The Century of the Self Reader

Part 2:

The Image and the Self

The Commodity as Spectacle by Guy Debord

Media Unlimited (excerpt) by Todd Gitlin

Ways of Seeing, Essay 7 by John Berger

Ideology Materialized by Guy Debord

Debord writes: "The spectacle is ideology par excellence, because it exposes and manifests in its fullness the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, servitude and negation of real life". What does he mean?

The Society of the Spectacle

Chapter 2:
The Commodity as Spectacle

> "*The commodity can be understood in its undistorted essence only when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole. Only in this context does the reification produced by commodity relations assume decisive importance both for the objective evolution of society and for the attitudes that people adopt toward it, as it subjugates their consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression. ... As labor is increasingly rationalized and mechanized, this subjugation is reinforced by the fact that people's activity becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative.*"
>
> —Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*

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In the spectacle's basic practice of incorporating into itself all the *fluid* aspects of human activity so as to possess them in a congealed form, and of *inverting* living values into purely abstract values, we recognize our old enemy *the commodity*, which seems at first glance so trivial and obvious, yet which is actually so complex and full of metaphysical subtleties.

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The fetishism of the commodity — the domination of society by "intangible as well as tangible things" — attains its ultimate fulfillment in the spectacle, where the real world is replaced by a selection of images which are projected above it, yet which at the same time succeed in making themselves regarded as the epitome of reality.

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The world at once present and absent that the spectacle *holds up to view* is the world of the commodity dominating all living experience. The world of the commodity is thus shown for *what it is*, because its development is identical to people's *estrangement* from each other and from everything they produce.

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The loss of quality that is so evident at every level of spectacular language, from the objects it glorifies to the behavior it regulates, stems from the basic nature of a production system that shuns reality. The commodity form reduces everything to quantitative equivalence. The quantitative is what it develops, and it can develop only within the quantitative.

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Despite the fact that this development excludes the qualitative, it is itself subject to qualitative change. The spectacle reflects the fact that this development has crossed the threshold of *its own abundance*. Although this qualitative change has as yet taken place only partially in a few local areas, it is already implicit at the universal level that was the commodity's original standard — a standard that the commodity has lived up to by turning the whole planet into a single world market.

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The development of productive forces is the *unconscious history* that has actually created and altered the living conditions of human groups — the conditions enabling them to survive and the expansion of those conditions. It has been the economic basis of all human undertakings. Within natural economies, the emergence of a commodity sector represented a surplus survival. Commodity production, which implies the exchange of varied products between independent producers, tended for a long time to retain its small-scale craft aspects, relegated as it was to a marginal economic role where its quantitative reality was still hidden. But whenever it encountered the social conditions of large-scale commerce and capital accumulation, it took total control of the economy. The entire economy then became what the commodity had already shown itself to be in the course of this conquest: a process of quantitative development. This constant expansion of economic power in the form of commodities transformed human labor itself into a commodity, into *wage labor*, and ultimately produced a level of abundance sufficient to solve the initial problem of survival — but only in such a way that the same problem is continually being regenerated at a higher level. Economic growth has liberated societies from the natural pressures that forced them into an immediate struggle for survival; but they have not yet been liberated from their liberator. The commodity's *independence* has spread to the entire economy it now dominates. This economy has transformed the world, but it has merely transformed it into a world dominated by the economy. The pseudonature within which human labor has become alienated demands that such labor remain forever *in its service;* and since this demand is formulated by and answerable only to itself, it in fact ends up channeling all socially permitted projects and endeavors into its own reinforcement. The abundance of commodities — that is, the abundance of commodity relations — amounts to nothing more than an *augmented survival*.

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As long as the economy's role as material basis of social life was neither noticed nor understood (remaining unknown precisely because it was so familiar), the commodity's dominion over the economy was exerted in a covert manner. In societies where actual commodities were few and far between, money was the apparent master, serving as plenipotentiary representative of the greater power that remained unknown. With the Industrial Revolution's manufactural division of labor and mass production for a global market, the commodity finally became fully visible as a power that was *colonizing* all social life. It was at that point that political economy established itself as the dominant science, and as the science of domination.

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The spectacle is the stage at which the commodity has succeeded in *totally* colonizing social life. Commodification is not only visible, we no longer see anything else; the world we see is the world of the commodity. Modern economic production extends its dictatorship both extensively and intensively. In the less industrialized regions, its reign is already manifested by the presence of a few star commodities and by the imperialist domination imposed by the more industrially advanced regions. In the latter, social space is blanketed with ever-new layers of commodities. With the "second industrial revolution," alienated consumption has become just as much a duty for the masses as alienated production. The society's *entire sold labor* has become a *total commodity* whose constant turnover must be maintained at all cost. To accomplish this, this total commodity has to be returned in fragmented form to fragmented individuals who are completely cut off from the overall operation of the productive forces. To this end the specialized science of domination is broken down into further specialties such as sociology, applied psychology, cybernetics, and semiology, which oversee the self-regulation of every phase of the process.

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Whereas during the primitive stage of capitalist accumulation "political economy considers the proletarian only as a *worker*," who only needs to be allotted the indispensable minimum for maintaining his labor power, and never considers him "in his leisure and humanity," this ruling-class perspective is revised as soon as commodity abundance reaches a level that requires an additional collaboration from him. Once his workday is over, the worker is suddenly redeemed from the total contempt toward him that is so clearly implied by every aspect of the organization and surveillance of production, and finds himself seemingly treated like a grownup, with a great show of politeness, in his new role as a consumer. At this point the *humanism of the commodity* takes charge of the worker's "leisure and humanity" simply because political economy now can and must dominate those spheres *as political economy*. The "perfected denial of man" has thus taken charge of all human existence.

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The spectacle is a permanent opium war designed to force people to equate goods with commodities and to equate satisfaction with a survival that expands according to its own laws. Consumable survival must constantly expand because it never ceases to *include privation*. If augmented survival never comes to a resolution, if there is no point where it might stop expanding, this is because it is itself stuck in the realm of privation. It may gild poverty, but it cannot transcend it.

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Automation, which is both the most advanced sector of modern industry and the epitome of its practice, obliges the commodity system to resolve the following contradiction: The technological developments that objectively tend to eliminate work must at the same time preserve *labor as a commodity*, because labor is the only creator of commodities. The only way to prevent automation (or any other less extreme method of increasing labor productivity) from reducing society's total necessary labor time is to create new jobs. To this end the reserve army of the unemployed is enlisted into the tertiary or

"service" sector, reinforcing the troops responsible for distributing and glorifying the latest commodities; and in this it is serving a real need, in the sense that increasingly extensive campaigns are necessary to convince people to buy increasingly unnecessary commodities.

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Exchange value could arise only as a representative of use value, but the victory it eventually won with its own weapons created the conditions for its own autonomous power. By mobilizing all human use value and monopolizing its fulfillment, exchange value ultimately succeeded in *controlling use*. Usefulness has come to be seen purely in terms of exchange value, and is now completely at its mercy. Starting out like a *condottiere* in the service of use value, exchange value has ended up waging the war for its own sake.

47

The constant *decline of use value* that has always characterized the capitalist economy has given rise to a new form of poverty within the realm of augmented survival — alongside the old poverty which still persists, since the vast majority of people are still forced to take part as wage workers in the unending pursuit of the system's ends and each of them knows that he must submit or die. The reality of this blackmail — the fact that even in its most impoverished forms (food, shelter) use value now has no existence outside the illusory riches of augmented survival — accounts for the general acceptance of the illusions of modern commodity consumption. The real consumer has become a consumer of illusions. The commodity is this materialized illusion, and the spectacle is its general expression.

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Use value was formerly understood as an implicit aspect of exchange value. Now, however, within the upside-down world of the spectacle, it must be explicitly proclaimed, both because its actual reality has been eroded by the overdeveloped commodity economy and because it serves as a necessary pseudo-justification for a counterfeit life.

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The spectacle is the flip side of money. It, too, is an abstract general equivalent of all commodities. But whereas money has dominated society as the representation of universal equivalence — the exchangeability of different goods whose uses remain uncomparable — the spectacle is the modern complement of money: a representation of the commodity world as a whole which serves as a general equivalent for what the entire society can be and can do. The spectacle is money one can *only look at*, because in it all use has already been exchanged for the totality of abstract representation. The spectacle is not just a servant of *pseudo-use*, it is already in itself a pseudo-use of life.

