

Rethinking the Spectacle

Guy Debord, Radical
Democracy, and the Digital Age

Devin Penner



UBCPress · Vancouver · Toronto

Sample Material © UBC Press

Contents

Acknowledgments / vii

Introduction / 3

1 The Spectacle in Theory: Debord's Conception and Beyond / 20

2 Practical Implications: From the Situationist International to
Autonomist Marxism / 47

3 Rethinking the Spectacle 1: Lessons from the Situationist
International / 73

4 Rethinking the Spectacle 2: Toward a Radically Democratic
Approach / 104

5 The Spectacular Politics of the 2011 Occupy Movement / 146

Conclusion / 182

Notes / 187

Bibliography / 218

Index / 236

Introduction

French Marxist Guy Debord once characterized modern society as the “society of the spectacle,” most notably in a 1967 book by the same title.¹ Witnessing the rise of advertising and electronic mass media, his intention was to criticize the way the appearance form of commodities – the properties of objects most prone to cosmetic manipulation – had come to dominate people’s everyday lives under twentieth-century capitalism. As he wrote, paraphrasing Marx, “The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*.”²

As images are rapidly transmitted around the world thanks to the enormous advances in communications technology that have occurred over the past few decades, it is difficult to disagree with Debord’s claim today. Advertising and other mass-media images now mediate our social interactions to a greater extent than ever before. It does not take a trip to Times Square to feel surrounded by distracting visual displays. Ads are plastered to the steps at subway stations, and onto the fibreglass boards at local hockey arenas, and stare you in the face whenever you use a public washroom. Meanwhile, the development of wireless technology means that one can religiously check the stock ticker or news headlines on the internet, regardless of location, and use iPods and iPhones to spend one’s commute immersed in movies and games rather than reading, socializing, or people-watching. In light of such media saturation, with people spending more and more time in

one-way interactions with screens, it is easy to see why Tael Harper argues that a “new kind of citizen” has developed over the past half-century or so: the *homo spectaculum* or “being of the spectacle.”³

This is by no means intended as an anti-technology rant. The point is that “left-wing” politics can in no way claim to be immune from the demands of the society of the spectacle. Rather, it must come to terms with this situation and examine how the various media of the modern spectacle can be turned toward the egalitarian goals of social justice and radical democracy. Such a task is by no means a simple one. As Stephen Duncombe puts it in one of the few efforts to develop an alternative, participatory conception of spectacle, “spectacle, by tradition, is antidemocratic. It is created by the few to be followed by the many.”⁴ Well-designed spectacles – including media portrayals, advertising, and other cultural conduits – are today being used to draw attention and support to potentially worthy causes. However, they do so by shocking, overwhelming, or even deceiving viewers. Thus, the importance of spectacles in modern society poses a dilemma for left-wing organizations: democratic politics requires an *active and informed* political agent, yet, as Debord makes clear, spectacles are in many ways based on *eliciting irrational responses* from an otherwise passive and conditioned audience.

The purpose of this work is to examine this tension between spectacles and political agency in today’s hypermediated digital society. More specifically, it uses the ideas and practices of Debord and the Situationist International (SI) as a point of departure to reflect on the potential uses of new communications technology by left-wing organizations and social movements. While the underlying assumption here is that spectacles have become a crucial source of political agency – that it is not possible today to rely on the rational self-interest of the working class, as Marxism suggests – not all spectacles are made equal. So how can spectacles be made compatible with the demands of radical democracy? How can the inherently deceptive, irrational, and affective dimensions of spectacle be reconciled with the need for an active political agent engaged in a critical questioning of and dialogue about the world?

Bringing together ideas of the Situationists and a certain strand of radical democratic theory, my argument is that spectacles are a necessary means to persuade, prod, and mobilize the public to support egalitarian causes; however, a spectacle will succeed in promoting radical political agency only if it is closely connected to longer-term processes – to democratic institutions and organizations in which members of the public can actively and continuously agree to disagree. Otherwise, the initial exuberance of the “audience”

will eventually wane, while the pragmatic need to attract attention and to persuade will take precedence over the development of democratic capacities. To put it simply, a radically democratic conception of a spectacle requires thinking about it in much wider terms, as involving not just the images and messages themselves but also the processes whereby they are produced and the contexts in which they are received.

Why the Spectacle? Why the Situationist International?

