

The Society of the Spectacle REDUX #3: Detached Spectatorialism

This paper discusses the third instalment in the contemporary reimagining of Guy Debord's 1974 film 'The Society of the Spectacle', the cinematic analysis of consumer culture based on his influential book. Debord's description of the spectacle as capitalism's instrument for distracting and pacifying the masses is more prescient than ever. This instalment was initially intended as an evaluation of human and non-human video scene detection and annotation, testing AI 'computer vision technology' platforms. Recent events have provoked the production of this instalment sooner than intended.

The video essay can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/780698932>

Guy Debord wrote *The Society of the Spectacle* in a time of political and social unrest, the radical Left movement in France protested against capitalism, consumerism and traditional institutions, supported by students and workers alike. The actions of May 1968 displaced President Charles de Gaulle, but not the political system he represented. The success was more philosophical than political, representing a time of change when anything seemed possible. By the time the film was released in 1974, the geopolitical situation was rapidly shifting toward the socioeconomics of neoliberalism, a capitalist ideology with 'the market' as a central tenet and citizens redefined as consumers.¹ The success of neoliberalism was in part due to the stasis in centre-left politics.

When the financial meltdown of 2008 exposed neoliberalism's absolute failings and should have signalled its end, there was nothing (Left) to replace it. In 'Capitalist Realism' Mark Fisher clarifies the book's title, stating that 'not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it.'² In advanced economies this period of transition from industrialism to post-industrialism, and modernism to postmodernism, signalled a failure of the Left. The success of neoliberalism was a symptom of this failure.³ The acceleration of commodity consumption meant in Debordian terms that the Spectacle became particularly active and visible.⁴ The financial crash was in part caused by predatory and unethical lending by financial institutions. The media blamed excessive risk-taking and a culture of excess in investment banking, shifting responsibility to a few immoral individuals and away from the neoliberal capitalist system, which received little or no criticism. To prevent the collapse of the global financial system, governments around the world gave enormous bailouts to the very financial institutions that had caused the crash. Central banks introduced 'quantitative easing', effectively creating new (digital) money to buy government bonds, with the intention of supporting further lending (and spending) for businesses and individuals. The US government went further, providing a multibillion-dollar rescue package for the auto industry, including a \$465 million loan to Tesla, saving Elon Musk from bankruptcy.⁵

The death of Queen Elizabeth II on September 8th, 2022, after 70 years as reigning monarch, triggered a mediated spectacular spectacle on a scale unseen since the funeral of Princess Diana in

¹ Foucault, M. and Senellart, M. (2008). *The birth of biopolitics lectures at the Collège de France, 1978 - 1979*. New York, NY Picador.

² Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books. P: 2

³ Fisher, M. (2013). *How to Kill a Zombie: Strategizing the End of Neoliberalism*. [Online]. York Neoliberalism Conference. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49Tuck7eMqo&ab_channel=YorkNeoliberalismConference [Accessed 17 November 2022].

⁴ Briziarelli, M. and Armano, E. (2017). *The Spectacle 2.0: Reading Debord in the Context of Digital Capitalism*. University Of Westminster Press, London. P:28

⁵ Swaine, J. (2014). *Elon Musk: the new It Boy of Silicon Valley | The Observer profile*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2014/may/25/elon-musk-entrepreneur-observer-profile> [Accessed 18 August 2022].

