new round of Terror and martyrdom. For it offers those newly initiated into its technics *an illusion of political effectiveness* which, in a world of phantasms, may go on seeming enough.⁵²⁷ Jihadists are the new ‘televisionaries.’ Echoing Kellner and Giroux, Retort also note that at the same time as new medias and technologies stop the state and a handful of corporations from having a monopoly over the means of production and distribution of images, non-state actors have developed the capabilities of producing political media events that cannot possibly be completely censored.

Second, going back to Retort’s formulation of the concept of the spectacle, there is a problem with the vagueness of the notion of twinned concepts. While they certainly do need each other in order to function, rather than seeing ‘the society of the spectacle’ and ‘the colonisation of everyday life’ as intertwined, the colonisation of everyday life by the commodity-form and market imperatives is a key aspect of the society of the spectacle, i.e. the concept of the spectacle necessarily contains within it the notion of the colonisation of everyday life. In May 1961 Debord first referred to the colonisation of everyday life in a talk delivered to Henri Lefebvre’s Group for Research on Everyday Life.⁵²⁸ While the concept of the spectacle is not yet developed in any real detail by 1961, Debord claims that everyday life is being colonised by a society of exploitation and alienation, undergoing a rapid growth of technological powers and a forced expansion of its market, and that it has degenerated into ‘the

⁵²⁷ Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, p. 189. Alberto Franceschini, one of the Red Brigades founders: ‘The more we grew militarily, the more we were living in the mass media, in the giant headlines of the newspapers. At a certain point, we began to measure our initiatives more against the space the media gave us than against society’s approval. Without our catching on, the society of the spettacolo was using us as elements of the spettacolo itself. In this way we, the enemies of the state, the ‘terrorists,’ became the favorite actors of the state.’⁵²⁷ Quoted in, LaPalombara, *Democracy Italian Style*, p. 188. ‘Spettacolo’ is untranslated and unitalicised in the original.

⁵²⁸ Lefebvre would then incorporate it into his own critique of everyday life. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Critique of Everyday Life*. Vol. II, trans John Moore (London: Verso, 2002), p. xxii, 11.

realm of separation and spectacle'.⁵²⁹ It is in this sense that Debord claimed the world of the spectacle is the world of the commodity, and that commodity fetishism has reached its absolute fulfilment in the spectacle.⁵³⁰

This may seem like needless quibbling over a minor detail but it is not without consequence. Retort are clearly aware of the passage in *Society of the Spectacle* about the mass media being the spectacle's most superficial manifestation, remarking that Debord and the SI resisted the notion that the colonisation of everyday life was dependant on any specific technological development, and instead focused on the abilities really existing capitalism and socialism 'have at their disposal to systematize and disseminate appearances, and to subject the texture of day-to-day living to a constant barrage of images, instructions, slogans, logos, false promises, virtual realities, miniature happiness-motifs.'⁵³¹ But by separating the concept of the colonisation of everyday life from the spectacle, one runs the risk of thinking of the spectacle as merely this realm of appearances and images that accompanies and nourishes the colonisation of everyday life, and, like Kellner and to a lesser extent Giroux, banalising it by restricting it to a specific sector of contemporary society and not society in its totality.

This problem recurs in different forms throughout the text. As Balakrishnan argues, 'Explanations of the current scene in terms of primitive accumulation and of the spectacle are juxtaposed more than integrated, leaving the obvious theoretical tensions between the two unresolved'.⁵³² Too often, when actually mobilised by Retort, spectacle seems to refer to the world of images or appearances, and the twin concept of the colonisation of everyday life is bracketed out. Without this, the

⁵²⁹ Debord, 'Perspectives for Conscious Changes in Everyday Life', *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 93.

⁵³⁰ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 36.

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*, par. 24, Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, p. 19-20.

⁵³² Balakrishnan, *Antagonistics*, p. 95

spectacle then refers solely to the management of the image of the American empire, both in the US and abroad.⁵³³ It refers to ‘the realm of the image’ – as the mass media and the effects of the power and ubiquity of the mass media on citizens, states, and terrorists.⁵³⁴ So then the image of the World Trade Centre’s collapse can be read simply as an image of defeat for the American empire in that it depicted and demonstrated its vulnerability. Such a conception of the spectacle glosses over many of the theory’s key aspects. The question of whether or not the events of 9/11 can be considered a spectacular defeat depends on a number of other factors of life in the society of the spectacle.

Finally, on a related note, Retort’s is also an analysis that, like Kellner and Giroux’s, completely neglects Debord’s own positions on terror and the state. Retort are certainly aware of Debord’s later writings, as they quote from *Comments* and even refer to Debord’s paranoia, but his actual statements on terrorism are almost conspicuous by their absence. As Balakrishnan notes in his essay on *Afflicted Powers* in *New Left Review*, Retort’s conclusion that the attacks were a gigantic defeat for the US state is somewhat surprising considering their debt to Debord, ‘For Debord did not take terrorism very seriously at all, and his judgement of its effects was wholly deflationary’.⁵³⁵ Balakrishnan quotes Debord from *Comments*: ‘This perfect democracy fabricates its own inconceivable enemy, terrorism. *Its wish is to be judged by its enemies rather than its results.*’⁵³⁶ While this may just be semantics, I would not agree that this means that Debord did not take terrorism seriously. That said, Balakrishnan is certainly right to suggest that Debord would not have been quick to credit the 9/11 hijackers with a victory in the realm of the spectacle. This becomes

⁵³³ See, for example, Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, p. 187-8.

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵³⁵ Balakrishnan, *Antagonistics*, p. 91.

⁵³⁶ Debord, *Comments*, p. 24.

even more complicated if one considers the subsequent line in the passage from which Balakrishnan quotes: ‘The story of terrorism is written by the state’.⁵³⁷

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

The Real Report on the Last Chance to Save the New American Century

Everywhere speculation has become, in the end, the sovereign aspect of all property.

–Guy Debord, 1993⁵³⁸

In a review of *Afflicted Powers* Bill Brown (Bill Not Bored) attacks Retort for accepting the Bush administration's narrative of the 9/11 attacks. In an attempt to explicitly distance themselves from 9/11 conspiracy theories, Retort have stated: 'We actually do think al-Qaeda *done it* [sic] on September 11th. We see no reason to doubt that. They did it in Nairobi, Jakarta, Casablanca, Tanzania, the Gulf of Aden, Madrid, and their affiliates are doing it everyday in Mosel and Baghdad'.⁵³⁹ Not Bored claims that this position not only represents a naïve faith in the spectacle's dissemination of details about the event, but also reveals an incomplete understanding of Debord's theories. He writes with typical arrogance,

This is precisely the point where Retort's complete and total ignorance of the real value of situationist theory comes back to haunt them. Had they read Gianfranco Sanguinetti's *On Terrorism and the State*, or Debord's 21 April 1978 letter to Sanguinetti concerning the kidnapping of Aldo Moro, or Debord's Preface to the 4th Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle* or even his *Considerations on the Assassination of Gérard Lebovici*, the members of Retort would have focused on what happened on September 11, not during its aftermath.⁵⁴⁰

While it is unlikely that Retort are unaware of these later writings – although one can hardly fault them for not having read all of Debord's mammoth correspondence and the assertion that *Considerations* would colour their reading is a bit unclear, as Debord does not in fact focus on what happened on the day Lebovici was assassinated

⁵³⁸ 'Partout la *spéculation* est, pour finir, devenue la part souveraine de toute la propriété.' Debord, '*Cette Mauvaise Réputation...*' in *Oeuvres*, p. 1832.

⁵³⁹ Retort, on Against the Grain, KPFA, 8 June 8, 2005.

⁵⁴⁰ Bill Not Bored, 'An Unkindly Reply to Retort', 25 March 2006.

<<http://www.notbored.org/retort.html>>. In the comments section to an announcement that Retort will be having a reading in New York Bill Not Bored comments: 'Retort fetishizes the Debord of the 1960s, while I've moved ahead and am studying the Debord of the 1970s and 1980s.' No longer online. Was at: <<http://info.interactivist.net/node/4448>>. Last checked 10 June, 2009.

– as we have seen, Brown is correct in pointing out that their impact on Retort’s analysis is minimal. What Brown suggests is that if they had consulted these later texts by Debord and Sanguinetti, Retort would not be so quick to dismiss conspiratorial accounts of 9/11.

In a discussion of the role of secrecy in the integrated spectacle Not Bored writes, ‘Perhaps the biggest “secret” of the last 20 years is September 11th: what *really* happened on that day?’⁵⁴¹ Without presenting any evidence, and without any real elaboration, they make the hypothesis that terrorists did indeed hijack and pilot the airplanes, but unbeknownst to them, ‘both [WTC and WTC 7] had been slated for closure and evacuation due to their failure as commercial enterprises and – because it was cheaper to do it well in advance – had already been secretly wired for demolition by experts’.⁵⁴² It is left to the reader to discover if these buildings were in fact slated for closure and evacuation (something I haven’t seen corroborated), to ponder how the fifty thousand plus people that worked in the building daily failed to notice the explosives, or what the conspirators would have done if the planes had missed the towers or the hijackings had failed. The perceived importance of Debord’s emphasis on conspiracy leads Not Bored later in this text on the Situationist International’s 50th anniversary in 2007 to go as far as labelling ‘Various "Anti-Conspiracy" Pro-Situationists’ as a faction of theorists influenced by the SI:

Like the members of Retort, these are people who – during their denunciations of what they call "conspiracy theories" concerning September 11th – demonstrate their lack of knowledge or interest in both *Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of "The Society of the Spectacle"* and *Comments of the Society of the Spectacle*. As if the Italian section of the SI never published ‘Is the Reichstag Burning?’ such people claim that "conspiracy theories" are either non-situationist or anti-situationist.⁵⁴³

⁵⁴¹ Not Bored, ‘The Society of the Virtual Spectacle’, 1 Nov., 2007, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/virtual-spectacle.html>>.

⁵⁴² *Ibid.*

⁵⁴³ Not Bored, ‘On the 50th Anniversary of the Founding of the Situationist International’, 28 July, 2007, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/50th-anniversary.html>>.

Not Bored's criticism of Retort follows any mention of *Afflicted Powers* throughout the internet, appearing as a comment on Amazon.com, Interactivist Info Exchange, and various Indy Media sites.

Not Bored are correct to point out that conspiracy, and particularly the state's involvement in acts of terror, is emphasised in Debord's later texts. The motif of conspiracy is central to *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* to the extent that it has been claimed that 'late in his life Debord developed a penchant for conspiracy theory'.⁵⁴⁴ While it is debatable whether or not this is true (keeping the pejorative sense of the word), conspiracies are certainly seen as one of the ways through which those that run the spectacle maintain their power. He writes that while in the past conspiracies were only hatched against an established order, in the integrated spectacle conspiracies in its favour to maintain its well-being are a part of its very functioning'.⁵⁴⁵ Not only this, but Debord seems to suggest at the end of *Comments* that a conspiracy developing in the inner-halls or back rooms of power will eventually lead to the destruction of the integrated spectacle: the elite conspiratorial network also comes to replace the class-conscious proletariat as the spectacle's revolutionary subject.

Considering this emphasis on the conspiratorial it is perhaps not surprising that the only book-length discussion of the events of 9/11 that actually builds upon Debord's later works – Bracken's *The Shadow Government: 9-11 and State Terror* (2002) – places conspiracy at the heart of its account of 9/11 and the 'War on Terror'. Bracken has been cited earlier in this text as the author of a biography of Debord as well as the translator of Sanguinetti's *The Real Report on the Last Chance to Save*

⁵⁴⁴ Lütticken, *Secret Publicity*, p. 191.

⁵⁴⁵ Debord, *Comments*, p. 74.

Capitalism in Italy (1976). Operating well outside of academia, he is an anarchist conspiracist (self-proclaimed) and the author of pulp fiction like *Stasi Slut* (1992). *The Shadow Government* is of particular interest because it is written by someone who has demonstrated a strong knowledge of Debord's late work in addition to being the only book-length text to apply these theses to 9/11 and its aftermath (going into much greater detail than Not Bored). Rather than developing the concept of the spectacle in terms of recent developments, Bracken uses Debord and Sanguinetti's ideas to generate a conspiracy theory of 9/11 that involves the upper echelons of the Bush administration and the intelligence services masterminding, or at least allowing, the attacks in a manner not drastically different from 9/11 'conspiracy theorists' like Alex Jones, David Ray Griffin, Webster Griffin Tarpley (a former follower of Lyndon LaRouche who also references Sanguinetti and even engages briefly with the likes of Derrida and Habermas in his *9/11 Synthetic Terror*), Michael Ruppert or for that matter David Icke (minus the shape-shifting lizards).⁵⁴⁶ Debord is never actually mentioned in the text (although Sanguinetti is cited), but his influence is clearly felt. For example, when Bracken writes, 'Bush seems willing to be judged in relation to bin Laden rather than for anything good he could accomplish', he is clearly echoing Debord's claim in *Comments* that 'Such a perfect democracy constructs its own inconceivable foe, terrorism. Its wish is *to be judged by its enemies rather than by its results*.'⁵⁴⁷ There are other clear parallels. While Debord referred to the nefarious influence of secret groups like P2, Bracken points to the infamous Skull & Bones, a secret society at Yale that famously both George W. Bush and John Kerry were

⁵⁴⁶ See *Terrorstorm: A History of Government Sponsored Terrorism*, dir. Alex Jones (2006), Webster Griffin Tarpley, *9/11 Synthetic Terror* (California: Progressive Press, 2007), Michael Ruppert, *Crossing the Rubicon* (USA: New Society, 2004), David Icke, *Alice in Wonderland and the World Trade Center Disaster* (UK: David Icke Books, 2002). David Icke has posited that shape-shifting lizards (reptilian humanoids) from the star system Alpha Draconis control the world. Examples of these creatures range from the British Royal Family to the Clintons to Kris Kristofferson.

⁵⁴⁷ Bracken, *Shadow Government*, p. 186. Debord, *Comments*, p. 24.

members of. Bracken also tries to mimic the severity of Debord's tone and uses many of the same historical references: the text begins with an epigram from Lautréamont and Machiavelli, Sun Tzu and Clausewitz are all referenced throughout. His thesis is that: 'Bush or those with sway over him used illegitimately obtained power, circumstances suggest, to orchestrate or allow the Black Tuesday attacks as a pretext to invade Afghanistan for economic, specifically energy, interests and to tighten the paramilitary grip on restless populations.'⁵⁴⁸

Unlike much 9/11 conspiracy theory that focuses on the physics of the attack (the speed with which the towers collapsed, the size of the hole in the wall of the Pentagon, etc.), in *Shadow Government* the focus is entirely on historical instances of state terror, false flag operations and the 9/11 plot. Using the schema developed by Sanguinetti in *On Terrorism and the State* (1979), Bracken sees 9/11 – as well as the anthrax attacks, the Oklahoma City and 1993 WTC bombings – as acts of defensive terrorism perpetrated by elements within the US state. Much of Bracken's text is dedicated to convincing the reader that 9/11 is more likely a case of defensive than offensive terror and this is done first by setting historical precedents for his theory of 9/11, adopting Debord's maxim in *Comments* that 'people who understand nothing of history can be readily manipulated; even more so than others'.⁵⁴⁹ He provides a wide range of evidence gathered from sources of varying credibility (including publications like *The National Enquirer*) that suggest 9/11 is an act of state-sponsored terrorism. Bracken told *The Village Voice* that he had no concrete proof of anything and that the evidence was entirely circumstantial.⁵⁵⁰ The book is published by Adventures Unlimited Press, and the last few pages feature advertisements for books on anti-

⁵⁴⁸ Bracken, *Shadow Government*, p. 191.

⁵⁴⁹ Debord, *Comments*, p. 25.

⁵⁵⁰ Geoffrey Gray, 'The Parallax View', *The Village Voice*, 3 Sept, 2002, Available online at: <<http://www.villagevoice.com/books/0236.gray2,38029,10.html>>.

gravity, Atlantis, mind control, and titles like *NASA, Nazis & JFK*; in other words, it is clearly coming from what most would characterise as the ‘lunatic fringe’.

Perhaps anxious that he will be dismissed as just another conspiracy theorist, Bracken goes to great lengths to ground his theory in historical precedents, and is obviously keen to heed Debord’s warning from *Comments* that ‘people who understand nothing of history can be readily manipulated; even more so than others.’⁵⁵¹ Bracken writes, ‘Those who have cultivated historical consciousness know better than to assume the best in people. Conspiratorial plans play a part in most, if not all, historical events.’⁵⁵² As such, he is at pains throughout the text to demonstrate that states, even liberal democracies, have used terror covertly against their populations. The examples cited range from the sinking of the *Lusitania* (it was essentially sent to be torpedoed to provoke the US into the WWI) and Pearl Harbor (J. Edgar Hoover knew of the attack but didn’t take action to stop it), to Operation Northwoods and the Oklahoma City bombings. He continues, ‘With revelations like Operation Northwoods in mind, any adult analysis of 9-11 would be incomplete without careful consideration of the state-terror thesis, which is to say that the state indirectly attacked its citizens so as to go on the offensive.’⁵⁵³ The book even features a timeline as an afterword that ‘comprises deceptive actions by institutions and individuals, states and statesmen, along with numerous contextual facts.’ This timeline stretches over a century from the sinking of the *USS Maine* on 15 February, 1898 as the initiation of the Spanish-American War, to the months following 9/11.

This historical record of state-sponsored terror is discussed in many conspiratorial accounts of 9/11. Webster Griffin Tarpley’s *9/11 Synthetic Terror: Made in the USA* (2005), for example, starts with a bizarre inside cover that states the

⁵⁵¹ Debord, *Comments*, p. 25.