A key task of this work is to think about spectacles in terms of theories of organization and leadership. Guy Debord and the Situationist International provide a unique entry point into this discussion because of the way they conceived themselves as a part of the “revolutionary avant-garde.”⁵ The Situationists clearly embrace Marx’s emphasis on the unity of theory and practice,⁶ as is reflected in their continuous efforts to connect their abstract theoretical insights to their own practical efforts to organize and change society. The concepts of “the situation” and “détournement,” for example, represent ways to spur people to step past the narrow patterns and pressures of modern society. The use of the term “spurring” here is quite deliberate, as it reflects the political role the SI saw for itself: its self-described task was to create “situations” that would induce emotional responses and reflection among the people, not to provide a ready-made leadership and program for a new type of society. As the SI put it in a 1963 article: “*We will only organize the detonation: the free explosion must escape us and any other control forever.*”⁷

This is not to suggest that the Situationist conception of avant-garde leadership is unproblematic. Situationist ideas and practice have a number of important internal contradictions, which this work will explore and attempt to resolve by bringing in thinkers such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Hannah Arendt. These contradictions are worth exploring because they illuminate the challenges of developing non-vanguardist notions of leadership and organization. Moreover, as [Chapter 3](#) argues, the Situationist ethos of “play” provides an approach to addressing such challenges: there is a playful dimension to practical concepts such as the situation, one that recognizes the confrontational, conflictual, and indeterminate nature of politics and helps us think through the practice of radical democracy.

Setting aside the practical orientation of the Situationists, Debord’s ideas remain an interesting entry point to thinking about radical politics today for reasons related to the historical context in which they emerged. Writing in

the 1960s, at a time when the Fordist welfare state was being consolidated, Debord focused on what Henri Lefebvre called the terrain of “everyday life.” Lefebvre, a prominent French Marxist who was in direct contact with Debord and many other Situationists, used the early Marx’s concept of “alienation” as the point of departure for his dialectical analysis of modern society. His aim was to reconcile the fragmented individual of capitalist society with their essence as a human being or to recover the “*total man*.”⁸ This project no doubt involved moving beyond the narrow bounds of the workplace, as well as the dogmatic and reductionist preoccupation with economic “laws” that characterized Second International and Stalinist Marxism. Lefebvre’s solution was to redefine Marxism as a “*critical knowledge of everyday life*,” with “everyday” referring to “what is left over’ after all distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities have been singled out.”⁹ Or, as he puts it elsewhere, “everydayness” is a common denominator tying together the apparently distinct experiences – from work to housing to fashion – that individuals repeatedly experience while living under capitalism.¹⁰ It includes the workplace, which is the primary site of exploitation and capitalist social relations, but goes beyond it to include the countless activities necessary to reproduce these relations, including leisure, consumption, and biological reproduction.

As working-class living standards improved in the postwar period, owing to cheaper commodities and increasing wages, Lefebvre’s turn to everyday life became not just useful but necessary. No longer did the polarization of classes into “two great hostile camps,” the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, seem as inevitable as Marx suggested in the *Communist Manifesto*.¹¹ And no longer did it seem that an “accumulation of misery [is] a necessary condition ... to the accumulation of wealth,” as Marx’s “*absolute general law of capitalist accumulation*” suggested.¹² To be sure, relative inequalities persisted, and many of Marx’s other insights about the demise of human capacities under capitalism remained valid, confirmed in the first instance by the dull tedium of assembly-line production. More importantly, however, some clear questions emerged in the postwar period about the quality of everyday life under capitalism. These shifts in the quality of life were aptly summarized by Lefebvre in his later description of the postwar world as the “bureaucratic society of controlled consumption” – a highly regimented and banal lifestyle.¹³

The idea of “controlled consumption” leads to a second point that more directly indicates the significance of Situationist ideas, both for the 1960s and for today. For the ability to “control” consumption was bolstered by

technological changes – in particular, by advances in communications technology. Indeed, the concept of the spectacle was a response to the climax of what conservative historian Daniel Boorstin in 1961 dubbed the “Graphic Revolution.” Between the development of photography in the mid-eighteenth century and the invention of television around 1940, Boorstin claims, the “ability to make, preserve, transmit, and disseminate precise images ... grew at a fantastic pace.” Consequently, by the 1960s a significant proportion of lived experience consisted of second-hand reports – what Boorstin calls “pseudo-events” – which are fake in the sense that they are deliberately concocted, usually for purposes of commercial profit.¹⁴

