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## **‘Our old enemy the commodity’: Image, Narration, Spectacular Time**

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**Daniel Barrow**

In chapter six of *The Society of the Spectacle* (published in 1967), Guy Debord writes:

The time of production, time-as-commodity, is an infinite accumulation of equivalent intervals [...]. This time manifests nothing in its effective reality aside from its *exchangeability*. It is under the rule of time-as-commodity that ‘time is everything, man is nothing; he is at most time’s carcass’ (*The Poverty of Philosophy*) [...]. The general time of human non-development also has a complementary aspect, that of a *consumable time* which [...] presents itself in the everyday life of society as a *pseudo-cyclical time* [...]. Pseudo-cyclical time is in fact merely the *consumable disguise* of the time-as-commodity of the production system [...] [b]ut as a by-product of time-as-commodity intended to promote and maintain the backwardness of everyday life it necessarily finds itself laden with false attributions of value, and it must manifest itself as a succession of artificially distinct moments.<sup>1</sup>

This description’s debt to the young Karl Marx and to Georg Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* — writing in the 1840s and 1920s respectively — is clear enough. In the form of abstract labour-time, denuded of any qualitative dimension in order that it be exchangeable with the labour embodied in any other object, time appears autonomously as exchange-value. For the subject in the social field of post-war consumer capitalism — here I quote Lukács — ‘time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable “things” [...] in short, it becomes space’.<sup>2</sup> These premises can be condensed in the formulation that begins the text’s second chapter: the spectacle

arrogates to itself everything that in human activity exists in a fluid state so as to possess it in a congealed form [...]. In these signs we recognize our old enemy the commodity, which appears at first sight a very trivial thing, and easily understood, yet which is in reality a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties.<sup>3</sup>

Debord’s analysis is, I will argue in the course of this paper, theoretically productive, though one that has been controversial in the reception history of the Situationist International, especially in the fields of

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<sup>1</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> Debord, *Society*, p. 26.

literature and art history. My argument will focus on the set of problems that form the core of Debord's work: namely, the relationship in late capitalist society between the key categories of representation, capitalist time, the subject and narrative. It is therefore useful to briefly make clear the terms of this argument.

As Anselm Jappe has shown, Debord largely inherits his definitions of these categories from Lukács's reading of Marx.<sup>4</sup> If, as I have argued, Lukács premises his analysis of time on Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, his conception of the subject derives from a quite specific reading of Marx's Hegelian underpinnings. For Lukács, the modern division of labour and the creation of a class of propertyless workers, who must sell their labour on the market to survive, is the very foundation of the subject: '[t]he immediate practical as well as intellectual confrontation of the individual with society, the immediate production and reproduction of life [...] could only take place in the form of rational and isolated acts of exchange between isolated commodity owners'.<sup>5</sup> The ideological fiction of the self-sufficient and isolated subject is placed in a rigid opposition to the object-world formed by commodities. In Debord's analysis, the overcoming of this opposition is the task of revolutionary workers' councils, the true form of 'that class which is able to effect the dissolution of all classes, subjecting all power to the disalienating form of a realized democracy'.<sup>6</sup> Debord's analysis of subjectivity links quite directly with his work on aesthetics: as T. J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith comment:

[w]e shall never begin to understand Debord's hostility to the concept 'representation,' for instance, unless we realize that for him the word always carried a Leninist aftertaste. The spectacle is repugnant because it threatens to generalize [...] the [Communist] Party's claim to be the representative of the working class.<sup>7</sup>

The reconciliation of subject and object posited by the council represents an end to the social time constituted by the logic of commodity production: 'an individual and collective irreversible time [...] the complete realization, in short, within the medium of time, of that communism which "abolishes everything

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<sup>4</sup> Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 19-31.

<sup>5</sup> Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 92.

<sup>6</sup> Debord, *Society*, p. 154.

