

Debord

Society of the Spectacle

B & R

SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

guy debord

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I

Separation Perfected

But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, fancy to reality, the appearance to the essence, . . . *illusion* only is sacred, *truth profane*. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.

—Feuerbach, Preface to the Second Edition
of *The Essence of Christianity*

In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.

The images detached from every aspect of life fuse in a common stream in which the unity of this life can no longer be reestablished. Reality considered *partially* unfolds, in its own general unity, as a pseudo-world *apart*, an object of mere contemplation. The specialization of images of the world is completed in the world of the autonomous image, where the liar has lied to himself. The spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement of the non-living.

The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as all of society, as part of society, and as *instrument of unification*. As a part of society it is specifically the sector which concentrates all gazing and all consciousness. Due to the very fact that this sector is *separate*, it is the common ground of the deceived gaze and of false consciousness, and the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of generalized separation.

The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.

The spectacle cannot be understood as an abuse of the world of vision, as a product of the techniques of mass dissemination of images. It is, rather, a *Weltanschauung* which has become actual, materially translated. It is a world vision which has become objectified.

The spectacle, grasped in its totality, is both the result and the project of the existing mode of production. It is not a supplement to the real world, an additional decoration. It is the heart of the unrealism of the real society. In all its specific forms, as information or propaganda, as advertisement or direct entertainment consumption, the spectacle is the present *model* of socially dominant life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choice *already made* in production and its corollary consumption. The spectacle's form and content are identically the total justification of the existing system's conditions and goals. The spectacle is also the *permanent presence* of this justification, since it occupies the main part of the time lived outside of modern production.

Separation is itself part of the unity of the world, of the global social praxis split up into reality and image. The social practice which the autonomous spectacle confronts is also the real totality which contains the spectacle. But the split within this totality mutilates it to the point of making the spectacle appear as its goal. The language of the spectacle consists of signs of the ruling production, which at the same time are the ultimate goal of this production.

One cannot abstractly contrast the spectacle to actual social activity: such a division is itself divided. The spectacle which inverts the real is in fact produced. Lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle while simultaneously absorbing the spectacular order, giving it positive cohesiveness. Objective reality is present on both sides. Every notion fixed this way has no other basis than its passage into the opposite: reality rises up within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and the support of the existing society.

In a world which really is topsy-turvy, the true is a moment of the false.

The concept of "spectacle" unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena. The diversity and the contrasts are appearances of a socially organized appearance, the general truth of which must itself be recognized. Considered in its own terms, the spectacle is *affirmation* of appearance and affirmation of all human life, namely social life, as mere appearance. But the critique which reaches the truth of the spectacle exposes it as the visible negation of life, as a negation of life which has become visible.

To describe the spectacle, its formation, its functions and the forces which tend to dissolve it, one must artificially distinguish certain inseparable elements. When *analyzing* the spectacle one speaks, to some extent, the language of the spectacular itself in the sense that one moves through the methodological terrain of the very society which expresses itself in the spectacle. But the spectacle is nothing other than the sense of the total practice of a social-economic formation, its use of time. It is the historical movement in which we are caught.

The spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible. It says nothing more than "that which appears is good, that which is good appears." The attitude which it demands in principle is passive acceptance which in fact it already obtained by its manner of appearing without reply, by its monopoly of appearance.

The basically tautological character of the spectacle flows from the simple fact that its means are simultaneously its ends.

It is the sun which never sets over the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire surface of the world and bathes endlessly in its own glory.

The society which rests on modern industry is not accidentally or superficially spectacular, it is fundamentally *spectaclist*. In the spectacle, which is the image of the ruling economy, the goal is nothing, development everything. The spectacle aims at nothing other than itself.

As the indispensable decoration of the objects produced today, as the general exposé of the rationality of the system, as the advanced economic sector which directly shapes a growing multitude of image-objects, the spectacle is the *main production* of present-day society.

The spectacle subjugates living men to itself to the extent that the economy has totally subjugated them. It is no more than the economy developing for itself. It is the true reflection of the production of things, and the false objectification of the producers.

The first phase of the domination of the economy over social life brought into the definition of all human realization the obvious degradation of *being* into *having*. The present phase of total occupation of social life by the accumulated results of the economy leads to a generalized sliding of *having* into *appearing*, from which all actual "having" must draw its immediate prestige and its ultimate function. At the same time all individual reality has become social reality directly dependent on social power and shaped by it. It is allowed to appear only to the extent that it is not.

Where the real world changes into simple images, the simple images become real beings and effective motivations of hypnotic behavior. The spectacle, as a tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly), naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs; the most abstract, the most mystifiable sense corresponds to the generalized abstraction of present-day society. But the spectacle is not identifiable with mere gazing, even combined with hearing. It is that which escapes the activity of men, that which escapes reconsideration and correction by their work. It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever there is independent representation, the spectacle reconstitutes itself.

The spectacle inherits all the weaknesses of the Western philosophical project which undertook to comprehend activity in terms of the categories of seeing; furthermore, it is based on the incessant spread of the precise technical rationality which grew out of this thought. The spectacle does not realize philosophy, it philosophizes reality. The concrete life of everyone has been degraded into a speculative universe.



Philosophy, the power of separate thought and the thought of separate power, could never by itself supersede theology. The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion. Spectacular technology has not dispelled the religious clouds where men had placed their own powers detached from themselves; it has only tied them to an earthly base. The most earthly life thus becomes opaque and unbreathable. It no longer projects into the sky but shelters within itself its absolute denial, its fallacious paradise. The spectacle is the technical realization of the exile of human powers into a beyond; it is separation perfected within the interior of man.

To the extent that necessity is socially dreamed, the dream becomes necessary. The spectacle is the nightmare of imprisoned modern society which ultimately expresses nothing more than its desire to sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of sleep.

The fact that the practical power of modern society detached itself and built an independent empire in the spectacle

can be explained only by the fact that this practical power continued to lack cohesion and remained in contradiction with itself.

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The oldest social specialization, the specialization of power, is at the root of the spectacle. The spectacle is thus a specialized activity which speaks for all the others. It is the diplomatic representation of hierarchic society to itself, where all other expression is banned. Here the most modern is also the most archaic.

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The spectacle is the existing order's uninterrupted discourse about itself, its laudatory monologue. It is the self-portrait of power in the epoch of its totalitarian management of the conditions of existence. The fetishistic, purely objective appearance of spectacular relations conceals the fact that they are relations among men and classes: a second nature with its fatal laws seems to dominate our environment. But the spectacle is not the necessary product of technical development seen as a *natural* development. The society of the spectacle is on the contrary the form which chooses its own technical content. If the spectacle, taken in the limited sense of "mass media" which are its most glaring superficial manifestation, seems to invade society as mere equipment, this equipment is in no way neutral but is the very means suited to its total self-movement. If the social needs of the epoch in which such techniques are developed can only be satisfied through their mediation, if the administration of this society and all contact among men can no longer take place except through the intermediary of this power of instantaneous communication, it is because this "communication" is essentially *unilateral*. The concentration of "communication" is thus an accumulation, in the hands of the existing system's administration, of the means which allow it to carry on this particular administration. The generalized cleavage of the spectacle is inseparable from the modern State, namely from the general form of cleavage within society, the product of the division of social labor and the organ of class domination.

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Separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle. The institutionalization of the social division of labor, the formation of classes, had given rise to a first sacred contemplation, the mythical order with which every power shrouds itself from the beginning. The sacred has justified the cosmic and ontological order which corresponded to the interests of the masters; it has explained and embellished that which society *could not do*. Thus all separate power has been spectacular, but the adherence of all to an immobile image only signified the common acceptance of an imaginary prolongation of the poverty of real social activity, still largely felt as a unitary condition. The modern spectacle, on the contrary, expresses what society *can do*, but in this expression the *permitted* is absolutely opposed to the *possible*. The spectacle is the preservation of unconsciousness within the practical change of the conditions of existence. It is its own product, and it has made its own rules: it is a pseudo-sacred entity. It shows what it is: separate power developing in itself, in the growth of productivity by means of the incessant refinement of the division of labor into a parcellization of gestures which are then dominated by the independent movement of machines; and working for an ever-expanding market. All community and all critical sense are dissolved during this movement in which the forces that could grow by separating are not yet reunited.

