FROM THE CULTURE INDUSTRY TO THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE: CRITICAL THEORY AND THE SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL

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ABSTRACT

Since Karl Marx fashioned his theory of capitalism in the nineteenth century, scholars have continually updated Marxian theory to capture the pervasiveness of commodity relations in modern society. Influenced by Georg Lukács and Henri Lefebvre, the members of the French avant-guard group, the Situationist International (1957–1972), developed an intransigent critique of consumer capitalism based on the concept of the spectacle. In the spectacle, media and consumer society replace lived experience, the passive gaze of images supplants active social participation, and new forms of alienation induce social atomization at a more abstract level than in previous societies. We endeavor to make two theoretical contributions: First, we highlight the contributions of the Situationist International, pointing out how they revised the Marxian categories of alienation, commodification, and reification in order to analyze the dynamics of twentieth century capitalism and to give these...
concepts new explanatory power. Second, we build a critical theory of consumer capitalism that incorporates the theoretical assumptions and arguments of the Situationists and the Frankfurt School. Today, critical theory can make an important contribution to sociology by critically examining the plurality of spectacles and their reifying manifestations. In addition, critical theorists can explore how different spectacles connect to one another, how they connect to different social institutions, and how spectacles express contradictions and conflicting meanings. A critical theory of spectacle and consumption can disclose both novelties and discontinuities in the current period, as well as continuities in the development of globalized consumer capitalism.

INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have witnessed an explosion of sociological research on the changing role of consumption, entertainment, and leisure in contemporary society. Scholarly treatments of the subject of consumption, demographic analyses of consumer behavior, and studies on the increasing proliferation of goods and services now dominate the literature (Campbell, 1987; Rojek, 1985; Fine, 2002; Slater, 1997). Diverse scholars have examined the rise of theme parks, fast food restaurants, chain stores, shopping malls, cruise ships, casinos, and other sites in enabling people to consume many different commodities. Reflecting Max Weber’s thesis on rationalization and disenchantment, Ritzer (1999, 2002) maintains that what unites these “new means of consumption” is that they are rationally designed to have an “enchanted” character to maximize consumption. Gottdiener’s (1997) analysis of the development of a “fully themed mass culture” suggests that mass advertising, marketing, and other corporate efforts to create consumer demand now fuel the production of urban space. Hannigan’s (1998) discussion of the rise of “fantasy city” draws attention to the increasing importance of historic preservation sites, megaplex cinema, themed restaurants, simulation theaters, and virtual reality arcades in constituting a “new urban economy” dominated by tourism, sports, and entertainment. The diverse research on consumption reflect scholarly interest in understanding the social dynamics of entertainment and leisure; the effect of themed environments on conceptions of time and space; changing socio-cultural attitudes toward consumption; and the amalgam of global-local connections that promote cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity through consumption (for overviews, see Gottdiener, 2000; Ritzer, 2002).
The burgeoning sociological work on entertainment and consumption dovetails with the growth of a vast secondary literature on the writings of the Situationist International, especially the work of Guy Debord. In the *Society of the Spectacle* and other essays, Debord ([1967]1994, [1957]1981) developed the concept of the “spectacle” to refer to the domination of media images and consumer society over the individual while obscuring the nature and effects of capitalism.¹ The spectacle is a tool of pacification, depoliticization, and massification that “distracts” and “seduces” people using the mechanisms of leisure, consumption, and entertainment as ruled by the dictates of advertising and commodified media culture. Synthesizing Hegel, Marx, and Lukács, Debord explicitly connected the concept of the spectacle to Marx’s critique of the commodity and the dominance of exchange-value over use-value. The spectacle, as Debord notes, is the unifying principle of modern society that signals a new stage in the development of capitalism, a movement from a society organized on the basis of an “immense accumulation of commodities” – to quote Marx ([1867]1978, pp. 302–303) – to a society dominated by “an immense accumulation of spectacles” (Debord, [1967]1994, #1). Debord and the Situationists maintained that Marx’s ([1852]1978, p. 594) famous observation that “men make their own history, but ... they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves” can only be understood in the present era through an appreciation of the dominance of media and the advertising image. The spectacle, according to Debord ([1967]1994, #34), is “capital accumulated to the point where it becomes an image” and represents the “historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life” (#42). In the spectacle, media and consumer society replace lived experience, the passive gaze of images supplants active social participation, and new forms of alienation induce social atomization at a more abstract level than in previous societies.

Decades after Debord developed his thesis, interest in the spectacle has attracted the attention of sociologists (Gardiner, 2000; Gotham, 2002, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Ritzer, 2002), geographers (Bonnett, 1989; Ley & Olds, 1988; Swyngedouw, 2002), and other scholars interested in electronic media, computers, and urban design and planning (Pinder, 2000; Sadler, 1998). The concept has been used to refer to festivals of the Middle Ages, or mid-nineteenth century Paris with its *flaneurs*, or the great exhibitions in metropolises such as, Berlin and Paris, described by Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel (Chaney, 1993; Richards, 1990). In Plant (1992) and Best and Kellner (1997), Debord’s arguments are used to counter those of Jean Baudrillard, with the former’s commitment to materiality, praxis, and
radical social theory being contrasted with the latter’s political acquiescence and emphasis on semiotics and the death of the social. Situationist ideas have become popular within music, film, and architectural design and several websites contain key texts and commentary on Debord and the Situationist International.\(^2\) Recent years have also seen a new translation of Raoul Vaneigem’s *Revolution of Everyday Life* (Vaneigem, [1967]2001), one of the Situationist’s main theoretical contributions, also originally published in 1967 along with Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*. Several new and re-edited books and collections have been published since the 1980s and a series of prestigious exhibitions have been staged to celebrate the Situationists’ urban explorations in, among other places, Paris, New York, Barcelona, Boston, and the Hague (Bracken, 1999; Gray, 1974; Blazwick, 1989; Sussman, 1989; Jappe, 1999; Andreottie & Costa, 1996; Edwards, 2000).

Despite this renewed focus, the ideas of Debord and the Situationist International remain marginalized within social theory and their contributions to understanding capitalism are obscure. The Situationists suffered from organizational instability, changing intellectual foci, and serial purging-problems that impeded the development of a unified theory, political stance, and empirical agenda.\(^3\) Many scholars have labeled the Situationist International as an artistic or cultural school and stressed the aesthetic focus of the group thereby ignoring or dismissing their theoretical insights (Plant, 1990; Stracey, 2003; Wollen, 1989, 2001; Berman, Pan, & Piccone, 1990–1991). Accounts on the history of Western Marxism by Anderson (1976), Poster (1975), and Jacoby (1981) ignore the importance of Debord and Situationist ideas. There are, of course, exceptions to this tendency. Jay’s (1993) book on the denigration of vision in French thought locates the work of the Situationists in the esthetic traditions of Surrealism, Dadaism, and Lettrism. The fact that in French *spectacle* also means theatrical presentation suggests, according to Jay, that Debord and Situationists “were drawing on the long-standing suspicion of theatrical illusion evident in Rousseau and before” (pp. 419–420). MacDonald (1995, p. 108) argues that the Situationists’s commitment to understanding the connections between micropolitical struggles and larger structures of cultural domination “points toward their relevance for the development of a viable post-Marxist position.” These works offer a glimpse into the intellectual and socio-cultural context surrounding the development of the Situationist International and their attempt to revitalize Marxism under new historical conditions. Despite these laudable efforts, a comprehensive and detailed account of Situationist insights and contributions remain elusive and unexplored.
We endeavor to make two broad theoretical contributions. Our first theoretical contribution is to show that the concepts of Western Marxism broadly, and the ideas of Debord and the Situationists specifically, offer the theoretical resources to understand and explain the ascendance of consumer capitalism during the second half of the twentieth century. For Marxian theorists, the social theories of Georg Lukács, Henri Lefebvre, and the Frankfurt School theorists, especially Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and others, are complementary contributions of the analysis of modern capitalist society. The major contributions of these scholars lie in the elaboration and application of the ideas of alienation, commodification, and reification. Influenced by Lukács and Lefebvre, Debord and the Situationists attempted to update and extend these concepts, broaden their empirical application, and enhance their explanatory power. For the Situationists, the “spectacle” is a conceptual extension of the phenomenon of reification, a process of “objectification” or “thingification” of social relations and products that extends to the production and consumption of images. In turn, individuals view and experience the “image society” as an alien force, as an independent and objective reality that controls their lives by constituting them as torpid spectators. As we show, Debord and the Situationist International produced a sophisticated theoretically-driven critique of postwar consumer capitalism and the first analysis of the postmodern condition discussed by later scholars such as David Harvey (1989), Fredric Jameson (1984), and Jean-Francis Lyotard (1984).

