

The Society of the Spectacle REDUX #2: Unified Division

This is the second REDUX instalment of Guy Debord's 1974 film *The Society of the Spectacle*, a 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 is a contemporary reimagining of Debord's work, this is the spectacle in the era of augmented capitalism.

The video essay can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/715876956>

The piece begins with a short excerpt from Mr. Robot *eps1.2_d3bug.mkv*, with the central character Elliot Alderson, a hacker, experiencing an epiphany: he believes fsociety, the hacktivist group he was recruited to by cyber anarchist Mr. Robot, is over. Elliot experiences a sojourn into a normal life, and plans to join a gym, heart things on Instagram, drink vanilla lattes¹. In April 2022, Elon Musk, the world's richest man, made a bid to take ownership of the microblogging social media network Twitter, in the name of free speech saying, "Free speech is the bedrock of a functioning democracy, and Twitter is the digital town square where matters of humanity are debated".² The use of 'richest man' rather than 'richest person' is a necessary distinction, the top ten billionaires in the world, the top one percent of the top one percent, are all men.

By early July Musk's bid for Twitter was in jeopardy after he accused the company of not providing accurate information on the number of false users and spam accounts using bots on the platform. Bots are small software applications that use algorithms to run scripts autonomously, aiming to emulate human behaviours and establish conversations with humans. Twitter CEO Parag Agrawal responded to the claims in a lengthy series of posts on the platform spelling out their approaches to dealing with spam accounts and bot activity. Musk replied with a single 🐞 'Pile of Poo' emoji, withdrawing his offer of \$44 billion for the platform on the 8th of July. Days later Twitter sued Musk for the full amount, and he replied by posting a series of memes via the platform, then launched his own legal proceedings to countersue. Twitter argued that his decision to pull out of the deal was 'motivated by protecting his financial interests as stock markets cool, rather than any valid concerns over bots.'³ If we look at Musk's entrepreneurial career through an early 20th-century lens, it has a more traditional capitalist perspective; a newspaper platform, a banking system, and a car factory. We can assume that his bid for Twitter was not driven by a benevolent desire to support free speech but rather by the economics of platform capitalism. Anonymous, the international activist hacker group posted a video on YouTube as a message to Elon Musk. The message was in response to Musk's promotion of cryptocurrency memes stating, "It seems that the games you have played with the crypto markets have destroyed lives," accusing him of showing a "clear disregard for the average working person" and calling him "another narcissistic rich dude desperate for attention."⁴ The boundaries between fiction and fact continue to blur.

We revisit the dominant contemporary commodities, the mobile phone, and the self-image, the selfie. Mark Fisher suggests that when we look back at Debord's 'spectacle' of the 1960s 'it seems

¹ Mc Kay, J (2015). *eps1.2_d3bug.mkv*. Season 1, Episode 3. [Television series] Mr. Robot. Amazon Prime. Episode first aired 16 October.

² Musk, E. (2022). <https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1518677066325053441>. [Online]. Available at: <https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1518677066325053441>.

³ Indap, S. and Murphey, H. (2022). *Elon Musk suggested delaying Twitter deal over 'world war three' concerns*. [Online]. 6 September. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/1b2eb3e0-8c0a-4f83-88c8-1c4528efe98f> [Accessed 9 September 2022].

⁴ Anonymous. (2021). *Anonymous Message To Elon Musk*. [Online]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UG07x3aN3b0&t=3s&ab_channel=Anonymous [Accessed 8 July 2022].

like some genteel period.' Adding that 'You had to put the TV on, or see an advertising billboard in order to be commanded or have your nervous system assailed by the urgencies of capitalism. Now we carry them around at all times with us.'⁵ Not only do we carry them with us at all times, but the social media platforms we access on them are designed to demand both our attention, and contribution. This symbiotic relationship of spectator and spectacle, of consumer and commodity, is a condition of augmented capitalism. The mobile phone represents a tangible commodity to which we can apply Marxist economics, it has use-value, exchange value and value. In the opening section of *Capital* Marx states, 'the commodity is, first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind.' Adding that it doesn't matter how it satisfies that need 'whether directly as a means of subsistence, i.e. an object of consumption, or indirectly as a means of production.'⁶

When we consider the image, or specifically the self-image, as a commodity; this image commodity does not fit into a transactional exchange, the poster didn't pay to post it and doesn't receive any payment for posting it. We enter the territory of 'objective' value.⁷ Grant Bollmer suggests that selfies 'represent a particular articulation of capital, in which image and information possess value in several different ways.' For the person posting the image there is value in 'attention and visibility', a notion of being here, of being visible, of validation. For the platforms, the value is in the potential to target 'advertisements toward a range of potential consumers.'⁸

Social media platforms are incredibly effective at mining granular pieces of metadata, or data about data. This provides information about user behaviour, creating large subsets referred to as 'Big Data', the main driver for accumulating these large datasets is to sell advertising.⁹ Facebook advertising points to the metaverse as the next evolution of social connection, a 'future with privacy, safety, and inclusivity in mind'¹⁰, a collective project open to everyone claiming 'This will be made by all of us'.¹¹ It may be made by all of us, but it will only benefit the few.