⁵⁵² Bracken, *The Shadow Government*, p. 60.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 60-1.

book is published in the year of the 400th anniversary of state-sponsored false-flag terrorism in the English-speaking world: Guy Fawkes Day. Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, whose work I would not classify as conspiracy theory, equally bizarrely seems to suggest that the manipulation of violence for political ends is somehow built into the American character. His chronology of the American manipulation of violence for political ends begins with Samuel Adams and the exploitation of the Boston Massacre as a key event in the build up to the Revolutionary War.⁵⁵⁴ Conspiracy theorist Alex Jones also goes through a similar list of state-sponsored terror in his documentary *Terrorstorm* (2006). Even the film *Loose Change* (2006), which otherwise focuses almost entirely on the physics of the attacks (the impossibility of the towers collapsing from jet fuel, the size of the whole in the façade of the Pentagon was too small for it to have been a 747), mentions Operation Northwoods in its brief contextualisation of the attacks.⁵⁵⁵ Barrie Zwicker, in his documentary *The Great Conspiracy*, goes as far as to claim that if 9/11 was *not* a state-sponsored conspiracy, it would be a historical exception as most ‘war triggering incidents are great deceptions’ planned or encouraged by the American state to trick their peace-loving population into supporting war.⁵⁵⁶ The Mexican-American and Spanish-American Wars, WWII, Vietnam and Desert Storm are all cited as examples. Interestingly, though, none of the examples that he details (Northwoods, Gulf of Tonkin, Iraqi soldiers taking Kuwaiti babies out of incubators) involve any American

⁵⁵⁴ Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, *The War on Truth: 9/11, Disinformation, and the Anatomy of Terrorism* (Gloucestershire, Arris Books, 2005).

⁵⁵⁵ The most important aspect of Northwoods, from a debunking perspective, is that *it wasn't carried out*. Obviously there are various people in power that have crazy ideas, but the institutions are supposedly built so that the idea of one crazy person doesn't get acted upon. In the conspiracy narratives, Lemnitzer suggesting quickly jumps to the Pentagon contemplating, to the US State considering. Moreover, you often see an equation of individuals within institutions as being representative of entire institutions: Lemnitzer=Pentagon=US State.

⁵⁵⁶ *The Great Conspiracy*, dir. Barrie Zwicker, 2004, The film provides a good summary of 9/11 conspiracy theories as it features interviews with Mike Ruppert and David Ray Griffin and footage of Webster Tarpley speaking.

casualties. Of the three past instances of deception he mentions, one was proposed but never carried out, while the other two were simply lies according to him.

When Bracken claims that there have been no historical events that did not involve conspiracy to some extent, he may be correct, but this claim raises two key questions. First, does not conspiracy here simply mean the capacity of individual actors (or small groups of individuals since one cannot conspire alone) to consciously influence the movement of history? And even if one acknowledges that these individual actors can and do regularly influence history, ‘how does one account scientifically for the political ambitions of a few strategically well placed individuals?’ as Walter Laqueur puts it pertinently in the forward to *Coup d'état: A Practical Handbook*.⁵⁵⁷ Second, if there are no historical events that do not involve conspiracies, what is unique about the current epoch? Does Bracken’s claim make redundant Debord’s about the importance of conspiracy in the integrated spectacle? Is there a qualitative or quantitative difference?

The book is theoretically light, the vast majority of the text being devoted to supplying evidence of conspiracy. It could easily be dismissed outright as conspiracy theory so before looking more closely at *The Shadow Government* and its connection to the concept of the spectacle, it is useful to discuss conspiracy theory more generally, and conspiracy theories of 9/11 in particular. An important first step is trying to think about how we want to define ‘conspiracy theory’. Just as one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter, one man’s profound truth – bolstered by legions of evidence – is another man’s delusional pseudo-science or pathology. While conspiracy theory is certainly not an exclusively postmodern phenomenon, much has been written on how postmodernity lays a fertile ground for the proliferation of

⁵⁵⁷ Walter Laqueur, ‘Foreword’ to Edward Luttwak, *Coup d'état: A Practical Handbook* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979).

conspiracy theory – and many of these arguments can be applied to the world of the integrated spectacle as well. There are two things I would like to do in the following section. First, I would like to try to come to at least a working definition of conspiracy theory, and second, I want to discuss the characteristics of the integrated spectacle that allow conspiracy theory to flourish. This will serve as a transition back to the Bracken book and contemporary uses of the concept of spectacle.

Conspiracy-Theory Theory

‘Political conspiracy is so routine, as a concept “conspiracy” would be of little interest were it not for the refusal of our chattering classes to acknowledge its legitimacy.’

–Robin Ramsay, 2000⁵⁵⁸

Bracken and Not Bored are unabashedly presenting a theory of conspiracy that might even stretch as far as the White House. In order to ascertain if they, as well as Debord, are positing what one might dismissively label ‘conspiracy theory’, however, we must first decide what conspiracy theory is, why it is so prevalent, and what is wrong with it as a theory of power and history. While conspiracies and conspiracy theories obviously emerge everywhere, this section will focus on North America – both because the majority of the literature on conspiracy theory (even from academics based in England like Peter Knight) focuses on the US and because of the centrality of the 9/11 attacks to contemporary uses of the concept of the spectacle.⁵⁵⁹ While there are obviously conspiracy theories circulating about the 7/7 bombings in London, for example, many by the same people propagating various 9/11 conspiracies, they are not nearly as prevalent. 9/11 conspiracy theories are also not exclusive to the US. One

⁵⁵⁸ Robin Ramsay, *Conspiracy Theories* (UK: Pocket Essentials, 2000).

⁵⁵⁹ Peter Knight has argued that conspiracy theory is a more widespread phenomenon in the United States because of American liberalism’s suspicion of big government. Knight, ‘A Nation of Conspiracy Theorists’, *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Post War America*. ed. Peter Knight (USA: NYU Press, 2002), p. 7. More on this below.

of the major 9/11 Truth movement research centres is in Toronto and one of the genre's best-selling books is *9/11: The Big Lie* (2002) by the Frenchman Thierry Meyssan.⁵⁶⁰ Much has also been made of the prevalence of conspiracy theory in the Middle East.⁵⁶¹

There are two main positions adopted by 9/11 conspiracy theories.⁵⁶² First, there are those who believe that members of the US state actively colluded in carrying out the attacks. These are the proponents of the 'inside job' or 'made it happen on purpose' (MIHOP) hypothesis. Second, there are those who believe that elements within the US state knew that the attacks were going to take place, but consciously ignored or repressed this information – not out of incompetence, but because they wanted the attacks to happen. These are the proponents of the 'let it happen on purpose' hypothesis (LIHOP). Not Bored, with their proposition that the WTC had been prepped with explosives before 9/11, fall into the MIHOP camp while Bracken remains open to either scenario, writing that the Bush administrated 'orchestrated or allowed' the attacks.⁵⁶³ Neither position can be considered particularly marginal as polls conducted five years after the attacks show that a considerable percentage of Americans, some thirty-six percent (other polls suggest even higher numbers in New York City), subscribe to either LIHOP or MIHOP, or at least consider them plausible scenarios.⁵⁶⁴

⁵⁶⁰ See Jack Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics* (NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), p. 131.

⁵⁶¹ Although this is often done with a clear agenda. See, for example, Daniel Pipes, *The Hidden Hand: Middle East Fears of Conspiracy* (USA: Palgrave, 1998).

⁵⁶² A decent summary of all of the different positions concerning 9/11 authored by a 'sceptic' can be found here: Nicholas Levis, 'What is your HOP level?', *Summer of Truth*, May 2006, Available online at: <<http://summeroftruth.org/lihopmihopnohop.html>>.

⁵⁶³ Bracken, *Shadow Government*, p. 191.

⁵⁶⁴ Hargrove, Thomas. 'Third of Americans suspect 9.11 government conspiracy'. *ScrippsNews*, 1 Aug., 2006, Available online at: <<http://www.scrippsnews.com/911poll>>. There are, however, problems with this poll. See 'The Zogby Poll', *Debunking 9/11 Conspiracy Theories*, Available online at: <<http://www.debunking911.com/zogby.htm>>. It is interesting to compare these numbers to polls that show that, even by 2007, 41% of Americans thought that Saddam Hussein was directly involved in the 9/11 attacks. Josh Catone, 'Number of Americans who believe Saddam-9/11 tie rises to 41 percent',

In the mass of 9/11 conspiracy theories – what we can refer to as the 9/11 Truth movement – no single piece of work positing an alternative to the official 9/11 account has gained more popularity or courted more controversy than *Loose Change*, a feature-length film written and directed by Dylan Avery on an inexpensive laptop in his home in upstate New York.⁵⁶⁵ Avery and the film’s producers, all in their early twenties, estimate that it has been watched by over 100 million people – primarily via the internet. The film argues that the attacks were an inside job, and considering the aforementioned poll, its conclusions are hardly marginal. No matter how one judges *Loose Change* – whether one sees it as a courageous, inventive and commendable product of the ‘Google generation’ or an incoherent and paranoid fantasy – its impact and success makes it worthy of scrutiny. It is not only the veracity of its conclusions that should be thought through but also the questions it raises about the overall relevance of conspiracy theory for understanding 9/11 and the ‘War on Terror’. While the 9/11 Truth movement is by no means homogenous – many adherents consider *Loose Change* to be problematic, or even a piece of disinformation – it touches numerous themes considered by ‘Truthers’ and can be seen for our purposes here as being indicative.⁵⁶⁶

Surprisingly slick considering its almost non-existent production costs, *Loose Change* fires off a litany of charges so rapidly that each is difficult to ponder for more than an instant. After the barrage many of the allegations seem dubious, but one need

The Raw Story, 24 June, 2007, Available online at: <http://rawstory.com/news/2007/Poll_41_of_Americans_believe_Saddam_0624.html>. Others polls have revealed that 24 percent of Americans believe in witches. See Dana Blanton, ‘More Believe in God Than Heaven’, *FOXNews.com*, 18 June, 2004, Available online at: <<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,99945,00.html>>.

⁵⁶⁵ I will be referring here to the second edition of the film, widely available online. Available online at: <<http://www.loosechange911.com/>>.

⁵⁶⁶ The extremely unconvincing *In Plane Site*, dir. William Lewis (2004), is also considered by many within the movement as a work of disinformation meant to ‘distract and discredit’ 9/11 sceptics. See ‘Loose (with truth) Change’, *Oil Empire*, Available online at: <<http://www.oilempire.us/loose-change.html>>.

not believe in the accuracy of everything presented in order to be convinced that something is amiss in the conventional narrative of the attacks as told by the *9/11 Commission Report* and propagated by the media.⁵⁶⁷ The film presents two types of evidence to make its case that members of the Bush administration and other elites colluded in a conspiracy. The first is based on what one could call the mechanics or physics of the attacks and how they contradict the official story. This characterises the majority of the evidence presented in the film, and there are parallels with the ‘magic bullet theory’ in relation to the JFK assassination and the claims that the moon landing was faked.⁵⁶⁸ The second is circumstantial evidence meant to attack the character of their main suspects in order to convince a sceptical public that elected officials, bureaucrats and elites would be capable of such a malevolent action. This can be said to be true of many works from the 9/11 Truth movement. Not Bored discuss both (as do theorists like David Ray Griffin, Webster Tarpley and Alex Jones), while Bracken is only concerned with presenting circumstantial evidence.

The evidence based on the physics of the events asserts that much of the story presented by the 9/11 Commission could not possibly have physically occurred: the World Trade Center towers could not possibly have collapsed due to the collision of the planes and ensuing fire alone, rather, the evidence points to a controlled demolition; the wreckage at the Pentagon and in the Pennsylvania field is inconsistent with a plane crash site and thus we must assume that something else, probably a missile, hit the Pentagon and created the smoking crater in Pennsylvania. Facts are reeled off about the temperature at which jet fuel burns and at which steel melts, and video clips of controlled demolitions are shown alongside quotes from

⁵⁶⁷ *The 9/11 Commission Report* (USA: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004).

⁵⁶⁸ See for example the famous ‘magic bullet’ scene from Oliver Stone’s film *JFK* (1991) or those who dispute the moon landing by pointing to things like the flag’s appearance of waving in the wind, the depth of footprints, etc.

‘experts’.⁵⁶⁹ What is interesting about evidence of this kind is that it is both instantaneously convincing and easily countered. Most non-specialists do not have the slightest idea what it takes to bring down a skyscraper, what happens when an airliner hits reinforced concrete, or how difficult it is to turn around a Boeing 757 at 400mph, so having what appears to be credible testimony of any kind can be persuasive. Yet, just by quickly searching online, it is possible to find a myriad of other ‘experts’ disputing the testimonies in *Loose Change* from across the political spectrum. The American magazine *Popular Mechanics* has even released a book debunking these aspects of the film.⁵⁷⁰

This situation can be framed by Debord’s claims about the disastrous state of contemporary science and the levels of education of the general population in *Comments*. As scientific research has become increasingly subordinated to the necessities of the economy, and as life has become increasingly specialised and reliant on experts, society has seen the re-emergence of ‘fairground mountebanks’ who specialise in convincing an increasingly ignorant and illiterate population of their deceptions.⁵⁷¹ Debord acknowledges that specialisation obviously existed before, that science also served the economy in the past, and that bad research and ignorance are hardly historically novel, yet maintains that their intensity and ubiquity is. Scientific research, in order to attract attention and funding, needs to prostrate itself to business and politics, and Debord claims that the numbers those whose work does not directly contradict the spirit of science are dwindling.⁵⁷² The vast majority of spectators,

⁵⁶⁹ *Loose Change* does not in fact interview any scientific experts in the film on screen. In the WTC segment for example, they show quotes from a supposed expert (his expertise and qualifications since denigrated by numerous debunkers), but only interview a WTC janitor who claims to have heard numerous unexplained explosions prior to the buildings collapse and show dubiously edited interviews with a group of firemen who suggest nothing other than that the collapse *seemed like* a controlled demolition.

⁵⁷⁰ *Debunking 9/11 Myths*, ed. David Dunbar and Brad Reagan (USA: Hearst, 2006).

⁵⁷¹ Debord, *Comments*, p. 41-2.

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

inundated with stories about pseudo-scientific discoveries on a daily basis, do not have the skills necessary, and are too lazy anyway, to differentiate between an actual scientific discover and a fraud.⁵⁷³

Loose Change's concurrent argument looks at the likely perpetrators of the attacks. Even if one discounts the counter-explanations based on the physical evidence – if one does accept that a plane hit the Pentagon, the towers collapsed due to the impact of the planes and resulting inferno – the possibility of a conspiracy involving actors within the US state remains. This second type of evidence is almost completely circumstantial and is meagre in comparison to the amount of physical evidence given. It attempts to show that members of the Bush administration were not only capable of doing something of this magnitude, but that if the evidence is looked at comprehensively then it seems they probably did. A large portion of this evidence has been gathered by trawling the mainstream media, the rest coming from a range of websites of varying reliability. The infamous claim by the Project for the New American Century that 'a new Pearl Harbor' was needed to galvanise Americans into supporting military interventions throughout the Middle East and past instances of American officials recommending the perpetration of terrorist acts and then blaming them on a convenient enemy (Operation Northwoods in 1962 involving Cuba) are two of the relatively few facts cited.⁵⁷⁴ Circumstantial evidence cited includes the owner of the World Trade Center taking out a multi-billion dollar insurance policy in the July prior to the attacks, unusually high amounts of put options placed on American

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 29-30.

⁵⁷⁴ *Loose Change* is far inferior to a lot other 9/11 conspiracy films and literature in this regard. See for example Alex Jones' occasionally decent, often ludicrous, film *Terrorstorm* (2006) or Webster Griffin Tarpley's *9/11 Synthetic Terror: Made in the USA*. Operation Northwoods was a plan drafted by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, signed by its Chairman Lyman Lemnitzer in 1962, which would involve false-flag terror attacks in American cities to garner public support for a war against newly communist Cuba. The plans, which were rejected, were revealed by James Bamford in his book on the National Security Agency, published in May, 2001. Bamford compares Northwoods to the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, which helped justify American military involvement in Vietnam. James Bamford, *Body of Secrets: Anatomy of the Ultra-Secret National Security Agency* (NY: Doubleday, 2001), pp. 82-91.

Airlines stock in the days before, and the need of the Bush administration to create a justification for invading Afghanistan and Iraq.

By the end of *Loose Change* the conspiracy that emerges is enormous. Not only does it include members of the Bush administration who must have actively planned the attacks, but – and this is only a partial list – also the teams that placed explosives within WTC and faked the voices of passengers on the hijacked planes to call their loved ones, the owner of WTC and then-New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani, hundreds of stock traders and the SEC that won't reveal who profited substantially from the attacks, Pentagon and WTC clean up crews, and possibly even the passengers on United 93, which did not crash in Pennsylvania but instead landed in Cleveland, and on Flight 77, which never hit the Pentagon. As such, it is not surprising that *Loose Change* has been derided more often than not by its detractors as an archetypal conspiracy theory. The response of the filmmakers and many that share their views is that the claim that 9/11 was the handiwork of nineteen Arabs armed with box cutters and orchestrated from a cave in Afghanistan is the most far fetched conspiracy theory of them all. Part of the problem here is that there is no unanimous definition of what exactly constitutes 'conspiracy theory'. Obviously the term cannot simply designate any claim of conspiracy, as the official account of 9/11 is indeed a theory of conspiracy (Zacarias Moussaoui, the so-called 20th hijacker, for example, was convicted of conspiracy to commit acts of terrorism) and stresses that a small cabal of men were able to drastically change the course of the young twenty-first century, provoking wars, curtailments on civil liberties, etc. Furthermore, really existing conspiracies are constantly afoot. To take an example of one of the architects of the 'War on Terror', a cursory look at the biography of former US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld reveals a life rich in conspiracy: conspiring against George

Bush senior to become President Ford's Secretary of Defence, then conspiring as the CEO of GD Searle & Company against scientists and the American public at large to get NutraSweet approved despite evidence suggesting it gave rats brain tumours, and finally conspiring against pretty much the world to propagate belief in Saddam's WMDs to justify invading Iraq.⁵⁷⁵ And as we have seen, there are even documented cases in Western democratic states of criminal conspiracies at the highest levels and elements resorting to false flag terrorism against their own populations – so one cannot really reject anything *tout court*. How then do we differentiate between a deluded conspiracy theory and research that actually reveals criminal conspiracies other than simply by saying that conspiracy theories are ultimately incorrect theories of conspiracy?

As discussed in the previous chapter, the label 'conspiracy theory' is almost exclusively used in the pejorative. Since being belittled by Hofstadter as a 'political pathology', it is often seen as at best a misguided and inadequate attempt to understand the functioning of power in an increasingly complex global society.⁵⁷⁶ Awash in symbolic misery and bereft of any conceptual apparatus to understand the antagonisms, fluctuations and developments in global politics and the economy, people turn to conspiracy theory as an immensely oversimplified narrativisation of amorphous and/or anonymous global power dynamics. This does not mean that there are not actually really existing conspiracies in the world that must be uncovered; what differentiates the paranoid style is that conspiracy is seen to be the "motive force" in historical events as opposed to social and economic forces.⁵⁷⁷ It is not that the

⁵⁷⁵ See Andrew Cockburn, *Rumsfeld: His Rise, Fall, and Catastrophic Legacy* (New York: Verso, 2007).