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With the generalized separation of the worker and his products, every unitary view of accomplished activity and all direct personal communication among producers are lost. Accompanying the progress of accumulation of separate products and the concentration of the productive process, unity and communication become the exclusive attribute of the system's management. The success of the economic system of separation is the *proletarianization* of the world.

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Due to the success of separate production as production of the separate, the fundamental experience which in primitive societies is attached to a central task is in the process of being

displaced, at the crest of the system's development, by non-work, by inactivity. But this inactivity is in no way liberated from productive activity: it depends on productive activity and is an uneasy and admiring submission to the necessities and results of production; it is itself a product of its rationality. There can be no freedom outside of activity, and in the context of the spectacle all activity is negated, just as real activity has been captured in its entirety for the global construction of this result. Thus the present "liberation from labor," the increase of leisure, is in no way a liberation within labor, nor a liberation from the world shaped by this labor. None of the activity lost in labor can be regained in the submission to its result.

28

The economic system founded on isolation is a *circular production of isolation*. The technology is based on isolation, and the technical process isolates in turn. From the automobile to television, all the *goods selected* by the spectacular system are also its weapons for a constant reinforcement of the conditions of isolation of "lonely crowds." The spectacle constantly rediscovers its own assumptions more concretely.

29

The spectacle originates in the loss of the unity of the world, and the gigantic expansion of the modern spectacle expresses the totality of this loss: the abstraction of all specific labor and the general abstraction of the entirety of production are perfectly rendered in the spectacle, whose *mode of being concrete* is precisely abstraction. In the spectacle, one part of the world represents *itself* to the world and is superior to it. The spectacle is nothing more than the common language of this separation. What binds the spectators together is no more than an irreversible relation at the very center which maintains their isolation. The spectacle reunites the separate, but reunites it as separate.

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The alienation of the spectator to the profit of the contemplated object (which is the result of his own unconscious ac-

tivity) is expressed in the following way: the more he contemplates the less he lives; the more he accepts recognizing himself in the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him. This is why the spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere.

31

The worker does not produce himself; he produces an independent power. The success of this production, its abundance, returns to the producer as an *abundance of dis-possession*. All the time and space of his world become *foreign* to him with the accumulation of his alienated products. The spectacle is the map of this new world, a map which exactly covers its territory. The very powers which escaped us show themselves to us in all their force.

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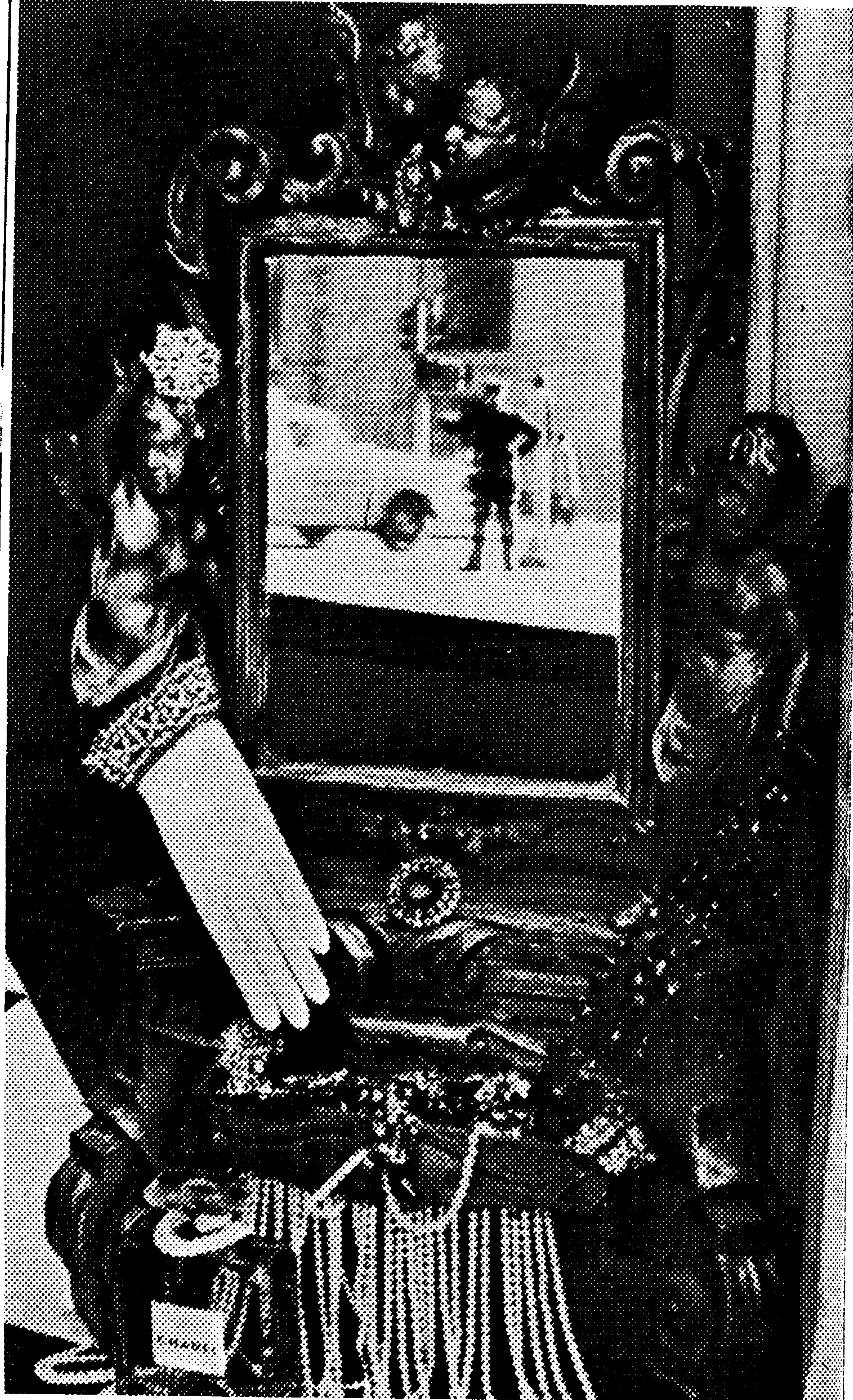
The spectacle within society corresponds to a concrete manufacture of alienation. Economic expansion is mainly the expansion of this specific industrial production. What grows with the economy in motion for itself can only be the very alienation which was at its origin.

33

Separated from his product, man himself produces all the details of his world with ever increasing power, and thus finds himself ever more separated from his world. The more his life is now his product, the more he is separated from his life.

34

The spectacle is *capital* to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image.



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The Commodity as Spectacle

The commodity can only be understood in its undistorted essence 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 stance adopted by men towards it. Only then does the commodity become crucial for the subjugation of men's consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression. . . . As labor is progressively rationalized and mechanized, his (the worker's) lack of will is reinforced by the way in which his activity becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative.

—Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*

In the essential movement of the spectacle, which consists of taking up all that existed in human activity in a fluid state so as to possess it in a congealed state as things which have become the exclusive value by their *formulation in negative of lived value*, we recognize our old enemy, the commodity, who knows so well how to seem at first glance something trivial and obvious, while on the contrary it is so complex and so full of metaphysical subtleties.

This is the principle of commodity fetishism, the domination of society by "intangible as well as tangible things," which reaches its absolute fulfillment in the spectacle, where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which simultaneously impose themselves as the tangible *par excellence*.

The world at once present and absent which the spectacle makes visible is the world of the commodity dominating all that is lived. The world of the commodity is thus shown for what it is, because its movement is identical to the estrangement of men among themselves and in relation to their global product.

