

The Society of the Unspectacular

Leaving Debord Behind

It is time to leave Debord's Society of the Spectacle behind. If we witness the hyperspectacular in the mass media today, this should not fool us. This is not the apotheosis of the spectacle, but its fatal eclipse – the final moment of tragic sublimity, of hyperviolence, before it fades away.

In many ways, the fate of the spectacle mirrors (and is mirrored in) the culture of the spectacle par excellence: the mass-mediated United States of America. If today, the USA projects its power as super-state throughout the world with an unprecedented hyperviolence, then we should not be deceived by this tragic spectacle. The USA has long shed its status as the sole superpower in the world. Silently financed by China, economically eclipsed by the European Union, by China again, and soon even India, unable to procure for its own wasteful energy needs (hence its dependence on countries like Russia, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia), culturally and intellectually unsettled, it has become a crash waiting to happen.

The mass media are about to dissolve into a sea of hypermedial fragments, transforming into a multitude of hybrids and singularities (does anybody still know what television actually is these days?). This inevitably invites a radical fragmentation of 'the public'. It is a process that has long taken hold of informational societies. The current explosion of self-publication in countless blogs, on community websites, self-video portals, online diaries, web forums and individual websites is only the first signs of an undercurrent that has already for many years been transforming 'the public' into an amalgamation of increasingly unrelated subjectivities and singular interest groups.

Today, we are witnessing the rise of swarm publics, highly unstable constellations of temporary alliances that resemble a public sphere in constant flux; globally mediated flash mobs that never meet, fuelled by sentiment and affect, escaping fixed capture.

The Face of 'Radical Mediocrity'

Rather than tending towards hyperindividuality, these swarm publics tend towards the lowest common denominator, the absolute unparticular, an excess of mediation that only establishes confirmation of its own averageness. This is what we could perhaps call the face of 'radical mediocrity' (as philosopher Henk Oosterling would probably call it, though I'm not sure he means the same thing by this as what I'm getting at here).

Mass media then become generic media. What we see on YouTube is first and foremost the eternal return of the same, the absolutely average, the radically unparticular, the excessive practice of everyday life.

The media space of generic media is a quotidian space: it is the space of the everyday. It is inherently unspectacular. Generic media is never in any sense an anti-spectacle, it is simply the denial of spectacle altogether.

What can be witnessed in the universe of self-media is the nominalization of the mediated image – and what is so striking is that the image (on average) is so exceedingly boring. It is the grand testimony to the human spirit's inability to move beyond itself. We witness it day in and day out trapped in its own circularity. The media image in the universe of self-publication tends towards that negative horizon where it

loses all its articulation and becomes 'vernacular', something that is impossible to capture.

The current excess of self-mediation was already prefigured in the early experimental Internet cultures of the 1990s. When I was asked to reflect on the Liverpool variation of the 'Superchannel' project, a do-it-yourself web-TV platform facilitated by the Superflex collective from Copenhagen, called Tenant Spin. I couldn't help but notice while going through the archive of this web-TV project in the UK's oldest tower block under reconstruction, how incredibly boring, unspecific and 'normal' these webcasts were. In no way did they reflect the spectacle of mass media. I called it 'Aesthetics of the Unspectacular', and of course, these were media without an audience *par excellence!*

The Dark Face of 'YOU'

The productive moment of self-media is quite obviously based on its escape of authoritarian indoctrination. However, this certainly does not mean that it constitutes a space without conflict. On the contrary, tensions and conflict flourish in the system of generic media. In a sense, the space of self-mediation is the ultimate realization of Chantal Mouffe's notion of antagonistic pluralism. The system actually has a double face, at once an expression of radical mediocrity and a much more darker semblance.

The dark-face of 'YOU' is constituted by the exponential proliferation of DiY xenophobia, racism, hatred and paranoia ('don't trust anyone – not even yourself!'). No theoretical account of social reality can be trusted anymore. Every argument is immediately suspect, overturned, reversed, subverted. Discourse is tribalized, fragmented and ultimately atomized. The unceasing online debate surrounding the conspiracy theories of 9/11 are the clearest case in point – this excess of DiY paranoia results in a space of complete disinformation, a context in which all public discourse breaks down (and decision making is entirely removed).

The state apparatus, no longer assured of mediated mass-mind-control, has to respond to the radical fragmentation of its publics with new systems of control, and adopts the swarm model of radically distributed surveillance (RFID, smart dust, and so forth) and the integration of the population's biological bodies in a technologically induced system of control (biometrics). If Joseph Goebbels still believed that the true base of political power was 'to capture the heart of a people and keep it', the contemporary regime of hypersurveillance strives for the complete traceability and scrutiny of all people.

Power today is vested not in the ability to connect and become visible, but in the ability to disconnect, to become invisible and untraceable, at will. This is the paradox: under conditions of complete media transparency, decision making retreats from the public sphere altogether. Agency today is located outside the domain of visibility.