50

With the achievement of *economic* abundance, the concentrated result of social labor becomes visible, subjecting all reality to the appearances that are now that labor's primary product. Capital is no longer the invisible center governing the production

process; as it accumulates, it spreads to the ends of the earth in the form of tangible objects. The entire expanse of society is its portrait.

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The economy's triumph as an independent power at the same time spells its own doom, because the forces it has unleashed have eliminated the *economic necessity* that was the unchanging basis of earlier societies. Replacing that necessity with a necessity for boundless economic development can only mean replacing the satisfaction of primary human needs (now scarcely met) with an incessant fabrication of pseudoneeds, all of which ultimately come down to the single pseudoneed of maintaining the reign of the autonomous economy. But that economy loses all connection with authentic needs insofar as it emerges from the *social unconscious* that unknowingly depended on it. "Whatever is conscious wears out. What is unconscious remains unalterable. But once it is freed, it too falls to ruin" (Freud).

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Once society discovers that it depends on the economy, the economy in fact depends on the society. When the subterranean power of the economy grew to the point of visible domination, it lost its power. The economic *Id* must be replaced by the *I*. This subject can only arise out of society, that is, out of the struggle within society. Its existence depends on the outcome of the class struggle that is both product and producer of the economic foundation of history.

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Consciousness of desire and desire for consciousness are the same project, the project that in its negative form seeks the abolition of classes and thus the workers' direct possession of every aspect of their activity. The *opposite* of this project is the society of the spectacle, where the commodity contemplates itself in a world of its own making.

Chapter 2 of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (Paris, 1967). Translated by Ken Knabb.

DISTRACTIONS, DRUGS, AND FETISHES

The urge to grasp the totality of the media has been with us even longer than most modern media. During the centuries when popular culture had not yet grown torrential, many critics already nonetheless argued that images and performances diverted people from more constructive pursuits. Many pointed accusing fingers at the sirens of "distraction," the better to convince people to plug their ears. Some

thought popular culture a distraction from a piety that ought to have been directed toward God or Church. Some saw popular culture as a pacifying circus that offered the masses some psychic compensation for their sufferings without detracting from the authorities' power. Even defenders of today's media barrage generally agree that it amounts to distraction from the burdens of industrialized life—though, unlike the critics, they celebrate it precisely for that reason, as a valuable, even a necessary remedy. Distraction cannot by itself account for the unlimited flow of today's media. But the concept deserves some exploration.

Distraction is one of those terms—like *freedom*, *responsibility*, and *alienation*—that requires an object to make sense. The question is, distraction from what? Mortality? God? Pain? Subjugation? Changing the world? More than one, or all, of the above? (The German Marxist critic Siegfried Kracauer, for instance, suggested in 1930: "The flight of images is the flight from revolution and death.") Your answer to the question *Distraction from what?* reveals what you value.

Distraction from mortality and distraction from God are the historical starting points for this line of thought. The Old Testament God condemned "graven images." St. Paul and St. Augustine added their own supplementary condemnations. But Blaise Pascal, the French mathematician and Augustinian devotee, was the most pungent distraction critic of early modern times. In his *Pensées* of 1657–58, Pascal declared that gambling, hunting, and womanizing were but feeble—and ultimately futile—efforts to divert ourselves from the inescapable fact of human mortality. "The only thing which consoles us for our miseries is diversion, and yet this is the greatest of our miseries." For diversion was habit-forming. Seeking excitement, we might foolishly imagine that "the possession of the objects of [our] quest would make [us] really happy," and thereby miss the only possible path to salvation—Christian devotion.

The religious strand of suspicion continues to this day. Pentacostalists disapprove of dancing, and other fundamentalists deplore

televised sex. Partisans of various creeds despise "degenerate art." But over the last century and a half, secular critique and analysis have come to the fore. During the heyday of social theory, the period between 1848 and 1918 when industry, cities, bureaucracies, commerce, nationalism, and empire were booming, the media flow was, by today's standards, only a rivulet. Nonetheless, some of the great social thinkers of Europe and the United States explored and tried to explain the nature of modern diversion. The founders of sociology elaborated concepts that help us understand the origins of our way of life and of the vast machinery society has devised to feed our equally vast appetite for wish fulfillment. Karl Marx called this way of life capitalism; Max Weber, rationalization; Georg Simmel, the least known but for our purposes the most helpful, intellectualism.

Marx died in 1883, four years before the first gramophone patent and twelve years before the first motion picture. Never having heard recorded music or gone to the movies, he still understood that capitalism required popular distraction. The great upender of the nineteenth century, Marx in 1843 turned Pascal on his head. For this militant atheist, religion was not what diversion diverted *from*; it was diversion itself. As the Bolivian peasant chewed coca leaves to overcome the exhaustion of a wretched life, so did the worker in a capitalist society turn to religion as "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people . . . the *illusory* happiness of men." Religion was mass distraction, the result of imagining man's own powers projected beyond himself into God. But according to Marx, the objects that human beings produced for the market also acquired a magical—indeed, an illusory and distracting—aspect. They became, in a sense, religious artifacts.

By 1867, in *Capital*, Marx had come to identify a new form of popular irrationality that he called "the fetishism of commodities." Commodities, he wrote, were "transcendent," "mystical," "mysterious," and "fantastic" in that they acquired a value not inherent in

their physical nature. Through the mysteries of the market, people assigned value to goods that they could live without. But Marx did not anticipate that capitalism, thanks to its ongoing productive success, would serve up such an abundance of transcendent mysteries with which people could compensate themselves for their sacrifices. Marx was transfixed by production, not consumption. For him, workers were wage slaves barely able to dream of becoming distracted consumers. They were condemned to growing impoverishment, not declining hours of work and increasing amounts of disposable income. He did not anticipate that the magic loaded into commodities at the production end might rub off on people at the consumption end—so much so as to create a new, enveloping way of life brimming with satisfactions.

Obsessed by the exploitative nature of production, Marx tended to think of consumption strictly as an auxiliary process that accomplished two purposes: it circulated goods and replenished the laborer's powers. It was not a fundamental, useful human act. He missed the way in which commodities didn't just "confront" people with "alien" powers in an externalized face-off but entered into people, "spoke" to them, linked them to one another, cultivated their satisfactions, and in certain ways satisfied them. As an image or sound enters the mind, one may feel oneself, at least for a moment, going to meet it, welcoming it, even melting into it—overcoming confrontation with gratification. For Marx, such satisfaction was only a distraction from the "real conditions of life." But what are those "real conditions"?

Marx was right that markets work mysteriously, that there is magic in the way a compact disc, say, comes to be "worth" two hours of a janitor's labor or the same as a six-pack of premium beer. An act of culture produces this equation. But he underestimated the amount of magic in the world. What is going on when I walk into a music store and hold a CD in my hand? I approach not only a shiny metallic object in a plastic case whose manufacturing costs are

a few cents but an aura of pleasure and a trail of resonance derived perhaps from the reputation of the band whose music it contains or from my experience of having heard a song at a party, on the radio, or downloaded onto my computer. The object of advertising is to intensify this resonance and link it with my own good feelings past and prospective. My armchair, in this sense, "produces" not only the sensation against my back and backside but a sense of comfort I may associate with my childhood. Nike sneakers produce not only a certain spongy sensation against my soles but (at least until I get into the gym) my dream of soaring like Michael Jordan.

When my friends and I shoot baskets, we aren't just compensating ourselves for what the alienation of labor has cost us; we are also forming a social relation for the purpose of play. We invest in the game some of our human powers. Why isn't our game just as real as our labor? For that matter, why isn't watching a game on TV as real and central as the labors we perform on the job?

Marx, imprisoned in the utilitarian attitude he condemned, was in this respect not radical enough. He didn't take seriously the fact that we were all children once, and all children play. They simulate and observe others simulating. Children are fascinated by mirrors and grow up impressed by games of cognition and recognition, cartoonish representations, performances in masks and disguises. Developmental psychologists point out that play has utility, increasing competencies, offering lessons in how to win and lose—but play is also gratuitous. People play "for fun," because it pleases them. Adults surrender much, but never all, of their playfulness. They do not simply put away childish things. Things promise pleasure—and not only things bought and kept for oneself. Gifts, too, are expressions of feeling, of affection, or love, or duty. Things are more than things; they are containers for love and self-love.

