



The Pleasures of the Spectacle

Edited by
Phillip Drummond

The London Film and Media Reader 3



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The Pleasures of the Spectacle

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Julio Cesar Lemes de Castro

Karl Marx: Commodity Fetishism

This essay explores the ways in which Walter Benjamin, with his concept of 'phantasmagoria', and Guy Debord, with his understanding of 'spectacle', develop Karl Marx's ideas about commodity fetishism. At the same time, it suggests how, taking advantage of these theoretical tools, we may consider possible articulations of consumer culture, first in the case of what may be called proto-cinematic apparatuses, and then in terms of cinema itself.

Marx locates commodity fetishism at the heart of capitalism. A product of labour has use value insofar as it satisfies a want or need, and exchange value when it is traded in the market, that is, when it functions as a commodity. The exchange value of a commodity expresses the average amount of

labour socially necessary for its production. But, once in the market, a product distances itself from its producers and from the conditions in which it was produced.

Whereas in the pre-capitalist community the buyer has direct contact with those who make things, in capitalist society each product results from the work of several anonymous individuals, separated from the purchaser by numerous intermediaries. As a consequence, market value gains autonomy and is seen as intrinsic to the commodity.

A table, for instance, is, in itself, something banal, but, as soon as it appears as a commodity, it splits into physical and metaphysical aspects. The physical aspect refers to its materiality, the metaphysical to the market value assigned to it. Since it is this value which defines it in the market. In a famous formulation, what Marx calls "*the determined social relation between men*" assumes, for him, "*the phantasmagoric form of a relation between things*".¹

At first glance, it may be thought that in the case of commodity fetishism the visual dimension is weakened, to the extent that the abstract aspect of exchange value prevails over the concrete aspect of use value. Things, however, are more complex. When the value appears as something inherent to the commodity, it transcends the materiality of the commodity, surrounding it with a ghostly 'shell'. As we read on the first page of *Capital*, the commodity meets needs which arise from both "*stomach*" and "*imagination*".²

Cut adrift from the materiality of human labour, the commodity may give free rein to fantasy; to put it another way, the phantasmagoria of value drives the fantasy. This gives the commodity a spectacular facet, which in turn

further enhances the distance from the strict empirical properties of the object.

With the evolution of capitalism, the more abstract the system gets, the greater the spectacle of the world of commodities. It should be noted, however, that the spectacular appearance of the commodity under capitalism, entirely congruent with Marx's analysis, is not in fact developed there. At this point, recourse to Benjamin and Debord is useful.

Walter Benjamin: Phantasmagoria

Marx's theory is contemporary with the rise of mass consumption, which takes place from the second half of the 19th Century onwards. To take account of the cultural universe of this period, marked strongly by the problematic of consumption, Benjamin, in his unfinished masterpiece on the Parisian arcades, proposes as a starting point the concept of commodity fetishism.

In his letters, he says that the Marxist concept is at the heart of *The Arcades Project*, and that the basic categories of his work aim at determining it. Whereas in the Baroque age commodity fetishism was still relatively undeveloped, "*the new forms of behaviour and the new economically and technologically based creations that we owe to the 19th Century enter the universe of a phantasmagoria*".³ We can even define 'modernity', as the word is used for example by Baudelaire, as "*the world dominated by its phantasmagoria*".⁴

Benjamin's project, however, has some remarkable peculiarities. If Marx calls attention to the relations behind

the appearance of the commodity, Benjamin highlights a different aspect of commodity fetishism: the commodity as spectacle, for instance in arcades, universal expositions, and department stores. It is no coincidence that the expression “*phantasmagoric form*”, which qualifies commodity fetishism in the first quotation from *Capital* above, captures his attention in a special way.

Throughout *The Arcades Project*, there are numerous references to ‘phantasmagoria’ to describe fetishism, but in many cases the term takes on connotations that go beyond what we find in Marx. Benjamin’s working method leads him to adduce quotations from other authors in which this term appears, continuously expanding its constellation of applications.

When Benjamin refers to fetishism, his interest is not so much in the commodity in general, which is simply circulating in the economy. Rather, it is important for him to apprehend its status at the time it is being displayed somehow to the public. For Benjamin, ‘phantasmagoria’ refers to the visible, lush, spectacular side of the merchandise, and to its subjective impact. Moreover, he wants to show how phantasmagoria spreads through all walks of life.