<sup>7</sup> T. J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith, 'Why Art Can't Kill the Situationist International', in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, ed. by Tom McDonough, trans. by John Shepley (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 467-488 (p. 479).

that exists independently of individuals”<sup>8</sup>. Debord’s critics therefore link this putatively eschatological narrative of time’s end to what Martin Jay has falsely called, ‘the Situationists’ relentless hostility to visual pleasure in the present’.<sup>9</sup> I will identify more fully later the actual moments of artistic critique in Debord’s work. My contention in what follows is that, far from being an iconoclastic theorist of anti-art, who in negating representation in the name of a reconciled subject-object would delete the temporality of narrative itself, Debord finds in the representations of spectacular time a point where the stability of the naturalised categories of contemporary capitalism begin to break down. Through a reading of fragments from Debord’s film work, I will go on to suggest that Debord’s analysis sheds valuable light on the relation between time and subjectivity in contemporary narrative. Although the Situationists exercise a certain influence on art theory and the field of critical theory more generally, the productive potential of their contributions to philosophies of time for narrative theory remains almost entirely neglected.<sup>10</sup> This essay attempts to put forth some elements of such a revision.

For Debord, the category of the image is central to this assessment of spectacular time. He states that ‘[t]he spectacle is capital accumulated to the point that it becomes image’.<sup>11</sup> That is, the tautological process of capital accumulation reaches the point that it becomes the very appearance of lived experience, and lived experience becomes the experience of living among the appearances of capital, detached from their productive totality. ‘Consumable pseudo-cyclical time’, he writes, ‘is [...] in the narrow sense, [...] the time appropriate to the consumption of images and, in the broadest sense [...], the image of the consumption of time’.<sup>12</sup> The dialectic that Debord outlines here moves in two directions. The spectacular time of a reified everyday life is lived through a proliferating mass of images, which inscribe the subject in a contemplative distance from the object. But these very acts of consumption are a generic image of themselves, of consumption-as-such as social action, the social use of time. Consumption only appears meaningful in this totality of consumption, but this totality is an appearance, static and excluding time,

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<sup>8</sup> Debord, *Society*, p. 116.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 429-430.

<sup>10</sup> For a suggestive, if incomplete, overview of encounters between the philosophy of time and narrative theory, see Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction And The Philosophy Of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Debord, *Society*, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> Debord, *Society*, p. 112.

only to be looked at and not participated in. What the commodity promises is '[t]he image of the blissful unification of society through consumption', the recovery of the totality that industrial production itself disintegrated, 'a dramatic shortcut to the long-awaited promised land of total consumption' in the post-industrial image.<sup>13</sup> The 'irreversible time' produced by modern societies cannot be directly lived, and lived time 'has a meaning only outside itself, in an "elsewhere" which, being no longer in heaven, is only the more maddening to locate'.<sup>14</sup> It ossifies into a realm of frozen, dumb representations, whose mode of making-visible makes invisible the qualitative human activity — irreversible time — that first constituted them.

Such a process of imaging, in which human subjects discover themselves only in the visibility of dead and fossilised time, go on to be inverted in Debord's final, remarkable film work, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1979).<sup>15</sup> Here, in a formal *détournement* of the languages of both advertising and biography, Debord cracks open the surface integrity of such spectacular time, that negates narration itself. What results, as we will see, is a narrative hall-of-mirrors in which the subject can no longer discover itself in the forms provided by spectacular time. First, however, let us turn for a moment back to the 'Spectacular Time' chapter. The transformation of the irreversible historical time of modern societies, Debord argues, is a function of the dissolution of society into abstract fragments, what Henri Lefebvre referred to as the 'reprivatization' of social life, with the 'residual deposits' of pre-war social forms being destroyed and reappearing in the alienated form of private life.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Debord writes,

everything really lived has no relation to society's official version of irreversible time, and is directly opposed to the pseudo-cyclical rhythm of that time's consumable by-product. Such individual lived experience of a cut-off everyday life remains bereft of language or concept [...]. It cannot be communicated.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Debord, *Society*, p. 45. It is worth noting that English translations of Debord tend to use 'image', 'representation', 'appearance' and related terms more or less synonymously. This is entirely appropriate: as we have seen, the constitutive ambiguity at the heart of 'representation' directly links the aesthetic and political for Debord.

<sup>14</sup> Debord, *Society*, p. 100; Guy Debord and Pierre Canjuers, 'Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program', in *Situationist International Anthology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, trans. and ed. by Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), pp. 387-393 (p. 389).

<sup>15</sup> *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, dir. by Guy Debord (Simar Films, 1979).

<sup>16</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life Volume II*, trans. by John Moore (London: Verso, 2002), p. 88.

<sup>17</sup> Debord, *Society*, p. 114.

