Cinema and the Portable Spectacle

by

Zach Shippee

Submitted to the Board of Cinema Studies
School of Film and Media Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

December 2016

Sponsor: Dr. Nicholas Baer

Second Reader: Dr. Anne Kern

Cinema occupies a distinctive position in the 21st century, as new media tend to utilize certain qualities and techniques which used to belong to film: immersion on the one hand, shrinking transmission/portability on the other. The Hollywood blockbuster (Dolby sound, world-building, etc.) absorbed millions of spectators into realities discrete from our own, while home video and VHS, Blockbuster video rental stores, etc. disseminated movies to the private spaces of our homes. These two trends have been taken up by mediums as diverse as video games, museum installation art, social networking apps, journalism – in fact, it is difficult to discern cultural phenomena not accustoming themselves to increased portability and immersion, and these two cinematic trends have modeled much of how our lives are influenced by the new visual and aural landscape. D.N. Rodowick's claim that "the marketing of the new is also the reassertion of something already well established: the preservation and enhancement of psychological structures that have informed the pleasures of cinema viewing throughout its history" [1], is borne out by this bifurcation of film's strategies. The two trends of immersion and portability become experientially unified when we equip our phones with virtual reality goggles, providing grandly expansive experiences of art, once only possible in public spaces such as theaters, and which now require only the disposed presence of our bodies. All this occurs as the cinema-proper, however, struggles against increasing obsolescence. It is not particularly practical to watch a two-hour movie with a headset weighing three pounds, or on a five-inch screen, and even the

[1] D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) 181. He theorizes new media as constructing itself formally based upon the cinematic metaphor. For example, video games are constructed to immerse gamers via the seamless integration of elements, and techniques of perceptual-realism whereby the contrivances that contribute to the creation of images disappear, and the spectator experiences the duration of the moving image without the awareness of its un-reality. This allows the spectator (gamer, viewer, reader, etc.) to enter the world of the media they experience. This entering, the crossing of the threshold/screen mediated by film, still dominates media that do not properly qualify as cinema, but which are nonetheless "cinematic".

comparatively larger screens on laptops are ill-equipped to fulfil the possibilities of the filmic medium. By the same token, cinema always comes short of the promise of the total immersion of its subject within the cinematic world, whereas virtual reality devices such as the Occulus Rift and Sony PlayStation VR are further developments of the teleological course of film imagined by André Bazin: "…it is clear that all the definitive stages of the invention of the cinema had been reached before the requisite conditions had been fulfilled."[2] Their fulfillment is fast approaching. The concept of Total Cinema, the perceptual leavening of images to the status of reality, it is now clear, to be fulfilled, must paradoxically leave the "cinema" behind. So, film finds itself stuck in the middle, as it were, between 1) the ubiquity of visual (and aural) media transmitted on smart phones and televisions, on billboards, through headphones, and in computers, all of which plumb the traditions of the cinema to take their cues, and 2) being relegated to an artifact of the 20th century, indeed that century's singular art form.

The historical timeline of the effective transition from analog film to the era of digital media roughly coincides with a new stage in the development of the global spectacle, and the political and social conditions it inaugurates. The concept of the spectacle for the purposes of the present study was outlined by Guy Debord in 1967 with the publication of *The Society of the Spectacle*. This definition of spectacle is not the same as that which is often given in film and media scholarship. It is not, for example, a marvel such as the first sighting of the Brachiosaurus in *Jurassic Park* (1993), or the famous case of the baby carriage descending the Odessa Steps in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). Spectacles in these contexts are isolated events within the filmic

---

[2]André Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," in *What is Cinema? Vol. 1* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967) 18.

diegesis, akin to cinematic *attractions* as proposed by Tom Gunning.[3] However, the spectacle for the purposes of this essay is a socio-political concept. *The Society of the Spectacle* was a foundational text for the Situationist International, a radical political group founded by Debord in 1957. The spectacle is not a discrete image, nor a set of images, but the faux unity comprised of the linkages between nearly *all* images. There are many theses in Debord's fractured text which, once taken together, make clear what is meant: "The spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point that it becomes images." (*Thesis 34*) "[The spectacle] is a social relation between people that is mediated by images." (*Thesis 4*) "Everything that was directly lived has receded into representation." (*Thesis 1*) "The spectacle that falsifies reality is nevertheless a real product of that reality, while lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle and ends up absorbing it and aligning itself with it." (*Thesis* 8) "The spectacle is the ruling order's nonstop discourse about itself'. (*Thesis* 24) Etc. It is the material consummation of the ruling class's ideology. It is the historical moment in which the Marxist superstructure envelops the economic base, demanding that the political battlefield *must first be cultural,* even though the superstructure remains symptomatic of the base, rather than formative. "What appears is good; what is good appears." (*Thesis 12*)[4] The "good" that appears here bearing a direct relationship to the material conditions of the base. The spectacle aligns the landscape of our sensory perceptions

---

[3] Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *Critical Visions in Film Theory* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011) Moments in which the diegesis is broken and specific reactions are solicited from the audience. These "attractions" may sometimes be exemplary of the Debordian spectacle, but are by no means synonymous, or even necessarily relevant.

[4] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014. Orig. Pub. 1967) 2, 3, 4, 7, 11.

with the ideology of those that construct it (concertedly or otherwise), and imagines it as being *natural*, and therefore *incontestable*.

The spectacle is not an image that belongs to the cinema nor strictly to aesthetics; advertising, news media, even infrastructure constitute spectacular images. The cinema, however, was of primary concern to the situationists, because of its popularity and universality as a medium in the 20th century, and because, as a principally visual medium, it was so conducive to spectacular critique. Thomas Y. Levin summarizes the situationist critique of cinema in a short study on the topic: "To the extent that cinema is synonymous with spectacle – a spatialization of time, a staging of separation, a fostering of passivity, alienation, and so on – it is simply unacceptable and must be eliminated."[5] And he continues: "The question remains, however, to what extent the condemnation of cinema here is a critique of the politics of the apparatus analogous to arguments put forth by Martin Heidegger and later by Jean-Louis Baudry and Jean-Louis Comolli regarding the objectification inherent in the very structure of representation." Debord was himself a filmmaker, and his films are programmatic in their strategies for undermining spectacular structures and linkages. He attempted to use film to undermine the seamless, causal links between information contained within a shot that, according to various montage theories and especially the continuity editing style perfected by Hollywood, are conjoined to impress upon the viewer an illusory sense of uniformity of motion and duration. Debord, in his movies, broke the causal links demanded by continuity montage between shot and shot (as well as visual image and sound image) to make visual the faux unities that we take for granted when watching a movie. He expands this meta-critique of cinematic praxis to encompass

---

[5] Thomas Y. Levin, "Dismantling the Spectacle: The cinema of Guy Debord," in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002) 325.

the wider political landscape of spectacular society in which the once "unitary" life of the subject is represented by images in the spectacle, parceled off and sutured into a fake unity, representing to the alienated subject the illusion of the life they do not actually lead. Formally, Debord's films juxtapose images, often found footage and clips from popular movies, with voice over narration, such as in the film adaptation of *The Society of the Spectacle,*[6] in which Debord narrates the theses from the book over a string of pop culture scenes and images. McKenzie Wark characterizes Debord's artistic endeavors as being strategic before aesthetic:

> [H]e starts with a casual disregard for the value that professional makers or owners or interpreters claim of [images]. Images are merely moves in a game, tactics in a strategy, the goal of which is the critique and overturning of a world in which images are just objects of contemplation. The people make meaning, but not with the media of their own choosing. The task is the social production of recovered meaning or fresh-minted meaning, with what images one can beg, borrow or steal.[7]

Rather than, as in the classical style of continuity editing and perceptual realism, linking images and sounds to create an organic-seeming flow in which the viewer is absorbed, Debord antagonizes the narrative continuity of traditional cinema by posing various elements against one another, i.e. image and soundtrack. It was part of a broader political strategy devised by the situationists called *détournement.* Already existing images are "remixed" to disconnect them from the seamless web of images with which they form an ideological tangle for the spectator. In doing so, the structural logic behind the images that we experience everyday becomes apparent, and new forms of meaning can be coaxed from this preexisting material. In the classical style of filmmaking, movies are formally allied with the spectacle. "The spectacle tries to abolish the

---

[6] *The Society of the Spectacle*, directed by Guy Debord (Simar Films, 1974).

