

# Spectacle and Strategy: On the Development of Debord's Theoretical Work from *The Society of the Spectacle* to *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*

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## Introduction

### Debord's Two Books on 'Spectacle'

Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* was first published in 1967. It is, by far, his most famous and celebrated work, but it was followed in 1988 by another book that tends to receive comparatively little attention. This is his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*: a book in which he outlined the changes that 'spectacular society' had undergone since *The Society of the Spectacle's* publication, and since the events of May 1968. The nature of these changes, and the way in which it presents them to the reader, makes *Comments* rather different from its predecessor. *The Society of the Spectacle's* compact and unforgiving theses present the social revolution that Debord and the Situationist International (S.I.) advocated as a real and immanent possibility, and despite the austerity of its text, the book is touched with a hint of almost messianic euphoria. *Comments*, in contrast, is written in a more accessible prose style, and although Debord's condemnatory tone is still very much present, the euphoria has gone. The book reflects on the retreat and suppression of the radical potential that May 1968 was held to have evidenced, and in doing so, it sets out an account of a social order that had

succeeded in “eliminating” almost “every organized revolutionary tendency.”<sup>1</sup> *Comments* describes a society marked by confusion, manipulation, unverifiable claims, surveillance, and demagoguery, and which had engendered a set of impending crises that it could not hope to control. It closes by predicting that this condition would prompt “changes in the art of government,”<sup>2</sup> on the grounds that those tasked with maintaining this state of affairs would soon gain a clearer understanding of the advantages that it affords for managing a pliable populace.

This vision of society was described as pessimistic, defeatist, and paranoid when *Comments* first appeared.<sup>3</sup> When read again today, however, its account of generalized disorder, discord, environmental damage and technologically facilitated manipulation can seem remarkably prescient. It is, I would suggest, a text that deserves to be revisited and reconsidered; but if such a reconsideration is to be conducted, some preliminary and clarificatory work would seem to be required.

Firstly, and most obviously, *Comments* needs to be placed in relation to *The Society of the Spectacle*. This requires addressing the differences and correspondences between the two books. Attention also needs to be paid to the ways in which Debord’s ideas developed over the intervening years and, given the widespread appropriation of Debord’s central concept of spectacle, an attempt to clarify the latter may also be of some use. *The Society of the Spectacle* is not reducible to a critique of modern capitalist visual culture, as is sometimes assumed,<sup>4</sup> or indeed to a socio-economic description of a culture structured by commodity relations. It addresses such issues, to be sure; but the book was, above all, an attempt to articulate what Debord took to be the central revolutionary demands of his historical moment. *The Society of the Spectacle*’s claims are centered around the identification of

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<sup>1</sup> Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (London: Verso, 1998), henceforth *Comments*, 80; Guy Debord, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 1641, henceforth *Oeuvres*.

<sup>2</sup> *Comments*, 87; *Oeuvres*, 1645.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Debord was said to have broken “with the utopian possibilities” offered in his earlier book: “he now regards the optimistic strategies that he formerly proposed as bankrupt”; he “seems concerned only with how the new spectacle appears, rather than with how it might be opposed.” Paul McDonald, “Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*,” *Screen*, vol. 32, no. 4, 492. Illustrative quotations from the French reception of *Comments* were presented in Debord’s *Cette mauvaise réputation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993). The view that *Comments* is a melancholic text has become relatively established within the literature. See, for example: Andrew Hussey, *The Game of War: The Life and Death of Guy Debord* (London: Pimlico, 2002), Vincent Kaufmann, *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry*, trans. by Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), and Andy Merrifield, *Guy Debord* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> As we shall see below, its claims concerning “images” and “representations” should not be understood in reductively literal terms. Debord states at the very outset of the book 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” (Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith [New York: Zone Books, 1995], 12-3, henceforth *Society of the Spectacle*; *Oeuvres*, 767), and writes that “the ‘mass media’ are only the spectacle’s “most stultifyingly superficial manifestation” (*Society of the Spectacle*, 19; *Oeuvres*, 772).

immanent revolutionary potential within that moment, and *Comments'* ostensibly pessimistic account needs to be read as a response to the increasing difficulties that the actualization of that potential faced in the years that followed 1968.

Debord's conception of the nature and stakes of that potential social revolution should also shape the ways in which *Comments* might pertain to our own present. To sketch this in brief:

For Debord, the modern revolutionary project needed to be understood as a drive towards collective autonomy, and he conceived that autonomy in a manner that foregrounded temporality and lived experience. It was framed as a demand, on the part of all those whose social activity creates an alienating and stagnant way of life, for free, collective, control over their own lived time. *The Society of the Spectacle* thus casts the modern revolution as a struggle to take collective possession of the means of shaping society's passage through time, and thus of making history ("historical time" was framed as both "the milieu and goal of the proletarian revolution";<sup>5</sup> indeed, "history itself," Debord claimed, via a *détournement* of *The Communist Manifesto*, "is the specter haunting modern society").<sup>6</sup> The book presents modern capitalist society as characterized by the generalized denigration of such self-determinacy. For Debord, the subordination of social life to the commodity had resulted in a condition in which lived experience had become articulated by patterns, roles, identities, and norms that suit the requirements of an "autonomous economy."<sup>7</sup> Collective social life had thereby collapsed into a condition of fragmented and fetishistic "non-life,"<sup>8</sup> insofar as it was governed not by its participants, but by their own quasi-independent social and economic creations. Modern society was thus characterised by a "false consciousness of time":<sup>9</sup> a sense of separation from the possibility of shaping a temporal existence that had become locked within these reified social structures. *The Society of the Spectacle* describes a mode of social life marked by a merely "contemplative" and alienated relation to its own historical existence. Hence the notion of "spectacle": we are held to have become passive "observers" of, and indeed "performers" within, a way of life that escapes our control. The book contends that this condition of generalized alienation had reached a potentially explosive extreme, and that it had thereby given rise to a growing, immanent, revolutionary demand for the collective pursuit of a "new historical life."<sup>10</sup>

Now, if *Comments'* account of technologically facilitated disorientation, demagogic power and impending crises does indeed resemble aspects of our present, as I indicated above—and if Debord's theory can be understood in the manner that I have just outlined—then *Comments* can be taken to provide a means of framing a host of contemporary phenomena as aspects of a deepening lack of collective orientation towards the future. Claims are often made for the relevance of Debord's theory, on the grounds that he predicted our world

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<sup>5</sup> Guy Debord, *Correspondance*, vol. 4: Janvier 1969 – Décembre 1972 (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2004), 79; henceforth *Correspondance*, vol. 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Society of the Spectacle*, 141; *Oeuvres*, 851.

<sup>7</sup> *Society of the Spectacle*, 34; *Oeuvres*, 782.

<sup>8</sup> *Society of the Spectacle*, 89; *Oeuvres*, 8193.

<sup>9</sup> *Society of the Spectacle*, 114; *Oeuvres*, 834.

<sup>10</sup> *Society of the Spectacle*, 106; *Oeuvres*, 829.

of mediatized distractions.<sup>11</sup> I shall try to suggest here, however, that its relevance may in fact lie its account of a society that suffers from an inability to address its own increasingly grim future.

Developing that suggestion fully, via a discussion of contemporary issues, is far more than can be attempted here. My aim is only to demonstrate its possibility, and to that end, I shall set out interpretations of *Comments* and *The Society of the Spectacle* that could support it. In the first part of the essay, I focus on *The Society of the Spectacle*, and treat the theory of spectacle as an account of the social predicament posed by modern capitalism's general denigration of collective and coherent historical agency. In the second, I use that interpretation of spectacle to discuss *Comments*, and I offer some indications as to how the phenomena that it treats under that rubric might relate to our present. Both sections of the essay place considerable emphasis on Debord's rather idiosyncratic conception of strategy. This is because it is intimately connected to many of the themes that I wish to highlight. It does, however, require a short introduction of its own.

## Strategic Theory

Debord had a life-long passion for strategic thought and military history,<sup>12</sup> but in the early 1960s that interest became increasingly tied to his theoretical concerns. This was due to his turn, at that time, towards Hegel and Marx, and to related ideas about praxis. The details are complex, but the basic principle here is very simple: the role of genuinely radical theory, for Debord, was to facilitate revolutionary struggle by clarifying the stakes, the dangers, and the possibilities that such struggle faced. Its analyses, therefore, should be tantamount to a mode of strategic thought. Like a piece of military strategy, it needed to set out a contextually specific analysis capable of orienting and facilitating a project that would involve conflict, and which was intended to affect social and historical change. Such theory would be more than a means of merely interpreting the world; instead, it would constitute a contribution towards the world's practical transformation.