The redemption of time in representation was an important point in realist aesthetic theories aligned with Marxism. In the society of the spectacle the experience of time has passed beyond the condition of fragmentation that Lukács saw as being reintegrated in the disenchanted epic form of the novel, or Siegfried Kracauer's account of realist film as the reconstitution of wholeness to 'bits of chance events'.<sup>18</sup> In the pseudo-cyclical time of everyday life, the process of reification and disenchantment surveyed in those theories takes a further dialectical turn. Abstract labour-time becomes the appearance of significance as 'a succession of artificially distinct moments': the meaningful social time of prior societies is recreated, in inverted form, in the second nature of consumption.<sup>19</sup> It is by no means clear how narration could have a critical relation to this, especially in the form of the emphasis on 'deeds and action' in Lukács's later realist theories.<sup>20</sup>

This was a problem that the Situationists had already confronted in the reckoning of their early theoretical work with the fate of Modernist art. The Situationist International was formed in 1957 out of several groups immersed in the avant-gardes of the period. Debord wrote in the second issue of the group's journal:

The depletion of modern forms of art and style is all too obvious; and analysis of this steady trend leads us to the conclusion that in order to overcome [...] [this] state of decomposition [...] that has arrived at its final historical stage, one must seek a higher organization of the means of action in this period of our culture.<sup>21</sup>

The subjects that post-war capitalism produced were synchronised to this production of depletion: '[p]assive consumers of culture [...] can love any manifestation of decomposition'.<sup>22</sup> For Debord, modernism's strategies of differentiation and negation, aimed at reconstituting a significant form of time, had dissolved into an irrational faith in contingency as a specifically aesthetic problem. As T. J. Clark suggests, in the post-war era modernism's dialectical opposition to commodity culture, 'its role in the disenchantment of the world', threatened to collapse: art would 'become one of the forms, maybe the form, in which the

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<sup>18</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. by Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971); Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 297.

<sup>19</sup> Debord, *Society*, p. 110.

<sup>20</sup> Georg Lukács, *Writer & Critic and Other Essays*, trans. by Arthur D. Kahn (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1970), p. 123.

<sup>21</sup> Guy Debord, 'One More Try If You Want to Be Situationists (The SI *in* and *against* Decomposition)', in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, ed. by Tom McDonough, trans. by John Shepley (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 51-59 (p. 51).

<sup>22</sup> Debord, 'One More Try If You Want to Be Situationists', p. 58.

world is re-enchanting', and would mirror 'the general conjuror of depth and desirability back into the world we presently inhabit — that is, the commodity form'.<sup>23</sup> For Debord, the solution was the wholesale collapse of the aesthetic as a separated category, and the reconstitution of time around 'the question of how to spend our lives [that] looms at the edge of the expanding freedom we have achieved by our appropriation of nature'.<sup>24</sup> Narrative would be dissolved into the speechless direct experience of a newly lived time.

That the transformation of cultural commodities into transparently lived time did not last is clear enough from the opening fifteen minutes of *In girum*, with its still images of domestic interiors culled from French advertisements. What I want to suggest in these concluding thoughts is that Debord thinks very seriously — at least on the other side of revolutionary disappointment — about the depth-function of the commodity-image, and its illusion of cyclical time. What Benjamin Noys describes as Debord's 'dialectical reworking of what fissures representation' is the image of the subject itself, as it discovers itself in the frozen tableau of spectacular time.<sup>25</sup> The destruction of spectacular time will mean re-inhabiting the standpoint that capital creates for the subject from which, like a landscape that cannot become an aesthetic object unless seen from a distance, time freezes into space. As Massimiliano Tomba writes, 'the appearance of the *spatialisation of time* is nothing other than the inverted image of the harder *temporalisation of space*'.<sup>26</sup> In this dialectic, I want to suggest, we can identify certain moments in forms of narrative time in late capitalist culture that serve as points of rupture for the emergence of temporal space from the spatialised time of the commodity-world.

<sup>23</sup> T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 374.

<sup>24</sup> Anon., 'Editorial Notes: The Meaning of Decay in Art', in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, ed. by Tom McDonough, trans. by John Shepley (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 85-93 (p. 86).

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence Of The Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 98.