Boorstin’s analysis remains just as relevant today, if not more so. Consider one of his claims in light of what many would now see as the substance-deprived, image-centred nature of modern party politics: whereas individuals once *achieved* greatness, now the great are “those who [hire] public relations and press secretaries to make themselves look great.”¹⁵ In a time when the Canadian prime minister, Justin Trudeau, has developed a rock-star image through elaborately staged photo-ops,¹⁶ it is easy to make the case today that what matters most is how something is made to appear, not the context behind a statement or action. Similarly, US president Donald Trump, while not as clearly accepting of professional advice, constantly reminds the American public of his personal “success” and based his campaign largely on mass rallies and incendiary tweets, using “daily spectacles of political attack” to continually capture media attention.¹⁷ Despite its failings in some areas, Debord’s concept of the spectacle rightly highlights this shift to appearances, a shift that was initiated with the rise of television and that has only speeded up with more recent technological innovations such as the internet and social media.

Oppositional Politics and the Spectacle

That challengers to the status quo must engage on the terrain of the spectacle has been clearly recognized by recent movements such as Occupy Wall Street, Idle No More, and Black Lives Matter. The need to engage on the terrain of spectacle has also been clearly recognized in contemporary critical theory, one striking example being Jean Baudrillard’s post-structuralist analysis of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The gravity of those attacks, he claims, was to be found not in the number of casualties but in their “symbolic impact.” Above all, 9/11 “assimilated everything of modernity and globalism” in order to

battle the seeming pinnacle and guardian of Western values, the United States. The media were key players in the process, as weapons of the “dominant power” made to serve its enemies by virtue of their efficient and global reach.¹⁸ Thus, the “terrorists exploited the ‘real time’ of images,” using their instantaneous transmission to give the event “unprecedented impact, but impact as image-event.” The result was a “highly symbolic weapon” whose “destructive potential [was] multiplied to infinity” – the reason Baudrillard dubbed the attack the “absolute, irrevocable event.”¹⁹

Of course, 9/11 is a bad example because both its means and its goals are unacceptable from a radical democratic perspective. Even so, it demonstrates how traditional forms of resistance appear to be outdated in a capitalist system that is increasingly based on the production and global dissemination of knowledge and information, which can be transmitted across borders with near impunity. In fact, there are noticeable parallels between Baudrillard’s analysis and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s much-discussed revolutionary manifesto, *Empire*.

The thrust of Hardt and Negri’s argument is precisely that Marxist categories need to be reformulated because the world has passed into an entirely new paradigm – a centre-less, global capitalist system they call “Empire.” Hardt and Negri thus claim to be writing “a new chapter of *Das Capital*,” one that “Marx could not write because the world that he analyzed did not allow him.”²⁰ The appropriate form for radical resistance has changed as well, shifting from traditional models such as unions and political parties toward a decentralized “network” model. In Hardt and Negri’s view, globalization has reduced the power of the state and new technologies are facilitating communication between geographically dispersed individuals and groups. This leads them to argue that (as Baudrillard implies) the most effective resistance will replicate Empire, though here the “nonhierarchical and noncentered network structure” of the internet is intended to preserve the localized *and* mass character of radical action: by promoting the global transmission of spontaneous spectacles, Hardt and Negri are able to elude thorny questions regarding the relationship between organizational leadership and mass participation.²¹

The position put forward in the present work is skeptical of the network model of organization advocated by Hardt and Negri – which is very similar to the “new social movement” model – for reasons that will be offered in [Chapter 2](#). Baudrillard, as well as Hardt and Negri, are right to recognize the need to re-evaluate radical practice in our “hypermediated” world, but their proposals are flawed, attached as they are to a purely evental, spontaneous

notion of politics. To put it briefly, the network model gives significant autonomy to various groups (or “nodes”) to create their own spectacles, but there is little to ensure that a group’s actions are not at cross-purposes with the actions of another group. In other words, the decentralized model effectively rules out any practical or ethical discussion about using the spectacle to create and mobilize collective awareness. What is necessary, then, is to determine how and on what basis radicals can decide which spectacles are permissible, despite their deceptive qualities, and which are not. In other words, the question is: How can organizations mobilize the public while avoiding the twin evils of either excessive centralization, where consensus is imposed at the expense of democracy, and excessive decentralization, where all spectacular “means” are permissible so long as the “end” is correct?

The “End” of Radical Politics?