⁵⁷⁶ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (NY: Knopf, 1966), p. 6.

⁵⁷⁷ Hofstadter, p. 29.

paranoid discourse is completely baseless or bereft of facts, but that its practitioners make leaps of imagination at crucial points in the elaboration of the theory.⁵⁷⁸

Since Hofstadter's oft-cited formulations in the 1960s, the available literature on conspiracy theory (conspiracy theory theory for lack of a better term) has grown considerably. While conspiracy was once the domain of fringe groups on the far right, in the nineties it entered the mainstream, with even Hillary Clinton appearing on American television in 1998 claiming there was a 'vast right-wing conspiracy' trying to undermine her husband. Much of this is related to the popularity of television programmes like *The X-Files*, the importance of authors like Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon, and the attention given to the American militia movement and its themes of black helicopters and the New World Order after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. What may once have only circulated through the newsletters of groups on the far right became the title for a film starring Mel Gibson and Julia Roberts (*Conspiracy Theory*, 1997). There was also a technological component to this rise to prominence connected to the growth of the internet as a space where theories could circulate among wide audiences outside of the major publishing houses. The approaching millennium heralded a period where those with various forms of 'stigmatized knowledge' could mix and mingle on internet forums.⁵⁷⁹ Today the production of conspiracy theory has become an inevitable consequence of any major event – from the death of Princess Diana to Hurricane Katrina. Conspiracy culture is now mainstream and even if not everyone who reads and watches its products

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵⁷⁹ Barkun argues that conspiracy theory can be classified as 'stigmatized knowledge': 'claims to truth that the claimants regard as verified despite the marginalization of those claims by the institutions that conventionally distinguish between knowledge and error – universities, communities of scientific researchers, and the like.' There are different varieties of stigmatized knowledge and not all of them can be necessarily related to conspiracy theory. Barkun identifies five types: forgotten, superseded, ignored, rejected, and suppressed knowledge. While only suppressed knowledge – knowledge suppressed by a given elite – is often within the conspiratorial framework, other believers in various types of stigmatized knowledge are often pushed down the conspiratorial path in their effort to generate a rationale as to why their knowledge is not accepted. Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*.

believes it, as Peter Knight writes, many are ‘happy to dabble with the camp aesthetics’.⁵⁸⁰ The US State Department has even recently put up a website advising people to be on the lookout for 9/11 conspiracy theories and advising how to spot them.⁵⁸¹ In the months after 9/11 Bush warned against the conspiracy theory temptation: ‘We must speak the truth about terror. Let us never tolerate outrageous conspiracy theories concerning the attacks of the September the 11th – malicious lies that attempt to shift the blame away from the terrorists themselves, away from the guilty.’⁵⁸² This can be increasingly difficult as many stigmatized kinds of knowledge increasingly try to adopt the practices of the knowledge-verifying institutions, (albeit superficially). The 9/11 Truth movement tries to appear more and more scholarly, and now even has a peer-reviewed online journal, *The Journal of 9/11 Studies*. Co-edited by Steven Jones, a former physicist on the faculty of Brigham Young University [(in)famous for his studies supposedly demonstrating the use of thermite in the controlled demolition of the towers], the journal is keen to flaunt its academic protocol and authors’ qualifications.⁵⁸³

In recent times there has also been a shift in the kinds of narratives conspiracy theory creates. As we have seen, Hofstadter sees examples of conspiracy theory stretching back to panics about the Bavarian Illuminati in Europe and North America, with a rise in these theories around the time of the American Revolution. According to Peter Knight, ‘Until recently conspiracy theories have helped historically to

⁵⁸⁰ Knight, ‘A Nation of Conspiracy Theorists’, p. 6.

⁵⁸¹ ‘The Top September 11 Conspiracy Theories’, 5 May, 2009, Available online at: <<http://www.america.gov/st/webchat-english/2009/May/20060828133846esnamfuaK0.2676355.html>>. Interestingly, conspiracy theory is not dismissed outright when it comes to understanding acts of terror in Putin’s Russia. See, for example, Steven Lee Myers, ‘There’s a Reason Russians Are Paranoid’, *New York Times*, 3 December, 2006, Available online at: <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9507E0DF1F3EF930A35751C1A9609C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=all>>.

⁵⁸² George W. Bush, ‘Statement at the 56th Session of the United Nations General Assembly’, 10 Nov. 2001, Available online at: <<http://www.un.org/webcast/ga/56/statements/011110usaE.htm>>.

⁵⁸³ There is also a journal devoted to debunking 9/11 conspiracy theories. See *The Journal of Debunking 9/11*, Available online at: <<http://www.jod911.com/>>.

prescribe and preserve a sense of American national identity that is restrictive in terms of race, class, and gender.⁵⁸⁴ This is the case of the right-wing conspiracy theories discussed by Hofstadter. The threat of Masons, Catholics and Communists was seen as that of a foreign group trying to challenge, undermine, or destroy the American way of life. This is the case even when the threat is internal. For example, in J. Edgar Hoover's *Masters of Deceit* (1958), communists are portrayed as irreducibly foreign: 'Even though he lives in the United States, he is a supporter of a foreign power, espousing an alien line of thought. He is a conspirator against his country.'⁵⁸⁵ Post-1960s conspiracy theory, on the other hand, 'has often seen the American way of life as itself a permanent conspiracy against many of its citizens.'⁵⁸⁶ In these theories, rather than a foreign influence, it is often the US state itself that is conspiring against its populace by putting fluoride in the water or introducing AIDS to kill blacks and homosexuals. Conspiracy theory has, in the words of Knight, 'mutated from an obsession with a fixed enemy to a generalized suspicion about conspiring forces. It has shifted, in effect, from a paradoxically secure form of paranoia that bolstered one's sense of identity, to a far more insecure version of conspiracy-infused anxiety which plunges everything into an infinite regress of suspicion.'⁵⁸⁷ Timothy Melley links their rise with what he calls 'agency panic': a crisis in belief in individual agency⁵⁸⁸ while Jodi Dean has put conspiracy culture within the context of the collapse of meta-narratives associated with postmodernity. Much of Dean's emphasis in her book *Aliens in America* (which deals primarily with discourses surrounding

⁵⁸⁴ Knight, 'A Nation of Conspiracy Theorists', pp. 1-17, p. 5.

⁵⁸⁵ J. Edgar Hoover, *Masters of Deceit: The Story of Communism in America and How to Fight It* (USA: Pocket Books, Inc, 1965), p. 3.

⁵⁸⁶ Knight, 'A Nation of Conspiracy Theorists', p. 7.

⁵⁸⁷ Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files* (UK: Routledge, 2000), p. 4.

⁵⁸⁸ See Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Dean, *Publicity's Secret* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

aliens, UFOs and abduction, but also touches upon conspiracy theory) is the equivalence of truth claims or the lack of any meaningful criteria for judging testimony in our ‘technoglobal information societies’. Here the figure of the alien is seen as ‘a repository for postmodern anxieties.’⁵⁸⁹ Christopher Hitchens makes a similar point when he claims that ‘Conspiracy theory thus becomes an ailment of democracy. It is the white noise which moves in to fill the vacuity of the official version. To blame the theorists is therefore to look at only half the story, and sometimes even less.’⁵⁹⁰ In this account, conspiracy theory is associated not just with the vacuity of the public sphere or the distance of political elites from ‘ordinary’ citizens, but also with the rise in secrecy in all branches of life: or ‘generalised secrecy’ in Debordian terms. In the United States, for example, approximately four million people have security clearances to work on black world classified projects, in contrast to the 1.8 million civilians employed by the federal government in the so-called ‘white’ world.⁵⁹¹ While the number of secret documents can only be roughly estimated in the billions, an astounding fact is that in 2001 the US Information Security Oversight Office reported a \$5.5 billion expenditure to protect these classified documents.⁵⁹² As Sissela Bok argues, as secrecy multiplies so does the fear of conspiracy.⁵⁹³ While conspiracy theory can obviously be found everywhere, Knight theorises that it can perhaps be felt more strongly in the US because of American liberalism’s obsession with rugged individual agency and the fear of ‘big government’ and the state in general.⁵⁹⁴ I would suggest that it also has to do with the country’s

⁵⁸⁹ Dean, *Aliens in America*, p. 54.

⁵⁹⁰ Hitchens, p. 14.

⁵⁹¹ Trevor Paglen, *Blank Spots on the Map* (USA: Dutton, 2009), p. 4.

⁵⁹² Peter Galison, ‘Removing Knowledge’, *Critical Inquiry* (31, Autumn, 2004), Available online at: <<http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/features/artsstatements/arts.galison.htm>>.

⁵⁹³ Bok, *Secrets*, p. 199. This position is reiterated by Dean, *Aliens in America*, pp. 33-5.

⁵⁹⁴ Knight, ‘A Nation of Conspiracy Theorists’, p. 7.

size (both in terms of population and geography) and great disparities of wealth and power.

The most important event in the birth of contemporary American conspiracy theory is without doubt the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963. Knight calls it ‘an inevitably ambiguous point of origin for a loss of faith in authority and coherent causality – the primal scene, as it were, of a postmodern sense of paranoia.’⁵⁹⁵ This goes together with the ‘loss of innocence’ theme commonly connected with the assassination. As Knight notes, it is often thought of as the ‘cause of an irreversible historical decline’.⁵⁹⁶ The wave of political assassinations that swept the US (RFK, MLK, and Malcolm X being the most famous) after the JFK assassination, followed by scandals like Watergate and Iran-Contra, gave conspiracy theory credibility across the political spectrum. Hitchens argues that it was not necessarily the JFK assassination itself that led many Americans to conspiracism but rather the abject failure of the Warren Commission to deliver a credible report on the assassination, commenting: ‘modern American conspiracy theory begins with the Warren Commission.’⁵⁹⁷ Indeed, the Kennedy assassination is the event that generated by far the most conspiracy theory in the 20th century (possibly now eclipsed by 9/11). Even Bill Clinton and Al Gore, along with up to 75% percent of Americans, are said to have believed that there was some kind of conspiracy or cover-up.⁵⁹⁸

So what exactly is meant by ‘conspiracy theory’? The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition proposes: ‘the theory that something happens as a result of a conspiracy between interested parties; esp. a belief that some powerful covert agency (typically political in motivation and oppressive in intent) is responsible for an

⁵⁹⁵ Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 4.

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁵⁹⁷ Hitchens, p. 14.

⁵⁹⁸ Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 78.

unexplained event.’ This definition is rather neutral and could be used to characterise both the official *9/11 Commission Report* and Bracken’s book. To approach an adequate common definition we have to start by considering some of its primary characteristics. Michael Barkun’s study of conspiracy culture identifies three principles found in almost all conspiracy theory: nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected. He also helpfully differentiates between three different types of conspiracy theory: event conspiracies, systemic conspiracies and super conspiracies, which respectively seek to explain a single event (the JFK assassination for example), account for a series of events by uncovering a single, evil organization behind them (Masons, Jews, Catholics, etc.), and present a combination of the two in which conspiratorial groups are linked to various series of events over a considerable time span (Illuminati, New World Order and reptilian humanoid conspiracy theories).⁵⁹⁹ Interestingly, the more outlandish the conspiracy theory, often the closer the theory gets to a systematic analysis. While event and systemic conspiracies tend to focus on evil individuals or cabals, super conspiracies often focus on broader categories (sometimes almost something resembling classes) in which individuals are only representatives. The group that controls the world does not do so due to any inherent gift or talent, but a relationship to the means of production that they fiendishly defend.

Speaking of the JFK assassination in particular but making a claim that can be extended to a large percentage of conspiracy theories, including those about 9/11, Melley notes that conspiracy theories, no matter whether they accuse the mob, Cubans, or US intelligence, posit a conspiracy that is ‘usually massive in scale and

⁵⁹⁹ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, p. 3-7.

almost always an embodiment of collective power'.⁶⁰⁰ This is in stark opposition to the Warren Commission's conclusion that Oswald (and Jack Ruby) acted alone. Interestingly, in a manner similar to Jameson's claim that it is in the heist film that we can find a contemporary utopian narrative of alienated labour, Melley writes, 'If there is a form of utopian collectivism anywhere in this affair, it would seem to be [...] in the conspiracy theorist's relentless willingness to use the crime to imagine the causal power of large social systems and organizations.'⁶⁰¹ In an increasingly individualised world, where mass movements are increasingly on the wane, it is in the conspiratorial imagination that collective power can be thought. 'Such a vast yet cohesive network is a typical feature of postwar conspiracy theories. Paradoxically, it possesses the *singularity* of will and coordinated action of a *single* individual. Its intentions are uniform; it never "leaks" information; and it functions with the coherence of a single body.'⁶⁰² This might be a slight exaggeration. Obviously the conspiracies posited are never perfect to the extent that they have been detected. In the film *Conspiracy Theory*, for example, Mel Gibson's character voraciously scans mainstream newspapers looking for clues. As Dean writes, 'conspiracy theory tends to make public information the content of the secret. [...] It rereads available information to demonstrate that *it's right before our eyes*.'⁶⁰³ Many 9/11 conspiracy theories focus on slippages in the language of officials: for example Rumsfeld accidentally revealing a missile hit the Pentagon in a slip in a live interview.⁶⁰⁴

The conspiracy narrative imagines a collective body, but this collective body acts *as though* it was an individual agent. 'While a [theory of social conspiracy]

⁶⁰⁰ Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy*, p. 134.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 134. See Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 14.

⁶⁰² Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy*, p. 136.

⁶⁰³ Dean, *Publicity's Secret*, p. 53.

⁶⁰⁴ 'Secretary Rumsfeld Interview with *Parade Magazine*', 12 Oct., 2001, Available online at: <<http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=3845>>. It seems more likely Rumsfeld is trying to say the hijackers used the plane as a missile.

attempts to theorize broad sociological effects and sweeping systemic operations, it nonetheless posits an invisible headquarters, “center of operations,” or mysterious “higher power” that plans, manages, and brings such effects to fruition.’⁶⁰⁵ While any conspiratorial narrative of the 9/11 attacks, including the official narrative, would have to conjecture a large global network of operatives, they almost always put final responsibility on a solitary evil genius – whether it be Bin Laden in his cave or Dick Cheney in a secret military bunker. Not only is there often a single character at the heart of the operation, but, as Melley continues, ‘It is a totalizing explanation, an account that *theorizes a social system* (the closed system of the institution or conspiracy) but that does so *on a model of the possessive individual*, a subject whose clearly conceived intentions wholly determine its subsequent actions.’⁶⁰⁶ This is more obvious in *Loose Change* than in Bracken’s text, but any MIHOP (and clearly LIHOP to a lesser extent) theory of 9/11 requires conceiving of a relatively large group of people with similar goals, ambitions, ethics, and an extremely high level of trust in each other, conspiring over years first to pull off the conspiracy, and then to reap its rewards and keep the plot secret. The network acts as though it was a single individual.

There are similarities between Melley’s discussion of a theorisation of a social system based on the model of a possessive individual and explanation of the spectacle that give it a certain intentionality. Unlike in the concentrated spectacle in which a powerful individual stood in the centre (Hitler, Stalin, etc.), in the integrated spectacle, ‘the controlling centre has now become occult’.⁶⁰⁷ WTJ Mitchell argues that the spectacle, in both Retort and Debord’s use, is a proper name that should be capitalised, together with concepts like Capital, the State, and Modernity. He claims

⁶⁰⁵ Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy*, p. 143-4.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁶⁰⁷ Debord, *Comments*, p. 9.

that all of these terms are personified and given intentionality, needs, and act on their own behest: ‘The State has “anxieties” and “obsession.” The Spectacle, as Debord always insisted, even has “plans” for “self development”’.⁶⁰⁸ As Mitchell writes, in this conception the spectacle does everything:

It is ‘both the macro- and the microstructure of contemporary ideology, both the center and the circumference, the cause and the effect. It is what is hidden and what shows itself; it is what produces the agony of a colonized everyday life and its numbing anaesthetic; it generates a “Prozac state” and an “empire of shock and awes,” while it “agonizes” at its own internal contradictions and its vulnerability to the sort of “spectacular defeat” it suffered on September 11 (a defeat that, of course, is magically transformed into a spectacular victory for neoconservatism.)’⁶⁰⁹

Mitchell sees these problems as originating in Debord’s original conception, which is too powerful and tries to explain too much. Here the spectacle not only acts with the same degree of coordination as a single individual, it is also omnipresent and omnipowerful. ‘Like every idol,’ Mitchell writes, ‘it seems to take on a life of its own. It becomes precisely the figure of that “magic shaping power” of capital, as well as of modernity and consumerism. Spectacle is the face, the avatar, the image of capital. Its “totalizing closure” seems unavoidable.’⁶¹⁰ While Marx talked about the cosmopolitan conspiracy of capital, one could speak of the cosmopolitan conspiracy of the spectacle as its logic animates and decides the outcome of events around the globe.

Another defining characteristic of conspiracy theories is that they are non-falsifiable in that ‘every attempt at falsification is dismissed as a ruse.’⁶¹¹ Any evidence that contradicts the theory is seen as compromised or as a part of the conspiracy. For example, the makers of *Loose Change*, when debating the editors of the *Popular Mechanics* book *Debunking 9/11 Myths*, open by dismissing the

⁶⁰⁸ Mitchell, ‘The Spectacle Today’, p. 574.

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 575.

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 577.

⁶¹¹ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, p. 7.

magazine as a representative of ‘Hearst’s yellow journalism’, thus disqualifying any arguments they might make as propaganda and making them complicit in the conspiracy.⁶¹² A similar move is made in David Ray Griffin’s *Debunking 9/11 Debunking* (2007), where he spends two pages discussing editorial changes at *Popular Mechanics* prior to the writing of the article and the fact that ‘25-year-old Benjamin Chertoff, who described himself as the “senior researcher” for the article, is a cousin of the new head of Homeland Security, Michael Chertoff.’⁶¹³ The larger the theory, the more non-falsifiable it becomes. One who believes that the Bush administration was behind 9/11 might have trouble making a cogent argument as to why none of the major news outlets, and the vast majority of the minor ones, support their position, but those who believe that the world is dominated by shape-shifting lizards (David Icke), can easily say in the same position that this is because the shape-shifting lizards have used their influence to repress any stories detrimental to their reign.⁶¹⁴

Despite the fact that many of these characteristics do describe most discourses classified as conspiracy theory, as a concept it cannot be elucidated with a merely positive definition. As Jack Bratich writes, ‘Conspiracy theories exist as a category not just of description but of disqualification.’⁶¹⁵ Bratich argues that conspiracy theory is defined as much by its external discursive position as by any internal

⁶¹² ‘9/11 Debate: Loose Change Filmmakers vs. Popular Mechanics Editors of “Debunking 9/11 Myths”’, 11 Sept., 2006, Available online at:

<http://www.democracynow.org/2006/9/11/exclusive_9_11_debate_loose_change>.