Our second theoretical contribution is to combine Debord’s insights on the “spectacle” with the Frankfurt School’s critique of the “culture industry” to build a critical theory of consumer capitalism. Growing out of similar foundations in Western Marxism, the Situationists and the Frankfurt School independently developed critiques that share many assumptions and arguments, though with some significant differences. Scholars have long noted that the writings of the Frankfurt School flow within the broader intellectual stream of Western Marxism but connections between the Situationists and Western Marxism remain unclear. Moreover, despite the Situationists’s astute and prescient observations, their theoretical ideas and approach contain problems and limitations. Debord’s conceptualization of the spectacle is speculative, prone to abstraction and sweeping generalization, and lacks empirical specificity. Moreover, Debord and the Situationists never probed very deeply into the multiple logics, conflicts, and contradictions of the spectacle. We locate these limitations in the Situationists’s failure to make explicit their method of immanent critique.
As discussed by Antonio (1981), Calhoun (1995), Held (1980), and other scholars, the method of immanent critique “is a means of detecting the societal contradictions which offer the most determinant possibilities for emancipatory social change” (Antonio, 1981, p. 330). Against Debord’s conception of the spectacle as a single totality that dominates society from the top down, we maintain that there are a variety of different types of spectacles that are multidimensional and contradictory. To study spectacles dialectically, one should explore how different spectacles are represented, how they are produced and consumed, and what mechanisms regulate their use. A dialectical analysis that is informed by immanent critique seeks to identify and explain conflicts, contradictions, and crisis tendencies within different spectacles and illuminate the connections between relatively autonomous spheres of consumer society (tourism, entertainment, sports, and so on).

Important to note here, we enter into a dialogue with the Frankfurt School to identify the weaknesses of Situationist theorizing in order to revise and extend critical theory to understand the development of capitalism and the production of spectacle. Despite their powerful analysis and prescient insights, there are several limitations in the work of the Situationists. They do not have a comprehensive, exhaustive, or systemic theoretical framework. Their antipathy toward scholars and academic scholarship, their lack of commitment to empirical research, and the absence of sophisticated analysis are major problems that limit the explanatory power of Situationist ideas. In the Society of the Spectacle and other essays, Debord’s conception of the spectacle is often presented as a monolithic juggernaut, an irresistible force of cultural hegemony that dominates society from the top down. It is this imagery that has led to the emergence of several critiques of the work of Debord and the Situationists, including claims that the group over-emphasized class and failed to take into account the everyday life of other sectors of the population, most notably women and ethnic minorities (Jay, 1993, p. 431). Other critiques include the Situationists’s failure to clearly specify the connections between macro- and micro-levels, their tendency toward hyperbole and exaggeration, their orthodox and naive faith in the revolutionary agency of the proletariat, and their lack of attention to the crisis tendencies and sources of opposition and resistance that affect capitalist societies (Best & Kellner, 1997, p. 117; Gardiner, 2000, pp. 124–125; Jappe, 1999, pp. 103–104).

Through a dialogue with the Frankfurt School, we hope to deepen scholarly understanding of the multiple sites of spectacularization, the conflicting meanings and effects of spectacles, and the novelties and discontinuities in the development of modern capitalism. We define
spectacularization as a conflictual and contested process by which the major institutions of society are adopting the logic and principles of entertainment and spectacle to their basic operations and organization. Indeed, the worldwide ascendance of globalized entertainment and techno-capitalism have thrust issues of alienation, commodification, and reification at the center of social-science research and theory. The expansion of tourism to all corners of the globe combined with the proliferation of advertising and marketing illustrate significant changes in the realm of social consumption (for overviews, see Urry, 2002; Alsayyad, 2001; Holmes, 2001; Crane, Kawashima, & Kawaski, 2002). Profound transformations in the global finance and culture have prompted some scholars to argue that we are moving toward a world of increasingly dehumanized services, delocalized culture and tradition (Giddens, 1991), and social forms that are devoid of distinctive content (Ritzer, 2004). Other scholars claim that “consumption” is taking precedence over “production” to the extent that the expansion and deepening of commodity markets has transferred the logic and rationality of “production” to the sphere of “consumption” (Bauman, 1992; Featherstone, 1991). Yet many of these changes remain under-theoretized and poorly understood. Few scholars have developed an overarching theoretical orientation, or elaborated a set of concepts or heuristic device that specifies the connections between consumption and other spheres of society (e.g., law and the political system, economy, culture, and so on) (for exceptions, see Ritzer, 2002; Gottdiener, 1997). Our goal is to remedy these problems and omissions by providing a critical theory of consumption and spectacle.

THEORIES OF CONSUMER CAPITALISM IN WESTERN MARXISM: LUKÁCS, THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL, AND LEFEBVRE

Beginning with Karl Marx and continuing through Georg Lukács, the Frankfurt School theorists, Henri Lefebvre, and others, Marxian theory has been continually updated to capture the pervasiveness of commodity relations in the twentieth century. Early, Marx noted the tendency of capitalism to transform social relations into commodified exchange relations, “an act characterized by a total abstraction of use-value” (Marx [1867]1978, p. 305). Commodities embody both a use-value (its purpose or use to fulfill a need) and an exchange-value (its worth or
price as defined by money). In *Capital*, Marx noted that while a commodity may appear to be a “very trivial thing, and easily understood,” in reality it is a “very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” ([Marx [1867]1978, p. 319](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867/capital/ch26.htm)). The mysteriousness of the commodity, according to Marx, lies in its ability to mask social relationships between things through the medium of money and domination of exchange-value over use-value. In a market-driven world, money becomes the universal equivalent of exchange – for example, the commodity of commodities – and appears to people as a “power external to and independent of the producers” (p. 320). In his original analyses, Marx argued that with the spread of money and commodification, relations and experiences become “things” that people exchange for profit. “Just as money reduces everything to its abstract form, so it reduces itself in the course of its own movement to something merely quantitative” (p. 93). Money establishes an “inverted” world in which it simulates human qualities: money can buy beauty, intelligence, emotion, in addition to tangible goods (p. 78). As a consequence of the commodification process, “abstractions” dominate everyday life, camouflaging the underlying social relations that govern commodity production.

The process of commodification cuts across the phenomenon of commodity fetishism. In *Capital*, Marx understood that the commodification process “fetishized” human relationships, producing their representation as immutable and rational relationships among things in nature. This nature-like appearance of social relations, according to Marx, means that people view capital/labor relationships within capitalism as just, efficient, and egalitarian. For Marx ([1867]1978), fetishism is a process, a social condition, and an ideology. As a process, fetishism “attaches itself to products of labor, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities” (p. 321). As a social condition, fetishism “is a definite social relation between men, that assumes in their eyes, the fantastic form of relation between things” (p. 321). For Marx, the fetishism of commodities imputes to the “market” an independent objective reality; people come to believe that value arises from natural properties of the commodities themselves. As an ideology, fetishism expresses “the illusions of the monetary system” to the extent that “[i]n the eyes of each other we are nothing but exchange-values” (p. 328). To paraphrase Habermas (1975), fetishism contains a series of ideas or “legitimations” to support the existence of the system of commodity production. Fetishism “mystifies” the social character of production making it unclear how commodities obtain their value.
In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács ([1922]1968, pp. 83–222) maintained that the fetishism of commodities is part of a larger process of reification and implies that people believe social structures are beyond their control and unchangeable. Reification, as the German *Verdinglichung* is translated (see Dahms, 1997, 1998), is a process by which people come to believe that humanly created social structures are natural, universal, and absolute “things” and, as a result, that those social structures do acquire those characteristics. According to Lukács, reification is less perceptible than commodification and represents the generalization and totalization of commodity fetishism (see Dahms, 1998, pp. 11–12). Synthesizing Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism and Weber’s theory of rationalization, Lukács argued that the tenacity and resiliency of capitalism lies in its ability to adapt the bureaucratic mechanisms of efficiency, control, calculability, and predictability to all aspects of human action and social organization. Under the conditions of bureaucratized commodity exchange, for example, the social relations people enter as part of the labor contract appear as inevitable rather than historically contingent. As Lukács describes this process:

Man in capitalist society confronts a reality “made” by himself (as a class) which appears to him to be a natural phenomenon alien to himself; he is wholly at the mercy of its “laws”; his activity is confined to the exploitation of the inexorable fulfillment of certain individual laws for his own (egoistic) interests. But even while “acting” he remains, in the nature of the case, the object and not the subject of events ([1922]1968, p. 135).

