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Abstract

When Guy Debord wrote *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967, he was criticizing a society that was saturated by mass media and the endless stream of representations they crank out. This article argues that the society of the spectacle as described by Debord has mutated into a new form, best described as the society of the machinery. In it, the focus on representations is complemented by an obsession with the machinery that produces said representations. The mechanism can be seen at work in phenomena as diverse as America's Next Top Model, the by-now obligatory Director's Commentary on DVD releases, or the success of Hollywood and television tourism. In the society of the machinery, the dominant ideological form is the debunking mode that combines a hermeneutics of suspicion with a conservative refusal of utopianism, making it a particularly effective ideological tool for pacifying society. The second part of the article traces how the change from spectacle to machinery has occurred. Drawing on the work of Boltanski and Chiapello, the article contends that the society of the machinery is a by-product of the Situationist critique of the spectacle. Contemporary capitalism has split the Debordian critique into the artist critique and the social critique, and has incorporated the former while neutralizing the latter.

Keywords

Capitalism, ideology, machinery, savviness, spectacle

Introduction

In the last decade or so we have witnessed a remarkable rise in interest in Situationism, both in and outside the academy, leading one commentator to speak of Situationism's 'strange respectability' (Swyngedouw, 2002). Although other thinkers within the

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Situationist realm, like Raoul van Eigem or Henri Lefebvre, have received their fair share of attention, the main focus has been on Guy Debord's work, especially his manifesto *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). One explanation is that many of the tendencies Debord describes can be seen to be at work in a heightened form in our post-1989, multi-media infested era. When thinkers like Steven Shaviro (2006) write about the *age of aesthetics*, or Jodi Dean about *communicative capitalism* (2009), or Jonathan Beller about the *cinematic mode of production* (2006) it is hard *not* to hear echoes of issues already raised in 1967 by Debord.

It is not surprising then, that the critical consensus surrounding Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* is that its relevance is increasing rather than decreasing. Only a handful of commentators have argued that Debord's analysis needs to be updated for the new era (e.g. Best and Kellner, 1999), while those that have declared it irrelevant are even fewer (e.g. Baudrillard, 1975; Debray, 1995). In this article, however, I argue that the society of the spectacle as described by Debord has mutated into a new form. In true dialectical fashion, so I argue, the Situationist critique has been absorbed within the capitalist mode of production, incorporating it in contemporary forms of the spectacle. For reasons that will become clear, I propose 'the society of the machinery' to describe this 'new and enhanced' version of the old spectacle. But I also argue that this mutation does not pose a serious challenge to Debord's analysis, since the rough contours of his analysis as well as its political implications remain as valid as ever. An analysis of the society of the machinery, then, needs to start from Debord's observations on the spectacle in order to refine it for the current conjuncture.

The society of the spectacle

If the title of Debord's manifesto has become somewhat of a household term it is also true that this came at the price of losing some of the political radicalism that invigorated the initial project. At the heart of the *Society of the Spectacle* is a vociferous critique of capitalism, as well as an attempt to update the Marxist analysis of commodity production to the postwar French context. Debord argues that 19th-century capitalism, focused as it was on the disciplining of labour in production, had been so successful that it had to change in order to remain economically viable. The answer was to be found in increasing its inroads into every aspect of human existence, not just production (an analysis Debord shares with both Adorno and the Italian autonomist tradition).¹ The consumerist society that was the result, worked in fundamentally different ways than the productivist period that preceded it. The earlier period needs productive and disciplined *workers* with the type of subjectivity described so succinctly by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2001 [1905]); the latter period needs hedonistic yet passive *consumers*, consumers that perform their economic function well, without challenging the status quo. For Debord, the name for the mechanism through which people are interpellated into such subject positions is 'the spectacle'. The term refers to the increasing role of the entertainment sector, not only as a commodity producer in its own right (the industry that produces cultural products through the commodity form), but also towards the way that ordinary commodities have become '*spectacularized*', objects to be looked at. A

