

In 1967, Guy Debord published the text The Society of the Spectacle, a seminal text of the Situationist International which defines and explains the Situationist concept of the Spectacle. Debord's writing along with the pamphlet, written by multiple members of the International including Mustapha Khayati, "On the Poverty of Student Life", influenced the political consciousness of students in Paris in the time leading up to the strikes and occupations of May '68. These Situationist ideas are very clearly prevalent and influential to Jean-Luc Godard's film "La Chinoise" which was released just before May '68, a film that offered up the milieu of communist Parisian students at the time which increased the social unrest.

Guy Debord's work is a series of theses made up of short paragraphs. The first chapter of this text defines the concept of the Spectacle. He states "all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation". At this point in history, of western economic growth at the same time of war and terror in lesser economically developed nations, the propaganda of capitalism must create a conceit for people to be passive and accepting of these contradictions and of their own privileges created by the hierarchical structures of capitalist society. The way that this shows itself is in "reality considered partially unfold[ing] as a pseudo-world apart, an object of mere contemplation". One main method in which this occurs is through media and images. These images and objects of "gazing" create "false consciousness...an official language of generalized separation". But, the Spectacle is not just these images it is "a social relation among people, mediated by images." The effect of the Spectacle is the "unrealism of the real society" It enforces "the empire of modern passivity".

This Spectacle is pushed even further into this unreality and generalized separation when all workers are "separated from his product", how workers never obtain the true value of the

fruits of the labor due to the capitalist labor system. Guy Debord goes on to say “man himself produces all the details of his world with ever increasing power, and thus finds himself ever more separated from his world.” The western economies of the 60s were completely built on the backs of the workers who were then immediately separated from their product while the upper classes gained even more power and wealth. This separation, or dissociation, between a worker and the fruits of their labor enforces the spectacle and thus hierarchy. The worker also is made to believe that the only meaningful part of living is his work and production, he is only how productive he can be and nothing else. Guy Debord says”The more his life is now his product, the more he is separated from his life.”

The spectacle of western dominant culture created and enforced social and economic rules, creating the meaningless and damning hierarchies. The ideas of this dominant culture, white supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia, classism ect., that were developed in the minds of the people of these western societies through media and image manifest themselves into real world circumstances of segregation, misogyny, queer bashing and impersonation ect. The people at the top of this socio-economic hierarchy are reinforced in their superiority through the idolatry they received through media and real world circumstances of privilege and even luxury. All of this creates the sense of unreality Guy Debord speaks of, and the language of separation. With no critical thinking these hierarchies will go unquestioned and people accept the position that they were born into culminating in a mass culture of passivity.

In applying this concept of the spectacle to students Mustapha Khayati, and other members of Situationists International, authored a pamphlet entitled “On the Poverty of Student Life” after situationist students took over the student union at the university of strausberg and asked for critiques of their university. The students then used the funds the university gave to

their union to print out 10,000 copies, creating a massive scandal, the expulsion of the situationist students, and a court ruling to dissolve the student union. In the pamphlet, Khayati and the other authors critique the role of students in society, their passivism, especially the passivesim of allegedly radical students, and explains the role of spectacle in the university.

They state that the student is not an exception to the rule of the spectacle, which “allots everyone a specific role in a general passivity”. Universities are “a rehearsal for his final role as an element in market society”. Being educated at a university is an “initiation”. This means the student is in an inbetween stage, “between his present status and his future role”. This is terrifying and paralyzing, but he is in a circumstance which allows his “withdrawing into his initiation group to hide from that future. Protected from history, the present is a mystic trance.” They then go on to critique the actual education at universities, explaining that the economy “demand[ed] mass production of students who are not educated and have been rendered incapable of thinking” in order to prop itself up. The university effectively is the “propagation of ignorance”. The university and higher education that once upon a time was a place of “high culture” and only accessible to the children of the ruling class, now “has taken on the rhythm of the production line”.