[7] McKenzie Wark, *The Spectacle of Disintegration* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2013) 124.

qualitative space and irreversible time of history. In its place, it offers mere representations of time and space, images that have a formal equivalence, any of which can be exchanged for another."[8] The cinema, likewise, possesses the illusion of unified temporality and "qualitative space". Up to a point, it immerses the viewer into the linearity of filmic experience. Immersion was already a problem for the cinema in Debord's mind, in that classical, narrative cinema is allied or even synonymous with the relationship between spectator and spectacle. By sundering the linkages between images, which are typically, short of the avant-garde, connected fluidly by montage, Debord exposes the faux unity of the cinematic experience and recontextualizes popular images to unearth latent political content, and to vitalize the spectator as master of the spectacle. The deployment of a cinematic image is a strategic "move in a game". Debord's critique of the cinema is of its dominant historical modes, not its inherent powers, which he considered and practiced as powerful tools, pieces, in the game of subverting and ultimately overturning the global spectacle.

This essay takes a different perspective on the cinema and how it might be practiced contemporaneously, while remaining serious about a critique of the spectacle. The objective is to facilitate a conversation between theorists who have theorized the post/modern subject: what is the subject's political recourse in neoliberal democracies? If our spontaneous relationship to our socio-political environment is that of spectatorship (passive), how do the qualities of that relationship formulate the citizenry as subjects? And ultimately, what can cinematic images in the 21st century contribute to the subject's formation, conceptualization, and *re*politicization? As spectatorship is made mobile and portable, we come to depend on the technological apparatuses

---

[8] Ibid., 127.

(tablets, smart phones, perhaps soon VR goggles, etc.) the spectacle appears in. They mediate our social, pubic life, and thus our political community. As these spectacular interfaces become more immersive and hyperreal, the spectator's relationship to images is de-spatialized, and we are beckoned over thresholds into which our political recourse is highly damaged, if not destroyed. The arena in which our public, communitarian, and political recourses are expended does not belong to shared, material reality. The spectator is subsumed by images that promise democratic empowerment while simultaneously denying substantive outlet for democratic action. The cinema in the 21st century has a different social character than it did when it was a dominant form of spectacle. Today, cinematic spaces slow the spectator down, rather than awe them in the jostle like it previously did. Today, cinema suffers commercially because new media offer more effective thresholds. Spectator and spectacle both enter cinema spaces to *slow down*. Not to "escape" modern life, because movies are still a socially mediating and formative aesthetic medium, but to impose a dam on its flow and facilitate a space of contemplation where a spectator can confront their own life as spectator.

If Bazin helped establish, or identified, an historical telos for the cinema, of total realism, then what are we to make of the classical cinematic apparatus as this teleology leaves the "cinema" behind? The qualities of Bazin's realism are complex and not easily reducible to singular phenomena amongst the ubiquity of 21st century media. In his essay "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" he distinguishes two trends between 1920 and 1940. They were practiced either by "those directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality. By 'image' I [Bazin] here mean, very broadly speaking, everything that the

representation on the screen adds to the object there represented."[9] Cinematic realism for Bazin was a set of techniques that cultivated the revelation of reality to the spectator in its ambiguity and indeterminacy. If Soviet montage theory posited that the fundamental element of film was the *shot*, its formal construction and position relative to other shots, then Bazin believed that the fundamental material of film lay, as it were, on the other side of the screen, in the reality it depicted, and montage damaged or manipulated that reality, which should be revealed rather than constructed.

Part of this essay's project is to identify, not what new media's relationship is to an a priori established "reality" on the other side of its screens, but, what has happened to what we call "reality" under the dominion of the spectacle. For example, according to Debord, reality is now a highly formalized and constructed social milieu that we take as being natural, but which is in fact subsumed and disseminated by images: "reality emerges within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real." (*Thesis 8*)[10] The once unitary reality that is replaced, or covered, by the fragmented and sewn images of the spectacle, does not constitute the disappearance of reality. Reality is formalized and reformed by the materialization of capital that becomes the spectacle. It might seem as if this type of image-making aligns itself with Bazin's concept of artists "putting their faith in the image", rather than in reality, but I would argue that this formalization of reality within images commits an image's relationship to neither Bazin's "image" nor "reality". A window onto reality provided by a screen, even as it contributes to the reification of that reality as such, is still a window onto *reality*, in both Bazin's and Debord's theories. Again, the question

---

[9] Bazin, "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," in *What is Cinema? Vol. 1*, 24.

[10] Debord, *Society*, 3.

is what do we make of the historical apparatus of cinema as our screens, becoming ever thinner, crisper, more portable, leave it behind? Another example to finally clarify the contemporary relevance of Bazin for this essay: The New York Times virtual reality app, which represents 360 degree, immersive land/soundscapes are developed, seemingly unitary and perceptually quite convincing, to envelop the spectator in the environments of their news stories via a simple and portable technological apparatus. It is a case in which the formal promises of the cinema are taken beyond what the cinematic apparatus can accommodate. The images are constructed to reveal the recorded reality to the viewer more completely. It as an experiential step (or steps) beyond what Flaherty did with *Nanook of the North*. The making of an image out of the world will always incur a perspective short of experiential reality (or beyond it), as well as a kind of damage or reduction of that reality before it was recorded.[11] Although the images of elaborate and immersive virtual reality require more formal techniques than the images of Flaherty, the objective is still to provide for the viewer an experience of the recorded reality minus the formal intrusions of montage shallow depth, etc. "Montage as used by Kuleshov, Eisenstein, or Gance, did not show us the event; it alluded to it."[12] Virtual reality environments do not "allude to" the event, they reveal it, quite convincingly, constructed as it may be, as the spectacle delineates the

---

[11] For Bergson and then for Deleuze in his cinema books, images are defined as a concept that exist between the imaginative procreations of human consciousness and the material fundaments of the external world. They are an interlinked network of ever-present phenomena (I, for example, am an image, as are you, and the earth, etc.) which, as they are ascertained by our senses, are constantly in flux, in present duration, between our inner minds and the external environments from which we glean them. Images in this sense do not refer to, say, a painting, or a cinematic image. They always already exist, and when cinema makes an "image", it slices, as Deleuze would say, that appearance from the already constituted and fluxing Image the presupposes it. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013, 2010).

[12] Bazin, "Evolution," 25.

boundaries of new realities. Similar arguments can be made for video games, another post-cinema medium that Rodowick has identified as being definitively "cinematic".

Homay King, in her book *Virtual Memory*, makes the argument that seemingly new forms of artistic practice and image making, such as the digital arts associated with the silicon dream of "virtual" transcendence of the body by the mind, are in fact realizations of the latent virtual content of previous forms of image making. She writes: "New forms of image making are not definitive breaks from the old, nor are they simply its filial offspring. They are the gleaned revivals of what was already contained there as virtual possibility and the extension of these possibilities into new and unexpected terrain."[13] This argument is closely aligned with that of Rodowick, when he notices that much of "new media" is not in fact new at all, but the perpetuity of cinematic forms carried over from its inception (and, if Bazin's thesis in "The Myth of Total Cinema" is to be applied, as I believe it should, some of these "new" forms, especially related to so-called virtual reality, have been latent in aesthetic practice and theory since the early 19th century; well before the invention of cinema, its "guiding myth" had been developed); "…cinema has not yet been invented!" And it might even be a relic of the past by the time it *is* "invented". The point here is that however its aesthetic genealogy is conceptualized, the "cinematic" still flourishes in multifarious iterations of the digital spectacle, and the historical untimeliness of contemporary cinema, that is, as in *cinema-proper*, charges it with potentialities, to un-substantiate and destabilize the relationship between spectacular representation (images) and the ideological content hidden therein. The possibilities here are finite to the extent that new models that movies can offer for the body and for subjecthood can be put into practice in the real

---

[13] Homay King, *Virtual Memory: Time-Based Art and the Dream of Digitality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015) 88.

world, as a catalyst for thought, self-reflection, political action, and the remapping of public and private territories, but infinite to the extent of the possible narratives and creative methods that might contain these models. A kind of praxis can be established between the philosophizing of subjects by the camera and the way spectators might claim for their own bodies and thoughts, their different uses, behaviors, powers, none sanctioned by the popular image structures that dominate our self-definition.

One quality of movies contributing to its contemporary commercial lag is that we must leave our homes,[14] and we cannot carry it on our bodies. It is not a corporeal accessory. Paradoxically, as our media becomes more portable and universal, the material conditions of the postmodern subject are more notably at odds with their spectacular image. There is an historical interval that has opened, a growing tension between our bodies and the society of the global spectacle. Before discussing the aesthetic possibilities of reimagining the subject and its body, this tension must be expounded. Much can be gleaned about the contemporary abstraction of the subject and their body (and about the ways they are beckoned to behave and to think) by examining the ways in which their body appears in art and media. Popular trends in aesthetics can be identified as symptomatic of the political needs of the hegemonic elite. When an opposition is formulated, as was done by Debord and the situationists, between subjects and objects, between spectators and the spectacle, the visual media that mediate our engagement with the world begin to reveal themselves as being composed of highly politicized phenomena. They serve societal functions beyond the seeming immediacy of their entertainment. Cinema occupies an intriguing position within this interval as its own legacy leaves itself behind to be realized by

---

[14] Except when we watch on devices such as laptops, but television is a medium more popular on and conducive to these platforms.

new and digital media. From this perspective, the cinema, including its classical, even commercial, apparatus, can potentially be opened as possessing new functions in spectacular society. As the spectacle's social function is increasingly enhanced by immersive media, integrating images into our lives, and vice versa, the cinema now becomes, for what it withholds, newly politicized. Some historical thoughts are obligatory to contextualize these points.