1997.⁶ Concern for the monarch's health was communicated to Prime Minister Liz Truss on live television, during her ill-fated announcement of proposed measures to tackle the cost of living crisis at midday. The ripple of the news quickly spread across the house of commons and rapidly filtered through to social media and mainstream media outlets. The BBC interrupted regular broadcasting 24 minutes later, with news presenter Huw Edwards already dressed in funereal black, announcing concerns for the Queen's health to the wider public. Breaking news events occurred across the world and live coverage across media platforms continued throughout the day. Buckingham Palace confirmed the Queen's death at 6.30pm, and the spectacle of all spectacles began. Despite the very real economic and energy crisis, all other news items slipped into temporary insignificance. The Institute for Fiscal Studies called Truss's 'Energy Price Guarantee', estimated to cost £100 billion, 'extraordinary, and deeply disappointing'.⁷ Another thinktank, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research were even more critical, saying that the energy plan was 'needlessly inefficient and expensive'.⁸ No one was listening, collective mourning had grabbed the nation's attention in a spectacular fashion and a shared stupor prevailed. In terms of broadcast hours alone, the commodification of death and the funeral as a mediated spectacle was unprecedented. The first spectacular mediated funeral was nearly 60 years ago, with John F Kennedy's reaching a global audience of 600 million people in 23 countries.⁹ The audience for Princess Dianna's in 1997 was 2.5 billion and for Queen Elizabeth, it was predicted to be over 4.1 billion.¹⁰ Death, it seems, can be a good thing. Queuing, often referred to as a British trait, was a product of industrialisation that became 'an established social form in the early 19th Century', turned into a bizarre display of public pride.¹¹ The queue became 'The Queue' with one Tweet declaring it as "the greatest bit of British performance art that has ever happened."¹² David Beckham, a spectacular representation himself, was praised for queueing for 13 hours to view the Queen's coffin lying in state, propelling him to an even higher status of celebrity being.¹³ Other stars were not so fortunate. The estimated 250,000¹⁴ other people in the queue were seemingly inconsequential on any individual level, unless they had travelled particularly far or could offer a hackneyed comment about the dead monarch's personal significance to them. The same prosaic statements were made to camera over and over again. The rhetoric of subjectification. Rationality was lost. God Save the King!

⁶ Fleck, A. (2022). *Infographic: Queen Elizabeth's (Predicted) Funeral Ratings in Perspective*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/chart/28281/television-ratings-for-selected-historic-events/> [Accessed 2 November 2022].

⁷ Adam, S. et al. (2022). *Response to the Energy Price Guarantee*. [Online]. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/response-energy-price-guarantee>.

⁸ Sparrow, A. (2022). *Liz Truss energy plan 'needlessly inefficient and expensive', says thinktank – as it happened*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2022/sep/08/liz-truss-energy-bills-plan-uk-politics-news-live-latest?page=with:block-6319ef458f087fa006e13900#block-6319ef458f087fa006e13900> [Accessed 13 November 2022].

⁹ Fang, I. E. (1997). *A History of Mass Communication: Six Information Revolutions*. Boston Focal Press.

¹⁰ Fleck, A. (2022). *Infographic: Queen Elizabeth's (Predicted) Funeral Ratings in Perspective*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/chart/28281/television-ratings-for-selected-historic-events/> [Accessed 2 November 2022].

¹¹ Winterton, D. (2013). *Queuing: Is it really the British way?* [Online]. 4 July. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-23087024>. [Accessed 3 November 2022].

¹² The Economist. (2022). *Why Britons love to queue*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/09/15/why-britons-love-to-queue> [Accessed 3 November 2022].

¹³ Clark, M. and Ng, K. (2022). *David Beckham hailed for queueing for 13 hours as other celebrities skip queue*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/david-beckham-queen-queue-b2169356.html> [Accessed 3 November 2022].

¹⁴ Ward, V. and Parekh, M. (2022). *'Around 250,000' saw late Queen lying in state – fewer than Winston Churchill*. [Online]. 20 September. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/09/20/250000-people-went-queue-see-queen-lying-in-state/>. [Accessed 3 November 2022].

The mourning for a monarch more mediated than real sparked a revival of nationalism and nostalgic yearnings for the utopia of yesteryear amid widespread cultural amnesia. Liz Truss served only 44 days as Prime Minister before being ousted by her own party. Her misjudged 'mini-budget' of tax cuts required the Bank of England to make an emergency purchase of £65bn of government gilts to prop up the economy and protect pension funds. Once again politicians from the centre left offered only perceived passivity and no radical opposition. Fisher suggested that 'capitalism is what is left when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and the relics.'¹⁵ The system of capitalism has led to the desacralisation of sovereignty, a process expedited by the media's fascination with the royal family, initially by the British press in a love/hate, hate/love, love/love relationship. The Netflix dramatisation of Queen Elizabeth's life, *The Crown*, has proven to be a huge success, with season 5 currently available to view and season 6 in production. It may prove to be the defining commentary that informs a generation on the machinations of the Royal Family, real or not.¹⁶ Queen Elizabeth herself embraced elements of media promotion, perhaps most famously for appearing with James Bond actor Daniel Craig for the 2012 London Olympics, and most recently her sketch with an animated Paddington Bear for the Platinum Jubilee earlier this year. In 2020 Prince Harry and his wife Meghan signed a lucrative production deal with Netflix, reported to be worth \$100 million, that will include a docuseries on their life together.¹⁷ The boundaries between factual fiction and fictional fact continue to blur.