Then they critique student activism saying “the students continue blithely to organize demonstrations which mobilize students and students only” and that their radicalism is “false consciousness in its virgin state” which is easily manipulated by the university to indoctrinate them into capitalist bureaucrats. These radical students are very easily “reincorporated into a status quo which they have never really radically opposed”. The students though, do have a sort of “marginal freedom” where they are able to escape the “control of the spectacle”. Free time and “flexible working hours permit him adventure and experiment”, but Khyati argues “freedom

scares him to death”. The routine and schedule constructed by the university and its professors are a sort of “open air prison” or “straightjacket” that the student is more than happy to be controlled by. Rebellion at the student level will first be against “his studies” but must go further to be a rebellion against society. When the youth revolt “against an imposed and “given” way of life is the first sign of a total subversion”. Khyati goes on to connect the way in which the failure of the university to truly educate them and this easily manipulated political consciousness creates an impulse to stand with the enemies of their enemy, Khyati says the same person “ can in the same breath condemn the State and praise the “Cultural Revolution”—that pseudo-revolt directed by the most elephantine bureaucracy of modern times”.

Khyati goes on to critique different organizations or methods of organizing that were current at the time or historical, stating that student unionism is “the travesty of a travesty, trade unionism is “long totally degenerate”, Stalinsim must be “denunciated in all its forms”, the Communist Party in France and all other countries that were not ruled by their communist party “have not taken a single step towards the conquest of power” in 45 years. Khyati says “the revolutionary project must be reinvented”. They call for an “abolition of work” as the division of so called “free time” and “working hours” which is an expression of use value, the tangible functions of something, and exchange value, meaning price be that monetary or otherwise, is the strongest and most intense contradiction in modern society, only after this contradiction is destroyed can “history begin, that men make their activity an object of their will and their consciousness, and see themselves in the world they have created.” Khyati finishes his pamphlet by explaining that human nature and desires are being “crammed by the spectacle into the darkest corners of the revolutionary unconscious” and that “we must destroy the spectacle itself, the whole apparatus of commodity society , if we are to realize human needs. We must abolish

those pseudo-needs and false desires which the system manufactures daily in order to preserve its power.”

Jean Luc Godard, in his film *La Chinoise*, depicts a sect of the political consciousness of Parisian university students in the late 1960s, just before May 68. Five Parisian university students, who are some sort of a Maoist affinity group, squat in an apartment together, argue, teach each other, and attempt to plan actions. A large majority of the film are extended arguments and explanations of their own political ideologies. The film ends with one character Veronique, accidentally killing the wrong man in an attempted political assassination, and the owners of their apartment coming back home forcibly removing the affinity group from their lodging.

In the film Godard uses techniques of theatre of the absurd such as the distancing effect. This alienates the viewer, the film is not meant for distraction, relativity or comfort. The film features absurdity, breaking the third wall, moments of just text on screen, differing modes of narrative (interview, narrative, reenactment), humour, metacritique, sight gags, unrealistic acting styles, song, animation, and use of extreme symbolism. All of these techniques are used to force the viewer to question what is both being seen on screen and the real outside world beyond the cinema. The viewer is conscious and responsible, the film is begging for a response and a reaction. Just as the characters in the film challenge society, the form of the film challenges the traditional techniques of mainstream film and the societal expectations of cinema.

The alienation and absurdity that is created by these techniques along with Godard's narrative, creates an effect of removing the veil of the false consciousness constructed by the spectacle. Yes, it is true that the characters in Godard's film, along with Godard himself, are not situationists; however, the film showcases the spectacle at its peak and then dismantles it for the

viewers and the characters themselves. Furthermore, the film showcases the symbols of the new left at the time, with Mao's little red book, costumes that make a character look like Vietnamese soldier, a communist radio station playing at all hours, a pop song about Mao. In the film these meaningful symbols of radical ideologies are being showcased as something "that was directly lived that has moved away into a representation" by the characters use of them as entertainmet or decoration. This takes away all meaning and leaves their representation of products being consumed by these hyperconsumerist privileged Parisian university students, and therefore the ideologies they tote are represented as a product to consume or a fashion to wear or as a way to create "a social relation among people, mediated by images", in other words their affinity group. These images and symbols allow the students to order themselves within the society of the radical left, allowing for passivity within itself.

The majority of the film is set inside of one apartment, where all the characters live, where they mostly argue and explain their political ideologies with one another or to no one, or to the viewer of the film, this means that the reality of their ideologies are "a pseudo-world apart, an object of mere contemplation". Even more, as students they are told that they are the future of society, yet they are completely isolated from this society inside of the apartment they are squatting in, as they increase their education, thus increasing their economic power, they are increasingly separated from the world, another aspect of the spectacle. At the end of the film, when Veronique murders the wrong man in an attempted political assassination, one could argue that she is being separated by the product of her labor, another aspect of Debord's definition of the spectacle. Her labor being her political education and organizing and the product being a successful political action.