cappuccino machine is not only an instrument to make coffee and heat up milk, it is also an aesthetic object (which is why you find so many of them in design shops instead of electronics shops); the packaging of meals in fast food restaurants is a substantial part of the cost, and is designed to entertain us while we are eating (even more pronounced in the case of kids' meals, where the entertainment function takes centre stage); even non-commercial social gatherings have been subjected to the logic of the spectacle, with flyers as invitations, or stag nights in uniforms; and political events are punctuated by photo-ops and other media-related orchestrations. This leads Debord to start his manifesto with the following nod to the opening paragraph of Marx's *Capital*:

In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation.

Followed by entry number 4:

The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.

Taken together, these two quotes set out the main theme of the manifesto. The spectacle is first and foremost an ideological mechanism that prevents people from taking direct control over their own life. If Debord's ideal is the autonomous, self-governing man (or woman) of council communism, in the society of the spectacle it is the spectacle that becomes autonomous and governs all of life. But that is also why the spectacle is such an effective ideological mechanism: because it presents itself as standing 'above' us we no longer recognize it as our own product. Like Feuerbach's God, the spectacle governs the people while negating that it is of their own creation. In short, in the spectacle, men (and women) dominate each other, but they do so by means of images.

For Debord the spectacle is intimately related to the concept of *separation*: not only does capitalism separate 'workers from the product of their labour', it also separates 'life from art, and spheres of production from consumption, which involve spectators passively observing the products of social life' (Best and Kellner, 1999: 133). Debord's answer to this increasing degree of separation is decidedly humanist: the aim is to overcome all forms of separation and restore the integral, non-alienated human being. Separation is a crucial element of his critique, because it also underpins his critique of trade unions as well as the then-existing communist regimes. In a long section of the manifesto he sketches a history of the Left as one of increasing separation of the Left leadership from the working class they were supposed to represent. Leninism (especially the Stalinist variety) and the labour aristocracy of the trade unions and social-democratic parties serve as important tipping points, as they perfectly illustrate the emancipatory failure of these representational organs. Paragraph 100:

The historical moment when Bolshevism triumphed for itself in Russia and social democracy fought victoriously for the old world [that is, during the First World War] marks the inauguration

of the state of affairs that is at the heart of modern spectacle's domination: the representation of the working class has become an enemy of the working class.

We are now in a better position to fully understand the crucial role of *separation* in Debord's theory of the spectacle. He argues that the spectacle is not only to be found in the capitalist West, but also in the Communist East.² Though the degrees and precise mechanism may differ, the core of both systems is that the working class are being prevented from taking direct control of their own lives. And in both cases this separation happens through representations – in the form of images, or in the form of organizational bodies that are supposed to represent the working class. Debord's critique, then, is based on a distrust of *representation*, both in the sense of *darstellen* and *vertreten*, because both always imply an initial separation and alienation, respectively between an image and its referent, and between a group of people and their representatives (see Spivak 1988: 276–278).

In capitalist societies however, the spectacle is particularly linked to the *commodity* form. We have seen that for Debord, commodities have already become images. Even more: the image itself can even be said to be 'the ultimate form of commodity reification in contemporary consumer society', leading to 'the universal commodification of our object world' (Jameson, 1979: 131). In other words, the increasing 'spectacularization' of the world is a symptom of the increasing capitalist penetration of spheres of life that hitherto remained untouched by it: '[t]he spectacle is the stage at which the commodity has succeeded in totally colonizing social life' (paragraph 42). Debord is pessimistic about what could possibly limit capitalism's incorporation into the commodity structure:

Complacent acceptance of the status quo may also coexist with purely spectacular rebelliousness – dissatisfaction itself becomes a commodity as soon as the economy of abundance develops the capacity to process that particular raw material. (paragraph 59)

The message is clear: in its relentless drive to extract surplus value, capitalism will incorporate any aspect of life, even dissatisfaction with the system itself.