CALCULATION AND FEELING

In conventional usage, the media deliver an information flow. The term *information* goes with thought, cognition, knowledge. It sounds as hard (and objective and masculine) as *emotion* sounds soft (and subjective and feminine). Many commentators today think of the mind as an "information processor"; business likes to talk about IT, information technology. But what if we tease apart the notion of information? We see into our current situation more deeply if we consider information as something that happens within a human setting, something that people approach, seek, develop, employ, avoid, circulate, and resist. We do live in an "information society," but no less, if less famously, it is *a society of feeling and sensation*, toward the furtherance of which information is sometimes useful.

Marx starts with people required to live by their labor; the key modern social institution is the factory. In the standard sequence of sociological founding fathers, Marx's great successor is Max Weber (1864–1920), for whom people are required to live in power relations, and moderns, in particular, are under severe pressure to "rationalize" their social relations—to give reasons for their conduct, to think instrumentally, to calculate means toward ends. They, we, must surrender to abstract "rational-legal" rules installed by unforgiving bureaucracies. We may protest by seeking leaders tinged with grace, gifted with what Weber called "charisma," but charisma too becomes routinized in the end, and we are doomed to enclosure in the "iron cage" of modern rationality. It's easy enough to imagine why Weber's disenchanted moderns would turn to entertainment for relief, a sort of reenchantment, even though Weber did not take up the subject in particular.

For a deeper understanding of the wellsprings of the all-engulfing spectacle, we must turn to Weber's German-Jewish contemporary Georg Simmel (1858–1918), the first great modern analyst of what

we take today as everyday experience. Simmel thought the decisive force in people's lives is "the power and the rhythm of emotions." Desire precedes rationality, chronologically in the life of the individual but also logically, in the evolution of human conduct and institutions. The human condition begins with dependencies that are emotional (the need for love and support) as well as physical (the need for nourishment and warmth). "For man, who is always striving, never satisfied, always becoming, love is the true human condition." From the moment of birth, to live is to be and feel connected. Our cognitive and intellectual faculties rest upon foundations of feeling. The emotional linkages of childhood persist and develop in ways that make all social relations finally emotional relations, compounded of desires, satisfactions, frustrations, attachments, and antagonisms.

For Simmel, the framework in which man strives for love and connection is not so much, as with Marx, capitalist production but the money economy. "Man is a 'purposive' animal," Simmel writes. He develops goals and exercises his will to attain them through making and using tools, and increasingly through money, a means that develops psychologically into an end. People treat other people, as well as things, in a utilitarian fashion, and money is "the most extreme example of a means becoming an end." People now organize their lives to make money. They think calculatingly and categorically. They abstract calculation from sentiment. They develop the mental faculties to "size up" people, things, and situations reliably and quickly. Thus (and perhaps Simmel exaggerates the point) "money is responsible for impersonal relations between people."

The metropolis, Simmel maintains, is the most concentrated locale of the money economy, and it is here, above all, that mental life becomes "essentially intellectualistic." In the epochal movement of humanity from the village to the city, emotions were sidelined. The residents of populous cities like Berlin and Strasbourg, where Simmel lived, were required to tame their passions in favor of "calculating exactness" as a style of life. What will your trade be? For

whom will you work and whom will you hire? What will you buy, where will you sell, and at what prices? Of whom will you make use? All-consuming, incessant calculation, in turn, required defenses against the assault and battery of a life in which everyone was judged according to whether he or she appeared usable, and people routinely, casually treated both persons and things with formality and "an unrelenting hardness."

Moreover, money "reduces the highest as well as the lowest values equally" to a single standard, putting them "on the same level." Money, therefore, is a school for cynicism. (In our own time, the standard of monetary worth gives us expressions like "She's a dime a dozen," "He's a loser," "You get what you pay for," and "I feel like a million bucks.") Moreover, besieged by the variety of strangers and things, people frantically categorize, cultivating an "intellectualistic quality . . . a protection of the inner life against the domination of the metropolis." The modern city dweller must acquire "a relentless matter-of-factness," a "blasé outlook," a kind of "reserve with its overtone of concealed aversion." The German and French languages share a word to express this sort of cultivated indifference: in German, *egal*, in French, *égal*. They mean "equal," but with a shrug or a somewhat depressed implication not found in English: "It doesn't matter"; "I don't care"; "It's all the same to me" (in French, expressed in the all-purpose phrase "*ça m'est égal*").

For Simmel, "cynicism and a blasé attitude" are the direct results of "the reduction of the concrete values of life to the mediating value of money." Within the metropolis, there are special "nurseries of cynicism . . . places with huge turnovers," like stock exchanges, where money constantly changes hands. "The more money becomes the sole center of interest," Simmel writes, "the more one discovers that honor and conviction, talent and virtue, beauty and salvation of the soul, are exchanged against money, and so the more a mocking and frivolous attitude will develop in relation to these higher values that are for sale for the same kind of value as groceries, and that also

command a 'market price.' " Cynicism is the subjective expression of a marketplace for values.

Cynicism can be enlivening, offering a momentary lift, a superior knowingness, but its dark side emerges in dismissals like "show me something I haven't seen," "been there, done that," and "*so* over." At an extreme, as Simmel writes, the blasé person "has completely lost the feeling for value differences. He experiences all things as being of an equally dull and grey hue, as not worth getting excited about." Simmel is writing in 1900, before the media torrent, but he anticipates our world with his startling observation that the growth of the blasé attitude produces a paradoxical result—a culture of sensation. The cynic is content with his inner state, but the blasé person is not. Hence the latter's craving "for excitement, for extreme impressions, for the greatest speed in its change." Satisfying that craving may bring relief, but only temporarily. The more excitements, the worse. "The modern preference for 'stimulation' as such in impressions, relations and information" follows, in other words, Simmel maintains, from "the increasingly blasé attitude through which natural excitement increasingly disappears. This search for stimuli originates in the money economy with the fading of all specific values into a mere mediating value. We have here one of those interesting cases in which the disease determines its own form of the cure."

So emerges the modern individual, a role player who is also a part-time adventurer and stimulus seeker, trying frenetically to find himself by abandoning himself. This paradoxical individual is primed for unlimited media.

The money economy is not the only source of impersonal social relations. Our ordinary encounters with large numbers of unfamiliar people also drive us to calculate each other's usefulness. The members of traditional or primitive economies were dependent on small numbers of people. Modern man, Simmel argues, has many more needs. "Not only is the extent of our needs considerably wider," he

writes, "but even the elementary necessities that we have in common with all other human beings (food, clothing and shelter) can be satisfied only with the help of a much more complex organization and many more hands. Not only does specialization of our activities itself require an infinitely extended range of other producers with whom we exchange products," but many of our actions require increasing amounts "of preparatory work, additional help and semi-finished products." Once upon a time, we knew the people we met at the market by name and face. "In contrast, consider how many 'delivery men' alone we are dependent upon in a money economy!" As they are functionally indistinguishable, so are they interchangeable. "We grow indifferent to them in their particularity."

Simmel is writing at the dawn of the twentieth century. Already, the calculating individual has split into parts corresponding to distinct roles (worker, parent, shopper), and he experiences most other people in equally stylized roles (coworker, shopkeeper, boss). Under the sway of calculating individualism, people must mask themselves in their roles—must appear *as* their roles—in order to be recognized by others. Yet the role never seeps into all of a person's interior crevices. The mask never melts utterly into the face. Instead, we live elaborate inner lives—which, ironically, we crave all the more intensely because of the constraints under which we operate in our outer lives. We *play* roles but *are not* the roles. Some part of us is always backstage.

For Simmel, the real person, hovering behind the strutting and fretting of everyday metropolitan life, is the one who feels. Feeling is the way a person gets personal. This obvious principle, he believes, has been disguised by "rationalistic platitudes that are entirely unpsychological." Foremost among these historic misunderstandings is that of Descartes, who, starting his chain of reasoning with reasons, proceeds, reason by reason, to the famous conclusion that he exists because he thinks.

Here, then, is the grand paradox that Simmel's thinking leads to:

a society of calculation is inhabited by people who need to feel to distract themselves from precisely the rational discipline on which their practical lives rely. The calculation and reserve demanded by the money economy stimulate, by way of compensation, emotional needs and a craving for excitement and sensation. Thus does the upsurge of marketplace thinking in the eighteenth century call up its opposite, romanticism, which urges us to heed the inner voice of feeling. Real life takes place in *deep* feeling, *authentic* feeling, feeling that must be protected from social impositions, feeling that was born free and longs to go native. The idea spreads that the individual *is*, above all, his or her feelings.