On the 26th October, Elon Musk was filmed entering Twitter HQ carrying a porcelain sink in an absurd publicity stunt, signalling a spectacular U-turn in his purchase of the social media platform. Two days later the deal was confirmed, and Musk began to fire top executives including chief executive Parag Agrawal. Mass layoffs followed, triggering concerns for the platform's obligations towards privacy and data security. Musk has said he will reverse the ban on Donald Trump, who was permanently removed from the platform in 2021 after his involvement in the storming of the US Capitol. Vijaya Gadde, Twitter's head of legal and policy, and the executive most identified as responsible for the ban had reportedly already been sacked.¹⁸ Cryptocurrency exchange FTX filed for bankruptcy protection on the 11th November, with the collapse of the \$32 billion crypto empire sparking fears of another 'Lehman moment.'¹⁹ Changpeng Zhao, CEO of Binance, the world's biggest digital asset exchange compared the crisis facing the digital asset market as 'akin to the 2008 financial crash.'²⁰ FTX assets, customer's deposits, had been used to fund another crypto trading firm leaving the exchange with a liquidity problem, a black hole in their finances that meant they couldn't cover withdrawals. The company valued at \$32 billion in January collapsed. In a series of emotional posts on Twitter, FTX founder and CEO Sam Bankman-Fried, often referred to as 'The Crypto King', said he had

¹⁵ Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books. P:4.

¹⁶ Hughes, S. (2019). *How The Crown has changed the world's view of the Royals*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20191117-how-the-crown-has-changed-the-worlds-view-of-the-royals>.

¹⁷ Beckett, L. (2022). *Will the Queen's death change Meghan and Harry's new chapter?* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/sep/09/prince-harry-meghan-sussex-queen-elizabeth-california> [Accessed 15 November 2022].

¹⁸ Hern, A. and Paul, K. (2022). *Twitter braces for Donald Trump's return as Elon Musk takes over platform*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/oct/28/twitter-donald-trump-return-elon-musk-takeover-civil-rights> [Accessed 14 November 2022].

¹⁹ Weardon, G. (2022). *FTX files for US bankruptcy protection, CEO Bankman-Fried resigns – as it happened*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/live/2022/nov/11/uk-economy-gdp-recession-trade-hunt-stock-markets-ftse-pound-business-live> [Accessed 15 November 2022].

²⁰ Oliver, J. and Asgari, N. (2022). *Binance chief Changpeng Zhao warns of 'cascading' crypto crisis*. [Online]. 11 November. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/0fa4f3b6-213c-4e76-bcd9-fcf184a264a2> [Accessed 15 November 2022].

“fucked up.”²¹ Decentralised, cryptocurrencies are not under the control of any authority or underpinned by any financial system or any tangible assets. The integrity and validity of cryptocurrencies are provided by blockchain, a distributed ledger system that uses cryptography to verify ownership and transactions. Governments won’t be creating any new money to bailout this new money.

There is no notion of déjà vu, but rather so what? In that sense, there is nothing new, which in a sense is nothing new itself. Fisher argued that we are haunted by futures that failed to happen, coining the terms lost futures and the slow cancellation of the future, he said:

In the last 10 to 15 years, meanwhile, the internet and mobile telecommunications technologies have altered the texture of the everyday experience beyond recognition. Yet, perhaps *because* of all this, there’s an increasing sense that culture has lost the ability to grasp and articulate the present. Or it could be that, in one very important sense, there is no present to grasp and articulate anymore.²²

Although in this instance Fisher draws specifically on music to illustrate the discussion, he had previously drawn parallels with Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’ and Nietzsche’s Last Man, ‘who has seen everything, but is decadently enfeebled precisely by this excess of (self) awareness.’²³ For Fisher the loss of anything new in the idea of capitalism, and the lack of a viable alternative, is the end of history. Detached spectatorialism is the unconscious response to a present endlessly remediated without sense of purpose or memory: This is the cultural logic of augmented capitalism.