Capital conceals the everydayness of alienated labor in the supposed economic laws of market economy, which produces the illusion of fair exchange promulgated by the labor contract. Concomitantly, the major institutions of society from law, politics, religion, education, and culture reproduce, protect, and legitimate the reification of social structure that, in turn, reproduces itself in workers’ quiescence and conformity. Lukács ([1922]1968, pp. 93–94) argued that reification was an immediate reality that dominated capitalist culture as an ideological phenomenon related to commodity relations and the preservation of the status quo. More broadly, Lukács expanded the meaning of reification, applying the concept to capture the process by the major institutions of society – the political system, culture, art, and so on – become oriented to the imperatives and logic of capital accumulation. According to Dahms (1998, p. 4), capitalism “assimilates to its specific requirements the ways in which human beings think the world.” As a result, the expansion of capitalism over more and more areas of social life “impoverishes concrete social, political, and
cultural forms of coexistence and cooperation, and brings about an 
impoverishment of our ability to conceive of reality from a variety of 
social, political, and philosophical viewpoints” (p. 4). Despite their 
otherwise diverse work, Marx and Lukács recognized that the movement 
and generalization of money and the commodity form is simultaneously 
the fetishization and reification of social reality.6

Such concerns animated the work of the Frankfurt School theorists who 
drew attention to the role of the “culture industry” in concealing class 
contradictions and legitimating social inequalities under capitalism.7 Like 
Marx and Lukács, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno maintained 
that the spread of commodification and the domination of money 
transformed cultural forms into external, autonomous objects. As a result, 
politics, religion, and culture become commodities subject to the logic of 
capital accumulation, integrating all parts of social-life into a mass market. 
In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for example, *Horkheimer and Adorno* 
([1947]1972) argued that the institutions of religion, education, music 
and entertainment had emerged as the organs of mass deception and 
mystification that manipulated individuals into accepting the current 
organization of society. In their view, these culture industries were engaged 
in sophisticated forms of ideological indoctrination, using “entertainment” to 
 seduce people and while eliding the distinction between “high” and “low” 
culture. Consumer choice and “individuality” itself “becomes the ideology of 
the pleasure industry,” according to *Horkheimer and Adorno* (1972, pp. 154), 
and leads to the standardization of consciousness, conformity to name-brand 
products, and mass production of homogenized consumer identity. 

In his famous essay, “The Culture Industry Reconsidered,” *Adorno* 
([1967]1989), lamented the transformation of spontaneous and authentic 
“popular culture” into a totally administered and reified “mass culture” that is 
 imposed from above. Rather than autonomous culture creation, which is 
characteristic of social connectedness at the micro or everyday level, the 
culture industry works through a relentless process of commodification to 
hollow out the distinctive substantive content of social relations and their 
creations. In this process, culture becomes a centrally conceived and controlled 
social form, an object of market-based instrumental relations that is devoid of 
emotional and sensuous life. “The total effect of the cultural [sic] industry,” 
according to Adorno, is mass deception that “impedes the development of 
autonomous, independent individuals” (p. 135). As Adorno elaborates,

Cultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer also commodities, they are commodities through and through … Ultimately, the culture industry no longer even
needs to directly pursue everywhere the profit interests from which it originated. These interests have been objectified in its ideology and have even made themselves independent of the compulsion to sell the commodity ... Brought to bear is a general uncritical consensus, advertisements produced for the world so that each product of the culture industry becomes its own advertisement ... What parades as progress in the culture industry, as the incessantly new which it offers up, remains the disguise of an eternal sameness (pp. 129–130).

For Adorno, music, fashion, and other products of the culture industry exhibit “incessantly repeated formulae” that suppress spontaneity and active creativity, and accelerate the trends toward commodification, standardization, and reification that distinguish all of capitalist culture. In a similar vein, Kracauer ([1927]1989) maintained that the patterns of dance and tightly rehearsed movements characteristic of popular entertainment reviews during the 1920s and later reflected the massification of audiences. Foreshadowing Adorno’s discussion of the culture industry, Kracauer’s essay, “Mass Ornament,” portrayed the role of movies, newsreels, variety shows, and other spectacles as constituting the “distraction factories” that are empty of social content. For Kracauer, Adorno, and the other Frankfurt School theorists, audiences and consumers believe that non-mainstream cultural styles are original, innovative, and express a type of rebellious and nonconformist cultural experience. Rather than challenging the status quo, music, film, and other forms of entertainment reflect the conformist tendencies shared by all forms of the culture industry.

It is in the context of the Frankfurt School’s critique of the culture industry that Henri Lefebvre’s insights on consumption, leisure, and alienation become poignant. Several major themes unite Lefebvre’s oft-cited books, *Critique of Everyday Life* (Lefebvre, [1958]1991) and *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (Lefebvre, [1971]1984). One major theme involves theorizing the extension of alienation and the commodity form to the social realm of leisure and entertainment. For Lefebvre, leisure is not a separate social world that stands apart from the conditions of wage labor ([1958]1991, p. 29). In capitalist societies, leisure is commodified and rationalized, and therefore represents a profitable avenue of capital accumulation at the same time it involves the pacification of people through the ideology of consumerism: “leisure involves passive attitudes. Someone sitting in front of cinema screen offers an example and common model of this passivity, the potentially ‘alienating’ nature of which is immediately apparent. It is particularly easy to exploit these attitudes commercially” (p. 32). According to Lefebvre, commodified forms of leisure encourage the development of a society of “generalized display: television, cinema,
tourism” ([1971]1984, p. 53–54) which short-circuit active participation and signal the spread of alienation over all spheres of social life. “New types of alienation join the ranks of the old, enriching the typology of alienation: political, ideological, technological, bureaucratic, urban etc.” (p. 94). New forms of consumption, including advertising, film, and the mass media, mean that “alienation is spreading and becoming so powerful that it obliterates all trace or consciousness of alienation” (p. 94).

In a section of the Critique of Everyday Life entitled, “Critique of Needs,” Lefebvre argues that leisure and entertainment invert human values and relations through the creation of “fictitious, artificial, and imaginary needs” ([1958]1991, p. 161). Thus, advertisers, marketers, and other capitalist producers manufacture the need for leisure, vacations, and other “breaks” from work through the dissemination of advertising images, signs, and other simulations of pleasure and fantasy. Anticipating Marcuse’s (1964, 1968, pp. 159–200) contention that capitalism replaces authentic human needs with false ones, Lefebvre argued that the manufacturing of needs dovetails with the tendency toward the abstraction, homogenization, and quantification of human relations, embodied in the abstract commodity form. The image of advertising is of pleasure and enjoyment while the reality of capitalism is a mammoth increase in reification that blurs the distinction between the real and the non-real. As Lefebvre puts it:

We are now entering the vast domain of the illusory reverse image. What we find is a false world; firstly because it is not a world, and because it presents itself as true, and because it mimics real life closely in order to replace the real by its opposite; by replacing real unhappiness by fictions of happiness, for example-by offering a fiction in response to the real need for happiness-and so on. This is the ‘world’ of most films, most of the press, the theatre, the music hall: of a large sector of leisure activities. How strange the split between the real world and its reverse image is. For in the end it is not strange at all, but a false strangeness, a cheap-and-nasty, all-pervasive mystery ([1958], p. 1991, p. 35; emphasis in original).

For Lefebvre, the extension of alienated production to alienated consumption parallels the development of the “bureaucratic society of controlled consumption” (p. 60) in which the production and consumption of signs and images, rather than tangible material goods, becomes the essential vehicle of commodified exchange and communication. Quoting Lefebvre, “Consumer-goods are not only glorified by signs and ‘good’ in so far as they are signified; consumption is primarily related to these signs and not to the goods themselves” (p. 91). The result is that people do not consume commodities per se but consume signs, and signs of signs that are divorced from any referential relationship to actual consumer goods or
services. Reflecting Max Weber, Lefebvre suggests that in order for consumption to flourish, all aspects of life have to be increasingly rationally managed and designed, calculated, and quantified according to the dictates of formal rationality. This development portends the atomization and fragmentation of social life and, at the same time, integrates social life into the aegis of the commodification process. The dominance of exchange-value over use-value dissociates signifiers from signifieds, creating a “floating stock of meaningless signifiers” (1984, p. 116) that acquire an autonomous power. Thus, the ideology of consumption substitutes signs for human agency, and “for the image of active man that of the consumer as the possessor of happiness and of perfect rationality, as the ideal become reality” (p. 56). This shift is part of the increasing importance of consumption and consuming in the development of capitalism in the twentieth century, a position that parallels that of later theorists such as Boorstin (1962), Bauman (1992), and Lefebvre’s student, Jean Baudrillard, in his early work (Baudrillard [1968]1988, [1970]1988).