This view can be discerned in nascent form in Debord's early work, but it became increasingly concrete in the early 1960s,<sup>13</sup> and it informed both the content and the intended

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<sup>11</sup> For indicative examples see John Harris, "Guy Debord Predicted our Distracted Society," *The Guardian*, March 30, 2012; Marco Briziarelli and Emiliana Armano, eds., *The Spectacle 2.0: Reading Debord in the Context of Digital Capitalism* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> "I have been very interested in war, in the theoreticians of its strategy, but also in reminiscences of battles and in the countless other disruptions history mentions, surface eddies on the river of time. I am not unaware that war is the domain of danger and disappointment, perhaps even more so than the other sides of life. This consideration has not, however, diminished the attraction that I have felt for it." Debord, *Panegyric*, vols. 1 and 2, trans. James Brook and John McHale (London: Verso, 2004). See also: Hussey, *The Game of War*.

<sup>13</sup> It can be seen, for example, in his attempts to theorize the role of a contemporary avant-garde towards the start of that decade. Following the break with the S.I.'s artistic "right wing" in 1962 (see below), Debord defined the role of the modern avant-garde as that of clarifying the possibilities and demands of its present. See his letter to Robert Estivals, March 15, 1963, in: Debord, *Correspondance*, vol. 2: Janvier 1960 – Décembre 1964 (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard), 194; henceforth

role of 1967's *The Society of the Spectacle*. But Debord's views concerning the importance of strategic thought started to become more prominent and obvious in his subsequent writings. By that point, a theory able to explain his moment's defining predicament had been devised (i.e., the theory of spectacle), and in his view, the events of 1968 had proved the validity of its analyses. His focus then started to move towards understanding political events and maneuvers in the light of that theory; a focus rendered all the more important by the need to understand the state's responses to the challenges posed by the uprisings associated with 1968, and indeed the conflicts, terrorism, and intrigue that followed internationally.<sup>14</sup> By 1974, one can find Debord making claims such as the following:

The principal work that it appears to me should be envisaged now—as the complementary contrary to *The Society of the Spectacle*, which described frozen alienation (and the negation that was implicit within it)—is the theory of historical action. This means to bring forth, in its moment, which has come, strategic theory. At this stage—and to speak schematically here—the foundational theoreticians to retrieve and develop are not so much Hegel, Marx and Lautréamont, but Thucydides—Machiavelli—Clausewitz.<sup>15</sup>

This did not mean that the Hegelian, Marxian, and avant-garde ideas that informed *The Society of the Spectacle* were to be simply *replaced* by “strategic theory.” Rather, those ideas needed to be augmented and developed in a “strategic” vein. This development would constitute a “complementary contrary” to *The Society of the Spectacle's* account of the denigration of historical agency because focus would now fall on the latter's practical actualization. Hegel and Marx would still be used. Their primary contribution, for Debord, was that they had provided means of conceiving social action and interaction, and the reified forms that such interactions can take. In his view, both had contributed towards articulating a mode of thought capable of understanding dynamic, conflictual movement in time: “dialectics,” or at least Debord's conception thereof. A “dialectical” conception of social life, he held, afforded an understanding of the dynamics between individuals and the collectivities in which they operate, and indeed of the processes through which social groups generate, employ, revise, and become subordinate to the norms that articulate their interactions. Such a mode of thought allowed a conception of society as a mobile, mutable totality. It could be used to

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*Correspondance*, vol. 2. The picture that he presents here seems very close to that set out by Marx in his seminal letters to Ruge in 1843. Marx there presents “critique” as the work of clarifying the struggles of a given moment (Debord read and studied these letters).

<sup>14</sup> Debord's interest in the Portuguese revolution (see Debord, *Correspondance*, vol. 5: Janvier 1973 – Décembre 1978 [Paris: Librairie *Arthème* Fayard], 308, henceforth *Correspondance*, vol. 5, for an illuminating letter on the topic, and for commentary: Ricardo Noronha, “Letters to Glaucos,” *Historical Materialism*, vol. 28, no. 4 [2020], 176–201) and the Italian *anni di piombo* were crucial factors here (see his 1979 preface to the fourth Italian edition of *The Society of the Spectacle* for indicative comments on the Italian context; see also his exchanges with the Italian Situationist Gianfranco Sanguinetti, particularly as regards Sanguinetti's *Terrorism and the State* and *Veritable Report on the Last Chance to Save Capitalism in Italy*).

<sup>15</sup> *Correspondance*, vol. 5, 127.

theorize a social totality marked by a “paralyzed history,” as in *The Society of the Spectacle*; yet it also afforded a means of thinking the practical conduct of the agency that would address that predicament. In the context of the 1970s, the latter came to the fore, and Debord developed a renewed interest in reading writers such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Clausewitz as “dialecticians.” They were exponents of “dialectical, strategic thought,”<sup>16</sup> in his view; for a “dialectician,” according to Debord, “possesses the intelligence of the real,”<sup>17</sup> i.e., is able to comprehend social being as a process of becoming, and can thereby theorize and shape that process, rendering historical change a self-conscious affair. Thus, in a letter of 1973, Debord can be found advising a correspondent to “read Clausewitz well,” because “in the current era,” both Clausewitz and Machiavelli were needed in order “to complete readings of Hegel and of other old friends of the International.”<sup>18</sup> One of his personal notes from the 1970s even states that it is “the *same thing* to think dialectically and to think strategically.”<sup>19</sup>

1988’s *Comments* is, I think, greatly informed by the line of development described here. It builds on Debord’s earlier account of a society caught in a condition of “frozen alienation,” but it does so in a way that was shaped by his increased emphasis on “dialectical” strategy during the 1970s. I shall argue in the second part of this essay that when *Comments* is read with this in mind, its meaning can shift a little: it becomes rather less maudlin and pessimistic, and much more combative.

So, to recapitulate: my aim is to set out a reading of both *The Society of the Spectacle* and *Comments* that foregrounds the themes outlined here, and which might thereby provide a basis for locating their contemporary salience in their accounts of a society that is unable to manage its own future. Debord’s conception of strategy is crucial to this. It bears a direct relation to his framing of the problem of historical agency in *The Society of the Spectacle*; to *Comments*’ nuanced claims concerning the deepening of that problem in the late 1980s; and as we shall see towards the end of the essay, it also inflects the ways in which we might relate to these texts today.

## 1) *The Society of the Spectacle*

### The Theory of Spectacle

Debord once remarked to Giorgio Agamben that he was “not a philosopher,” but rather “a strategist.”<sup>20</sup> This owes a great deal to Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach,” the final thesis of which

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<sup>16</sup> Debord, *Correspondance*, vol. 7: Janvier 1988 – Novembre 1994 (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2008), 78; henceforth *Correspondance*, vol. 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Correspondance*, vol. 4, 609.

<sup>18</sup> Debord *Correspondance*, vol. 5: Janvier 1973 – Décembre 1978 (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2005), 42; henceforth *Correspondance*, vol. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Debord, *Stratégie*, ed. Laurence Le Bras (Paris: Éditions l’échappée, 2018), 430, emphasis in the original.

<sup>20</sup> The remark comes from an anecdote recounted by Giorgio Agamben: Agamben, “Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord’s Films,” trans. Brian Holmes, in Tom McDonough, ed., *Guy Debord and*

states: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”<sup>21</sup> That line encapsulates a great deal of Debord’s theoretical work, both in terms of its content (a critique of contemplative detachment) and its intended application (revolutionary action). The same is true for Marx’s closely related statements about the “realization” of philosophy, which grew from his dissatisfaction with Young Hegelian criticisms of religion. It was not sufficient, according to the young Marx, for critical philosophical thought to merely point out the illusory nature of religion, dogma, and other such “fixed ideas.”<sup>22</sup> If critical thought really sought to resolve those mystifications, it would need to address the social conditions that render such palliative intellectual comforts desirable; and if it was fully committed to that aim, Marx held, it ought to apply its critical powers in clarifying and facilitating the proletarian revolution that would transform those social conditions. Philosophy would thus become a practical force by enabling the proletariat to destroy its own proletarian condition. Hence, “philosophy cannot realize itself without the supersession [*Aufhebung*] of the proletariat, and the proletariat cannot supersede itself within the realization [*Verwirklichung*] of philosophy.”<sup>23</sup> The central motif here—that of superseding contemplative detachment through the application of transformative potential in historical change—runs throughout Debord’s theoretical work, and greatly informs the concept of spectacle.