Neoliberalism and the Bipolar Body

Our bodies had been fully implicated as principal objects in the global economy, and the ideological sovereignty of those in power became shrouded from veritable protest. We disappeared as political subjects. Research in neurochemistry and the functions of dopamine in the brain opened a new frontier for economists and marketers in the early 1980's. Advertisers studied how pleasure can be exploited to catalyze consumer spending[15], reducing not just consumer choices but the reaches of social and psychological life to the brutality of cross-benefit analyses. The ontological status of the body morphed and became economized more intricately than it had previously been. Neoliberalism inundated us; we became wholly chartered, absorbed within the monistic world in which all is measured against financial valuation, where there is "merely sentiment, experiences of pleasure and pain that fluctuate silently inside the head," as

[15] And this has reached heights unforeseeable before the ubiquity of smartphones Gamification, the strategy of using elements of video games in advertising, such as accruing emblems and leveling up, has provided companies the opportunity to harness the "reward" affect naturally dosed in our brains by the release of dopamine to associate their products in our minds with happiness. Fitocracy, for example, is a fitness social media app which incorporates the unlocking of achievements for completing workouts, as well as live coaches and experts showering complements on subscribers.

William Davies describes the universal metric of finance colonizing the deep recesses of the body. It was a spatial reconfiguration more than anything else that allowed for this reconceptualization of the body, as labor became more localized in our private spaces with the benefits of home computers, and commodities such as cell phones made personal accessories out of communication technologies. Our bodies became networked. We chased a conception of happiness that was quantifiable, distinctive from money, but *always indirectly measurable in financial terms*, as Davies writes: "…money itself is not the most important thing in life, but it is the perfect measure for anything that we do consider important."[16]

Giorgio Agamben discusses how the concept of the self in Western thought became confused in the modern world. He distinguishes two definitions of the life passed through the traditions of Western Civilization from the Greeks: *zoè* and *bios*. The first refers to life in its bare form, the fleshy body, mankind as an animal with animalistic needs, while the latter refers to the life of the subject in social life, as a political subject. He discusses Aristotle's master-slave relationship to clarify. The master in the relationship has *bios*, sovereignty over the slave, whose life is reduced to mere *zoè* as a result of the relationship. The master's public life is made possible by the exclusion of the slave, so political life is sanctified by power to exclude, and by reducing the excluded to the status of biological bodies. The slave does not work when they labor, because the work belongs to the master; the slave *uses his body* to enact the *master's* work, and so the two are simultaneously conjoined and separated by this relationship. Because the slave is defined by the uses of their body, they do not have a soul, according to Aristotle. The soul belongs to *bios*, and it commands the body, and because the slave has only their body, they

---

[16] William Davies, *The Happiness Industry: How the Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-*Being (Brooklyn: Verso, 2015) 53.

have no command. Agamben writes: "the relation between master and slave and that between soul and body are defined by one another and even that we must attend to the first if we want to understand the second. The soul is to the body as the master is to the slave."[17] And it is from one another that they derive their identities as such. In the modern world, Agamben argues, we are all, as citizens, effectively stripped of our political selves, of our *bios*, and reduced to *zoè* in that we can always be stripped of our rights as citizens and put in the category of the state of exception, like the Japanese were when we put them in internment camps, or like the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay are stripped of due process. It is well known that this is a power that the state has, and so we are always already reduced to *zoè*.

Agamben begins the final book of his multi-volume study *Homo Sacer* with some comments on Debord, and what Agamben perceives as a paradox in situationist praxis. On the one hand, he notes, the theory of the spectacle positions the subject as a passive observer of their own spiritual[18] life, and of their own potential as a politically qualified being. Life in this sense is hollow. At the same time Debord, in his autobiographical text *Panegyric*[19], celebrates an enriched personal life, highlighting intense friendships, ebullient nights of drinking and escapades, utilizing both text and photographs as if to canonize a *way of living* beyond the enslaving strictures of disempowered spectatorship. Agamben refers to Debord in *The Use of Bodies* only in the prologue, to contextualize his arguments within a kind of fissure of lived

---

[17] Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of* Bodies (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015) 4.

[18] The term "spiritual" is loaded. Debord uses it, and this reveals the utopianism in his philosophy. The spectator is stripped of abstract, innate qualities – the subject's spirit – which must be revived in opposing the spectacle. The subject as an ideal social being can only reemerge once the spectacle is destroyed.

[19] Debord, *Panegyric* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2004).

experience between representation and corporeality, but this contextualization can be extrapolated to characterize the broader formulation of subjective life in spectacular society. *The spectacle formulates its spectators as* zoè, *by imposing that they occupy the role of passive spectator*. Debord already describes citizens under spectacular domination as slaves: "The abundance of commodities – that is, the abundance of commodity relations – amounts to nothing more than an *augmented survival.*" (*Thesis 40*)[20] This "survival" belongs to the category of *zoè,* as there is little critical engagement in the political dimension of this life. Richard Gilman-Opalsky, in his book *Spectacular Capitalism*, elaborates on Debord's theses and discusses the spectacle in more practical terms: "A spectacle is a particular strategic interpretation of the world that functions as an operational logic (i.e. ideology) that effectively organizes society in both structural and superstructural terms."[21] The spectacle functions via the matriculation of its spectators into its discourses, and he reiterates Debord that we are *always already formulated as spectators in/of our own lives.* For Opalsky, when we discuss politics, as we are encouraged to do as "voters" in a democracy, we are participants in a discourse that does not include the material actualities of the terms to which we refer – "…we do not have direct experience of capitalism. That is, we do not experience the capitalist world as a thing outside of ourselves, as an object with a physical address that we encounter, but rather as a set of organizational principals that shape and mediate our experience and our original comprehensive understanding of the world."[22] In other words, the economic and socio-political foundation of our society is

---

[20] Debord, *Society*, 15-16.

[21] Richard Gilman-Opalsky, *Spectacular Capitalism: Guy Debord and the Practice of Radical Philosophy* (Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, 2011) 15.

[22] Ibid., 9.

something we accept before we even comprehend its meanings or ramifications, because its logic is baked into the landscape of images. As we are formulated by the spectacle as spectators, adopting the ideologies of the ruling class, we internalize this logic as being inevitable. So, veritable, *structural* change is strictly forbidden by the discourses we enter as subjects, and it is forbidden not explicitly, but by the fundamental nature of the imagistic landscape that gives that discourse its boundaries. An example given by Opalsky of how we are governed as subjects is via the spectacle of anarchism. Political ideologies and "isms" are not directly lived or understood, as was already noted; we come to terms with them through their spectacles. And while anarchism, misconstrued as it is, is entirely unacceptable in contemporary debate, it nonetheless plays a conspicuous role in our political discourses and is invoked often by pundits and talking-heads:

> One could […] argue that a kind of spectacular anarchism *does* function as an operational logic – in the manner of a constant reminder of our dependence on state power that thereby helps to acculturate widespread acceptance of the "normal person," the "citizen-subject" who is "upstanding" and law-abiding at all times. This is at least how the caricature of anarchism is used, and in this way it *does* lurk behind the whole of spectacular society as a kind of ghost that haunts the system like a warning of the terrible danger that could come from rebellion.[23]

We are raised from birth amongst signals of the ruling class' ideology, and today we even carry this landscape in our pockets. The very logic of our environment predetermines the acceptable terms of our discourses, and commit us to the margins of their prescribed rationality. George Orwell's Newspeak, the language developed by Big Brother to control its population, is an unnecessary contrivance in advanced spectacular society. The controls are surreptitiously

---

[23] Ibid., 15.

embedded in the commodity form, and they develop into specific, discursive spectacles of anarchism, socialism, capitalism, etc. When we discuss these terms, for example, it is not grounded in actual experience or even information, but rather in the elaborate *appearances* of these ideologies, unreal but nevertheless dominant of our discourses.