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“theories are made only to die in the war of time: they are stronger or weaker units to be thrown at the right moment into combat” Guy Debord (quoted in Jappe, 1999, p. 114).

The work of the Frankfurt School and Henri Lefebvre reflect efforts at mid-century to understand the development of consumer capitalism, the commodification of leisure, and the increasing power of the culture industry in maximizing reification. It is in the same historical context, that the Situationist International developed a critical analysis of the role of advertising, entertainment, and consumption in the development of the “society of the spectacle.” The Situationists maintained that the rise of consumer capitalism in the 1920s and later had initiated a new stage in the development of modern societies where the manufacture of signs and images become the outcome and goal of production. For Debord, “spectacle” is “not a collection of images” but a “social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (1994, #4). The spectacle is the “totality of the commodity world” (#49) that represents the annihilation of use-value by exchange-value and the replacing of human needs by a “ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs” (#51), a position shared by Lefebvre and the
Frankfurt School. Much of Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* and Raoul Vaneigem’s *Revolution in Everyday Life* (Vaneigem, [1967]2001) share Lefebvre’s concern with alienation and the extension of the commodity form into everyday life. What distinguishes the Situationists’s approach is their emphasis on commodification as a tripartite process of unification, trivialization, and homogenization of time and space; the centrality of consumption; and the “ever-intensifying imposition of alienation at all levels” (Debord, [1967]1994, #122) through the machinations of the mass media, advertising, and entertainment. To illustrate this approach, it is necessary to first grasp how the Situationists revised the Marxian categories of alienation, commodification, and reification in order to analyze the dynamics of twentieth century capitalism and to give these concepts new explanatory power.

*Alienation, Commodification, and the Homogenization of Time and Space*

Guy Debord’s theorization of the spectacle extends Marxian discussions of alienation by tracing the transformation of social relations into abstract representations. For Marx, alienation manifested itself at the workplace where workers are alienated from the products of their labor, the process of production, from themselves as well as other human beings, and from their species-being and nature (Marx [1844]1978). Debord’s contribution is to elaborate on Marx’s theory of alienation to understand the extension of alienation to the sphere of consumption where hypothesized abstractions now affect all aspects of human life (#42). “Under capitalist regimes, ‘to exist’ and ‘to have’ are identical,” Lefebvre had written in the *Critique of Everyday Life*, quoting Marx: “The man who has nothing is nothing” ([1958]1991, p. 155). Debord ([1967]1994, #17) agreed with Marx and Lefebvre that in the first phase of the historical development of alienation, “social life entailed an obvious downgrading of being into having that left its stamp on all human endeavor.” Yet the transition to a society dominated by images and spectacles “entails a generalized shift from having to appearing” (#17, emphasis in original). Just as Marx lamented the alienated character of work as a process of estrangement and fragmentation, Debord maintains that “[s]eparation is the alpha and the omega of the spectacle,” and individuals, atomized and dissociated from one another, rediscover their unity as “consumers” within the spectacle. In this view, social life becomes “blanketed by substratum after substratum of commodities” (#42) that
people become spectators of their own lives, assigned to roles that subject them to a condition of passive contemplation. As Debord puts it,

The spectator’s alienation from and submission to the contemplated object (which is the outcome of his own unthinking activity) works like this: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The spectacle’s externality with respect to the acting is demonstrated by the fact that the individual’s own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator feels at home nowhere, for the spectacle is everywhere (1994, #30).

It is important to note that Debord does not equate the spectacle with the television, film, or other means of mass media and communication. These are only manifestations of the larger system of social relations and institutions, from the economy to political system, art and science, culture and religion that paralyze self-activity and collective practice. In Debord’s work, the spectacle is Janus-faced. On the one hand, the concept refers to the institutional apparatus of contemporary capitalism governed by class domination and the totalization of fetishism. On the other hand, the spectacle is an ideology, derived from material social conditions, which distorts reality and cloaks the exploitative conditions of capitalism in a mélange of images and signs. Debord and the other Situationists employed the metaphor of a motion picture to describe the society of the spectacle. During a motion picture, individuals are constituted as spectators rather than acting subjects, forced to observe the images that others create. Such a society is predicated on conformity, submission, inactivity, and contemplation. More broadly, the intensity and extensiveness of social and technological change combined with the speed of the changing images, on television and elsewhere, isolates and abstracts events and knowledge from the realm of affective and lived experience, creating a social condition of chronic ephemerality and discontinuity. As Debord ([1967]1994, #157) illustrates: “The pseudo-events that vie from attention in the spectacle’s dramatizations have not been lived by those who are thus informed by them. In any case they are quickly forgotten, thanks to the precipitation with which the spectacle’s pulsing machinery replaces one by the next.”

To paraphrase Simmel ([1908]1971, [1903]1971, p. 337), the development of the society of the spectacle represents the pinnacle of the “tragedy of culture” whereby objective culture comes to dominate subjective culture. In place of the ensemble of concrete personal associations which are the source of authentic cultural creation and reproduction, the rule of the commodity induces separation and transforms culture (including law,
science, education, religion, and so on) into an object that is produced and valued for its instrumental qualities. In contrast to the inactivity of the spectacle, Debord and the Situationists advocate the construction of authentic community whereby people engage collectively in genuine communication and free exchange of ideas and knowledge. It is about, as Debord puts it, the active and imaginative creation of new desires, possibilities, and forms of living. The activist agenda of the Situationists focused on creating dérives, a technique of “rapid passage through varied ambiances” involving “playful-constructive behavior” (Debord, 1956a, 1956b). Drifting through the city at random, creating chance encounters, or engaging in disruptive acts to alter the routines of everyday life are techniques of the dérive. Such actions aimed to work through individual consciousness to help unlock the potential of the acting subject. For Debord, the subject “can only be the self-production of the living: the living becoming master and possessor of its world—that is, of history—and coming to exist as consciousness of its own activity” (#74, emphasis in original).

Reflecting Marx’s famous published letter to Arnold Ruge (Marx [1843]1978, pp. 12–15), the Situationists committed themselves to a “ruthless critique of everything existing” and pointed to the need of constructing situations, a position they adopted from Sartre and the Surrealists.9 In a 1957 text, “Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organization of Action,” Debord suggested that

Our central idea is that of the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passionate quality ... The construction of situations begins on the ruins of the modern spectacle. It is easy to see what extent the very principle of the spectacle-nonintervention-is linked to the alienation of the old world... The situation is thus designed to be lived by its constructors. The role played by a passive or merely bit-part playing “public” must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors, but rather, in a new sense of the term, “livers,” must steadily increase ([1957]1981, pp. 22, 25).

One of the targets of critique in the work of the Situationists is the role of state policy and urban planning in the “self-destruction of the urban environment” (Debord, [1967]1994, #174) and the corresponding unification, trivialization, and homogenization of time and space. The notion of “unitary urbanism” reflected the Situationists’s belief that the problems of urban life could not be studied as separate and isolated issues but must be seen as interconnected (Situationist International, 1959). Running through Debord’s critique is a concern with the negative consequences of the development of mass suburbanization, shopping malls (“temples of frenetic
consumption,’” #174), and the creation of an automobile-dependent populace in Western Europe and North America. As Swyngedouw (2002, p. 157) has noted, the modern metropolis is a recurrent theme in much of the work of Debord and the Situationists but “only to the extent that it constituted the spatialization of the most advanced form of capitalism.” Part of the Situationist critique of modern capitalism involved assailing transformation of the older sections of cities into “museums” for tourist consumption (Debord, [1967]1994, #65; Situationist International, 1959) and the tendency for planners to embrace “an authoritarian decision-making process that abstractly develops any environment into an environment of abstraction” (#173, emphasis in original). Debord’s assessment of urban planning and post-World War II metropolitan development is framed in terms of the destruction of indigenous cultures and place-bound traditions by commodity production and consumption. Commodification corrupts the sensuous, emotional, and qualitative aspect of authentic places by homogenizing space, allowing for its standardization and mass production, and ensuring its interchangeability. In his critique of travel, Debord laments that tourism is a “by-product of the circulation of commodities” and is a “chance to go and see what has been made trite” and artificial (#168). The society of the spectacle is a society devoid of community that integrates isolated individuals “as individuals isolated together” (#172, emphasis in original). As Debord continues,

Factories and cultural centers, holiday camps, and housing developments—all are expressly oriented to the goals of a pseudo-community of this kind. These imperatives pursue the isolated individual right into the family cell, where the generalized use of receivers of the spectacle’s message ensures that his isolation is filled with the dominant images-images that indeed attain their full force only by virtue of this isolation (#172, emphasis in original).

