



Debord

Society of the Spectacle

B & R

SOCIETY
of the
SPECTACLE

guy
debord

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Guy Debord was editor of the journal *Internationale Situationniste* from 1958 to 1969.

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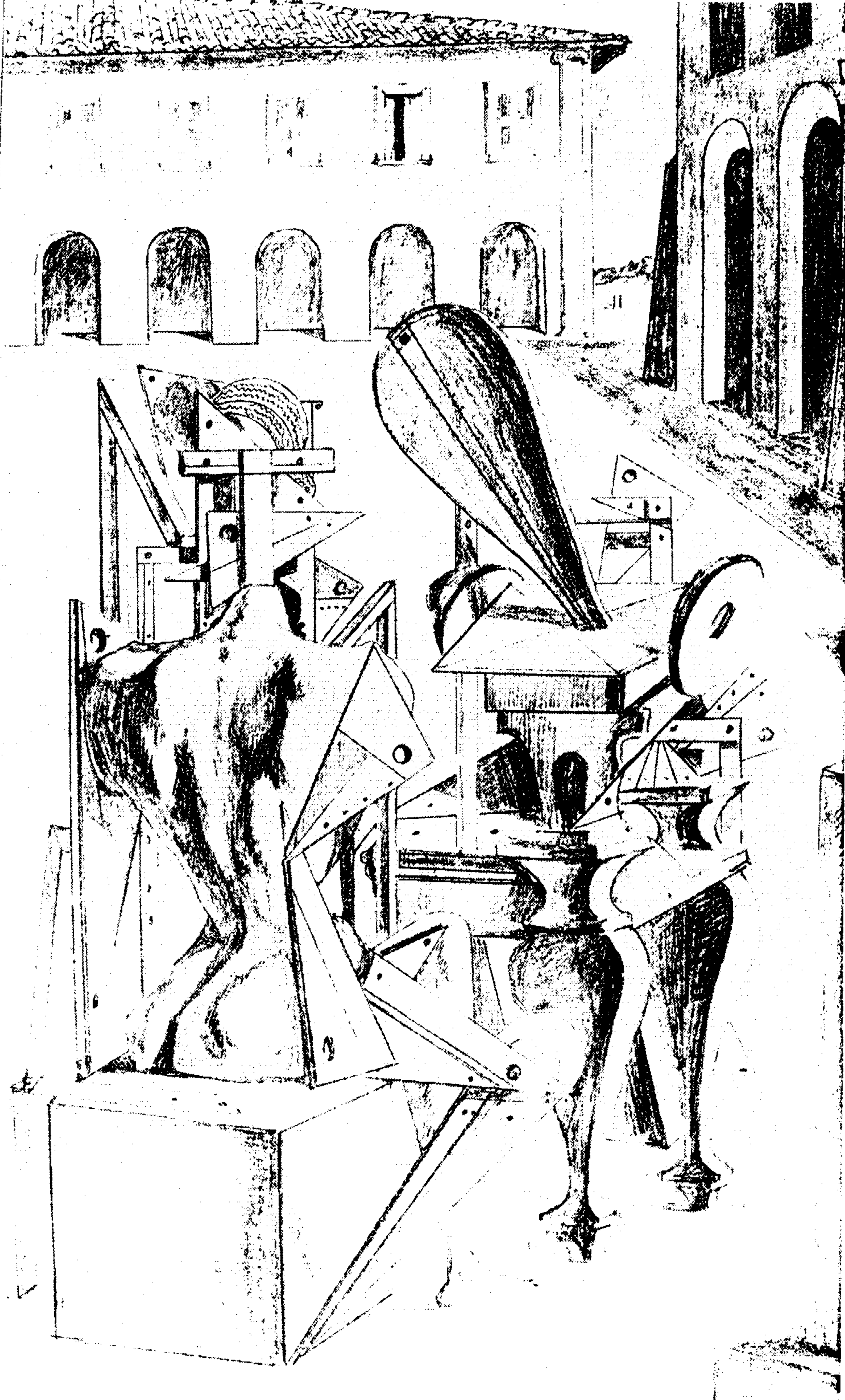
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Contents

Chapter	Paragraph
I Separation Perfected	1
II The Commodity as Spectacle	35
III Unity and Division within Appearance	54
IV The Proletariat as Subject and as Representation ..	73
V Time and History	125
VI Spectacular Time	147
VII The Organization of Territory	165
VIII Negation and Consumption within Culture	180
IX Ideology Materialized	212

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VIII

Negation and Consumption within Culture

Shall we live long enough to see a political revolution? We, the contemporaries of those Germans? My friend, you believe what you want to see . . . As I judge Germany in terms of its present history, you cannot object that its whole history is falsified and all its present public life does not represent the real condition of the people. Read any newspaper you want, convince yourself that we don't stop—and you will concede that censorship prevents no one from stopping—to celebrate the liberty and national happiness we possess . . .