Feeling too vigorously expressed, however, presents a management problem. Feeling too much, or expressing it too freely, would interfere with work and duty. (You do not want to give in to grief or, having fallen in love, go about walking on air while running a lathe or balancing the books.) Romanticism must be domesticated, made to fit into the niches of life. Emotions must be contained, reserved for convenient times when they may be expressed without risk to workaday life. Emotions must refresh, not drain or disrupt. They must be disposable and, if not free, at least low-cost. We are on our way here into the society of nonstop popular culture that induces limited-liability feelings on demand—feelings that do not bind and sensations that feel like, and pass for, feelings. A society consecrated to self-interest ends up placing a premium on finding life *interesting*.

What I am arguing, following Simmel, is not that human beings suddenly began to feel, but that, in recent centuries, they came to experience, and crave, particular kinds of feelings—disposable ones. It seems that, in much of the West in the seventeenth century and accelerating thereafter, feelings became associated ever more closely with the sense of an internal, subjective life set apart from the external world. By the end of the eighteenth century, the English language was teeming with new terms to describe feelings felt to be happening

in here, within the person. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as philologist Owen Barfield pointed out, terms like *apathy*, *chagrin*, *diffidence*, *ennui*, and *homesickness* emerged, along with the phrase *the feelings*, while other terms for mental states, such as *agitation*, *constraint*, *disappointment*, *embarrassment*, and *excitement*, were relocated from the outer to the inner world. To these nouns for states of feeling were added adjectives that describe external phenomena "purely by the *effects* which they produce on human beings." Barfield's examples include *affecting*, *amusing*, *boring*, *charming*, *diverting*, *entertaining*, *enthralling*, *entrancing*, *exciting*, *fascinating*, *interesting*, and *pathetic* in its modern sense. As Barfield put it: "When a Roman spoke of events as *auspicious* or *sinister*, or when some natural object was said in the Middle Ages to be *baleful*, or *benign*, or *malign* . . . the activity was felt to emanate from the object itself. When we speak of an object or an event as *amusing*, on the contrary, we know that the process indicated by the word *amuse* takes place within ourselves."

So modernity, the age of calculation, produced a culture devoted to sentiment. Increasingly, the self-fashioning man or woman needed instructions in what to feel and how to express it. Philosophers wrote of "moral sentiments," sympathy foremost among them. Novels, indulging the taste for private feeling, were schools for sentiment. So were popular eighteenth-century British manuals advocating the arts of impression management. Feeling was plentiful but had to be disguised in public, lest (for example) laughing aloud damage one's ability to produce calculated impressions, or excessive enthusiasm jeopardize a woman's ability to protect herself. Middle-class strivers wished to cultivate self-control to improve their social standing and marriageability. Lord Chesterfield's volume of letters to his son on the arts of self-management, published posthumously in 1775, was a best-seller not only in England but in America. Novels conveyed not only advice about what to feel but the direct experience of feelings themselves: sympathy, surprise, recognition, satisfaction, pity, dread,

and suspense; along with aesthetic pleasures in phrasing, wit, poignancy, and so on. One read, in other words, in order to feel.

By the nineteenth century, some of the main contours of present-day popular culture were evident. Entertainments like the novel filtered down from the middle class to the popular majority. It was in the United States, where the money economy and democracy developed together, that Simmel's observations about calculation and feeling prove most apropos. Usable, everyday distraction required surges of feeling and high-intensity stimuli that would be generally accessible but at the same time transitory. By the early 1830s, when Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States—long before Times Square or Hollywood, before vaudeville or Al Jolson, Michael Jackson or Arnold Schwarzenegger, *USA Today* or the Internet—American culture was already sensational, emotional, melodramatic, and informal. Long before the remote control device, call waiting, cruise control, the car radio scan option, or the Apple mouse, before electricity, let alone the humble on-off switch, the United States was consecrated to comfort and convenience. Tocqueville accordingly wrote: "Democratic nations cultivate the arts that serve to render life easy in preference to those whose object is to adorn it." Artists in aristocratic societies perfected their craft while following established traditions, but in democracies, "What is generally sought in the productions of mind is easy pleasure and information without labor." What results, he added, are "many imperfect commodities" that "substitute the representation of motion and sensation for that of sentiment and thought. . . . Style will frequently be fantastic, incorrect, overburdened, and loose, almost always vehement and bold. Authors will aim at rapidity of execution more than at perfection of detail. . . . There will be more wit than erudition, more imagination than profundity. . . . The object of authors will be to astonish rather than to please, and to stir the passions more than to charm the taste."

Amusements encourage people to feel in a heightened way, to revel in familiar feelings, but also to experiment with unaccustomed

ones in order to feel like somebody else without risk. The efficient production of sentiment—this has long been the essence of democratic artistry. Popular artists have the knack. Lesser ones test the waters and try to catch the wave of the moment. All of them do market research, listening for laughs and cries, looking into their audience as if into a mirror while working out their next steps. Groucho Marx wrote of his famous scoot: "I was just kidding around one day and started to walk funny. The audience liked it, so I kept it in. I would try a line and leave it in too if it got a laugh. If it didn't, I'd take it out and put in another. Pretty soon I had a character." Later, fearful that making movies insulated in a Hollywood studio had cost them their knack, the Marx brothers took a theatrical version of *A Day at the Races* out on the road. According to their publicist, Groucho's classic line "That's the most nauseating proposition I ever had" came after he had tried out *obnoxious*, *revolting*, *disgusting*, *offensive*, *repulsive*, *disagreeable*, and *distasteful*. "The last two of these words never got more than titters," according to the publicist. "The others elicited various degrees of ha-has. But *nauseating* drew roars. I asked Groucho why that was so. 'I don't know. I really don't care. I only know the audiences told us it was funny.' "

Tocqueville's traditional artist would have been able to say exactly why he did what he did—it was what his masters did. He belonged to a guild. His inspiration blew in from the past, not from the crowd before him. Tocqueville's democratic artist, by contrast, transmuted the popular hunger for feeling into a living manual for artwork. Cultural industries would mass-produce the results, and from a multitude of such products generate a popular culture that, given money enough and time, would come to suffuse everyday life. Thus is there a continuous upsurge from the ever-larger printings of ever more novels in the eighteenth century, to the penny press, circuses, minstrel and Wild West shows in the nineteenth, through to the Viacoms, Disneys, NBCs, and SONYs of today.

THE RISE OF THE PANOPLY

The consumption of images and sounds was an extension of the burgeoning consumption of goods. In modern society, according to Georg Simmel, a sensitive person (one senses he is describing himself) "will be overpowered and feel disorientated" by the immense spectacle of commodities. But indeed "precisely this wealth and colorfulness of over-hastened impressions is appropriate to overexcited and exhausted nerves' need for stimulation. It seems as if the modern person wishes to compensate for the one-sidedness and uniformity of what he produces within the division of labor by the increasing crowding together of heterogeneous impressions, by the increasingly hasty and colourful change in emotions."

In other words, notes Simmel's contemporary interpreter, sociologist David Frisby, "the tedium of the production process is compensated for by the artificial stimulation and amusement of consumption." One must add, since Simmel was preoccupied with the lives of men, that women at home were far less likely to be subjected to "the tedium of . . . production," but they had their own tedium to contend with.

Although present for the development of the motion picture, Simmel did not write much about images as such, except in the form of fashion, which he brilliantly understood as a declaration of both individuality and class distinction, of freedom and membership at one and the same time. Writing in 1904, he described fashion as a means "to combine . . . the tendency toward social equalization [i.e., *I look like selected others*] with the desire for individual differentiation and change [i.e., *I present to the world my unique self*]." A century ago, Simmel already grasped that fashion seized popular consciousness partly because "major, permanent, unquestioned convictions increasingly lose their force. In this way, the fleeting and changeable elements of life gain that much more free space. The break with the

past . . . increasingly concentrates consciousness upon the present. This emphasis upon the present is clearly, at the same time, an emphasis upon change."

University trendhoppers have let themselves be convinced by French philosopher-historian Michel Foucault, with his brilliantly paranoid imagination, that the defining institution of the European nineteenth century was the Panopticon, a never-built prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in order to impose total surveillance on every waking and sleeping moment of a prisoner's life. But Simmel was more perceptive. The heart of modernity was not the Panopticon but the panoply of appearances that emerged in everyday life. He might have deployed this concept to look at the spectacle of images that already filled public spaces in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the posters and billboards conspicuously adorning the walls and vacant lots of great cities, the imagistic advertisements, the shop windows with their mannequins, the fabulous electrified signs and department store displays, the multiple sources of light and shades of color, the halftones and lithographs swarming through newspapers and magazines, all meant to be quickly superseded by new, often gaudier, and more elaborate versions. Not to mention the street noises of horses, wagons, cars, children playing, musicians, and hawkers all crowding into earshot with announcements of their existence, purpose, and worth.