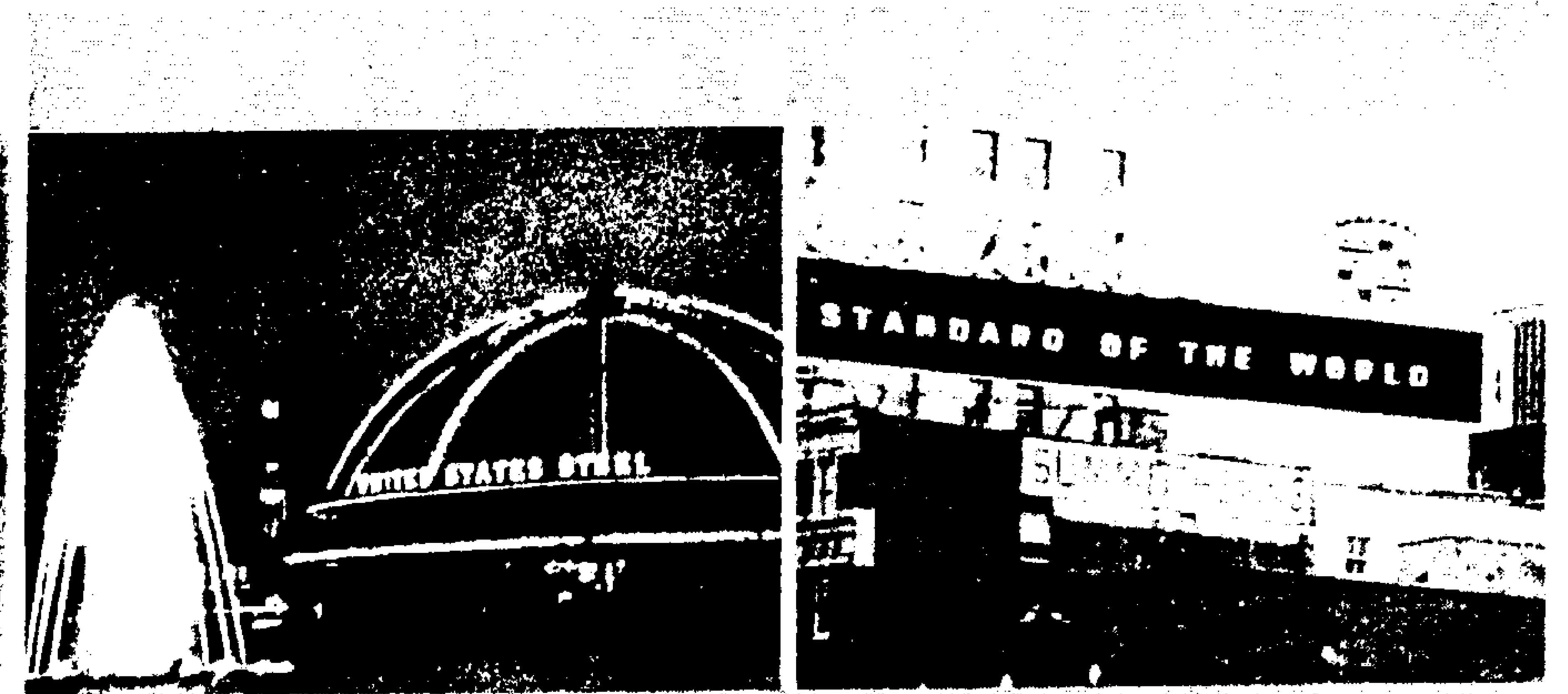
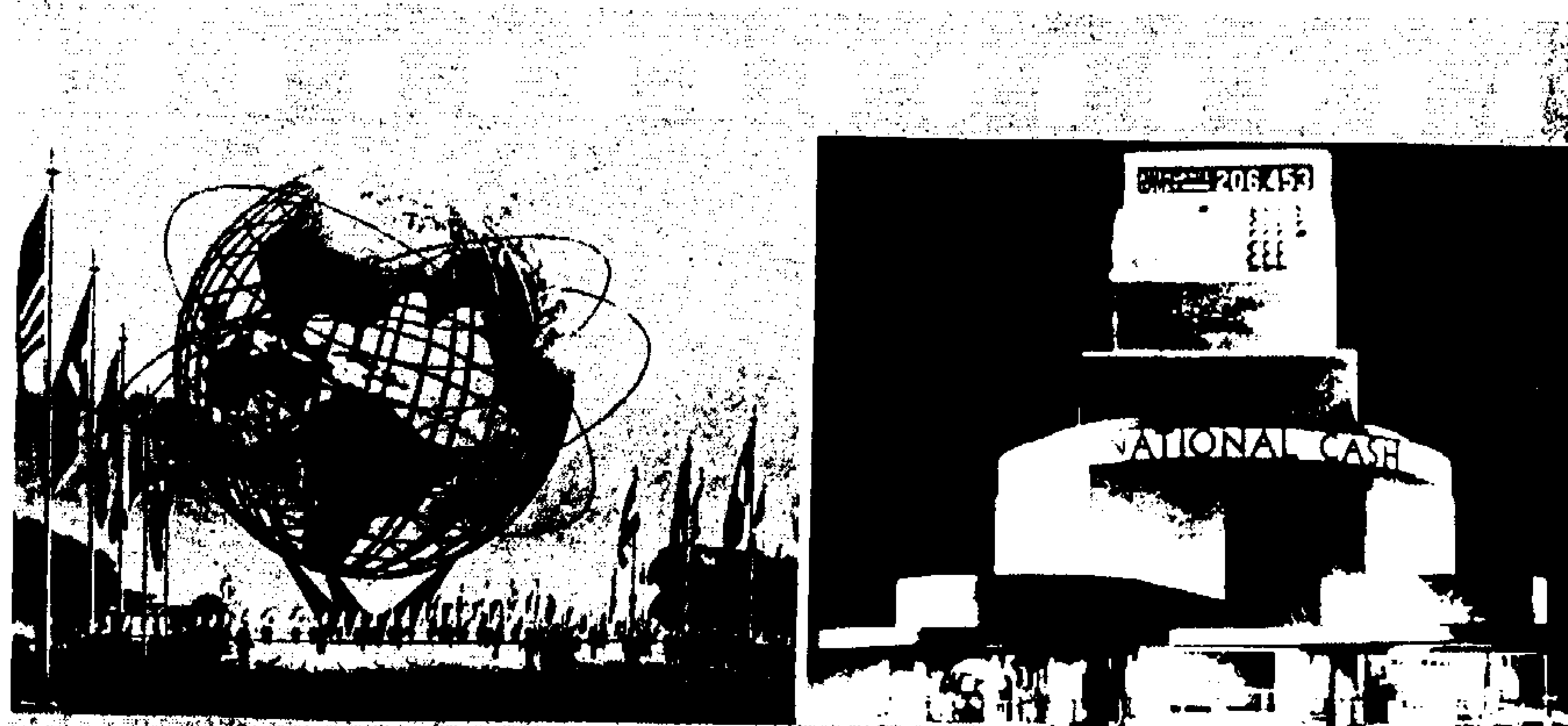
The loss of quality so evident at all levels of spectacular language, from the objects it praises to the behavior it regulates, merely translates the fundamental traits of the real production which brushes reality aside: the commodity-form is through and through equal to itself, the category of the quantitative. The quantitative is what the commodity-form develops, and it can develop only within the quantitative.

This development which excludes the qualitative is itself, as development, subject to qualitative change: the spectacle indicates that it has crossed the threshold of its own abundance; this is as yet true only locally at some points, but is already true on the universal scale which is the original context of the commodity, a context which its practical movement, encompassing the Earth as a world market, has verified.

The development of productive forces has been the real unconscious history which built and modified the conditions of existence of human groups as conditions of survival, and extended those conditions: the economic basis of all their undertakings. In a primitive economy, the commodity sector represented a surplus of survival. The production of commodities, which implies the exchange of varied products among independent producers, could for a long time remain craft production, contained within a marginal economic function where its quantitative truth was still masked. However, where commodity production met the social conditions of large scale commerce and of the accumulation of capitals, it seized total domination over the economy. The entire economy then became what the commodity had shown itself to be in the course of this conquest: a process of quantitative development. This incessant expansion of economic power in the form of the commodity, which transformed human labor into commodity-labor, into wage-labor, cumulatively led to an abundance in which the primary question of survival is undoubtedly resolved, but in such a way that it is constantly rediscovered; it is continually posed again each time at a higher level. Economic growth frees societies from the natural pressure which required their direct struggle for survival, but at that point it is from their liberator that they are not liberated. The independence of the commodity is extended to the entire economy over which it rules. The economy transforms the world, but transforms it only into a world of economy. The pseudo-nature within which human labor is alienated demands that it be served ad infinitum, and this service, being judged and absolved only by itself, in fact acquires the totality of socially permissible efforts and projects as its servants. The abundance of commodities, namely, of commodity relations, can be nothing more than increased survival.

The commodity's domination was at first exerted over the economy in an occult manner; the economy itself, the material basis of social life, remained unperceived and not understood, like the familiar which is not necessarily known. In a society where the concrete commodity is rare or unusual, money, apparently dominant, presents itself as an emissary armed with full powers who speaks in the name of an unknown force. With the industrial revolution, the division of labor in manufactures, and mass production for the world market, the commodity appears in fact as a power which comes to occupy social life. It is then that political economy takes shape, as the dominant science and the science of domination.