*The Society of the Spectacle’s* basic contention is that that, within modern society, human subjects have become subordinated to the dictates of social and economic structures that are produced by their own alienated social activity, and which constitute concentrated loci of their own collective power. Crucially, for Debord, all such power is, ultimately, the power to shape actions, events and experience in time<sup>24</sup> (the book contains two entire chapters on time, and Debord refers to time and history throughout its pages). The separation of such power from its producers entails a denigration of their historical agency, i.e., of their ability to shape their own lived experience and future. “Spectatorship,” therefore, does not just denote the consumption of literally visual imagery. Rather, it denotes a kind of existential poverty, caused by the merely “contemplative” relation to historical time that this social formation engenders. It also owes a great deal to the enthusiastic French reception of Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness*.<sup>25</sup> Drawing on Lukács, and whilst reworking his earlier

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*the Situationist International: Texts and Documents* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2004), 313.

<sup>21</sup> Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (Middlesex: Penguin, 1975), 423.

<sup>22</sup> Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own: The Case of the Individual Against Authority*, trans. Steven T. Byington (New York: Dover Publications, 2005), 43.

<sup>23</sup> Marx, *Early Writings*, 257.

<sup>24</sup> See chapter five of *The Society of the Spectacle*, and for a more substantial presentation of this claim: Tom Bunyard, *Debord, Time and Spectacle: Hegelian Marxism and Situationist Theory* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> See in particular section one of Lukács’ reification essay, which provides the epigraph to *The Society of the Spectacle’s* second chapter.

avant-garde ideas concerning bourgeois culture,<sup>26</sup> Debord used the motif of the passive observer vis-à-vis the active image to encapsulate the basic dynamic of a way of life in which human subjects are confronted with a seemingly independent world (literal instances of the passive consumption of the commodity's celebratory imagery constituted paradigmatic, but no less "superficial,"<sup>27</sup> exemplars of this dynamic). This is a world that certainly changes historically, through the collective actions of these "contemplative" subjects, but over which they have little direct and collective control. Spectacular society is thus a "historical society that refuses history":<sup>28</sup> a society marked by historical change, and by awareness of such change, but which undermines its inhabitants' ability to engage with the latter coherently and collectively.

The concept of spectacle pertains to situations in which collectivities of social agents become dominated by formations that emerge from the collective conduct of social life, and which are thus instantiations of their ability to shape their own existence, but which take on a degree of apparent independence from their producers. The idea can be approached by noting Debord's debts to Feuerbach, who held, in his *The Essence of Christianity*, that worshipping God amounted to worshipping a representation of humanity's collective powers and capacities (Feuerbach provides the epigraph to *The Society of the Spectacle's* first chapter). He and the S.I. used this idea to refer to a range of phenomena—hierarchy, dogma, religion, political figureheads, and media imagery were all described as "spectacular"—and Debord indicated that this problem could also be discerned, retrospectively, in previous social formations (in his letters he traces it back to antiquity,<sup>29</sup> and in *The Society of the Spectacle* he states that "all separate power has been spectacular").<sup>30</sup> The "total colonization [*l'occupation totale*] of social life"<sup>31</sup> by the commodity within his own era had brought this longstanding problem to a recognisable and resolvable extreme: advanced consumer capitalism had given rise to a society that was entirely characterised by this problematic, due to the degree to which the very architecture of everyday life had become shaped by an effectively sovereign economy based upon alienated social activity.<sup>32</sup> Humanity's power to shape itself and its

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<sup>26</sup> Debord's earliest references to "spectacle" tend to concern art and culture, and were levelled primarily at the separation of the observer from the art object. They grew from his earlier, post-Surrealist ideas about the need to unite art and life, and to thereby shape lived time, through the construction of situations. In the late 1950s, however, this started to change into a broader socio-economic critique of the way of life that engendered such cultural forms. One can see the beginnings of this change in his seminal 1957 "Report on the Construction of Situations."

<sup>27</sup> *Society of the Spectacle*, 19; *Oeuvres*, 772.

<sup>28</sup> *Correspondance*, vol. 4, 79.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 455-6

<sup>30</sup> *Society of Spectacle*, 20; *Oeuvres*, 772.

<sup>31</sup> *Society of the Spectacle*, 29; *Oeuvres*, 778.

<sup>32</sup> Debord's theory is thus not just a critique of false *ideas* about society and social power. Rather, it contends that real, practically effective bodies of social power have become removed from the direct control of those whose social activity produces them, due to the nature of the real, concrete social relations through which these individuals act and interact ("The fact that the practical power of modern society" became "detached" and "independent" can "only be explained by the additional fact"



world was now greater than at any other period in the past; and yet that power had also become further removed from its producers than in any preceding epoch, rendering the need to take collective possession of that power the defining revolutionary issue of the age (thus Debord: “though separated from his product, man [*sic*] is more and more, and ever more powerfully, the producer of every detail of his world”; yet “the closer his life comes to being his own creation, the more drastically he is cut off from that life”).<sup>33</sup>

The concept of spectacle was thus used to grasp the dilemma posed by a mode of social life characterised by “contemplative” detachment from its own alienated historical agency. This means that it would be a mistake to treat it as a descriptive sociological category.<sup>34</sup> In keeping with Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach,” and with Debord’s self-professed status as a strategist, it was meant to function not just as a means of describing or interpreting specific aspects of modern society—the media, perhaps, or indeed the commodity—but rather as a means of articulating the revolutionary predicament that that society had engendered. It did so only as a means towards *responding* to that predicament. It was produced in the hope that its analyses would be recognized and employed by those whose conditions and frustrations it purported to explain. The “critical theory of the spectacle” was devised, as Debord put it, with a view towards facilitating “the resumption of revolutionary class struggle,” which in turn would “become conscious of itself by developing the critique of the spectacle.”<sup>35</sup> That statement is a deliberate echo of Marx’s remarks about philosophy’s realization.

Foregrounding *The Society of the Spectacle*’s intended function as a work of strategic theory requires that we also acknowledge its contextual specificity. The point to stress here is that it meant to articulate the demands of a context in which a revolution aimed at pursuing nothing less than “a new historical life” seemed both desirable and possible. This can be approached by way of the following.

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that the “powerful practice” of social life “continued to lack cohesion” and “remained in contradiction with itself”; *Society of the Spectacle*, 18, translation altered; *Oeuvres*, 771). It is thus not an account of ideology in the simplistically dualistic sense often attributed to crude forms of classical Marxism, i.e., an account of false ideas that mask a true economic reality. Rather, it concerns the generation, acceptance, and consequent perpetuation of forms of separated power through patterns of behavior that suit their continued existence (e.g., religious activity, the recognition of authority, or indeed the very conduct of a mode of life governed by the commodity). Rather than merely describing false ideas, it contends that social reality has itself become “false,” due to the enormous extent to which social life has become molded and shaped in this manner. Debord is concerned with “ideology in material form”: with a mode of social existence that has become completely shaped by a set of templates for thought and interaction that have emerged from *within* the movement of social and historical life, but which now dominate and freeze it. Indeed, “The spectacle is ideology *par excellence*,” he writes, “because it exposes and manifests in its plenitude the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life” (*Society of the Spectacle*, 151; *Oeuvres*, 857).

<sup>33</sup> *Society of the Spectacle*, 24; *Oeuvres*, 775.

<sup>34</sup> See thesis #203 of *The Society of the Spectacle* for remarks in this vein.

<sup>35</sup> *The Society of the Spectacle*, 143; *Oeuvres*, 852.

## The Formation of the Theory

The interpretation of spectacle outlined above concerns what we might call Debord's "mature" version of the concept, which took form in the early 1960s. He had been using the term "spectacle" for some time prior to this date (it starts to appear in his work with some frequency during the mid-1950s, although its uses at that point are rather gestural), but it seems to have coalesced more fully around 1960 or 1961.<sup>36</sup> This means that it took form in the lead-up to a major split in the S.I., which took place in 1962.

The split in question was, as Debord later put it, a "rupture with the S.I.'s artistic 'Right'."<sup>37</sup> The group's initial, post-Surrealist aim of uniting art and life had, by this time, led to a crux. Debord and those close to his ideas had come to the view that, if art and life were to be united, and if the formation of modern society prevented the ludic<sup>38</sup> transformation of the everyday that this would provide, then the role of the contemporary avant-garde ought to be to foment revolution. From this perspective, to continue to work in the traditional plastic arts, and to engage with the extant art world, could only be reactionary (hence the reference to an artistic "right wing"; hence also the current interest in recovering the S.I.'s early artistic work from beneath Debord's theoretical legacy).<sup>39</sup> The primarily Scandinavian and German members of the group who opposed this view were ejected. The break ended the S.I.'s initial artistic period, and it opened a new stage in the group's activities in which the S.I. would become increasingly oriented towards the production and dissemination of revolutionary social theory. Significantly, the maxim that Debord used to encapsulate this new turn was that "The S.I. must now realize philosophy."<sup>40</sup>

This position was informed by Debord's ideas concerning the trajectory of the avant-garde. He held that the start of his century had seen a potential conjunction between art, which had been progressively destroying itself as a means of *representing* life, and the revolutionary workers' movement, which had been gaining in strength whilst demanding *more* from life. The potential for a revolutionary project that would pursue not just a fairer mode of production and distribution, but the enrichment of life itself, was thus "already ripe

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<sup>36</sup> See Bunyard, *Debord, Time and Spectacle*, 95-100 for a more substantial discussion.