After the spectacle, the machinery

The constant stream of attention for Debord's work is indicative of its continuing relevance. At the same time the focus on the spectacle runs the risk of blinding us to see to what extent things have changed since the 1960s, and it is this point that needs interrogating. At the heart of this article is the argument that the society of the spectacle has gradually been eroded, or more precisely, that it has gradually changed into a mutant form, and I propose the term the 'society of the machinery' for this new constellation. The society of the machinery is a direct product of its predecessor, but differs from it in that it has incorporated criticism of the society of the spectacle into its functional logic.

Although he does not use the term himself, I take the concept of the society of the machinery from Mark Andrejevic's excellent book on reality TV (2004). In it, he argues that reality TV incites 'savvy' viewings, subject positions that claim not to be duped by

appearances and look beyond the surface of things. Savvy viewers are scornful of 'naive viewers' who take TV shows at face value. Instead, they operate in a 'deconstructive' mode, literally seeing through the text the machinery that produced the latter. Reality TV stimulates such readings because its contrivance, its artificiality and low production values, mobilize viewers' critical capacities. The result is a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' that does not take media representations at face value but constantly sees through the text the machinery that produced it. This debunking viewing mode explains, for example, participants' behaviour by pointing to production strategies – the familiar 'he is in the show because they still needed a gay character', or 'they introduced this new feisty participant because ratings are down'. For savvy viewers, then, a reality show is first and foremost a *production*, and they bring production logic into their readings of the show. Andrejevic cites Todd Gitlin describing the savvy position as 'a postmodern fascination with surfaces and the machinery that cranks them out' (Gitlin, 1990: 21). It is this notion of the machinery, namely the *dispositif* that produces spectacles, that has informed my take on the society of the machinery. Although the term may conjure up industrial connotations related closely to the 19th century I intend it in the precise way Gitlin uses it in the above quote. It refers to the technological and institutional aspects of spectacle production, as well as the organizational forms and professional practices that shape it. If the spectacle is in essence a visual metaphor, the notion of machinery is decidedly *materialist* in its orientation.

At first sight the savvy viewing position looks like it is politically progressive, since it brings the production context, and the economic logic that governs it, into the limelight. But Andrejevic warns us that such 'realist' subject positions are essentially conservative. He notes that: 'savviness works in a conservative direction, naturalizing the status quo in the very attempt not to be duped by it' (Andrejevic, 2004: 135). This can be seen at work in viewers' statements such as 'reality TV is all about the ratings', or 'get real, everything is manipulated': apparently critical they are nevertheless devoid of any utopian content. Or, as Andrejevic writes: 'The naturalization of the commercial model places it beyond the reach of questions of morality: it retains the status of an ahistorical given – a brute force of nature: as amoral as an earthquake' (2004: 135). As a result, the machinery that produces the spectacle (rather than the spectacle itself) is (a) brought to the fore, (b) naturalized and (c) put beyond any possibility of critique, and all of these three things *simultaneously*.

Andrejevic's book focuses on reality TV, but the logic he describes can be found in many contemporary cultural forms. The machinery is a pervasive feature of the world we inhabit, not only because it is a common ideological position but also because the cultural artefacts themselves obliterate the difference between front- and backstage, or between spectacle and machinery. Some examples will illustrate this point. Every DVD provides a 'behind-the-scenes' feature in which the director explains how the movie has been shot; reality shows like *Pop Stars*, *American Idol* or *The X Factor* make the modus operandi of the entertainment industry visible – *The X Factor* even has its own 'companion show' called *The Xtra Factor*, dedicated exclusively to behind-the-scenes footage after the main show has stopped; media sports are ruled by 'an imperative of transparency' (Stauff, 2009) in that they show not only the game or the result but also *how this came about* – hence the endless commentary on strategies, club policy, trainer positions