The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the *total occupation* of social life. Not only is the relation to the commodity visible but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world. Modern economic production extends its dictatorship extensively and intensively. In the least industrialized places, its reign is already attested by a few star commodities and by the imperialist domination imposed by regions which are ahead in the development of productivity. In the advanced regions, social space is invaded by a continuous



superimposition of geological layers of commodities. At this point in the "second industrial revolution," alienated consumption becomes for the masses a duty supplementary to alienated production. It is *all the sold labor* of a society which globally becomes the *total commodity* for which the cycle must be continued. For this to be done, the total commodity has to return as a fragment to the fragmented individual, absolutely separated from the productive forces operating as a whole. Thus it is here that the specialized science of domination must in turn specialize: it fragments itself into sociology, psychotechnics, cybernetics, semiology, etc., watching over the self-regulation of every level of the process.

Whereas in the primitive phase of capitalist accumulation, "political economy sees in the *proletarian* only the worker" who must receive the minimum indispensable for the conservation of his labor power, without ever seeing him "in his leisure and humanity," these ideas of the ruling class are reversed as soon as the production of commodities reaches a level of abundance which requires a surplus of collaboration from the worker. This worker, suddenly redeemed from the total contempt which is clearly shown him by all the varieties of organization and supervision of production, finds himself every day, outside of production and in the guise of a con-

sumer, seemingly treated as an adult, with zealous politeness. At this point the *humanism of the commodity* takes charge of the worker's "leisure and humanity," simply because now political economy can and must dominate these spheres as *political economy*. Thus the "perfected denial of man" has taken charge of the totality of human existence.

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The spectacle is a permanent opium war which aims to make people identify goods with commodities and satisfaction with survival that increases according to its own laws. But if consumable survival is something which must always increase, this is because it continues to *contain privation*. If there is nothing beyond increasing survival, if there is no point where it might stop growing, this is not because it is beyond privation, but because it is enriched privation.

45

Automation, the most advanced sector of modern industry as well as the model which perfectly sums up its practice, drives the commodity world toward the following contradiction: the technical equipment which objectively eliminates labor must at the same time preserve *labor as a commodity* and as the only source of the commodity. If the social labor (time) engaged by the society is not to diminish because of automation (or any other less extreme form of increasing the productivity of labor), then new jobs have to be created. Services, the tertiary sector, swell the ranks of the army of distribution and are a eulogy to the current commodities; the additional forces which are mobilized just happen to be suitable for the organization of redundant labor required by the artificial needs for such commodities.

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Exchange value could arise only as an agent of use value, but its victory by means of its own weapons created the conditions for its autonomous domination. Mobilizing all human use and establishing a monopoly over its satisfaction, exchange

value has ended up by *directing use*. The process of exchange became identified with all possible use and reduced use to the mercy of exchange. Exchange value is the *condottiere* of use value who ends up waging the war for himself.

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The *tendency of use value to fall*, this constant of capitalist economy, develops a new form of privation within increased survival: the new privation is not far removed from the old penury since it requires most men to participate as wage workers in the endless pursuit of its attainment, and since everyone knows he must submit or die. The reality of this blackmail accounts for the general acceptance of the illusion at the heart of the consumption of modern commodities: use in its most impoverished form (food and lodging) today exists only to the extent that it is imprisoned in the illusory wealth of increased survival. The real consumer becomes a consumer of illusions. The commodity is this factually real illusion, and the spectacle is its general manifestation.

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In the inverted reality of the spectacle, use value (which was implicitly contained in exchange value) must now be explicitly proclaimed precisely because its factual reality is eroded by the overdeveloped commodity economy and because counterfeit life requires a pseudo-justification.

49

The spectacle is the other side of money: it is the general abstract equivalent of all commodities. Money dominated society as the representation of general equivalence, namely, of the exchangeability of different goods whose uses could not be compared. The spectacle is the developed modern complement of money where the totality of the commodity world appears as a whole, as a general equivalence for what the entire society can be and can do. The spectacle is the money which one *only looks at*, because in the spectacle the totality of use is already exchanged for the totality of abstract representation. The spectacle is not only the servant of *pseudo-use*, it is already in itself the pseudo-use of life.

At the moment of economic abundance, the concentrated result of social labor becomes visible and subjugates all reality to appearance, which is now its product. Capital is no longer the invisible center which directs the mode of production: its accumulation spreads it all the way to the periphery in the form of tangible objects. The entire expanse of society is its portrait.

The victory of the autonomous economy must at the same time be its defeat. The forces which it has unleashed eliminate the economic necessity which was the immutable basis of earlier societies. When economic necessity is replaced by the necessity for boundless economic development, the satisfaction of primary human needs is replaced by an uninterrupted fabrication of pseudo-needs which are reduced to the single pseudo-need of maintaining the reign of the autonomous economy. The autonomous economy permanently breaks away from fundamental need to the extent that it emerges from the social unconscious which unknowingly depended on it. "All that is conscious wears out. What is unconscious remains unalterable. But once freed, does it not fall to ruins in turn?" (Freud).

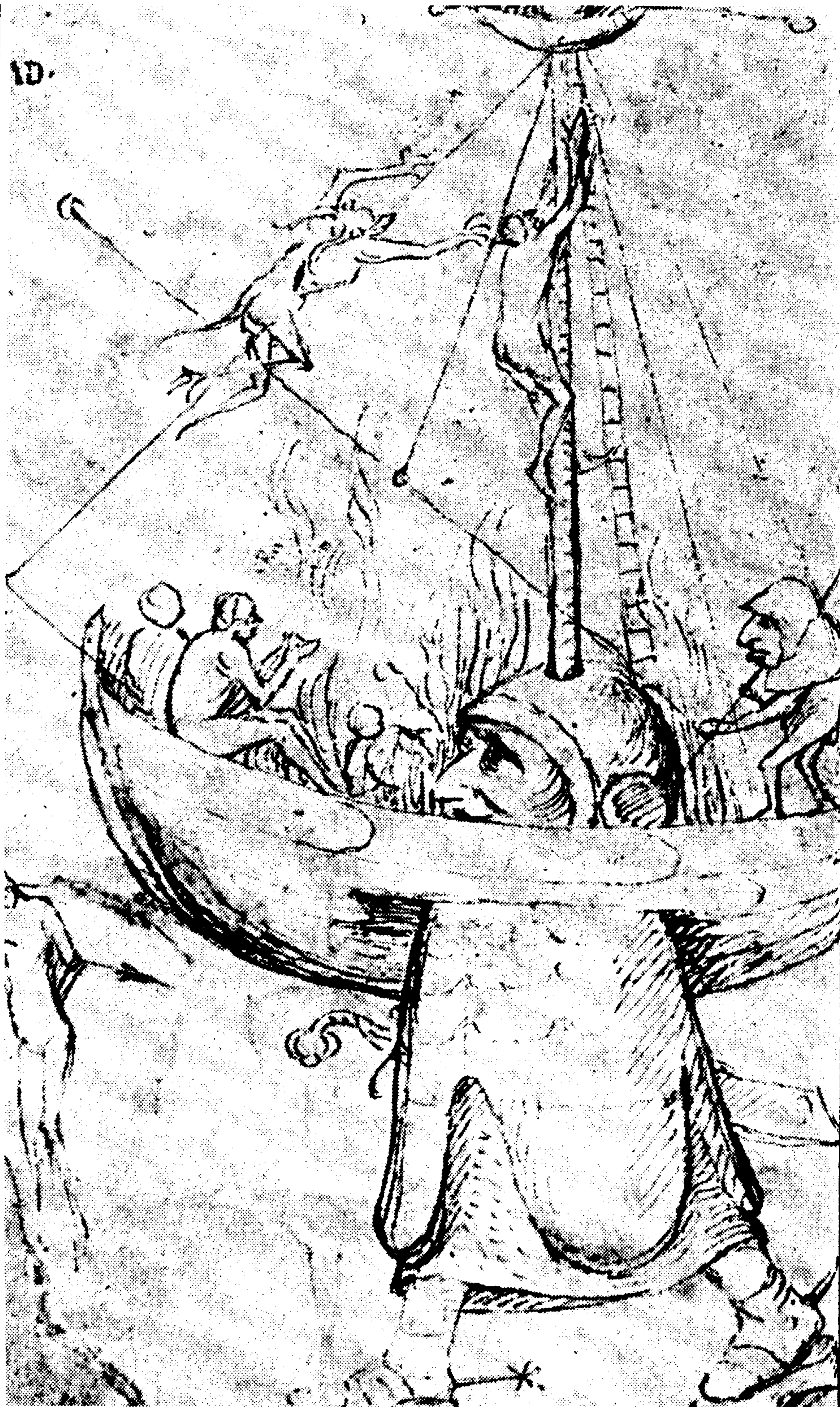
As soon as society discovers that it depends on the economy, the economy, in fact, depends on society. This subterranean force, which grew until it appeared sovereign, has lost its power. That which was the economic it must become the I. The subject can emerge only from society, namely from the struggle within society. The subject's possible existence depends on the outcome of the class struggle which shows itself to be the product and the producer of the economic foundation of history.