⁶¹³ David Ray Griffin, *Debunking 9/11 Debunking: An Answer to the Defenders of the Official Conspiracy Theory* (Gloucestershire: Arris Books, 2007), p. 212. Benjamin Chertoff’s mother apparently disputes they are first cousins, saying they might be distant cousins, and in any case have never spoken.

⁶¹⁴ In the 9/11 Truth movement this explanations can stretch from the argument that journalists and academics have essentially been intimidated into silence for fear of losing their jobs to vague and underdeveloped theories of the ‘group-mind’. See, for example, the respective essays by Morgan Reynolds and John McMurtry in *9/11 and American Empire: Intellectuals Speak Out*, vol. I. ed. David Ray Griffin and Peter Dale Scott (Massachusetts: Olive Branch Press, 2007).

⁶¹⁵ Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics*, p. 3.

narrative characteristics. Conspiracy theories are not simply theories of conspiracies, but are by definition marginal: dismissed by the dominant discourse and excluded from the realm of reasonable debate, they ‘do not reach the threshold of acceptability to even be tested, to be falsifiable.’⁶¹⁶ Using a Foucauldian vocabulary, in a similar move to Barkun’s concept of stigmatized knowledges, Bratich classifies conspiracy theory as ‘subjugated knowledges’, in opposition to ‘official knowledges.’⁶¹⁷ By classifying a given theory as ‘conspiracy theory’, one assumes that its proponents deem it non-falsifiable, rendering any attempt at dialogue or debate meaningless. This can broaden the conception of conspiracy in the sense that when they are ignored rather than falsified, the theorist’s sense of paranoia is bolstered, increasing the range of the conspiracy.

Many of those classified as conspiracy theorists are quick to point out that the official narrative of the 9/11 attacks is itself a conspiracy theory that claims that a small cabal of men were able to commit an act that changed the course of history. Thus the subtitle of David Ray Griffin’s *Debunking 9/11 Debunking* is ‘An Answer to the Defenders of the Official Conspiracy Theory.’ One could also argue, for example, that the Bush administration’s 9/11 narrative with its focus on Bin Laden, especially in the weeks and months following the attacks, had many of the hallmarks of the paranoid style as laid out by Hofstadter and conspiracy theory in general. As Hofstadter writes, the central image of the paranoid style ‘is that of a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life’.⁶¹⁸ The paranoid style frames the battle as one between good and evil and nothing but complete victory, and the eradication of the enemy, will be sufficient. ‘This enemy is clearly delineated: he is a perfect model of

⁶¹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶¹⁷ See Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, ed. C. Gordon. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), pp. 78-108.

⁶¹⁸ Hofstadter, p. 29

malice, a kind of amoral superman: sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving.⁶¹⁹ Bin Laden certainly matched this description in his framing as a comic book arch villain: living in disciplined austerity in his cave and pining for his hundred virgins, laughing as he sent his minions unwittingly to their death, capable of organising plans with global reach while remaining completely mobile and undetectable.⁶²⁰ Similarly, the dominant narrative of the attacks could be seen as non-falsifiable in the sense that even mere questioning was deemed unpatriotic and critics were vilified. Yet, because this is the state-sponsored narrative of the attacks, it is rarely approached as, or accused of being, conspiracy theory.

Bratich, on the other hand, with his focus on conspiracy theory's place within a larger body of political narratives and explanations, is not as interested in why conspiracy theory is flourishing as why it is provoking such a hostile reaction from people across the political spectrum. Why do so many people feel the need to enter into polemics against it? What does one say then about the fact that today, perhaps more than ever before, everyone from the 'gatekeeper left' to the mainstream media, US State Department and the National Institute of Standards and Technology are responding to conspiracy theory?⁶²¹ In addition, the *Popular Mechanics* book *Debunking 9/11 Myths* does not simply dismiss all of the conspiracy theorists' suspicions outright but engages them point-by-point. Obviously the writers are doing so in order to point out its inconsistencies, but does this not mark a distinct shift in the place of conspiracy theory within contemporary discourse? While it is true that a number of the professors (including David Ray Griffin and Steven Jones) who have

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 31-2.

⁶²⁰ This of course becomes all the more amusing when after all attempts to capture Bin Laden failed he was suddenly deemed insignificant.

⁶²¹ 'The Top September 11 Conspiracy Theories', 5 May, 2009; National Institute of Standards and Technology, 'Final Report on the Collapse of World Trade Center Building 7', August, 2008, Available online at: <http://wtc.nist.gov/media/NIST_NCSTAR_1A_for_public_comment.pdf>.

argued for the ‘inside job’ hypothesis have been disciplined, dismissed, or pushed into early retirement, their message has spread to the extent that it can perhaps no longer be considered to be a ‘subjugated knowledge’: ‘official knowledge’ has been forced to respond.⁶²² After all, while numerous articles have attacked and ridiculed the 9/11 Truth movement, there have been many considerably more sympathetic articles in the popular press.⁶²³

There is a tendency to want to come out either for or against conspiracy theory. Is it a distraction, a part of a vicious circle of paranoia, or a healthy and playful scepticism towards dominant narratives? Jodi Dean is not as directly hostile to conspiracy theory as most conspiracy theory theorists. While describing the *jouissance* with which conspiracy theories connect the dots of the conspiracy, she rejects the notion that these always, or even usually, form tight conspiratorial narratives.⁶²⁴ ‘Most [conspiracy theories] fail to delineate any conspiracy at all. They simply counter conventionally available narratives with questions, suspicions, and allegations that, more often than not, resist coherent emplotment or satisfying narrative resolution.’⁶²⁵ Many 9/11 conspiracy theories, for example, do not attempt to present evidence of a coherent plot by anyone, rather they simply poke holes in the official narrative, and instead of making accusations of guilt, their core demand is for

⁶²² See David Ray Griffin, *The New Pearl Harbor* (Gloucestershire: Arris Books, 2007), Stephen Jones, ‘Why Indeed Did the World Trade Center Buildings Completely Collapse?’ *Journal of 9/11 Studies*. Sept. 2009, Vol. 3, Available online at: <<http://journalof911studies.com/volume/200609/WhyIndeedDidtheWorldTradeCenterBuildingsCompletelyCollapse.pdf>>.

⁶²³ See, for example, Mark Jacobson, ‘The Ground Zero Grassy Knoll’, *New York Magazine*, 19 March, 2006., or *New World Order*, dir. Luke Meyer and Andrew Neel, 2009.

⁶²⁴ Austin, Texas based conspiracy theorist Alex Jones (<http://www.prisonplanet.com/>) is the archetypical conspiracy theorist in this sense. The conspiratorial *jouissance* comes across not only in his writing and radio program, in the obvious stimulation he gets from exposing conspiracies, but is embodied in his gesticulations on video and his enunciation on air. See for example, *Terrorstorm: A History of Government Sponsored Terrorism*.

⁶²⁵ Dean, *Publicity's Secret* (Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 51.

an independent investigation of the attacks.⁶²⁶ ‘Rather than mapping totality, conspiracy’s questions and insinuations disrupt the presumption that there is a coherent, knowable reality that could be mapped,’ Dean argues.⁶²⁷ This may be what conspiracy theory essentially demonstrates when considered with academic distance, but it is slightly dubious to argue that the theorists themselves do not believe that they are mapping a knowable reality. She claims that what is so abhorrent about conspiracy theory for the mainstream is the manner with which they focus with secret dealings going on beneath the veneer of the political spectacle. It is the implacable suspicion that the relatively placid pluralism of the liberal democratic state is underwritten by violence, greed and corruption that is outrageous about conspiracy theory.⁶²⁸ When wading through the endless conspiracy theory literature, Jameson’s claim that it is a poor man’s cognitive mapping may appear at first to fail to completely capture what’s going on as is not as though these theories posit a simple solution that enables them to easily understand the forces at play. They are often ridiculously complicated and, in their own way, extensively researched. For example, conspiratorial investigations into the JFK assassination point to the inextricability of thinking about the CIA, the Mafia, the military-industrial complex, and even foreign radicals (or conservative revolutionaries, Anti-Castro Cubans) who felt hard done-by by the US state (Bay of Pigs blowback).

Skip Willman has argued that those debunkers of conspiracy theory who claim that conspiracy theory wrongly posits a perfectly ordered universe full of causality

⁶²⁶ See, for example, Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, *The London Bombings: An Independent Inquiry* (UK: Duckworth, 2006). This cannot really be classified as conspiracy theory as no conspiracy is ever posited, although Ahmed is generally considered to be part of the 9/11 Truth Movement. Here he focuses solely on the unanswered questions about 7/7 that have not been answered largely because there has been no independent inquiry into the events. His focus is on the intelligence services, their collusion with Islamic extremists in Afghanistan, the Balkans, and elsewhere and the so-called ‘Covenant of Security’: the informal agreement that British Islamists would not strike within the UK as long as the UK state guarantees a degree of freedom to even the most radical, pro-terrorism Islamists.

⁶²⁷ Dean, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 51.

⁶²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

and without coincidence posit their own 'equally ideological vision of historical causality.'⁶²⁹ A text by Alasdair Spark in which he argues that conspiracy theories 'conjure order' and place events in a narrative exemplifies many of the problems involved in classifying conspiracy theory. Spark also claims that Noam Chomsky is at least approaching conspiracy theory when he argues that the corporate media purposely ignore certain stories. When Spark states that Chomsky's technique resembles conspiracy theory in its 'exhaustive plotting of a mass of detail' and his 'deep mining of the world's detail for bits of evidence', one is left wondering how one could do research without one's work resembling conspiracy theory.⁶³⁰ Willman refers to this position held by many critics of conspiracy theory as the 'contingency theory of history'. While the conspiracy theory of history sees mysterious forces and cabals as dictating historical movement, according to contingency theory, history is driven by random chaos, chance, and accident. Citing Slavoj Žižek's argument from *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), Willman argues that these two conceptions of social reality are both ideological visions that shroud society's fundamental antagonisms. Conspiracy theory projects an ordered society that is prevented from being harmonious by the conspirators behind the scenes rather than any fundamental (class, gender, racial) antagonism. 'The essence of conspiracy beliefs lies in attempts to delineate and explain evil,' whose 'locus lies outside the true community'.⁶³¹ In this sense conspiracy theory is similar to populism as defined by Žižek. Rather than seeing a central antagonism as the principle political force, it frames conspiracy as a source

⁶²⁹ Skip Willman, 'Spinning Paranoia: The Ideologies of Conspiracy and Contingency in Postmodern Culture', *Conspiracy Nation*, pp. 21-39, p. 21.

⁶³⁰ Alasdair Spark, 'Conjuring Order: The New World Order and Conspiracy Theories of Globalization', *The Age of Anxiety: Conspiracy Theory and the Human Sciences* (UK: Blackwells, 2001), p. 52, 53.

⁶³¹ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, p. 3. In this sense conspiracy theory is similar to populism as defined by Žižek. Rather than seeing a central antagonism as the principle political force, it sees a source of evil either invading the true community or growing within the community as a blight that must be eliminated. See Slavoj Žižek, 'Against the Populist Temptation', *Critical Inquiry* (32, Spring, 2006), pp. 551-74.

of evil either invading the true community or growing within it as a blight that must be eliminated. Contingency theory, meanwhile, ‘maintains the existing capitalist system by attributing any deviations from the social equilibrium to chance and accident rather than immanent social antagonisms or contradictions.’⁶³² Wars, financial crises, school shootings and crime are all seen as exceptions (for which individuals take sole responsibility) to an otherwise harmonious society. Contingency theory, thus, ‘as a form of historical causality represents a renunciation of any attempt to grasp the operations of the social totality.’⁶³³ For contingency theory, any form of cognitive mapping is impossible and conspiracy theory misunderstands the world as much as historical materialism.

What is interesting about Debord’s position, put in these terms, is that he seems to be sitting somewhere between conspiracy and contingency theory in *Comments*. The conspiracy theory of history is said to have *become* true recently as antagonism has been completely repressed. This seems to leave a social reality that is *both* conspiratorial and chaotic. Debord argues that the conspiracy theory of history has come to be realised in the integrated spectacle, yet the multiplicity of conspiracies, and the inability of their adherents to understand history and thus strategy, leave a disordered society. There is no single conspiracy to be unravelled, except perhaps for the conspiracy of the spectacle itself, put in terms ripe for Mitchell’s critique. The society of the spectacle, whether diffuse or concentrated, projected a progressive vision of a harmonious society in order to shroud the (class) antagonisms pullulating beneath its surface. The integrated spectacle, however, projects a false antagonism in order to not so much shroud as defer and devalue real antagonisms. Following the collapse of communism, Baudrillard claims, the enemy of

⁶³² Willman, p. 28.

⁶³³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

the global liberal order that emerged was ghostly and Islam ‘was merely the moving front along which the antagonism crystallized’, but this antagonism is everywhere, within each of us.⁶³⁴ There is no clash of civilisations, but a ‘triumphant globalization battling against itself’.⁶³⁵ The integrated spectacle simulates antagonism when what really exists are mutually constituting forces, or a disjunctive synthesis of two nihilisms (to borrow a phrase from Deleuze via Badiou).⁶³⁶ Importantly, these mutually constituting forces can only be understood together and by considering the relation of both to the social whole.

Organised Uncertainty and the Dangers of Retrology

The spectacle is an infirmity more than a conspiracy.

–Guy Debord, 1975⁶³⁷

Considering the world historical significance of their deed, it is surprising that the general public knows relatively little about the nineteen men who carried out the 11 September attacks. The only one of the nineteen readily recognisable is Mohamed Atta, the alleged leader of the hijackers and the pilot of the first plane to hit the World Trade Center. Rumours abound about Atta: there have been claims that he blew up a bus in Israel in 1986; that he met Iraqi officials at their embassy in Prague in 2001, thus linking Al Qaeda and Saddam; that he was gay and that his conflicted sexuality ultimately drove him to terrorism (the looming towers as gigantic phalluses in some kind of perverse fantasy); even a story that made the rounds in the days after 9/11, still referenced by 9/11 conspiracy theorists, that he is still alive and well, and had

⁶³⁴ Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2003), p. 15.

⁶³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶³⁶ Badiou, *Infinite Thought*. ed. Justin Clemens and Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 118-22.

⁶³⁷ Debord, ‘Refutation of All the Judgments, Pro or Con, Thus Far Rendered on the Film *The Society of the Spectacle*’, *Complete Cinematic Works*, p. 112.

nothing to do with the attacks. With the exception of the rumour of his homosexuality, which is unlikely ever to be verified either way, all of these rumours have been proven false beyond reasonable doubt, yet are surprisingly durable and still in circulation.

The rumour of Atta's homosexuality was largely propagated after his father said he had been a 'girlish' child – far too shy and introverted to commit such a horrific and potent act – in an interview following the attacks. Atta's father also claimed that his son was still alive up to a year after the attacks, and this claim has been inserted into numerous conspiracy narratives.⁶³⁸ Atta's alleged homosexuality is taken up in Lawrence Wright's Pulitzer Prize winning *The Looming Tower* (2006) where he considers reports from Atta's colleagues at the Technical University of Hamburg according to which Atta avoided all physical contact with women and that he had a 'feminine quality to his bearing'. From this Wright feels confident enough to speculate that his 'aversion to women [...] invites the thought that Atta's turn to terror had as much to do with his own conflicted sexuality as it did with the clash of civilizations.'⁶³⁹ The rumour that Atta blew up a bus in Israel in 1986 has been referenced in many accounts that doubt the veracity of the *9/11 Commission Report*. Take Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed's *The War on Truth: 9/11, Disinformation, and the Anatomy of Terrorism* (2005). He references two stories, both written within a week of 9/11, that state that Mohamed Atta had been on a US government terrorist watch list since 1986 when he participated in a terrorist bombing in Israel. '[D]espite being well known to authorities, Mohamed Atta seems to have led a rather charmed life. Although listed since 1986 on the State Department's terrorist watch list, he was

⁶³⁸ Kate Connolly, 'Father insists alleged leader is still alive', *The Guardian*, 2 Sept., 2002, Available online at: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/sep/02/september11.usa>>. Later Atta's father seems to have changed his tune: 'Atta's father praises London bombs', *CNN.com*, 20 July, 2005, Available online at: <<http://www.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/meast/07/19/atta.father.terror/index.html>>.

⁶³⁹ Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower* (USA: Knopf, 2006), p. 307

repeatedly permitted to enter, leave, and return to the US freely.⁶⁴⁰ His continual admittance into the country despite his known record is cited as one of several suspicious facts that lead one to believe that either the US authorities were ridiculously negligent or that someone within the US state was protecting Atta, allowing him to enter the country. There is one considerable flaw in this narrative: the Atta that bombed a bus in Israel was Mahmoud Mahmoud Atta, a Jordanian national and naturalized US citizen who was eventually tried by Israel and sentenced to life in prison.⁶⁴¹ In other words, it was a completely different person, fourteen years older, with nothing more than a similar name.

A case of mistaken identity was also involved in order to connect Mohamed Atta to Saddam Hussein.⁶⁴² As early as a week after 9/11, the *New York Times* ran a story saying US government sources said Atta had met with a member of Iraqi intelligence somewhere in Europe.⁶⁴³ Later there were reports that Atta had travelled to Prague to meet with the Iraqi council once in the spring of 2000 and then a year later. In both late 2001 and September 2002, Dick Cheney was on *Meet the Press* claiming that this pointed to possible Iraqi involvement in the 9/11 attacks. About ten weeks after the 9/11 attacks, Tim Russert of NBC News asked Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice whether she agreed with an assessment by the Czech government that Iraqi agents met with one of the hijackers who flew into the World Trade Center. 'In evaluating the report,' Ms. Rice replied, 'certainly one would have to suspect that there's no reason to believe Saddam Hussein wouldn't do something exactly of that

⁶⁴⁰ Ahmed, p. 205.