According to Debord, the spectacle’s destruction of place goes hand-in-hand with the destruction of history, loss of authentic time, and the coordinated planning and rationalization of an eternal present. Like space, time under the rule of the spectacle-commodity differs radically from time in pre-capitalist periods. In the chapter of the Society of the Spectacle called “Spectacular Time,” Debord draws attention to the significance of commodified time, where the qualitative and use-value of time is erased and transformed into a quantified, homogenized, and exchangeable unit (#149). Under the conditions of modern production and consumption, the production of pseudo-events and the selling of “‘fully-equipped’ blocks of time” (#152) become part of the expanding economy of leisure activities.
Paraphrasing Marx, who argued that the consumable product may serve as raw material for a further product, Debord maintains that consumable time is “raw material for the production of a diversity of new products to be put on the market” (#151). Time is appropriated to the consumption of images and modern society becomes obsessed with saving time, spending “quality” time with friends and family, and with maintaining young age and youthful appearances, which merely suggests that “under advertising’s bombardments it is simply forbidden to get old” (#160). Debord’s critique of time-as-commodity is based on his observation that time as lived and experienced, as a sequence of qualitative events that constitute traditions and community, has been replaced by the image of time, the advertisement of time, and consumable pseudo-cyclical time. Once time and space are commodified, it becomes possible to mass produce festivals and celebrations that incite people to spend money while producing only an illusion of community, a phenomenon discussed by George Ritzer (2000) in his analysis of McDonaldization and Michael Sorkin and colleagues (Sorkin, 1992) in their explorations of the Disneyfication of urban space (see also Bryman, 1999; Eeckhout, 2001).

From Reified Production to Reified Consumption

Debord’s analysis of commodification and homogenization of time and space reflect larger Marxian concerns with the fetishism of commodities and reifying characteristics of contemporary capitalism and consumer culture. Whereas Lukács attempted to generalize Marx’s account of commodity fetishism from the sphere of work to other social institutions, the Situationists maintained that fetishism had moved into the sphere of representation, in which social relations are transformed into an image or spectacle. More broadly, Debord and the Situationists emphasize “the super-reification of image-objects as a massive unreality” (Best, 1989, pp. 31–32) that authenticates illusion as reality: “the spectacle is affirmation of appearance and affirmation of … social life as mere appearance” (Debord, [1967]1994, p. 10). Debord’s insights in the Society of the Spectacle echo Vaneigem’s arguments in Revolution of Everyday Life that the “economy of consumption” has assimilated the “economy of production” and “the exploitation of labour power is submerged by the exploitation of everyday creativity. The same energy is torn from the worker in his hours of work and in his hours of leisure” (Vaneigem, [1967]2001, Chapter 2). In the realm of consumption, as Vaneigem ([1967]2001) argued, it is not
commodities that are alienating but the ideological conditioning that leads their buyers to choose them and their false promises of gratification and happiness. Reflecting Gramsci, Vaneigem maintains that consumerism, as the most recent manifestation of hegemonic domination, offers a false promise of material abundance and enjoyment while producing docility without the use of physical force. The “conditioning of choice” in consumer society is clever “mediations” which give the “illusion of action in a real passivity” and transform the consumer into “an essentially dependent thing.” As a result, “[t]he stolen mediations separate the individual from himself, his desires, his dreams, and his will to live; and so people come to believe in the myth that you can’t do without them, or the power that governs them” (Vaneigem, [1967]2001, Chapter 9).

The works of the Situationists connect to three schools of thought on the source of reification in modern society. First, the theorists associated with the Frankfurt School, especially Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse, identify the capitalist production process as the source of reification. For Marcuse (1964, p. 189) reification is akin to mystification and the “technical achievement of advanced industrial society, and the effective manipulation of mental and material productivity have brought about a shift in the locus of mystification.” Reification and ideology come “to be embodied in the process of production itself” and the “rational rather than the irrational becomes the most effective vehicle of mystification.” According to Marcuse, “a system that ‘delivers the goods’ legitimates itself in the process of commodity production and distribution” (pp. 1–18). Such a position corresponds with the Situationist position that the spectacle is a system of social and ideological control that reproduces consensus through the cultural domination of leisure, entertainment, and consumption. Rather than revolt against exploitation, the middle classes buy into new forms of entertainment, media spectacle, and cultural products that fuel consumer demand. Moreover, new communication and information technologies, new modes of entertainment, and other visual media broaden and extend a “jargon of authenticity” (Adorno, 1973) whereby people judge the image of sincerity of a speaker over and above the actual content of the message.

The Situationists maintain that the logic of reification has moved into the realm of consumption and representation and therefore has become universalized.10 Yet neither Debord nor Vaneigem argue that consumption has displaced production as the prime source of capitalist exploitation, only that consumption is a further source of reification, in addition to the social relations of production. In the August 1964 issue of Internationale Situationniste, the Situationists noted that “with the development of leisure
and of forced consumption, pseudo-culture and pseudo-games not only become expanding sectors of the economy … but tend to be what makes the entire economy run, by representing the very objective of that economy” (Situationist International, 1964). Reflecting Lefebvre, the Situationists view reification as a process of the imaging of society, “where the perceptible world is replaced by the set of images that are superior to that world yet at the same time impose themselves as eminently perceptible” (Debord, [1967]1994, #36, emphasis in original). In this situation, people produce art, culture, space, and time as consumable “things,” each of which combines a variety of other commodities that mask exploitative labor conditions. In turn, people do not experience events or reality as reflexive and acting subjects. Insofar as possible, consumer capitalism constructs people as acquiescent and submissive consumers, thereby reducing people’s capacity to perceive, conceive, and experience reality on multiple levels of complexity and sensitivity. According to Vaneigem ([1967]2001, Chapter 7),

The present economic system can only be rescued by turning man into a consumer, by identifying him with the largest possible number of consumable values, which is to say, non-values, or empty, fictitious, abstract values. … The stereotyped images of the star, the poor man, the communist, the murderer-for-love, the law-abiding-citizen, the rebel, the bourgeois, will replace man, putting in his place a system of multicopy categories arranged according to the irrefutable logic of robotisation. Already the idea of ‘teenager’ tends to define the buyer in conformity with the product he buys, to reduce his variety to a varied but limited range of objects in the shops (Records, guitars, Levis…). You are no longer as old as you feel or as old as you look, but as old as what you buy. The time of production-society where ‘time is money’ will give way to the time of consumption, measured in terms of products bought, worn out and thrown away.

Second, radical semiologists such as Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard argue that reification now manifests in the realm of the “code” or autonomous “sign” but do not specify the historical mechanisms by which this transformation occurs. Indeed their work is evasive on identifying whether capitalist consumption is the source of reification. For Baudrillard, the logic of reification is disembedded from social relations; it is not located in the logic of production or consumption. In Simulations (Baudrillard, 1983a) and In the Shadow of Silent Majorities (Baudrillard, 1983b), Baudrillard develops the argument that the ubiquity and complexity of the new media and informational world destroy referential reality by saturating the masses with signifiers and simulated models. In Baudrillard’s works, the commodity radiates with sign value in which the value of images, objects, and practices is organized into a hierarchy of prestige, coded differences,
and associative chains and symbols that “bears no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (1983a, p. 11). Sign value involves the atomization of the signifier in which common meanings and external referents break apart. Semiotic domination overrides materiality, and signifiers circulate in a purely contingent manner unconstrained by material or “structural” factors. Such a position emphasizes the causal primacy of semiotic over material exchange while maintaining that Marxian analyses of commodity production and consumption are antiquated and misguided. Against the Situationists, Baudrillard (1983a, p. 56) argues that “we are no longer in the society of the spectacle which the situationists talked about, nor in the specific types of alienation and repression which this implied.” Instead, we now live in a world dominated by “simulations” or infinite production of copies without originals, a situation that obliterates distinctions between real and illusory conditions or events, and evaporates the possibilities for genuine communication and agency.