and so on; open kitchen restaurants show the guests how their food is being prepared, making the cooking process part of the show – the term ‘show cooking’ says it all really; film and television companies organize ‘media pilgrimages’ (Couldry, 2000) to the places where well-known films and TV series are recorded; the name of Tony Blair’s most important spin doctor was a household name in the UK of the late 1990s; during the Dutch 2006 parliamentary election a newspaper headline read after a debate ‘The spin doctors of Bos [a politician] are relieved’ (Kalse and Valk, 2006). In all of these instances we see a wilful obliteration of the difference between front- and backstage, or more accurately, an ontological flattening of front- and backstage, with the machinery producing the spectacle coming to the fore rather than remaining invisible.

Mad Men as machinic drama

To leave the argument here would leave it too abstractly stated. Hence, I want to illustrate the logic of the machinery through an analysis of the American hit series *Mad Men* as ‘machinic’ drama. Having just completed its sixth season, the AMC series has been critically acclaimed because of its unconventional and subtle storylines, its obsessively detailed and precise reconstruction of the early 1960s, and its general stylishness. Set in New York’s Madison Avenue advertising business, the show centres on an imaginary ad agency, Sterling Cooper (which later in the series becomes Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce). Half cultural history, half social commentary, *Mad Men* balances between a smug self-congratulatory attitude towards the past and a nostalgic longing for a time when life was less complicated. Characters smoke and drink a lot, anti-Semitism, racism and male chauvinism abound, many of the mores seem outright dangerous or immoral from a present-day point of view. But there is also a subtext of nostalgia for a time when political correctness did not exist, people dressed smartly, the American lifestyle was an example to the world and consumer goods were made in the US rather than China.

In this context, however, *Mad Men* is of interest because it is a good illustration of the society of the machinery as described earlier. The show is ‘spectacular’ in term of its aesthetic qualities. Review after review stresses the sheer beauty of the series, its cinematic qualities and the stylishness of its set design, costume design and props. But as a cross-mediatic production it explicitly foregrounds how it obtained these qualities. The audio commentary on the DVD, for example, features interviews with writers, directors and actors, who explain the pains the production team went to in order to get the details right. The website performs a similar function: not only do we get interviews with the writers and actors, but also with set designers and costume designers, who become veritable stars in their own right. Just about every interview in the popular press stresses the efforts that went into maintaining historical accuracy. In short, if we abandon the exclusive focus on *Mad Men*-the-TV-show, and incorporate secondary texts (Fiske, 1987: 117–118) in the analysis it is clear that not only the spectacle but also the machinery that created the spectacle is brought to the fore. They make *Mad Men* (the TV show) transparent because they show *how* the TV show was made, and we are invited to bring this knowledge to our appreciation of the show.

But there is more to it. If we zoom out and look at *Mad Men* as a piece of cultural commentary, it is clear that it is also a series about the techniques used by consumer

capitalism to sell its goods. In other words, the show is an audiovisual product in which consumer capitalism reflects on itself, and the picture it paints is often not a very pretty one. In the first episode, for example, we witness how Don Draper comes up with the well-known ‘it’s toasted’ Lucky Strike slogan: since the Surgeon General had just issued a warning that smoking is hazardous for your health, ad agencies could no longer advertise cigarettes on health grounds. In what is presented to us as a stroke of advertising genius, Don Draper argues that the Surgeon General has done Lucky Strike a favour: none of its competitors can make any health claims, so all are on an equal footing. Don Draper then coins the slogan ‘it’s toasted’ – all tobacco firms toast their tobacco, but Lucky Strike is the first in claiming so.

Condensed as it may be, this scene is intended to offer us a glimpse of the deceitfulness of the advertising business: all the executives around the table tacitly agree that smoking is bad for your health, but instead of changing the product a new promotional strategy is devised, one that sidesteps the health problem and moreover claims a trait that it shares with other products – ‘selling hot air’ has never been as appropriate a proverb. *Mad Men* is full of scenes like these, in which the hollowness of consumer capitalism’s promotional techniques are made visible. We are presented a view of the *machinery* that promotes consumer culture: the strategic meetings, the different departments (accounts vs creative), the relations between ad agencies and clients, the promotional techniques, the regulatory environment and so on.