<sup>37</sup> Debord, "The Hamburg Theses of September 1961," trans. Reuben Keehan, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/postsi/hamburg.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Debord's interest in play, and in making life a "game," is intimately connected to his interest in strategy (hence his enthusiasm for writers such as Castiglione and Gracián, whose works offer "strategic" advice on how to conduct oneself and live well, and hence also his interest in Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*).

<sup>39</sup> See, for example: Jakob Jakobsen and Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, eds., *Expect Anything Fear Nothing: The Situationist Movement in Scandinavia and Elsewhere* (Copenhagen: Nebula, 2011). Their book is an attempt to recover "some of the marginalised dimensions of the Situationist International" from "the ruling Debord industry" (pp. 9-10).

<sup>40</sup> Situationist International, *Internationale Situationniste* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1997), 703, translation altered.

in the 1920s.”<sup>41</sup> But that moment of possibility had been lost: the workers’ movement fell prey to its own representation, the commodity triumphed, and culture, unable to advance, degenerated into a condition of stagnant “decomposition” (in 1956, and whilst referring to his present, Debord remarked that “the premises for revolution” were “not only ripe, but had begun to rot”).<sup>42</sup> These views, which shaped his seminal “Report on the Construction of Situations” of 1957, bear a direct relation to the conception of revolution that would come to the fore in the S.I. after the split of 1962, and around which Debord’s “mature” theory of spectacle gravitates. This is because the 1960s were seen as harboring the potential return of the possibilities that he had identified in the early twentieth century. That nexus of possibilities had returned in a clearer and more extreme form: the demand for the enrichment of life had been exacerbated by consumer society’s deadening banalities, the extant forms of art and culture had become more vacuous, and the so-called “workers’ states” had highlighted revolutionary politics’ more dangerous illusions. Placed in context, the maxim that “the S.I. must now realize philosophy” thus signifies a great deal: it pertains to Debord’s concern with the production of “strategic” theory, outlined above; but it also expresses a broad commitment to the supersession of *all* forms of separated power, whether it be in the form of hierarchical social organization, the separation of art from life, or the abstract rule of capital, and a commitment to the application, or “realization,” of such capacities in the conscious transformation of lived experience.

So, by the early 1960s, the S.I.’s drive towards the conscious creation of moments of time (“situations”), which had initially emerged as a response to problems in avant-garde culture, had become a broader response to political and social problems. For example: in a letter of 1963, written in the wake of the split with the artists, Debord can be found stating that, “today, we are at the point where the cultural avant-garde can only define itself by joining (and thus superseding as such) the real political avant-garde.”<sup>43</sup> The S.I. would become theorists, and thereby *strategists*, in the sense of the term outlined above. In 1967, the year of *The Society of the Spectacle’s* publication, he wrote that the S.I. should be understood as “an extreme avant-garde,” the role of which was “to produce the most adequate critical theory,” so as to assist and orientate the “spontaneous movements” emerging within “the current context” by clarifying their goals, obstacles and oppositions.<sup>44</sup> Once again, the echo of Marx’s comments on the “realization of philosophy” should be apparent.

The theory took form in a context within which revolution seemed, to Debord, a real and pressing possibility. The Watts riots, the Strasbourg Scandal,<sup>45</sup> May 1968—all were taken

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<sup>41</sup> Debord, *Correspondence: The Foundation of the Situationist International*, trans. Stewart Kendall and John McHale (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 228.

<sup>42</sup> Situationist International, *Internationale Situationniste*, 14; *Oeuvres*, 221.

<sup>43</sup> *Correspondance*, vol. 2, 192.

<sup>44</sup> Debord, *Correspondance*, vol. ‘o’: Septembre 1951 – Juillet 1957 (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2010), 329.

<sup>45</sup> In 1966, a group of radical students managed to get themselves elected to Strasbourg University’s student union. They used the entirety of its funds to print 10,000 copies of the Situationist text “On the Poverty of Student Life”: a work that advocated (to quote the judge who presided over the student union’s subsequent closure) “theft, the destruction of scholarship, the abolition of work, total subversion, and a worldwide proletarian revolution with ‘unlicensed pleasure’ as its only goal”;

as evidencing that possibility. This view became more nuanced during the 1970s, and by 1988, when Debord wrote *Comments*, his position had changed somewhat: revolutionary change was still a viable response to modern society's inadequacies, but the possibility of actualizing such change had become much harder. But before we turn to *Comments*, we should first try to outline his use of Hegel, and the connections between the latter and his ideas about history and strategy. This affords an opportunity to close our discussion of *The Society of the Spectacle* by noting some problems with its vision of revolution, and by introducing some of the ideas that need to be borne in mind when looking at *Comments*.

### Conscious History and “Dialectical” Strategy

Debord and the S.I. advocated a councilist<sup>46</sup> mode of social organization, which would enable, due to its non-hierarchical and democratic nature, the “consciousness” of social agents to become “inseparable from coherent intervention in history.”<sup>47</sup> But workers' councils were never viewed as a permanent solution to the question of social organization. They were simply a practical means of minimizing separated political power within a fledgling post-revolutionary society. Debord and the S.I.'s more general goal, which would be pursued by a range of different technical and organizational means in the future, was to create conditions within which the passage of historical time could become a conscious, collective process. This was framed as a Lukácsian condition of subject-object unity.

The “subject of history,” according to *The Society of the Spectacle*, “can only be the self-production of the living: the living becoming master and possessor of its world—that is, of history—and coming to exist as *consciousness of its own activity* [*conscience de son jeu*]; and the history that this subject would create would have “no goal [*n'as pas d'objet*] other than the effects it works upon itself.”<sup>48</sup> Debord does not state this explicitly, but I would suggest that the central Hegelian and Marxian ideas that underpin Debord's “mature” theory of spectacle can be schematized as a Lukácsian reformulation of the Hegelian Spirit's attainment of full self-consciousness.<sup>49</sup> In Hegel (or at least on the broadly traditional and boldly

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Situationist International, *Situationist International Anthology*, trans. and ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 501. This resulted in a national scandal.

<sup>46</sup> The basic idea of council communism is that the management of society should be conducted via democratic workers' councils. Representatives of councils would meet in higher councils, so as to afford cohesion, but would always be recallable to the base. The S.I. advocated this form of social organisation as it seemed the best suited to the minimization of hierarchy and arbitrary authority, and thus to the need to avoid the recurrence of forms of spectacle within revolutionary organisations.

<sup>47</sup> *Society of the Spectacle*, 87; *Oeuvres*, 817.

<sup>48</sup> *Society of the Spectacle*, 48, translation altered; *Oeuvres*, 792.

<sup>49</sup> Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* refigures the Hegelian account of Spirit's attainment of self-consciousness, which presents Spirit, *qua* subject, as ultimately arriving at a point at which it recognises that it shares an identity (a shared rational structure) with the objects that it addresses. Lukács draws on this, claiming that the proletariat, *qua* subject, are placed in a “contemplative” relation to an objective social world that seems immutable and removed from direct intervention,

metaphysical reading of Hegel that Debord seems to have used), this is achieved through Spirit's philosophical identification with the quasi-divine Absolute that comprises and constitutes all being; in Debord, the Absolute becomes the collective activity that creates history and social being, and is brought to a condition of self-conscious self-determinacy in revolutionary praxis. Three issues can be noted.

Firstly: Debord's theoretical work advocates a rejection of *all* forms of representational detachment in order to achieve total immersion within the flow of time. Such a desire to move in step with time can be found throughout Debord's oeuvre. It is wedded to his aesthetic appreciation of lived temporal experience, and it informed his early ideas regarding the unification of art and life in the construction of situations. Indeed, the Situationist attitude was said to involve "going with the flow of time [*miser sur la fuite de temps*];"<sup>50</sup> "eternity," by contrast, was described as "the grossest idea a person can conceive of in connection with his acts."<sup>51</sup> This entailed a willingness to embrace finitude, and even mortality,<sup>52</sup> and in some areas of Debord's work, it gave rise to a decidedly hard-nosed approach to revolutionary struggle (this is particularly apparent in his 1978 film *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni*: "a historical project," he declares there, "can hardly expect to preserve an eternal youth, sheltered from every blow").<sup>53</sup> There is cause for concern here: when coupled to Debord's utterly uncompromising politics, and when articulated via Hegelian ideas that celebrate negativity, finitude and destruction, and which render praxis akin to communion with the Absolute, this results in a vision of revolution that can, at times, resemble a kind of thanotic crusade.<sup>54</sup>

Secondly: *The Society of the Spectacle* contains a strikingly ambitious philosophy of history<sup>55</sup> (presented in its fifth chapter) which, together with its critical history of the workers' movement (its fourth chapter), casts Debord's own society and times as a decisive, world-historical crux (hence the title of the book's first chapter: "Separation Perfected" [*achevée*]).<sup>56</sup> The problematic of spectacle, foregrounded by the inadequacies of his present, was presented as having revealed the implicit core of all previous revolutionary struggles. Every prior demand for better working conditions and access to the means of production could now be viewed, from the perspective of Debord's present, as containing an implicit demand for the liberation of social life itself (thus, "in the [modern] demand to *live* the historical time that it

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but which is in fact an expression of their own alienated agency. The revolutionary supersession of this condition would render the proletariat a self-determining subject-object, and thereby turn historical life into a free, collective and conscious construction.