⁶⁴¹ Arie O'Sullivan. 'Justice Ministry: WTC Bomber Was Never Held in Israel', *Jerusalem Post*. Nov 7, 2001, p. 03.

⁶⁴² Brian Kenety, 'A Tale of Two "Attas": How spurious Czech intelligence muddled the 9/11 probe', *Radio Prague*, 9 March, 2004, Available online at: <<http://www.radio.cz/en/article/57782/limit>>.

⁶⁴³ David Johnston and James Risen, 'Officials Say 2 More Jets May Have Been in the Plot', *New York Times*, 19 Sept., 2001, Available online at: <<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/19/us/nation-challenged-investigation-officials-say-2-more-jets-may-have-been-plot.html?scp=10&sq=atta+iraq+intelligence&st=nyt>>.

kind; that he would not be supportive of terrorists is hard to imagine. But this particular report I don't want to comment on, because I don't want to get into intelligence information'.⁶⁴⁴ It would later come out that the Mohammed Atta who visited in Prague in the spring of 2000 was a Pakistani businessman who spent a day in the airport after being refused entry for not having the proper visa. Hijacker Mohamed Atta did indeed visit Prague in the spring of 2001, but all that could be verified of his activities is that he played the slot machines in the Happy Day's Casino for several hours.⁶⁴⁵

Rumour plays a role in considering the state's direct response to the attacks as well. In an Op-Ed piece in the *New York Times*, several of the staff members of the 9/11 Commission – John Garmer, John Azzarello and Miles Kara – observe that many of the personal narratives of what happened on 9/11 that have been spread via interviews, books and articles are often so tainted by heroic embellishment that they end up distorting not only the individual's role in the events on that day but also the effectiveness of the US state's response.⁶⁴⁶ They use the example of a Major Billy Hutchison's tale of his pursuit of flight United 93 and his intense narrative of sitting in the cockpit of his fighter jet, considering how to shoot down the plane, and fail that, crash into it kamikaze style in order to prevent it from reaching Washington. The problem with his story is that Hutchison's plane wasn't even in the air until thirty minutes after United 93 had already crashed. Similar self-serving myths abound in the personal narratives of politicians, officials and bureaucrats and each narrative of self-

⁶⁴⁴ 'Administration Comments on Saddam Hussein and the Sept. 11 Attacks', *The Washington Post*, 2003, Available online at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/9-11_saddam_quotes.html>.

⁶⁴⁵ James Risen, 'Prague Discounts an Iraqi Meeting', *New York Times*, 21 Oct., 2002, Available online at: <<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/21/world/threats-and-responses-the-view-from-prague-prague-discounts-an-iraqi-meeting.html>>.

⁶⁴⁶ John Garmer, John Azzarello, and Miles Kara, 'Real Heroes, Fake Stories', *New York Times*, 14 Sept, 2008. Available online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/14/opinion/14farmer.html?_r=1>.

aggrandisement spread throughout the media not only serves to shroud the extent to which the US state was caught unaware and unable to respond adequately, but also consequently prevents the state from taking the necessary steps to remedy these failings. This is another case of how a different aspect of the society of the spectacle – here the public’s desire for stories of valour and sacrifice coupled with the sensationalism of the media – hampers the functioning of government agencies.

In *Comments*, Debord writes that rumour is ‘originally a sort of uncontrollable by-product of spectacular information,’ but that as the spectacle has become more developed rumours can be created, manipulated, and spread consciously.⁶⁴⁷ ‘Media/police rumours acquire instantly – or at worst after three or four repetitions – the indisputable status of age-old historical evidence.’⁶⁴⁸ Rumour is just one contributor to the seeming ‘eternity of noisy insignificance’ that characterises the integrated spectacle, a consequence of the fact that generalised secrecy is the integrated spectacle’s ‘most vital operation.’⁶⁴⁹ The words fallacious, deceptive, impostrous, inveigling, insidious, and captious ‘taken together constitute today a kind of palette of colours with which to paint a portrait of the society of the spectacle.’⁶⁵⁰ Like rumour, this is not just a consequence of the spectacle, but is actively organized. Debord writes,

When almost every aspect of international political life and ever more important aspects of internal politics are conducted and displayed in the style of the secret services, with decoys, disinformation, and double explanations (one *may* conceal another, or may only seem to) the spectacle confines itself to revealing a wearisome world of necessary incomprehensibility. This tedious series of lifeless, inconclusive crime novels has all the dramatic interest of a realistically staged fight between blacks, at night, in a tunnel.⁶⁵¹

⁶⁴⁷ Debord, *Comments*, p. 76-7.

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12. p. 15. For more on rumour in political struggles see Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (USA: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 251-77.

⁶⁵⁰ Debord, *Comments*, p. 43.

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59. Interestingly, this politically incorrect metaphor seems to have its origins in a 1882 monochrome, regarded as the first ever, by the poet Paul Bilhaud entitled *Combat de nègres dans une*

Conspiracy has become generalised: ‘thousands of plots [*complots*] in favour of the established order tangle and clash almost everywhere’,⁶⁵² and like generalised secrecy, this muddled web of generalised conspiracy makes strategising difficult.

Just as Retort overlook the role of conspiracy in the integrated spectacle, Bracken’s narrative of conspiracy disregards a key feature of Debord’s theory of the integrated spectacle which problematises his conspiratorial narrative and any attempt to reveal ‘the truth’ behind 9/11. Debord described the integrated spectacle as a society dominated by secrecy and lies: ‘a world where there is no room for verification.’⁶⁵³ Several studies have examined the ways in which the Bush administration took lying to new heights.⁶⁵⁴ The amount of lies coming out of the administration leading up to the Iraq War has even been quantified: at least 935.⁶⁵⁵ The Office of Strategic Influence, created by the Defence Department after 9/11 to produce disinformation and propaganda directed at enemy combatants and foreign civilians, caused an uproar and was quickly closed after its existence was made public in February 2002 – although Rumsfeld later claimed publically that it is still active under a more secretive arrangement.⁶⁵⁶ Other examples of the US state blurring the truth stretch from using euphemisms – as in the careful selection of specific terms to prevent the imagination from conjuring unpleasant images (torture at Abu Ghraib becomes abuse, escalation becomes surge, mercenaries are contractors, and civilian

cave pendant la nuit. See Arthur Danto, ‘Paint It Black’, *The Nation*, 31 July, 2003, Available online at: <<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20030818/danto>>. Thanks Alberto Toscano for the reference.

⁶⁵² Debord, *Comments*, p. 82.

⁶⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁶⁵⁴ See Frank Rich, *The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9/11 to Katrina* (USA: Penguin, 2006), David Corn, *The Lies of George W. Bush* (USA: Three Rivers Press, 2004).

⁶⁵⁵ See Charles Lewis and Mark Reading-Smith, ‘False Pretences’, *The War Card: Orchestrated Deception on the Path to War* (Center for Public Integrity, 23 Jan, 2008), Available online at: <<http://www.publicintegrity.org/WarCard/>>.

⁶⁵⁶ See ‘The Office of Strategic Influence Is Gone, But Are Its Programs In Place?’, *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting*, 27 Nov., 2002, Available online at: <<http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=1859>>.

deaths are collateral damage)⁶⁵⁷ – to FEMA staging a fake press conference with junior agency staff posing as journalists and asking scripted questions in response to the Californian wildfires.⁶⁵⁸

Bracken acknowledges this difficulty in the preface to his book: ‘Maybe we’re wrong on more than a few minor errors of fact, inevitable in a time of widespread disinformation’.⁶⁵⁹ However, in his actual analysis, he mingles rumour, news stories from questionable sources and ‘curious leaps of logic’ to such an extent that it is obvious he did not sufficiently acknowledge the difficulty of creating such a narrative in a time of widespread disinformation. Take for example the intriguing story of the Israeli ‘art students’ that Bracken sites in his text to demonstrate the likelihood of foreknowledge of the attacks:⁶⁶⁰ in the year prior to 9/11, Drug Enforcement Agency offices in the United States began to get visits from young people claiming to be Israeli art students, trying to sell them sketches or paintings or advertising for various exhibitions. Some DEA agents even reported being visited at home by people matching this description. When several reports turned up of these ‘art students’ attempting to get past security controls in certain offices, in some cases being caught with blueprints of the building in their possession, enough interest was generated for an official memo to be written in June 2001 on the phenomenon. All together there were around 130 reported ‘art student’ visits in places like Atlanta, Chicago, Denver,

⁶⁵⁷ Bromwich, David, ‘Euphemism and American Violence’, *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 55, number 5. 3 April, 2008, Available online at: <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/21199>>.

⁶⁵⁸ Haroon Siddique, ‘Faked wildfires briefing costs US official his job’, *The Guardian*, 30 Oct. 2007, Available online at: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/oct/30/media.usa>>.

⁶⁵⁹ Bracken, *The Shadow Government*, p. 18

⁶⁶⁰ Christopher Ketcham, ‘The Israeli “art student” mystery’, *Salon*, 7 May, 2002, Available online at: <<http://dir.salon.com/story/news/feature/2002/05/07/students/>>. For more on the story, see ‘The “Israeli Art Student” Files’, *Antiwar.com*, <<http://www.antiwar.com/israeli-files.php>>. Elsewhere, Ketcham has linked the ‘art students’ to the story of the so-called ‘high-fivers’, a group of (possibly) Mossad agents on a surveillance operation in northern New Jersey who were observed celebrating the attacks from across the Hudson River. Christopher Ketcham, ‘What Did Israel Know in Advance of the 9/11 Attacks?’, *Counterpunch*, 7 March, 2007, Available online at: <<http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article17260.htm>>.

Detroit, El Paso, Los Angeles, Miami, Orlando, New Orleans, Phoenix, San Diego, Little Rock, Seattle, Washington, D.C., Arlington, Texas, Albuquerque, and dozens of other small cities and towns. Some were found with receipts in their possession indicating large withdrawals of money (one having withdrawn over \$180,000 over a two month period); others with photos of DEA agents – and many who turned out to have connections to the Israeli military and intelligence services. While most of the reports come from DEA agents, there were other visits to Department of Defence sites and other agencies. The reason why the story is of particular interest to 9/11 researchers is the startling fact that a portion of these ‘students’ lived in a house at 4220 Sheridan St. in Hollywood, Florida: Mohamed Atta and at least ten of the 9/11 hijackers lived at 3389 Sheridan St. over the same period.⁶⁶¹

Bracken cites this story and argues that this ‘point(s) to close coverage by Mossad of the entire affair. Either Israeli intelligence behaved like disloyal mercenaries to their most generous ally, the United States, and withheld information, which it denies. Or else the executive branch of the US government has a staunch ally and knew much more than it admits.’⁶⁶² This is one possible interpretation of course, but Christopher Ketcham, the author of the article that Bracken cites, is not as certain about what conclusions can be drawn.⁶⁶³ For one, Bracken’s reading does not explain why these Israeli agents would be posing as art students and why they would be arousing suspicion by engaging DEA agents. Ketcham distinctly avoids coming to any sort of full stop and suggests that there is also a chance that these bizarre events were connected to the US ecstasy market, of which the Israeli mafia is a powerful supplier. This possibility is doubtful as well as there does not seem to be any reason why the drug suppliers would actively be provoking the interest of the DEA and no

⁶⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶² Bracken, *Shadow Government*, p. 29.

⁶⁶³ Ketcham, ‘The Israeli “art student” mystery’,

connections to the sale of drugs ever emerged. In fact the article, via an anonymous source high within the US intelligence community calling himself ‘Stability’, argues that there is a good chance that the operation was a smokescreen meant to divert attention from something else entirely unknown: the fascination and suspicion that the art students would create was calculated, and while people were trying to investigate this relatively large network, another intelligence operation was being carried out simultaneously.⁶⁶⁴ Stability was not completely certain of this interpretation either, as he claims, ‘Almost nothing is wrong in this particular instance. In this particular situation, right is wrong, left is right, up is down, day is night.’⁶⁶⁵

A similar line of argumentation is followed by Bracken in many different examples in *Shadow Government*, and with each example, the credibility of his conclusions decreases. Another example is his analysis of the anthrax attacks that occurred over several weeks starting the week after 9/11 in which letters containing anthrax spores were posted to various media outlets and two Democratic senators, killing five and infecting possibly at least 68 others.⁶⁶⁶ Even after presenting a pretty convincing argument that Dr. Steven J. Hatfill, one of the prime suspects, might have been behind the letters, the fact that the FBI searched his home with more publicity than other suspects leads Bracken to ask whether Hatfill might in fact be a patsy.⁶⁶⁷ The man who the FBI concluded had launched the deadly attacks on his own, Bruce E. Ivins, is never mentioned by Bracken.⁶⁶⁸ In the end, when one is forced to resort to

⁶⁶⁴ Considering how little sense all of these explications of the Israeli art students’ behaviour make, it is perhaps worth considering that they actually were art students involved in a vast conceptual-performance piece.

⁶⁶⁵ Ketcham, ‘The Israeli “art student” mystery’,

⁶⁶⁶ Tyler Cymet and Gary Kerkvliet, ‘What is the True Number of Victims of the Postal Anthrax Attack of 2001?’, *Journal of the American Osteopathic Association* (Vol 104, No 11, Nov. 2004), p. 452, Available online at: <<http://www.jaoa.org/cgi/content/full/104/11/452>>.

⁶⁶⁷ Bracken, *Shadow Government*, p. 164.

⁶⁶⁸ Joby Warrick, ‘FBI investigation of 2001 anthrax attacks concluded; U.S. releases details’, *The Washington Post*, 20 February, 2010, Available online at <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/19/AR2010021902369.html?hpid=topnews>>.

speculation on such shaky grounds, what can we do but acknowledge that ‘we live and die at the confluence of innumerable mysteries’ and conclude ‘Who knows?’

In the previous chapter I discussed the assassination of Gérard Lebovici, Debord’s close friend and benefactor, in a Parisian parking garage in 1984. In his published text on the murder, *Considerations on the Assassination of Gérald Lebovici*, Debord declines to speculate even once as to who might have been the killer, instead attacking the press for the manner in which they have spread ridiculous rumours, many implicating him in the killing. The point for him is not necessarily whether or not these conspiracy theories are true; rather, it is that the integrated spectacle creates a kind of epistemological uncertainty that prevents one from logically judging the situation. At the same time, there is almost a reversal of responsibility in a world where one can longer ask ‘*Cui prodest?* (‘Who profits?’)’.⁶⁶⁹ As a pamphlet spread in the wake of Lebovici’s murder claims: Lebovici’s was assassinated ‘by *the established social order*.’⁶⁷⁰ There is no need to find an individual to blame when a problem is so systemic.

There is a difference between arguing that the present is awash in conspiracies, that ‘thousands of plots in favour of the established order tangle and clash almost everywhere’, and positing theories of actually existing conspiracies. First, the latter assumes that these conspiracies can be uncovered – that they can be known by any engaged citizen with a library card, internet connection, basic research skills, and dedication. Second, most conspiracy theory sees a given conspiracy as a criminal aberration that must be solved and whose masterminds must be brought to justice, so that normal functioning democracy can be restored. As Willman has argued, such a position often shrouds structural antagonisms, and structural critique as

⁶⁶⁹ Debord, *Comments*, p. 55.

⁶⁷⁰ ‘Words and Bullets: The Condemned of the Lebovici Affair’, 1984, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/les-mots.html>>.

a whole, and instead conceives of the conspiracy as an infection to be expelled from the social body.⁶⁷¹ For Debord, however, the conditions of the integrated spectacle are such that conspiracy is both a priori inevitable and particular conspiracies are unknowable. Speaking the truth of power – saying the unsayable about the State (as Debord says Machiavelli does in *The Prince*) is here not about exposing conspiracies but about a critique of the functioning of the spectacle.⁶⁷²

But what is critique without truth or explanation, and is there a way in which one can accept the existence of conspiracies without indulging in exposing them? What are the broader consequences for critical thought of this suspension of the epistemological drive? There are points within *Comments* at which Debord comes dangerously close to indulging in conspiracy theory, for example when he suggests that the search after oil beds under Paris in the autumn of 1986 had no other goal than to measure the populations ‘current level of stupefaction and submission’.⁶⁷³ On the surface he resembles a conspiracy theorist: the paranoia, the self-certainty, the secrecy, producing theory outside of the traditional academy, and the attempt to stuff the messiness of reality into a grand narrative encompassing the globe and all of recent history. The former Situationist Rene Riesel has claimed that for at least half of *Comments* ‘Debord enclosed himself in an obsessional and sterile conspiracy theory’.⁶⁷⁴ This is perhaps never stronger than in the opening and closing sections of *Comments*. His claim in the book’s first paragraph – that he must watch what he says for fear of providing those who seek to defend and preserve the spectacle with too

⁶⁷¹ Willman, ‘Spinning Paranoia: The Ideologies of Conspiracy and Contingency in Postmodern Culture’, pp. 21-39,

⁶⁷² Debord claims Machiavelli was able to ‘say the unsayable about the State’. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, par. 139.

⁶⁷³ Debord, *Comments*, p. 56.

⁶⁷⁴ ‘Interview with Rene Riesel’, *Not Bored*, trans. Not Bored (August, 2007), Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/riesel-interview.html>>. Interview was conducted by Alain Leauthier and originally published in *Libération* (3-4 Feb, 2001).

much information – seems to imply a vision of a world dominated by a secret cabal of men with power, apparently eagerly awaiting Debord’s new book with which they can plan the next stage of their scheme. This is reiterated in the closing when he claims some kind of dramatic changeover is imminent, but that it will not be the result of the actions of the proletariat or the masses, but a cabal of sorts that understands the obstacles they have overcome, and of what they are capable.⁶⁷⁵ What can we make of Debord’s claims, for example, that it was P2 that was holding Aldo Moro after his kidnapping?⁶⁷⁶ Had he verified this directly? The French collective Tiqqun’s has suggestively claimed that Debord, in his writings on the Red Brigades and seventies Italy, imported the Italian discipline of ‘retrology’ into France. They call retrology ‘a discipline for which the first axiom might be “the truth is out there”’, and that it is ‘a game of mirrors played by those who can no longer believe in any vital event of phenomenon and who must suppose, from this very fact, that is to say, due to their illness, that there is someone behind what happens: the P2 Lodge, the CIA, Mossad or they themselves. The winner is the one who has given his comrades the solidest reasons to doubt reality.’⁶⁷⁷ While Jodi Dean celebrated so-called conspiracy theorists whose theorising challenges the notion that there is a coherent and knowable reality that could be mapped in the first place, Debord believed in the existence of a coherent and knowable reality, but felt that the integrated spectacle makes cartographers of this

⁶⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53. Not Bored interprets this claim thus: ‘Strictly speaking, the ex-Premier of Italy, Aldo Moro, wasn’t held prisoner by *Potere Due*, but by the Italian State itself. And so, Debord appears to be making a sarcastic remark, to the effect that there’s no difference between the “parallel” and official governments of the country.’ Debord, *Comments on The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Not Bored, Available online at: <http://www.notbored.org/commentaires.html#_edn23>.