As should be clear by now, this book is about “left” politics, by which I mean a broadly egalitarian and democratic politics. However, it is arguing for a “radical” approach to left politics, as is apparent in the term “radical political agency.” But what exactly does this mean? The infamous Marxist answer would be that radical agency means “class consciousness,” though there is considerable debate as to what this implies and how it is to be attained. Against Lenin’s infamous claim that class consciousness comes “from without” or from the “revolutionary socialist intelligentsia,”²² Guy Debord follows Marx in suggesting that revolution requires proletarian self-emancipation.²³ As he puts it, it is necessary that “workers become dialecticians,” or purveyors of Marx’s method for understanding social reality.²⁴ According to this view, “class consciousness” will be achieved only when workers are able to organize themselves and discern the true nature of the capitalist system.

Debord’s ideas are certainly an advance beyond the elitist and anti-democratic tendencies of Lenin’s formulation, though there are tensions within Debord’s thought as well. Above all, there is the question of whether the political “truth” the workers are supposed to discover through the dialectical method is singular or plural. By singular, I mean that workers are to become what Georg Lukács called the “identical subject-object of history,”²⁵ discovering concretely the abstract categories and consciousness derived *for them* by Marxist intellectuals. In contrast, the word “plural” should not be understood here in relativistic sense, but rather as stressing what Theodor Adorno calls the “non-identity” of subject and object:²⁶ because a concept can never fully grasp its object, it is necessary to focus more explicitly on

whatever it is that workers actually learn through critical reflection on their own concrete experience. At issue here is the relationship between theory and practice, a question that will arise throughout this work. In general, [Chapter 2](#) will suggest that Debord leans toward the former pole – the singular truth of Marxist theory – while [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#) attempt to push Debord's concepts toward the latter – non-identity, democratic practice, and concrete experience – by highlighting the Situationist notion of play and using the work of Bakhtin and Arendt.

To put it another way, this book appropriates Debord and the Situationists to enhance our understanding of the theory and practice of radical democracy. I say “appropriates” because I will be using tendencies in Debord's thought in ways he would not completely agree with. For one, Debord's thought is avowedly class-centric, though his definition of “class” is relatively broad and subjective, as hinted at above. There are good reasons why the impact of class cannot be ignored in a capitalist society, and capitalism will continue to generate resistance because of the inequalities it produces; but this need not suggest that workers are the privileged agents of change and that class should be a primary locus of identification. People experience domination and oppression in different ways, and the by no means unique view here is that it is problematic to make blanket statements telling people that their experience of oppression was not the “right” one. Ultimately, the claim that anyone who is not anti-capitalist is lacking a true and proper revolutionary consciousness is dismissive and counterproductive. Resistance to the various inequalities and injustices in our society emerges from many different sources, and we cannot predict ahead of time what these will be or what the resulting project will or should look like. Moreover, abolishing capitalism and class division will not magically lead to an egalitarian and democratic society, one without exclusions or divisions. This wrong-headed idea follows from a certain anti-political tendency within Marxism, where politics is reduced to the mere means to the end of a “true” communist society – as Friedrich Engels put it in one of Marxism's especially anti-political moments, “the government of persons is replaced by the administration of things” after class domination is eradicated.²⁷

Unwilling to instrumentally subordinate means to the revolutionary end, the primary commitment of this book is to radical conceptions of democracy and politics. As Jacques Rancière argues, these conceptions are radical and egalitarian in that they continually buck against attempts to assign people to places and roles by determining who can and cannot speak and what can and cannot be said.²⁸ Implicit in this statement is an assertion of a

specific strand of radical democratic thinking. As has been set out in a number of works,²⁹ there are two main traditions in radical democratic theory: a deliberative one most commonly associated with Jürgen Habermas; and an agonistic one associated with the work of Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Bonnie Honig, William Connolly, and Jacques Rancière, among others. It is important to bear in mind that these traditions are competing approaches to *radical* democracy – approaches that have more in common with one another than they do with liberal democracy. As Adrian Little and Moya Lloyd point out, both deliberative and agonistic theories reject abstract liberal conceptions of rights and focus on the ways in which power inequalities undermine democratic participation.³⁰ But there are also some crucial differences between the two approaches, with the most fundamental of these related to their respective views of reason, consensus, and division.