—Ruge, Letter to Marx, March 1844

In the historical society divided into classes, culture is the general sphere of knowledge and of representations of the lived; which is to say that culture is the power of generalization existing *apart*, as division of intellectual labor and as intellectual labor of division. Culture detaches itself from the unity of the society of myth "when the power of unification disappears from the life of man and when opposites lose their living relation and interaction and acquire autonomy..." (Hegel's *Treatise on the Differences between the Systems of Fichte and Schelling*). By gaining its independence, culture begins an imperialist movement of enrichment which is at the same time the decline of its independence. The history which creates the relative autonomy of culture and the ideological illusions about this autonomy also expresses itself as history of culture. And the entire victorious history of culture can be understood as the history of the revelation of its inadequacy, as a march toward its self-suppression. Culture is the locus of the search for lost unity. In this search for unity, culture as a separate sphere is obliged to negate itself.

The struggle between tradition and innovation, which is the principle of internal cultural development in historical societies, can be carried on only through the permanent victory of innovation. Yet cultural innovation is carried by nothing other than the total historical movement which, by becoming conscious of its totality, tends to supersede its own cultural presuppositions and moves toward the suppression of all separation.

The growth of knowledge about society, which includes the understanding of history as the heart of culture, derives from itself an irreversible knowledge, which is expressed by the destruction of God. But this "first condition of any critique" is also the first obligation of a critique without end. When it is no longer possible to maintain a single rule of conduct, every result of culture forces culture to advance toward its dissolu-

tion. Like philosophy at the moment when it gained its full autonomy, every discipline which becomes autonomous has to collapse, first of all as a pretention to explain social totality coherently, and finally even as a fragmented tool which can be used within its own boundaries. The *lack of rationality* of separate culture is the element which condemns it to disappear, because within it the victory of the rational is already present as a requirement.

Culture grew out of the history which abolished the way of life of the old world, but as a separate sphere it is still no more than perceptible intelligence and communication, which remain partial in a *partially historical* society. It is the sense of a world which hardly makes sense.

The end of cultural history manifests itself on two opposite sides: the project of its supersession in total history, and the organization of its preservation as a dead object in spectacular contemplation. One of these movements has linked its fate to social critique, the other to the defense of class power.

The two sides of the end of culture—in all the aspects of knowledge as well as in all the aspects of perceptible representations—exist in a unified manner in what used to be *art* in the most general sense. In the case of knowledge, the accumulation of branches of fragmentary knowledge, which become unusable because the *approval* of existing conditions must finally *renounce knowledge of itself*, confronts the theory of praxis which alone holds the truth of them all since it alone holds the secret of their use. In the case of representations, the critical self-destruction of society's former *common language* confronts its artificial recomposition in the commodity spectacle, the illusory representation of the non-lived.

When society loses the community of the society of myth, it must lose all the references of a really common language until the time when the rifts within the inactive community can be surmounted by the inauguration of the real historical community. When art, which was the common language of social inaction, becomes independent art in the modern sense, emerging from its original religious universe and becoming individual production of separate works, it too experiences the movement that dominates the history of the entirety of separate culture. The affirmation of its independence is the beginning of its disintegration.

The loss of the language of communication is positively expressed by the modern movement of decomposition of all art, its formal annihilation. This movement expresses negatively the fact that a common language must be rediscovered—no longer in the unilateral conclusion which, in the art of the historical society, *always arrived too late*, speaking to others about what was lived without real dialogue, and admitting this deficiency of life—but it must be rediscovered in praxis, which unifies direct activity and its language. The problem is to actually possess the community of dialogue and the game with time which have been represented by poetico-artistic works.

When art, become independent, depicts its world in dazzling colors, a moment of life has grown old and it cannot be rejuvenated with dazzling colors. It can only be evoked as a memory. The greatness of art begins to appear only at the dusk of life.

The historical time which invades art expressed itself first of all in the sphere of art itself, starting with the *baroque*. Ba-

roque is the art of a world which has lost its center: the last mythical order, in the cosmos and in terrestrial government, accepted by the Middle Ages—the unity of Christianity and the phantom of an Empire—has fallen. The art of *the change* must carry within itself the ephemeral principle it discovers in the world. It chose, said Eugenio d'Ors, "life against eternity." Theater and the festival, the theatrical festival, are the outstanding achievements of the baroque where every specific artistic expression becomes meaningful only with reference to the setting of a constructed place, a construction which is its own center of unification; this center is the *passage*, which is inscribed as a threatened equilibrium in the dynamic disorder of everything. The somewhat excessive importance given to the concept of the baroque in the contemporary discussion of esthetics is an expression of the awareness that artistic classicism is impossible: for three centuries the attempts to realize a normative classicism or neo-classicism were no more than brief artificial constructions speaking the external language of the State, the absolute monarchy, or the revolutionary bourgeoisie in Roman clothes. What followed the general path of the baroque, from romanticism to cubism, was ultimately an ever more individualized art of negation perpetually renewing itself to the point of the fragmentation and complete negation of the artistic sphere. The disappearance of historical art, which was linked to the internal communication of an elite and had its semi-independent social basis in the partly playful conditions still lived by the last aristocracies, also expresses the fact that capitalism possesses the first class power which admits itself stripped of any ontological quality, a power which, rooted in the simple management of the economy, is equally the loss of all human *mastery*. The baroque, artistic creation's long-lost unity, is in some way rediscovered in the current *consumption* of the totality of past art. When all past art is recognized and sought historically and retrospectively constituted into a world art, it is relativized into a global disorder which in turn constitutes a baroque edifice on a higher level, an edifice in which the very production of baroque art merges with all its revivals. The arts of all civilizations and all epochs can be known and accepted together for the first time. Once this "collection of souvenirs" of art history becomes possible, it is also *the end of the world of art*. In this age of museums, when artistic communication can no longer exist, all the former moments of art can be admitted equally, because they no longer suffer from the loss of their specific conditions of communication in the current *general* loss of the conditions of communication.