The spectacle considered here as an environment or landscape we dwell in yields fruitful revelations. Agamben theorizes the observation of landscapes by the subject. The context in which he writes this is a study of Heidegger and the difference between humans and animals to comprehend their respective relationships to their environment. An animal's perception of its environment is restricted because "it remains a prisoner of the immediate relationship with a series of elements […] that their receptive organs have selected in the environment." The animal cannot see the "open" world, the whole, that exists beyond this restricted, experiential scope, as *homo sapiens* can. However, humans can only comprehend this "openness" by recognizing their own inability to enter it (the open access to the whole): "The openness of the world begins in the human being precisely from the perception of a non-openness" (to which animals are ignorant). Agamben sets up a discussion of the perception of landscapes:

> One can comprehend what landscape is only if one understands that it represents, with respect to the animal environment and the human world, an ulterior stage. When we look at a landscape, we certainly see the open and contemplate the world, with all the elements that make it up […]; but these things, which are already no longer parts of an animal environment, are now, so to speak, deactivated one by one on the level of being and perceived as a whole in a new dimension. We see them as perfectly and clearly as ever, and yet we already do not see them, lost – happily, immemorially lost – in the landscape. Being […] is suspended and rendered inoperative, and the world, having become perfectly in-appropriable, goes, so to speak, beyond being and nothing. No longer animal nor human, to the one who contemplates the landscape is only landscape. *That person no longer seeks to comprehend, only look* [my italics]. If the world is the inoperativity of the animal environment, landscape is, so to speak, inoperativity of inoperativity, deactivated being. And negativity, which inhered in the world in the form of the nothing and non-openness – because it comes

> from the animal closure, of which it was only a suspension – is now dismissed.[24]

It is from this perspective that the spectacle as conceived of as a landscape contains latent potentialities for subversion. As the spectacle always already deactivates subjects of their political life, it enacts for the subject the activity they cannot enact themselves, and screens it. It is the spectacle of the subject's becoming spectacle, *and can therefore be read as such, and responded to.*[25] In the distinction between *bios* and *zoè*, and the separation of soul and body that preoccupied Greek philosophy of selfhood, the spectacle commits its spectators to the role of *zoè*, then reproduces the spectator's own reduction. The spectacle must therefore take on a new role of its own, in response to the dangers of its spectators becoming knowledgeable of their spiritual depravity. *The spectacle must address the poverty of its spectators, and absorb it; otherwise, we become privy.* The specifics of this poverty change historically, and the images respond accordingly, but the point is that these images can be read in order that we better understand *ourselves.*

One of the great successes of the spectacle is that it utilizes this differentiation between soul and body that has dominated western political thought and returns the soul to the spectator, who has been stripped of it, but in the form of images that do not in fact belong to them. The bare life that defines citizenship in so-called western democracies is given a show of its own spirit. Formulated as a spectator, the subject as *zoè* is consecrated, and the subject as *bios,* which would appear to be necessary for a functioning democracy, is outsourced to the landscape of

---

[24] Agamben, *Bodies*, 89-91

[25] It is true that there is a circularity to this logic, wherein the subject/spectator, to resist the representational logic of the spectacle, must first pass into it, and so it is a resistance that depends on that which it resists.

commodities-as-images, which citizens as *zoè* knowingly fashion for themselves, and are alienated from. In doing so, we construct ourselves as alienated subjects as we construct the spectacle that subjugates us. And this becomes increasingly more problematic in the digital, internet age, when identifiable sources of information, such as production companies, major news outlets, professional publishing, etc., give way to self-publishing, social media news, blogging, YouTube music criticism – in other words, when the authority to "create" and more significantly to disseminate is in the citizenry's hands. This structure of information exchange is still heralded as a new freedom. The internet belongs to all of us! But perhaps what has occurred is a qualitative shift in the *relationship* the spectator has to information and art? Regardless of the veracity of that information, as *ceaselessly reconstituting ourselves as spectators* in a world we ourselves are creating the appearances of, are we not forsaking the dream that *art can be a political act*, such as it was conceived by the situationists, and as well by Brecht and the Frankfurt School, etc.? That art can change our lives beyond the paltry sense in which it is usually marketed as "triumphant!" or "life changing!" – "life" as in *zoè.* You will watch such-and-such movie and be brought-to-tears, or made to laugh, etc., without risking any *actual* change in the way you formulate yourself as a political subject.

Examples of this fundamental interplay between spectator and spectacle are common in video games, i.e. first-person-shooters, where the player is charged with accomplishing important social or political agendas, from rescuing key operatives to saving the entirety of mankind from extra-terrestrial incursion; or, the popular genre of apocalyptic zombie fiction, which takes the critique a bit further still: the majority of mankind is utterly reduced to *zoè*, to their basest animalistic impulses, but the protagonist/s (we) having retained for ourselves social autonomy and an ethical will, need to bring the cliché child to the coast, the last hope for

mankind, or discover the antidote for the virus and establish a new society to reclaim from the rubble the future of civilization; or, and this example is more prescient and immediate, the forms in which we behave "politically" on the internet, particularly on social media: we invent avatars of ourselves that do not *actually even exist* (although they may share our names, our appearances, etc.) and re/post articles from popular news sources, often without reading them, just because we were inspired by the headlines; or, we share truncated and spontaneous thoughts we might have about topical issues, submitting ourselves to the cloud, outsourcing our corporeal responsibility to veritable political action.

This bipolar utilization/manifestation of the subject, in which they confirm themselves as a dis-empowered member of democratic society by contributing to the spectacle that subjugates them, leads to further bifurcations and even contradictions of their lived experience as *zoè.* As the spectacle is increasingly dependent upon corporeal immersion, we are interpellated[26] as fleshy, bare beings, to enter spaces which leave us susceptible to the winds of the market. These include immersive spaces of escape, such as virtual realities, and other spaces that divert the subject from corporeal life, such as digital cloud spaces like the internet.[27] We can enter these spaces from various thresholds, small and large, and aurally, etc. We do not even know what the internet is, but there are phenomena that we can access by entering it, and constructing ourselves

[26] Implicit in a critique of the spectacle is the ideological ripeness of the subject/spectator posited by Althusser. We cannot shirk ideology, it is "the air we breathe", to quote Slavoj Zizek. We are interpellated as subjects by institutional apparatuses that exploit our incessant need for ideological content, typically unconscious. The spectacle is a discourse between external world and the inner lives of subjects, mediated by images, that interpellates its spectators to the ideological content of those in power. See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," accessed on December 16, 2016, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm (Orig. pub. 1970).

[27] I am not making a regressive argument against the progress of Silicon Valley and of these technologies – the possibilities are encouraging, but an unremitting critique of their dangers as we move forward in their development will be necessary to contend with the overwhelming pleasures that they provide.

as avatars within it, and these phenomena certainly do exist, and they often want to sell us things. They tell us we can be happy, and that our fear and anger can be mitigated, and that fear is actually good, and pleasure too, of course, we can be pleasured, and we can interact with friends. On and on. On interfaces that mediate our psychic escape from embodied life.[28]

Hans Magnus Enzensberger, in his essay "Theory of Tourism", describes tourism as a form of travel with roots in Roman society, but popularly emerging in the 19th century when industrial labor engendered the bourgeoisie as the ruling and organizing class. As the world shrunk due to safer and more efficient travel methods, and as the growing bourgeoisie had accumulated expendable capital for pleasure, the Romantic era's vision of the individual's escape from banal life to mythic lands become tenable. Those "mythic lands" became foreign cultures, and people began traveling for pleasure and escape. The Other's culture became transmuted into a "folkloric" escape from capitalist civilization. "To the degree that bourgeois society closed itself, the bourgeois tried to escape from it – as tourist."[29] Here Enzensberger establishes a dialectic of tourism, wherein the modern subject tries to escape the banality of labor and general modern life by traveling, but in doing so further implicates themselves into society's hegemonic logic. The Silicon dream again transfigures that Romantic longing, this time into our pockets. Our bodies seek "experiences" on the one hand and endure boredom on the other, and mental illnesses that, in the overdeveloped world, are reaching clinical high levels. We enjoy release from banality through the very spectacular media with which that banality is bound up.

---

[28] There is a sensory-affective dimension to these media that further immerse the subject into their experience of them. Swiping, scrolling, even the habit of reflexively reaching into your pocket or bag to respond to vibrations or customizable jingles constitute a qualitative leap in the ways we interact with media.

[29] Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Theory of Tourism," accessed on December 16, 2016, https://mestrantroponova.files.wordpress.com/2008/11/hans-magnus-enzensberger.pdf (Orig. pub. 1958).

Reduced to *zoè*, the practical eclipse of political life (or the threat if one does not operate within the sanctions of established discourses) leads to a position of animal vulnerability to the excessive impulses and commodities of pleasure.