Deliberative democracy is premised on reasoned debate, which leads to considered and consensual judgment. This is illustrated well in Habermas's theory of communicative action. If communicative power inequalities are removed, and there is space to debunk empty rhetoric, all we are left with is the "force of the better argument." In this situation of "communicative rationality" (as opposed to "instrumental rationality"), the discussion moves toward mutual understanding and rational consensus: it makes possible the "unconstrained, unifying, consensus-bringing force of argumentative speech, in which different participants overcome their merely subjective views."³¹ What follows is that divisions and conflict are seen as empirical obstacles to be removed. Since humans are imperfect creatures who cannot live up to the ideal of communicative rationality, it will not always be possible to reach consensus.³² But better deliberative techniques can minimize these problems, which is why so much work by deliberate democrats is focused on questions about "the appropriate institutional design" (to quote deliberativist James Fishkin).³³ The theory's foundation remains the idea that, if the proper techniques are in place, anyone can become the universal, rational citizen who is necessary for a correct, consensual outcome to be possible.

Agonistic democrats are highly suspicious of the deliberative emphasis on mutual understanding and consensus, which in their view homogenize human plurality and exclude the unpredictable and irrational aspects of the human will.³⁴ As Jacques Rancière argues, consensus requires the existence of a certain "regime of the perceptible," a "system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and

positions within it.” This “apportionment of parts and positions,” he continues, defines how actors may appear in the political realm as well as a way of seeing that will form the basis of political discussion: it is “a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution.”³⁵

The important point that Rancière makes is that consensus will be unattainable unless certain narrowly determined parameters are placed around the discussion. Those involved must be talking about the same object, for instance, and have relatively similar (i.e., “reasonable” and non-incommensurable) interpretations of it; also, each party must understand his or her role in the affair and the rigid rules of the game. Habermas acknowledges as much, asserting that “the critique of value standards presupposes a shared pre-understanding among participants in the argument, a pre-understanding that is not at their disposal but constitutes and at the same time circumscribes the domain of the thematized validity claims.”³⁶ Here Habermas is thinking especially about matters such as tastes or aesthetics, which he argues are rooted in local cultural values and therefore cannot lead to a rational universal consensus in the same way as cognitive, moral, or symbolic expressions. But what if the division between aesthetics and politics were not as clear as Habermas suggests? Then disagreement and dissensus would have to be at the core of politics because no “shared pre-understanding” would be possible, only conflicting and often contradictory interpretations. To put it another way, agonistic democrats recognize that there will always be a “constitutive outside” (Mouffe from Henry Staten’s reading of Jacques Derrida) – a “part ... who have no part” (Rancière), or a “remainder” (Honig) – which is excluded and miscounted and thus always offers a potential source of creative interruption and political conflict.³⁷ The deliberative privileging of a notion of reason over emotion is just one manifestation of such exclusion, and one that is particularly problematic because it downplays the role that emotion plays in politics and, similarly, that tone, intonation, and style play in communication.

This book is not the place to fully rehash the contours of the deliberative/agonistic democracy debate, a terrain that has been well covered. But there is a certain aspect of this debate that is especially relevant, as becomes clear when we reframe the consciousness question in terms of what Patrick Riley calls the “greatest paradox of all” in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.³⁸ In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau sets out to develop

an alternative to a bourgeois society overrun by private wills and the idea that private vice equals public virtue (to paraphrase Rousseau's contemporary, Bernard Mandeville). But his alternative social contract, which is based on his notion of the "general will," is confronted with the problem of "men as they are": individuals are self-interested at the time of Rousseau's social contract, yet they are expected to cast aside their private wills for the general will – what is best for the community as a whole – immediately after the contract is made. To escape this dilemma, Rousseau simply skips the process, turning instead to a number of anti-democratic measures – from bestowing the power to make laws on a "god-like Legislator" to endorsing censorship and civil religion – in order to ensure the transition from egoistic individuals to public-spirited citizens.³⁹ The homogenizing and consensual orientation of Rousseau's notion of the general will has been rightly criticized, but his evasion of questions of process is equally worrisome – a radical democratic politics must necessarily be, as Barbara Epstein put it, a "prefigurative" politics that serves as a microcosm for a future society.⁴⁰

Deliberative democracy confronts Rousseau's paradox directly, providing a certain notion of process in the form of political education. Unlike voluntary models of democracy, deliberative democrats are specifically concerned with the quality of thought that goes into the citizenry's political positions. In the words of James Fishkin, decisions should not be based on the "uninformed and unreflective preferences commonly found in the mass public." Thus, deliberative democrats focus on techniques for ensuring that proper education and discussion precede decision making, and political decisions are considered valid only to the extent that they follow such techniques.⁴¹ It seems difficult to argue against a theory endorsing education and reflection; however, the problem with the deliberative resolution to Rousseau's paradox is that it presupposes a proper "rational" approach to argumentation as well as a curated set of "comprehensive" educational materials. This approach leaves no room for theorizing spectacles, which are designed in part to play on the audience's emotions and to illicit "irrational" responses. But there is a much more fundamental issue with the deliberative approach: as is touched on in [Chapter 3](#), agonistic democrats rightly warn about the dangers of exclusion lurking behind such determinations of who is and who is not an informed citizen. They also warn that the deliberative reliance on procedures that produce rational discussion would end up minimizing the value of the democratic imaginary, of the people's creative ability to determine the direction

of society without recourse to a principle that structures their activity in advance.⁴²