This sensory uproar was by no means new. A century earlier, in 1805–6, William Wordsworth heard London's "thickening hubbub" and was struck, even shocked, by the sight and sound of "pleasure whirl[ing] about incessantly," by street shows and the city's display of images, which, while composed without "subtlest craft," helped overcome human "weakness":

> Here files of ballads dangle from dead walls;
> Advertisements, of giant-size, from high
> Press forward, in all colours. . . .

Wordsworth was perhaps the first modern poet to react viscerally to the posting of sign upon sign, the clamoring profusion of

> those sights that ape
> The absolute presence of reality. . . .
> . . . imitations, fondly made in plain
> Confession of man's weakness and his loves.

By Simmel's time, the clamoring confusion of posters had become a commonplace. The street shows were in decline, but the city at night had become a spectacle unto itself, for the streets were now electrified with the lamps and signs, the bright displays that promised what Theodore Dreiser called "artificial fires of merriment, the rush of profit-seeking trade, and pleasure-selling amusements," all inspiring "the soul of the toiler" to declare, " 'I shall soon be free. . . . The theatre, the halls, the parties, the ways of rest and the paths of song—these are mine in the night.' "

This vivid commotion of illuminations, images, and sounds was, in today's e-business jargon, a "push technology." The images entered into your perceptual field whether you wanted them around or not—powered, in a sense, by your own legs. Traditional signs offered useful information (repair your shoes here, buy your pork there), but the gaudier, more colossal electric displays heightened the sensational impact without adding information. To come into contact with them, you did not have to be a flâneur, Charles Baudelaire's "passionate spectator," the strolling man-about-town freed from the burdens of routine, no slave to clocks, blessed with all the time in the world to devote to the spectacle of the city. Working women and men too welcomed their strolls through the alluring streets, coming upon transitory and fragmentary surprises. The cascading images incessantly invited people to feel sensations that might not be safe or convenient in the face of flesh-and-blood human beings, who might require reciprocal relationships. Unlike palpable

human beings, images offered stimuli without making demands. Strangely impersonal, displayed indifferently for everyone who might cross their path, they required nothing much—a momentary notice, a whiff of mood, a passing fancy. They stimulated sensation but required no commitment. Encountering the profusion of signs, each clamoring for attention amid the clutter of other signs, big-city dwellers learned to take for granted the gap between the present image (the cigarette with its smoke ring) and the absent, though intimated, reality (the pleasure of filled lungs).

Writers and artists were sometimes impressed, sometimes appalled by the new concentrations of dazzle, like New York's Times Square and the center of Paris, where neon lights were first put to large-scale use. The giddy illuminations of night life sometimes jarred intellectuals, who were prone to experience the panoramic spectacle, at least at times, as a loud, attention-seizing alternative to an idealized contemplative stillness. Critics of capitalist society saw the spectacle of neon, billboards, and night-lit monuments as tricky "compensations" for the burdens of exploitation—as Siegfried Kracauer put it with romantic overkill, "façades of light . . . to banish the dread of the night. . . . a flashing protest against the darkness of our existence, a protest of the thirst for life." Such critiques did not find much resonance in a bedazzled populace. The city's hearts of brightness were staggering crowd-pleasers.

The entrepreneurs who erected these thrilling displays certainly hoped to enchant those multitudes with delirious distractions. When the lights and marquees were lit, one editorial booster wrote in 1904, Broadway was "a continuous vaudeville that is worth many times the 'price of admission'—especially as no admission price is asked." O. J. Gude—an early "broker of commercial light" who first called Broadway "the Great White Way," invented the permanent signboard, and installed the first giant electric signs in Times Square—referred to his productions in 1912 as a "phantasmagoria of . . . lights and electric

signs." In the same year, an advertising journal that took its name, *Signs of the Times*, with a certain ironic amusement, from millennial zealots, declared: "Electrical advertising is a *picture* medium. Moreover, it is a *color* medium; still, again, electrical advertising is a medium of motion, of action, *of life, of light*, of compulsory attraction."

It was indeed in hopes of "compulsory attraction" that entrepreneurs of the public spectacle in New York City erected such imposing displays as a forty-five-foot-long electric Heinz pickle at Madison Square in 1900 and an illuminated Roman chariot race seventy-two feet high and nine hundred feet wide on top of a Broadway hotel in 1910. But the hope that any installation would become a "compulsory attraction" was routinely disappointed. Amid a clutter of signs, each beckoning in its own electric way, a particular sign might stimulate a shiver of enchantment, a tickle of pleasure, or a recoil of annoyance or bewilderment—a little burst of feeling—followed by a fleeting afterglow before fading, leaving, if the advertiser was lucky, a fitful remembrance of feeling touched by a trace of an image. Once the sensation passed, however, the passerby would resume his passage through the city in a state of readiness—or blaséness.

At times, there were purposive collective spectacles, too: demonstrations, parades, and, in revolutionary times, riots, and the placards, leaflets, effigies, torches, papier-mâché figures that accompanied them. As much as time permitted, men and women asserted the right to set their mood and stepped out—to saloon, club, dance hall, arcade, circus, amusement park, burlesque house, nickelodeon, vaudeville show, or "legitimate" theater.

And the public panoply had its private equivalents. By the late nineteenth century, family photographs reposed on shelves, mantels, and pianos, and not only in the homes of the prosperous. As the family shrank to nuclear scale, photographs extended it in time and space, ushering absent members into the intimate world of the here and now—once more, with feeling. Homes turned into private

shrines of visual icons. Magic became domestic; one composed one's own personal spectacle.

Increasingly there were also images from beyond the family circle, the descendants of the paintings, maps, prints, and engravings of Vermeer's Dutch burghers, alongside crosses and flags, depictions of the Messiah, saints, heroes, and ancestors. Augmenting these were the images and texts delivered to the house at regular intervals: the newspapers, magazines, catalogs, sheet (and later recorded) music, and books, their numbers rising throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If income permitted, one "took" a periodical, a regular and familiar package of image and text that one liked because one approved of its formula, trusting the packagers to deliver approximately the right look, thoughts, and feelings, approving their taste, sharing their interests and curiosities, and through their formulas gaining low-risk access to a bountiful world. As during a walk down a familiar street, there might be surprises, too. Breaking with the imperatives of the time clock, one gambled—at low stakes. What would one find in this issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*? What adventure would beckon in this month's *National Geographic*? The novelty was finite; the material was new but not *too* new. The magazine would always be a limited liability experience. If it didn't pan out this month, one could await the next issue or subscribe to another publication with a more appealing package.

Newspapers and most magazines promised firm information, usable facts, and, at the most exalted level, knowledge, a state of comprehension. But the wonder of communications was that the carriers of information did not simply transmit facts or ideology. They occasioned a human experience—a sense of connection to the world. In a complex society, dispersed individuals had to be aware of what was going on outside their immediate milieux, in order to coordinate their activities. Thus they craved information. But this information was not pure; it arrived certified by celebrities, jostling with gossip, and, above all, accompanied by emotions. To learn what was going

on elsewhere entailed some sort of mental excitement: the *wow!* of salaciousness, the *aha!* of mastery, the *click* of understanding, the *what?* of astonishment.

So not only were the factual media informative; they were diverting. The first mass newspapers, the penny press of the 1830s, as Neal Gabler has pointed out, had their origins in a working-class entertainment tradition that was already thriving.

> For a constituency being conditioned by trashy crime pamphlets, gory novels and overwrought melodramas, news was simply the most exciting, most entertaining content a paper could offer, especially when it was skewed, as it invariably was in the penny press, to the most sensational stories. In fact, one might even say that the masters of the penny press *invented* the concept of news because it was the best way to sell their papers in an entertainment environment.

Cultivating the human interest story, newspapers could be sensational yet newsy, realistic yet emotion-inspiring, vividly personal yet general in their import. They were diversions that didn't strictly divert. Or rather, they distracted readers from their immediate environs by refusing to distract them from some larger world. They cultivated curiosity, and curiosity corralled facts. Thanks to such means of delivery, the spirit of information rode high.