⁶⁷⁷ Tiqqun, *This is Not A Program*, 2001, Available online at: <<http://libcom.org/library/not-program>>. The event to have generated the most retrological speculation is the ‘*Strage di Ustica*’, the Ustica Massacre. On 27 June, 1980, a Aerolinee Itavia Flight 870 from Bologna to Palermo crashed into the Tyrrhenian Sea near the Italian island of Ustica, killing all 81 people on board. The investigation into the crash is still open and has been the subject of an enormous amount of speculation over the years. One explanation, which crazily enough sounds plausible, is that American and French airplanes were attempting to shoot down a plane carrying Libya’s Muammar al-Gaddafi. The Libyans found out about the scheme and sent fighter planes to intercept and a dogfight ensued in which Flight 870 was accidentally hit with a missile. See Willan, *Puppetmasters*, pp. 167-72.

contemporary reality essentially impotent. This claim is as disempowering as it is defeatist for Tiquun, as it neglects everything that was actually powerful and threatening to state power about the event and social movements of seventies Italy.

Parapolitics and Structural Conspiracy

'Even though you are competent, appear to be incompetent. Though effective, appear ineffective.'

–Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 500 BCE⁶⁷⁸

Is some notion of conspiracy actually integral to understanding the current situation? While it might not be historically unique in this regard, it may be impossible to understand the actions of the Bush administration in Iraq simply by understanding 'the logic of capital' or by looking at the historical relationship between the US and the Middle East. The Bush administration *did* conduct itself conspiratorially: constantly acting under a shroud of secrecy with decisions made by a small group of individuals, evidence forged, disinformation spread, etc..⁶⁷⁹ There was even a small group of policy advisers and analysts within the Pentagon's Office of Special Plans that referred to themselves as 'The Cabal'. Can it really be said that understanding the Bush family's connections to the oil industry or Dick Cheney's role at Halliburton or various other connections between members of the administration and the infamous military-industrial complex has nothing to do with various decisions and policies or that there is no reason to suspect this administration of consistently breaking the law and belittling the US constitution?⁶⁸⁰ To put it succinctly: is not understanding the conspiratorial behaviour of the Bush administration central to understanding the role of the US state in the world?

It is productive in this regard to look at Debord's later writings in relation to some of the work emerging from the burgeoning field of parapolitics. As Robert

⁶⁷⁸ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Thomas Cleary (Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala, 2005), p. 11.

⁶⁷⁹ Dean, Jodi, 'Secrecy since September 11', *Interventions* (6:3), pp. 362-80.

⁶⁸⁰ See for example the 'family tree' Stan Goff provides of the Bush administrations connections to 'guns and oil'. Mike McCormick, "'You've Got To Be Up Front': The Stan Goff Interview", *Narco News*, 4 Nov., 2001, Available online at: <<http://www.narconews.com/goffmccormick1.html>>.

Cribb writes, parapolitics is a term that only emerged in scholarly discourses in the early 1990s ‘to capture a set of observations which suggest a strange, powerful, clandestine and apparently structural relationship between state security-intelligence apparatuses, terrorist organisations and transnational organised criminal syndicates.’⁶⁸¹ Cribb claims that parapolitics differentiates itself from what might be denigrated as conspiracy theory in that rather than identifying the cause of historical events in the conspiratorial behaviour of elites or seeing ‘normal’ politics as an illusory spectacle always underpinned and manipulated in the last instance by ‘deep’ politics, parapolitics seeks to analyse the systemic relationship between these levels. Parapolitics ‘proposes that the tripartite relationship between security and intelligence organisations, international criminal networks and quasi-states is systematic, extensive and influential.’⁶⁸² For Peter Dale Scott, who is credited with creating the term, parapolitics sees conspiracies as being part of the political structure and not as exceptions – things like the employment/utilisation of mobsters, terrorists, death squads, or drug traffickers in foreign (or domestic for that matter) affairs not as a question of corruption but one of governance.⁶⁸³ These structures are ‘neither “parasitic” nor “deviant”, but functionally central to the routine operation of global governance and private authority’.⁶⁸⁴ This parapolitical perspective is clearly in tune with the analysis offered by Debord in these later works and many of his claims are echoed in the parapolitical literature, stretching from the manner in which the state

⁶⁸¹ Cribb, ‘Introduction: Parapolitics, Shadow Governance and Criminal Sovereignty’, *Government of the Shadows*, ed. Eric Wilson (London: Pluto Press, 2009), p. 1.

⁶⁸² Cribb, p. 8.

⁶⁸³ Peter Dale Scott, *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK*. (University of California Press, 1993), pp. 7-10. Scott’s writings are doubly interesting in that they are in many ways located on the border between irresponsible conspiracy theory and parapolitical analysis. He has edited a book together with conspiracy theorist David Ray Griffin (*9/11 and American Empire: Intellectuals Speak Out*, 2007), yet his own books are published by respectable presses and his own book *The Road to 9/11* does not engage in the baseless speculation of theorists like Griffin, and he even challenges Griffin’s interpretations when he is mentioned.

⁶⁸⁴ Eric Wilson, ‘Deconstructing the Shadows’, *Government of the Shadows*, p. 30.

manipulates, provokes or commits acts of terror to the importance of the Mafia in the global economy. Debord is valuable in this regard in that he adds a dimension never really addressed: he presents a novel way of thinking about the systemic relation between publicity and secrecy, consumer culture and the deep state, celebrities and secret agents.

Writing in relation to Debord's 'penchant' for conspiracy, Sven Lütticken coins the term 'structural conspiracies' in his essay 'The Conspiracy of Publicness'.⁶⁸⁵ Structural conspiracies are 'as if' or 'pseudo' conspiracies. In opposition to conspiracy theory – which frames conspiracy as disturbing an otherwise harmonious social order from the outside, as an essentially evil force threatening the community – structural conspiracies exist symbiotically within the social order from which they benefit. They may bolster the social structure or power arrangement in which they exist, but they do not actually define it. 'These structural conspiracies function to a certain extent *as if* they were deliberate, actual conspiracies. They may also, at various points, involve real conspiracies, but these do not determine the overall structure.'⁶⁸⁶ As an example, Lütticken asks if the events of 9/11 cannot be said to have effectively worked '*as if*' the Bush administration and elites within the military-industrial complex had planned them. He continues, 'A structural conspiracy has an ambiguous ontological status that does not presume lots of people actively and deliberately conspiring, yet it has much the same effect as a real conspiracy.'⁶⁸⁷

Lütticken starts the essay by referencing Debord but this is more to introduce the discussion than anything else and he does not explicitly detail the relation between structural conspiracies and the integrated spectacle beyond citing Debord's claim that conspiring in its favour is a new and flourishing profession. It can be argued,

⁶⁸⁵ Lütticken, *Secret Publicity*, p. 191.

⁶⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁶⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

however, that structural conspiracies are a result of the growth of the integrated spectacle and the concomitant growth of secrecy, lies, and the occultisation of power. The conditions of life under the integrated spectacle are such that conspiracies can flourish in all sectors of society. What is valuable about the notion that conspiracies are structurally facilitated by the integrated spectacle is that it gives us a way of thinking about conspiracy theory that avoids simply dismissing it as paranoid psychopathology without leading into an endless circle of debunking. Besides failing to prevent 9/11, probably the Bush administration's other most spectacular failure was its inability to adequately respond to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. And in a vein similar to 9/11, there are numerous theories (from those of Lil Wayne to Farrakhan, Alex Jones and David Icke) in which the administration is said to have colluded with various property developers to blow up the levees or let the flooding happen on purpose to rid the city of its underclass in order to turn it into a sort of Creole Disney.⁶⁸⁸ In this case too the concept of structural conspiracy is relevant. The poor living in the flood plain were not protected or effectively rescued, black residents desperately procuring food and water were portrayed by the media as looters, while whites doing the same thing were merely doing what they had to do to survive. Housing prices have gone up drastically since the disaster while thousands of poor have lost their homes. All of this could be interpreted as the nefarious plan of a secret circle of elites within the federal, state, and city governments, real estate and the media, or as a sign of a reprehensible system that desperately needs to be changed. It may not have been an actual conspiracy, but it benefited various elite interests as though it had been.

⁶⁸⁸ Lil Wayne, 'Georgia Bush', *Dedication 2* (Mixtape), 2006; Zenitha Prince, 'Was there a conspiracy in New Orleans?', *FinalCall.com*, 7 March, 2006, Available online at: <http://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/article_2454.shtml>.

To claim, as Debord does in *Comments*, that the story of terrorism is written by the state does not necessarily mean that acts of terror must be false-flag events. Take, for example, not only the anthrax letters that Bracken argues must have originated from statesmen or stage agencies, but the numerous hoaxes that proliferated in the weeks, months and years after 9/11. These hoaxes, which surprisingly were already more prevalent than bomb threat hoaxes as early as 1999, have been discussed in relation to the spectacle by Susan Willis: ‘The hoax is a symbolic ploy that takes aim at the spectacular. It is the unreal bent on conjuring the real. [...] Like a monkey wrench thrust in the cogs of the daily grind, the hoax ruptures commodified time. [...] The hoax is produced as if it were real, and the real is produced by the media as spectacle’.⁶⁸⁹ Willis’ application of the concept of the spectacle here is relatively unnuanced and similar to that employed by Kellner. Rather than rupturing commodified time, in the months and years following 9/11 these ruptures became an inextricable lubricant of the daily grind, bolstering the spectacle rather than subverting it or providing any sort of respite. No matter where they originated – the conclusion of the FBI was that they were sent by the aforementioned Dr. Bruce E. Ivins, a biodefense researcher at the US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases who had actually been a consultant for the FBI on the case before he was a suspect – they functioned as if they were a false-flag event, contributing to the culture of fear exploited by the Bush administration, not to mention the \$60 billion plus windfall for the biodefense industry.⁶⁹⁰

In a period where manipulation is so rife, where secret agents and revolutionaries are continually switching sides (whether they know it or not), the distinction between the two ceases to matter. To posit 9/11 as a structural, pseudo or

⁶⁸⁹ Willis, *Portents of the Real*, pp. 44-5.

⁶⁹⁰ Scott Shane, ‘FBI Concludes Investigation in Fatal Anthrax Mailings’, *New York Times*, 19 Feb, 2010, Available online at: <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/20/us/20anthrax.html>>.

as if conspiracy is not to argue that there was a conspiracy within the US state to plan the attacks or allow them to happen. It is not necessary to argue that the US state actively aided Bin Laden (as implied early in *Loose Change* when he is said to have been treated in the American hospital in Dubai and to have been visited by CIA agents two months before the attacks) to see how Bin Laden's actions and very existence helped the Bush administration or how the Bush administration's foreign policy helped the Al Qaeda franchise. Bush himself is said to have insisted that the attacks be seen as an 'opportunity' and Rumsfeld is supposed to have said they could be viewed as a chance to 'go massive. Sweep it all up. Things related and not.'⁶⁹¹

Numerous questions come up here however. First, does this not notion of structural conspiracies not repudiate rather than compliment Debord's position in *Comments*? For Lütticken, these conspiracies are in submission to the logic structuring society but for Debord, or at least at times throughout *Comments*, there is the suggestion that these actually existing conspiracies can run counter to any logic, or that conspiracies in favour of and against the existing order proliferate and collide with increasing frequency. This is a key difference between Debord's position and most conspiracy theory in which conspiracy disturbs an otherwise harmonious social order, but it also seems to counter Lütticken in the sense that while most of these conspiracies may be banal, some may in fact have a determinate influence on historical outcomes. Second, a distinction has to be made between conspiracy (structural or not) and simple opportunism. As Naomi Klein has written, crisis opportunism is one of the guiding logics of the financial institutions trying to establish a neoliberal world order.⁶⁹²

Third, does one really need recourse to the concept of conspiracy to claim that elites

⁶⁹¹ Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), p. 32. and Joel Roberts, 'Plans for Iraq Attack Began on 9/11', CBS News, 4 Sept 2002, Available online at: <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/09/04/september11/main520830.shtml>>.

⁶⁹² Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*.

or classes are ruthlessly pursuing their interests? Even if this pursuit sometimes puts them at the edge of the legality, this does not necessarily require a conception of conspiracy; it can be explained, as Vincenzo Ruggiero puts it, by ‘the day-to-day improvisation of powerful actors seeking to maintain and augment social and institutional position’.⁶⁹³ Many of these practices may at first challenge the law but eventually establish new legislation and norms.

Furthermore, there is a need to be wary about the lures of conspiracism. Lütticken cites Hakim Bey’s text on ‘The Ontological Status of Conspiracy’ and while it may be true that conspiracy theory, if employed in an open-ended manner that raises suspicions and interrogates official narratives rather than constructing tight, ‘factual’ counter-narratives, might be useful, Bey warns of falling into a conspiratorial obscurantism that ends up mystifying power and denigrating even the possibility of political change. He writes,

[W]e should avoid the mystique of conspiracy theory, the fantasy that conspiracy is all-powerful. Conspiracies can be blown. They can even be defeated. But I fear they cannot simply be ignored. The refusal to admit any validity to conspiracy theory is itself a form of spectacular delusion-blind belief in the liberal, rational, daylight world in which we all have "rights", in which "the system works", in which "democratic values will prevail in the long run" because Nature has so decreed it.⁶⁹⁴

Debord’s own conspiratorial discourse does at times drift into dangerous territory, but alongside the aspects of his writing that almost romanticise conspiracy, there is a general move towards its banalisation, where political conspiracies become as petty as workplace power struggles, and where one who assumes himself to be a king is merely another’s pawn as thousands of conspiracies collide and undermine each other.

⁶⁹³ Vincenzo Ruggiero, ‘Transnational Crime and Global Illicit Economies’, *Government of the Shadows*, p. 122.

⁶⁹⁴ Bey. ‘The Ontological Status of Conspiracy Theory’.

When seen purely as a conspiracy, without the context of the spectacle, what is ultimately mystified is state power itself. For example, in a *South Park* episode that parodies 9/11 conspiracy theories, ‘The Mystery of the Urinal Deuce’, the discovery of a bowel movement in an elementary school urinal leads the show’s protagonists to uncover a conspiracy that goes all the way to the White House.⁶⁹⁵ The conspiracy that is uncovered however is not that the Bush administration was behind the 9/11 attacks; rather that they had conspired to create conspiracy theories that posited their involvement in order to give the impression that they were powerful enough to carry off such a scheme. Considering Orson Welles’ remake of *The Trial*, but in a manner that can be generalised, Žižek writes, ‘the true conspiracy of power resides in the very notion of some mysterious agency that “pulls the strings” and effectively runs the show, that is to say, in the notion that, behind the visible, public power, there is another obscene, invisible, “crazy” power structure.’⁶⁹⁶ This type of conspiracy theory’s ‘basic premise is that, behind the public Master (who, of course, is an impostor), there is a hidden Master who effectively keeps everything under control.’⁶⁹⁷ Baudrillard takes a similar position when considering 9/11 conspiracy theories: ‘Above and beyond the truth of the matter, of which we shall perhaps never have any knowledge, what remains of this [conspitorial] thesis is, once again, that the dominant power is the instigator of everything, including effects of subversion and violence, which are of the order of *tompe-l’oeil*’.⁶⁹⁸ There is more comfort, according to Baudrillard, in contemplating the malevolence of one’s own state that admitting to the power of the other party. Conspiracy theory in this sense not only mystifies

⁶⁹⁵ ‘Mystery of the Urinal Deuce’, *South Park* (Episode 148, Aired on Comedy Central 11 October 2006, USA).

⁶⁹⁶ Žižek, ‘I Hear You with My Eyes’, *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, ed. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (USA: Duke UP, 1996), p. 96

⁶⁹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 97.

⁶⁹⁸ Baudrillard, *Spirit of Terrorism*, p. 78.

political power but also greatly exaggerates the efficiency and effectiveness of the state and its control by and coordination with various local, national, and global elites.

This can be seen clearly in the purportedly Debordian conspiratorial accounts of 9/11. In order for their theories to make any sense, Not Bored and Bracken – against Debord – must insist that the state is capable of acting with frightening clarity, even within the eternal present of the integrated spectacle and despite the epistemological uncertainty it generates. For these accounts, it is suspicious that the state seems to have behaved so incompetently. The argument that the terrorists' actions essentially benefitted the Bush administration is the sign of a government conspiracy rather than a sign of the idiocy of the terrorists and their warped sense of strategy. The media's seemingly symbiotic relationship with the terrorists – their irresponsibility in performing the service the terrorists desired in spreading their message and also spreading fear in service of the state – points to an even wider conspiracy.⁶⁹⁹ Rather than arguing that the state is no longer being led competently or strategically, that Al Qaeda does not understand that offensive terrorism is bound to fail because their situatedness in the society of the spectacle has prohibited them from developing an adequate historical-strategic understanding, or that the media's fear-mongering serves to bolster the state and spread the terrorist's message as much as it helps with advertising revenue, they must claim that the state is able to act with an almost inconceivable degree of precision and that it has a deep and subtle grasp of history allowing it to scrupulously calculate the effects of defensive terrorism.

Without giving conspiracy a structural role or shifting the focus from the actual conspiracies to the social organisation that allows them to flourish, it is difficult to imagine where conspiratorial investigations could end: what their political purchase

⁶⁹⁹ This perspective can also be seen clearly in Michel Bounan somewhat Debordian text 'The Logic of Terrorism', published in France in 2003. Bounan, 'The Logic of Terrorism', *Not Bored*, trans. Not Bored, July 2009, Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/logic-of-terrorism.html>>.

might be. Even if they were able to convince people that 9/11 was an inside job, there is little reason to think it would make a difference. An ABC News poll taken on the 40th anniversary of the JFK assassination revealed that 70% of the population think there is more to the plot than demonstrated by the Warren Commission with over 50% believing in a second shooter.⁷⁰⁰ Despite millions of Americans believing the state covered up certain details involving the assassination of their president, there is no, and never really has been any, concerted mass movement attempting to discover the truth or dispose of those impeding its realisation. Do they simply want to arrest Bush or those responsible or do they want revolution to transform the system that allows conspiracies to flourish? Conspiracy theorists spend more time collecting information and weaving disparate news stories into a coherent narrative than organising. What kind of organising could one do against a conspiracy? First it must be exposed. But the late Debord's theory is not connected to a mass movement either and it is difficult to see what one can *do* with his ideas except for wait for this inevitable coup d'état. Is there a possibility of counter-conspiratorial thought?