<sup>26</sup> Massimiliano Tomba, *Marx's Temporalities*, trans. by Peter D. Thomas and Sara R. Farris (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. xii. Giorgio Agamben's early work has perhaps done the most to develop the implications of Debord's work here; see especially Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. by Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 63-65. The Italian theorists of *Autonomia* have provided a remarkable development of alternative perspectives on the question of what it means to inhabit this standpoint in spatialised time. See particularly Mario Tronti, *Workers and Capital*, trans. by David Broder (London: Verso, 2019). Much important work in feminist and queer studies has been devoted to exactly these questions; for some representative examples, see Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero* (New York: Autonomedia/PM Press, 2012); Lee Edelman, *No Future* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Sam McBean, *Feminism's Queer Temporalities* (London: Routledge, 2016). The recent movement of what has been called 'new materialisms', although often at some considerable distance from the Marxist analysis of commodity fetishism, has produced remarkable insights into inhabiting the 'nonhuman' perspective of objects; see particularly Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ontology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

The splintering of the categories of narrative, commodity, time and image are at the structural heart of *In girum*. After the images switch again to movement — excerpts mostly from Westerns — the voiceover ventriloquises a more shrill version of Debord’s own criticism of commercial cinema in his early writing: ‘[i]t serves no purpose but to while away an hour of boredom with a reflection of that same boredom [...]. Its mass of fictions and grand spectacles amounts to nothing but a useless accumulation of images that time sweeps away’.<sup>27</sup> A moment later the voiceover asks: ‘[w]hat needs to be proved by images?’ To images it opposes ‘the real movement that dissolves existing conditions’. Whose time, or what time is it that sweeps these images away? The voiceover disdains the film’s found materials, ‘whatever rubbish was at hand’, conjoining this with ‘the frivolous adventures typically recounted by the cinema’. Instead, the film will make an ‘examination of an important subject: myself’. The rest of the film after this point concentrates on Debord’s autobiographical narrative of his life in Paris in the 50s. But in this moment the only figure onscreen is ‘The Lone Ranger’ as, in a reaction shot, the audience of a dying man asks him to reveal his true identity. The authentic narrative time of the self is the function of cinema’s vapid adventures. The autobiographical self is introduced in the form of the image-commodity — reinforced by Debord’s other alter-ego, the Prince Valiant of the Sunday strips, who appears with the Knights of the Round Table as symbols of the Paris avant-garde he knew. This casts a strange light on the film’s opening sequence, with its bleak, hyperbolic invective against the ‘mystified ignoramuses’ who make up the cinema audience, ‘maintained in the modernized illiteracy and spectacular superstitions that reinforce the power of their masters’. The voiceover reveals that it is ‘simply stating a few truths over a background of images that are all trivial or false’. But here, narration or narrative *is* the image, and image *is* narrative. What results, then, is in fact a *mise-en-abyme*: the subject discovers itself in the spurious depth of the commodity, the commodity in the baroque despair, the homogeneous empty time of the narration.

Following the metaphor that Lacan derived from Hans Holbein’s painting, *The Ambassadors* (1533), we could describe this situation as one of narrative anamorphosis. In this *mise-en-abyme*, there

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<sup>27</sup> Guy Debord, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, trans. by Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau Of Public Secrets, 2003) <<http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord.films/ingirum.htm>> [accessed 14 January 2019]. All further quotations from the script are taken from Knabb’s translation.

is no possible standpoint from which the territory of spectacular time appears 'natural'. The subject discovers, in spectacular time, what is both its mirror image — its self-insertion into the image as the semblance of narrative — and utterly unlike it, rendering the surrounding time in its truly alien form. While there is no automatic escape from the antimony here, spectacular time cannot be seen; as Debord writes, 'at a *distance* [...], as desirable by definition'.<sup>28</sup> The grim endlessness of time-as-commodity — its empty, homogeneous time — is only too close and only too familiar. In Debord's account of spectacular time, a narrative realism of the deep unreality of time under late capitalism, far from presupposing the destruction of images and the dead time they manifest, identifies the subject with representation itself. But in and beyond the trajectories of home goods catalogues, *The Lone Ranger* and *Prince Valiant* is the glimpse of a time inassimilable to the individual and atomised subject — a time, immanent to late capitalism, of the workers' councils.

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<sup>28</sup> Debord, *Society*, p. 112.

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