The money economy was accompanied by an all-embracing swirl of modernity: investments, capital flows, migrations, turnovers of taste, style, fashion, and opinion. What Simmel called "the modern soul that is so much more unstable" had a high psychic metabolism. Endlessly it regenerated boredom. "A faint sense of tension and vague longing," a "secret restlessness," a "helpless urgency" that "originates in the bustle and excitement of modern life"—all this, Simmel wrote, "impels us to search for momentary satisfaction in ever-new stimulations, sensations and external activities." Even at

home, the dislodged soul needed constant replenishment, a ceaseless, streaming importation of content to play with, reflect upon, or learn from. A taste for the new ran deep, as did the economic payoff, for superficiality, replaceability, and the itch to keep up with the Joneses were good for production.

Excitements and analgesics multiplied. Modern people, led by Americans, came to expect the comfort and convenience of home access. The standard array of sensation machines grew. What could more reliably cater to the volatile spirit, delivering riffs and squirts of emotion, instructions, and pleasures? New communication technologies spurred hungers by provisionally satisfying them, but as Marx had anticipated, no sooner had old needs been satisfied than new ones opened up. Entrepreneurs continually searched for the next household delivery system to feed unappeasable hungers.

For brevity's sake, I am compressing a tangled history, downplaying national differences, and exaggerating the uniformity of a process that proceeded—is still proceeding—in fits and starts. Still, the main direction has been clear enough. After newspapers and magazines came commercial radio. As costs fell, technologies that had at first been the province of the rich drifted into the middle class and then, within surprisingly few years, crossed over to the majority. With television and its auxiliaries, what had been an exclusive right to luxuriate passed into a general right to connect—and with cable, the right to connect to a channel of your own liking, the majority be damned.

The thirst for images, for music, for reverberations from the world of public affairs could be satisfied as fast as mail could be delivered and vacuum tubes warmed up. But availability did not quench the thirst for images and sounds. To the contrary: the more technologies, the more images and sounds they could carry, the greater the thirst—and the desire to please one's private self. Boredom was a crime against plenitude. Who could say, "Stop, I have enough"? Technology came to the aid of fragmented tastes. Media

conglomerates spun out multiple channels for distinct demographic niches. Why not establish your own mood, create your personalized top ten from the ever-expanding menu of entertainment and information that flows through the living room? Why stop at the living room? Why not pipe the bounty into the bedroom? Yet always there is the threat of tedium and the persistent shrug. A century after Georg Simmel wrote about "nurseries of cynicism," we find them in the household, where the bountiful screen offers access indiscriminately to an episode of fictional domestic anguish, a tennis match, a sports utility vehicle driving over a mountain, a soccer score, a salad preparation, an animal cartoon, a futurist dystopia, a murder headline, a joke, a poker-faced policeman, a nude, a hurricane victim shivering in the cold, a jewelry advertisement . . .

In George Orwell's classic *1984*, Big Brother was the ultimate coercive broadcaster, the sole controller of propaganda. But Big Brother had no chance against niche media and personal choice. In the West, at least, he was no more than a hollow bogeyman. In the widening torrent available to all-consuming humanity, you rode your own current. Why not revel in the pursuit of such happiness? Why fear engulfment?

NOMADICITY

Increasingly, you could carry your private current anywhere. The home entertainment center was, after all, a luxury for which you had to confine yourself. Images and manufactured sounds came home but you had to be home to greet them. So why not render your private amusements portable? Why not, like Pascal's well-served if pitiable monarch, have it all wherever and whenever you like?

Self-sufficiency, that most tempting and expansive of modern motifs, feels like a sort of liberation—until it becomes banal and we have need of the next liberation. People gravitate toward portability and miniaturization—each a kind of freedom—in everyday life. The

Ways of Seeing

by John Berger

Essay 7

In the cities in which we live, all of us see hundreds of publicity images every day of our lives. No other kind of image confronts us so frequently. In no other form of society in history has there been such a concentration of images, such a density of visual messages.

One may remember or forget these messages but briefly one takes them in, and for a moment they stimulate the imagination by way of either memory or expectation. The publicity image belongs to the moment. We see it as we turn a page, as we turn a corner, as a vehicle passes us. Or we see it on a television screen while waiting for the commercial break to end. Publicity images also belong to the moment in the sense that they must be continually renewed and made up-to-date. Yet they never speak of the present. Often they refer to the past and always they speak of the future.

We are now so accustomed to being addressed by these images that we scarcely notice their total impact. A person may notice a particular image or piece of information because it corresponds to some particular interest he has. But we accept the total system of publicity images as we accept an element of climate. For example, the fact that these images belong to the moment but speak of the future produces a strange effect which has become so familiar that we scarcely notice it. Usually it is we who pass the image - walking, traveling, turning a page; on the TV screen it is somewhat different but even then we are theoretically the active agent - we can look away, turn down the sound, make some coffee. Yet despite this, one has the impression that publicity images are continually passing us, like express trains on their way to some distant terminus. We are static; they are dynamic - until the newspaper is thrown away, the television program continues or the poster is posted over.

Publicity is usually explained and justified as a competitive medium which ultimately benefits the public (the consumer) and the most efficient manufacturers - and thus the national economy. It is closely related to certain ideas about freedom: freedom of choice for the purchaser: freedom of enterprise for the manufacturer. The great hoardings and the publicity neons of the cities of capitalism are the immediate visible sign of "The Free World." For many in Eastern Europe such images in the West sum up what they in the East lack. Publicity, it is thought, offers a free choice.

It is true that in publicity one brand of manufacture, one firm, competes with another; but it is also true that every publicity image confirms and enhances every other. Publicity is not merely an assembly of competing messages: it is a language in itself which is always being used to make the same general proposal. Within publicity, choices are offered between this cream and that cream, that car and this car, but publicity as a system only makes a single proposal.

It proposes to each of us that we transform ourselves, or our lives, by buying something more. This more, it proposes, will make us in some way richer - even though we will be poorer by having spent our money.

Publicity persuades us of such a transformation by showing us people who have apparently been transformed and are, as a result, enviable. The state of being envied is what constitutes glamour. And publicity is the process of manufacturing glamour.

It is important here not to confuse publicity with the pleasure or benefits to be enjoyed from the things it advertises. Publicity is effective precisely because it feeds upon the real. Clothes, food, cars, cosmetics, baths, sunshine are real things to be enjoyed in themselves. Publicity begins by working on a natural appetite for pleasure. But it cannot offer the real object of pleasure and there is no convincing substitute for a pleasure in that pleasure's own terms. The more convincingly publicity conveys the pleasure of bathing in a warm, distant sea, the more the spectator-buyer will become aware that he is hundreds of miles away from that sea and the more remote the chance of bathing in it will seem to him. This is why publicity can never really afford to be about the product or opportunity it is proposing to the buyer who is not yet enjoying it. Publicity is never a celebration of a pleasure-in-itself. Publicity is always about the future buyer. It offers him an image of himself made glamorous by the product or opportunity it is trying to sell. The image then makes him envious of himself as he might be. Yet what makes this self-which-he-might-be enviable? The envy of other. Publicity is about social relations, not objects. Its promise is not of pleasure, but of happiness: happiness as judged from the outside by others. The happiness of being envied is glamour.

Being envied is a solitary form of reassurance. It depends precisely upon not sharing your experience with those who envy you. You are observed with interest but you do not observe with interest - if you do, you will become less enviable. In this respect the envied are like bureaucrats; the more impersonal they are, the greater the illusion (for themselves and for others) of their power. The power of the glamorous resides in their supposed happiness: the power of the bureaucrat in his supposed authority. It is this which explains the absent, unfocused look of so many glamour images. They look out over the looks of envy which sustain them.

The spectator-buyer is meant to envy herself as she will become if she buys the product. She is meant to imagine herself transformed by the product into an object of envy for others, an envy which will then justify her loving herself. One could put this another way: the publicity image steals her love of herself as she is, and offers it back to her for the price of the product.

Does the language if publicity have anything in common with that of oil painting which, until the invention of the camera, dominated the European way of seeing during four centuries? It is one of those questions which simply needs to be asked for the answer to become clear. There is a direct continuity. Only interests of cultural prestige have obscured it. At the same time, despite the continuity, there is a profound difference which is no less important to examine.

There are many references in publicity to works of art from the past. Sometime a whole image is a frank pastiche of a well-known painting.

Publicity images often use sculptures or paintings to lend allure or authority to their own message. Framed oil paintings often hang in shop windows as part of their display.

Any work of art 'quoted' by publicity serves two purposes. Art is a sign of affluence; it

belongs to the good life; it is part of the furnishing which the world give to the rich and the beautiful.