The challenge now is to create a system that can critique this system. The development of increasingly powerful artificial intelligence platforms reached a frenetic pace over the last year, and this looks set to continue. ChatGPT, the chatbot launched by AI research lab OpenAI in November 2022, has received an incredible amount of attention and media coverage since. Within days, millions of users were trying out ChatGPT.²⁴ So rapid was the uptake and interest that it seemingly took OpenAI by surprise, they rushed to monetise the platform and eventually had to restrict access. In January 2023 OpenAI announced the third phase of Microsoft’s ‘multi-billion dollar investment’, extending their partnership to accelerate AI breakthroughs.²⁵ ChatGPT now has over 100 million users, this unprecedented growth has made it the fastest growing internet app.²⁶ The technology has not been received with enthusiasm in all areas, and the potential threat to the education sector was muted within days of ChatGPT’s launch. Academics used the application to generate responses to undergraduate exam questions that would have resulted in full marks if submitted.²⁷ In a recent interview Noam Chomsky was less than complimentary, calling it ‘high tech plagiarism’ before adding

²¹ Hern, A. (2022). *TechScape: Inside the \$8bn FTX crypto scandal – and its real-world impact*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/nov/15/inside-the-8bn-ftx-crypto-scandal-and-its-real-world-impact> [Accessed 15 November 2022].

²² Fisher, M. (2014). *Ghosts of my life: writings on depression, hauntology and lost futures*. Hants: Zero Books.

²³ Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books. P:6-7.

²⁴ Shankland, S. (2023). *Why the ChatGPT AI Chatbot Is Blowing Everyone’s Mind*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.cnet.com/tech/computing/why-the-chatgpt-ai-chatbot-is-blowing-everyones-mind/>. [Accessed 6 February 2023].

²⁵ OpenAI. (2023). *OpenAI and Microsoft Extend Partnership*. [Online]. Available at: <https://openai.com/blog/openai-and-microsoft-extend-partnership/>. [Accessed 6 February 2023].

²⁶ Milmo, D. (2023). ChatGPT reaches 100 million users two months after launch. [Online]. 2 February. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/feb/02/chatgpt-100-million-users-open-ai-fastest-growing-app>. [Accessed 6 February 2023].

²⁷ Hern, A. (2022). *AI bot ChatGPT stuns academics with essay-writing skills and usability*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/dec/04/ai-bot-chatgpt-stuns-academics-with-essay-writing-skills-and-usability>. [Accessed 6 February 2023].

it has no value in regard to language or cognition.²⁸ Elon Musk, a co-founder of OpenAI who left after a conflict of interest in 2017, has raised concerns with ChatGPT saying there is a “Need to understand more about governance structure & revenue plans going forward,” adding. “OpenAI was started as open-source & non-profit. Neither are still true.”²⁹

OpenAI CEO Sam Altman said in a recent interview ‘I think that if AGI [artificial general intelligence] really truly happens, I can imagine all these ways that it breaks capitalism.’³⁰ If artificial general intelligence really truly happens can it break capitalism? It's impossible to predict the exact impact that artificial general intelligence (AGI) would have on capitalism or any other economic system. However, some experts in the field of AI have expressed concerns that the development of AGI could lead to significant changes in the job market and could potentially disrupt existing economic structures. The effects of AGI on capitalism would likely depend on many factors, including how it is developed, implemented, and regulated. As such, it would be up to society to determine how to manage the impact of AGI on the economy in a way that benefits all people. This answer was a response to the question by ChatGPT. Although far from an insightful answer, there can be little doubt that this platform, and the ones that will follow, are the new monetised resource in the internet revenue stream. From the ashes of the crypto crash and the faltering fortunes of Tesla, Twitter and the Metaverse the rise of AI platforms is the next stage of augmented capitalism.

Google announced its AI powered chatbot Barda on the 6th February 2023, built on their existing large language model Lamda, signalling that they are developing tools for their search engine, with the ability to synthesize answers to more nuanced questions. CEO Sundar Pichai said "Soon, you'll see AI-powered features in Search that distil complex information and multiple perspectives into easy-to-digest formats.”³¹ The following day Microsoft held a special event to detail plans to work with Open AI to integrate powerful AI tools into its Bing search engine and Edge browser.³² The rivalry between the two technology giants for dominance in the use of AI technologies in both search and browser applications is intense. The increasing frequency of announcements reflects the corporate excitement at the potential these technologies offer, especially the financial ones. The Bard chatbot shared inaccurate information in its first promotional video, prior to an underwhelming event by Google on February 8th, wiping an incredible \$100 billion from the market value of the parent company Alphabet.³³ The stakes are very high.