<sup>50</sup> Situationist International, *Internationale Situationniste*, 42; *Oeuvres*, 327.

<sup>51</sup> Situationist International, *Internationale Situationniste*, 41; *Oeuvres*, 326.

<sup>52</sup> For example: commenting on modern society's fixation on the preservation of youth and beauty, he remarked that "This social absence of death is identical to the social absence of life" (*Society of the Spectacle*, 115; *Oeuvres*, 835).

<sup>53</sup> Debord *Complete Cinematic Works: Scripts, Stills and Documents*, trans. and ed. Ken Knabb (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2003); *Oeuvres*, 1390.

<sup>54</sup> Debord mocked a reviewer for making a similar set of observations in *Cette mauvaise réputation*, 51.

<sup>55</sup> See Bunyard, *Debord, Time and Spectacle*.

<sup>56</sup> *The Society of the Spectacle*, 11; *Oeuvres*, 766.

creates, the proletariat finds the simple unforgettable core of its revolutionary project”).<sup>57</sup> The historical and geopolitical localization of this insight, which was cast as dependent upon the political and cultural developments afforded by his own society and times, render Debord’s thought susceptible to objections similar to those commonly levelled against the popular conception of Hegel’s Germanic “end of history.”

Yet thirdly, and more positively: as I sought to indicate in the opening sections of this essay, these Hegelian themes are also closely connected to Debord’s notion of “dialectical” strategy. Hegel’s great contribution, for Debord was to have devised a mode of thought capable of thinking historical change; his great failing, on the other hand, was to have locked it up within an ostensibly complete metaphysical system. Hegel had understood the world as mutable and historical, and he had pushed the bounds of philosophy by advancing a similarly dynamic logic; yet he had remained a “philosopher,” in Debord’s sense, because his work presented a detached and contemplative view of a world that had been shaped to completion by the “supreme external agent”<sup>58</sup> of Spirit. Marx’s “inversion” of Hegel, according to Debord, resolves this: not by simply replacing Hegel’s unfolding categories with a succession of economic structures, but rather by reversing Hegel’s detached and retrospective stance and replacing it with a practical orientation towards the creation of the future.<sup>59</sup> Dialectics, with its ability to think change, could then be “realized” in praxis. It would then become the “thought of history,” no less (for “history is dialectic,”<sup>60</sup> according to Debord).

Clearly, this invites an account of precisely what Debord means by “dialectics.” Characteristically, he tells us almost nothing about this. He was averse to laying out philosophical doctrines, and held, like Clausewitz, that the true home of strategic thought lay not in a military manual but rather in the actual *conduct* of practical action.<sup>61</sup> In consequence, we can only make inferences from textual evidence. This means that a reconstruction can certainly be attempted,<sup>62</sup> but there is no space for that here, and I think we can make sufficient headway by simply noting the kind of attitude that this mode of thought was supposed to adopt. This can be illustrated by noting Debord’s enthusiasm for Marx’s remark (to which Debord alludes several times)<sup>63</sup> that the radical core of Hegel’s work “includes in its positive

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<sup>57</sup> *The Society of the Spectacle*, 106; *Oeuvres*, 829.

<sup>58</sup> *The Society of the Spectacle*, 51; *Oeuvres*, 795.

<sup>59</sup> See theses #73-81 of *The Society of the Spectacle*, and thesis #80 in particular.

<sup>60</sup> *Correspondance*, vol. 4, 60.

<sup>61</sup> Debord’s reading notes on Clausewitz quote the latter’s views in this regard. Debord, *Stratégie*, 109; for the original, see Carl von Clausewitz *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Princeton University Press, 1993), 172; see also *ibid.*, 154-5. Debord also added a marginal note that alludes to Marx’s warnings against confecting “recipes for the cookshops of the future”; Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Pelican, 1976), 99. We should also note that Debord was well aware of the fact that the “dialectical” dimensions of Clausewitz’ work did not stem from Hegel. He seems to have been of the view that Kant, Fichte and military experience sufficed to render him a “dialectician.”

<sup>62</sup> For my own initial attempts in this regard, see: Bunyard, *Debord, Time, and Spectacle*, chs. 8 and 13.

<sup>63</sup> See: *Society of the Spectacle*, 49; *Oeuvres*, 793 and 1465.

understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, of its simultaneous destruction,” and “regards every historically developed form as being in a fluid state.”<sup>64</sup> This, for Debord, meant thinking strategically, because it enabled a conception of the practical conduct of historical change. As we saw earlier, his personal notes include the remark that “it is the *same thing* to think dialectically and to think strategically.” They are “the same thing,” he continues, because both are aspects of “the thought of praxis, which must act; *practical theory*, in the course of its combat in time”;<sup>65</sup> “*both denote the totality*.”<sup>66</sup> It seems that dialectics, in his view, allows one to conceive change as following from conflict and opposition, and to view such change as arising within contexts and moments that can be understood as mobile, mutable totalities. Such a perspective renders it possible to identify the decisive factors and loci that shape those totalities, and to organize attacks, defenses and maneuvers accordingly. And because all such maneuvers must take place in time, i.e., within a process of historical change, *kairos*<sup>67</sup> appears to have been an important theme: the good strategist knows when and where to act in order to pursue her ends.<sup>68</sup> So, when Debord writes, gnomically, that “workers must become dialecticians,”<sup>69</sup> he means that they must become *strategists*.<sup>70</sup> I shall argue in the following section that *Comments* should be read with these themes in mind.

## 2) Comments on the Society of the Spectacle

### Spectacle and Revolution in the 1980s

The kind of “dialectical” thinking described above does not rely on the legendarily mechanical and predictable interplay of “thesis,” “antithesis” and “synthesis,” or involve a closed philosophical system.<sup>71</sup> Debord was not a simplistically teleological thinker—his interest, *qua* strategist, in chance and unforeseen eventualities militates against this—and despite his occasional oratorical flourishes, he presented social change only as a possibility, not as an inevitability.

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<sup>64</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 103.

<sup>65</sup> Debord, *Stratégie*, 430, emphasis in the original.

<sup>66</sup> Debord, *Stratégie*, 430, emphasis in the original.

<sup>67</sup> *Kairos* is a classical Greek term. It refers to the right time to act.

<sup>68</sup> Remarks in this vein can be found throughout his work. He often stresses that if one does not act at the right time, the passage of time will overwhelm one’s projects; e.g., “those who have chosen to strike with the time know that [the time that is] their weapon is also their master ... it is an even harsher master to those who have no weapons.” Debord, *Complete Cinematic Works*, 174, translation modified; *Oeuvres*, 1380–1. See also: *Oeuvres*, 1790.

<sup>69</sup> *Society of the Spectacle*, 89; *Oeuvres*, 819.

<sup>70</sup> This claim can be reinforced by his remark, in his preface to the fourth Italian edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*, that “it is by beginning to conduct the war for freedom with anger that workers can become strategists” (*Oeuvres*, 1464).

<sup>71</sup> Debord’s weakest criticisms of Hegel involve conflating the purported finality of the latter’s philosophy with a notion of historical conclusion.

Indeed, from the 1960s onwards, he seems to have viewed it as an increasingly difficult challenge. In 1971, he rejected the idea that “the advent of revolution was certain”;<sup>72</sup> in a letter of 1979, and thus long after his break with Raoul Vaneigem, the S.I.’s other principal theorist, he mocked the latter’s “unique stupidity” in presenting a simplistically hedonistic vision in which “the revolution will be quickly made”;<sup>73</sup> and in a new preface to *The Society of the Spectacle*, written in that same year, he commented (albeit still optimistically) on the “difficulty” and “immensity of the tasks of the revolution.”<sup>74</sup> Nearly ten years later, in 1988’s *Comments*, that difficulty seems to have worsened.