The Situationist approach breaks with the semiotic determinism of Baudrillard and other radical semiologists. Whereas Baudrillard accepts the “impossibility of isolating the process of simulation” (1983a, p. 40), the Situationists locate the images and their reifying character in the process of commodification. More important, the strategy of the Situationists is to highlight the seemingly all-pervasive power of the spectacle while pointing to its antagonistic and contradictory aspects. On the one hand, the Situationists argued that attempts to conceptualize and organize the world along the imperatives of capitalist accumulation short-circuit resistant forms of collective action and discourage debate over genuine solutions to pressing social problems. On the other hand, they pointed out that the impoverishment of everyday life under the power of spectacular consumption creates the fissures that can nurture the development of revolutionary movements, a position shared by early Frankfurt School theorists. As Vaneigem ([1967]2001, Chapter 17) put it,

As we know, the consumption of goods ... carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction and the conditions of its own transcendence. The consumer cannot and must not ever attain satisfaction: the logic of the consumable object demands the creation of fresh needs, yet the accumulation of such false needs exacerbates the malaise of people confined with increasing difficulty solely to the status of consumers. Furthermore, the wealth of consumer goods impoverishes authentic life. It does so in two ways. First, it replaces authentic life with things. Secondly, it makes it impossible, with the best will in the world, to become attached to these things, precisely because they have to be consumed, i.e., destroyed. Whence an absence of life which is ever more frustrating, a self-devouring dissatisfaction.
A third position, advocated by Habermas (1984, 1987), locates reification in the sphere of formal rationality and the tendency of instrumental reason to colonize the “life-world.” Following Max Weber’s critique of the rationalization process, Habermas argues that the dominance of efficiency and quantification in the capitalist production process and the administrative capacities of the welfare state reduce modern societies’ capacity to confront social problems by means of undistorted communication. Insofar as possible, the logic of formal rationality seeks to crush the substantive rationality of the life-world, the “context-forming background of processes of reaching understanding” through communicative action (Habermas, 1987, p. 204). The life-world is composed of several different elements, including culture, society, and personality. Each of these refers to rich emotional ties, strong cultural bonds and traditions, and normative prescriptions of appropriate individual and collective behavior. Engaging in communicative action and constructing meaning of the world in terms of these different themes reproduces the social world and integrates the individual into society. In contrast, the rationalization of the life-world assumes “the socio-pathological form of an internal colonization” (1987, p. 305) involving the growth of reification and the corresponding differentiation and fragmentation of society, culture, and personality (1987, p. 288). For Habermas, reification has its source in the process of instrumental or formal rationality which dominates all major institutions and suppresses the rich and diverse communicative capacities of the life-world (for an overview, see Dahms, 1998, pp. 16–21).

While Habermas attempts to specify the connection between reification and formal rationality, the Situationists approach stresses the capitalist character of reification. In a 1966 article, titled “The Root Structures of Reification,” Garnault (1966), another member of Situationists, noted that commodification and bureaucratization are twin processes that welcome each other: “The bureaucratization of capitalism does not mean an inner qualitative transformation, but on the contrary is an extension of the commodity form. The commodity was always bureaucratic.” Both the Situationists and Habermas (1987, p. 204) lament the tendency toward the rationalization of communication in the life-world, a process in which people’s styles of interaction come to be dominated by the pursuit of rational methods of achieving understanding and consensus. Under these conditions, abstract ideas such as freedom, democracy, and social justice lose their critical meaning and relevance and are transformed into politically legitimizing principles, a concern that permeates Vaneigem’s (1962, 1963) text “Basic Banalities” as well as other Situationists texts.
These concerns are also present in the work of Khayati (1966, p. 173), another member of the Situationist International, who argued that “[l]anguage colonized by bureaucracy is reduced to a series of blunt, inflexible formulas in which the same nouns are always accompanied by the same adjectives and participles.” For the Situationists, the dominance of commodification combined with the bureaucratic rationalization of consumption and information flows sanitizes language, robbing it of its depth and profundity, and abolishing critical distance through which people can challenge capitalism.

The Situationists’s critique thus follows a long tradition of theorizing reification as a subordination of human beings to objects (including representations, images, and signs) they have created. Yet, unlike Lukács, Adorno, and Horkheimer, the Situationists do not maintain that science and technology are reifying forces. Early on, the Situationists followed Marx’s ([1846]1978, pp. 136–142) famous observation that technology could be a revolutionary force, a means to “imagine what can be done,” according to the Situationists (quoted in Jappe, 1999, p. 138). “[A]ll goods proposed by the spectacular system, from cars to televisions, also serve as weapons for that system,” according to Debord ([1967]1994, #28). When discussing environmental and social disasters, Debord did not denounce science but the subordination of science to a “spectacular domination” (quoted in Jappe, 1999, p. 138). The position of Debord and the Situationists parallels Marcuse’s (1964, p. 56) argument in One-Dimensional Man that while science and technology “sustain and streamline the continuum of domination” they are not inherently the “problem” and can be used to build a non-alienating society.

Despite the continuing significance of Situationist ideas there are unresolved dilemmas and limitations with Situationist theorizations. It is interesting to note the striking parallels between the deep cultural pessimism of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, in their later work, and the despair and cynicism of Debord (1988) in his Comments on the Society of the Spectacle published in 1988. Unlike the possibility of radical social change that Debord proclaimed in the Society of the Spectacle, by 1988, his optimism descends into fatalism and resignation that the spectacle has assimilated all instances of potential challenge and become a formidable and absolute power. In the Society of the Spectacle, Debord ([1967]1994, #63–#65) distinguished between two forms of spectacular power: the “concentrated” spectacle of totalitarian and overt state power and the “diffuse” spectacle of the rule of the commodity economy. By Comments on the Society of the Spectacle, Debord (1988, pp. 11–12) maintained that these
categories had been assimilated into an all-pervasive “integrated” spectacle which is characterized by “incessant technological renewal, integration of state and economy, generalized secrecy, unanswerable lies, an eternal present.” These assertions have led critics to dismiss Debord’s work and claim that Situationist perspectives are outmoded and obsolete. We disagree and though we are critical of some of Debord’s totalizing claims and unreflexive theorizing, our goal is to update and extend Situationist theorizing via critical theory. To help remedy the theoretical, analytical, and practical limitations of the work of the Situationists, we call for the development of a critical theory that is more multidimensional and recognizes the conflictual and contradictory nature of different spectacles. Thus, we elaborate several major dimensions for understanding and analyzing consumption, spectacle, entertainment that a substantive critical theory must be willing to address.

**TOWARD A CRITICAL THEORY OF ENTERTAINMENT AND SPECTACLE**

In our view, a critical theory will reject conceptualizations of spectacle as a totality in favor of an orientation that views spectacles as plural and multidimensional. From a dialectical and non-reductive perspective, a critical theory would identify and explain connections between different forms of spectacle (political, economic, and cultural), different types of spectacle (shopping malls, casinos, world fairs, sports, theme parks, tourist-oriented celebrations, media spectacles, and so on), and different technologies of spectacle (theming, simulation, virtual reality, and so on). As Ritzer (2002, p. 200) notes, not all spectacles take the commodity form. Political spectacles such as Watergate and the Monica Lewinsky scandal, military spectacles such as the Gulf War and the War in Iraq, and media spectacles such as the O.J. Simpson trial each have their own logic, suggesting that there are “multiple logics” that shape the production of spectacles. In short, a critical theory would eschew univocal explanations and refuse to reduce spectacles to any one dimension. Thus, a critical theory would draw attention to the role that different spectacles play as forms of commodified pleasure, how spectacles define individuals as consumers, and the impact of the entertainment industry in using advertising and marketing to constitute consumer desires and needs, and then exploiting them for profit. This analytic approach seeks to identify and explain conflicts,
contradictions, and crisis tendencies within the different forms, types, and technologies of spectacle. We break with Debord’s extreme conception that the spectacle is the central organizing principle of society. Spectacles are part of a wider and multifaceted totality of capitalist modernity that includes the changing dynamics of the economy, culture, political system, and so on.

In addition, a critical theory would eschew generalized and abstract notions of spectacle and examine the interconnected processes that constitute the diverse forms, types, and technologies of spectacle. Against monolithic views, it is helpful to view spectacles as comprising the interconnected processes of production, consumption, representation, and regulation. Individuals and groups cannot consume spectacles without the corresponding and prior production and representation of spectacles. The production of spectacle refers to the multifaceted process of capital accumulation that involves investment, circulation, and profit realization through the commodification of images, space, and so on. A dialectical perspective would combine both macro- and micro-levels to understand how different governments and political organizations work with economic elites and private interests to produce spectacles; how different marketers and advertising agents use images and theming strategies to represent spectacles; which groups and interests oppose different spectacles; and which contending groups use spectacles to advance their own resistant agendas. Analyzing the different dimensions of spectacle also means exploring what social identities are connected with different spectacles, how people use and consume spectacles to reinforce or challenge identity categories, and what mechanisms regulate the distribution and use of particular spectacles. In this sense, while particular spectacles are produced by a combination of local power interests and multinational corporations, and regulated by various governmental frameworks, it is also necessary to explore the lived consumer experience and the role of human agents in shaping meanings and representations of different spectacles.