One quality that defines our time is the overwhelming quantity of goods and information that flood our perception in the "overdeveloped" world. Because our bodies are so immersed within the ideological fields of this economic overdevelopment, we become implicated as superfluous ourselves, reproducing the images and signs of overdevelopment, its spectacle, both as consumers and as laborers in finance, retail, the arts, communications, customer service, jobs, etc. The excesses of our bodies and of their infinite potential uses are a danger to 21st century capitalism: "What if the greatest threat to capitalism, at least in the liberal West, is simply lack of enthusiasm and activity? What if, rather than inciting violence or explicit refusal, contemporary capitalism is just met with a yawn?"[30] Davies describes the interests of the World Economic Forum shifting from crisis management after the recession of 2008 to "happiness", the pleasure of the subject and their body, since. He argues, I think convincingly, that the reason for this is that the greatest impediments to economic growth today are psychological ones – depression, anxiety, *boredom*. The markets have responded to develop products that measure the health of our bodies in real time, such as Fitbit watches that keep you on top of your exercises and bodily energy, or smartphones, which permit immediate entertaining reprieve from banality. Contemporary culture makes images out of our qualitative bodily and emotional states, images that we can interact with and attempt to perfect, in hopes that our bodies, mysterious to us, will become perfected as well. It is one of the pressing necessities of the disintegrating spectacle to

---

[30] Davies, *Happiness*, 105.

perpetually recreate itself out of the superfluity of its spectator's bodies, which, if they were not treated to a show of their own emotionality and usefulness, would likely devote energy to confronting their own spectacle.

This is to return to a concept of boredom that is subjectively empowering for the spectator, and today even dangerous to those in power. Siegfried Kracauer championed boredom as evidence of the subject's "presence". For him, there is a psychic split between the spiritual "self" and our external conditions. When we shirk boredom (today with immediately available entertainment on demand) we are losing our Self to the hastening illusions of contemporary culture:

> people whose duties occasionally make them yawn may be less boring than those who do their business by inclination. The latter, unhappy types, are pushed deeper and deeper into the hustle and bustle until eventually they no longer know where their head is, and the extraordinary, radical boredom that might be able to reunite them with their heads remains eternally distant for them.[31]

The state of boredom is the subject's connectedness to the intolerability of certain conditions of life, and those well-adjusted enough to function without boredom's persistence are indeed detached from those conditions of socio-economic and ideological oppression. "[I]f indeed one is present, one would have no choice but to be bored by the ubiquitous abstract racket that does not allow one to exist, and, at the same time, to find oneself boring for existing in it."[32] And the disintegrating spectacle, in having to attend to the multifarious pathologies of the contemporary subject, has the impossible task of transmuting the societal dangers of boredom into

---

[31] Siegfried Kracauer, "Boredom," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) 331.

[32] Ibid., 334.

entertainment, by palliative rather than curative measures of pleasurable immersion. Boredom, for Kracauer, has a radical potential to release the subject from the "hustle and bustle" that disempowers them. The contemporary spectacle aims to eliminate that radical boredom, always acting as a threshold into spaces in which the spectator is entertained, thus eradicating boredom's utopian possibilities. The contemporary spectacle represents active rather than contemplative bodies, precisely to combat contemplation. And the landscapes we traverse, especially the urban grids, beckon us into the ramping speed of spectacular immersion. But it is not just localized in cities: it is a technological feat of the 21st century to realize the portability of screens with which to interface the subject's immersion anywhere.

If there is a mythically utopic idea of tourism that the subject holds as a means for escape from the conditions of modern life, various media which seek to transport the spectator to worlds other than their own are likewise utopic, in a sense. Foucault's concept of heterotopic spaces accounts for the material, spatial realization of "utopias" such as mirrors. A utopia is by definition unreal and unrealizable in actual space, but certain spaces can enworld utopic unreality, and these are what Foucault terms heterotopias. Among other examples, he provides the mirror:

> I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. […] The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.[33]

---

[33] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," accessed on December 16, 2016, http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf (Orig. pub. 1984) 4.

A heterotopia is an actual space that facilitates a transgression with the virtual, without it coming into being. Foucault cites cinema as another heterotopia "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible."[34] A spectator enters the space of the cinema to experience the projection of a world onto a screen that is incompatible with the actual world they inhabit. The heterotopia is always short of the cinematic world's materialization, but nonetheless *real*, because of its fixation in the actual space of the cinema that it and the spectator simultaneously occupy. What if this concept of the heterotopic space is extrapolated to platforms such as the New York Times virtual reality app? It is a platform that belongs to the "cinematic" medium of VR, but one of the significant differences between it and the classical cinematic apparatus is that it is not spatially fixed, nor is its image virtually or physically beholden to the localization of the spectator, who can theoretically experience it in a vacuum, a vacuum that *becomes the enworlded reality of the spectator.* The immersive realism of many new media entail the despatialization of both the subject and the reality they occupy.[35]

The cinema screens a world for the spectator spatially and temporally framed as separate from their existential reality. It subjugates the spectator. It does not fully immerse, but draws our attention elsewhere, and screens patterns of thought that we enter and, willingly or not, move the images of our imaginations to. There is a dialectical antagonism between the formal image structures of a movie and the structures of the images conjured in our consciousness. This thesis is essentially Eisensteinian, in that a film and its viewer enact a dialectical relationship that

---

[34] Ibid., 6.

[35] It is a joy to watch a body experience virtual reality goggles from the outside. Depending on the content of the virtual experience, they often flail and stumble and shriek. Their body obviously occupies the *actual* space where they are at, but without any sensory-motor connection. It is as if their occupying space becomes a burden hindering the fruition of the world they literally, phenomenologically experience.

ultimately results in a change in the ideological character of the spectator,[36] which has led critics of Eisenstein to claim that he is inherently propagandist.[37] Of course, if you accept Eisenstein's theory, there is the risk of cinema being a statist or nationalist or politicized manipulator. But, regardless of his intentions, or our opinions of his films, if his theory of the ideological functionality of the spectator/spectacle dialectic is correct, and I think it is quite convincing, then this manipulation of spectator occurs regardless of who creates or funds cinematic images, and for whatever purpose. And it is not so much that filmic images model ways of behaving, as they and the way they are linked together model ways of thinking yourself as a fixed perspective (though not fixed as an ideological subject) in relation to, most immediately, the world of the film, and then the reality to which you return.[38] When we watch a movie we often think like it thinks, in the same directions, at the same speed, although always as a potential antagonist to its forms and embedded ideologies, etc. This spectator/spectacle relationship, and the historical

---

[36] Sergei Eisenstein, "A Dialectical Approach to Film Form," in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1949).

[37] Bazin, "Evolution". He argued that montage, by arrogating for itself the function of manipulating reality to the point of formulating a perspective for the viewer, lacked hermeneutic openness and ambiguity. He thus preferred the techniques of deep focus and long takes characteristic of Jean Renoir, Orson Welles, and the Italian neo-realists, etc.

[38] The most effective manipulation of the spectator by images would be carried out by a style such as continuity editing, wherein the technical illusions that construct a movie disappear, and thus the viewer disappears as completely as possible into the film world, which one takes as being perceptually "real". Jean Baudrillard has argued that as cinema becomes more realistic, it loses its magic. It is precisely in those moments that appear flawed, and which remind the spectator that they are watching a movie, that cinema is most effective. This perspective highlights a trajectory in cinematic realism that makes film more dangerous from the perspective of those who criticize the propagandist nature of movies. These flaws that Baudrillard celebrates make the viewer less susceptible to the enticing "reality" of a movie, a situation that can inspire the viewer to accept its ideological content without the resistance of their self-awareness of being a spectator. See Jean Baudrillard, "History: A Retro Scenario," in *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994).

precarity of the medium as we go deeper into the 21st century, are conditions from which we can reevaluate the relevance of movies in constructing ourselves as indeterminate subjects.

The Integrated Subject

The functional parsing, cutting up, and reconstituting of the body that occurs when the unitary duration of lived experience recedes into the spectacle poses problems about what it is to be/have a body in the first place. Debord defined a new stage of the spectacle in 1988 as being a combination of the earlier *concentrated* and *diffuse* forms. This *integrated* spectacle developed in France and Italy, but quickly became dominant in the United States by the mid-1980's. It combined the concentrated spectacle of supreme leadership (i.e. of Stalin) under which the subject is forced to assume deference to conditions imposed via the strict and overt manipulations of the appearances of/by heads of state, with the diffuse spectacle of commodity abundance. The diffuse form proved more effective, subtly permeating the contours of reality, obscuring it and constructing a vast, illusory "reality", constituted of images which we take as being natural, but which are in fact the materialization of the social elite's ideology. The spectator's incessant confrontation with images enforces that they absorb the ruling class's ideology as pertaining to human nature, and thus as being the-way-things-*should*-be. We come to accept the forms of behavior and subjectivity required in a highly competitive financial society that sustains itself with the expenditure of money by the consumer class and the social, corporeal, financial poverty of those who cannot keep up.