*The Society of the Spectacle* described the fetishistic alienation of social power into a set of “frozen” social formations, and it stressed the need for the reclamation of that power. *Comments* is more concerned with the domination exerted by those formations. “The spectacle” is defined very simply at the outset of the book as “the autocratic reign of the market economy” over everyday life, and the “techniques of government”<sup>75</sup> that facilitate that reign. It is treated as a general pattern of combined tacit and overt control that serves to contain the stifled possibilities that were glimpsed in the 1960s. The book contends that the revolutionary efforts taken towards realizing those possibilities have been forced into retreat, and that the spectacular system has been able to regroup: it has “continued to gather strength,” Debord writes, deepening and entrenching its hold on social life whilst doing so, and has “even learnt new defensive techniques, as powers under attack usually do.”<sup>76</sup> 1988’s *Comments* thus provides an overview of the nature and results of “the spectacle’s rapid extension over the last twenty years,” and it details the “practical consequences” of that extension.<sup>77</sup>

The most striking of these “practical consequences” is the increased difficulty of actualizing revolutionary potential.<sup>78</sup> *Comments* holds that the disorientation and fragmentation caused by commodification had deepened over the preceding two decades, and that new police techniques and technologies of surveillance and manipulation had become available. Hence the distinction in tone between the two books that I noted in the introduction to this essay. *The Society of the Spectacle* presents a rousing account of the nature and stakes of a coming battle, and it details the forces and terrain involved; *Comments* is a field report from within that conflict, and it does not seem to indicate that the fight is going well. The terrain has shifted, and formidable new weapons have been deployed. Yet all is not quite as it appears.

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<sup>72</sup> Debord, *A Sick Planet*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Seagull Books, 2007), 91.

<sup>73</sup> Debord, *Correspondance*, vol. 6: Janvier 1979 – Décembre 1987 (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2006), 41; henceforth *Correspondance*, vol. 6.

<sup>74</sup> *Oeuvres*, 1473.

<sup>75</sup> *Comments*, 2; *Oeuvres*, 1594.

<sup>76</sup> *Comments*, 2–3, translation modified; *Oeuvres*, 1594.

<sup>77</sup> *Comments*, 4; *Oeuvres*, 1595.

<sup>78</sup> As Debord puts it: “wherever the spectacle rules, the only organized forces are those that want the spectacle”; and in consequence, we seem to have “finished with that disturbing conception, which was dominant for over two hundred years, in which a society was open to criticism or transformation, reform or revolution” (*Comments*, 21; *Oeuvres*, 1605).



## 'Omissions' and 'Lures'

*Comments* is a complex text, despite its brevity. This is signaled to the reader by a rather enigmatic warning placed at its outset. Debord begins by telling us that he has come to be considered an expert in some circles, and that he expects *Comments'* broad readership to include a small elite of some "fifty or sixty people."<sup>79</sup> Half of this small group are "devoted to maintaining" the existing social order; the other half "persist in doing quite the opposite"<sup>80</sup> (this may seem hubristic, but his work has indeed been studied by security forces).<sup>81</sup> In consequence, he writes, he needs to "take account of readers who are both attentive and diversely influential," and must, therefore, "take care not to give too much information to just anybody."<sup>82</sup> He then continues as follows:

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 be able to encounter certain lures, like the very hallmark [*comme la signature même*] 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 what treatises 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.<sup>83</sup>

This is remarkably enigmatic. Unsurprisingly, it fueled the charges of megalomania and paranoia that attended the book's reception,<sup>84</sup> and it poses obvious challenges for Debord's commentators. But although his stance here is eccentric, *Comments* is not wholly impenetrable. A letter of 1989, in which Debord responded to a reader who had tried to identify the book's "lures," contains some helpful clues:<sup>85</sup>

One can call anything that misleads rapid reading or computers a "lure." In any case, there isn't a single inexact or deceptive piece of information [in my book]. I suggest another hypothesis to you: what if, in this book—for a reader capable of understanding dialectical, strategic thought (Machiavelli or Clausewitz)—there are in fact no lures? What if the only lure is the very evocation of the possibility of there being lures?<sup>86</sup>

Let us begin with the remark about computers. Debord's later writings contain several references to computer technology, and typically charge the latter with denigrating independent

<sup>79</sup> *Comments*, 1; *Oeuvres*, 1593-4.

<sup>80</sup> *Comments*, 1; *Oeuvres*, 1593-4.

<sup>81</sup> Eyal Weizman, "The Art of War," *Frieze* 99 (2006), <https://frieze.com/article/art-war/>.

<sup>82</sup> *Comments*, 1; *Oeuvres*, 1593-4.

<sup>83</sup> *Comments*, 2, translation modified; *Oeuvres*, 1594.

<sup>84</sup> See: Debord, *Cette mauvaise réputation*.

<sup>85</sup> Similar points are made in a letter to a Spanish translator of *Comments* (*Correspondance*, vol. 7, 93) and in his *Cette mauvaise réputation*, 33.

<sup>86</sup> *Correspondance*, vol. 7, 78.

thought.<sup>87</sup> In his view, “computers cannot understand dialectics.”<sup>88</sup> Presumably, because they are constrained by programmed algorithmic rules, they fall short of the mutability and critical stance afforded by “dialectical, strategic thought.” *Comments*, as Debord remarked in another letter, “was made to paralyze a computer,”<sup>89</sup> and Debord seems to have believed that he achieved this by directing the book’s intended meanings towards a select readership who are proficient in a mode of thought that eludes such algorithmic constraint. This is a kind of thinking characterized by inversion, reversal and opposition; those are, not coincidentally, the primary characteristics of *détournement*.

The first line of *Comments’* opening warning states that the nature of his times has compelled him, “once again, to write in a new way.” That is, I think, an allusion to *The Society of the Spectacle’s* own odd mode of presentation. Debord’s 1967 text used *détournement* to unite form and content, and to thereby actualize, within its pages, the negation of spectacular culture that it advocates. In 1988, society’s increased subordination to spectacular power had necessitated a more guarded approach: one in which the critique of a world replete with illusions would be articulated through a *détournement* of that world’s propensity towards illusion. It is significant in this regard that the book’s “lures” were cast as the “very hallmark of the era”; and it is also significant that, for the intended revolutionary reader, they can be recognized as intangible, as nothing, and as mere distractions from the question of practical engagement with a flawed social reality (like Clausewitz,<sup>90</sup> Debord held that a good strategist should learn to recognize and avoid feints and bluffs).

This is undoubtedly baroque, but it leaves us with the indication that “dialectical, strategic thought” may be the key required to unlock *Comments*. I shall return to this in a moment. First, however, let us look a little more closely at the book’s contents.

### The ‘Integrated Spectacle’

*The Society of the Spectacle* drew a distinction between the “diffuse” and “concentrated” forms of spectacular society. The former, which corresponded to the consumer capitalist societies of the West, was largely able to disseminate and maintain its model of the good life through the proliferation of commodities, media, and entertainment, although it relied on police techniques when necessary. The “concentrated” spectacle was identified with fascist states and the bureaucratic capitalism of the East. Unable to depend upon the diffuse spectacle’s panoply of commodity-images, this form made greater use of surveillance, violence, and indoctrination to keep lived activity channeled into more narrowly focused models of the social good. In *Comments*, Debord claims that, since the 1970s, these two forms have

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<sup>87</sup> In *Comments*, Debord writes as follows: “... the computer’s binary language is an irresistible inducement to the continual and unreserved acceptance of what has been programmed according to the wishes of someone else and passes the for the timeless source of a superior, impartial and total logic” (*Comments*, 28-9; *Oeuvres*, 1609). Other remarks in his late writings stress the role of computers in monitoring, managing and even simulating forms of dissent.

<sup>88</sup> Debord, *Cette mauvaise réputation*, 102.

<sup>89</sup> *Correspondance*, vol. 7, 218.

<sup>90</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 239.

undergone a fusion, characterized by the general victory of the diffuse form over its concentrated counterpart (the book was produced just prior to the collapse of the USSR). Debord named this new social context the “integrated spectacle.” Within the latter, the commodity’s increased penetration into social reality (which corresponds to the diffuse form) has created a social terrain that both facilitates and encourages an increased use of surveillance, manipulation, disinformation and state terrorism (i.e., techniques proper to the concentrated form) as means of pursuing vested interests and maintaining control.

The new conditions proper to this context are said to be characterized by five principal features: 1) perpetual technological renewal; 2) integration of state and economy; 3) generalized secrecy; 4) unanswerable lies; 5) a perpetual present.<sup>91</sup> The first two have “proved to be highly favorable to the development of spectacular domination”; the others are described as “direct effects of this domination.”<sup>92</sup> I shall try to summarize the book’s major claims by placing them under these headings. Whilst doing so, I shall also try to give a sense of its prescience by suggesting ways in which they relate to our present.