Debord delineates what makes the integrated spectacle such fertile ground for conspiracies and conspiracy theory. The integrated spectacle not only complicates questions of strategy for states and their enemies, it also complicates the production of theory, especially concerning terrorism. This is one of the key elements missing from the analyses of Giroux, Kellner, and Retort, as well as Not Bored and Bracken. Since these theorists, at the very least, see the society of the spectacle as the *mise-en-scène* in which the 9/11 attacks took place, and in which the US state strategized its response, it is necessary to consider the full consequences of acting and theorising within this society. As Debord's later work testifies, this goes beyond questions of

⁷⁰⁰ Gary Langer, 'Legacy of Suspicion', *ABCNews.com*, 16 Nov., 2003, Available online at: <http://abcnews.go.com/sections/wnt/US/JFK_poll_031116.html>.

commodity fetishism and reification, alienation and spectators being enraptured by the media. Importantly it also goes beyond the revelation of specific conspiracies or terror plots that threaten to destabilise the social order. Terrorist atrocities have been committed by the secret services in order to defend state power and by delusional would-be revolutionaries in misguided attempts to attack state power. Despite this, for Debord the appropriate response is not simply to try and unmask these conspiracies or identify the actual individuals responsible for the terror attacks – this would be seen as futile (at one point he writes it is ‘generally impossible’ to be able to understand why certain people are assassinated in the integrated spectacle).⁷⁰¹ This, importantly, is not the same thing as saying that conspiracies do not exist or that to suspect state actors as being involved in conspiracies is a sign of a politically dangerous and debilitating paranoia. Conspiracy is given a structural role in Debord’s theory of the spectacle, while at the same time he suggests, quite obscurely, the possibility of conspiracies emerging that would threaten the spectacle itself.

But if one accepts that conspiracies flourish under the integrated spectacle, and recognises that our ability to unveil them will inevitably be stymied by some of the same properties of the integrated spectacle that allowed said conspiracies to flourish in the first place, what can one do but acknowledge our impotence and wait for this lighting bolt in the night that will conclude these spectacular times? Debord ends *Comments* with a passage from A.-L. Sardou’s *Nouveau Dictionnaire des Synonymes Français* on the various uses of ‘vainly’, ‘in vain’ and ‘uselessly’. The obvious implication is that Debord must face the fact that he has either worked vainly, or in vain, depending on future events that he may or may not have been able to influence, and that he may or may not have actually influenced favourably. The

⁷⁰¹ Debord, *Comments*, p. 54.

melancholic rueing of missed opportunities, failures, and the irreversible passage of time is a constant theme of Debord's work since the 1950s. In his film *In Girum* from 1979, a clip from the 1936 film *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, based on the suicidal charge of British cavalry against the Russian army during the Crimean War (1854), is meant to represent the period of the Situationist International – suggesting that while the SI may have been brave and courageous, their activity was also marked by futility and tragedy.⁷⁰² It is key here not to fall into the trap of reading Debord's late writing as merely the pessimistic reflections of a failed revolutionary. In many respects they are of course, but at the same time these texts have to be read as examples of political writing – political writing for bad times – that seek to soberly assess a dismal situation and look for possibilities.

⁷⁰² See Galloway, 'Debord's Nostalgic Algorithm', p. 144.

Conclusion

The Disintegrated Spectacle and the Spectacle of Disintegration

A society that is ever more sick, but ever more powerful, has recreated the world – everywhere and in concrete form – as the environment and backdrop of its sickness: it has created a sick planet.

–Guy Debord, 1971⁷⁰³

[E]verywhere death spreads as fast and massively as disorder. Nothing works anymore, and nothing is believed anymore.

–Guy Debord, 1993⁷⁰⁴

⁷⁰³ Debord, *A Sick Planet*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London, New York, Calcutta: Sea Gull Books, 2008), p. 81.

⁷⁰⁴ Debord, “*Cette Mauvaise Réputation...*”, p. 1832.

While doing the bulk of the research and writing for this dissertation between 2005 and 2008, I was quite convinced that I was engaging the contemporary moment. The later texts of Debord felt directly relatable to that period, especially in the United States, and his conception of the integrated spectacle felt even more relevant than its proponents realised. The election of Barack Obama as the 44th president of the US seemed to change that overnight. All of a sudden considering the events of 9/11 and the secrecy and lies of the Bush administration felt passé. There was never a doubt that Debord's concept was still relevant following Obama's historic victory, but in this new era the spectacle seemed qualitatively different than it had since the beginning of the century, or at least since 9/11. Despite the financial crisis, despite the fact that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were still ongoing, this spectacle was no longer feared. It wanted to be loved, and indeed to a large extent it was. While several US presidents have demonstrated that one can come from nothing to hold the country's highest office – Nixon and Clinton for example – Obama showed that one of the US' most deeply rooted antagonisms, that of race, was no longer an insurmountable hurdle.⁷⁰⁵ The constant horror and sense of impending doom that surrounded the Bush years was being replaced with a hope that things might just get better. Much of this hope was diffuse and rather insipid, but it was also partially coupled to the possibility of real achievements and reforms – passing health care, closing Guantanamo, funding stem cell research, improved environmental legislation, nuclear disarmament, etc.⁷⁰⁶

⁷⁰⁵ At a certain level of course. See Walter Benn Michaels, 'Against Diversity', *New Left Review* (52, 2008), pp. 33-6.

⁷⁰⁶ Again, obviously there are limitations to what will or can be accomplished. See Tariq Ali, 'President of Cant', *New Left Review* (61, 2010), pp. 99-116.

Writing over a year after Obama's election, the euphoria has clearly subsided. Sifting through news of 'death boards' and faked birth certificates, clips of town council meetings ending in the Pledges of Allegiance, and full-page ads in the *New York Times* claiming Obama is leading the country towards communism amply demonstrate the ways in which unanswerable lies and disinformation still pollute the agora. The Republican Party has returned, quite openly, to encouraging and practicing a politics of fear.⁷⁰⁷ The 'paranoid style' is thriving in the Tea Party movement and conspiracy theorists have been as provoked by Obama as they were by Bush, although their angle is a bit different (and their accusations often have a slightly racist or at least Islamophobic edge, although not always). For example, the LaRouchian Webster Griffin Tarpley, who is discussed briefly in Chapter III in relation to his book *9/11 Synthetic Terror* that references Sanguinetti, has recently written two books about Obama, one of which has the evocative title *Obama: The Postmodern Coup* (2008). The second book, his 'unauthorised biography' of the president, contains passages like this:

Obama is something very sinister indeed. Obama himself is either an atheist, or much more likely a Satanist of the apostate Jeremiah Wright-James Cone-black liberation theology school, a Christian heresy which places racist hatred instead of charity at the center of its edifice of faith. Wright is ultimately the high priest of a death cult. Obama is, more precisely, an existentialist fascist made of equal parts 1969 Weatherman race war theory and Frantz Fanon's cult of violent Third World rebellion. This is what low-income blue collar voters in West Virginia have understood far better than all the effete snobs who profess postmodernism at Harvard.⁷⁰⁸

Throughout Obama is referred to as Barack Hussein Obama, and he is portrayed as a self-obsessed Trilateral Commission stooge who hates America, a radical subversive

⁷⁰⁷ Ben Smith, 'RNC document mocks donors, play on "fear"', *Politico*, 3 March, 2010, Available online at: <<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0310/33866.html>>.

⁷⁰⁸ Webster Griffin Tarpley, *Barack H. Obama: The Unauthorized Biography* (California: Progressive Press, 2008), pp. 8-9.

manipulated by the country's elites, *and* a racist postmodern socialist fascist, amongst other things.

This dissertation started with Debord's assertion in *Comments* that Manuel Noriega is the modern prince of the society of the spectacle. His claim may seem completely counter-intuitive to one only familiar with the concept of the spectacle as casually referenced in Cultural Studies and the art world, in which it usually refers to the world of the mass media, and in which someone like Reagan would seem a more apt choice, especially considering *Comments* was published in 1988. Using this familiar concept of the spectacle today, it is once again tempting to think of Obama as our modern prince for the adroitness with which he crafted his public persona during the campaign and the manner in which he reinstated a degree of trust in the integrity of the US state, in particular that state as the world's hegemon, following the Bush years, seemingly winning the Nobel Peace Prize for this act of rebranding. Yet, as the previous paragraph indicates, as much as he utilised the mass and new media to get into the White House, his attempts at reform – whatever their inadequacies – have been as frustrated as enabled by the conditions of the spectacle in which he operates. Moreover, the society of the spectacle is not only a world dominated by smiling celebrities and conspicuous consumption, but a world cloaked by layers of deception in which a wide assortment of unsavoury characters emerge and thrive.

The integrated spectacle was born out of the period – generally conceived as encompassing 1968 and the following decade – in which the spectacle was contested. Since emerging from this era of turbulence one has to admit it has proven quite robust. The biggest threat to its dominance was perhaps the anti-capitalist movement of the late 1990s, which never really recovered after being turned into an anti-war

movement following the 9/11 attacks and build up to the Iraq war.⁷⁰⁹ The ‘imminent and ineluctable’ changeover that Debord predicted has not materialised. There have been no lighting strikes in the night and life in the integrated spectacle, with its cultural, political, and social inertia, is as stifling as ever. ‘Naturally,’ Kaufmann writes, ‘Debord’s point of view in his last books is no longer revolutionary, but he is hardly to blame that such a perspective disappeared from sight.’⁷¹⁰ Considering that Debord felt himself to have lead, ‘to a great extent, during an entire generation, the work of the negative in Europe’, the disappearance of the perspective of negation and the pessimism surrounding the possibilities for political change suggests that the integrated spectacle may be even more powerful today than it was at the end of his life.⁷¹¹

Debord’s pessimism about the prospects for significant, positive change is ubiquitous today. There is an oft-cited observation by Fredric Jameson that in the present period it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. This comment was made as a series of apocalyptic blockbusters were streaming out of Hollywood – *Independence Day* (1996), *Armageddon* (1998), *Deep Impact* (1998), etc. – and coincided with fears about the approaching millennium generated by the prospect of everything from a looming computing meltdown to the Rapture. These films by and large created a scenario in which an external threat – often literally from outside of this solar system: aliens, asteroids – forces humanity, nations, families, or romantic couples to unite to overcome the challenge to their very existence and/or realise an important lesson about life before being vaporised by aliens or engulfed by

⁷⁰⁹ See Michael Hardt, ‘A trap set for protesters’, *The Guardian*, 21 Feb., 2003, Available online at: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2003/feb/21/usa.world>>.

⁷¹⁰ Kaufmann, p. 204.

⁷¹¹ Debord, *Considerations*, p. 70.

a gigantic tidal wave.⁷¹² Recently, a second series of end-of-the-world films has emerged: *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *The Happening* (2008), *The Mist* (2007), *Children of Men* (2006), *2012* (2009), *The Road* (2009), *I am Legend* (2007), *Cloverfield* (2008), *War of the Worlds* (2005), *WALL•E* (2008), etc. Without really going into any schematic depth, while similar to the disaster films from the nineties in some respects, they are clearly coloured by either the events of 9/11 and their aftermath or the growing consciousness of the climate crisis, often both.⁷¹³ Rather than positing some external, otherworldly threat to which humanity can respond heroically, the threat is often man-made, and following events like the US state's abject failure before, during, and following Hurricane Katrina, little hope is offered in our ability to emerge victorious.⁷¹⁴ Even when the ending in these films is arguably 'happy' – the hero makes it out alive – it is only after a tremendous amount of suffering has occurred and the world has been destroyed to such an extent that normality cannot possibly return. In the past, a dystopian scenario was often set so far in the future that the work could serve as a warning of what could happen if humanity did not change its ways. What is striking about the current crop of films is that the collapse has either already begun or is imminent and inevitable. It is the palpable inability to even imagine a future that isn't a barren wasteland (literally or culturally), let alone reflect back on the present from this imaginary space, that marks them out.

The inability to think the future is intimately tied to an inability to understand the present. To paraphrase Debord, all usurpers do everything in their power to make

⁷¹² Žižek's observation that in the majority of Hollywood disaster film's the disaster serves to unite a family or romantic couple is relatively trite, perhaps with the exception of *Deep Impact*, where that romantic couple is a father/daughter. That being said there is something odd, both incestuous and homoerotic, about the Ben Affleck, Bruce Willis, Liv Tyler triangle in *Armageddon*, which during the same lecture was said to be one of Alain Badiou's favourite films. Žižek Masterclass, Birkbeck College, London, 20 Feb., 2008.

⁷¹³ In M. Night Shyamalan's underrated *The Happening*, what is initially suspected to be a terror attack turns out to have actually been perpetrated by nature itself.

⁷¹⁴ Even when it is alien (*Cloverfield*, *War of the Worlds*), it stands for fears created by decidedly planetary antagonisms.

the population forget that they have just arrived. Still, it is trite to claim that capitalism, and particularly its present hegemonic form, is not going to be with us forever, that there have been and will be other economic systems and forms of government in the future. As Jameson has pointed out, ‘Most of human history has unfolded in situations of general impotence and powerlessness, when this or that system of state power is firmly in place, and no revolts seem even conceivable, let alone possible or imminent. Those stretches of human history are for the most part passed in utterly non-utopian conditions, in which none of the images of the future or of radical difference peculiar to utopias ever reach the surface’.⁷¹⁵ John Gray has argued that the re-emergence of the belief in imminent apocalypse in contemporary culture is connected to the death of these utopian visions.⁷¹⁶ The consequences of this re-emergence are greater than just the dominance of a moribund outlook as religious Millennialists have emerged as an active force in US politics, influencing the state’s stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict, the ‘War on Terror’, and even climate change.⁷¹⁷ As Gray makes clear, apocalypse here is not simply opposed to utopia: ‘In common speech “apocalyptic” denotes a catastrophic event, but in biblical terms it derives from the Greek word for unveiling – an apocalypse is a revelation in which mysteries that are written in heaven are revealed at the end of time, and for the Elect this means not catastrophe but salvation’.⁷¹⁸ A distinction thus has to be made between catastrophe and apocalypse. Catastrophe is a collapse without revelation; apocalypse is an end with revelation, a ‘lifting of the veil’. Or as Evan Calder Williams writes, apocalypse is both the end of a world order and a way of ordering

⁷¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, ‘The Politics of Utopia’, *New Left Review* (25, 2004), p. 45.

⁷¹⁶ John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

⁷¹⁷ See Gray, pp. 107-45.

⁷¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

the world anew.⁷¹⁹ In the nightmare of a situation that has become ‘statically catastrophic’ – an exhausted culture slowly dies with a long sustained whimper instead of a bang – Williams argues for the necessity of a post-apocalyptic stance, which finds revelation in the collapse, the antagonisms and contradictions that had been shrouded, and allows us to imagine rebuilding the world. Viewed most cynically, one could argue that these films offer a public languishing at the beginning of the end of history a spectacle of disintegration to contemplate: a spectacle of violent change vastly more engaging than the eternal present. There is a danger that the ubiquity of apocalyptic fantasies acts as a replacement for any serious engagement with the problems of the present and the possibilities for real change, which would likely involve a tremendous amount of work, or that they allow the post-historical subject to maintain a degree of excitement following the end of history, a period – as Fukuyama originally claimed – that is ‘a very sad time’. After all, it is hard to imagine a more important world-historical event than Armageddon.

In Rosa Luxembour’s famous Janius pamphlet, written in 1915, there is only one hope for humanity: socialism. It is class struggle and the socialist movement that can save the world from barbarism, from the horrors provoked by the domination of capital and its crises. The enemy was clearly established and the remedy, while arguably vague, could be envisioned. Debord was writing – throughout his life – during what he saw as dire times. As mentioned previously, in his 1978 film *In Girum Imus Nocte Et Consumimur Igni* he quotes Marx’s 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge: ‘You will not say that I have had too high an opinion of the present time; and if, nevertheless, I do not despair of it, that is only because it is precisely the desperate

⁷¹⁹ Williams, Evan Calder, ‘An End Without End: Catastrophe Cinema in the Age of Crisis’, *Mute*, 25 Feb., 2010, Available online at: http://www.metamute.org/en/content/an_end_without_end_catastrophe_cinema_in_the_age_of_crisis.

situation which fills me with hope'.⁷²⁰ There is a sense as late as his introduction to his preface to the third French edition of *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1992 that the world is still horrible enough to give him hope. Yet precisely this feeling that things are getting so bad that a positive change must be forthcoming is exactly what seems to be missing from the contemporary imagination, despite the ubiquity of the word as a slogan in the Obama campaign. When reading Debord today, my immediate reaction is not that his diagnosis of the contemporary world is too pessimistic but that this notion that things could change, especially at the behest of a small cabal, suddenly and overnight, is naïve.

In 'the degraded utopia of the present', a moment when the choice of socialism or barbarism has already been made, with utopia impossible, the contemporary culture has difficulty imagining anything other than oblivion. Jameson has said that this is to be expected in a period in which a given power structure is firmly in place, but what is strange about the present mood is that our times are in fact relatively tumultuous. The 'end of history' thesis has been passé for well over a decade, and even if the current financial crisis is not likely to destroy capitalism, it could potentially be the final death knell of its neo-liberal variant and signal the death of the current hegemon of the world system, as Immanuel Wallerstein has argued.⁷²¹ Despite its severity, and the fact that perhaps 'conditions have never been so seriously revolutionary', very few are demanding systematic change.⁷²² The only people that seem to think this means the end of capitalism are rightwing libertarians who see the semi-nationalisation of banks, buying up of mortgages, and the election of Obama as the first steps towards communism.

⁷²⁰ Marx, 'Marx to Ruge: Cologne, May 1843'.

⁷²¹ Immanuel Wallerstein, 'The Depression: A Long-Term View', 16 Oct., 2008, Available online at: <<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2008/wallerstein161008.html>>. See also Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Decline of American Power* (WW Norton & Company, 2003).