The above points suggest a further concern, namely, that a critical theory would reject views that consumers are cultural dupes that are manipulated by the producers and organizers of spectacles. In contrast, a critical theory would probe the diverse forms of action and resistance that consumers engage in to challenge corporate attempts to induce them to conform to established patterns of consumer behavior. Consumers of spectacles are not simply passive “recipients” of accepted meanings produced by advertisers and marketers. They are actively involved in the production of meaning and, indeed, produce meanings, some which are unintended by the promoters of spectacles. Indeed, spectacles are sites of struggle where powerful economic
and political interests are often forced to defend what they would prefer to have taken for granted. In this conception, spectacles are “a horizon of meaning: a specific or indefinite multiplicity of meanings, a shifting hierarchy in which one, now another meaning comes momentarily to the fore” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 222, emphasis in original). While spectacles connect to a larger process of ideological production and transmission, this process is not a one-dimensional process of indoctrination, but rather, is an active process of negotiation that groups of consumers can resist or transform to their own needs and interests. Reflecting de Certeau (1984, p. 21), who draws attention to the different “tactics of consumption,” consumers often use spectacles for ends rather different from those inscribed within them by their makers, suggesting that the consumption of spectacles is always contextual and relational (see also du Gay, 1996, p. 165; du Gay & Pryke, 2002). While the representation of spectacles connects to issues of political and economic power, the interpretation of spectacles is filtered through prior experience, one’s social location and identity (race, class, gender, and so on), and one’s conversations and engagement with others. Understanding the cultural construction of spectacles requires addressing a range of processes from encoding the practices of institutions involved in the representation of spectacles to individual and collective responses to these dominant representations.

In addition, a critical theory would analyze relations of domination and subordination, and the ways that inequality and exploitation are built into the structure and operation of spectacles. A critical theory would relate exploitative work relations in the sphere of consumption to wider structures of capitalism, and patterns of class, race, and gender inequality. At the same time, a critical theory recognizes that spectacles contain emancipatory as well as oppressive qualities. Critical theory is thus political, relating theory to practice and suggesting possibilities for emancipatory social change (Antonio, 1981). The Frankfurt School’s notion of immanent critique, for instance, evaluates the existing state of affairs in terms of society’s dominant ideas and values, showing in varied ways the problems and unrealized potentials. The purpose of immanent critique, as Horkheimer noted in Eclipse of Reason (1974), is to discern what aspects of existing society should be negated or transcended, in order to create a better society. The Situationists informed their critique of the spectacle with a vision of liberation using the strategy of detournement, a practice of transforming the original meaning of a photograph, film, advertisement, or other text by placing it in a new context, using new images and signs, to reveal the oppressive character of consumer capitalism and expose the contrast between
the image of abundance and the reality of poverty and material suffering (Jorn, 1959; Debord, [1967]1994, #206–211). For the Situationists, detournement is revolutionary praxis that attempts to reveal that the ideas, values, and cultural and technological means of launching progressive social change are already available to everyone. According to Vaneigem ([1967]2001), “all Situationist ideas are noting other than the faithful development of acts attempted constantly by thousands of people to try and prevent another day from being no more than twenty-four hours of wasted time.” The goal of Situationist practice is to appropriate the texts, images, and advertisements that are produced by the spectacular society in an effort to bring critical awareness to people’s struggles and conflicts, and to incite collective revolt against the stultification induced by entertainment and spectacle.

Finally, a critical theory would analyze past developments and current happenings using the method of immanent critique. As we enter into a new millennium we find that new communications and information technology are eroding previous stable conceptions of time and space, reinforcing a situation of ephemerality, chaos, and fragmentation that Harvey (1989) discussed in the Condition of Postmodernity. Douglas Kellner’s book on Media Spectacle (Kellner, 2003), George Ritzer’s book on the Globalization of Nothing, Gottdiener’s (1997, 2000) analysis of theming and consumption, and Hannigan’s (1998) study of the rise of “fantasy cities” draw attention to the new forms of spectacle, entertainment, and simulation that are transforming the society. These diverse thinkers imply that the processes of commodification and rationalization are producing widespread socio-cultural change, but they disagree over the form, impact, and periodization. The work of the Frankfurt School, Henri Lefebvre, and the Situationists offer the conceptual and analytic tools to understand the present conjuncture and provide crucial resources for a renewal of critical social theory. On advantage of critical theory, as Dahms (1997, p. 204) notes, is that it “cuts through veil of power and ideology” that existing theoretical perspectives often fail to identify (and often reflect or perpetuate). Critical theory provides a normative and analytic perspective, as well as critical and methodological standards, to evaluate the validity of different claims and data sources, and identify the shortcomings of different theoretical and methodological approaches. In this sense, critical theory offers a logic of analysis that brings a critical eye to the subject matter of culture, consumption, and entertainment; portrays contradictions between images and reality; and points to avenues to overcome these contradictions. The immanent critique of critical theory is not a reductionistic or idealistic because it aims for a fusion of theory and practice, for praxis.
CONCLUSION

In light of our attempt to illuminate the Situationists’s ideas on consumption and spectacle by pointing out certain affinities with Henri Lefebvre’s insights on consumer capitalism and the Frankfurt School’s critique of the culture industry, the Situationists offered a penetrating analysis of the development of postwar capitalism organized around consumption, entertainment, and new forms of domination. The Situationists in the 1950s and 1960s found themselves in a complex and changing socio-historical juncture and adapted and extended the classical ideas of Marx, Lukács, and Lefebvre to provide theoretical understanding of tenacity and resiliency of twentieth century capitalism. For Lukács, Lefebvre, and the Frankfurt School theorists, the reproduction of capitalist social relations took the form of the reproduction of labor power and the production of space, technology, and raw materials through the precepts of formal rationality. *For the Situationists, the development of the society of the spectacle inaugurates a new, qualitatively different, stage in the development of capitalism.* This stage of “consumer” capitalism includes the production and consumption of signs and spectacular images, the commodification of time and space and their transformation into abstract representations, and the development of new forms of advertising and marketing that operate through a bureaucratized communication and information network to stimulate consumer demand. In the world of consumer capitalism, fetishized commodities and reified social conditions obscure the relations of exploitation and alienation and ensure the survival and reproduction of capitalism through the creation of artificial needs and fictions of material abundance for all people.

Our integrative attempts have been motivated by a concern to connect several variants of Marxian social theory to each other in a meaningful manner, to address important social problems and empirical concerns, and answer questions of cultural significance. The Situationists’s writings on consumption, entertainment, and spectacle have attracted much attention in recent years. Although their writings reflect the concerns of Marx, Lukács, and Lefebvre, their contribution to critical theory has yet to be assessed. Part of this problem has been that their work is widely interpreted by scholars as paradoxical and contradictory. The Situationists failed to distinguish normative issues from empirical ones and their tendency for overgeneralization and romanticism has caused scholars to easily dismiss their ideas. Despite limitations, we have argued that the Situationists’s perspectives, if understood in historical context and in social theoretical
terms, can provide a promising starting point for developing a critical theory of consumer capitalism and for guiding empirical analysis on the changing relationship between economy and society. In addition, we have argued the case for a renewed interest in Situationist work by connecting their theories of alienation and reification to the broader Marxian concern with understanding the contradictions and crisis tendencies of capitalism. Our effort has been to renew the collaborative project of critical theory, specifying a starting point for rigorous sociological-research on consumption and entertainment, and on explicating the possibilities for social transformation.