These criticisms, however, suggest a problem: How are agonistic democrats to replace the deliberative concept of political education? If, as Cornelius Castoriadis suggests, radical democracy requires a people that has democratic capacities and a democratic “spirit” – a willingness to engage in an ongoing collective questioning of existing institutions, norms, and ideas – how are we to move from Rousseau’s narrowly self-interested “men as they are,” who for the most part fulfill the passive role attributed to them in Debord’s “society of the spectacle,” to such a democratic people?⁴³ One answer to this question is provided by Rancière’s idea of the “ignorant school-master” who refuses to divide the world into knowing and ignorant minds – inferior and superior intelligences – but rather works on the student’s *will* to assert their intelligence and thus their equality. As he puts it, “The problem [for the emancipatory master] is to reveal an intelligence to itself.”⁴⁴

From the perspective of radical democracy, it seems appropriate to follow Rancière in rejecting the idea of a *knowing* master who imparts his or her knowledge on “lesser” minds. The presumption of the “equality of intelligence,” the common ability of people to speak and think, should no doubt be the starting point for democratic politics.⁴⁵ But Rancière takes his legitimate concern about one imposing their will on others – what he calls “stultification”⁴⁶ – too far. As a number of critics have pointed out, the result for Rancière is a purely spontaneous notion of politics that dismisses questions regarding institutions, organization, and leadership out of fear that some will speak *for* others in any more permanent forms of political movement.⁴⁷ Rancière’s various writings on politics and aesthetics have a similar anti-organizational orientation. For instance, he rejects “activist” art that tries to subvert the social order, instead proposing a notion of “critical art” that is “not so much a type of art that reveals the forms and contradictions of domination as it is an art that questions its own limits and powers, that refuses to anticipate its own effects.”⁴⁸ As with Umberto Eco’s “open work” (discussed in [Chapter 3](#)), there is a troubling degree of ambiguity to this notion, one that undermines the ability to use aesthetic forms such as spectacles to build political movements. While it is also problematic to have a purely instrumental conception of the relationship between spectacles and politics, where all strategic means are on the table to achieve the desired political end, this book asserts that it is possible to have a stronger notion of leadership and organization that is consistent with agonistic democracy’s emphasis on equality and non-identity.

A Note on Method and Three Caveats

This book is above all a work of “critical theory,” which means it expresses a normative commitment to human emancipation as opposed to the disinterested character of “traditional theory.” Adding a slight twist to this general approach, [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#) shift to what can be dubbed, following Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, a method of thinking in “constellations.” According to Benjamin and Adorno, concepts can never fully grasp phenomena – they can only surround the object, provisionally teaming up with other concepts with the aim of gradually illuminating more and more of it.⁴⁹ With this in mind, [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#) juxtapose Debord’s concepts of the “spectacle,” “situation,” and “détournement” with Bakhtin’s notions of “dialogue,” “polyphony,” “heteroglossia,” “novelistic style,” and authorship, as well as with Arendt’s notions of “natality,” “foundation,” “power,” and “politics,” in order to get a clearer view of what the “object” of a radical spectacle would look like.

This book also frequently appeals to past empirical examples such as the May 1968 student and worker uprising in France, in which the Situationists were heavily involved, but it will primarily discuss more contemporary examples such as the 1999 “Battle of Seattle” protests against the World Trade Organization, the Occupy Wall Street protests, and the more conventional public relations strategies of political parties today. The idea is to demonstrate, in a preliminary fashion, how spectacles have been created by leftist organizations and received by the general public and then to point out some ways in which these two separate acts – creation and reception – could be bridged to create a radical spectacle.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to offer a few caveats about what follows in the next five chapters. Above all, it is important to note that Debord’s writings are not conventional works of political theory. *The Society of the Spectacle*, for example, is a collection of 221 theses, which are much more sweeping and provocative than philosophically rigorous. Vincent Kaufman is right to suggest that the book is primarily an expression of style and “only secondarily a work of theory.”⁵⁰ It certainly cannot be considered a rigorous theoretical work given its breadth – it sweepingly addresses subjects ranging from the history of proletarian organization to how time was experienced in different eras, without discussing any of these in great detail.