The characters in the film are very similar to the description of radical leftist students in the pamphlet “On the poverty of student life”, these characters political ideologies are portrayed in such an absurd manner that the viewer comes to understand that they are “false consciousness in its virgin state” and that these characters weak and flawed university educations have resulted in them having easily manipulated political consciousness by each others willingness to up the anti. In the scene on the train where Veronique argues with her professor, he tries to impart in her some sort of critical thinking about her revolutionary mindset and violent ideas, but he fails in doing so resulting in her murdering someone. The characters isolation inside of the apartment, also harkens back to Khyati’s pamphlet where they argue that university students, paralyzed by the fear of their future and afraid to let go of their youths, “withdraw into their initiation group to hide from that future. Protected from history, the present is a mystic trance.” and the film truly does have the effect of a mystic trance.

“Society of the spectacle”, “On the poverty of student life”, and “La Chinoise”, are all pieces of work that were produced and released before the strikes of Mai 68, both representing the thoughts of artists, students, and political thinkers at the time that were partially inspiration and catalysts for the strikes. In Mai 68, students and workers came together to enact political upheaval starting in Paris and spreading throughout France, which very directly takes the advice from Khyati’s pamphlet which criticizes student movements for only organizing other students. This coming together of different sectors of life and people of differing economic roles in society is the reason why these strikes were so meaningful. The occupation of university buildings and factories also breaks down the spectacle created by these institutions, the social relation created by their architecture of classrooms and offices, student and faculty code of conduct literature, hierarchy that is established through fashion, all were destroyed by the occupation, vandalism,

and partial destruction of these buildings. The reframing of the street from an orderly and policed space to that of a battleground and a place to spread revolutionary information with graffiti and posters is another example of the spectacle being shed. The graffiti and posters at the time also directly tried to destroy the spectacle, the famous graffiti of “under the pavement, the beach” tries to destroy the cognitive dissonance of man made constructions versus mother nature, the political flyers being distributed directly showcased the contradictions of French society, with flyers saying “voting doesnt change anything” and “we participate, they profit”. This type of images and media does the opposite of the types of media that the dominant culture, and government, produces that enforces hierarchy and separation between classes, separation between the workers and the fruits of their labor, and general passivity.

In reading these papers, I have found it applicable to the political climate of the bay area today. Nowhere I have lived in the past has it been so clear to understand someone’s social relation to myself and others through simply their appearance. The fashion of subcultures here is incredibly prominent; however, in my experience they are quite meaningless similar to the ideas presented in “On the poverty of student life”, where political ideologies are something that is tried on and then easily discarded. All of these subcultural fashionings come from decades past, a time when perhaps they did have true meaning, something “that was directly lived” and now is just “ a representation”. Walking the streets in the Bay Area you are also able to see an incredible distinction between classes. On the same street you can see people sitting outside an upscale bar drinking \$20 cocktails and wearing expensive patagonia jackets and people living outside on the sidewalk. One can either accept this dichotomy of life and the way in which the dominant culture wants to believe about these different classes of people, or you can look through the spectacle to see the humanity in someone.

Another connection to the present moment is the idea that student organizing right now is so tied to the past, trying to recreate past movements and unable to create something new, which is what Khayati urged students to do against in his pamphlet. At San Francisco State, people are so obsessed with the Third World Liberation Front that the meaning of it feels watered down and a shell of its true history. People do not understand that we are in a completely different moment in history, therefore we need to do something completely unheard of and never been done before. In order to make change we must change; but also, we must have catalysts and inspirational art and writings in order to uncover the spectacle that we all live in. At this point in time though, the cinema is full of United States military funded propaganda films and any type of art that is even slightly political or attempting to uncover the spectacle are repressed or the artists are left to suffer with no support or funding available from art institutions. We must create formative and seminal works in order to create a movement.

In conclusion, the ideas of the situationist international had a large effect on the political consciousness at the time in May 68 and is very applicable to the current state of organizing in the Bay Area. In order to reach a period of extreme action, a movement needs pieces of writing and art to stoke the fires of unrest. Without Guy Debord's work, Khayati's pamphlet, Godard's film and other radical artistic or political works being widely discussed the social upheaval and political action of May 68 would have never occurred.

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