The consciousness of desire and the desire for consciousness are identically the project which, in its negative form,

seeks the abolition of classes, the workers' direct possession of every aspect of their activity. Its opposite is the society of the spectacle, where the commodity contemplates itself in a world it has created.

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III

Unity and Division within Appearance

A lively, new polemic about the concepts "one divides into two" and "two fuse into one" is unfolding on the philosophical front in the country. This debate is a struggle between those who are for and those who are against the materialist dialectic, a struggle between two conceptions of the world: the proletarian and the bourgeois conception. Those who maintain that "one divides into two" is the fundamental law of things are on the side of the materialist dialectic; those who maintain that the fundamental law of things is that "two fuse into one" are against the materialist dialectic. The two sides have drawn a clear line of demarcation between them, and their arguments are diametrically opposed. This polemic reflects, on the ideological level, the acute and complex class struggle taking place in China and in the world.

—The Red Flag of Peking, September 21, 1964

The spectacle, like modern society, is at once unified and divided. Like society, it builds its unity on the disjunction. But the contradiction, when it emerges in the spectacle, is in turn contradicted by a reversal of its meaning, so that the demonstrated division is unitary, while the demonstrated unity is divided.

The struggle of powers constituted for the management of the same socio-economic system is disseminated as the official contradiction but is in fact part of the real unity—on a world scale as well as within every nation.

The spectacular sham struggles of rival forms of separate power are at the same time real in that they translate the unequal and antagonistic development of the system, the relatively contradictory interests of classes or subdivisions of classes which acknowledge the system and define themselves as participants within its power. Just as the development of the most advanced economy is a clash between some priorities and others, the totalitarian management of the economy by a State bureaucracy and the condition of the countries within the sphere of colonization or semi-colonization are defined by specific peculiarities in the varieties of production and power. These diverse oppositions can be passed off in the spectacle as absolutely distinct forms of society (by means of any number of different criteria). But in actual fact, the truth of the uniqueness of all these specific sectors resides in the universal system that contains them: the unique movement that makes the planet its field, capitalism.

The society which carries the spectacle does not dominate the underdeveloped regions by its economic hegemony alone. It dominates them as *the society of the spectacle*. Even where the material base is still absent, modern society has already

invaded the social surface of each continent by means of the spectacle. It defines the program of the ruling class and presides over its formation. Just as it presents pseudo-goods to be coveted, it offers false models of revolution to local revolutionaries. The spectacle of bureaucratic power, which holds sway over some industrial countries, is an integral part of the total spectacle, its general pseudo-negation and support. The spectacle displays certain totalitarian specializations of communication and administration when viewed locally, but when viewed in terms of the functioning of the entire system these specializations merge in a *world division of spectacular tasks*.

The division of spectacular tasks preserves the entirety of the existing order and especially the dominant pole of its development. The root of the spectacle is within the abundant economy—the source of the fruits which ultimately take over the spectacular market despite the ideological-police protectionist barriers of local spectacles aspiring to autarchy.

Under the shimmering diversions of the spectacle, *banalization* dominates modern society the world over and at every point where the developed consumption of commodities has seemingly multiplied the roles and objects to choose from. The remains of religion and of the family (the principal relic of the heritage of class power) and the moral repression they assure, merge whenever the enjoyment of *this world* is affirmed—this world being nothing other than repressive pseudo-enjoyment. The smug acceptance of what exists can also merge with purely spectacular rebellion; this reflects the simple fact that dissatisfaction itself became a commodity as soon as economic abundance could extend production to the processing of such raw materials.

The celebrity, the spectacular representation of a living human being, embodies this banality by embodying the image

of a possible role. Being a star means specializing in the *seemingly lived*; the star is the object of identification with the shallow seeming life that has to compensate for the fragmented productive specializations which are actually lived. Celebrities exist to act out various styles of living and viewing society—unfettered, free to express themselves *globally*. They embody the inaccessible result of social labor by dramatizing its by-products magically projected above it as its goal: power and vacations, decision and consumption, which are the beginning and end of an undiscussed process. In one case state power personalizes itself as a pseudo-star; in another a star of consumption gets elected as a pseudo-power over the lived. But just as the activities of the star are not really global, they are not really varied.

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The agent of the spectacle placed on stage as a star is the opposite of the individual, the enemy of the individual in himself as well as in others. Passing into the spectacle as a model for identification, the agent renounces all autonomous qualities in order to identify himself with the general law of obedience to the course of things. The consumption celebrity superficially represents different types of personality and shows each of these types having equal access to the totality of consumption and finding similar happiness there. The decision celebrity must possess a complete stock of accepted human qualities. Official differences between stars are wiped out by the official similarity which is the presupposition of their excellence in everything. Khrushchev became a general so as to make decisions on the battle of Kursk, not on the spot, but at the twentieth anniversary, when he was master of the State. Kennedy remained an orator even to the point of proclaiming the eulogy over his own tomb, since Theodore Sorenson continued to edit speeches for the successor in the style which had characterized the personality of the deceased. The admirable people in whom the system personifies itself are well known for not being what they are; they became great men by stooping below the reality of the smallest individual life, and everyone knows it.

62

False choice in spectacular abundance, a choice which lies in the juxtaposition of competing and complimentary specta-

cles and also in the juxtaposition of roles (signified and carried mainly by things) which are at once exclusive and overlapping, develops into a struggle of vaporous qualities meant to stimulate loyalty to quantitative triviality. This resurrects false archaic oppositions, regionalisms and racisms which serve to raise the vulgar hierarchic ranks of consumption to a preposterous ontological superiority. In this way, the endless series of trivial confrontations is set up again, from competitive sports to elections, mobilizing a sub-ludic interest. Wherever there is abundant consumption, a major spectacular opposition between youth and adults comes to the fore among the false roles—false because the adult, master of his life, does not exist and because youth, the transformation of what exists, is in no way the property of those who are now young, but of the economic system, of the dynamism of capitalism. Things rule and are young; things confront and replace one another.

63

What hides under the spectacular oppositions is a unity of misery. Behind the masks of total choice, different forms of the same alienation confront each other, all of them built on real contradictions which are repressed. The spectacle exists in a concentrated or a diffuse form depending on the necessities of the particular stage of misery which it denies and supports. In both cases, the spectacle is nothing more than an image of happy unification surrounded by desolation and fear at the tranquil center of misery.

64

The concentrated spectacle belongs essentially to bureaucratic capitalism, even though it may be imported as a technique of state power in mixed backward economies or, at certain moments of crisis, in advanced capitalism. In fact, bureaucratic property itself is concentrated in such a way that the individual bureaucrat relates to the ownership of the global economy only through an intermediary, the bureaucratic community, and only as a member of this community. Moreover, the production of commodities, less developed in bureaucratic capitalism, also takes on a concentrated form: the commodity the bureaucracy holds on to is the totality of social labor, and what it sells back to society is wholesale survival. The dictatorship of the

bureaucratic economy cannot leave the exploited masses any significant margin of choice, since the bureaucracy itself has to choose everything and since any other external choice, whether it concern food or music, is already a choice to destroy the bureaucracy completely. This dictatorship must be accompanied by permanent violence. The imposed image of the good envelops in its spectacle the totality of what officially exists, and is usually concentrated in one man, who is the guarantee of totalitarian cohesion. Everyone must magically identify with this absolute celebrity—or disappear. This celebrity is master of non-consumption, and the heroic image which gives an acceptable meaning to the absolute exploitation that primitive accumulation accelerated by terror really is. If every Chinese must learn Mao, and thus be Mao, it is because he can be nothing else. Wherever the concentrated spectacle rules, so does the police.