As a negative movement which seeks the supersession of art in a historical society where history is not yet lived, art in the epoch of its dissolution is simultaneously an art of change and the pure expression of impossible change. The more grandiose its reach, the more its true realization is beyond it. This art is perforce *avant-garde*, and it is not. Its *avant-garde* is its disappearance.

Dadaism and surrealism are the two currents which mark the end of modern art. They are contemporaries, though only in a relatively conscious manner, of the last great assault of the revolutionary proletarian movement; and the defeat of this movement, which left them imprisoned in the same artistic field whose decrepitude they had announced, is the basic reason for their immobilization. Dadaism and surrealism are at once historically related and opposed to each other. This opposition, which each of them considered to be its most impor-

tant and radical contribution, reveals the internal inadequacy of their critique, which each developed one-sidedly. Dadaism wanted to suppress art without realizing it; surrealism wanted to realize art without suppressing it. The critical position later elaborated by the Situationists has shown that the suppression and the realization of art are inseparable aspects of a single supersession of art.

Spectacular consumption which preserves congealed past culture, including the recuperated repetition of its negative manifestations, openly becomes in the cultural sector what it is implicitly in its totality: the *communication of the incommunicable*. The flagrant destruction of language is flatly acknowledged as an officially positive value because the point is to advertise reconciliation with the dominant state of affairs—and here all communication is joyously proclaimed absent. The critical truth of this destruction—the real life of modern poetry and art—is obviously hidden, since the spectacle, whose function is to make history forgotten within culture, applies, in



the pseudo-novelty of its modernist means, the very strategy which constitutes its core. Thus a school of neo-literature, which simply admits that it contemplates the written word for its own sake, can present itself as something new. Furthermore, next to the simple proclamation of the sufficient beauty of the decay of the communicable, the most modern tendency of spectacular culture—and the one most closely linked to the repressive practice of the general organization of society—seeks to remake, by means of “team projects,” a complex neo-artistic environment made up of decomposed elements: notably in urbanism’s attempts to integrate artistic debris or esthetico-technical hybrids. This is an expression, on the level of spectacular pseudo-culture, of developed capitalism’s general project, which aims to recapture the fragmented worker as a “personality well integrated in the group,” a tendency described by American sociologists (Riesman, Whyte, etc.). It is the same project everywhere: *a restructuring without community.*

193

When culture becomes nothing more than a commodity, it must also become the star commodity of the spectacular society. Clark Kerr, one of the foremost ideologues of this tendency, has calculated that the complex process of production, distribution and consumption of *knowledge* already gets 29% of the yearly national product in the United States; and he predicts that in the second half of this century culture will be the driving force in the development of the economy, a role played by the automobile in the first half of this century, and by railroads in the second half of the previous century.

194

All the branches of knowledge, which continue to develop as the *thought of the spectacle*, have to justify a society without justification, and constitute a general science of false consciousness. This thought is completely conditioned by the fact that it cannot and will not investigate its own material basis in the spectacular system.

The system’s thought, the thought of the social organization of appearance, is itself obscured by the generalized *sub-communication* which it defends. It does not know that conflict is at the origin of all things in its world. Specialists in the power of the spectacle, an absolute power within its system of language without response, are absolutely corrupted by their experience of contempt and of the success of contempt; and they find their contempt confirmed by their knowledge of the *contemptible man*, who the spectator really is.

196

Within the specialized thought of the spectacular system, a new division of tasks takes place to the extent that the improvement of this system itself poses new problems: on one hand, modern sociology which studies separation by means of the conceptual and material instruments of separation itself, undertakes the *spectacular critique of the spectacle*; on the other hand, in the various disciplines where structuralism takes root, the *apology for the spectacle* institutes itself as the thought of non-thought, as the *official amnesia* of historical practice. Nevertheless, the false despair of non-dialectical critique and the false optimism of pure advertising of the system are indetical in that they are both submissive thought.

197

The sociology which began, first in the United States, to focus discussion on the living conditions brought about by present development, compiled a great deal of empirical data, but could not fathom the truth of its subject because it lacked the critique immanent in this subject. As a result, the sincerely reformist tendency of this sociology resorts to morality, common sense, appeals devoid of all relevance to practical measures, etc. Because this type of critique is ignorant of the negative at the core of its world, it insists on describing only a sort of negative surplus which it finds deplorably annoying on the surface, like an irrational parasitic proliferation. This indignant good will, even if genuine, ends up blaming only the external consequences of the system, yet thinks itself critical, forgetting the essentially *apologetic* character of its assumptions and method.