⁷²² Debord, *Comments*, p. 84.

In relation to both these spectacles of disintegration and Debord's prognosis of an age in which even the most basic strategising has become difficult, it is possible to contemplate what could be called the disintegrated spectacle. The disintegrated spectacle's emergence is attributable to the very success of the integrated spectacle, and the two forms are nearly identical. The effects of the integrated spectacle – generalised secrecy, unanswerable lies and an eternal present – not only make it difficult for statesmen and revolutionaries to accomplish their goals, they undermine the other foundational features of the spectacle: the fusion of state and economy and incessant technological development. In Chapter III I referenced a footnote from *Afflicted Powers* in which Retort assert that the nous that the state lacks in its war efforts is still present in its relationship with the economy. A few years later Retort's assertion that the special relationship between the state and economy has not been contaminated by the spectacle seems highly debatable. Of course there have been financial crises before the emergence of the spectacle – one could even argue that the spectacle itself is best seen as having emerged in the response to the crisis of 1929 – and this is not to say that the spectacle is responsible for the crisis per se, but the conditions of life in the spectacle contributed to its emergence and could disrupt its resolution. This could include everything from the image of home ownership that has been propagated so enthusiastically in the US over the past decades seducing individuals and families into borrowing well beyond their means to the general surrender across the narrowing political spectrum to the ideology of the market and the inability of the US state to regulate the economy for both of the above reasons and due to a general lack of understanding of history and capitalism's cycles. Before the dissolution of the SI, Debord had written that the continuation of the functioning of capitalism was threatened not only by the global revolutionary movement but also by

the spectre of environmental catastrophe.⁷²³ Writing in 1971 this was conceived as the threat of pollution. The environmentalist discourse has developed considerably since then, as has the severity of the problem, but Debord's observations can still be thought today in relation to the climate change debate. For Debord, a science that follows the dictates of capital, regulated by a state that does the same, is quite literally in the process of ruining the planet and cannot conceivably be trusted to contribute to any remedy. This problem is compounded in the (dis)integrated spectacle as the debate around solutions to the problem is endlessly diverted by disinformers rehashing dubious arguments disputing the very existence of any problem, as for example climate change doubters citing the cold winter of 2010 as proof that global warming is a fiction (or actually a good thing).

The disintegrated spectacle is a society that is not subject to any kind of external threat, but is rather rotting on the inside. If the nature of the spectacle is 'the transmutation of everything for the worst', as Debord wrote in the late seventies, the disintegrated spectacle is a world threatened by its own idiocy. The fact that this society's would-be revolutionaries are as inept as the rulers of the society they are attempting to overthrow has simply prolonged this general decay. Emerging battle-hardened from the 1970s, the spectacle in its integrated phase had, according to Debord in his ventriloquising of Machiavelli, moved on from being loved and was now happy to be feared. The danger then for the spectacle, put in Machiavelli's terms, is that this fear will be replaced with or accompanied by hatred: the prince who is feared by his subjects has no need to fear conspiracy or revolt while the prince who is hated must fear both arising from every direction. Writing in relation to the riots in the French *banlieues* in 2005, Baudrillard considers the disintegration of the Western

⁷²³ See Debord, *A Sick Planet*.

model: ‘Today it is precisely the “best” [the West] has to offer – cars, schools, shopping centres – that are torched and ransacked. Even nursery schools: the very tools through which the car-burners were to be integrated and mothered. “Screw your mother” might be their organizing slogan. [...] Everything indicates they are successive phases of a revolt whose end is not in sight’.⁷²⁴ In 1958, the Situationist wrote, ‘There is a lot of talk about angry, raging youth’, citing the riots young people in Sweden, the Angry Young Men in England and the ‘mystical cretins’ of the Beat Generation, and criticising them for being somewhat reminiscent of the surrealist state of mind without sharing its revolutionary hope or desire to recreate everyday life.⁷²⁵ Operating without perspective, although not without a cause, it was the goal of the Situationists to insert these events into a revolutionary narrative: their desire to relate them to the totality of contemporary life was accomplished via the theory of the spectacle and in practice in the construction of situations. While there is perhaps a temptation to do just this with the riots of 2005, to write an updated version of ‘Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy’⁷²⁶ applying the concept of the spectacle as the *mise-en-scène* in which these youths developed and revolted, everything in *Comments* and Debord’s later texts seems to indicate that an event like this is destined to remain isolated as there is no larger proletarian or revolutionary movement for it to feed into.

So where does all of this leave us? What kind of politics can be practised in the eternal present of the integrated spectacle or the terminal decline of the disintegrated spectacle? ‘The career of Guy Debord’, according to Balakrishnan, ‘was

⁷²⁴ Jean Baudrillard, ‘The Pyres of Autumn’, *New Left Review* (37, 2006), p. 7.

⁷²⁵ ‘The Sound and the Fury’, *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 47.

⁷²⁶ This is especially since the question asked in that text, ‘How do people make history under conditions designed to dissuade them from intervening it?’, seems particularly apposite for the epoch of the (dis)integrated spectacle. See pp. 56-8 of this dissertation for more on ‘Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy’.

a failed attempt to articulate a politics adequate to the austere severity of his diagnosis of the time. But his is a legacy that deserves its own *What is to be Done?*.⁷²⁷ As I suggested in the close of the second chapter, Debord's texts are not simply written for him to publically register his disgust with the contemporary world and to self-aggrandise; they must be read as political manifestos. With a book like *Society of the Spectacle*, this is obvious, but it is less clear in the case of *Comments* or *Panegyric*. In *Comments*, this is partially because the book is ostensibly written for such a small audience – Debord claims that his readership consists of a group of fifty or sixty interested elites – and partially because the political subject it posits is a group within society's upper echelon. My argument is that this is one of the book's many feints, and that like Machiavelli's *The Prince* – a book that Gramsci and Althusser, among others, have claimed is written for the masses rather than a prince – the audience Debord is addressing and interpellating is actually much larger.

'The fact is', according to Jappe, 'that the last of Debord's works are by no means concerned with the struggle between masses in revolt and the spectacle but rather with the imbecility of a world where everyone has succumbed to the spectacle's tyranny.'⁷²⁸ It is clear, however, that Debord does not think that *everyone* has succumbed to the spectacle's tyranny. As he insists time and time again, he did not.⁷²⁹ He lived the entirety of his adult life in opposition to the spectacle. A year after *Comments*, Debord published his autobiographical *Panegyric*, which is a testament to and a celebration of a life lived joyously during the reign of the spectacle. In a cynical reading, this opposition is just a reflection of Debord's rampant megalomania, but in a more open reading, Debord can be seen as consciously bolstering his own legend –

⁷²⁷ Balakrishnan, *Antagonistics*, p. 95.

⁷²⁸ Jappe, *Guy Debord*, p. 123.

⁷²⁹ Although he seems to suggest in *Panegyric* that no one else did: 'Has even one other person dared to behave like me, in this era?' Debord, *Panegyric*, p. 16.

not simply so his greatness will be remembered for posterity, but as an example of what can be accomplished, the life one can live, without engaging the spectacle on its own terms. As he writes early in the text, giving a precise account of the life he lived ‘will be perhaps even more precious now, in an era when so many things have been changed at the astounding speed of catastrophes, in an era about which one can say that almost every point of reference and comparison has suddenly been swept away, along with the very ground on which the old society was built’.⁷³⁰ This reading reverses Kaufmann’s claim that all of Debord’s texts are essentially autobiographical and argues that Debord’s most autobiographical texts are in fact written as political tracts. They are meant to be exemplary in that Debord offers his life as evidence that one can live a fulfilling life in, and against, the spectacle. As such they are as much a catalogue of the things Debord refused – to appear on television, to accept an academic position, to pursue a career, to become a fully functioning member of spectacular society – as they are an insight into the life he actually lead.

Even if we read *Comments* and *Panegyric* as veiled manifestos and acknowledge that they are more optimistic than they might appear, it is difficult to ascertain what kind of politics Debord feels are necessary or possible, besides a vague form of lifestyle politics based on being truculent. As TJ Clark has written, it is obvious that ‘in Debord’s case politics was largely *writing*’.⁷³¹ In addition to works like *Society of the Spectacle* and *Comments*, Situationist and post-Situationist texts like ‘On Poverty of Student Life’ and later *The Real Report on the Last Change to Save Capitalism* were meant to explode into their contexts, in considerably different ways. Debord’s texts were always written strategically. As Agamben reports, ‘Once, when I was tempted (as I still am) to consider Guy Debord a philosopher, he told me:

⁷³⁰ Debord, *Panegyric*, p. 6.

⁷³¹ TJ Clark, ‘Foreword’ to Jappe, *Guy Debord*, p. vii.

“I’m not a philosopher, I’m a strategist.” Debord saw his time as an incessant war that engaged his entire life in a strategy.⁷³² What strategy was Debord practicing in these later texts? Alex Galloway attacks Debord for sitting in his rural villa playing board games and writing while Italian radicals were kidnapping politicians, throwing Molotov cocktails, and sitting in jail cells, which is a strange accusation in the sense that Galloway also acknowledges that Debord considered such activity to be meaningless at best, and at worst play perfectly into the hands of the state. Since Debord felt the story of terrorism is written by the state, it wouldn’t have made sense for him to try to play the villain in a Licio Gelli (or whoever) production.

The question of the political use-value of Debord is nevertheless a valid one. What these later texts lack is anything that might link the critique of the society of the spectacle with any sort of collective political agency or project. While it is debatable if this is because Debord felt that there was no longer any possibility of a mass movement combating the spectacle, the notion that one can still live a good life amongst so much mediocrity and mendacity suggests not. Quite simply, if one person is able to do so, others can as well, and then collaborations can emerge.⁷³³ The lessons of the Situationist International are exemplary in this regard. McKenzie Wark writes in his introduction to Debord’s first volume of *Correspondence*, ‘One makes a movement with what one has,’ and the fact that Debord and company were able to create an international organisation that has had such a lasting influence with such modest means and experience is remarkable.⁷³⁴ It is productive to think of Debord’s

⁷³² Giorgio Agamben, ‘Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord’s Films’, *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, p. 313.

⁷³³ The discussions linking the Tarnac 9, Tiquun and the Invisible Committee to the legacy of the Situationists are very relevant here. See The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2009); Alberto Toscano, ‘The War Against Pre-Terrorism: The Tarnac 9 and *The Coming Insurrection*’, *Radical Philosophy* (March/April 2009); Patrick Marcolini, ‘Situationist Inheritors: Julien Coupat, Tiquun and *The Coming Insurrection*’, *Not Bored*, trans. Not Bored (May 2009), Available online at: <<http://www.notbored.org/situationist-inheritors.html>>.

⁷³⁴ Debord, *Correspondence*, p. 7.

claim from the beginning of *Comments*, that the text is being read by 25 to 30 enemies of the spectacle, in relation to the fact that the SI was founded by eight individuals and only had 70 members in total over its 15 year existence.

Worth considering too is the notion that the integrated spectacle is so dominant that it has completely subsumed society, totally decimating all hopes of resistance. This narrative is compatible with the reading of *Comments* as a lonely, hopeless book. Illuminating in this regard is an image from *Panegyric*'s second volume of the isolated farmhouse in Champot, France where Debord spent most of the final years of his life. There is a tendency, encouraged by Debord to a large extent, to think that he was able to remain an 'angel of purity' only by exiling himself from the spectacle: by living in a farmhouse deep in the provinces without television or radio and only old books for company.⁷³⁵ Under this image, however, is a quote from Max Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own* (1845): 'As little as *we* can be declared clear of every coercion in the world, so little can our writing be withdrawn from it. But as free as we are, so free can we make it too.'⁷³⁶ This is taken from a passage in Stirner's book on the freedom of the press where he argues that freedom is not something merely granted by the state; rather, everyone must struggle to free themselves of their reliance on morality, religion, ideology and respect for the law and assert their own ego and perspective.⁷³⁷ What this suggests is both that Debord realised that even in exile one is not completely free from the coercion of the spectacle, and also that one can free oneself from these coercions, at least to an extent, and that this can be reflected in one's writing, relationships, and associations. The rural farmhouse becomes a symbol of the struggle of Debord (and his wife, Alice Becker-Ho) to avoid

⁷³⁵ See Vincent Kauffman, 'Angels of Purity', *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, pp. 285-312.

⁷³⁶ Debord, *Panegyric*, p. 141.

⁷³⁷ See Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, trans. Steven Byington (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 190-5. Quote is on p. 190, emphasis in original.

the contagion of the spectacle while the caption accepts that this struggle is collective and never-ending.

The relationship that Debord had late in his life with the dominant culture was certainly complex, although his decision to partake in the production of Brigitte Cornand's film for Canal Plus, *Guy Debord, son art et son temps* (1995), means he must have felt some form of inclusion in the spectacle would not be completely corrupting or futile. This can also be seen by looking at the correspondence from the early days of the SI, where it is clear that they were concerned with creating a legend around the group from the very beginning.⁷³⁸ One can certainly argue that they were following a certain spectacular logic of publicity, but it is more productive to think about how the SI's praxis reflects back on to the theory of the spectacle and particularly its 'totalising closure'. In the 1964 text in which they famously proclaim to have created the best plan for 'getting out of the twentieth century,' the Situationists write, 'The path of total police-state control over all human activities and the path of unlimited free creation of all human activities are one: it is the same path of modern discoveries. We are necessarily on the same path as our enemies – most often preceding them – but we must be there, without any confusion, *as enemies*. The best player will win.'⁷³⁹ This was not just a direct competition, as the Situationists also realised that their work would be recuperated by and incorporated into the very society they were combating. This perspective still exists in Debord's later texts. In *Comments* he ridicules an article in *Le Monde* from 1987 where the writer claims, 'That modern society is a society of the spectacle now goes without saying. [...] What is so droll is that all the books which do analyse this phenomenon, usually to deplore

⁷³⁸ See Kinkle, Review, *Historical Materialism* (18.1, 2010), pp. 164-77.

⁷³⁹ 'Now, The S.I.', *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 175-6.

it, cannot but join the spectacle if they're to get attention.'⁷⁴⁰ The notion that Debord, or the Situationists, in any way thought they managed to escape the spectacle is absurd – their work was always destined to be recuperated, its results commodified.

The myth of autonomy from and distance to the spectacle maintained by the SI has always been a legend, functional in the sense that the aura of radical purity contributed to turning their theory into one of the most 'commercially successful "memes" or "brands" of the past half-century, for better or for worse,' according to Steve Shaviro.⁷⁴¹ Today, however, this legend has perhaps outlived its usefulness as it is preventing an honest appraisal of Situationist theory and practice. Because of this, in opposition to Debord's occasional faux-aristocratic snobbery, where he pines for a prelapsarian era of jovial pubs, organic tomatoes, and meaningful conversation, perhaps a better attitude is that of Felix Guattari, who uses a giddy octopus dancing in the polluted waters of Marseille as a mascot.⁷⁴² The damage that has already been done and the dangers faced are palpable, but a fascination remains – there is a need to immerse oneself in this degraded utopia. 'Men resemble their times more than their fathers' as Debord claims, quoting a 14th century Arab poem, and just as Guattari's octopus shrivelled up and died within seconds of being placed in a tank of clean seawater, any attempt to return to a less despoiled perspective by artists, activists, or theorists would be pathetic.

While I have speculated on Debord's motives and overall writing strategy at various points in this dissertation, there is a sense that one – in a manner similar the member of the US intelligence services calling himself 'Stability' who admitted that the whole Israeli 'art student' affair is probably a decoy meant to cover up some other

⁷⁴⁰ Debord, *Comments* p. 5.

⁷⁴¹ See Shaviro, 'Michael Jackson'. This is a questionable claim, perhaps drastically exaggerating the fame of the Situationist brand, but Shaviro's point is taken.

⁷⁴² Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. By Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (Continuum, 2008), p. 28-9.

unknown operation – quite simply has to claim that Debord’s motivations will remain obscure, and that this is an intentional part of the strategy being employed. It is remarkable, and could be considered a testament to either the success of his strategy or his opacity, that after so many texts being dedicated to Debord, his life and theory remain so obfuscated. Despite the claims to the contrary, Debord was a theorist who over the course of his career was more fascinated by the clandestine operations of the intelligence services than the vapid smiles of celebrity politicians and their campaigns, more dedicated to developing creative ways to engage the spectacle than finding a less contaminated haven on its edges, and more interested in the spectacle’s dark underbelly than its gleaming surface. A simple acknowledgement of his later work would contribute to a more complex conception of Debord and his work than the one that is prevalent within Cultural Studies. While much of Debord’s theory of the spectacle is not as forceful as it was when it was first being articulated approximately fifty years ago, his later reflections on the integrated spectacle are as complex and challenging as they are relevant to considering the historical period in which we are still caught.

Even if many of Debord’s strategies and motivations will remain mysterious, what is clear is that Debord thought the world had changed dramatically over the course of his life and that the old categories, strategies and theories that may have been valid in the fifties or sixties were no longer valid in the eighties, never mind the 21st century. The penultimate chapter of *Comments* begins with a consideration of how the French Revolution brought about changes in the art of war across the European continent. One of these, the development of independent fire, was discovered inadvertently as the new masses of French soldiers were incapable of firing in line on command. Independent fire turned out to be considerably more

deadly than the conventional forms of fire and Debord says it was the most decisive factor in the period's military engagements. Despite the fact that this had been demonstrated conclusively in battle time and time again, military theorists were still debating its effectiveness into the following century. This situation, he claims, is analogous to the relationship people today have to the society of the spectacle: 'the establishment of spectacular domination is such a profound social transformation that it has radically altered the art of government. This simplification, which has quickly borne such fruit in practice, has yet to be fully comprehended in theory'.⁷⁴³ This is true across the board, according to Debord. It is as true for artists as it is for statesmen, as true for revolutionaries as it is for the security services, as true for academics as it is for advertising executives. 'Not only are the subjected led to believe that to all intents and purposes they are still living in a world which in fact has been eliminated,' he continues, 'but the rulers themselves sometimes suffer from the absurd belief that in some respects they do too'.⁷⁴⁴ Understanding this new reality and being able to devise strategies for operating in it effectively is thus a primary concern. Debord's late theory, in its effort to lay out the consequences of spectacular domination, is essentially concerned with comprehending them on behalf of his most avid readers: inevitably, those who defend the society of the spectacle, but most of all, those who seek to destroy it.

⁷⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 86.

⁷⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

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