But a work of art also suggests a cultural authority, a form of dignity, even of wisdom, which is superior to any vulgar material interest;an oil painting belongs to the cultural heritage; it is a reminder of what it means to be a cultivated European. And so the quoted work of art (and this is why it is so useful to publicity) says two almost contradictory things at the same time: it denotes wealth and spirituality: it implies that the purchase being proposed is both a luxury and a cultural value. Publicity has in fact understood the tradition of the oil painting more thoroughly than most art historians. It has grasped the implications of the relationship between the work of art and its spectator-owner and with these it tries to persuade and flatter the spectator-buyer.

The continuity, however, between oil painting and publicity goes far deeper that the 'quoting' of specific paintings. Publicity relies to a very large extent on the language of oil painting. It speaks in the same voice about the same things. Sometimes the visual correspondences are so close that it is possible to play a game of 'Snap!' - putting almost identical images or details of images side by side. It is not, however, just at the level of exact pictorial correspondence that the continuity is important: it is at the level of the set of signs.

Compare the images of publicity and paintings in this book, or take a picture magazine, or walk down a smart shopping street looking at the window displays, and then turn over the pages of an illustrated museum catalogue, and notice how similarly messages are conveyed by the two media. A systemic study needs to be made of this. Here we can do no more than indicate a few areas where the similarity of the devices and aims are particularly striking.

The gestures of models (mannequins) and mythological figures.

The romantic use of nature (leaves, trees, water) to create a place where innocence can be refound.

The exotic and nostalgic attraction of the Mediterranean.

The poses taken up to denote stereotypes of women: serene mother (madonna), free-wheeling secretary (actress, king's mistress), perfect hostess (spectator-owner's wife), sex-object (Venus, nymph surprised), etc.

The special sexual emphasis given to women's legs.

The materials particularly used to indicate luxury: engraved metal, furs, polished leather, etc.

The gestures and embrace of lovers, arranged frontally for the benefit of the spectator.

The sea, offering a new life.

The physical stance of men conveying wealth and virility.

The treatment of distance by perspective – offering mystery.

The equation of drinking and success.

The man as knight (horseman) become motorist.

Why does publicity depend so heavily upon the visual language of oil painting?

Publicity is the culture of the consumer society. It propagates through images that society's belief in itself. There are several reasons why these images use the language of oil painting.

Oil painting, before it was anything else, was a celebration of private property. As an art-form it derived from the principle that you are what you have. It is a mistake to think of publicity supplanting the visual art of post-Renaissance Europe; it is the last moribund form of that art.

Publicity is, in essence, nostalgic. It has to sell the past to the future. It cannot itself supply the standards of its own claims. And so all its references to quality are bound to be retrospective and traditional. It would lack both confidence and credibility if it used a strictly contemporary language.

Publicity needs to turn to its own advantage the traditional education of the average spectator-buyer. What he has learnt at school of history, mythology, poetry can be used in the manufacturing of glamour. Cigars can be sold in the name of a King, underwear in connection with the Sphinx, a new car by reference to the status of a country house. In the language of oil painting these vague historical or poetic references are always present. The fact that they are imprecise and ultimately meaningless is an advantage: they should not be understandable, they should merely be reminiscent of cultural lessons half-learnt. Publicity makes all history mythical, but to do so effectively it needs a visual language with historical dimensions.

Lastly, a technical development made it easy to translate the language of oil painting into publicity cliches. This was the invention, about fifteen years ago, of cheap color photography. Such photography can reproduce the color and texture and tangibility of objects as only oil paint had been able to do before. Color photography is to the spectator-buyer what oil paint was to the spectator-owner. Both media use similar, highly tactile means to play upon the spectator's sense of acquiring the real thing which the image shows. In both cases his feeling that he can almost touch what is in the image reminds him how he might or does possess the real thing.

Yet, despite this continuity of language, the function of publicity is very different from that of the oil painting. The spectator-buyer stands in a very different relation to the world from the spectator-owner.

The oil painting showed what its owner was already enjoying among his possessions and his way of life. It consolidated his own sense of his own value. It enhanced his view of himself as he already was. It began with facts, the facts of his life. The paintings embellished the interior in which he actually lived.

The purpose of publicity is to make the spectator marginally dissatisfied with his present way of life. Not with the way of life of society, but with his own within it. It suggests that if he buys what it is offering, his life will become better. It offers him an improved alternative to what he is.

The oil painting was addressed to those who made money out of the market. Publicity is addressed to those who constitute the market, to the spectator-buyer who is also the consumer-producer from whom profits are made twice over - as worker and then as buyer. The only places relatively free of publicity are the quarters of the very rich; their money is theirs to keep.

All publicity works upon anxiety. The sum of everything is money, to get money is to overcome anxiety. Alternatively the anxiety on which publicity plays is the fear that having nothing you will be nothing. Money is life. Not in the sense that without money you starve. Not in the sense that capital gives one class power over the entire lives of another class. But in the sense that money is the token of, and the key to, every human capacity. The power to spend money is the power to live. According to the legends of publicity, those who lack the power to spend money become literally faceless. Those who have the power become lovable.

Publicity increasingly uses sexuality to sell any product or service. But this sexuality is never free in itself; it is a symbol of something presumed to be larger than it: the good life in which you can buy whatever you want. To be able to buy is the same thing as being sexually desirable; occasionally this is the explicit message of publicity, usually it is the implicit message, i.e. if you are able to buy this product you will be lovable. If you cannot buy it, you will be less lovable.

For publicity the present is by definition insufficient. The oil painting was thought of as a permanent record. One of the pleasures a painting gave to its owner was the thought that it would convey the image of his present to the future of his descendants. Thus the oil painting was naturally painted in the present tense. The painter painted what was before him, either in reality or in imagination. The publicity image which is ephemeral uses only the future tense. With this you WILL become desirable. In these surroundings all your relationships WILL become happy and radiant.

Publicity principally addressed to the working class tends to promise a personal transformation through the function of the particular product it is selling (Cinderella); middle-class publicity promises a transformation of relationships through a general atmosphere created by an ensemble of products (The Enchanted Palace).

Publicity speaks in the future tense and yet the achievement of this future is endlessly deferred. How then does publicity remain credible - or credible enough to exert the influence it does? It remains credible because the truthfulness of publicity is judged, not by the real fulfillment of its promises, but by the relevance of its fantasies to those of the spectator-buyer. Its essential application is not to reality but to day-dreams.

To understand this better we must go back to the notion of glamour. Glamour is a modern invention. In the heyday of the oil painting it did not exist. Ideas of grace, elegance, authority amounted to something apparently similar but fundamentally different. Mrs. Siddons as seen by Gainsborough is not glamorous, because she is not presented as enviable and therefore happy. She may be seen as wealthy, beautiful, talented, lucky. But her qualities are her own and have been recognized as such. What she is does not entirely depend upon others' envy - which is how, for example, Andy Warhol presents Marilyn Monroe.

Glamour cannot exist without personal social envy being a common and widespread emotion.

The industrial society which has moved towards democracy and then stopped half way is the ideal society for generating such an emotion. The pursuit of individual happiness has been acknowledged as a universal right. Yet the existing social conditions make the individual feel powerless. He lives in the contradiction between what he is and what he would like to be. Either he then becomes fully conscious of the contradiction and its causes, and so joins the political struggle for a full democracy which entails, amongst other thing, the overthrow of capitalism; or else he lives, continually subject to an envy which, compounded with his sense of powerlessness, dissolves into recurrent day-dreams.

It is this which makes it possible to understand why publicity remains credible. The gap between what publicity actually offers and the future it promises, corresponds with the gap between what the spectator-buyer feels himself to be and what he would like to be. The two gaps become one; and instead of the single gap being bridged by action or lived experience, it is filled with glamorous day-dreams. The process is often reinforced by working conditions. The interminable present of mean- ingless working hours is "balanced" by a dreamt future in which imaginary activity replaces the passivity of the moment. In his or her day-dreams the passive worker becomes the active consumer. The working self envies the consuming self.

No two dreams are the same. Some are instantaneous, others prolonged, The dream is always personal to the dreamer. Publicity does not manufacture the dream. All that it does is to propose to each one of us that we are not yet enviable - yet could be.

Publicity has another important social function. The fact that this function has not been planned as a purpose by those who make and use publicity in no way lessens its significance. Publicity turns consumption into a substitute for democracy. The choice of what one eats (or wears or drives) takes the place of significant political choice. Publicity helps to mask and compensate for all that is undemocratic within society. And it also masks what is happening in the rest of the world. Publicity adds up to a kind of philosophical system. It explains everything in its own terms. It interprets the world.