"The language of the spectacle consists of *signs* of the dominant system of production – signs which are at the same time the ultimate end-products of that system." (*Thesis 7*)[39] This "language" dictates our social relations, one of Debord's most famous theses, and once our bodies became integrated within the economy, and reality with the spectacle, little of our social or political life is untouched by spectacular discourse. Debord describes the aspects of integration:

> As regards concentration, the controlling center has now become occult: never to be occupied by a known leader, or clear ideology. And on the diffuse side, the spectacle has never before put its mark to such a degree on almost the full range of socially produced behavior and objects. For the final sense of the integrated spectacle is this – that it has integrated itself into reality to the same extent that it [is] describing it, and it is reconstructing it as it [is] describing it.[40]

Neoliberalism introduced to the nuanced-consumerist form of spectacular capitalism the "occult" image of the CEO, male or female, omnipresent, benevolent in appearance, because our submission was no longer compulsory. Compulsion is not relevant to a social structure that is becoming increasingly synonymous with reality, because the hidden ideological structures of that reality inaugurate the subject/spectator/citizen from birth. This holds serious implications for the political subjecthood and *bios* of the spectator.

Wendy Brown writes about the concerted efforts of neoliberal institutions to hollow us of our political subjectivity. We become "economized", and she impresses that the economization of the subject is not something that reveals itself to us consciously: "neoliberal rationality disseminates the *model of the market* to all domains and activities […] and configures human

---

[39] Debord, *Society*, 3.

[40] Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (Brooklyn: Verso, 1988) 9.

beings exhaustively as market actors".[41] She terms this new subject *homo oeconomicus,* acting in every domain as market objects. She uses the example of dating, a phenomenon radically transformed by the internet and smart phone apps, gamified by interfaces such as Tinder, and requiring new investments of time tweaking profiles, considering candidates, etc., in search for those posing little risk of disappointment or danger. Money figures into these decisions only to the extent that one pays for the dating service, and of course the date itself, but the logic of capital is invisibly present throughout the entire process. As our subjective prisms become economized, our recourse as democratic subjects diminished, and a fissure develops between the subject and the activity of politics. When the subject participates in the political process, as it were, then they are "political", and Brown's program here involves the hope of once again elevating the neoliberal subject to the position of being critical and informed, *public* in concern – a being of *bios*. She writes that the

> persistence of politics amid the destruction of public life and especially educated public life, combined with the marketization of the political sphere, is part of what makes contemporary politics particularly unappealing and toxic – full of ranting and posturing, emptied of intellectual seriousness, pandering to an uneducated and manipulable electorate and a celebrity-and-scandal-hungry corporate media.[42]

The logic of the scheme Brown lays out is classically Marxist: shifts in the economic base precede and are the roots of cultural phenomena the form the superstructure, as well our social relations which might constitute the subject as politically empowered. Neoliberal rationality emanates from the era's global financialization, the dramatic rise of jobs in the financial sector

---

[41] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2015) 31.

[42] Ibid., 39.

and the expansion of service and retail jobs as the global economies shifted from industrial labor.[43] With the majority-population working to uphold this economic model, we become tawdry in our interests and tastes, and are informed of politics via celebrities, etc.

A virtue of a critique of the spectacle in this context is that it hones in on the *superstructure*, which Marx largely ignored as secondary in his critique of capitalism, as formulating society's subjects. This perspective inverts the process by which the individual is hollowed of their *bios*, without dispensing with the fundamental Marxist sub/superstructure correlation. Walter Benjamin had already thought the superstructure as having a "metaphorical" relationship to the economic base, a position that branded him amongst his Frankfurt School colleagues as being "undialectical". Hannah Arendt describes some of the ramifications for this manner of interpreting objects within the superstructure in her introductory essay to Benjamin's *Illuminations*. There is a dual transference between the outward, expressive objects which appear to us, and the more abstract economic roots that cause them. To the "word from the sphere of the superstructure has been given back its sensual substructure, or, conversely, that a concept has been transformed into a metaphor,"[44] and this elevating of the role of the superstructure gave new life to the increasingly abstract and masturbatory theorizing about the isolated substructure that inveigled post-Marxist thought. For Benjamin, the "word" of the superstructure can be "read" to concretely understand the qualities of the base to which it corresponds. This mode of

---

[43] "…because labor is the only creator of commodities. The only way to prevent automaton (or any other less extreme method of increasing labor productivity) from reducing society's total necessary labor time is to create new jobs. To this end the reserve army of the unemployed is enlisted into the tertiary or 'service' sector, reinforcing the troops responsible for distributing and glorifying the latest commodities at a time when increasingly extensive campaigns are necessary to convince people to buy increasingly unnecessary commodities." Debord, *Society*, 18.

[44] Hannah Arendt, Introduction to *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, by Walter Benjamin (New York: Schocken Books, 2007) 13.

thinking the relationship between two estranged phenomena in Marxist philosophy introduced a path already pointed in the direction of a critique of the spectacle, and that the situationists elaborated upon. *The spectacle is the "word" we worship, without realizing that what we enshrine is not that poetry that moves us, but the ideological content it conceals, and which governs us.*

THE DISINTEGRATING BODY

The primary function of the spectacle is to transfer the ideology of the capitalist elite to the masses by turning that ideology into images, which dominate and direct the subject's experience of the world. The spectacle, Debord tells us, is capital accrued to the point where it literally becomes images, so, already, its society is one defined by a sense of excess and overdevelopment. The Marxist superstructure becomes not just the metaphorical lodestar that it was for Benjamin, but a substantive – *the fundamental* – political dimension, where democratic politics *appears* to persist, but in fact where the political subjectivity of the spectator is hollowed, enshrouding and protecting the ideological hegemony of the elite who oversee the economic base. This occurs once capital accumulates either under the auspices of a state (as in the concentrated spectacle form) or corporations (as in the diffuse), and in either case to a grandiose, excessive degree. McKenzie Wark discusses the conditions of the contemporary, disintegrating spectacle:

> In the early twenty-first century the idea gained force that pretty much everything can be sacrificed to the disintegrating spectacle, from which nothing much should be expected in return. Far from the care and

> management of the *biopower* of its subject populations, the state's role is rather to sacrifice the health and education of present and future populations by cutting taxes on finance capital and freeing the latter for yet more speculative investments, from which not much should be expected beyond a few menial jobs. Nor should the state invest in infrastructure for future industrial expansion.[45]

Finance must accumulate and flow at all costs, and the care of citizenry is an impossible end in such a globalized, competitive environment; but then what happens of the body? How is it to be kept attentive and busy? Once the spectacle exists on millions of portable screens, and effectively becomes corporeally accessorized, it begins to disintegrate, as there is no way for institutional sources to manage the imagistic landscape.

> The disintegrating spectacle chips away at centralized means of producing images and distributes this responsibility among the spectators themselves. While the production of goods is out-sourced to various cheap labor countries, the production of images is *in-sourced* to unpaid labor, offered up in what was once leisure time. […] Where once the spectacle entertained us, now we must entertain each other, while the vulture industries collect the rent. The disintegrating spectacle replaces the monologue of appearances with the appearance of dialogue. Spectators are now obliged to make images and stories for each other that do not unite those spectators in anything other than their separateness.[46]

Essentially, the spectacle disintegrates as the spectator becomes responsible for its dissemination.

If the primary function of the spectacle is the management of its spectator's ideology, then there is a secondary function, implied in the first – to absorb the subversive life-potential of its spectators. The concentrated form was originally inferior to the diffuse because its appearances were so obviously at odds with the reality they sought to conceal. "[I]t simply used

---

[45] Wark, *Disintegration*, 63.

[46] Ibid., 6.

police-state methods to transform people's *perception* of the world"[47] (*Thesis 105*), while the diffuse spectacle did not require such explicit coercion to ensure its dominance of our perceptions. Integration went even further, uniting the benefits of a concentrated ideological position with the diffuse and surreptitious mechanisms of that ideology being transmitted by subtle and free-seeming commodity exchange. "Spectacular government, which now possesses all the means necessary to falsify the whole of production and perception, is the absolute master of memories just as it is the unfettered master of plans which will shape the most distant future",[48] and "The spectacle has spread itself to the point where it now permeates all reality." While this was true of its integrated form, the *dis*integrating spectacle begins to undermine Debord's thesis of a progressively more totalizing spectacular structure. Excesses abound and overtake the material conditions that the spectacle safeguards. Wark notes the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre as being emblematic of this new stage in the development of the landscape of appearances. There are miles of superfluous commodities and garbage of the overdeveloped world, including roughly 80,000 Nike sneakers, casualties of the Hansa Carrier. Excesses of useless technological advancements, as annually new smartphone upgrades render millions of the previous year's models as trash. Wholly unimaginable and grotesque excesses of capital in shrinking pockets of private holders, as, in January of 2016 an Oxfam International study found that the 62 richest people in the world had the shared wealth equal to the poorest half of the earth's population.[49] And there are excesses of labor, increasingly located in the service, retail, or

---

[47] Debord, *Society*, 52.