In other words, the show is a good example of how the machinery that ‘spectacularized’ consumer capitalism comes to stand next to the spectacle itself. Because *Mad Men* also partakes of the logic of the spectacle, namely in the already mentioned aestheticization of the consumer goods of the 1960s. In a way, the show is a *homage* to the products of postwar consumer capitalism, glamorizing them in precisely the same movement that shows how the gloss was created in the first place. We also encounter the conservative streak mentioned before: the viewers are invited to marvel at the ingenious solution Don Draper finds for what seemed to be an irresolvable problem. If advertising is the communicative-technocratic logic of consumer capitalism, viewers are drawn into that same logic and the seeds of criticism are made sterile even before conception.

‘Quelle (De)bordelle!’

It is clear that the society of the machinery as described above conflicts with Debord’s analysis, or at least seems to do so on a number of points. If his was an argument about how the spectacle pacifies people through representations, we are now confronted with a more active attitude that looks beyond appearances, focusing instead on the machinery that cranks out these representations. In this section I unpack the similarities and differences between Debord’s analysis and the contemporary analysis of the machinery.

We have already seen that we should be cautious about equating the debunking mode of the machinery with emancipatory politics: its hardcore ‘capitalist realism’ (Fisher, 2009) dismisses any utopian aspiration as naive and in this sense it enforces or even naturalizes the status quo. Here we encounter a first similarity between the society of the spectacle and the society of the machinery: both use ideological mechanisms for maintaining the status quo. But they differ in *how* they obtain this effect, and this can best be

fully appreciated by more precisely analysing the relationship between spectacle and machinery.

While I have argued that we have entered the society of the machinery, this does not mean that the spectacle disappears; rather, what actually happens is that both spectacle and machinery take frontstage – the ontological flattening of front- and backstage referred to earlier. The viewer or ideological subject then oscillates between two viewing modes: one of immersion in the spectacle (modelled along the lines of the filmic experience), the other of foregrounding the machinery (ostensibly destroying the illusion). Lev Manovich, writing about new media aesthetics but also making a claim about the wider cultural context, describes that oscillation as follows:

The periodic reappearance of the machinery, the continuous presence of the communication channel in the message, prevent the subject from falling into the dream world of illusion for very long, make her alternate between concentration and detachment. (Manovich, 2001: 207)

Manovich uses the term metarealism to describe this oscillation, and argues that this leads to new forms of ideology:

The new metarealism is based on oscillation and its destruction, between immersing a viewer in illusion and directly addressing her [*qua* communication]. In fact, the user is put in a much stronger position of mastery than ever before when she is ‘deconstructing’ commercials, newspaper reports of scandals, and other traditional noninteractive media. The user invests in the illusion precisely because she is given control over it. (Manovich, 2001: 209)

As a consequence, the viewer or ideological subject is ‘sutured’ into the dominant ideology, not because the spectacle is so effective but because the foregrounding of the machinery creates the illusion of mastery over the spectacle, and therefore offers even more pleasure in viewing it. In the society of the machinery, then, spectacle and machinery need each other in order to be effective. In other words: their interrelationship is one of compatibility rather than exclusion.

We are now in a better position to grasp precisely how Debord’s analysis is still valid today. The spectacle is still around us, but what has happened is that it has responded to the critique of the spectacle by incorporating the latter into its own functioning. To be more precise: it is precisely the moment of critique (when viewers switch their focus from spectacle to machinery) that creates the sense of mastery. One could even argue that it is criticism itself, in the form of the logic of the machinery, that is ultimately responsible for the illusionary effects, since the spectacle can no longer enchant the way it used to do – for that, we have all become too savvy. We need the logic of the machinery to pierce through the spectacle to cling to an illusion of autonomy, yet we are painfully unaware that this continues the oppression. Žižek (1990), drawing on Lacan, uses the expression ‘the non-duped err’ to describe such ideological mechanisms: those that do not want to be duped by appearances are frantically analysing how the appearances have been produced; but in doing so they miss the point.