The entire world becomes a setting for the fulfillment of publicity's promise of the good life. The world smiles at us. It offers itself to us. And because everywhere is imagined as offering itself to us, everywhere is more or less the same.

According to publicity, to be sophisticated is to live beyond conflict. Publicity can translate even revolution into its own terms.

The contrast between publicity's interpretation of the world and the world's actual condition is a very stark one, and this sometimes becomes evident in the color magazines which deal with news stories. Overleaf is the contents page of such a magazine. The shock of such contrasts is considerable: not only because of the coexistence of the two worlds shown, but also because of the cynicism of the culture which shows them one above the other. It can be argues that the juxtaposition of images was not planned. Nevertheless the text, the photographs taken in Pakistan, the photographs taken for the advertisements, the editing of the magazine, the layout of the publicity, the printing of both, the fact that advertiser's pages and news pages cannot be co-ordinated - all these are produced by the same culture.

It is not, however, the moral shock of the contrast which needs emphasizing. Advertisers themselves can take account of the shock. The Advertisers Weekly (3 March 1972) reports that some publicity firms, now aware of the commercial danger of such unfortunate

juxtapositions in new magazines, are deciding to use less brash, more somber images, often in black and white rather than color. What we need to realize is what such contrasts reveal about the nature of publicity.

Publicity is essentially eventless. It extends just as far as nothing else is happening. For publicity all real events are exceptional and happen only to strangers. In the BanglaDesh photographs, the events were tragic and distant. But the contrast would have been no less stark if they had been events near at hand in Derry or Birmingham. Nor is the contrast necessarily dependent upon the events being tragic. If they are tragic, their tragedy alerts our moral sense to the contrast. Yet if the events were joyous and if they were photographed in a direct and unstereotyped way the contrast would be just as great.

Publicity, situated in a future continually deferred, excludes the present and so eliminates all becoming, all development. Experience is impossible within it. All that happens, happens outside it. The fact that publicity is eventless would be immediately obvious if it did not use a language which makes of tangibility an event in itself. Everything publicity shows is there awaiting acquisition. The act of acquiring has taken the place of all other actions, the sense of having has obliterated all other senses.

Publicity exerts an enormous influence and is a political phenomenon of great importance. But its offer is as narrow as its references are wide. It recognizes nothing except the power to acquire. All other human faculties or needs are made subsidiary to this power. All hopes are gathered together, made homogeneous, simplified, so that they become the intense yet vague, magical yet repeatable promise offered in every purchase. No other kind of hope or satisfaction or pleasure can any longer be envisaged within the culture of capitalism.

Publicity is the life of this culture - in so far as without publicity capitalism could not survive - and at the same time publicity is its dream.

Capitalism survives by forcing the majority, whom it exploits, to define their own interests as narrowly as possible. This was once achieved by extensive deprivation. Today in the developed countries it is being achieved by imposing a false standard of what is and what is not desirable.

Society of the Spectacle by Guy Debord

Chapter 9: Ideology Materialized

> "Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself only insofar as it exists in and for another self-consciousness; that is, it exists only by being recognized and acknowledged."
>
> *Hegel, The Phenomenology of Spirit*

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Ideology is the intellectual basis of class societies within the conflictual course of history. Ideological expressions have never been pure fictions; they represent a distorted consciousness of realities, and as such they have been real factors that have in turn produced real distorting effects. This interconnection is intensified with the advent of the spectacle — the materialization of ideology brought about by the concrete success of an autonomized system of economic production — which virtually identifies social reality with an ideology that has remolded all reality in its own image.

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Once ideology — the abstract will to universality and the illusion associated with that will — is legitimized by the universal abstraction and the effective dictatorship of illusion that prevail in modern society, it is no longer a voluntaristic struggle of the fragmentary, but its triumph. Ideological pretensions take on a sort of flat, positivistic precision: they no longer represent historical choices, they are assertions of undeniable facts. The particular names of ideologies thus tend to disappear. The specifically ideological forms of system-supporting labor are reduced to an "epistemological base" that is itself presumed to be beyond ideology. Materialized ideology has no name, just as it has no formulatable historical agenda. Which is another way of saying that the history of different ideologies is over.

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Ideology, whose whole internal logic led toward what Mannheim calls "total ideology" — the despotism of a fragment imposing itself as pseudoknowledge of a frozen totality, as a totalitarian worldview — has reached its culmination in the immobilized spectacle of nonhistory. Its culmination is also its dissolution into society as a whole. When that society itself is concretely dissolved, ideology — the final irrationality standing in the way of historical life — must also disappear.

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The spectacle is the acme of ideology because it fully exposes and manifests the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life. The spectacle is the material "expression of the separation and estrangement between man and man." The "new power of deception" concentrated in it is based on the production system in which "as the mass of objects increases, so do the alien powers to which man is subjected." This is the supreme stage of an expansion that has turned need against life. "The need for money is thus the real need

created by the modern economic system, and the only need it creates" (Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts). Hegel's characterization of money as "the self-moving life of what is dead" (Jenenser Realphilosophie) has now been extended by the spectacle to all social life.

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In contrast to the project outlined in the "Theses on Feuerbach" (the realization of philosophy in a praxis transcending the opposition between idealism and materialism), the spectacle preserves the ideological features of both materialism and idealism, imposing them in the pseudoconcreteness of its universe. The contemplative aspect of the old materialism, which conceives the world as representation and not as activity — and which ultimately idealizes matter — is fulfilled in the spectacle, where concrete things are automatic masters of social life. Conversely, the dreamed activity of idealism is also fulfilled in the spectacle, through the technical mediation of signs and signals — which ultimately materialize an abstract ideal.

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The parallel between ideology and schizophrenia demonstrated in Gabel's False Consciousness should be considered in the context of this economic materialization of ideology. Society has become what ideology already was. The repression of practice and the antidialectical false consciousness that results from that repression are imposed at every moment of everyday life subjected to the spectacle — a subjection that systematically destroys the "faculty of encounter" and replaces it with a social hallucination: a false consciousness of encounter, an "illusion of encounter." In a society where no one can any longer be recognized by others, each individual becomes incapable of recognizing his own reality. Ideology is at home; separation has built its own world.

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"In clinical descriptions of schizophrenia," says Gabel, "the disintegration of the dialectic of totality (with dissociation as its extreme form) and the disintegration of the dialectic of becoming (with catatonia as its extreme form) seem closely interrelated." Imprisoned in a flattened universe bounded by the screen of the spectacle that has enthralled him, the spectator knows no one but the fictitious speakers who subject him to a one-way monologue about their commodities and the politics of their commodities. The spectacle as a whole serves as his looking glass. What he sees there are dramatizations of illusory escapes from a universal autism.

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The spectacle obliterates the boundaries between self and world by crushing the self besieged by the presence-absence of the world. It also obliterates the boundaries between true and false by repressing all directly lived truth beneath the real presence of the falsehood maintained by the organization of appearances. Individuals who passively accept their subjection to an alien everyday reality are thus driven toward a madness that reacts to this fate by resorting to illusory magical techniques. The essence of this pseudoresponse to an unanswerable communication is the acceptance and consumption of commodities. The consumer's compulsion to imitate is a truly infantile need, conditioned by all the aspects of his fundamental dispossession. As Gabel puts it in describing a quite different level of pathology, "the abnormal need for representation compensates for an agonizing feeling of being at the margin of existence."

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In contrast to the logic of false consciousness, which cannot truly know itself, the search for critical truth about the spectacle must also be a true critique. It must struggle in practice among the irreconcilable enemies of the spectacle, and admit that it is nothing without them. By rushing into sordid reformist compromises or pseudorevolutionary collective actions, those driven by an abstract desire for immediate effectiveness are in reality obeying the ruling laws of thought, adopting a perspective that can see nothing but the latest news. In this way delirium reappears in the camp that claims to be opposing it. A critique seeking to go beyond the spectacle must know how to wait.

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The self-emancipation of our time is an emancipation from the material bases of inverted truth. This “historic mission of establishing truth in the world” can be carried out neither by the isolated individual nor by atomized and manipulated masses, but only and always by the class that is able to dissolve all classes by reducing all power to the de-alienating form of realized democracy — to councils in which practical theory verifies itself and surveys its own actions. This is possible only when individuals are “directly linked to universal history” and dialogue arms itself to impose its own conditions.