1) For Debord, the growth of consumer capitalism has “accelerated”<sup>93</sup> capitalism’s inherent tendency towards technological innovation. Many of his remarks here anticipate the modern proliferation of commodity-gadgets and communications technologies, but his chief concern with technology seems to have been its capacity to foster a rather irrational and disempowering tendency towards rationalization. As society becomes more complex and technologically sophisticated, greater reliance must be placed upon specialists, which in turn undermines the ability of individuals to assess their society independently and holistically.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, because specialization is tied to the exigencies of politics and the market, expertise and impartiality become impaired: inconvenient truths and problems fall from view, and the economy shapes education and research funding. A connection can be drawn here to our current context, in which “experts” can then become subjects of suspicion, and that suspicion used for demagogic ends. The confusion that this breeds entails that society becomes increasingly ill-equipped to face the dangers that threaten it,<sup>95</sup> and the populace less able to hold rulers to account. This is exacerbated by forms of reliance on computer technologies (Debord’s remarks in this vein can seem Luddite in places, but they prefigure contemporary worries about shortened attention spans and enfeebled reading stamina),<sup>96</sup> and by market-based rationalization, which encourages surveys, statistics, and data-gathering exercises that further the conflation of quality with quantity.

2) The integration of state and economy entails the lack of any obvious “controlling center”<sup>97</sup> within the modern spectacle, and the profusion of “bonds of dependency and

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<sup>91</sup> *Comments*, 11-2; *Oeuvres*, 1599.

<sup>92</sup> *Comments*, 12; *Oeuvres*, 1600.

<sup>93</sup> *Comments*, 12; *Oeuvres*, 1600.

<sup>94</sup> “Whenever individuals lose the capacity to see things for themselves, the expert is there to offer an absolute reassurance” (*Comments*, 17; *Oeuvres*, 1602-3).

<sup>95</sup> See, for example, the discussion of pollution in chapter thirteen of *Comments*, 34-9; *Oeuvres*, 1613-6.

<sup>96</sup> *Comments*, 28-9; *Oeuvres*, 1608-9.

<sup>97</sup> *Comments*, 9; *Oeuvres*, 1598.

protection”<sup>98</sup> between those who manage the political and economic governance of the spectacular system. Such bonds arise from capital’s tendency towards centralization and monopoly as well as from the needs of economic and state actors to access and affect chains of influence between concentrations of economic and political power. The operation of much of that power is thus said to be akin to that of the Mafia, which now stands as the “model of all advanced commercial enterprises,”<sup>99</sup> and which “flourishes in the soil of contemporary society.”<sup>100</sup> Government has grown towards the practices of organized criminality through the use of terrorism, assassination, bribes, etc., whilst organized crime has grown closer ties with the state. *Comments* thus describe the current global order as marked by dangerous and obscure tangles of intrigue and interests; fertile ground for opaque conflicts and covert chains of influence, within which new, modern, Machiavellian princes can emerge (Debord’s example is Noriega, but Putin, Trump and others fit the bill).

3) Debord does not make this point explicitly, but I would suggest that “generalized secrecy” stems not only from the intrigue described above, but from the very nature of the commodity itself. The latter entails an emphasis on appearances, which in turn fosters the dissembling of that which those appearances obscure. It seems that, for Debord, the commodity’s colonization of society has meant that secrecy has come to play an increasingly important structural role. Front organizations and official secrets proliferate,<sup>101</sup> as do covert operations and the manipulation and representation of terrorism.<sup>102</sup> Competing and conflicting interests foster an ever-increasing use of both state and corporate espionage, as “thousands of plots in favor of the established order tangle and clash almost everywhere.”<sup>103</sup>

4) The profusion of unanswerable lies is fostered by the generalized confusion and disorientation that this state of affairs engenders. Within spectacular society, the relatively stable reference points of history, class, community and “critical sense” are increasingly “dissolved,” and “every unitary view of accomplished activity” and “all direct personal communication,” are steadily “lost”;<sup>104</sup> thus, when the spectacle “stops talking about something for three days,” Debord writes, “it is as if it did not exist.”<sup>105</sup> There is little space for independent discussion, verification, and critical analysis. The “agora,” Debord claims, “is gone”<sup>106</sup> (and I think we can safely infer that he would not judge it to have been conveniently replaced by the internet). Debord is also concerned here with the dissolution of logic. Logic, Debord writes, was constructed and employed through dialogue. The denigration of dialogue and the

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<sup>98</sup> *Comments*, 69; *Oeuvres*, 1634.

<sup>99</sup> *Comments*, 67; *Oeuvres*, 1633.

<sup>100</sup> *Comments*, 64; *Oeuvres*, 1631.

<sup>101</sup> *Comments*, 52-3; *Oeuvres*, 1624-5.

<sup>102</sup> *Comments*, 24-5; *Oeuvres*, 1607-8.

<sup>103</sup> *Comments*, 82; *Oeuvres*, 1642.

<sup>104</sup> The quotations are drawn from *The Society of the Spectacle*, 21 (*Oeuvres*, 772-3), but serve to illustrate claims set out in *Comments*.

<sup>105</sup> *Comments*, 20; *Oeuvres*, 1604.

<sup>106</sup> *Comments*, 19; *Oeuvres*, 1604.

reference points that it requires entails that modern “spectators” have become “just as illogical as the spectacle.”<sup>107</sup>

5) The ‘perpetual present’ that characterizes the integrated spectacle stems from the fetishistic naturalization of capitalist social relations, and from the prevalent sense within modern culture that there is simply ‘no alternative’ to the extant social system. Debord’s concerns here are almost Orwellian. *Comments* places particular emphasis on the sense in which it is in the interests of dominant powers to control narratives about the past, and on the disorienting results of total immersion within modern culture (‘the spectacle organizes ignorance of what is about to happen’, Debord writes, and ‘immediately afterwards, the forgetting of whatever has nonetheless been understood’).<sup>108</sup> Its fallacious ‘end of history’, thus ‘gives power a welcome break [*est un plaisant repos pour tout pouvoir présent*]’.<sup>109</sup>

To sum up: *Comments* describes a technologically mediated social order that fosters fragmentation and alienation; that erodes old and familiar reference points;<sup>110</sup> and which thereby undermines its denizen’s ability to grasp, articulate and resolve the bases of their frustrations. It describes a society replete with ‘unverifiable stories, uncheckable statistics, unlikely explanations and untenable reasoning’,<sup>111</sup> within which ‘the resources allocated to ... specialists in surveillance and influence continue to increase’.<sup>112</sup> This has conferred new advantages to the management of dissent—organized revolutionary opposition has been dissolved, and drastic change has become unthinkable—and it has resulted in a society that is unable to take charge of its own future.

I would suggest, as indicated at the outset of this essay, that many aspects of Debord’s visions and predictions in *Comments* echo our present. Those echoes are hardly comforting. But what happens if we now take account of his indications that the book might open up further for readers versed in ‘dialectical, strategic thought’?

## Inversions

Debord writes in *Comments* that ‘a negative outcome should be added’ to the book’s long and bleak ‘list of power’s triumphs’: ‘a state can no longer be led strategically when, in the course of its being managed, a great loss of historical understanding permanently takes hold.’<sup>113</sup> That statement should be read in conjunction with the book’s reference to Clausewitz’ classical

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<sup>107</sup> *Comments*, 29; *Oeuvres*, 1610.

<sup>108</sup> *Comments*, 14; *Oeuvres*, 1601.

<sup>109</sup> *Comments*, 14.

<sup>110</sup> ‘Beyond a legacy of old books and old buildings, still of some significance but destined to continual reduction and, moreover, increasingly highlighted and classified to suit the spectacle’s own needs, there remains nothing, in culture or nature, which has not been transformed, and polluted, according to the means and interests of modern industry. Even genetics has become readily accessible to the dominant social forces’ (*Comments*, 10; *Oeuvres*, 1598).

<sup>111</sup> *Comments*, 16; *Oeuvres*, 1602.

<sup>112</sup> *Comments*, 53; *Oeuvres*, 1624.

<sup>113</sup> *Comments*, 20, translation altered; *Oeuvres*, 1605. I am grateful to Alastair Hemmens and John McHale for their help with the translation of this statement.

distinction between tactics ('the use of forces in battle to obtain victory') and strategy ('the use of battles to pursue the goals of a war').<sup>114</sup> It should also be viewed in connection with the book's penultimate section, which discusses the development of spectacular society by way of reference to Napoleonic warfare.<sup>115</sup> Debord describes Napoleon there as having based his strategy on his confidence in achieving overwhelming tactical victories. The danger of such an approach is that strategy can become a mere by-product of tactical events<sup>116</sup> (indeed, Debord remarks elsewhere in the book that 'tactical successes can ... lead great powers down dangerous roads').<sup>117</sup> His point seems to be as follows: a state governed by the blinkered and short-term horizons of the capitalist form of wealth may be able to monopolize social life at the level of 'tactics', i.e. in shaping immediate objectives, but it is ill-equipped to take up the more future-oriented perspective required for effective 'strategy'. To think *strategically*, for Debord, is to think *historically*, and his suggestion seems to be that the spectacular system's functionaries and assorted managers are ill-positioned to take up such a stance. Propelled by a conflicting torrent of short-term objectives, spectacular society is singularly unable to think its own future.