The non-duped err because all the effects Debord attributed to the spectacle are present: despite its mobilization of our critical capacities it is a fundamentally *passive* attitude towards life. The fact that this is a more active subject position hides how acceptance

of existing cultural industries is built into it. In this sense it could be argued that the logic of the machinery leads to passivity 2.0: passivity that contradictorily works through the activation of our critical capacities, and hence is not experienced like passivity at all. To the contrary, the savvy viewer is actively criticizing *while* maintaining the status quo. To paraphrase Debord, in the society of the machinery, everything that was directly lived has receded into a mere critique of how representations are produced. The result is a life even more alienated than under conditions of the spectacle, since criticism of the prevailing conditions lacks the will for alternative orders, exemplified best by the savvy battle cry 'get real'.³ In the terms of Fredric Jameson's well-known essay, in the society of the machinery all utopia is evacuated from mass culture, and what remains is pure reification (Jameson, 1979).

The anti-utopian thrust also explains why the *separation* that is so characteristic for the society of the spectacle returns with a vengeance under conditions of the machinery. Savvy viewers are not only separated from their fellow citizens through the mediation by images (the Debord argument), but are also *internally* split, because their critique is devoid of any emancipatory content, making the critique toothless and zombie-like, formally alive but politically dead.

If we find it difficult to see how separation is a core characteristic of contemporary society, it is because the interactive and participatory forms of culture continually promise to *connect* rather than separate us. This is to a certain extent true, since the networked connectivity differs in the degree of and type of audience activity that it allows (roughly spectatorship vs use). But this blinds us to the extent to which 'user platforms' (as opposed to broadcast arrangements) come with their own specific forms of separation built into them. Platforms allow us to 'connect' and become 'active contributors' for example, but they also enact new relations of separation, in the form of increasing mediation of interpersonal relationships for example, or relations of ownership vis-a-vis the platform itself.

How did we get here?

In the remainder of this article I want to explore how the change from the society of the spectacle to the society of the machinery has taken place. This overview will necessarily be sketchy but it is nevertheless important to include it because it also points towards ways to escape the pessimism of the analysis thus far. If the previous pages indeed tend towards the idea that capitalism is an incredibly flexible system for value extraction that can even use criticism of itself as raw material to be exploited, I want to stress that this was not inevitably so. Yes, capitalism has proven flexible, but it has been so under certain conditions, and these conditions were the result of a particular trajectory. In short, if I historicize the account of the society of the machinery it is because I do not want to reify capitalism as an ahistoric and all-powerful system that inescapably absorbs whatever it encounters on its way.

In order to grasp how the critique of the spectacle has been incorporated into capitalism I will draw on Boltanski and Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005 [originally 1999]). It does a great job in tracing the mutation of capitalism since the 1960s. Its core argument is not very new or highly original, in that it advances a series of

arguments that can be found in other work. Its main argument echoes Heath and Potter's *The Rebel Sell* (2006), or Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool* (1997), although there are important differences between these accounts.⁴ All three books can be said to be critical of the idea of the 1960s as the birthplace of a set of ideas that were and are threatening to capitalism – the reason why Maurizio Lazzarato chastises Boltanski and Chiapello as displaying 'resentment against May 1968' (Lazzarato, 2011: 42). To varying degrees the three books argue that many of the subversive countercultural ideas are actually quite functional to capitalism. What makes Boltanski and Chiapello unique is their specific and precise focus on the role of critique in the subsequent transformations of the capitalist mode of production.