Phantasmagoria and Proto-cinematic Apparatuses

In the 19th Century the phantasmagoria surrounding commodities relates to the one generated by proto-cinematic apparatuses such as the panorama, the diorama, the cosmorama, the pleorama, the kaleidoscope, and others. The panorama is a cylindrical surface with paintings, usually portraying landscapes and historical events, which involve the viewer and give him the illusion of being in a certain

environment. The first 360-degree panorama was opened by Robert Baker in London in 1792.

The diorama had a platform which rotated, showing each time a different scene, mostly from a distant place and time. It is an 1822 invention by Daguerre, better known for the daguerreotype, which comes later. The cosmorama, created in 1832 by Abbe Gazzara, reproduces landscapes with the aid of magnifying mirrors which give them an illusory depth. The pleorama, debuting the same year in Berlin, simulates a journey, with the viewer sitting in a ship against a moving backdrop.

The kaleidoscope, patented in 1817 by David Brewster, uses an arrangement of mirrors to produce a series of symmetrical visual patterns. The phantasmagoria itself is a device, invented in the late 18th Century and popular in the 19th, which uses a magic lantern to project frightening images on to a screen; it is recalled in the early films of Georges Méliès.

In all these cases, what we have are techniques generating visual effects which attract and beguile the audience. The development of new technologies of representation goes hand-in-hand with the development of technologies employed directly in commodity production. And the fact that such apparatuses are contemporary with the expansion of the culture of consumption cannot be overlooked.

The City as Spectacle: The Arcades

Proto-cinematic apparatuses are often means of entertainment in the space of the arcades, which emerged in Paris in the first half of the 19th Century. The arcades were

narrow streets, covered with glass roofs to create an inner space, accessible only to pedestrians, and thus allowing refuge from weather and traffic. Described by Benjamin as temples of commodity capital, they served as corridors with luxury shops on both sides. Many survive today.

Benjamin sees them as the forerunners of department stores, but they are closer to modern shopping malls, which come later. The Passage des Panoramas, precursor of the others, owes its name to the fact that it was constructed in 1799 to give access to the panorama on the Boulevard Montmartre. The Galerie Vivienne, built in 1823, later housed the cosmorama.

In 1858 the Passage Jouffroy, an extension of the Passage des Panoramas, became the site of the Théâtre Séraphin, specialising in marionettes and shadow puppetry. Also in the Passage Jouffroy, the Musée Grévin, a waxworks museum, opened in 1882. The illusionist Georges Méliès presented his first public shows at the *Cabinet Fantastique* of the Musée Grévin, and then at the Galerie Vivienne.

All this means that the same gaze is entranced by scenes generated in the proto-cinematic apparatuses and by commodities displayed in the arcades. Content in both cases may also be similar, the tours often making reference to remote times and regions. Thus, the experience of the *flâneur*, or city stroller, characterised by Benjamin (drawing on Baudelaire) as the modern urban spectator wandering in the arcades, is redoubled by the proto-cinematic apparatuses as a *flânerie* of a virtual kind.

Akin to the arcades in its style and materials, although on a much greater scale, was London's Crystal Palace, home to the

Great Exhibition of 1851. Other world exhibitions followed suit - notably those organised in Paris - in 1855, 1867, 1878, 1889, and 1900. At first, the purpose of these events was to promote the world of production, showcasing scientific and technical novelties. Quickly, however, the emphasis shifted to consumption.

From 1855 onward, an entrance fee was charged and all objects carried price-tags. Benjamin considered world exhibitions as sites of pilgrimage to commodity fetishism. They are realised in large environments, opening up a phantasmagoria which a person enters to be distracted. And proto-cinematic apparatuses are helpful here: the Great Exhibition of 1851, for example, included dioramas of cities.

With the arrival of department stores, established around 1870, consumers were for the first time in history considered as a mass, and thus the theatrical element of commerce was heightened. For Roslind Williams they became, and remain, *“places where consumers are an audience to be entertained by commodities, where selling is mingled with amusement, where arousal of free-floating desire is as important as immediate purchase of particular items”*.⁵

It is no wonder that Dufayel, a department store in Paris at the turn of the century, should feature a cinema auditorium with a capacity of 1,500. And the tricks for catching the attention of viewers and consumers are similar: in 1900, L. Frank Baum published both *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, a book which deals with the power of illusion and was later turned into a famous film, and *The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows and Interiors*.⁶

Guy Debord: The Society of the Spectacle

Influenced by *avant-garde* currents like Dada, Surrealism, and Lettrism, which merge art and politics, Debord and his movement, the Situationist International, intended to change life and transform the world. In his 1967 book *The Society of the Spectacle* Debord sets out to revitalise Marxism, adapting its analysis to the new historical conditions of post-war France. He sees in this period a mutation in capitalism, which comes to rely on social reproduction through a cultural hegemony based on consumer values, the use of media apparatuses, and new forms of urban and everyday life.