65

The diffuse spectacle accompanies the abundance of commodities, the undisturbed development of modern capitalism. Here every individual commodity is justified in the name of the grandeur of the production of the totality of objects of which the spectacle is an apologetic catalogue. Irreconcilable claims crowd the stage of the affluent economy's unified spectacle; different star-commodities simultaneously support contradictory projects for provisioning society: the spectacle of automobiles demands a perfect transport network which destroys old cities, while the spectacle of the city itself requires museum-areas. Therefore the already problematic satisfaction which is supposed to come from the *consumption of the whole*, is falsified immediately since the actual consumer can directly touch only a succession of fragments of this commodity happiness, fragments in which the quality attributed to the whole is obviously missing every time.

66

Every given commodity fights for itself, cannot acknowledge the others, and attempts to impose itself everywhere as if it were the only one. The spectacle, then, is the epic poem of this struggle, an epic which cannot be concluded by the fall of any Troy. The spectacle does not sing the praises of men and their weapons, but of commodities and their passions. In this

blind struggle every commodity, pursuing its passion, unconsciously realizes something higher: the becoming-world of the commodity, which is also the becoming-commodity of the world. Thus, by means of a ruse of commodity logic, what's *specific* in the commodity wears itself out in the fight while the commodity-form moves toward its absolute realization.

67

The satisfaction which no longer comes from the use of abundant commodities is now sought in the recognition of their value as commodities: the use of commodities becomes sufficient unto itself; the consumer is filled with religious fervor for the sovereign liberty of the commodities. Waves of enthusiasm for a given product, supported and spread by all the media of communication, are thus propagated with lightning speed. A style of dress emerges from a film; a magazine promotes night spots which launch various clothing fads. Just when the mass of commodities slides toward puerility, the purile itself becomes a special commodity; this is epitomized by the gadget. We can recognize a mystical abandon to the transcendence of the commodity in free gifts, such as key chains which are not bought but are included by advertisers with prestigious purchases, or which flow by exchange in their own sphere. One who collects the key chains which have been manufactured for collection, accumulates the *indulgences of the commodity*, a glorious sign of his real presence among the faithful. Reified man advertises the proof of his intimacy with the commodity. The fetishism of commodities reaches moments of fervent exaltation similar to the ecstasies of the convulsions and miracles of the old religious fetishism. The only use which remains here is the fundamental use of submission.

68

The pseudo-need imposed by modern consumption clearly cannot be opposed by any genuine need or desire which is not itself shaped by society and its history. The abundant commodity stands for the total breach in the organic development of social needs. Its mechanical accumulation liberates *unlimited artificiality*, in the face of which living desire is helpless. The cumulative power of independent artificiality sows everywhere the *falsification of social life*.

In the image of the society happily unified by consumption, real division is only suspended until the next non-accomplishment in consumption. Every single product represents the hope for a dazzling shortcut to the promised land of total consumption and is ceremoniously presented as the decisive entity. But as with the diffusion of seemingly aristocratic first names carried by almost all individuals of the same age, the objects which promise unique powers can be recommended to the devotion of the masses only if they're produced in quantities large enough for mass consumption. A product acquires prestige when it is placed at the center of social life as the revealed mystery of the ultimate goal of production. But the object which was prestigious in the spectacle becomes vulgar as soon as it is taken home by its consumer—and by all its other consumers. It reveals its essential poverty (which naturally comes to it from the misery of its production) too late. But by then another object already carries the justification of the system and demands to be acknowledged.

The fraud of satisfaction exposes itself by being replaced, by following the change of products and of the general conditions of production. That which asserted its definitive excellence with perfect impudence nevertheless changes, both in the diffuse and the concentrated spectacle, and it is the system alone which must continue: Stalin as well as the outmoded commodity are denounced precisely by those who imposed them. Every new lie of advertising is also an avowal of the previous lie. The fall of every figure with totalitarian power reveals the *illusory community* which had approved him unanimously, and which had been nothing more than an agglomeration of solitudes without illusions.

What the spectacle offers as eternal is based on change and must change with its base. The spectacle is absolutely dogmatic and at the same time cannot really achieve any solid dogma. Nothing stops for the spectacle; this condition is natural to it, yet completely opposed to its inclination.

The unreal unity proclaimed by the spectacle masks the class division on which the real unity of the capitalist mode of production rests. What obliges the producers to participate in the construction of the world is also what separates them from it. What brings together men liberated from their local and national boundaries is also what pulls them apart. What requires a more profound rationality is also what nourishes the irrationality of hierarchic exploitation and repression. What creates the abstract power of society creates its concrete unfreedom.



V

Time and History

O, gentlemen, the time of life is short! . . .
And if we live, we live to tread on kings . . .

—Shakespeare, *Henry IV*

Man, "the negative being who is only to the extent that he suppresses Being," is identical to time. Man's appropriation of his own nature is at the same time his grasp of the unfolding of the universe. "History is itself a real part of natural history, of the transformation of nature into man" (Marx). Inversely, this "natural history" has no actual existence other than through the process of human history, the only part which recaptures this historical totality, like the modern telescope whose sight captures, in time, the retreat of nebulae at the periphery of the universe. History has always existed, but not always in a historical form. The temporalization of man as effected through the mediation of a society is equivalent to a humanization of time. The unconscious movement of time manifests itself and becomes true within historical consciousness.

Properly historical movement, although still hidden, begins in the slow and intangible formation of the "real nature of man," this "nature born within human history—within the generating action of human society—," but even though that society developed a technology and a language and is already a product of its own history, it is conscious only of a perpetual present. There, all knowledge, confined within the memory of the oldest, is always carried by the living. Neither death nor procreation is grasped as a law of time. Time remains immobile, like an enclosed space. A more complex society which finally becomes conscious of time devotes itself to negating it because it sees in time not what passes, but only what returns. A static society organizes time in terms of its immediate experience of nature, on the model of *cyclical* time.

Cyclical time already dominates the experience of nomadic populations because they find the same conditions repeated at every moment of their journey: Hegel notes that "the wandering of nomads is only formal because it is limited to uniform spaces." The society which, by fixing itself in place locally, gives space a content by arranging individualized places, thus finds itself enclosed inside this localization. The temporal return to similar places now becomes the pure return

of time in the same place, the repetition of a series of gestures. The transition from pastoral nomadism to sedentary agriculture is the end of the lazy liberty without content, the beginning of labor. The agrarian mode of production in general, dominated by the rhythm of the seasons, is the basis for fully constituted cyclical time. Eternity is internal to it; it is the return of the same here on earth. Myth is the unitary construction of the thought which guarantees the entire cosmic order surrounding the order which this society has in fact already realized within its frontiers.

The social appropriation of time, the production of man by human labor, develops within a society divided into classes. The power which constituted itself above the penury of the society of cyclical time, the class which organizes the social labor and appropriates the limited surplus value, simultaneously appropriates the *temporal surplus value* of its organization of social time: it possesses for itself alone the irreversible time of the living. The wealth that can be concentrated in the realm of power and materially used up in sumptuous feasts is also used up as a squandering of *historical time at the surface of society*. The owners of historical surplus value possess the knowledge and the enjoyment of lived events. Separated from the collective organization of time which predominates with the repetitive production at the base of social life, this time flows above its own static community. This is the time of adventure and war, when the masters of the cyclical society travel through their personal histories, and it is also the time which appears in confrontations with foreign communities, in the derangement of the unchangeable order of the society. History then passes before men as an alien factor, as that which they never wanted and against which they thought themselves protected. But by way of this detour returns the human negative anxiety which had been at the very origin of the entire development that had fallen asleep.

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VII

The Organization of Territory

And whoever becomes ruler of a city accustomed to living freely and does not destroy it, let him expect to be destroyed by her, because as refuge for her rebellions she always has the name of liberty and her old customs, which neither through the length of time nor for any good deed will ever be forgotten. And whatever one does there and whatever one provides, if it is not to persecute or disperse the inhabitants, this name and these customs will never be forgotten.

—Machiavelli, *The Prince*



Capitalist production has unified space, which is no longer bounded by external societies. This unification is at the same time an extensive and intensive process of banalization. The accumulation of commodities produced in mass for the abstract space of the market, which had to break down all regional and legal barriers and all the corporative restrictions of the Middle Ages that preserved the quality of craft production, also had to destroy the autonomy and quality of places. This power of homogenization is the heavy artillery which brought down all Chinese walls.

