## Notes on Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle

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- 1. 1967: consumer society; France rebuilt after WWII. Beginning of attention to the media. NB that the spectacle is not just mass media. #4: spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation between people mediated by images. In other words, the spectacle is like Gramsci's "hegemony," a New Left, Western Marxism way of discussing real subsumption: culture (as preparation for and reinforcement of patterns of consumption) must now be discussed, in primary relation to production, not just as reflection of production (Old Left economism). Everyday life. Relation with Lefebvre.
- 2. Debord as part of the Situationists. Provocateurs who wanted to unleash desires to emphasize that survival was productionist ideology. Inheritors of Dada and surrealism. For SI, survival was real threat to workers in 19th C, but now was assuaged due to Ford/Keynes/Modernist safety net/welfare state. NB the question of lack is important. For DG (following Bataille), lack is always socially produced, as way of effecting channeling of surplus into a society's preferred mode of waste / anti-production / glorious expenditure / potlatch, etc. Some on the left think lack was real / natural at one point and only recently (with capitalism) overcome. On either reading, the left agrees that now capitalism must manufacture lack in order to workers survival and hence coerce wage labor. One way to read the shift from modern to postmodern is to say that today the American state has discovered ways to use lack again for discipline (fear of homelessness). The French people are resisting this attack on the welfare state.
- 3. Separation = alienation. Complex genealogy here. Marx in 1844 manuscripts used Hegelian scheme of master / slave. Worker objectifies himself in changing the world. Recognition of this effectiveness brings consciousness. (Self-consciousness through struggle with owners.) Objectification is thus positive. Under capitalism, the worker cannot recognize his effectiveness because of division of labor and separation from end product (could be sold anywhere in the world: Marx as globalization theorist). Thus the worker is alienated from his labor (it no longer helps him recognize his effectiveness in changing the world), which he simply sells as a commodity on the labor market. For Debord, alienation has migrated from production and labor to consumption and everyday life. Now our very "enjoyments" are commodified and sold to us. We are thus reduced to

to consumption and everyday life. Now our very "enjoyments" are commodified and sold to us. We are thus reduced to spectators of our own lives: we prevision our leisure time, which is planned for us and sold to us. We are told that if we buy X, we will be happy, just like the beautiful people who also use X. There's then the odd feeling of checking to see whether

experience we're buying is really the experience we were promised. In fact the question arises as to whose experience this really is: is it me, or is it me-becoming-X?. This remove is what Debord calls the spectacle.

- 4. Immediacy. Debord critiques all mediation and representation: political and social. Hence he is anti-party and proworker councils. He is against all waiting for objective situations to ripen. Hence he is against Marxist economism and avant-garde parties, etc. For Debord, it's all about revolutionary practice, not a "scientific" (i.e., contemplative) theory. He demands that we be able to form our own situations (relation here to Sartre). It's all about the proletariat achieving class consciousness and becoming the subject of history (Lukacs). Debord changes definition of proletariat from industrial workers to all those who have to take orders, who cannot create their own situations due to threat to "survival" (the increasing needs inculcated by capitalist culture as way of creating new markets to solve overproduction / underconsumption result in a chase after an "augmented survival"). Either way, real survival or augmented survival, we are alienated, as we have no control. We have choices of products, but no control over the production process.
- 5. Total critique. Debord holds capitalism responsible for all forms of alienation. There is thus no healthy, natural, positive, objectification as in 1844 Marx and older Lukacs. Sadie Plant (*The Most Radical Gesture*, Routledge, 1992) says this is tactical response to real subsumption phase in which it is increasingly difficult if not impossible to discern the natural. Here we see interesting connection with Baudrillard and hyper-reality thesis. The difference is that Debord says we must aim at immediacy as our critical tool in a total critique of capitalist society whereas Baudrillard says that's a chimera. In the demand to create our own situations Debord still has a notion of separation, but thinks this cannot be expressed in capitalist language, Plant claims.
- 6. Connection with DG. Positive in sense of unleashing desires and critique of survival and manufactured lack (either biological or social / prestige "augmented survival"). Negative in that Debord has no theory of production of subjectivity, nor does he have a naturalized sense of humans as part of material nature.