
COURSE: Youth & Cyberculture S6 / Spring 2020

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Handout 6

From 'spectacle' to 'culture jamming'

Spectacle and the reification of life

Guy Debord's (1931–1994) best-known work, *La société du spectacle* (*The Society of the Spectacle*) (1967), is a polemical and prescient indictment of our image-saturated consumer culture. The book examines the "Spectacle," Debord's term for the everyday manifestation of capitalist-driven phenomena; advertising, television, film, and celebrity. The spectacle reduces reality to an endless supply of commodifiable fragments, while encouraging us to focus on appearances. The spectacle, which is driven by economic interest and profit, replaces lived reality with the "contemplation of the spectacle." Our lives are now organized and dominated by the needs of the ruling economy:

The alienation of the spectator to the profit of the contemplated object is expressed in the following way: The more [the spectator] 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 desires.

The spectacle's relentless proffering of goods and imagery impacts the spectators. Gradually, we begin to conflate visibility with value. If something is being talked about and seen, we assume that it must be important in some way. For instance, the amount of media coverage that terrorism receives in comparison to climate change is disproportionate, the latter being the direct consequence of our relentless consumerism.

The spectacle takes on many more forms today than it did during Debord's lifetime. His analysis of the spectacle can be extended to the Internet and social media. What do you do when you get lost in a foreign city? Do you ask a passer-by for directions, or consult Google Maps on your smartphone? Such technology is incredibly useful, but it also *engineers* our behavior. It reduces our lives to a daily series of commodity exchanges. Debord would no doubt have been horrified by social media companies such as Facebook and Twitter, which commodifies our friendships, opinions, and emotions. Our internal thoughts and experiences are now commodifiable assets. *Did you tweet today? Why haven't you posted to Instagram? Did you "like" your friend's photos on Facebook yet?*

Celebrity culture

In his 1988 follow-up text, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Debord observes that fame "has acquired infinitely more importance than the value of anything one might actually be capable of doing." He is particularly contemptuous of celebrities, branding them the "enemy of the individual." The star markets a lifestyle of leisure, "compensat[ing] for the fragmented productive specializations that are actually lived." As embodiments of the spectacle, celebrities necessarily "renounce all autonomous qualities in order to identify [themselves] with the general law of obedience to the course of things." Their Individuality is sacrificed in order to become a figurehead of the profit-driven system. After all, celebrities not only peddle commodities, but are commodities themselves. They serve as projections of our false aspirations. For Debord, this makes them less than human:

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.

'Détournement' as a tactic of resistance

A term variously translated as "diversion," "detour," "reroute," and "hijack," *détournement* is defined by Debord and the artist Gil J. Wolman in a 1957 essay entitled "A User's Guide to *Détournement*" as:

The mutual interference of two worlds of feeling, or the juxtaposition of two independent expressions, superseded[ing] the original elements and produc[ing] a synthetic organization of greater efficacy.

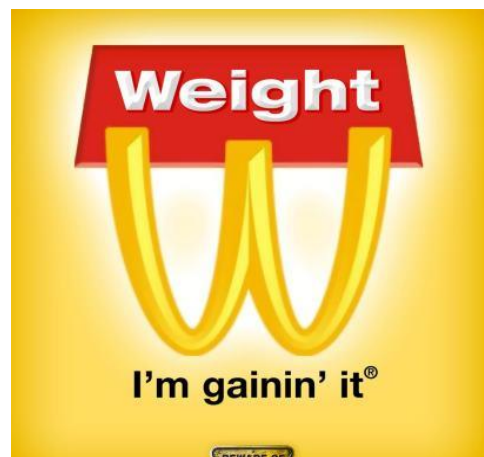
Culture Jamming

Culture jamming is a kind of **Media Activism, because it is a form of protest against consumerism**. The activist 'culture jamming' of groups such as The Yes Men and the Billboard Liberation Front is in many ways a cultural form of resistance to the spectacle. Culture jammers offer an incisive indictment of the consumerist experience in our contemporary world. Wikipedia defines culture jamming as follows:

'Culture jamming is a tactic used by many anti-consumerist social movements to disrupt or subvert media culture and its mainstream cultural institutions, including corporate advertising. It attempts to "expose the methods of domination" of a mass society to foster progressive change.' [Wikipedia](#)

Culture jammers criticize and subvert consumer culture and advertising in the mass media by producing advertisements which parody those of global brands.

Examples



One advertisement (on the left) shows the famous McDonalds arch, over a burger with the caption "McDeath," implying that this kind of fast food is destructive. In the other advertisement the 'M' in the word 'McDonalds' is turned upside down to look like a "W" with the slogan "Weight, I'm gainin' it".

This is obviously a parodic play on the words of the McDonalds slogan: “I’m lovin’ it”.

These examples show how culture jammers use the power of brands ‘against themselves’, **subvertising** or subverting their original meaning. Subvertising means subverting the original meaning of advertisements in mainstream media.