Second, this book is primarily focused on the ideas of Guy Debord and the activities of the Situationist International, the organization Debord co-founded and was the *de facto* leader of for its entire fifteen-year

existence. The ideas of other Situationists will occasionally appear, including those of Raoul Vaneigem, René Riesel, René Viénet, and Mustapha Khayati. Unless otherwise noted, however, their ideas are seen as consistent with Debord's ideas and are brought up to complement and extend his analysis. The book also uses editorial notes from *Internationale situationniste (IS)*, the SI's journal. These notes can be treated as though they were authored by Debord: he was the primary editor of *IS*, and a glance through Debord's correspondence with other SI members shows the enormous impact he had on potential *IS* articles, which he was not afraid to solicit, praise, reject, or suggest revisions to.

A final caveat is that the following ideas are written in a North American context and for the most part will not try to move outside of it. At the very most, they will reflect the political situation in advanced capitalist countries: their focus will be on what Debord calls the "diffuse" as opposed to the "concentrated" spectacle, and for the most part references to "the spectacle" can be treated as references to the diffuse spectacle.⁵¹ The difference lies in the degree of separation between the political and economic realms, with the state/bureaucracy directly controlling the economy to a significant extent in former "communist," "developing," and "underdeveloped" countries, while there is at least an apparently free market in advanced capitalist countries. As a result, media corporations, for example, have more autonomy from the state in advanced capitalist countries, and oppositional political parties have, at least theoretically, free access to mass-media outlets. It is this basic context that forms that background for this work, and more specific investigation would be necessary to determine its relevance in other contexts.

Outline of the Work

The chapters of this book are written so that they can be read individually or out of order. There is a broader narrative, however, when they are put together, and it consists of three main parts. The first two chapters provide a critical review of Situationist theory and practice; the next two positively appropriate the Situationist ideas with the most radical democratic potential and then work to reground/refound these by bringing them into contact with the ideas of Bakhtin and Arendt; the final chapter contextualizes these ideas by looking at the more recent case of OWS.

Chapter 1 begins with Debord's renowned theorization of the spectacle, emphasizing its roots in Karl Marx's concept of commodity fetishism.

Besides offering an innovative rendering of Marx's ideas in light of the rise of the welfare state, one of the key merits of Debord's spectacle is that it draws attention to questions about the *form* of communication. It is clear from both Debord's conception and Baudrillard's extension of it that a counter-spectacle cannot just adopt mainstream public relations tactics while delivering a different message, or simply disseminate information through independent media outlets instead of mainstream ones; rather, a counter-spectacle must address questions about the very form of the spectacle. However, Debord's theory has some important limitations, relating in part to its strongly totalizing nature (as pointed out by critical media theorists) and to the direct connection it draws between separation and passivity (as Rancière points out). As [Chapter 3](#) makes clear, these criticisms point us toward Debord's concept of the situation, which is a spectacle if the term is defined in a much more general way than he defines it.

[Chapter 2](#) examines the practical implications of Debord's conception of the spectacle for the organization he co-founded, the SI, and for the action-oriented circles of Autonomist Marxism. Situating the SI in the history of theories of radical organization, the Situationist idea of a "revolutionary avant-garde" organization is presented as an important advance on the vanguard party, but the idea could not reach its full potential because the SI interpreted it in a highly exclusionary way. Fear of being co-opted or "recuperated" by the spectacle led the Situationists to blend, somewhat incoherently, sectarian theoretical purity with a celebration of the democratic potential of workers' councils; this chapter aims to explore the resulting tension. Debord's concept of the spectacle has also been popular within Autonomist Marxism. [Chapter 2](#) will assess in particular the well-known current of Autonomism associated with Hardt and Negri because doing so helps illuminate a potential problem with practical appropriations of Situationist ideas. As mentioned earlier, the spontaneous, event-based construction of counter-spectacles is the essence of radical politics for Hardt and Negri, replacing any real notion of organization or dialogue. The results of Hardt and Negri's argument are particularly disturbing for two reasons. First and most obviously, counter-spectacular events are used as a substitute for mass mobilization and have no necessary connection to the will of the many. Second, without mass mobilization the only way to increase the impact of the counter-spectacle is to perpetually increase the "size" of the event, a logic that could easily suggest that physical violence is the true form of resistance. The argument, in sum, is that neither the SI nor Hardt and Negri's Autonomism can provide an adequate notion of the potential of the

spectacle for radical politics because both are limited by their conception of radical organization.