[48] Debord, *Comments*, 10.

[49] This metric has been popular to cite since the Occupy movements and the 99% vs. the 1% formulation. The results are increasingly disturbing, so alarming that they defy rational response. It is as if the

finance industries. This labor is not productive in any societal or communal sense, and is driven by the laborer's necessity for wages to purchase food, shelter, etc. Its excessiveness produces for the subject excesses of boredom, stymied by the excesses of commodities that their wages afford, which are themselves excessively useless and boring.

Writing about the advent of urbanism in Europe and the aesthetics of modern impressionism that coincided, Wark argues that the ubiquitous spectacular relationship between the work of art and its observer began in the late 19th century, when urban cities distanced citizens from one another, and a new, visual means of socially integrating subjects became necessary. Images must address the spectator's needs, to hide from them the fact that that need cannot be met in lived experience, but only through representation. "The representation has to address the real desires, frustrations, boredoms of its public. Yet it must arrest these real qualities and make of them nothing more than spectacle."[50] Beyond instilling ideology, the 21st century spectacle must combat boredom. Contemporarily it has done this via subject immersion. The "biopower" of the subject, flouted by neoliberal society, rather than being attended to by economic or social programs, or safeguarded by the rebuilding of infrastructure or the protection of the environment and thus the "biopower" of future generations, is now representationally transmuted via our immersion into hyperreal worlds with little bearing on our actual one.

---

numbers are relegated to the dimension of fantasy before the socio-political implications can even set in. How else can the equivalent wealth of 62 people vs. 3,750,000,000 not infuriate one to action? It is an example of an excess gone so far that it disappears as such and begins to define its own limits and discourse. We internalize such vulgar inequality as not meriting any qualifier – it is merely the inequality natural to the freedoms afforded by advanced capitalist societies, the *natural conditions of life.* https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/jan/18/richest-62-billionaires-wealthy-half-world-population-combined.

[50] Wark, *Disintegration*, 38.

As the spectacle disintegrates and despatializes itself into immersive platform extensions of its subjects, the binding image is that of *little sister*, which Wark contrasts with the Big Brother of the concentrated spectacle. Femininity as beauty is the glue of disintegration – it serves all needs, all demographics, and commodifies the body anew. "Whole industries exist to find and groom actual bodies who might embody this abstract, ultimately philosophical figure, who is one of the central modes of the contemporary world of images." This image of the girl, he notes, is not racially specific, can be populated by a man instead of a woman, and does not even need to be human. The point is not this image's specific attributes, so much as that the spectacular, faux-unity it constructs for our social lives is one of *interiority*. "The Girl's utopia is domestic, but the domicile of the domestic is imagined as the whole world. The Girl makes every scene an interior, as if any place in the world could be made her private domain by her presence."[51] The spectacle of disintegration is an ubiquitous interiority. The coziness of private life is proffered by billboards and on subways, in strip clubs, in the immateriality of cellphones, in the reassuring and customizable voices of our GPS's, in the fan-fiction we get-off to, in our reality-TV-star's personalities, in Forever Twenty-One and DSW, our hair salon templates, our *hair*, in the click-bait promising to direct us toward the signs that will signal our soul-mate, in the talking heads that tell us we are well-informed before we have to prove it, in our workplaces, in the settings created by our acquiescent bosses who always ask how our day is going, and as the coziness creeps, it hollows itself, and everything domestic becomes tinged, as it once was but now slightly…different. Unfamiliar, unsafe-seeming, *boring*, and we try to get away, accrue our frequent flyer miles, parcel, compartmentalize, box-up, interiorize. And in response to The Girl

[51] Ibid., 198-199.

we get The Girl. Disintegration with disintegration. The mere representation of ecstasy or terror for banality and precarity. *Her*[52] dramatizes this environment in which individuals are sonically isolated in public by their headphones, and visually by screens. The A.I., and Scarlett Johansson's character, are domestic spectacles that fully immerse their owners into a domestic interior that has mapped itself onto public spaces. Siri, Alexa, etc., are feminine voices that are already beginning to bind and universalize the ways in which we access the spectacle. And *zoè* was associated from the start with the home. The domestic space was not one for the polis, and women, children, and the incapacitated were always, per Aristotle, bare life, mere bodies – men left the domicile and practiced politics. It is this distinction between domesticity and publicity, between "a community of the simply living and a political community,"[53] that makes a polis possible in the first place. It only exists in contrast to bare domestic life. The same distinction stands today, although the spatial configuration of the home now extends so far as what we conceive as being "public". So long as the spectacle lords over its subject's ideologies via the universal image of The Girl, we are domestic bodies in public, spectators of ourselves in the seeming-polis.

Disintegration, however, opens new avenues for resistance, as the weight of the creative efforts to construct the spectacle increasingly rests in the hands of spectators themselves, and as spectacular representation is increasingly marked by immersion. These new powers of resistance do not rest in our responsibilities as creators of the spectacle, they are formed as a result of our evolving relationship with the imagistic landscape. As the material conditions of western society

---

[52] *Her*, directed by Spike Jonze (Annapurna Pictures, 2013).

[53] Agamben, *Bodies*, 197.

become more violently disproportionate to the domestic, comforting images that shroud them, the spectacle is more recognizable as such to its spectators. This, to reiterate, is why immersion is so important to the survival of spectacular capitalism: *as the spectacle disintegrates, it must always regenerate itself from the excessive spiritual life of its subjects, their superfluous boredom, which would otherwise be directed towards productive self-empowerment and the regeneration of the subject's life as* bios *rather than* zoè. Immersion is thus the seminal tactic of today's spectacle; to generate immersive pleasure with which to indulge bored labor, but that release must always remain attainable only as spectacle, because the division of the subject, their once unified spiritual coherence, must now be represented rather than experienced as actual life, parceled rather than unified. The labor conditions that make the subject bored must remain for neoliberal power to sustain itself, and for capital to be further arrested by the financial elite. Boredom *must* belong to the subject under neoliberal rule, and the spectacle *must* absorb it with immersion. A chasm grows between the subject and their representation. To return to a quote from Debord: "…the final sense of the integrated spectacle is this – that it has integrated itself into reality to the same extent that it [is] describing it, and that it is reconstructing it as it [is] describing it." But this is less the case as the spectacle disintegrates. The spectacle is not easily localized as a monolithic phenomenon anymore, but is recognizable in hundreds of disparate media, most of which are frivolously crafted by spectators (i.e. memes) and thrown onto social media sites where they quickly disappear into the landscape. Once again, there is a considerable gap between lived experience and the image of life. In other words, the disintegrating spectacle does not totally or sufficiently provide an alibi for lived experience. What we see does not belong to us, and it takes greater immersive force to convince us that *we belong to/in it.*

CIRCULAR PROBLEMS; RESPATIALIZING THE SUBJECT

Agamben wrote scarcely of cinema but his essay *Notes on Gesture* is a provocative theoretical perspective. In it he claims that cinema was the medium par-excellence of the 20th century because in it modern civilization, whose subjects had lost their gestures – the coherent control of their bodies – "tries at once to reclaim what it has lost and to record its loss."[54] This introduces an interesting relationship between the spectator and the cinematic image, quite compatible with a critique of the spectacle, wherein cinema captures and screens for the spectator what has been pilfered from them. Cinema does not only try to regain what has been stolen but also to record the moment of theft. In the 21st century, perhaps what the subject has lost is a coherent spatial relationship to objects, with particular relevance from the perspective of the subject's existence as a spectator. In this context, the functionality of the cinematic apparatus places it in the philosophical realm of ethics as much as aesthetics, because the relation between the subject and the screen is a practical one, informing how the subject is constituted. The cinematic spectator-spectacle relationship is one that mediates the subject's care of themselves by confronting them with the very instant and formalization of spectacular plunder. "Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation."[55] (*Thesis 1*) Ultimately, what results from our relationship with images are new conceptual relationships with ourselves.

For Foucault, a subject's self-care is fundamental to ethics. Self-awareness was synonymous with self- "constitution" as an ethical being, always evolving as ones' relationship

---

[54] Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) 53.