Debord said 'the spectacle, like modern society itself, is at once united and divided. The unity of each is based on violent divisions.'¹² There can be no greater violent division than war, and the current situation in Ukraine gives us an uncomfortably close view of war in Europe. If the long-term ramifications of the subsequent financial volatility for crypto investors look bleak, the stock market soon recovered from its initial wobble. Capitalism benefits from disaster. The US dollar has risen to a 20-year high.¹³ Ironically, despite the sanctions imposed on Russia since the invasion, the rouble has

⁵ Fisher, M. (2014). *Mark Fisher : The Slow Cancellation Of The Future*. [Online]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCgkLICTskQ&ab_channel=pmilat. From 'It all boils down to aesthetics and political economy' at Extended Aesthetic Education, Multimedia Institute, Zagreb. [Accessed 12 August 2022].

⁶ Marx, K. and Fowkes, B. (1976). *Capital : a critique of political economy / Vol. 1 / transl. by Ben Fowkes*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, London. P:1.

⁷ Morelock, J. and Narita, F. Z. (2021). *Society of the Selfie: Social Media and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy*. University Of Westminster, London. P:12.

⁸ Bollmer, G. (2022) *Counter-selfie and the Real Subsumption of Society*. In. Murray, D.C. (ed.). *Visual culture approaches to the selfie*. Routledge, New York. P:24.

⁹ Hassan, R. (2020). *The Condition of Digitality: A Post-Modern Marxism for the Practice of Digital Life*. University of Westminster Press, London.

¹⁰ Meta (2022) *We believe in the future of connection in the metaverse* [Online] <https://about.facebook.com/metaverse/> [Accessed 28 April 2022].

¹¹ Meta (2021) *This future will be made by all of us* [Online] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jrC7HW77HJs&ab_channel=BlessedarchCentral [Accessed 28 April 2022].

¹² Debord, G. (2003). *Complete cinematic works: scripts, stills, documents*. Oakland: Ak Press. P:57.

¹³ Duguid, K. and Megaw, N. (2022). *Rise in dollar to 20-year high costs US companies billions in earnings*. [Online]. 12 June. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/189a161c-7247-431d-83fa-f7645ee22573> [Accessed 8 September 2022].

become the world's best performing currency, gaining about '35 percent so far this year, beating every major currency, and has more than doubled from its post-invasion low.'¹⁴

The British Royal family, perhaps the last bastion of an outdated premodern European Monarchy system, still acts as the head of state and maintains strong traditional links with both church and government. The transference of their vast wealth and positions of power are hereditary, 'the primary mechanism for transferring class power from one generation to the next.'¹⁵ 21st century Royalty has mastered the art of branding and storytelling. Monarchism has deep roots in the British psyche, media representations unreservedly support the Royal Family, invoking affection and notions of history, whilst ignoring historical inequalities. Celebrities, famous for being famous, luminaries of our image-saturated age, 'spectacular representations of living human beings',¹⁶ are spectacularly present wherever we look.

The piece ends with a return to Mr. Robot. Elliot's plans have not been realised, and he slips back into a state of social anxiety disorder and dissociative identity behaviours. He becomes increasingly paranoid and discloses a top-secret, "a conspiracy bigger than all of us. There's a powerful group of people out there that are secretly running the world. I'm talking about the guys no one knows about, the guys that are invisible. The top one percent of the top one percent, the guys that play God without permission."¹⁷ Fisher concludes that 'there are certainly conspiracies in capitalism' but that these exist because 'it is evident that the vices are engendered by the structure',¹⁸ the corporate structure that the capitalist system can use to both deflect from individual responsibility so that 'suddenly, the causes of abuse or atrocity are so systematic, so diffuse, that no individual can be held responsible.'¹⁹ In the age of augmented capitalism, the powerful group of people running the world are very visible and corporate structures and systems are enmeshed across platforms and networks. If not specifically developed to facilitate evasion of accountability, they are not designed to assign responsibility beyond the individual who clicked 'post now' or 'share'.

¹⁴ Karaian, J. (2022). *The Russian ruble keeps rising, hitting a seven-year high*. [Online]. 21 June. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/21/business/russian-ruble-ukraine.html> [Accessed 8 September 2022].

¹⁵ Debord, G. (2003). *Complete cinematic works: scripts, stills, documents*. Oakland: Ak Press. P:58.

¹⁶ Ibid. P:59.

¹⁷ Mc Kay, J (2015). *eps1.2_d3bug.mkv*. Season 1, Episode 3. [Television series] Mr. Robot. Amazon Prime. Episode first aired 16 October.

¹⁸ Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books. P: 68

¹⁹ Ibid P: 69