Boltanski and Chiapello contend that throughout the last 150 years the capitalist mode of production encountered two types of criticism: the artist critique and the social critique (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 37–40). The first focuses on capitalism as a source of *inauthenticity*, and as a major limitation on the *freedom* and *autonomy* of people. It is rooted in the 19th-century bohemian lifestyle that opposed bourgeois society, but the critique has taken many cultural forms, like the Jazz Age of the 1920s, or 1960s counterculture. The social critique, on the other hand, focuses on capitalism as a system of exploitation, stresses the inequalities that are its result, and is historically associated with the labour movement. In contrast with the artist critique, it sees individualism as a problem as it is closely associated to the values of egoism and anti-communitarianism that capitalism needs and propagates. Boltanski and Chiapello stress that both types of critique are not necessarily compatible, but that in certain conjunctures they coalesce. The Frankfurter critique of the culture industry, for example, can be seen as combining both: partly a critique of capitalism as exploitation, it also decries the loss of the autonomy of art (an important trope in the artist critique because of its anti-utilitarian impetus). Similarly, 'May 1968' – at least in the French version – combined the artist and social critique. As an anti-authoritarian and anti-paternalist movement it reclaimed the autonomy of the people, but it did so in a framework that was strongly influenced by the Marxist tradition, as exemplified by the general strike that almost brought the De Gaulle government to its knees.

It is impossible to do full justice to the depth of Boltanski and Chiapello's analysis in just a few pages. For our purposes it suffices to mention the general thrust of their argument, namely that during the 1970s and 1980s the May 1968 movement was split into two, separating the social from the artistic critique and making the latter functional to capital. They describe contemporary capitalism as *connexionist*, characterized by flexible and fluid network-like arrangements, with autonomous workers instead of the hierarchic 'organization men' of the past. These new forms of organizing production were a response to the artist critique of the 1960s, integrating it into capitalism, thus giving rise to 'the new spirit of capitalism' that is the title of their book. At the same time, the social critique has been discredited and represented as belonging to a rigid past that has been overcome by advances in production. While it is true that the book covers only the French context (Budgen, 2000: 155–156), the main thrust of their analysis resembles the situation in the Anglophone countries.

Returning to the society of the machinery, we now understand how the critique of the spectacle has mutated into the former. During the past few decades Debord's critique has been separated into its two constituent forms: the aestheticist critique of *inauthenticity* (or in

other words, the artist critique) has been acknowledged and has become popularized, whereas the critique of capitalism as a system of exploitation and domination has been relegated to the background. This was, admittedly, not too difficult in the case of Debord, since there is no sustained *social* critique in the book. The central theme of alienation that runs through its pages is a dubious concept: it certainly *can* pertain to the social critique, but is easily translated into the artistic variant. If Marx himself gradually moved from alienation to exploitation in his theoretical apparatus, it is precisely because he encountered in the language of political economy much better and less humanist terms to ‘think’ capitalism.

Savvy viewers, then, are perfect ‘artist critics’ in that they approach the spectacle from the viewpoint of its *inauthenticity*. Put simply, the spectacle is criticized for being fake, managed and manipulative. But there is more to it: by zooming in on the machinery they regain their sense of *autonomy* vis-a-vis the spectacle – this is the sense of mastery that, according to Manovich, occurs when we switch from passive spectatorship to the foregrounding of the machinery. What is lacking in this critical attitude, however, is a notion of exploitation – what Boltanski and Chiapello call the social critique of capitalism. Such is the sorry fate of the Debordian critique: despite capturing the popular imagination it has been stripped of its social component and integrated into contemporary capitalism, made into a structural and even functional feature of it.

But Boltanski and Chiapello also show that this result was not a given, and that it took quite some effort to redirect capitalism towards incorporating the artistic critique. From the viewpoint of capitalists, the 1970s were a dangerous period, and they were hard-pressed to find ideological and political solutions to the challenges at hand. What is important is that they started from the then-existing situation, rather than focusing on a utopian and transcendent form of capitalism-to-come. It is this immanent-pragmatic attitude that allowed them to first split the artistic from the social critique and then capture the energies and ideals of the former in their reformulation of the capitalist mode of production – the reason why so many former hippies became exemplary capitalist entrepreneurs *without having to change their discourse* (Steve Jobs of Apple being a good example).