[55] Debord, *Society*, 2.

to oneself evolves. This was an important point for Agamben in his discussion of the life of the subject. In Debord, he finds a separation between the subject's hollowed public life as a spectator, on the one hand, and the possibilities for private enrichment on the other. In Foucault, Agamben finds the development of a theory locating ethical enquiries in the subject's care of themselves, seeking "the truth of being human not in a doctrine but in a certain form of life […] subverting the current models of society".[56] The cinematic apparatus fixes the subject before images, spatializes spectator and spectacle, and then projects a world that does not belong to the subject, or does not any longer. In recording and screening that loss within the context of disintegration and despatialization, the cinematic spectacle enacts for its spectator a chasm that has grown between the subject and their own spectacular image. It forces the disintegrating subject to confront their own presence as a spectator, and to conform to its logic. And this spectacular re-spatialization, as the commodity form of images disperses, dissolves, disintegrates, etc., reorients the subject's self-relationship while it mediates their relationship with images. In other words, the space of the cinema operates as a kind of mirror, but not in the Lacanian psychoanalytic connotation. It is a heterotopic "mirror" in which the spectator observes the grand, societal (and global) gesture of the becoming-representational of their subjecthood and spiritual life. Foucault ends his essay on heterotopic spaces with an enticing argument. He briefly discusses the fixation of boats in the imagination of Western civilization. Boats are floating, enclosed spaces that rove across the boundless sea, and are the superlative heterotopic spaces in their capacity to mediate between Western man and his utopic visions. "In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of

---

[56] Agamben, *Bodies*, 103.

pirates."[57] He establishes a political dimension for heterotopias, as constructing spaces in which the collective imagination can fertilize its self-image (as, for example, adventurers rather than political spies). As a society loses its heterotopias, social and political coercions intervene. Conspicuously, Foucault does not expand upon his concluding argument regarding "civilizations without boats", but implies that a civilization without the re/enactment of its utopic visions must have those visions oppressed upon them by an outside source. It might also be speculated that societies minus heterotopic spaces seek to realize their imaginative potentials in unauthorized spaces, such as the case with civil disobedience, therefore justifying in the ruling class's perspective a police state.[58] In any case, the despatialization of the cinematic heterotopia by new media has political consequences for the neoliberal subject. With the reduction of these spaces into the portable and immersive un-spaces that dominate the contemporary spectacle, the subject's dreams become formalized in hyperrealities not localized in shared, communal space. Politics becomes stripped of those possibilities emergent in a citizenry's imagination, and stagnation ensues.

Part of the task of this essay has been to establish how the spectacle formulates its subjects/spectators, rather than to contemplate how to strategically take the spectacle on. As the subject is increasingly beleaguered by the discourses of the spectacle, it becomes difficult to ground a productive response. Jacques Rancière and Richard Gilman-Opalsky both identify a circular trap to critiquing the spectacle, related to the subject's confidence in themselves vis-à-vis the capacity to understand the truth in/behind images. It begins with Debord, who theorized a

---

[57] Foucault, *Other Spaces*, 9.

[58] Oppressed peoples typically do not have the capital to control heterotopic spaces such as ships, nor to garner representation in spaces such as the cinema. They must actualize utopia through arresting real spaces, such as via protest.

world in which the subject is separated from their own spiritual life which recedes into representation. The subject must reclaim it by interrogating the imagistic landscape that antagonizes them, and short circuit the spectacle by *détourning* it. Jean Baudrillard completes the first circuit of the circular paradigm that spectacular critique gets caught in by claiming that truthful reality has totally disappeared under the façade of its signs, and the subject has no possible method of retrieving what has been separated from them. This is the essence of his "cool" philosophy: that the spectator should accept and revel in the illusory theme park of the spectacle. This circularity is characterized by Rancière as the attempt to

> transform the ignorance of reality or the denial of misery into ignorance of the fact that reality and misery have disappeared; to transform the desire to ignore what makes us guilty into the desire to ignore the fact that there is nothing we need feel guilty about.[59]

Rancière wants to abandon the trappings of the left's critique of this society altogether and empower the subject by other means, while Gilman-Opalsky urges that we just abandon Baudrillard's critique at that point where he theorizes that we should be "cool" within the spectacle. The position of this essay is closer to that of Gilman-Opalsky, but Rancière's critique of the left's critique is well founded. In cinematic practice, Steve McQueen's films, particularly his short, experimental ones, intended for museum spaces, represent the circular paradigm in which the subject is caught. "Illuminer"[60] (2002) is a shot of the subject on a hotel bed lit only by the television, which McQueen has subsequently said portrayed images of war on the news. The subject is barely visible but for his confrontation with the spectacle of war.[61] It is only through

---

[59] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2011) 30.

[60] Illuminer, directed by Steve McQueen, 2002.

our confrontation with the spectacle that we are visible within its society, always formulated as *zoè*.

The hope is to examine how the subject is disempowered without abandoning the critique of the spectacle, "the clearest and most severe analysis of the miseries and slavery of a society that by now has extended its dominion over the whole planet".[62] In examining the social functions of the spectacle, and the methods by which it diminishes the dignities of its spectators, perhaps the subject can find recourse to combat the spectacle without succumbing to the circularity that has marked its critique. As with McQueen's experimental cinema, spatially situating the subject as an antagonist toward images, we can interrogate our very existence as spectators. When we enter the spaces of the cinema, we blatantly comport ourselves as spectators. In the era of disintegration, the cinema offers distinct possibilities for transgression, in which the subject's very subjugation to the spectacle is screened, just as the very pilfering of their gestures and spiritual life.

---

[61] There is a salient racial critique in McQueen's films as well, particularly in the ways that black bodies appear on screen. The spectacle, being a purveyor of the normative ideological content embedded in capital, generally excludes minorities. Capital itself is racist and thus the spectacle – capital-turned-image – is as well.

[62] Agamben, "Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*," in *Means Without End,* 73.

Bibliography

Agamben, Giorgio. *The Use of Bodies. Homo Sacer IV, 2.* Translated by Adam Kotsko. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015.

Agamben, Giorgio. "Notes on Gesture." In *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, 49-60. Translated by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

Agamben, Giorgio. "Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle."* In *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, 73-89. Translated by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." Accessed on December 16, 2016, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm [Originally translated by Ben Brewster and published by La Pensée, 1970.]

Arendt, Hannah. Introduction to *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, by Walter Benjamin, 1-55. New York: Schocken Books, 2007.

Baudrillard, Jean. "History: A Retro Scenario." In *Simulacra and Simulation*, 43-48. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994. [Originally published in France by Éditions Galilée, 1981.]

Bazin, André. "The Myth of Total Cinema." In *What is Cinema? Volume 1*, 17-22. Edited and translated by Hugh Gray. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967.

Bazin, André. "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema." In *What is Cinema? Volume 1*, 23-40. Edited and translated by Hugh Gray. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967.

Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution.* Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2015.

Davies, William. *The Happiness Industry: How the Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being.* Brooklyn: Verso, 2015.

Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle.* Translated by Ken Knabb. Canada: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014. [Originally published in Paris by Éditions, 1967.]

Debord, Guy. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle.* Translated by Malcolm Imrie. Brooklyn: Verso, 1998. [Originally published by Éditions, 1988.]

Debord, Guy. *Panegyric.* Volume 1 translated by James Brook. Volume 2 translated by John

McHale. Brooklyn: Verso, 2004. [Volume 1 originally published in Paris by Éditions, 1989. Volume 2 originally published in Paris by Librairie, 1997.]

Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle.* Directed by Guy Debord. Simar Films, 1974.

Eisenstein, Sergei. "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form." In *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, 45-63. Edited and translated by Jay Leyda. New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1949.

Enzensberger, Hans Magnus. "Theory of Tourism." Translated by Gerd Gemünden and Kenn Johnson. Accessed on December 16, 2016, https://mestrantroponova.files.wordpress.com/2008/11/hans-magnus-enzensberger.pdf [Originally published in 1958.]

Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias." Translated by Jay Miskowiec. Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité, 1984. Accessed on December 16, 2016, http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf

Gilman-Opalsky, Richard. *Spectacular Capitalism: Guy Debord and the Practice of Radical Philosophy.* Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, 2011.

Gunning, Tom. "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde." In *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, 70-76. Edited by Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011.

Jonze, Spike. *Her.* Joaquin Phoenix, Scarlett Johansson, Amy Adams. Directed by Spike Jonze. Annapurna Pictures, 2013.

King, Homay. *Virtual Memory: Time-Based Art and the Dream of Digitality.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

Kracauer, Siegfried. "Boredom." In *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, 331-334. Edited and Translated by Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995

Levin, Thomas Y. "Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord." In *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, 321-453. Edited by Tom McDonough. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002.

McQueen, Steve. *Illuminer.* Directed by Steve McQueen, 2002.

Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator.* Translated by Gregory Elliott. Brooklyn: Verso, 2011.

"Richest 62 People as Wealthy as Half of World's Population, Says Oxfam." The Guardian.

Accessed December 16, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/jan/18/richest-62-billionaires-wealthy-half-world-population-combined

Rodowick, D.N. *The Virtual Life of Film.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Wark, McKenzie. *The Spectacle of Disintegration: Situationist Passages out of the 20th Century.* Brooklyn: Verso, 2013.