After critically assessing Situationist theory and practice in the first two chapters, the next two develop an alternative theory that relates spectacles to radically democratic organization and values. Although Debord is not generally considered a radical democratic thinker, [Chapter 3](#) argues that there are tendencies in his thought that lead in this direction, including his notions of the situation, *dérive*, *détournement*, and play. The last of these, the concept of play, is especially important, in that it provides the underlying political ethos for the situation, a “temporary” notion of leadership, and all of Debord’s other practical concepts.

[Chapter 4](#) uses Bakhtin’s dialogism and Arendt’s conception of politics to further establish a foundation on which to ground the playful tendencies of Debord and the Situationists. It focuses on what I call Bakhtin’s aesthetic-dialogic notion of authorship, an idea that is used to supplement Situationist conceptions of avant-garde organization and temporary leadership. This chapter also follows Arendt’s movement from the human condition of plurality to the development of more permanent institutions such as councils and mutual promises that are never absolute but provide the “worldly in-between space” for people to reflect, debate, and act together. I argue that a radical notion of the spectacle must retain this sort of long-term, organizational element in order to create a space for ongoing divisions and debates after the initial emotional encounter with a spectacle or “situation.” Putting everything together, then, [Chapter 4](#) highlights some crucial aspects of Bakhtin’s and Arendt’s thought that allow us to rethink how the spectacle, agency, and organization are all linked in a radical and democratic way. This chapter implicitly assumes that Bakhtin’s and Arendt’s ideas are consistent with agonistic democracy, a position that is relatively novel with regard to the former. Arendt has been associated with the agonistic tendency in radical democracy by a number of scholars;⁵² this connection is considerably less developed in the case of Bakhtin.

To conclude the work, [Chapter 5](#) offers a more detailed look at the 2011 Occupy movement, which began on Wall Street in New York City and spread globally. This relatively short-lived movement is particularly interesting because it encapsulates some of the most creative aspects of a spectacle-based politics while also demonstrating some of its shortcomings. On the one hand, it employed elements of the “new theatrical model of protest” (as Benjamin Shepard puts it) popularized during the anti-globalization movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and relied heavily on social

media networks such as Twitter to mobilize supporters. On the other hand, the dissolution of the Occupy movement was just as rapid as its ascent, confirming the importance of finding ways to translate initial feelings of outrage into sustained yet still passionate public disagreements and debates. While the Occupy movement may not provide the perfect example of a radical spectacle, [Chapter 5](#) will argue that it does offer some important insights into how the one-sided and manipulative tendencies of conventional spectacularized politics can be combated. Of course, because radical democracy necessarily begins from the concrete and is by nature open-ended, no definitive model of a radical spectacle can ever be put forward; however, the example of the Occupy movement will be used to begin to outline some principles of “self-limitation” (to adopt Cornelius Castoriadis’s term) with regard to the production, form, content, and reception of radical spectacles. In other words, even if it is not possible to outline a textbook radical conception of a spectacle, it *is* possible to conceive of ways that the one-sided, hierarchical, and exclusionary nature of modern, professionalized politics might be avoided.

© UBC Press 2019

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without prior written permission of the publisher, or, in Canada, in the case of photocopying or other reprographic copying, a licence from Access Copyright, www.accesscopyright.ca.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Rethinking the spectacle : Guy Debord, radical democracy, and the digital age / Devin Penner.

Names: Penner, Devin, author.

Description: Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 201900766581 | Canadiana (ebook) 20190076690 | ISBN 9780774860505 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780774860529 (PDF) | ISBN 9780774860536 (EPUB) | ISBN 9780774860543 (Kindle)

Subjects: LCSH: Debord, Guy, 1931–1994 – Criticism and interpretation. | LCSH: Internationale situationniste. | LCSH: Spectacular, The – Political aspects. | LCSH: Social movements – Political aspects. | LCSH: Radicalism.

Classification: LCC HN28 P46 2019 | DDC 303.48/4 – dc23

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens
Set in Segoe and Warnock by Apex CoVantage, LLC
Copy editor: Matthew Kudelka
Proofreader: Lauren Cross
Cover designer: Will Brown

UBC Press
The University of British Columbia
2029 West Mall
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2
www.ubcpress.ca