In order to become ever more identical to itself, to get as close as possible to motionless monotony, the free space of the commodity is henceforth constantly modified and reconstructed.

This society which eliminates geographical distance reproduces distance internally as spectacular separation.

Tourism, human circulation considered as consumption, a by-product of the circulation of commodities, is fundamentally nothing more than the leisure of going to see what has become banal. The economic organization of visits to different places is already in itself the guarantee of their equivalence. The same modernization that removed time from the voyage also removed from it the reality of space.

The society that molds all of its surroundings has developed a special technique for shaping its very territory, the solid ground of this collection of tasks. Urbanism is capitalism's seizure of the natural and human environment;

developing logically into absolute domination, capitalism can and must now remake the totality of space into its own setting.

The capitalist need which is satisfied by urbanism in the form of a visible freezing of life can be expressed in Hegelian terms as the absolute predominance of "the peaceful coexistence of space" over "the restless becoming in the passage of time."

If all the technical forces of capitalism must be understood as tools for the making of separations, in the case of urbanism we are dealing with the equipment at the basis of these technical forces, with the treatment of the ground that suits their deployment, with the very technique of separation.

Urbanism is the modern fulfillment of the uninterrupted task which safeguards class power: the preservation of the atomization of workers who had been dangerously brought together by urban conditions of production. The constant struggle that had to be waged against every possible form of their coming together discovers its favored field in urbanism. After the experiences of the French Revolution, the efforts of all established powers to increase the means of maintaining order in the streets finally culminates in the suppression of the street. "With the present means of long-distance mass communication, sprawling isolation has proved an even more effective method of keeping a population under control," says Lewis Mumford in *The City in History*, describing "henceforth a one-way world." But the general movement of isolation, which is the reality of urbanism, must also include a controlled reintegration of workers depending on the needs of production and consumption that can be planned. Integration into the system requires that isolated individuals be recaptured and isolated together: factories and halls of culture, tourist resorts and housing developments are expressly organized to serve this pseudo-community that follows the isolated individual right

into the *family cell*. The widespread use of receivers of the spectacular message enables the individual to fill his isolation with the dominant images—images which derive their power precisely from this isolation.

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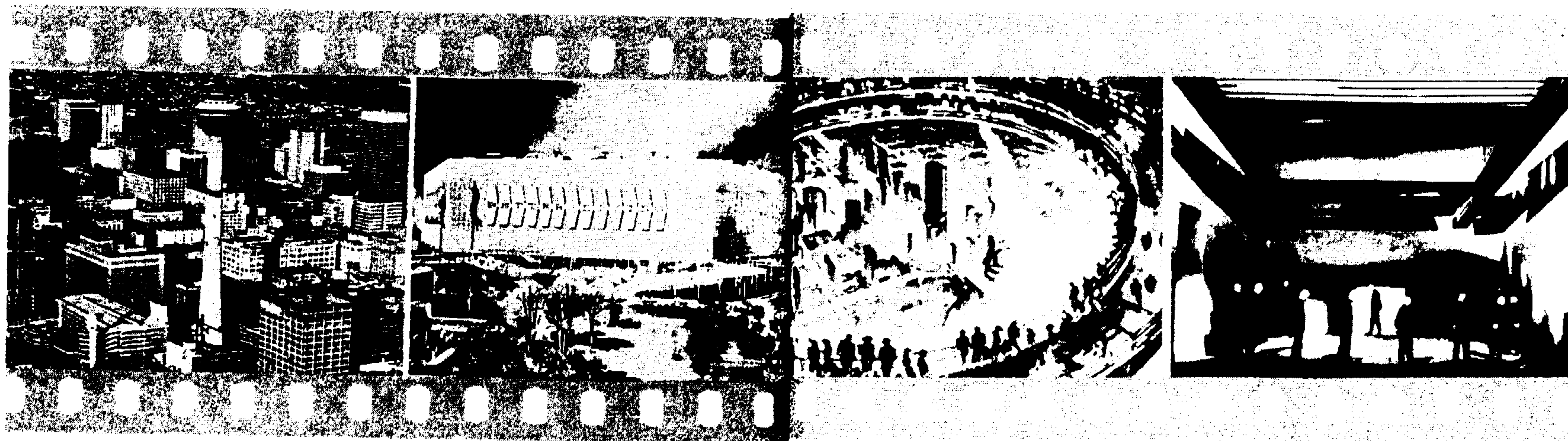
For the first time a new architecture, which in all previous epochs had been reserved for the satisfaction of the ruling classes, is directly aimed at the poor. The formal poverty and the gigantic spread of this new living experience both come from its mass character, which is implicit in its purpose and in modern conditions of construction. *Authoritarian decision*, which abstractly organizes territory into territory of abstraction, is obviously at the heart of these modern conditions of construction. The same architecture appears in all industrializing countries that are backward in this respect, as a suitable terrain for the new type of social existence which is to be implanted there. The threshold crossed by the growth of society's material power alongside the lag in the conscious domination of this power, are displayed as clearly by urbanism as by problems of thermonuclear armament or of birth control (where the possibility of manipulating heredity has already been reached).

174

The present is already the time of the self-destruction of the urban milieu. The explosion of cities which cover the countryside with "formless masses of urban residues" (Lewis Mumford) is directly regulated by the imperatives of consumption. The dictatorship of the automobile, pilot-product of the first phase of commodity abundance, has been stamped into the environment with the domination of the freeway, which dislocates old urban centers and requires an ever-larger dispersion. At the same time, stages of incomplete reorganization of the urban fabric polarize temporarily around "distribution factories," enormous shopping centers built on the bare ground of parking lots; and these temples of frenzied consumption, after bringing about a partial rearrangement of congestion, themselves flee within the centrifugal movement which rejects them as soon as they in turn become overburdened secondary centers. But the technical organization of consumption is only the first element of the general dissolution which has led the city to the point of consuming itself.

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Economic history, which developed entirely around the opposition between town and country, has reached a level of



success which simultaneously cancels out both terms. The current *paralysis* of total historical development for the sake of the mere continuation of the economy's independent movement makes the moment when town and country begin to disappear, not the supersession of their cleavage, but their simultaneous collapse. The reciprocal erosion of town and country, product of the failure of the historical movement through which existing urban reality should have been surmounted, is visible in the eclectic melange of their decayed elements which cover the most industrially advanced zones.

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Universal history was born in cities and reached maturity at the moment of the decisive victory of city over country. To Marx, one of the greatest revolutionary merits of the bourgeoisie was "the subjection of the country to the city" whose very *air emancipates*. But if the history of the city is the history of freedom, it is also the history of tyranny, of state administration that controls the countryside and the city itself. The city could as yet only struggle for historical freedom, but not possess it. The city is the *locus of history* because it is conscious of the past and also concentrates the social power that makes the historical undertaking possible. The present tendency to liquidate the city is thus merely another expression of the delay in the subordination of the economy to historical consciousness and in the unification of society reassuming the powers that were detached from it.

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"The countryside shows the exact opposite: isolation and separation" (*German Ideology*). Urbanism destroys cities and reestablishes a *pseudo-countryside* which lacks the natural relations of the old countryside as well as the direct social relations which were directly challenged by the historical city. A new artificial peasantry is recreated by the conditions of housing and spectacular control in today's "organized territory": the geographic dispersal and narrowmindedness that always kept the peasantry from undertaking independent action and from affirming itself as a creative historical force again today become characteristics of the producers—the movement of a world which they themselves produce remaining as completely beyond their reach as the natural rhythm of tasks was

for the agrarian society. But when this peasantry, which was the unshakable foundation of "Oriental despotism" and whose very fragmentation called for bureaucratic centralization, reemerges as a product of the conditions of growth of modern state bureaucracy, its *apathy* must now be *historically manufactured* and maintained; natural ignorance has been replaced by the organized spectacle of error. The "new towns" of the technological pseudo-peasantry clearly inscribe on the landscape their rupture with the historical time on which they are built; their motto could be: "On this spot nothing will ever happen, and *nothing ever has*." It is obviously because history, which must be liberated in the cities, has not yet been liberated, that the forces of *historical absence* begin to compose their own exclusive landscape.