Lessons for the future

The anti-capitalist movement should adopt a similar immanent-pragmatic attitude, meaning that we are forced to take the society of the machinery as our ontological and political starting point – whether we like it or not, that is the situation we find ourselves in. This means that we should not contrast savvy readings with ‘better’ (read: less sterile) criticism. Instead we should take the contemporary focus on the machinery as the starting point, but insist that the so-called transparency (and implied empowerment) only takes us so far. Watching *American Idol* or *The X Factor* might tell us a lot about how the entertainment industry operates, but we do not get to see the contracts the contestants sign; watching somebody cook in an expensive restaurant tells you a lot about the tools and products used but nothing of the long working hours or precarious labour contracts; visiting Hollywood or TV studios can be enlightening because we see how and where film and television are made, but we do not get to see the accounting department, let alone read the books; and visiting the *Mad Men* website might strike us with awe on how well researched the series is, but we do not know how much the researchers are paid or how much the series charges for product placement. In short, we need to stress that the transparency of

contemporary capitalism is limited to questions of *modus operandi*: how do they make it? Who is involved and what does each of them do? But conspicuously absent from such ‘mechanic’ descriptions are questions of political economy. The task at hand, then, is to reconnect the critique of the machinery to questions of political economy.

My analysis echoes Boltanski and Chiapello’s call to reinvigorate the social critique, by upgrading it for a connexionist world. They also make a plea for a renewed attention to questions of political economy, updated for the network era, but they are not alone in doing so. Alex Callinicos, for example, argues in *The Resources of Critique* for ‘the centrality of the Marxist critique of political economy’, although he is less convinced that Boltanski and Chiapello provide the means for doing so (2006: 245–247). This is not the time and place to play out these authors against each other. My aims in this article have been more specific, focusing on the forms of contemporary ideology and how to redirect them towards the challenge of the status quo. I call for the central importance of political economy in such a project. Perhaps the times are ripe: the current conjuncture of economic crisis and bank bailouts provides fertile grounds for asking such questions. What direction this moment of dislocation will take us is not clear, but the stakes are too high to leave it up for grabs.

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Notes

1. In Adorno’s analysis of the culture industry he argues that after the rationalization and disciplining of production the emergence of the culture industry presents an attempt to do the same with consumption. For Italian autonomists, the notion of the ‘social factory’ explains how value extraction is no longer limited to the walls of the factory. See Wright (2002: 36–41) for a good introduction.
2. In fact, for Debord, the Communist regime in Russia amounts to ‘state capitalism’. Here he links up with Trotskyists like Tony Cliff, who argued that the political economy of the USSR amounted to state capitalism. See Mandel (1991) for a scathing critique of the concept of state capitalism.
3. ‘Get real’ is the reproach that savvy viewers hurl at naive viewers when the latter complain about manipulation or tampering by the production team. Here, the savvy response shows how it is tangled up with the commercial logic of the producers: the ultimate horizon from which to judge reality TV is success in the ratings. See Andrejevic (2004: 132–138).
4. The main point of contention between these accounts is the extent to which capital is conceived as active or reactive. Frank dedicates several pages to what he calls the ‘myth of the counterculture’ (1997: 4), namely that the emerging counterculture fought a rigid mainstream culture, and especially the rigid and hierarchic world of work. He argues that the critique of mainstream culture was already well on its way *within mainstream culture itself*, and uses management literature to illustrate the point (precisely the same method used by Boltanski and Chiapello). Boltanski and Chiapello, on the other hand, attribute capital a more reactive

role, trying to catch up with mutations in society. Heath and Potter give the more radical account, namely that the values that underpin 1960s counterculture were never subversive to begin with, and were compatible with capitalism all along.

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