Debord dubs the resulting social formation 'the society of the spectacle', a concept which brings together a range of apparently disparate phenomena. It could be argued, for example, that the cultural form of the spectacle was already synthesised, for example, by late-Victorian advertisers, but back then it had to vie with other forms. It is only later that spectacle comes to dominate society as a whole, and this is for Debord the most important feature of 20th Century life. Spectacle comes then to cover the whole globe, either as *concentrated* spectacle (in the Soviet-style regimes of the former Eastern bloc) or as *diffuse* spectacle (in the capitalist regimes of the West).

The Society of the Spectacle begins with a paraphrase of Marx's opening to *Capital*: "*The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles.*"⁷ Substituting 'spectacles' for 'commodities' in Marx's formula, Debord stresses that commodities appear nowadays in the basic form of spectacle. Thus what was in Benjamin a highlighting of appearance now goes further: "*The spectacle*

proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance.”⁸

In an earlier stage, ‘being’ became ‘having’; now, ‘having’ became ‘appearing’. This is commodity fetishism to its utmost degree: capital is accumulated to a point where it becomes image. The prevalence of the spectacle furthers the prevalence of the commodity itself, which completes its colonisation of social life. In this moment, even dissatisfaction becomes a commodity. The form of spectacle thus corresponds to the contemporary materialisation of ideology, which freezes history through a false consciousness of time.

The Cinematic Spectacle

Throughout the 20th Century, the consumer and the cinematic dimensions of the spectacle, already associated in Benjamin, achieve even greater integration. This is evident in Debord’s analysis of the society of spectacle. According to Debord, in our epoch not only does commodity become spectacle, but at the same time spectacle – in the narrow sense of mass media, its most superficial manifestation – becomes commodity, the main commodity of the society of the spectacle.

The forms of representation which Debord mentions most frequently are television and cinema, referred to as spectacular industries. Debord declares that modern society is obsessed with saving time in several activities, but this time is then spent in passive spectatorship, which inhibits one from actively producing his or her own life.

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Spectators rely on media and its celebrities as models for lifestyles and views of society; for instance, a film may spark a fashion craze. So, in a circular motion, spectacle as commodity promotes commodity as spectacle. And the role of visual media makes them the perfect metaphor for the operation of ideology in the society of spectacle, in which the consciousness of the spectator is "*imprisoned in a flat universe bounded on all sides by the spectacle's screen.*"⁹

Debord was of course not simply a theorist. He began his career as a film critic and a film-maker, and he continued to make films throughout his life: *Howlings in Favour of Sade* (1952), *On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Moment in Time* (1959), *Critique of Separation* (1961), *The Society of the Spectacle* (1973), *Refutation of all the Judgments, both Complimentary and Hostile, that Have been Brought to Bear up until Now Concerning the Film 'The society of the Spectacle'* (1975), and *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni* (1978).

Debord's intensely experimental work has an important influence on later *avant-garde* and underground cinema. In his film adaptation of *The Society of the Spectacle*, many of the theses of the book are presented in voice-over, alongside extracts from movies of various genres, newsreels, and TV commercials, as well as framed quotations from other authors. Like the book, its adaptation, as Debord states in the publicity brochure for the film, proposes "*a holistic critique of the extant world, which is to say, of all aspects of modern capitalism and its general system of illusions*", of which cinema itself is an important component.

Film critics too, says Debord, are "*writing employees of the system of spectacular lying*". For that reason he prefers "to

remain in obscurity together with these masses rather than consenting to harangue them in the artificial illumination manipulated by those who hypnotize them".¹⁰ In other words, for Debord the radicalisation of the spectacle leaves no room for an opposition which is not itself radical as well.

Notes and References

¹ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: Kritik der Politischen Oekonomie, Buch I – der Produktionsprozess des Kapitals*, 5th. ed., Hamburg: Otto Meissners, 1903, p. 39.

² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁵ Rosalind H. Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth Century France*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, p. 67.

⁶ L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Chicago, IL: George M. Hill, 1900, and *The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows and Interiors*, Chicago, IL: The Show Window Publishing Company, 1900.

⁷ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, New York: Zone Books, 1995, p. 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹⁰ Guy Debord, 'Réfutation de tous les jugements, tant élogieux qu'hostiles, qui ont été jusqu'ici portés sur le film *La société du spectacle*', in Debord, *Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes, 1952-1978*, Paris: Editions Champ Libre, 1978, pp. 162, 174.