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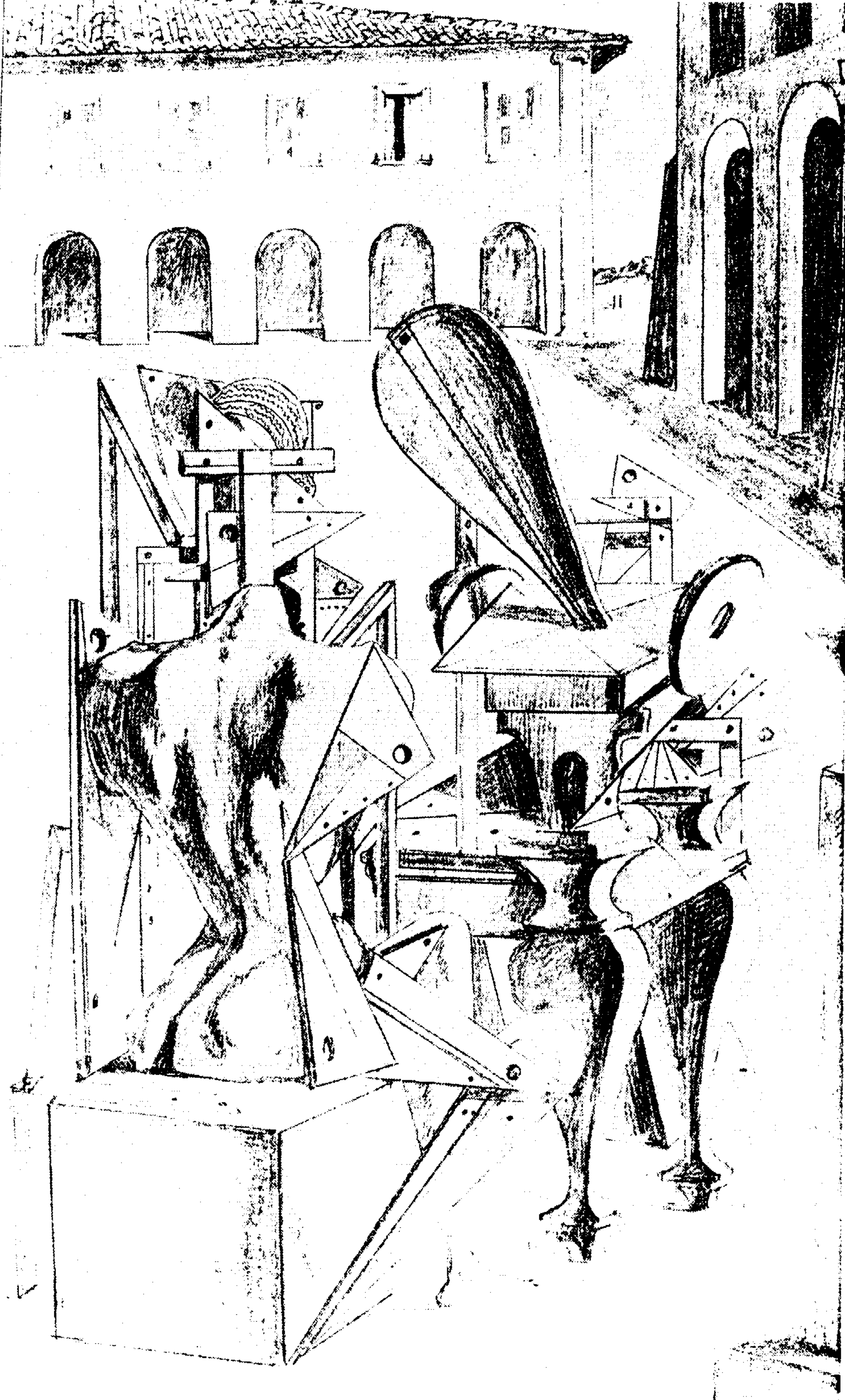
History, which threatens this twilight world, is also the force which could subject space to lived time. Proletarian revolution is the *critique of human geography* through which individuals and communities have to create places and events suitable for the appropriation, no longer just of their labor, but of their total history. In this game's changing space, and in the freely chosen variations in the game's rules, the autonomy of place can be rediscovered without the reintroduction of an exclusive attachment to the land, thus bringing back the reality of the voyage and of life understood as a voyage which contains its entire meaning within itself.

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The greatest revolutionary idea concerning urbanism is not itself urbanistic, technological or esthetic. It is the decision to reconstruct the entire environment in accordance with the needs of the power of the Workers' Councils, of the *anti-statist dictatorship* of the proletariat, of enforceable dialogue. And the power of the Councils, which can be effective only if it transforms existing conditions in their entirety, cannot assign itself a smaller task if it wants to be recognized and to *recognize itself* in its world.

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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*.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.



Debord

Society of the Spectacle

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

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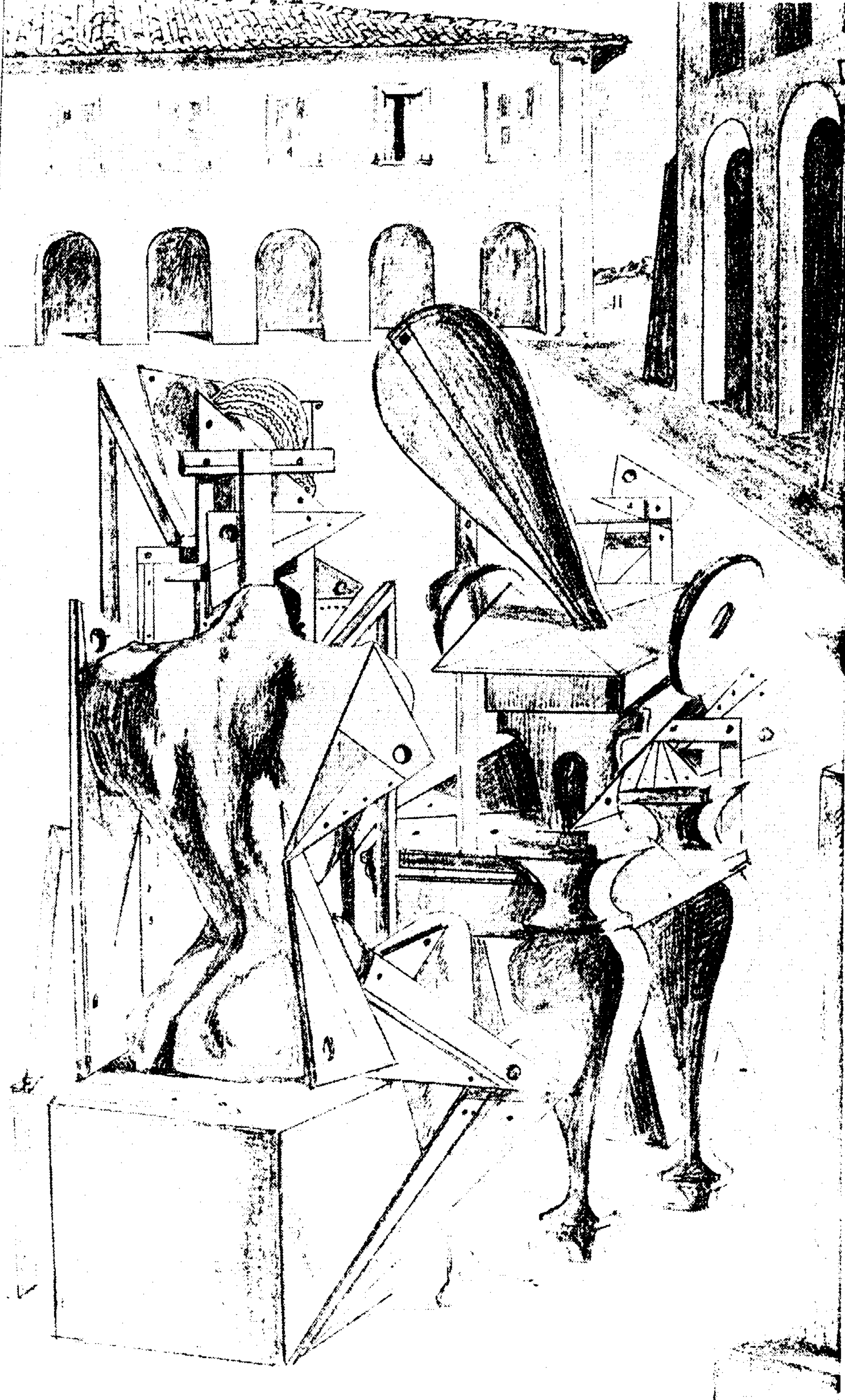
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VIII

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*.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.