The broad social transformations that are taking place in communication and information technology and globalized entertainment require the sort of radical reconstruction of social theory that Lukács, the Frankfurt School, and Lefebvre performed on Marxian theory in the 1920s and later. To grasp the changes that are occurring, we need more intense focus on political economy than is found in accounts that stress the ascendancy of cultural politics over class and the state, champion new consumption-based and niche-marketed “identities,” or explanations that maintain that the world of consumption and consumption experience is one in which image, advertising, and consumerism take primacy over production. Today, growing commodification of public goods and previously non-commodified realms of social activity means that increased “choice” is constrained by class and that the widely celebrated growth of new forms of consumption sharpens the material divisions between groups. Neoclassical economics assumes that consumer demand, tastes and preferences, and individual and group choices are given and that people freely enter markets to satisfy their desires and maximize individual utility. Yet schools of marketing for years have taught students and advised businesses on how to influence and control preferences, tastes, and motivations through advertising and other public relations efforts. Affirmations of “difference,” free “choice,” and consumer “demand” stressed in advertising combined with the growth of niche-markets belie the increasing dominance of transnational corporations in homogenizing cultural production and constraining consumer preferences. In addition, in the leisure and entertainment spaces of the changing city, paying substandard wages to an urban service proletariat helps subsidize the production of spectacle and entertainment. Linking political economy with issues of culture and marketing helps to focus attention on the role of simulations and imagery in stimulating consumer demand without missing or downplaying the exploitation and inequality that make possible the spaces of consumption devoted to glorifying and reproducing spectacles.
The analytic tools and resources of critical theory sensitize us to the complex, contradictory, and conflictual nature of new forms of consumption, entertainment, and spectacle. Today, the growth of globalized entertainment, media spectacle, and tourism suggests a process of standardization and rationalization that creates homogeneity and uniformity and thereby eradicates local differences and indigenous cultures, a phenomenon that George Ritzer (2004, p. 3) calls the “globalization of nothing,” in which “nothing” refers to a social form that is generally “centrally conceived, controlled, and comparatively devoid of distinctive content.” On the other hand, new globalized forms of cultural production and consumption sow the seeds of immanent critique that make possible new forms of resistance and opposition, thus nurturing diversity, variety, and hybridity. One advantage of critical theory is that it can help us grasp that processes of production, consumption, representation, and regulation of spectacles are forces of both homogeneity and heterogeneity, thus helping us avoid reductionist explanations. Another advantage is that critical theory can help fashion analyses that probe specific social conditions, power dynamics, and relations of domination and subordination that make consumption, simulation, theming, and advertising possible in the first place. Finally, critical theory can expose the theoretical limitations of rival explanations that refuse to critically probe the social relations underlying the production of spectacle. These theoretical advantages can help identify the key actors and organized interests involved in manufacturing cultural signifiers, and interrogate and explain the consequences of the actions of powerful groups, thereby pointing to possibilities for progressive societal transformation.

NOTES

1. Originally published in France in 1967, Society of the Spectacle contains nine chapters organized into 221 theses composed in an aphoristic style. The book contains no page numbers and the citations to the text we use refer to the numbered theses. For many years, the book was only available in English published by Black and Red (Detroit, 1970). A new French edition appeared in 1983 and a new translation in 1994. We refer to the 1994 translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith.

2. We use the term “Situationists” throughout this paper to refer to the changing members of the Situationist International (S.I.), formed in 1957 and disbanded in 1972. See complete texts of the Situationists at www.nothingness.org; www.cddc.vt.edu; www.situationist.cjb.net; www.notborded.org; www.bopsecrets.org.

3. The Situationist International was a merger of surrealist-inspired visual artists and architects and a group of anarcho-socialist political theorists and activists who
had been affiliated with the Lettrist International and the Imaginative Bauhaus. These different orientations were held together in an uncomfortable coalition through the late 1950s and early 1960s, splitting in 1962 when the visual artists/architects broke off and formed what some have labeled the “second situationist international” around the “CoBrA” (Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam) group of artists and architects who developed autonomously after 1962 but along lines consistent with the Situationist International’s writings. The primary break was a result of Guy Debord’s insistence that art and architecture would cease to exist as a separate, specialized activity for artistic virtuosos, since everyday life itself would be art in a post-revolutionary world. The CoBrA group, perhaps best represented by Constant’s “New Babylon” project, aimed at developing architecture that would enable playful, interactive, creative, and non-sterile interaction. The total size of the Situationist International was never large, and apart from an annual conference, the primary “unifier” of the group was its publication, the International Situationist, published on an erratic schedule between 1957 and 1969. There were periodic purgings of the remaining members during the 1960s, so that by the end of the decade, the group had essentially imploded. The Situationist International officially disbanded in 1972 (for overviews, see Bracken, 1999; Jappe, 1999).

4. We follow a long tradition of theorizing that embraces immanent critique as a powerful analytical and practical tool of analysis and explanation. According to Benhabib: “[Immanent] critique refuses to stand outside its object and instead juxtaposes the immanent, normative self-understanding of its object to the material actuality of the object. Criticism privileges an Archimedean standpoint, be it freedom, or reason and proceeds to show the unfreedom or unreasonableness of the world when measured against this ideal paradigm” (Benhabib, 1986, pp. 33). Unlike standpoint epistemology, where criticism emanates from the privileged social location of the social critic, immanent critique makes no assumptions about the critic. Instead, immanent critique focuses on the discrepancies and contradictions between the object of criticism and its explicit reality claims. Critical ideas do not have to be brought from outside by an autonomous critical standpoint or radical vanguard because they are already contained immanently within existing conditions. The practice of immanent critique is neither the production of moral statements nor normative judgments but critical interrogation, or “ruthless critique” according to Marx, of the terms and categories of existing society. The objective of immanent critique is to show the human construction of institutions, organizations, and relations, and thus to denaturalize them by removing them from the reified terrain of the “self-evident.” As such, immanent critique calls for analysis capable of deciphering the basis of exploitative relations in order to identify societal contradictions, injustices, and unrealized potential. In this way, we can criticize contemporary capitalism, not on the basis of privileged standpoints or transcendent standards, but from the perspective of an embryonic society developing within the old. “The conditions of [transcendence],” wrote Marx and Engels “result from the premises now in existence” (The German Ideology).

5. Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, Antonio Gramsci, and Ernst Bloch generally are considered the founders of “Western Marxism” (for an overview, see Agger (1979); see also Lowy, 1996; Poster, 1975, pp. 42–49). Marx’s early work, especially the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 Marx ([1932]1964), was heavily
influenced by G. W. F. Hegel but remained marginalized by Marxian scholars until the 1920s. Lukács’s major contribution was to re-emphasize the Hegelian roots of Marx’s theory by stressing the importance of the dialectical method and the interconnectedness of the subjective and objective dimensions of social life. According to Martin Jay, Lukács’s seminal work, *History and Class Consciousness* (Lukács ([1922]1968), “anticipated in several fundamental ways the philosophical implications of Marx’s 1844 Manuscripts, whose publication antedated by almost a decade” (Jay, 1984, p. 102). Arato and Breines (1979, p. ix) pointed out that Lukács’s work “was recognized by critics and sympathizers alike as a major event in the history of both Marxist and bourgeois thought.” The renewed interest in subjective factors, dialectics, and concepts such as alienation and fetishism had a profound influence on the development of the Frankfurt School (Feenberg, 1981).


8. Despite his prolific and wide-ranging writings, it has only been in recent years that Lefebvre’s critical ideas on the city and “everyday life” has become popular in the English-speaking world. Along with Norman Guterman, Lefebvre translated and helped publish Marx’s Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844. In 1939, Lefebvre published his Dialectical Materialism which drew attention to the Hegelian roots of Marxian theory. Gardiner (2000, p. 71) maintains that Lefebvre is “the quintessential critical theorist of everyday life.” Scholars such as David Harvey, Manual Castells, Mark Gottdiener, Joe Feagin, and Talmadge Wright have elaborated on Lefebvre’s political economy of space. Many other urban scholars have incorporated Lefebvre’s ideas into their perspectives and analyses, including Rob Shields, Fredrick Jameson, Michael Dear, Neil Smith, and Edward Soja, among others (for reviews, see Shields, 1999; Gottdiener, 1994; Benko & Strohmeyer, 1997; Liggett & Perry, 1995).


10. The concept of reification never appears in Debord’s Society of the Spectacle but appears several times in Vaneigem’s *Revolution of Everyday Life* (Chapters 2, 12, 21, and 23), and other Situationist writings. Debord’s ideas on fetishism and the reifying character of consumption are indebted to Karl Korsch who held that fetishism sufficed to describe reification.

11. Habermas’s “colonization of the lifeworld” echoes one of Debord’s key concepts, that of the “colonization of everyday life.” The crucial difference is that Debord derives his concept from Lefebvre’s notion of “everyday life” whereas Habermas’s “lifeworld” comes from the theory of Alfred Schütz. Habermas’s ideas on reification are consciously and explicitly connected to Weber’s theory of rationalization and Talcott Parsons’s systems-theoretic approach (for overview, see Calhoun, 1988, pp. 221–223).
12. In “Notes on Science and the Crisis,” Horkeheimer (1989) contended that science and technology could be forces of emancipation that might dramatically improve human life. For Horkheimer, the irrationality of capitalism corrupts the scientific method, turning it into an end in itself dominated by instrumental rationality and a positivist epistemology. In their later works, the Frankfurt School theorists would adopt a highly critical view of science and technology, leading them to an increasingly “pessimistic” critique of modern capitalism and cynical view of the future (Postone, 1993, pp. 84–120).

REFERENCES