The next stage of research is experimenting with Artificial Intelligence platforms to create an algorithmically edited remediation of The Society of the Spectacle. To do so will require the development of a critical set of Debordian Marxist Machine Learning algorithms to critique contemporary consumer culture. In the age of augmented capitalism can computational conditions of artistic production create an ensemble that confers new scope and effect. Developing the proof of

²⁸ Sprakel, T. (2023). *Chomsky on ChatGPT, Education, Russia and the unvaccinated*. [Online]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgxzcOugvEI&ab_channel=EduKitchen [Accessed 6 February 2023].

²⁹ Hern, A. (2022). *AI bot ChatGPT stuns academics with essay-writing skills and usability*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/dec/04/ai-bot-chatgpt-stuns-academics-with-essay-writing-skills-and-usability>. [Accessed 6 February 2023].

³⁰ Konrad, A. (2023). *Exclusive Interview: OpenAI's Sam Altman Talks ChatGPT And How Artificial General Intelligence Can 'Break Capitalism'*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexkonrad/2023/02/03/exclusive-openai-sam-altman-chatgpt-agi-google-search/?sh=45bfb8a56a63> [Accessed 6 February 2023].

³¹ Kleinman, Z. (2023). Google launches ChatGPT rival called Bard. [Online]. 6 February. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-64546299> [Accessed 8 February 2023].

³² Paul, K. (2023). Microsoft to power Bing with AI as race with Google heats up. [Online]. 7 February. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/feb/07/chatgpt-microsoft-search-ai-artificial-intelligence> [Accessed 8 February 2023].

³³ Bove, T. (2023). *Google shares tank after ChatGPT rival Bard's mistake*. [Online]. Available at: <https://fortune.com/2023/02/08/google-bard-ai-mistake-ad-stock-price-market-cap/> [Accessed 9 February 2023].

concept for a creative system of non-human computer-mediated storytelling to critique human self-curation on social media presents challenges. But it is not without some knowledge of pre-existing systems. Jan Bot, the 'self-proclaimed world's first robotised film museum curator' launched in 2018 at the Filmmuseum in Amsterdam. The filmmaking bot used algorithms to combine archival footage and the day's trending topics on the web to generate experimental videos. Jan Bot uses Google Trends to establish the trending topics of the day, then Computer Vision AI technology [Clarifai] to annotate each shot from the archive with a set of tags. Natural Language Processing tools [Coritcal.io] are deployed to select relevant video footage for the trending topics and custom algorithms generate intertitles. Jan Bot selects its favourite film and publishes it on its social media platforms daily.³⁴ On March 31, 2023, after five years and the production of over twenty-five thousand films, Jan Bot will be switched off, and apart from the 500 stored on the blockchain as NFTs, all the films will be deleted. On the Jan Bot website, creators Pablo Núñez Palma and Bram Loogman said that it is a homage to film heritage and the long tradition of artistic collaboration between humans and machines, proclaiming: "Jan Bot is dead. Long live Jan Bot!" Palma believes that NFTS are a fitting afterlife for Jan Bot's enormous filmography, with blockchain as a new way of archiving things on the internet and digital platforms "that bring old archives to the present, and archiving these new movies, made of old footage, in a new form of archive."³⁵

AI, the latest stage of augmented capitalism may offer a unique opportunity to reconsider notions of capitalism, consumerism, and the spectacle. In doing so we may create the ultimate Marxist hack; capitalism will critique itself!

³⁴ Loogman, B. and Núñez Palma, P. (2018). *Jan Bot*. [Online]. Available at: <https://docubase.mit.edu/project/jan-bot/>. [Accessed 23 November 2022].

³⁵ Schindel, D. and Schindel, D. (2022). *An Experimental AI Film Director Calls it Quits*. [Online]. Available at: <https://hyperallergic.com/750870/jan-bot-amsterdam-filmmuseum-filmmaker-ai/> [Accessed 24 October 2022].