If *Comments* is read with this in mind, the book's epigraph, which is taken from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, can then take on a greater degree of significance:

However desperate the situation and circumstances, do not despair. When there is everything to fear, be unafraid. When surrounded by dangers, fear none of them. When without resources, depend on resourcefulness. When surprised, take the enemy itself by surprise.<sup>118</sup>

The theme of dialectical reversal indicated by that passage appears to be a key aspect of Debord's understanding of strategy, and it can be detected throughout *Comments*. Many of the book's proclamations are colored by indications that strengths can become weaknesses. For example: 'surveillance would be much more dangerous had it not been led by its ambition for absolute control to a point where it encounters difficulties created by its own progress'.<sup>119</sup> It is also significant that some of these indications concern the nature of radical opposition, as in this case:

In a certain sense the coherence of spectacular society proves revolutionaries right, since it is evident that one cannot reform the most trifling detail without taking the whole thing apart. But at the same time this coherence has eliminated every organized revolutionary tendency by eliminating those social terrains where it had more or less effectively been able to find expression: from trade unions to newspapers, towns to

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<sup>114</sup> *Comments*, 85; *Oeuvres*, 1644; Clausewitz, *On War*, 146.

<sup>115</sup> This section of the book draws heavily on chapter seventeen of book three of *On War* (258)

<sup>116</sup> Michael Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 354. Debord's comments seem to draw on Clausewitz, *On War*, 462.

<sup>117</sup> *Comments*, 83; *Oeuvres*, 1643.

<sup>118</sup> *Comments*, vi; *Oeuvres*, 1593.

<sup>119</sup> *Comments*, 81, translation altered; *Oeuvres*, 1641.

books. In a single movement, it has been possible to illuminate the incompetence and thoughtlessness of which this tendency was quite naturally the bearer.<sup>120</sup>

On the one hand, old forms of opposition have been dismantled; but on the other, and as the book's closing discussion of the dialectical relation between weaponry and tactics seems intended to indicate, their 'elimination' has forcibly demonstrated the limitations of the old Left, obliging a more clear-eyed pursuit of newer approaches.

The point seems to be that the dialectical strategist would be able to read the book in such a way as to recognize and respond to these hints towards the emergence of new dangers and possibilities. As we saw earlier, Dialectical and strategic thought, for Debord, concerns conceiving change within mobile and conflictual totalities (i.e. within contexts construed as shifting webs of interrelated elements). Such a strategist could, presumably, use the book as a prompt for the identification of weak points, opportunities and threats, and thus pick out what Clausewitz called the 'centers of gravity' within such contexts.

A full reading of the book along these lines could be attempted. As I admitted in this essay's introduction, my aim here is *only* to lay some of the groundwork for such a reading; for if one was to undertake that reading, a closer critical discussion of *Comments* would be required, coupled to an engagement with the strategic theorists whom Debord drew upon.<sup>121</sup> Yet we can at least draw some provisional conclusions based on the foregoing.

## Conclusion

The predicament that Debord identified in 1967 remains in place in his 1988 book. *Comments* describes a society that has become subordinate to its own economy, and by framing that subordination under the general concept of spectacle, Debord cast it as a state of generalized separation from history. Yet in *Comments*, the contradiction that underpins that predicament has shifted somewhat. As we saw above, Debord's 1967 work framed it as a tension between the unprecedented scale of society's power to shape lived time, and the unprecedented separation of that power from its producers. In *Comments*, however, the conditions described in Debord's earlier work are presented as having become more intolerable, but as having also deepened and worsened in ways that make coherent and effective revolt more difficult. *Comments* is, however, a strategic analysis. It is not an expression of failure, but rather a coolly dispassionate exposition of a difficult situation that could, perhaps, be turned. As

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<sup>120</sup> *Comments*, 80; *Oeuvres*, 1641.

<sup>121</sup> The "dialectical" salience of those theorists could perhaps be summarized as follows: Sun Tzu teaches how to recognize and avoid illusion, and how to turn strength into weakness, and vice versa; Thucydides' account (which includes the suggestion that truth may need to be presented in a distorted form in a corrupted world) indicates that fixed ideas will be forcibly eradicated by practical power; Machiavelli shows how to persuade a populace to love that which they should hate; Clausewitz hints towards a notion of totality when foregrounding the need to concentrate on the central point that unifies and governs a set of forces, and argues that a strong attack, when carried too far, becomes weak. Debord's reading notes on strategy have now been published (*Stratégie*), and they contain a wealth of information on this topic.

Debord remarked in his correspondence, in connection to the *Comments*: ‘the role of revolutionary critique is assuredly not to lead people to believe that the revolution has become impossible!’<sup>122</sup> It was *not* impossible, in his view; the kind of political contestation that he advocated simply needed to change and adapt in order to respond to, and to take advantage of, the strengths and weaknesses of its enemies.

Ultimately, I take Debord to have adopted a rather long-term view here. One of the primary dialectical tensions that he identifies in *Comments* is that “never before” have “conditions been so seriously revolutionary,” but “it is only governments who think so.”<sup>123</sup> He clearly did not think that this would last. Three years later, in a new preface to *The Society of the Spectacle*, he wrote: “The same formidable question that has been haunting the world for two centuries is about to be posed everywhere: How can the poor be made to work once their illusions have been shattered, and once force is defeated?”<sup>124</sup> It would seem that, in contrast to the putative melancholia often attributed to his later work, Debord held—admittedly in a highly nuanced manner, but perhaps rather too *optimistically*, if anything—that the increasing banality and alienation of modern life, and the impending threats of socio-economic and environmental crises, would lead the populace to realize their own power. Concrete material privation and *ennui* would, in the end, show through the spectacle’s thinning illusions. The integrated spectacle’s penetration into social reality would then be rather like Napoleon’s march on Moscow: an invasion that becomes weaker the further it advances.

One could pursue this, as I have indicated, and study the book to work out further what this position might entail. I hope to have at least made some sort of contribution towards such a project. I would like to close, however, by suggesting that another approach is possible. None of the ideas described in this essay can be divorced from Debord’s understanding of revolution. As I have tried to show, the very concept of spectacle is wedded to the latter. This means that any engagement with Debord’s theoretical work really ought to take account of his conception of revolution; and as we have seen, there are reasons to view that conception of revolution critically. Debord’s call for utterly uncompromising social transformation is, at times, troublingly messianic, and it involves a historical, cultural, and political localization of revolutionary possibility that may seem unworkably Eurocentric.<sup>125</sup> Yet on the other hand, the *problem* that this notion of revolution centers around seems strikingly pertinent: modern society, for Debord, is simply unable to fully master its great technical powers, or to shape its own future coherently. This surely has some significance today, given the evident need to halt our own society’s tangle of means-become-ends from tumbling ever further towards environmental, economic and socio-political strife. If one was to pursue this tension, where might it lead?

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<sup>122</sup> *Correspondance*, vol. 6, 450.

<sup>123</sup> *Comments*, 84; *Oeuvres*, 1643.

<sup>124</sup> *Society of the Spectacle*, 10; *Oeuvres*, 1794; *Comments*, 84; *Oeuvres*, 1643.

<sup>125</sup> This view could be countered by arguing that the development of capitalism has rendered Debord’s analysis more universal. Such an argument would, however, need to address Debord’s own emphasis on the temporal specificity of his strategic analysis, and would also need to respond to concerns regarding the imposition of European theory on other parts of the world.



I have argued that *Comments* is an account of a set of social phenomena that echo elements of our present, and that it presents these phenomena as dimensions of the general problem of historical orientation and agency. If we look at Debord's book and broader oeuvre in this light, we could then cast him, against his wishes, not so much as a practical strategist, but rather as a writer who might be of interest to contemporary philosophy of history. To put that more bluntly: Debord's ideas about strategy lead directly into a highly politicized conception of historical existence that may be of interest in its own right. If one digs into his work in this way, the following assessment becomes possible: he identified a shared temporal condition ('historical life') and problem (separation from the means of directing that life), but presented a flawed response to that problem (an all-consuming yet narrowly localized revolution); and if that is so, a viable critical approach to his work would be to try to extricate the salient aspects of his account of that problem from the flawed aspects of his posited solution.